



# Learning Brief

## OIKKO: Unity Women working together for change

**OVERVIEW** Garment workers in Bangladesh are taking collective action to improve their situation. Empowering women to work together is bringing positive changes across many areas of their lives.

In 2018 CARE's [Made by Women](#) strategy commissioned an outcome harvesting evaluation to help understand the range of outcomes achieved by OIKKO. This learning brief outlines the major findings and lessons learned.

### BACKGROUND: OIKKO

OIKKO, which means Unity in Bangla, was a 3 year project from March 2015-February 2018. CARE Bangladesh implemented this project using their EKATA model to support a strong and united civil society which promotes the realisation of fundamental labour rights in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector in Bangladesh.

The project was supported by CARE Austria with funding from the European Union and the Austrian Development Agency.

# >20000

women were motivated to join trade unions.

EKATA groups support workers to collectively identify gaps in access to rights, identify actions to address these issues, and provide a safe, established space in which to organise that collective action.

# >5000

women participating in more than 170 solidarity and community support groups by 2018.

### BACKGROUND: THE EKATA MODEL

[EKATA \(Empowerment, Knowledge and Transformative Action\) groups](#) are a unique model developed and tested by CARE Bangladesh to build women's solidarity, critical awareness and collective action. EKATA groups support women to collectively identify issues and form collective action plans in a safe, established space.

CARE Bangladesh has worked with the garment industry for more than 20 years. CARE adapted the EKATA model for use in urban centres to promote workers' rights for garment workers and since 2011 has worked with partners to build EKATA groups in communities around garment factories. Alongside this, under the OIKKO project CARE engaged trade unions to provide gender training, conduct worker outreach training to organise more women into the unions, and develop supporting tools such as a compensation calculation toolkit.

CARE's research found the EKATA approach, combined with support to trade unions, is far more effective than training for supporting worker empowerment. Our experience shows individual training approaches on rights and life skills can support individuals to make better informed decisions and raise some demands on their own behalf, but this is unlikely to facilitate the collective action on a broader scope of rights-based issues seen as a result of EKATA.

For more information on how CARE worked to promote women's leadership and empowerment in the garment industry, see CARE's overview of *The EKATA Model*.

### WOMEN TAKING ACTION

[Manu\\*](#) was the only EKATA member at her factory. When Manu learned her factory would close, she informed the factory managers that she and others would protest if they were not fully paid. Her leadership ensured more than 400 workers received full salaries and compensation.



# What have we achieved?

The outcome harvest evaluation provided clear evidence OIKKO enabled women garment workers to raise demands and access their legal rights, both within the workplace and outside of work.

## WORKPLACES

### Women workers are demanding access to legal rights and entitlements.

New worker leaders are emerging. Workers are deploying smart, collaborative tactics to strengthen their bargaining position. Women's increased skills and confidence to engage with factory management is benefitting individuals and the broader workforce—women are not just raising issues for themselves, but to support others and on behalf of large numbers of workers in their factories.

### OIKKO enabled workers to:

- Claim maternity pay.
- Support others to apply for sick leave.
- Insist on action against abusive supervisors.
- Demand and receive minimum wage.
- Ensure payment of salaries and compensation for factory closure.
- Request and gain improved facilities.

## COMMUNITY

### Community groups are working together to resolve issues affecting women.

The EKATA approach to raising demands collectively has been successful at getting resolution of a range of community-level issues of concern to women workers.

### OIKKO enabled women to:

- Ensure community leaders address sexual harassment.
- Gain improved infrastructure in their homes through engaging local authorities.
- Gain more accessible services from health providers.

## HOUSEHOLD

### Changed gender relations are resolving household level issues which negatively affect women.

EKATA groups and community actors were important influencers to support improved gender relations.

### OIKKO enabled women to:

- Secure divorce with the support of others, which freed one woman from an abusive husband.
- Prevent a child marriage through engagement with the family.
- Open formal savings accounts to gain autonomy over their salaries.

## UNIONS

### Trade union partners are changing how they operate so more women are engaged and issues of particular concern to the women are better represented.

The number of workers in unions in Bangladesh remains very low (<5%). Men are disproportionately represented in union membership and leadership positions. More unions are recognising the importance of women's representation, which can lead to greater respect of rights for women workers.

### OIKKO enabled:

- Unions to increase the number of women members.
- More women to gain leadership and decision-making positions in unions.
- Formation of new unions in seven factories.

**“After the formation of [EKATA] groups, timely payment of salary and proper payment of overtime has been ensured.”**

Aklima, garment worker

## How did we get there?

### 1 Raising workers' awareness of gender inequalities and knowledge about their rights.



This included workplace rights as well as broader women's rights also relevant to the community, such as gender-based violence and sexual harassment.

### 2 Building and enhancing women's skills in leadership, communication and taking collective action.



Focusing the skills building element of EKATA on confidence building, collective organising and action was important, as workers applied these skills to raise demands in the workplace and community.

### 3 Providing an organised space for workers to collaborate.



This supported them to identify gaps in access to rights, identify actions to address these issues, and organise collective action.

### 4 Gender sensitisation and outreach training for trade union and federation leaders.



This demonstrated to union leaders the value of developing women union outreach activists who could reach out and organise women workers.

### 5 Resources for Trade Union and Federation representatives.



CARE's Compensation Toolkit and Worker Outreach Model supported them to more effectively represent workers.

#### WOMEN TAKING ACTION

Through her EKATA group, Sita\* learned about the legal minimum wage and realised she did not receive this. She requested the correct salary from management and organised a peaceful strike. The factory raised salaries to the mandated legal minimum and paid back-pay to all staff within a month.

#### WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Nilima\* started out as member of an EKATA group, progressed to lead a Community Worker Association and today is a Federation leader.

#### WOMEN TAKING ACTION

Maaryam\* and Rafia\* gained confidence from their EKATA group to address issues affecting women workers. They successfully persuaded factory administrators to install separate bathrooms for the 400 women employees.

#### WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

A garment Federation in Dhaka increased the number of women members by 20% and the number of women on the Executive Committee has increased from 11 to 17.

#### WOMEN TAKING ACTION

Women from nine EKATA groups collaborated with neighbours and others in the community to ask a private healthcare provider to make their services more accessible. They succeeded in securing a 50% reduction in the price of some services in clinics that are accessible to workers after dark.

\* Names changed to protect identities.



## What have we learned?

### **This model enables a shift from awareness to action.**

The scope of actions taken by workers, and the access to rights and entitlements gained, are far beyond the more limited outcomes seen from training or awareness raising activities.

Future projects using the EKATA model should build on the integrated awareness-skills-group formation-relationship building approach. They should consider integrating other inputs found to be important for achieving outcomes, such as introductions to duty bearers and influencers, facilitators directly assisting workers in raising demands, and interventions at household level to support women's participation.

### **Comparison of group success would help determine the most effective inputs.**

Success—in terms of participation, demands raised and issues resolved—was variable between groups. If the EKATA approach is to inspire further interventions, the factors that determine which groups are more or less successful should be examined in more detail.

### **There is a need to engage duty bearers to reduce the risks for women.**

Interventions which promote demand-raising by those with little power must acknowledge this can put people at risk of reprisals or negative consequences.

Future projects using the EKATA model should consider what can be done to soften the stance of duty-bearers and improve their respect for rights and responsiveness to workers' demands in order to mitigate risk and promote positive outcomes.

### **There is potential for further amplification of achievements.**

The sustainability and potential amplification of OIKKO achievements beyond the examples evident in the outcomes is not clear and could be investigated further.

Some very significant outcomes were achieved that will have lasting effects, such as the rise to executive leadership of a federation of a female RMG worker. However, more could be learned about the sustainability of OIKKO achievements by harvesting outcomes from the broader networks formed from the original EKATA groups.

## What's next?

CARE is using the lessons learned from OIKKO to inform our future projects. In particular, we are:

- Promoting the use of EKATA and worker collectives in our programming to move beyond training approaches and enable collective action to promote rights.
- Expanding and adapting the EKATA model to different country contexts. In addition to continuing to increase the number of EKATA groups in Bangladesh, as of June 2019:
  - 18 groups are meeting in Indonesia with over 350 members. This will expand to over 50 groups with more than 1,000 members by the end of 2019.
  - 10 groups are meeting in Vietnam with over 300 members. This will expand to 25 groups with more than 750 members by the end of 2019.
- Supporting EKATA groups to self-define their future direction so they can continue to meet and take action. Some groups in Bangladesh have merged into larger Community Worker's Associations and are working to formally register as trade unions.
- Building on our work to promote grassroots women leaders, supporting them to grow as leaders in their workplaces and at the national and global levels.



See more stories of change at [care.org/madebywomen](https://care.org/madebywomen).



**Made by Women**

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