

# Emergence of Natural Leaders in the Botlagari Union of Bangladesh: A Catalyst For Changing the Lives of Poor Women and Their Communities

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CARE International UK PPA Life Changes Case Study

**In Bangladesh**, extremely poor people are disadvantaged through lack of access to public services and resources, limiting livelihood options and increasing vulnerability to economic shocks. Complementing government safety net programmes targeted at the chronically poor, CARE, through its seven-year SETU programme (Social and Economic Transformation of the Ultra-poor), is building pro-poor inclusive governance mechanisms in order to facilitate equitable access to public services and resources. The intervention, supported by PPA funds, involves a number of training and awareness-raising modules aimed at increasing the capacity, participation and representation of marginalised groups, especially women, in decision-making spaces.

Emerging from this process are 'Natural Leaders' - individuals from ultra-poor backgrounds with improved confidence, livelihood skills (e.g. horticulture and aquaculture), and ability to organize and mobilize for community development. So far, 3,603 Natural Leaders have emerged from the programme; we focus this case study on the 61% of these who are women.

When women leaders are able to facilitate access to community resources through active engagement and negotiation with the Union Parishad - the lowest tier of Bangladesh's local government structure<sup>01</sup> - this challenges the cultural norm which limits women's role to reproductive work. The theory of change for women's political empowerment (see diagram on page 2) is that "strengthening the capacity of women from ultra-poor households will lead to their increased confidence and willingness to participate in local government decision-making, which will benefit the wider community".<sup>02</sup>

This case study seeks to demonstrate how women, to varying extents, are emerging as Natural Leaders and able to contribute to the transformation of their personal circumstances and their communities. Evidence has been drawn from CARE Bangladesh's annual Participatory Impact Assessment Report (PIA, 2011)<sup>03</sup> complemented by qualitative research undertaken with communities in March and April 2012 for the purposes of this case study.<sup>04</sup> This demonstrates how the SETU programme's capacity-building activities have led to different results amongst women Natural Leaders, categorised here as "best", "typical" and "worst" cases.

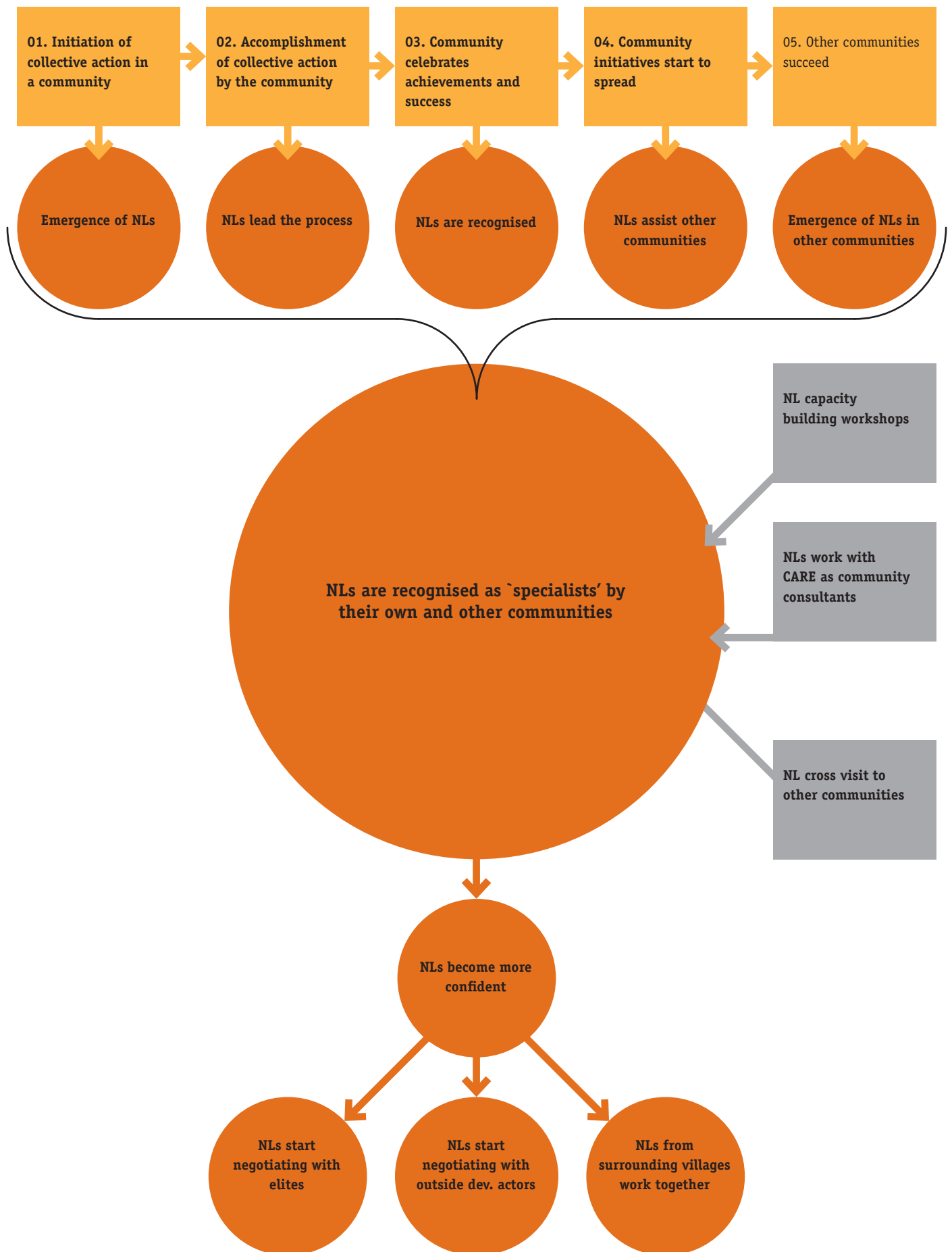
## The situation before the intervention

Before the intervention, women's leadership skills were poorly developed: they rarely interacted with power holders and had limited influence beyond their communities. Discriminatory social and political norms and a lack of skills, knowledge and confidence excluded women from decision-making processes. Since women also had limited landholding rights and access to economic opportunities, women were compelled to undertake several jobs, which were often underpaid or unpaid. Access to government resources and services was low and did not address women's rights and needs.

## 01. Best case for women's leadership

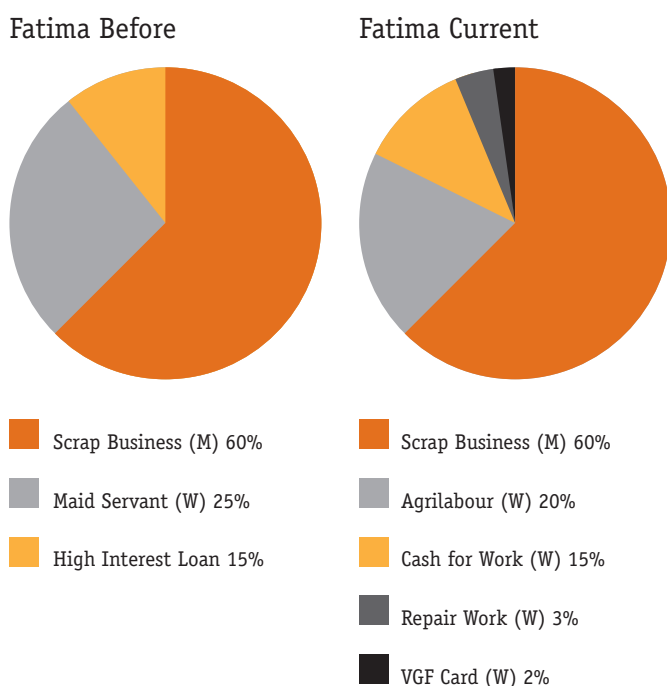
In the best cases, women Natural Leaders have acquired skills which enable them to facilitate community processes and engage in planning and monitoring development activities. They are more informed about rights and responsibilities, leading to increased confidence and more active roles in key spaces such as the UP Standing Committee, Para Unnayan Committee,<sup>05</sup> Savings Group, Village-Court, School Committee, and EKATA Forum,<sup>06</sup> and other community-based platforms. The 2011 Participatory Impact Assessment revealed that 69% of the 514 Natural Leaders (305 women) reported increased ability to participate in and influence local government spaces such as those mentioned above. For example, three women Natural Leaders are now elected representatives to three UP Standing Committees which were previously male dominated. Three other women have the intention of running for the next elections in the Botlagari Union. Increased confidence is also manifested in their ability to actively play the role of "watchdogs" and use negotiation skills to increase UP accountability and responsiveness to women's rights and needs. This has led, for example, to health officials in Jalagari, Mahodipur Union agreeing to provide free health care for pregnant women and children.

### The Theory of Change for Natural Leaders (NL) in Botlagari Union, Bangladesh



The effectiveness of Natural Leaders through participation in decision-making spaces and engagement with local government structures has led to tangible changes for extremely poor communities. These include all-year access to water for the drought-prone village of Mallipara and the establishment of a sewing machine workshop for women in the Botlagari Union. Additionally, Natural Leaders and other community members are engaging in economic activities which have led to increased income, reported by 55.2% of community members, and improved food security, reported by 76% of community members. Three meals a day has become the norm for many ultra-poor households. An indication of changes in traditional household sources of income is shown in the example for Fatima, a woman from Botlagari Union.

**Graph 01: Fatima's household livelihood sources before and after the intervention**



As a result of the project, Fatima was able to eliminate her dependence on high interest loans.

Finally, the "best" women leaders have successfully raised awareness and contributed to increasing tax contributions in their UP.<sup>07</sup> This has improved bargaining power for more equitable resource allocation to respond to women's rights and needs.

### Characteristics of 'best' women Natural Leaders

We found that approximately 30% of female focus group participants fit the above "best case" profile. These participants tend to come from households where members, including husbands, are willing to support them with childcare and other productive activities. This enables them to dedicate time to political and social leadership. They also tend to have been exposed to development activities implemented by CARE and other NGOs for a longer period of time (at least four years). They have regularly attended capacity-building workshops and had opportunities to use their skills and knowledge at the Union and Upazilla (district) levels. As a result of frequent contact with power holders and exposure to multiple dynamics outside their community, they have gained recognition and respect from community members.

## 02. Typical case for women leaders

These women feel more informed and confident in representing women's issues for their community. They are able to participate in decision-making spaces such as the Open Budget and the annual Graham Shava meeting at the Union level. However, they do not feel confident enough to express their concerns in public spheres. Their negotiations skills have improved and they are helping to resolve community conflicts through the village courts. Their bargaining power within the household has also improved but they still have to negotiate with their husbands to participate in decision-making spaces outside the community, that is, at the Ward, Union or Upazilla levels.

Alongside the best Natural Leaders, they have contributed to improving sanitation and access to clean water for more than 80% of the 90 villages covered by the assessment. They have also worked with the local government to improve targeting for safety net programmes. As a result of the Natural Leaders' involvement in the targeting of the ultra-poor, 3,040 extremely poor people (1,724 estimated to be women) have had access to various government safety net programmes<sup>08</sup> including the VGF (Vulnerable Group Feeding). This access to safety nets contributes to reducing household vulnerability during food shortages.

#### One UP member who participated in recent focus group discussions commented:

*"Earlier, the poor and extreme poor women did not have the courage to approach UP chairmen. It was even rare for them to approach UP members. They are now able to communicate with the UP... We prepared VGD, VGF<sup>09</sup> lists at home. Now it is done in front of Natural Leaders and with their assistance we have been able to select eligible persons for safety-net... governance of Botlagari has tremendously improved due to the active participation and leadership of women."*

### Characteristics of 'typical' Natural Leaders

The Natural Leaders in this category made up 45% of focus group participants. These tend to be women from households with little encouragement for participating in activities outside the community. They often undertake several jobs and have limited support for childcare. Despite the desire to become active leaders, they are normally restrained by household activities. Consequently, their participation in CARE's project activities is limited. They are not able to regularly attend capacity-building workshops and have few opportunities to practice acquired skills and knowledge. They also expressed greater confidence in public spheres when accompanied by more accomplished and empowered leaders. Male Natural Leaders who participated in the focus group discussions commented:

*"Both male and female Natural Leaders are working together – it is one of many reasons behind the successes of women Natural Leaders".*

## 03. Worst case for women's leadership

These women have struggled to become effective Natural Leaders. Their knowledge has increased but self-confidence and negotiation skills remain limited. This prevents them from actively representing women's voice at community and Union levels or participating in decision-making spaces. Apart from some community-led sanitation activities, worst-case leaders have had limited impact on the improvement of other women's lives.

### Characteristics of worst case women leaders

This group represents approximately a quarter of focus group participants. They tend to come from households where they have limited freedom of movement and bargaining power. Their main activities centre on childcare and low-yielding income generation. As such they have fewer opportunities to attend capacity-building workshops, the springboard for overcoming low self-esteem and acquiring new skills.

## Changes in intervention to increase benefits for typical and worst case women Natural Leaders

CARE will continue to encourage participation and involvement in capacity-building, which has a proven positive impact on participants. CARE is also now promoting peer-to-peer support and facilitating more cross-learning between the best, typical and worst case women Natural Leaders. CARE will thoroughly integrate gender dimensions into the Well-Being Analysis and facilitate more sessions with men and boys using the Do No Harm (DNH) approach to address harmful cultural norms. It is particularly important to strengthen community engagement with local government to address the structural causes of gender inequality.

## Conclusion

Through presenting the successes of best and typical case Natural Leaders, this case study has sought to demonstrate the vital role that capacity-building can play in empowering women to be the catalyst of change in their communities. Further, the study demonstrates that empowerment approaches not only contribute to improved self-esteem and self-confidence among women, which in turn increases their engagement in decision-making; but that this increased engagement produces tangible benefits to communities by improving their access to public goods.

<sup>01</sup> All members are elected, and main functions include public welfare, maintenance of law and order, revenue collection, development and adjudication.

<sup>02</sup> Concept of Natural Leaders in Nijera, CARE Bangladesh internal paper.

<sup>03</sup> The 2011 PIA undertaken between September and October covered 90 communities and 1,888 participants including 1,120 women. It is a robust and diverse participatory monitoring system which relies predominantly on random sampling.

<sup>04</sup> This comprised a small sample of four groups of male and female natural leaders (12 per group) in two villages of two Unions.

<sup>05</sup> Para Unnayan Committees comprise natural leaders and community members who coordinate community development activities.

<sup>06</sup> Empowering Knowledge and Transforming Actions – a women and adolescent local forum for addressing women and social issues.

<sup>07</sup> CARE Bangladesh's PPA IV, Year 1 Governance Report.

<sup>08</sup> For the purposes of this case study, only those in the SETU programmes core villages (para) have been counted. 2,301 (996 women) more from SETU pilot communities have had access to these programmes.

<sup>09</sup> The Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) and Vulnerable Group Feeding card are food assistance programmes for the most vulnerable households.