

Feminism in Bangladesh: 1971-2000
Voices from Women's Movement



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List of Acronyms

AL	Awami League
AML	Awami Muslim League
APWA	All Pakistan Women's Association
ASF	Acid Survival Foundation
ASK	Ain O Shalish Kendro (Legal and Arbitration Centre in English)
BKSL	Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (Bangladesh Farmer's and Laborer's Awami League in English)
BMP	Bangladesh Mahila Parishad
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
BNWLA	Bangladesh Women Lawyers Association
BPFA	Beijing Platform for Action
BWRB	Bangladesh Women's Rehabilitation Board
CEDAW	Convention on Elimination of Discrimination against Women
CPB	Communist Party of Bangladesh
CPI	Communist Party of India
CRC	Convention on the Rights of Children
CSW	Commission on the Status of Women
DMC	Dhaka Medical College
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
ECPB	East Pakistan Communist Party of Bangladesh
EPMP	East Pakistan Mahila Parishad
FYP	Five Year Plan
INSTRAW	International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women
IPPF	International Planned Parenthood Federation
IWF	Indian Women's Federation
IWRAW	International Women's Rights Action Watch
JP	Jatiyo Party
JSD	Jatiyo Shamajtantrik Dal (National Socialist Party in English)
MoWCA	Ministry of Women and Children Affairs
MP	Member of Parliament
MSP	Mahila Shongram Parishad (Women's Revolutionary Council in English)
NAP	National Plan of Action
NDP	National Democratic Party
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
NP	Naripokkho

NWDP	National Women Development Policy
PSC	Public Service Commission
Sangat	South Asian Feminist Network
SAP	Structural Adjustment Policy
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
VAW	Violence against Women
WCW	World Conferences on Women
WfW	Women for Women
WIDF	Women's International Democratic Federation
WoL	War of Liberation

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SUMMARY

This thesis analyses feminist formulations through the eyes of the key protagonists of the women's movement spanning over the first three decades of Bangladesh (1971-2000). The study attempts to look at the development and evolution of feminist thought by sifting through the voices of the women's movements and activism in contemporary Bangladesh. The focus is to reveal the particular forms and contents of feminist thought, its indigenous and autonomous forms, alongside its contemporary trends and nature, underscoring its distinct features if any. This entire effort, encapsulated in four major chapters, intends to look into the complex process of issues raised, and responses made by the women's movement.

In order to taper this intricate and vast engagement under one umbrella, three major women's organisations (Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Women for Women and Naripokkho) were purposefully selected to locate feminist constructions. Each represented their distinctive nature and characteristics, with their own historical rationale that make them worthy of being selected as the most prominent organisations of the country. Voices from the key protagonists of the movement, representing these three organisations are the mainstay of this thesis.

This study has chosen four broad areas i.e. violence against women, rights for women, question of religion and interface between state and global feminism, with fourteen sub-issues in total under each category, which are again found to be connected and intermingled with each other. Among the four broad areas selected, VAW (Chapter Two) emerged as the most common thread for all, overarching the entire array of the movement. Under VAW, the most prominent concerns highlighted by the respondents included the following: war time rape and atrocities against women in 1971, rehabilitation process by the state in association with the key persons from the movement, including abortion, adoption and declaration of war victims as *Birangona*. Apart from its engagement in the rehabilitation process during the seventies, the women's movement highlighted the issue of death in the brothel (Case Shabmeher), acid attacks, rape and murder under police custody (Case of Yasmin) during the subsequent decades of the eighties and nineties.

The second most important of the issues around which the women's movement in Bangladesh grew most vocal was the demand for rights in family, work and politics (Chapter Three). Right based movement focusing on family issues rotated around the demand for Anti-Dowry Act in 1980 and movement for Uniform Family Code (UFC) in 1992, alongside the

movement towards establishing women's rights over their own bodies and body as site of resistance. In order to establish women's rights in private or family setting, the dowry movement during the eighties was successful in terms of passing the Anti-Dowry Act (1980). The movement for UFC gained momentum during the late eighties. In spite of long painstaking and diligent work, the demand was finally co-opted with the advent of an all-encompassing CEDAW or other human rights conventions.

The issue of body politics was first raised in public around reproductive health. Women's body as site of resistance gained momentum during the nineties, manifesting mainly around reproductive rights, by demanding choice and access to information regarding available contraception and standing against state policy for population control as well as against the controversial role of multinational corporations. The issue of body was raised again around the question of 'prostitutions' and 'sex work'. The most controversial demonstration took place around women's rights in the public sphere demanding rights to livelihood and declaring 'sex work as work' during the late nineties. Through a High Court verdict 'sex work' was declared a legitimate profession in 2000. Chapter Three also elaborates on the responses of the movement for ensuring women's rights in politics which entailed critique of the Constitution and identifying the loopholes inherent to it as a recurrent hindrance to women's rights and freedom. Continuous mobilisation demanding direct election in reserved seats at local level and parliament finally led to a revolutionary legal gain allowing direct election in the reserved seats for women at the local level in 1997.

The third broad area that was raised by key figures in the movement was the question of religion (Chapter Four). The affinity with secularism and its contestation with the women's movement were largely identified as one of the unresolved arenas within feminist understanding and of the nation, till today. The politics of dress and deportment was also emphasised as a critical arena of contestation for feminist formulations. Rising adoption of Islamic style of dress was perceived with caution by the respondents. The uneasy relationship between feminist articulations and religion has been highlighted by many from the movement. The case of Taslima Nasrin came under the broad heading of fatwa and other religious sanctions and restrictions imposed upon the women's movement as a whole and on women in particular.

Chapter Five highlights the complex interfaces between the women's movement, state and global or UN led feminism. It was perceived that during its journey through various

political junctures like war of liberation, democracy, military and autocratic regime, caretaker or interim government, democracy under female leaderships, the women's movement had to deploy various approaches and tactics to deal with these complexities. The strategisation in relations to the state apparatus ranged from being cooperative to confrontational, from being silent and distancing to conflicting, challenging and making negotiations. This dilemma of maintaining a relationship of 'love and hate' with the state apparatus is found to be perpetual and has often moulded feminist formulations at different points in time.

Since the inception of Bangladesh, global feminism, and particularly UN-led feminism, played an influential role shaping the pathway of both the state and the women's movement. However, global feminism was a double-edged sword for the movement. On one hand it made the journey easier for the movement by providing an internationally accepted norm and charter for the emancipation and advancement of women, but the flipside of this coin is the shadowing of local agendas, local forms and priorities.

There are major trends and drifts in the women's movement in Bangladesh following a complex and varied path manifested itself in unity and diversity, linking theory and activism, by producing feminist knowledge and engaged in struggle for an equitable society. Feminism in Bangladesh is thus to be understood in terms of its historical contextuality, in its multiplicity, addressing the complex interactions and interfaces with the local and global, in its embeddedness in the socio-political environment and through its epistemological growth and development. Feminism in Bangladesh is a 'layered mosaic' (Sangat, 2006), historically created by the processes of alignment and realignment, mixing and mingling of diverse interest, priorities and strategies.

Chapter One

Feminism in Bangladesh: 1971-2000 An Overview of Issues and Strategies

I

Introduction

Studies of the feminist movement and feminist epistemology have now established themselves as a legitimate body of knowledge in academia. Feminist studies have largely been associated with the West during the age of enlightenment in Europe and ever since this branch of knowledge has developed a distinct epistemological position that includes ideas, ideals, political commitments, and methodological perspectives. All of this has contributed in theory construction. It has grown and developed through movements, activism, and negotiations with various actors using numerous strategies and ranges of approaches, thoughts and trends all over the world. Feminisms have evolved into a separate discipline with multiplicity being an important aspect.

It is now widely accepted that the West is not the sole home of feminism. In fact it is understood that in both the East and West, feminism has its own roots, history, specific material and ideological basis in every country (Khullar, 2005; Falguny, 2010). The strength of contemporary feminism lies in this idea of plurality, yet at the same time this multiplicity of approaches, positions and strategies poses the greatest challenge for feminism. However, over the last decades feminisms in the East have been established as a distinct body of knowledge and activism. It has developed its own agenda, revealed its own history of feminist movement and redefined its specific theoretical alignment while producing a rich and diverse feminist scholarship. It has broken thus ground for more critical engagement towards new horizons. This thesis thus is an attempt to explore and excavate the trajectory of the history of the women's movement, discover and rediscover the feminist heroes otherwise ignored and marginalised (Jayawardena, 1986).

Theoretical Underpinnings of Feminist Thought: The Women's Movement and Feminisms

The women's movement and feminism are inextricably linked with each other. The women's movement can be defined as an organised set of constituents pursuing a common

political agenda of change through collective action, meaning that the women's movement seeks equal rights and status between men and women while giving women the opportunity and options to construct their own identity and life patterns. It is engaged in collective activities using a variety of strategies. Feminism on the other hand is the theoretical framework with an epistemological position. Feminism combines both theory and action. The most essential feature of feminism is its political commitment to enacting change in society. The symbiotic relationship between the women's movement and feminism is crucial to the understanding of theory building in feminist scholarship. The women's movement leads to feminisms and feminisms in turn influence the women's movements (Kramarae & Treichler, 1985; Humm 1992).

Initially feminism started its journey by questioning the binary differentiation between men and women. Later it broadened its umbrella by addressing all sorts of discrimination and marginalisation across lines of race, class, caste, ethnicity, religion, ability and sexual orientation (Batliwala, 2008). The emergence of feminist ideas and feminist politics is based on the understanding that, in all societies which divide the sexes into differing cultural, economic or political spheres, women are less valued than men. Feminism also depends on the premise that women can consciously and collectively change their social position for the better.

Feminism is both a doctrine of equal rights for women (the organised movement to attain women's rights) and an ideology of social transformation aiming to create an equitable world for women, men and all the other social categories which are discriminated against in a particular social milieu. Feminism also depends on the belief that the sexes are culturally constructed and not just biologically formed. It recognises the need to understand the specific nature and conditions of women's oppression in various cultures, societies and economies. A person, female or male, whose worldview places the female in the centre of life and society, and/or who is not prejudiced based on gender or sexual preference can be called a feminist. Also, anyone in a male- dominated or patriarchal society who works toward the political, economic, spiritual, sexual, and social equality of women are part of feminist struggle.

Feminism transcends the accepted value systems of the time by exposing the existing prejudices and narrowness; it tries to bring to fruition a desire for a truly general conception of humanity (Humm, 1992; Kemp & Squires, 1997). Feminism in a broader sense is not only about women but stands for gender equality—for the transformation of all social relations of

power that oppress, exploit or marginalise any set of people, women or men, boys or girls, on the basis of their gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, race, religion, nationality (Jenainati & Groves, 2010; Batliwala, 2008).

Contemporary feminism, particularly from the South Asian perspective, is even wider than any other theoretical framework exploring unequal relationship between the social actors in a specific context. It talks about economic policies based upon food security, clean renewable energy, and ecological soundness, for a sustainable future for the planet, all its species and its natural resources. It strives for economic transformation that creates greater social equity and fosters human development. Feminism stands for political transformation that guarantees full citizenship rights, full body of human rights, and for secular, plural, democratic regimes that are transparent, accountable and responsive to all their citizens. Feminism opposes all sorts of violence, stands against wars and conflicts that displace, violate, subjugate and impoverish both men and women. It stands for responsible co-dependence rather than individualism, right to freedom of choice of individuals, talks about power within, while wanting to change the practice of power by creating new generations of actors and leaders, and creating respectful spaces and roles. Feminism stands against all ideologies and all forms of fundamentalisms and religious extremism that advocates against equal rights of any people (Sangat, 2006, 2010).

The basic tenets of feminism lies in its plurality and multiplicity in motivation, approaches or methods used, and experiences explored. Given its diversity, there lies a variety of schools of thought for feminisms (Kemp & Squires, 1997), examples of which include Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, Socialist Marxist Feminism, Post-Colonial/Third World Feminism, Eco Feminism, Feminism of Asian/Black and Women of Colour/Anti-Racist Feminism, Psychoanalytical Feminism, Existentialist Feminism, Post Modern Feminism, Gay and Lesbian Feminism, Global Feminism, Standpoint, Disability, Power, Cyber Feminism and Post Feminism (Bryson, 1992, 1999; Tong 1998).

It is important to note that all these approaches are not homogeneous and are often profoundly and bitterly divided, tinted by theoretical differences, competing arguments and assumptions. To my understanding, these debates and opinions are complementary to rather than only competitive with each other. The boundaries are often fluid, interlocking and interactive. The richness of feminism lies in its diverse fluidity and understanding of the

specificity in its variability, drawing its abundance from all these theoretical schools and approaches.

This particular tenet brings us to probe into postmodernist approaches to feminism. Feminism has its affinity with post modernism. Postmodernism has its profound effect upon the study of politics and academic feminist theory. Many feminists are drawn by its paradoxically confident assertion that ‘there is no truth’, a statement that announces its celebration of plurality, multiplicity and difference. According to this school of thought, ‘meaning’ is not fixed since there is no single truth—it can be endlessly constructed and reconstructed. This means our understanding of anything can never be final and complete, that our knowledge is always limited and partial. The process of ‘truth claim’ is inherently open ended rather than closed (Bryson, 1999; Harding, 1987; Gellner, 1992). Understanding of women’s oppression, marginality, absence and repression as peripheral, in varying contexts, in its plurality is hailed by many post-modernist feminists. They share a common desire to think non-binary, non-oppositional thoughts (Tong, 1998).

The negation of mega theory, constant deconstruction of fixed understanding and discourses and its refusal to develop one overarching explanation and solution is both liberating and exciting for many feminists. But the resonance between feminism and post-modernisms is not a smooth one—it remains an ‘uneasy alliance’¹ encompassing both celebration and critique. Feminism, though against any form of ‘essentialism’, is also bound by its political component—the desire to emancipate the women from their subjugated position. This generalized understanding finds itself in conflict with post-modernism. For its opponents, post modernism is divisive to the ‘solidarity’ of women—a politically dangerous approach which denies the reality of human suffering. It is accused of being incapable of making moral distinctions between freedom and slavery (Bryson, 1992, 1999).

Despite all the criticisms and debates raised against postmodern feminism, it remains one of the most exciting developments in contemporary feminist thought. The wider discussion of post-modern feminism as discussed in Tong (1998) places this approach beyond simple construction and deconstruction of discourse but creates a space for analysis of social practices in—a specific situation. This could enable feminists to engage in traditional or

¹ See Benhabib, et al. (1994) pp. 1-16. Retrieved from <https://www.marxists.org/subject/women/authors/benhabib-seyla/uneasy-alliance.htm>

feminist politics, while retaining a self-conscious awareness of the gendered implications of their activity. According to Tong (1998), "...broader alliances are also possible from a post-modernist perspective, provided that these are provisional and tactical, and that they do not lose sight of the historical and cultural specificity of women's experience." Postmodern feminism thus has all the potential to strike a balance between celebration of multiplicity, historical specificity and provisional and adequate understanding of a reality in everyday lives.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to understand the ways in which feminist issues and concerns emerged and developed in Bangladesh over the first three decades of the nation, from 1971 to 2000. Needless to state, Bangladesh also has a much longer history of this concern in its long anti-colonial struggle which it shared with the sub-continent and later in its journey as part of Pakistan from 1947 to 1971.² Though divided by geopolitical boundaries, Bangladesh shares, with the rest of the subcontinent, a commonality and collective experience of patriarchies, globalisation, authoritarian and undemocratic state structures (Sangat, 2006, 2010; Alexander & Mohanty, 1997). This is a past which this study does not delve into. It is necessary nonetheless, to refer to the longer and very rich trajectory of debates from the past that went into the making of Bangladesh's feminist epistemology and scholarship.

The focus of this research is limited to three decades that were marked by a very vibrant women's movement which at points conjoined with political shifts and change within and outside the country, change in global scenario, at points with questions of nationalist visions, whether secular or religion-based. Such questions are deeply implicated with the gender question. The women's movement in many countries of Asia and the East achieved political and legal equality with men at the judicial level, but failed to make any impression on women's secondary position with the broader patriarchal system of family and society. According to Jayawardena (1986), "feminist consciousness did not develop, except in rare exceptions, to the point of questioning traditional patriarchal structure. This thesis will also try to locate the basis of these successes and failures".

While the term feminism for the most part was not self-consciously used by women's organisations and movements, a quick look at the issues articulated would reveal a feminist

²See, Bagchi, et al. (2000); Alexander & Mohanty, (1997); Basu (1995); Chatterjee (1986, 1993,1997,1999, 2000); Jayawardena (1986, 2003); Sarkar & Sarkar (2008); Sarkar & Butalia (1996); Narayan (1997)

perspective. In Bangladesh, women's organisations were the central actors and sites of feminist articulations. It is also pertinent here to mention that the state played a crucial role in addressing gender issues, often prompted by global feminism or perhaps to portray a more modern image of itself.

In order to locate the feminist formulation within the women's movement this study primarily focuses on three major women's organisations³ of Bangladesh. The three organisations covered are, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), Women for Women: A Research and Study Group (WfW), Naripokkho (NP).

Eleven key figures⁴ from the movement were purposefully selected to outline issues and responses, reactions and nature of their involvement. Seven out of the total eleven interviewees are regarded as the key protagonists of the movement. Information and data were gathered through one-on-one interviews with the respondents, which remain the most vital source of data in this thesis.

Four central issues that have been analysed over the three decades are broadly as follows: violence against women; equal rights for women in family, work and politics; religion, secularism and state policy; and exploration of the interface between state and global feminism.

The Rationale of the Study

As stated earlier, Bangladesh shares its history of the women's movement with the larger history of the Indian subcontinent (Bagchi & Dasgupta, 2003; Chatterjee, 1997, 1986). The legacy is continued through the quest for national and gender recognition since the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country in 1971. Since 1971, the history of the women's movement has traversed a diverse and varied path addressing multiple issues. This thesis is about delineating feminist formulations that arise from the voices of the women's movement, highlighting the debates and dilemmas, consensus and contradictions, dispositions and divisions, diversities and unity, alliances and affiliations within the feminist discourse, during the proposed time frame.

Furthermore, there are significant differences within the movements. Despite the fact that the feminist scholarship in Bangladesh is rich in terms of content, academic analysis, and

³See Appendix A. for organisational profile

⁴See Appendix B. for profiles of the interviewees

emphasis on issues and activism, there has not been enough scholarly work⁵ highlighting the internal dynamics of the movement—the difference, diversities, consensus and divergence—that draws on first-hand information from the key protagonists of the movement. The research based publications that are available are largely descriptive and historical in nature (Begum, 2002, 1989, 1985, 1990; Das, 2003). Some deal with one particular area, such as issues related to violence against women, specifically during Bangladesh war of Liberation (Begum, 2004; Ibrahim, 1998; Kabir & Mehdi, 2006; Mookherjee, 2007, 2008; Hossain, 2009), acid attacks (Roy, et al., 2007; Kiron, 2014), sex workers (Huq, 2005; Azim, Mahmud & Shelly, 2002; Tahmina & Morol, 2004), laws and legal measures (Pereira, 2002; Begum, 2000; Nazneen & Tasneem, 2010), feminist pedagogy (Azim & Zaman, 1994, Guhathakurta, 1997; Chowdhury, 2010), etc. Most of the work either provide a linear history or focus on particular issues without putting them in a broader context of history. Most of the literature largely focuses on the area of gender and development, health, education, environment, garments sector and so on, but mostly in isolation⁶.

As a result, certain issues are hard to find, such as those that relate the movements with their context, including how they have been moulded, their specific natures, strategies and tactics of campaign, interaction with state and global women's movement, the internal dynamics of the movement and its interaction with the broader socio-political milieu which are crucial to feminist formations.

The present study seeks to locate the women's movement in relation to its feminist formulations, responses on certain selected issues in VAW, rights of women to work, interaction with the state in relation to religion, and linking these issues with the tactics, strategisation, diplomacy and devices used in upholding their feminist agendas on the above.

Changes in political regime and nature of the state play a critical role in this mediation and formulation of feminist agendas. The influence of UN-led global feminism has also shaped and moulded the nature and content of the movement. This study thus seeks to move beyond the simple narration of events or looking at one particular issue in seclusion, but attempts to look into issues raised by the women's movement leading to feminist formulation,

⁵Mention can be made here of a few studies in this area by Maleka Begum, Roushan Jahan, Rounaq Jahan, Najma Chowdhury, Niaz Zaman, Firdous Azim, Meghna Guhathakurta and many more. See Chowdhury (1994); Jahan (1995, 1981); Azim & Zaman (1994); Guhathakurta (1997); Jahan (1995); Nazneen & Sultan (2010) for detail.

⁶Each of the separate areas were not the focus of this study but only visited as and when necessary within the trajectory of the women's movement

looking at the debates and dilemmas, diversity and consensus, niches and nuances, negotiation and manoeuvring for the sake of the cause and, most importantly, relating it with the broader context of social and political dimensions of the country. Attempts are made here to excavate the transitional leap, the extent of autonomous expression and activism. It looks into the nature of protest and mobilisation, gaining consent and support from the masses or women as a category. The study tries to delineate the attainments and achievements of the movement, the degree of conscious choices made versus situational compulsion, level of compromise and co-optation by the stronger opponent.

Using the vantage point of the women's movement, this study will invariably look at the changing nature of the state and society. It is also important to note that the dynamics of the Bangladesh state and society have undergone significant changes both in terms of forms of government and the cultural atmosphere of the country⁷. Accordingly, the women's movement also underwent a series of negotiations in the form of the five C's: cooperation, concession, conciliation, compromise and confrontation. These were applied depending upon the stake of the issue at hand, the nature of the state and, most importantly, the alliances and political leanings of the particular women's organisations or of the individual respondent.

Through a discussion on women's issues over three decades one can trace a series of fissures and contesting worldviews between a secular imagination and religious imagination and their struggles over state power. This thesis, while dwelling upon the story of the women's movement, will also attempt to describe how the narratives and responses of key figures in the women's movement have interacted with the broader questions of state ideology and power politics which are played out through gender issues. The reason why gender issues offer such an important vantage point is because it is the core structural principle of our society.

Now, in 2014, four decades later, it is almost impossible to capture the entire range of events and intricacies in the history of the women's movement. Hence the focus here is on a selective survey of major formulations, organisations and key figures, concentrating on the

⁷See below under the subsection entitled 'Geo-physical Background' for the political shifts and forms of governments over the three decades, starting from democracy in 1971, to military backed quasi democracy, martial law, presidential form from 1975-1990, to parliamentary government, interim Caretaker governments and democratic governments under female leadership since the last two decades during nineties till today (2014).

terms in which issues were defined and fought for, the kind of interactions that took place, the issues which received the most attention and how they were developed.

This study thus focuses on the first three decades of modern Bangladesh, i.e. the seventies, eighties and the nineties. It looks at three major women's organisations as mentioned above. It studies the nature of mobilisation, its visible protests, its active confrontations and negotiations with the state and other social and political agents of the society. It compares different kinds of mobilisation, from mass movements to lobbying with the power structure. It also looks at the routes of cooperation, concession, compromise and confrontation and seeks to capture the content and form of feminist agendas within these three selected organisations.

An analysis of issues raised in the three decades reveals that the women's movement has historically evolved and revolved around four main threads weaving the tapestry of the movement in Bangladesh. Among the numerous issues raised within the women's movement, this thesis has isolated four major areas as its primary field of research. By tracing the ways these issues were addressed as changes occurred in different political regimes, the study also hopes to contribute towards an understanding of why so many crucial issues are forgotten or ignored. It will also try to answer why some issues persist as agendas and some are thrust aside, some have little direct impact upon society while others create long term impact and continue to revert back at different points of time. For instance, some issues such as the demand for Uniform Family Code (UFC), or constitutional changes remain muted, while big achievements like the Anti-Dowry Act continues to be ineffective as, despite continuous effort, VAW remains as ever pervasive.

Some issues on the other hand linger unresolved—questions of national and gender identity, the issue of women's body and sexuality, religion and questions around secularism are all open ended areas are as yet unsettled. Then again old issues that have re-emerged, such as war crimes and women's equal rights in private and public spheres, also shed light on the ebb and flow of the women's movement. The main aim of this thesis is to connect and analyse how and why these issues appear or disappear, gain strength or become less important in the public arena in the broader context of changing the nature of state and society.

Objective and Scope of the Study

The focus here is to locate the feminist articulation within the women's movement, covering the period of first three decades, looking at four areas and drawing its data from three major autonomous women's organisations through direct one-on-one interviews of leaders of the women's movement. Incidentally, the research almost falls into a neat pattern according to political regime and state⁸ formation. For example, the decade of the seventies was marked by the emergence of a new state and was followed by a brief period of democracy, political shift and unrest, coups and counter coups. The eighties were dominated by military backed autocratic regimes, and the nineties were the period of democratisation, led by two women leaders. This historical coincidence by which different socio-political phases fall into well-ordered decades facilitates our work further. While attempting to place the feminist formulation in a broader context of interaction with society as a whole, the focus would also be such that one can identify how the nature of state has shaped the women's movement and how the movement has interacted and negotiated with the state apparatus at different points in time. The interface between the women's movement and UN-led feminisms will also be explored.

The literature reviewed and data collected from interviews have revealed a long list of interesting issues, many of which are crucial to the overall analysis of feminist formulation. However, this thesis has selected only four major areas to concentrate upon. Feminist formulation around these areas⁹ will be explored are:

- Violence against women
- Equal rights for women in family, work and politics
- Role of state around the question of religion, secularism and gender
- Interface between the women's movement, the state and global feminism

Apart from exploring secondary sources, primary data was generated through direct interviews of eleven key activists and feminists from the movement representing each of selected organisations which is the main prop of this thesis.

⁸State and government have been used as synonymous in most of the cases in this thesis.

⁹I am aware that it would be difficult to separate the above issues into distinct categories. Some amount of overlapping is inevitable and perhaps not undesirable. Boundary-setting would therefore be more of an analytical exercise to facilitate both writing and analysis.

The main research question being pursued here is, what are the specific *forms* and *content* of contemporary women's movement in Bangladesh with particular reference to the first three decades? The sub questions related to this attempts to explore the roles, reactions, responses and activism of the women's movement in formulating the content and nature of feminist issues with specific reference to the four main areas outlined above and the sub-issues under each broad areas,
What is the nature of interaction of the women's movement with multiple stake holders and actors in the society? How far is the women's movement heterogeneous, multiple and plural?

Conceptualisation of The Term 'Feminism' and 'Movement': Towards an Explanation

I was faced with ambivalence and dilemma while deciding upon the title of my thesis. I also realised that the concept of 'feminism' in the title of my thesis seemed to be a contested term in itself. Phrasing the conceptualisation of the research theme posed a difficult challenge. I wanted to explore the feminist formulations as manifested in the women's movement, but the question was about how to label the topic—as 'women's movement', 'women centred' or 'women and gender issues' or simply as 'feminist'?

Feminism, except in academia, is not a commonly used term in Bangladesh. The Bangla translation of the word feminism is '*naribaad*' which is rather stigmatised and considered as foreign to this land due to being largely associated with Western radicalism. This ambiguity regarding the term is however not restricted to Bangladesh and has been a persistent issue in most non-Western countries (Chaudhuri, 2004).

The feminist formulations voiced till today are popularly accepted as part of 'the women's movement' or movement for women's right, but not specifically termed as 'feminist'. Given all these contextual embeddedness it was finally decided to leave it to my respondents to identify their activism on their own terms. I left the issue open to them to decide how they would like to label themselves in terms of their positioning within the broader organisational as well as their personal locations. The 'assumed' dilemma around the term 'feminism' is expected to be understood through this exploration in the context of Bangladesh. Despite my apprehension, all of my seven key respondents clearly stated that they identify themselves as 'feminists', but the term is not commonly used and carries little relevance to the broader cultural context of Bangladesh. 'The women's movement' on the other hand is more clearly understood, more accepted as a term and can be communicated

more easily to all. As mentioned earlier, in non-Western regions there is always be a degree of hesitance in using the term ‘feminism’. In Bangladesh context too, this term has not been used by the protagonists themselves in the organisational level. But while reflecting upon their own academic understanding and positioning within the wider framework of the women’s movement, both the activists and key figures in academia identified themselves as ‘feminist’ (*naribadi* in Bangla). In this connection the title reaches its destination in terms of choosing the word ‘feminism’ and labelling the respondents as ‘feminist’ without any confusion or hesitation.

The choice of the word ‘feminism’ in the title of this thesis has been a deliberate one. The reason is that in some fundamental ways it encompasses the entire range of issues which the women’s movement articulated from its very inception in both the West and the non-West. Walby (1997) argues that in order to ascertain whether a movement or scholarship can be understood as ‘feminist’, one must examine whether issues and practices of a movement or study are feminist rather than whether a scholar or movement is self-defined as ‘feminist’. Given this understanding, the thesis looks at the manner in which the women’s movement in Bangladesh has, in practice, raised issues inextricably linked with feminism, namely: addressing VAW, questions of equal rights in the public and private sphere, interface between religion, secularism and the women’s question.

The word ‘movement’ is also not beyond contestation and dilemma. Coming into agreement with the phrase ‘movement’ also stems from the personal understanding of the term. The discourses around women and gender issues have gradually evolved and taken shape in Bangladesh and are constantly changing. Thus conceptualising the women’s movement or just the word ‘movement’ entails a historical understanding. Since childhood I have experienced and seen the emergence of Bangladesh during the late sixties and seventies. I have also seen the movement for democracy (anti-Ershad movement) during the eighties and very recently the mass upsurge in Shahbag¹⁰. I seem to have a very clear ‘notion’ of

¹⁰ Recently (2013) the issue of war crimes resurfaced on the occasion of a particular verdict by the war crimes tribunal, which was initiated in February 2013. Mass protests, demonstrations and mobilisation took place at Shahbag, Dhaka (commonly known as *Projonmo Chottor, later Gonojagoron Moncho* at the time) against a verdict, when Quader Molla, a well-known *razakar* (collaborator of Pakistan army) was sentenced to life imprisonment. The main demand of the spontaneous mobilisation at Shahbag was life sentence or capital punishment for the accused because of his involvement in genocide, direct killing, atrocities, rape of an eleven year old girl etc. The protest continued from 5th February 2013 onwards. People from all walks and segments of life gathered there in solidarity with students, and the new generation of youth, after 42 years of independence. This also demonstrates that although the recent rapes could not mobilise mass protest, not even by the women’s movement, the issue of wartime atrocities embedded in the nationalist ethos proved still more powerful in

movement, more clearly understood through the Bangla word, *andolon*. The connotation of the word *andolon* is hardly reflected in ‘movement’. *Andolon* to me, and also probably to many of our generation, denotes a huge wave of people with clenched fists thrown up, stretched necks, thunderous voices rising in unison with slogans, a seething mass marching on the streets, men, and/or women making demands with a militant force, defying authority, and often facing brutal resistance from the police and law-enforcing agencies. Many of my respondents also feel that the previous notions around movement have considerably changed into newer forms. Following their reflections and despite my own limited and ‘romanticised’ notions of *andolon*, I have used ‘movement’ in a broader sense for academic purposes, to encompass activism of individuals to organisational responses to feminist issues ranging from militant street demonstration to making and placing petition to the state, use of creative slogans to spearhead any particular movement, arranging protests and demands in a milder form of human chains, press conferences, placing of memorandum to the government and ensuring media coverage or writing articles, doing research on women, generating data, engage in preparing a women’s development policy, or to participate in UN-led conferences and mobilising to ratify CEDAW and so on.

II

Methodological Concerns

During the first phase of this research, the challenge was to map the history of the women’s movement and I was overwhelmed with the numerous issues raised by the different agents. For instance, there were state and various women’s organisations, international and national donor agencies producing academic discourse and research/publications on women’s issues. Apart from institutional formulations, feminist articulations were in abundance in NGO literature and activities. UN-led global feminism was also playing a critical role in shaping national feminist agendas. Voices from newly emerged organisations included those involved in creative writing, theatre, creative and visual arts, media and music, while many

rousing mass reactions. However, it was observed that no women’s organisation as such the BMP, NP or WfW declared open solidarity with the ‘*Projonmo Chottor’ or Gonojagoron Moncho* of Shahbag. Individual women leaders were present but not as an organisation, even while most of the political parties and other professional organisations were visible there. The demand was capital punishment for all war criminals. The main slogan was: ‘*Fanshi chai, .. fanshi chai, Razakare er fanshi chai*’ (We want hanging of war criminals/razakars). This again did not highlight the atrocities against women. The demand for justice again co-opted the gender-based violence within its wider parameter of nationalist discourse. Facebook, internet, blog writing and other internet technologies also proved a powerful tool for mass mobilisation, highlighting newer forms of demonstration, mobilisation, movement and leadership.

others were continuously formulating women and gender related issues/agendas at different points in time. Hence it was indeed a great challenge to taper down both the issues and sources catering to the focus of this thesis.

Selection of Issues

While attempting to locate the feminist voices within the broader framework of the women's movement in particular, that the Bangladesh women's movement raised and addressed numerous issues and responded to many, ranging from:

- Nationalist demands for independence and democracy
- War time rape, abortion, adoption and *Birangona*
- Women's participation in war: issue of victimhood vs. agency
- Protesting all sorts of violence against women
- Acid Attacks
- Movement around deaths of Saleha, Shabmeher, Rima, Yasmin
- Movement against *Fatwa*: Nurjahan, Taslima Nasrin
- Addressing welfarist issues like sewerage problems, protesting price hike.
- Movement around reproductive rights and control over one's own body
- Demands for rights in family, work and politics: more specifically expressed through demand for an anti-dowry act, legal demands around family, marriage and divorce, Uniform Family Code (UFC)
- Claiming 'sex work as work',
- Direct election in reserved seats both at local level and in parliament.
- Protesting state decision on religion question
- Responding to global feminism, addressing international decade for women, participating in the international year for women
- Demanding ratification of international conventions and laws for women, more specifically CEDAW
- Mainstreaming gender issues at policy level.
- Creation of knowledge, generation of data on women, research, publication, training
- Lobbying and networking, building linkages, alliances and coalitions

These and many other issues have directed the course of feminist articulations through activism, protest, strategic negotiations, cooperation and confrontation with state, knowledge creation, lobbying at policy level (largely informed and shaped by the state), global feminism and international socio-economic shifts and changes at the global level.

In a context where there are so many layers of issues, it is important to clarify why I chose to confine my focus on four central issues. Given the wide range of issues the women's movement this study chose only those which were defined and highlighted by the key figures (my respondents) of the women's movement, identified as critical and common to the overall field of the women's movement in Bangladesh. I only picked up issues which were highlighted and emphasised by the respondents as crucial to the movement.

It was indeed a big challenge to narrow down the scope of this thesis by identifying critical issues contributing to the formulation of feminist agendas by the women's movement. Despite the fact that generalisation runs the risk of marginalisation, I had to go through a process of generalisation in identifying the 'constant and major' themes, using my own subjective discretion along with certain methodological stance which followed the broad indications of my respondents. The main purpose was to contract the issues to a more comprehensive platform in order to remain within a boundary which is necessary for any academic exercise. At the same time I am fully aware and conscious of having ignored some issues which, I believe, might be relevant for other researchers with different focus and goals. Thus, while struggling through all these apparently sporadic and scattered issues, four major areas emerged as largely constant to the women's movement during the first three decades of Bangladesh. This study thus broadly looked at the responses of the women's movement towards violence against women, equal rights, addressed the question of religion from a feminist perspective, and its responses to state and global feminism.

Selection of Women's Organisations

I have also narrowed down the arena in terms of choosing women's organisations in Bangladesh. My focus is to explore feminist response on the above issues covering three major autonomous women's organisations only.

There are obviously many other important organisations who are formulating women's issues. Nonetheless, I have deliberately selected these as they are the most

prominent ones in the history of Bangladesh's women's movement and are also representative of the diverse nature of women's organisations within the country. These organisations have played a critical role during the period covered, being the most prominent and influential women's organisations and widely accepted as such in the history of the women's movement in the country (MoWCA, GOB, 2000).

Another reason behind selecting these organisations has to do with their distinct characteristics and diversity in terms of activism and knowledge production. Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) and Naripokkho (NP) have their own focus and approach in formulating their agendas and activism through their networks while Women for Women (WfW), a research and study group, is distinctly engaged in knowledge production and have pursued yet another strategy of lobbying and networking in their 'activism'. BMP is the oldest women's organisation, established in 1970 with branches across the country. It can be labelled as belonging to 'liberal school'¹¹ of feminist discourse. Women for Women (WfW), a research and study group, established in 1973, has been primarily engaged in knowledge production and lobbying on policy issues, largely concentrating on creating a data base on the state and status of women in order to strengthen their demand for any intervention. The seventies were marked mainly by the activism of these two organisations¹². WfW has been identified as being a bridge between 'liberal' and 'radical'—connecting all other 'so called' West identified schools of feminist thought, linking activism and academia mainly through its academic exercise.

Naripokkho (NP) on the other hand emerged during the eighties (1983). NP was constantly challenging the existing way of looking at women and reformulating the notion of Violence against Women (VAW), body and sexuality, as well as religion at different points in time. Its position within the broader structure of the women's movement can be identified as belonging to the 'radical' school of feminist thought. NP, like WfW has no branches but extends its network via other connections, affiliations and NGOs as its outreach mechanism.

It needs to be mentioned that this labelling was done by the respondents only for the purpose of understanding the context through a conventional Western lens. Actually, in

¹¹These labels were given by a majority of the respondents themselves, including members belonging to the said organisations.

¹²One needs to note that there were many other small women's organisations and NGOs, *samity* and networks, but these two were considered by the movement as the most prominent autonomous women's organisations during the first decade of the new Bangladesh. BMP particularly had its roots far beyond the nation of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh, the women's movement is not demarcated as 'liberal' or 'radical' but broadly understood as a 'homogeneous' movement around women's rights. Many contemporary literatures have challenged these frameworks and reformulated the appearance of feminist thought in the non-West, tracing the historicity and the genealogy of feminism in particular contexts (Jayawardena, 2003; Narayan, 1997)¹³, embedded in broader social and political milieu. Keeping these in mind, this study hopes to contribute to the overall understanding of feminist formulation in the context of Bangladesh beyond the boundary of Western feminist schools of thought. This study also tries to explore this idea of perceived homogeneity around the broader understanding of the women's movement (more specifically, across selected organisations). Attempts will be made to analyse the diversity of approaches and nature of prioritisation of issues by these organisations to identify their distinct characteristics.

Selection of Key Protagonists of the Women's Movement

All the respondents were purposively selected depending upon their involvement, leadership, contribution in formulating feminist agendas. At least two key figures from each of the organisations were selected, from whom I solicited responses, reactions and information on the areas and issues for this thesis. These key figures are the pioneers in each of the selected organisations and have been involved in the women's movement since its very inception. One-on-one in depth interview with seven key personas from the women's movement, and four more detailed interviews on specific issues, have been the mainstay of this thesis. Accessibility, personal relationship of trust and reliance, permission and consent to use the data in this thesis were also some of the important considerations for selecting the respondents. However, the institutional affiliations often became blurred for the respondents as some were member of all three or at least two of the selected organisation. Some had long since ceased to be part of the organisation. Some are just involved in the movement in personal capacities without being affiliated with any of the organisations selected.

III

The Research Process

The entire course of research and exploration often had to be reflexive and reiterative. The entire research process involved two distinct phases. A great deal of work necessarily had to be historical, looking at archival materials, such as follows:

¹³ Also see, Sangari & Vaid, (1989); Chaudhuri (2004, 2011); Basu (1995); John (2008) for detail.

Sifting Through Secondary Sources

The first attempt was to look into the state discourse, government publications, and literature from the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs of Government of Bangladesh (MoWCA). The purpose was to identify state response towards and activities centred on gender rights.

This was helpful to locate the achievements, gains and steps taken on women's issues from a state perspective. Later, other secondary sources on histories of the women's movement in Bangladesh were explored¹⁴. The main task was to unearth the history of activism, of feminist voicing and its relationship with the state discourse. Another effort was to look at how far the steps taken by the state were induced or influenced by the women's movement and how far the movement has been successful in shaping the state's responses towards women. Apart from the vital role of the state, the influential role of UN-led global feminisms emerged as a critical area of study at this stage.

The initial stage of data gathering comprised of exploring details of events mentioned above in various literatures and looking into archives of old newspapers kept in the Bangla Academy Library. These ventures were not without impediments. Particularly while looking for details on the role of the women's movement in 1971, the work had to be postponed, even partially abandoned, because of the newly emerging agenda of international war crime tribunals by the present government of Sheikh Hasina in 2010. The Government for the time being seized all newspapers and documents of 1971 in order to preserve evidence for the war crime tribunals. The intermittent search for answers led this researcher to the parliament library¹⁵, where I began looking at details of discussions that took place in the parliament, to understand the process of enacting a law or passing of bill on women's issues. Preliminary discussion and sharing of information with people¹⁶ involved in the women's movement both inside the country and beyond was a continuous process, one involving seeking their perspective in trying to generate data and perspectives on the history of the women's movement.

¹⁴Books by Maleka Begum were useful in weaving the story. See for detail, Begum (1989, 2002, 2004). I am indebted to Maleka Begum for her extensive work and these books have immensely helped me in mapping the history of the women's movement.

¹⁵I am acknowledging the immense support received from A K M Rahmatullah, Member of Parliament and Ali Haider of Scholastica School and Gulshan Youth Club.

¹⁶I am especially indebted to all of my respondents: Ayesha Khanam, Firdous Azim, Mahmuda Islam, Maleka Begum, Najma Chowdhury, Rita Das Roy, Roushan Jahan, Samia Afreen, Shireen Huq, Maleka Khan and Meher Kabir for their inspiration, insight, and analytical input.

All these attempts actually shaped the focus of this thesis and to put a boundary to the arena of research and field of data collection. The target was narrowed down to concentrate on the first three decades (1970-2000) of Bangladesh and to explore the feminist formulations within this period only.

Through my first phase of literature review and research on secondary sources it was revealed that Bangladesh has the most vibrant history of the women's movement reflected in the emergence of autonomous women's organisations. I had to narrow down the arena in terms of choosing women's organisations in Bangladesh, covering three major autonomous women's organisations only. Exploring all the activities of the selected organisations was another seemingly insurmountable challenge, mainly because of the volume of data and information available, both material and non-material, i.e. recorded and non-recorded. Most of the organisations reviewed have poor data management system, often not careful about keeping record of dates, pictures or detailed information of the activism pursued by them or the people involved. An enormous amount of information is accessible but these were mostly in disarray, drowning in partial amnesia under the dust of storage.

Looking through the files, pamphlets, manifestoes, meeting minutes, documents, newsletters, publications and unpublished reports, articles, mimeos, newspaper clippings, posters, activity reports, annual reports, conference and workshop reports, training programmes, project work, slogans used at different points in time, visuals like documentaries, video footage, photographs and media representation, published interviews and write ups by key people in the movement, internet and archive search of the selected organisations, was indeed an immense task but an invaluable experience. However, I must confess that with all the effort I could only get a partial glimpse of the whole picture.

The second phase thus necessitated first hand data to reveal the intricate nuances which lie at the heart of the women's movement. The study invariably demanded tapping of corporate memories of the key personas from the movement.

Interviews Culminating into Life Stories: A Process of Sharing and Exchange

As I started with my pilot interviews of one or two key selected figures from my selected organisations, asking them to elaborate on their role and responses on, for example, violence against women or right based movement, the responses I received were all scattered

and often failed to indicate the dates and people involved. Sometimes specific issues were entangled with irrelevant incidents, memory failed when identifying important events. Lack of documentation was another problem which made cross verification a difficult task. All these challenges led me to formulate a more comprehensive interview guideline, identifying events and issues raised under the broader umbrella of the women's movement. My earlier research based on secondary sources have helped me map the events, issues raised, responses made and strategies adopted by the women's movement at different points in time. The outcome was astonishingly brilliant. Information came in abundance, in a more comprehensive and coherent form, when the issues and events were specifically mentioned with dates and context in the guideline.

I gradually realised that usually interviewees would not mention events where they were not directly involved but might have a clear position on the issue. For instance, events like the death of Yasmin¹⁷ or their response to the controversy surrounding Taslima Nasrin¹⁸, might not have been mentioned by some unless and until they were specifically asked. However, it needs to be clarified that in this process one cannot avoid the risk of omission and marginalisation of certain crucial issues. Based on my exploration of secondary sources, a detailed interview guideline was prepared, highlighting relevant issues for each of the organisations as well for the movement as a whole. Respondents then found it easy to identify issues which are relevant for her both on a personal and organisational level. But again one must admit that one single thesis is not enough to capture the entire three decades of the movement while covering all the crucial issues. In cases where I have failed to identify any issue which was relevant for my topic of focus and was also missed out by the respondents, it is probably lost in history or might be waiting to be picked up by some other researcher.

One-on-one interviews¹⁹ were conducted with eleven personalities in total, seven of whom are considered the main figures delineating the full range of the movement during the specific time frame. Most of the interviews were conducted in 2011 from March to September. The interviews were long, continued for two to three hours a day for two to three days. The interviews would always turn into a dialogue, sharing and exchanging of views and information, cross checking of details. The respondents often became involved with the

¹⁷Case of Yasmin, rape and murder under police custody. See Chapter Three for detail

¹⁸Taslima Nasrin, see Chapter Four for detail

¹⁹I have given the recorded CD containing their voices to the respondents hoping that this would help them to sketch their own role in their own words.

research process, taking part in constructing and deconstructing the history. Sometimes the exchanges became very emotional, paused by silent tears, especially during our discussion on 1971 war time atrocities. Laughter and mirth, humour and small anecdotes were shared along with fond memories and reminiscence. Critique encompassed both self-criticism and deconstruction of particular events, even responses by others and oneself. Failures and disappointments were often identified as being time bound, limited to its own historical context and narrow border.

Lastly, the interviews also turned out to be an account of life story, simultaneously creating an oral history of the women's movement alongside unravelling a narration of their own personal life and engagement with feminism. I personally gained immensely through this interview process, both academically and personally. More importantly, a bond was formed between me and the women's movement (despite the fact that I was never an 'activist') which have been a lifelong inspiration for me.

These detailed life stories have actually helped me comprehend the inner dynamics of the movement and its various facades usually absent in secondary sources. It should be mentioned here that not all the respondents were keen to talk about these issues. Leaders who were involved in the particular issues were more informative and had a lot to say on the topic related to their agendas and interests, while some preferred not to make any decisive comments giving instead only a suggestion of consent or disapproval or simple avoidance. I tried to pick up the threads of conversation that would allow for an understanding of feminism in Bangladesh. Interviews were long and detailed, often strayed away from the focus depending upon the particular concern and involvement of the person. Information unearthed were sometimes contradictory to each other and made the process of analysis a complicated one. I tried to keep my data as authentic as possible, linking the voices to the issues at hand, narrating the flow in their articulation by showcasing the divergence and convergence, multiplicity and heterogeneity.

Nevertheless this entire exercise of going back and forth to reassemble the historicity of events within the women's movement has actually enriched the data generated. Many of the existing documents and academic writings by those being interviewed often lacks personal position and mostly expresses organisational affiliation. However, during the interviews, personal views and analysis were allowed to surface, sometimes in retrospection, and a complex but intriguing set of interconnections were revealed.

On the other hand, many have referred to their written works to complement their voice, works where they have articulated their position on certain issues at stake at different point of time. As I have discussed, the interviewees had to go down the memory lane to remember many of the events that took place years ago. While they were narrating, they were simultaneously critically analysing their own views, how their reactions, responses, positions and perspectives have transformed over time on certain issues. Thus, the narration was constantly being complemented with data from the past, mingled with the present and analysed in hindsight. It was neither difficult nor impossible to get a rich glimpses of the growth and development of feminism and feminist scholarships in Bangladesh from these narratives which I have tried to produce verbatim, with slight modification, eliminating repetition. While doing so I have addressed them mostly in first names as in Bangladesh last names coincide for many. Moreover these key figures are mostly known by their first names—which is also part of the cultural setting of the country, to address people by their first name—sometimes by adding ‘*apa*’ to the end to show respect and recognition for women. Moreover I wanted to make it very clear that all my respondents are women. Addressing by the last name had the risk of confusing them as male as I was not using any title like Ms, Mrs or Dr.

Thus while quoting from direct interviews, the conventional western methods of addressing by the last name was not followed here. However in case of in –text references, regular process of citation by last name was followed.

Most of the interviews were in Bangla and were translated by the present writer to English. A significant level of omission and lapse could not be avoided due to translation. This study was also unable to do justice to the magnitude of data and information generated, in terms of using all the information they shared. It was a constant challenge to have to choose between what to retain and what to discard. It was indeed a matter of great disappointment for me that I had to disregard valuable information and insights for the sake of the narrow boundary of the thesis.

Processing of Data and Information into a Coherent Structure

My sources of information on selected organisations ranged from published, unpublished documents, secondary sources, and interviews of key persons involved in the

chosen organisations, their personal and organisational position interwoven with the historical context of larger socio-economic and political context of that particular time frame.

No linear path or blueprint is available for coding and analysing the qualitative data this study has had to cover (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Reinharz & Davidman, 1992; Harding, 1991). The data generated here can only be described as layers of reality, arranged in multiple competing textures and shades unfolding in rich diversity—a journey with complex twists and turns, illuminating unexpected beacons of the women’s movement of Bangladesh. These riches are difficult to confine into categories, classifications and boundaries.

Nevertheless, for the sake of the ‘rules of the game’, it was necessary to regulate the data gathered in a systematic framework. One has to note that the secondary and primary data played a complementary role in this study. Information and data from secondary sources were largely used to contextualise any particular event or to relate issues are connected to other events and occurrences. For example, the case of Shabmeher was identified as the first phase of the sex worker movement, something which was not apprehended fully during the time of occurrence²⁰. These information were largely used to locate the issue under study in its historicity. Introduction of the agenda was only possible through the data gathered from secondary sources. Coding of events in order to organise and arrange them within the time frame according to the scope of the study was the vital part of this exercise.

Studying the primary data gathered from the interviews and life stories were a big challenge. The main challenge was not lack of information but the abundance of it, which was difficult to handle. As noted before, that narrations were shared in retrospection. Review and recapitulation, going back and forth in time became inevitable, which often entailed memory failure, temporary amnesia and overlapping of responses, along with confusion of dates and events. I had to untangle them, systematically classify them from their state of intermingled ‘disorder’ which were rich and complex in their diversity but necessitated sorting and categorisation of the narrations so as to code them under each of the issues and finally organise them under each of my chapters. Discussion, reflection, analysis and insights that emerged from the research were an integral part of data sharing woven throughout the

²⁰See Chapter Two for details

chapters. An attempt was made to sum up the issues discussed exposing feminist proclamations at the end of each chapter.

It was deeply felt during the entire process of research and writing of this thesis that “... the movement is difficult to explain with words, descriptions and analysis. Like music it cannot be trapped into conceptual compartments and artificial divisions without affecting its entirety” (Gandhi & Shah, 1992).

IV

My Own Location and Subjective Quest

My involvement with women, gender and feminist studies dates back to the early nineties (1989-90) when I was working as a Field/ Research Officer in Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) under a Research Project entitled “Analysis of Poverty Trends”²¹. I had to travel to many districts of Bangladesh to collect data on poverty issues. Our Team Leader Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman²² encouraged us to develop a separate module on gender issues and collect data parallel to the main poverty module.

That is how it all started. Through many field visits to collect data for the poverty project I was exposed to the multidimensionality of women’s issues, how it is intermingled with poverty, health and nutrition, body and sexuality issues. And it brought us to see their connections with the larger political structures and also with the coping mechanism and strategies that are adopted by women in their everyday lives.

Later I had the opportunity to pursue my second MA degree on Gender and Development (1993-1994) at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in Sussex. This exposure opened up another window through which to look into, analyse and comprehend the complexity of gender issues on a theoretical plane. The IDS experience was the key to my

²¹ We were told that our research would contribute in negotiating grant and aid for the poor in Paris Consortium. We were immensely thrilled to be able to participate in the process of poverty alleviation in Bangladesh.

²² Hossain Zillur Rahman is an academic, economist and policy maker from Bangladesh. He led the drafting of the poverty reduction strategy of the government in 2005 and was a member of the Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA). He founded the Dhaka-based think-tank Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) in 1996 and prior to that was for over twenty years a leading researcher at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS). On 9 January 2008, he was appointed as an adviser (cabinet minister) to the Caretaker Government of Bangladesh in 2007 (led by Fakhruddin Ahmed as the Chief Advisor) and was entrusted with the ministries of commerce and education. He served in this capacity till evening of 6 January 2009.

comprehension of gender issues and contoured my worldview to explore gender issues from an analytical perspective.

The third shift came through my involvement in teaching at the newly established Department of Women's Studies in Dhaka University in the year 2000, the only one of its kind to be set up in either public or private universities in Bangladesh. The Department later in 2005 was renamed Women and Gender Studies. Suddenly, I came face to face with something which was beyond my capacity to handle. I was completely struck by the radiance of the discipline, the immense number of books, journals and literature on women's issues. Most of the works that I had come across were based on Western context along with a great deal of writing was on the non-West, especially India. A very few comprehensive analytical works were found on the Bangladesh's women's movement. While I was teaching different courses in the Department, I realised my inadequacy in terms of explaining Western theories in the context of Bangladesh. Given my class identity, urban origins, gender and lifestyle background I had little knowledge of Bangladeshi experiences, particularly in the arena of the specific articulation of feminism in the country. My inner desire was to know and explore the process of the specificities of feminist articulation in the Bangladesh context, the strategies evolved by the movement and to examine to what extent the movement has managed to address and formulate feminist agendas at large²³. Faced with my own desire to comprehend the content and complexity of feminist knowledge production and strategies of the movement in Bangladesh, in its distinct nature and forms, I tried to unearth the sites and locations where feminist analyses, desires, visions were formulated and articulated.

Through my personal, familial and professional networks I suddenly became aware that all through my life I have lived very closely with extraordinary women who were directly involved in formulating feminist agendas and in fact were the key people within the women's/feminist movement in Bangladesh. This realisation was another impetus behind my work—to talk to them, to record their experience, to keep a trajectory of oral history of feminist movement in Bangladesh. Thus the entire data collection, data coding and analysis process was marked by my subjective involvement with the topic itself vis a vis my position as a social science feminist researcher. It was not easy to systematically study an area with

²³However it actually started in Dalian, China in 2004 where Najma Chowdhury and I were presenting a joint paper entitled 'Roots and Revisions: Looking at Feminism in Bangladesh: Some Preliminary Thoughts' and it was Mary John from Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), New Delhi, who pursued us to work on Bangladesh feminism.

which one has been so familiar. In one way, it was an advantage. In another way, the involvement had made the disciplining of data even more difficult.

However, my position as an ‘outsider within’ (Collins, 2000) actually enriched my interaction with my respondents. As a student of Women’s /Feminist Studies, I was quite involved with the whole process of narration building and data gathering from secondary sources. The entire journey was propelled by a personal passion to learn and understand the conceptualisation of feminist thought in Bangladesh, interrogating assumptions while mining the particular forms of feminist articulation distinct from its dominant theoretical framework.

As mentioned before, my involvement with the research process was interactive. It entailed sharing my own views with the respondents, while sharpening my own ethical and theoretical speculations (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). Often the interview took the shape of interactive discussion embedded in both of our personal convictions, views and perspectives. Many of the interviewees were closely known to me. This knowledge and familiarity actually aided me in gaining closer proximity with the subject. From a feminist methodological perspective (Fonow & Cook, 1991) I considered this an asset rather than a hindrance to the research process. This particular relationship with the researched actually helped by placing both myself (the researcher) and the researched in the same critical plane (Harding, 1987). I was, simultaneously, not part of it, in the sense that I was never an activist or directly involved in the women’s movement. I was merely an apprentice, a student of women and gender studies who has only recently been exposed to these on an academic level. My status as a ‘partial insider’ helped me make use of personal connections, which again aided me get access, thereby carving out space for discussion and exchange of ideas. My subjective positioning within the field of women’s studies provided room for free reflection, and to build rapport with key persons in the women’s movement. I was often perceived as someone with awareness and knowledge of the institution and movement. This dual status gave me an advantage over the blending of both subjectivity and objectivity within the broader framework of social science research methodology (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Harding, 1987). From this unique vantage point of the methodological underpinnings, I felt that I could manage to maintain a relative distance from the entire research process, which helped me reflect upon the trends and tracts of the women’s movement in Bangladesh, without really getting carried away by personal biases and prejudices. At the same time, this awareness

helped me to be aware of my own subjectivity i.e. my personal interest, socio-political and economic as well as academic background and biases, which I carry within myself.

Framework of the Study at a Glance

While summing up this chapter I would like to append the flow chart/analytical framework²⁴ in the following page which was developed to exhibit the scope of this thesis at a glance.

²⁴Acknowledgement: Fhamida Yasmin, Lecturer, Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka 2014

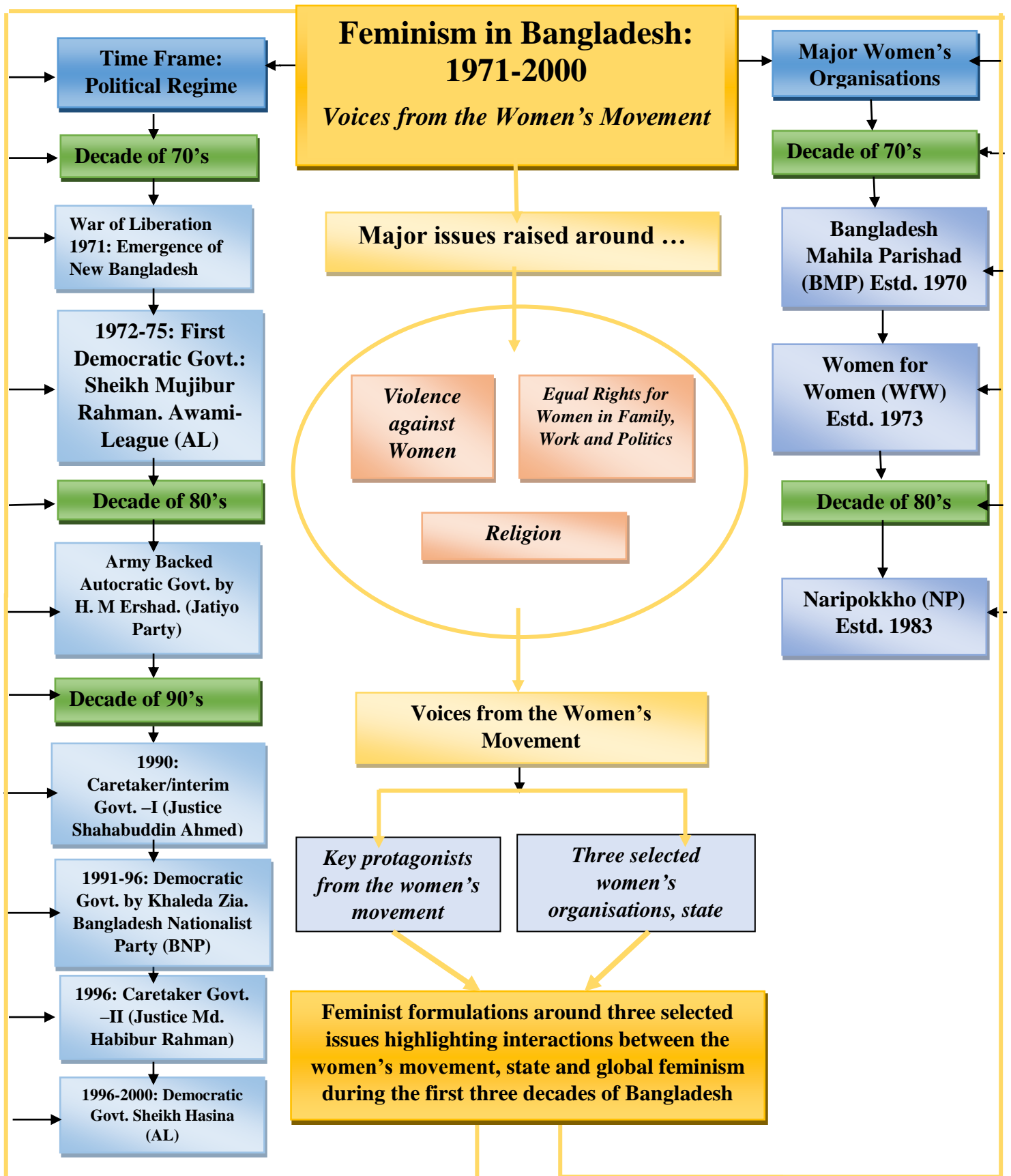


Figure 1: Analytical Frame Work

V

Geo-Physical, Socio -Politico and Historical Background of Bangladesh

Figure 2: Map of Bangladesh

Source: www.maps.com

Bangladesh, on the northern coast of the Bay of Bengal, is surrounded by India, with a small common border with Myanmar in the southeast. What is now called Bangladesh is part of the historic region of Bengal, the northeast portion of the Indian subcontinent. Bangladesh consists primarily of East Bengal (West Bengal is part of India; majority of the people are Hindu and their primary language is Bangla) plus the Sylhet district of the Indian state of Assam. Bangladesh shares its political lineage with India since the colonial era. In 1947 it became a part of Pakistan as East Pakistan. Bangladesh emerged as an independent country following a nine month long bloody war with West Pakistan in 1971. Bangladesh is currently (2014) known as the People's Republic of Bangladesh, with a parliamentary system of government. Sheikh Hasina is the present Prime Minister of Bangladesh, representing the Awami League which is the political party in power.

War of Liberation and Transition to Independent Bangladesh: 1971

“The past and history float free of each other, they are ages and miles apart. For the same object of enquiry can be read differently by different discursive practices.”

Keith Jenkins, 1991

The focus of this thesis is to trace the growth and emergence of feminist thought, its forms and content in contemporary Bangladesh. In order to do so it is crucial to explore the historical specificity of the emergence and growth of modern Bangladesh's nationalism and identity. This thesis therefore refers to the necessity of looking at the historical context before we discuss the emergence and creation of Bangladesh feminist thought. History writing of present Bangladesh is not very easy, however. Many distinct historical trajectories and events are entwined with more than one nation state i.e. Undivided India and Pakistan. To a certain extent the anti-colonial struggle in India left a legacy of idealistic conception imprinted on modern Bangladesh thought. At the same time, a growing need for a distinct Muslim identity, one that led to the partition of 1947 and became the foundation of the state of Pakistan, also left its mark (Moghadam, 1994). Not surprisingly, present day Bangladesh feminism reflects those contested trends. A process of construction and destruction reveals the pathways of feminist formulation accordingly. Thus, while looking at the contemporary scenario in Bangladesh, it is necessary to go back and forth to the historical trends.

In 1947, the independence of India from British colonial rule led to the creation of a new homeland for the Muslims of India. The Eastern and North Eastern part of greater India became East (present Bangladesh) and West Pakistan (present Pakistan). In the formation of Pakistan, Islam was the sole principle of nationhood unifying two widely separated units. The differences between the two wings entailed not only geographical distance but also included sharp cultural and linguistic differences. It is important to note that the Islam of Bengal or East Pakistan was different from the Islam of West Pakistan, as it was fused with popular beliefs and practices that represented the traditional culture of Bengal. ‘Orthodox’ Muslims in other parts of South Asia thus interpreted the practice of Islam in Bengal as ‘too Bengali’ and not proper practice for Muslims. Apprehensive of relying on religious allegiance alone, successive regimes in Pakistan from 1947 until 1971, embarked on a strategy of forcible cultural assimilation of the East Pakistan people (Murshid, 2006; Mookherjee, 2006; Sobhan, 1994; Kabeer, 1991).

The first target was the Bangla language. Attempting to replace it with Urdu as the only state language was meant to ‘clean’ Bengali culture of its perceived Hindu elements. The Language Movement in 1952²⁵ demanding Bangla as state language resulted in the death of six students and spearheaded the non-cooperation movement against the Pakistan regime²⁶. The conflict between the two wings continued and became increasingly confrontational with time.

The Awami League, under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, won a landslide victory in the 1970 General Election held in the then Pakistan. The results of the election saw the Awami League win a majority of seats. However, the President of Pakistan, Yahya Khan, Chief Martial Law Administrator of Pakistan, was opposed to handing over power to Awami League, and thus triggered a mass uprising in East Pakistan followed by the Bangladesh War of Liberation and the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. The struggle to establish democracy was rapidly forcing the country towards the demand for independence. With AL as the major political party flagging its ‘six point movement’, the country quickly engaged in mass non-cooperation movement. The women’s movement, students’ wings, general masses as well as individual men and women participated in this movement. The final impetus came from the genocide of 25th March 1970. “Demand for democracy and the victim hood of genocide of 25th March 1971 is what had composed the identity of the nation and eventually gave birth to it.” (Akhtar, Begum, Hossein, Kamal & Guhathakurata, 2013; Ahmed, 2009)

After the nine month long war East Pakistan became independent from West Pakistan and Bangladesh emerged as a new independent country on 16th December 1971. Independence of Bangladesh was only possible because of the mass participation of men, women and children. The war continued with the help of *Muktijodhha*²⁷ (consisting of men and women as well)—the guerrilla force and allied forces of India along with international support from Soviet Russia and Socialist frontiers. Women were an integral part of this struggle through individual effort, via organisations, women wings affiliated with main political party of the country and through women’s organisations who were already working

²⁵ Movement demanding Bangla as state language was gaining its momentum in February, 1952. The state declared 144 banning gathering of more than four at a time. Students of the University of Dhaka and other political activists defied the law and organised a protest on 21 February 1952. The movement reached its climax when police killed student demonstrators on that day. The deaths provoked widespread civil unrest. After years of conflict, the central government relented and granted official status to the ‘Bangla’ language in 1956. In 1999, UNESCO declared 21 February as International Mother Language Day, in tribute to the Language Movement and the ethno-linguistic rights of people around the world.

²⁶ See Banglapedia (2006) Vol. 6.

²⁷ Freedom Fighter in English

on women's issues. The history of the women's movement and specifically the articulation of feminist issues date further back in the history of the subcontinent of which Bangladesh was once a part. It is important therefore to place the women's issue within this larger framework of the political history of Bangladesh.

Genocide, Mass Rape and Atrocity

Calculated killing and mass rape was a central feature of this genocide. The intention of destroying, killing and raping was clear for Pakistanis. General Yahya Khan had clearly said: "Kill three millions of them and the rest will eat out of our hands" (Ahmed, 2009).

Major General Rao Farman Ali, Advisor to the Government of East Pakistan maintains in a recorded interview that Lt. General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi, The Martial Law Administrator of East Pakistan, while taking charge of the administration, made it clear to the Pakistani military officers stationed in Dhaka that: "We are in enemy territory... we should change the race of this land" (Ahmed, 2009). An article in the Dawn, published on 22 March 2002 quotes Yahya Khan saying: "Pahle inko Mussalman karo" (First make them Muslim).

Bina D'Costa (2011) has highlighted the significance of this anecdote, for it demonstrates that at the senior most level of the Pakistan army, there was a perception that Bengalis were not proper Muslims. This perception also fed into two other notions on the question for identity: that Bengalis are not patriotic Pakistanis and they were too close to Hindu India (D'Costa, 2011; Mookherjee, 2008). The complex relationship between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh could be understood in the context of the partition memories of abduction, and rape of thousands of women and children (Butalia, 1998). The incidence of mass exodus in 1947 had shaped India's and Pakistan's position towards each other, and East Pakistan became a significant pawn in this rivalry (D'Costa, 2011). The leadership in Islamabad has underestimated the power of the people and had always considered Bengalis not only to be weak and powerless but too close to Hindu religion and cultural practices. Rape thus became a political tool to change and suppress the agency of a new emerging nation (D'Costa, 2003). An estimated one million Bengalis were killed during the war or

slaughtered later. Ten million more took refuge in India. Finally in Feb. 1974, Pakistan agreed to recognize the independent state of Bangladesh²⁸.

There is much dispute and debate over the number of people killed during the war and women raped. It is often said that 30,00,000 were killed, 2,00,000 to 4,00,000 women were raped²⁹. Bangladesh emerged from the ashes of genocide and mass rape around which the genealogy of feminism is now entwined. The women's movement and individuals started to respond to VAW and war rape by engaging in the rehabilitation process.

The Women's Movement and Emergence of Bangladesh: Role of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) and Mobilisation Before and During the War of Liberation³⁰

Women's political activities and agencies were explicit during the 1969-70 non-cooperation movement. The women's movement was inextricably entwined with the nationalist movement. The foremost women's organisation was the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) of today, formerly known as East Pakistan Mahila Parishad.

During 1970, when the non-cooperation movement against West Pakistan government was at its peak, East Pakistan Mahila Parishad (EPMP) was established on 4th April under the leadership of Sufia Kamal³¹ with Maleka Begum as its General Secretary. Sufia Kamal, daughter of Jobeda Khatun Chowdhurani³² was the elected Vice President of the organisation.

However prior to this, during 1969-70, the whole nation was gradually coming under an umbrella of resistance against the West Pakistan regime and demands for 'autonomy' were gaining strength. During that volatile moment in history every other organisation, either political or social, were naming themselves *Shongrami* or 'revolutionary', denoting resistance and revolt. For example, former Student Union (Student wing of Communist Party of East

²⁸See Khan (1976) for details.

²⁹ See *Bangladesher Swadhinota Juddho: Dalilpatra* [The Liberation War of Bangladesh: Documents] (Vol. 8); Brownmiller (1975); Kabir & Mehedi (2006); Ahmed (2009); Mookherjee (2008).

³⁰ Information of this particular section is largely drawn from Maleka Begum, through face to face interview and personal communication during March 2010. This researcher also consulted secondary sources as and when necessary to cross check the information provided by the interviewee. Maleka Begum was particularly chosen as one of the major representative of the women's movement during seventies. She was the General Secretary for almost nineteen years of the East Pakistan Mahila Parishad, later Bangladesh Mahila Parishad—the pioneer women's organisation in Bangladesh.

³¹Sufia Kamal, see Appendix C. for profile.

³²Jobeda Khatun Choudhurani was the first Muslim female politician from Sylhet District.

Pakistan) or *Chhatro Union* in Bangla started to address themselves as ‘Student Union Revolutionary Organisation’ or *Chhatro Union Shongram Parishod*.

Mahila Parishad also took up the word *Shongram* in its title as a strategy, emerging with the name as *Mahila Shongram Parishad* (MSP). They were fully aware that soon they would shift to Mahila Parishad excluding the word *Shongram*. Women who were already in the field through involvement in student politics or experience and exposure gained through their active voluntary participation during the cyclone of 1970, all became involved in the mass movement for a new state. *Mahila Shongram Parishad* (MSP) started its journey with members from all platforms being welcomed and the primary agenda of the organisation was to engage in the non-cooperation movement on nationalist issues. The first seminar of the organisation was held at the room of the Islamic Foundation located at *Baitul Mokarram*, the national central mosque of the country.³³

Maleka Begum³⁴ was a student of Dhaka University at the time, a member of Student Union (student wing of the Communist Party of East Pakistan), and the Vice President of ‘*Matia Group*’³⁵ of the Communist Party’s student wing. She was also the elected Vice President of Rokeya Hall³⁶ twice during the period of 1965-1968. All these political experiences and exposure made Maleka a seasoned politician, who would take one of the most prominent women’s organisation to a new height in future.

During the period of non-cooperation, the female wing of the students’ front was mainly active on nationalist issues. Feminism was in a nascent stage, not overtly expressed but steadily picking up ground. The main target of this organisation was to bring more women to support the independence issue. One of the major demands of the moment was to create pressure on the government to release political prisoners. The movement was known as ‘*Bondi Mukti Andolon*’ in Bangla. A specific feminist agenda around women was not articulated at the time. During the early seventies, a signature campaign demanding equal political rights and autonomy was one of the main activities of *Mahila Shongram Parishad* (MSP). Sufia Kamal’s legitimacy within the women’s movement and in civil society actually helped MSP elicit support and participation from the broader platform. It is important to note

³³ This is important to note that MSP felt no resistance from any of the Islamic group during that time.

³⁴ Maleka Begum, see Appendix B. for profile.

³⁵ Matia Chowdhury, with a colourful history of political engagement since her student days, is a presidium member of Bangladesh Awami League. She is a Member of Parliament and the minister of agriculture under the prime ministership of Sheikh Hasina. She held this post twice before from 1996 to 2001 and 2009 to 2013 during the previous tenure of Awami League in power.

³⁶ Rokeya Hall is the largest women’s hostel of Dhaka University.

that although the women's movement was attached to the nationalist movement during this period, it retained its identity by upholding the issue of women's political participation in the nationalist movement at large (Begum, 2000, 2002; Chakravarty, 1980).

Apart from these efforts, the academic and research frontier was also quite strong in MSP. Under the leadership of Sufia Kamal, MSP started to compile a list of women's organisations and women activists from the subcontinent, which actually created the epistemological basis for feminist formulation on the academic level³⁷.

Support from men during the late seventies was another dimension that needs to be mentioned. CPB, following the Soviet model of movement, was active in engaging women in their struggle. However, it was noted that the support they enjoyed from a male dominated political party like the Communist Party was not a matter of simple gender sensitivity or awareness regarding women's issues but was rather motivated to ensure male political participation in the nationalist movement. Moni Sing the President of the Party, used to say that if only they could bring women into politics, they would succeed into drawing their husbands and sons to politics as well (personal communication between Moni Sing and Maleka Begum). Bringing women into politics was actually a strategy to ensure male participation in the independence movement for the mainstream political parties. Nevertheless, these strategies even though emerging from patriarchal motives actually created more space for women. Participation in public activities brought women out and exposed them to issues which were unknown to them hitherto. Experiences gained through this acceptance by their male counterparts were indeed ultimately helpful to the growth of the women's movement. Incorporating women was part of the broader patriarchal politics. However, right at that time this awareness had not surfaced—everybody was included as a part of the broader nationalistic politics of the non-cooperation movement, which would soon evolve into the War of Liberation, drawing both male and female participants in a tumultuous wave.

On April 4, 1970, cell members of *Mahila Shongram Parishad (MSP)* decided to change its name to *East Pakistan Mahila Parishod (EPMP)*. This shift was an important gain for the future of the women's movement in the sense that it was largely prompted by the desire to have a separate platform for the women's movement, not remain entangled with

³⁷Sufia Kamal actually brought back the original manuscript of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain during 1947 from India and later those manuscripts were printed and circulated among the public on individual effort to popularize Rokeya.

male dominated politics. Nonetheless, drawing in women activists was a challenge for the EPMP. Due to the existence of factions in the broader political scenario, people who joined EPMP were broadly aligned with the Awami League and were internationally linked with the Pro-Soviet bloc following its distant roots with the Communist Party. EPMP took up issues like increasing women's participation in politics and continued to work in the area of prohibiting child marriage, dowry and issues in the line of All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA). Activists like Lila Naag and Jui Phul from colonial Bengal also influenced the Parishad in terms of formulating their agendas. EPMP was clearly aware of their goal of working on women's issues and they planned to take it further whenever a more conducive environment became available (Das, 1999).

Bangladesh Mahila Parishad: Conflict with Communist Party and Quest for Independent Identity

Md Farhad³⁸ was always keen on having a female wing of the Communist Party following the Soviet Model. According to Maleka Begum, most of the members at the time believed in socialist ideology, and after independence the nation would also put forward socialism as its founding pillars, and thus they had no direct conflict of interest with the new state in terms of their ideological position. However, EPMP was never interested to become a female wing of East Pakistan Communist Party (EPCP, later CPB) they preferred to work on their own on issues related to women's education, child welfare, addressing women's daily needs like street lighting, security, sewage problem, electricity etc.

Maleka³⁹ soon realized that the patriarchal nature of EPCP male leaders would never allow them to agree to give space to women in leadership positions. Leaders from EPCP were not even interested to let Maleka speak from East Pakistan Mahila Parishad's platform. She had a big argument with leaders of EPCP on many occasions against making Mahila Parishad of East Pakistan (EPMP) a sub-wing of Communist Party. Finally, it was agreed upon that EPMP would remain an independent women's organisation and Maleka chose the Mahila Parishad as her own platform. According to Maleka⁴⁰, although *Mahila Parishad* shares its

³⁸ Mohammad Farhad, a freedom fighter, an ex-MP and former general secretary of Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), Farhad played a crucial role during different political movements in the country, including the Language Movement, the Education Movement in 1962, Mass-Upsurge of 1969, the Liberation War and the anti-autocratic movement. He died on October 9, 1987 in Moscow at the age of 49.

³⁹ As mentioned earlier, I am using the first name for all my interviewee while referring to their responses collected through direct interview.

⁴⁰ Maleka Begum was a general member of Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) till 1986 and became a Central Committee Member. Finally, she left CPB in the early 1990's after the fall of the Soviet Union. During the decade of early seventies, almost all influential political leaders were somehow linked with the Communist

roots with the Communist Party, *Mahila Parishad* gradually disengaged itself from the political affiliation and soon grounded themselves on their own platform.

EPMP was then finally able to reach a position where women from various political platforms came forward to pick up issues related to women in general. EPMP was one of the largest and the only autonomous women's organisation during this period. In spite of its political affiliation with the Communist Party and ideological affinity with the socialist block, EPMP made it very clear that it was not going to be under any political party or become the official female wings of any of the mainstream political power groups. However, during the year of Liberation War, Maleka personally remained close to the Communist Party through her connection with Motiur Rahman, her husband and with other Communist Party members through her kinship connections. Maleka, who was in exile in India during the War, adopted initiatives under the guidance of Communist Party leaders and worked on behalf of the Mahila Parishad largely on an individual capacity as the General Secretary of former Mahila Parishad of East Pakistan.

During early 1971, EPMP, along with other women, was preparing for the coming war. One of the major activities of the time was to attend symbolic march past with wooden rifles. Maleka Khan⁴¹ remembers arranging training for women from her Girl's Guide Association⁴², like first aid or civil defence (Scholte, 2011).

Maleka Khan, along with Badrunnessa Ahmed⁴³, used to arrange such march pasts, civil defence training or first aid training in various neighbourhoods on a voluntary basis. According to Maleka Khan, these were a sort of moral support for women. These efforts were

Party. Even Sheikh Mujibur Rahman held a red card of the Communist Party which he showed to Maleka while he was trying to convince her to join the Awami League. Also see Das (1999)

⁴¹Maleka Khan was involved with this rehabilitation centre as a volunteer since its inception and later served as the Director of the Board from 1973-1976. She was also involved in the Language Movement during 1952, where she actively participated in demonstrations and processions in the street during the Pakistan period. She is an activist who was involved in the rehabilitation process as a volunteer during 1970 cyclone. She was the Secretary for East Pakistan Girl's Guide Association. Right after of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's historic speech on 7th March, she volunteered to initiate women's training in first aid and civil defence along with parliament members and ministers, Badrunnessa Ahmed. She was the President of Bangla Craft, the first elected female president of FBCCI. She made her first trip into the cantonment, to the MP Hostel in Nakhapara, on 20/21 December, 1971 and brought out several women who had been held there. In the following days, she made repeated trips and recalls that neither she, nor the totally distraught, half-dressed women, whose hair had been chopped short, were able to speak a word as she gently wrapped them in blankets, loaded them into the jeep and took them to a safe house.

⁴²Girl guiding in today's Bangladesh started in 1928 and became the *East Pakistan Branch* of the Pakistan Girl Guides Association in 1947. After Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan, the branch organisation was reorganized into an independent national organisation. The girls-only organisation became a full member of the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts in 1973 and was incorporated on October 3, 1973.

⁴³Badrunnessa Ahmed see Appendix C. for profile

part of many other initiatives to prepare women for war. When the war was declared, the main political parties decided to ensure safety to all important political figures and transport them out of war ravaged Bangladesh. After 25th March 1971, all organised affiliations broke down. Everybody was scattered and people were in a state of complete shock for a while. Many on their own or through political connections started to flee to India (Scholte, 2011).

Building up International Alliances

Maleka Begum went to India along with other leaders of the Communist Party. Despite their differences in party-wise political affiliation, women leaders like Maleka Begum, Matia Chowdhury and Sajeda Chowdhury⁴⁴ were given the responsibility, by the male political leaders,– of creating awareness on Bangladesh and the ongoing violation of human rights while they were in exile in India. The first initiative was to travel all over India to create awareness about the genocide in Bangladesh and seek international support. Networks and contacts were established with the Communist Party of India (CPI), Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) and Indian Women's Federation (IWF). There were negotiations with government on guerrilla training, refugee issues and support for freedom fighters, arms and ammunition supply, medical help, running of war hospitals, nursing etc. Interaction with Indian women activists opened up new understanding, new frontiers, new experiences and exposure to women's issues. Apart from mobilisation and efforts to ensure international support for Bangladesh in general, two concrete efforts related to women's issues are worth mentioning here.

Firstly, establishment of international networking and contacts with women's organisations were crucial to the women's movement in the new Bangladesh. Through Indian connections, Bangladesh's the women's movement received exposure to the Soviet bloc as well as establishing global networks. These attempts at networking placed BMP on firmer ground in the years to come.

Secondly, inspired by Md Farhad, Maleka Begum prepared a small pamphlet highlighting violence against women (VAW), with descriptions of genocide and atrocities committed by the Pakistan army in Bangladesh, in order to draw international attention. Maleka wrote a small booklet⁴⁵ in Bangla with photographs and information on VAW and

⁴⁴ Sajeda Chowdhury, MP, Senior member of Awami League presidium and Deputy Leader of the House, 2014, active during WoL

⁴⁵To the Conscience of the World... Published on 1971 by Maleka Begum, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Mujibnagar. See Appendix H for more details.

other atrocities, which was translated in English by Renu Chakravarty, Vice President of IWF. Later this booklet was used widely in various awareness building efforts in favour of Bangladesh. IWF presented this booklet to the Soviet Women's Committee too.

Although this booklet came out due to the individual effort of Maleka Begum, General Secretary, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) and Md Farhad, Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), it was indeed the first formal appearance on behalf of BMP⁴⁶ in exile, the first instance in which VAW and war crime were highlighted. Maleka Begum and Matia Chowdhury, with the help of Indian Women's Federation (IWF), travelled widely to mobilize support for Bangladesh. Members of IWF, such as Aruna Asaf Ali, Bimala Faruqui, Geeta Mukherji, Bani Dasgupta, Ila Mitra, Kalpana Datt Joshi, Nibedita Nag and many others, were deeply involved in this effort. During July 1971, Freda Brown⁴⁷ from Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) took part in the hunger strike to protest against the Bangladesh genocide in front of the Australian Embassy at Delhi along with Maleka Begum and Matia Chowdhury (Begum, 2000).

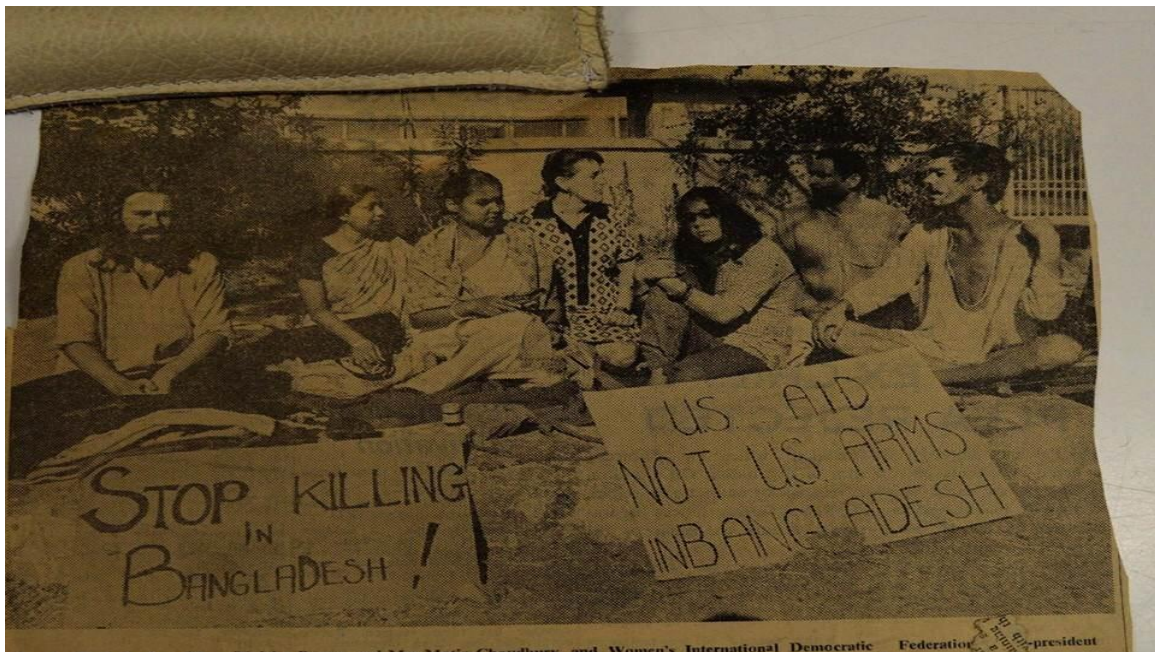


Figure 3: Maleka Begum, women activist; Motia Chowdhury, current Minister for Agriculture to be seen picketing with Freda Brown, renowned women activist from Australia, with others protesting shipment of US arms to Bangladesh in 1971, Kolkata.

Source: Heather Goodall, oral historian from Sydney. Collected from Facebook posting of Meghna Guhathakurta, Director, RIB, dated Jan 04, 2015

⁴⁶ It is to be noted that right after independence was declared on 26th March 1971, East Pakistan Mahila Parishad naturally renamed itself Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) which did not need any formal declaration or other.

⁴⁷ Freda Brown was an Australian political activist who was a member of the Communist Party of Australia and later the Socialist Party. She died in 2009.

Other international mobilisation through networks and linkages were also critical. Indian IWF arranged a meeting with women in Indian Association Hall on 1st April 1971 (The Liberation War of Bangladesh: Documents, 1984, Vol. 12). A meeting to chalk out future activities took place between BMP and IWF on June 1971. BMP delivered a statement on June 12, 1971 addressing the world community urging them to support the Bangladesh cause and to stop the violence against women (The Liberation War of Bangladesh: Documents, 1984, Vol. 6).

International networking was extended by BMP further during October 1971 when the BMP requested the United Nations to constitute an investigative committee to explore the genocide and war crime against the women of Bangladesh. The same plea was sent to the women's group of the Soviet Union who declared their support for Bangladesh and demanded justice (Begum, 2004).

These were strategic initiatives from the women's movement. Instead of shrouding the rape and war time VAW issues, the women's movement was thrusting these into the limelight. Claiming international justice and war time trial was one of their agendas apart from putting an end to the war. Women's peace-making efforts were entwined with taking part in a 'just war'. Multiple and complex experiences of war and VAW were actually shaping the feminist agenda during 1971.

Apart from many other efforts, one of the most important state initiatives was to appoint Noorjahan Murshid⁴⁸ as the mobile ambassador to Bangladesh in 1971 (by the Government in exile). She delivered a speech in joint session of the Indian Parliament trying to mobilize support for the Bangladesh cause and was accused of 'anti-state activity' by the Pakistan Government. . She was sentenced to 14 years of imprisonment and all her properties were declared seized by Yahya Khan. In fact, she was the only woman against whom such allegation was made during that time (Begum, 2004).

Women's role during the war took yet many other forms and was involved in many more initiatives. Although feminist responses were actually low key and all organised

⁴⁸ Noorjahan Murshid was one of the two women to be directly elected to the Provincial Legislative Assembly of East Bengal in 1954 on a United Front ticket. As an accredited deputy of the Mujibnagar Government in exile she sought the recognition of Bangladesh from the Indian government, essentially to raise support for the War of Liberation. That prompted the Pakistan military junta to sentence her to 14 years rigorous imprisonment in absentia. In independent Bangladesh, she was appointed in 1972 as state minister for health and social welfare in the cabinet of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. She was elected to the country's first parliament in 1973. See Appendix C for more details.

activities became scattered in a war ravaged country, the initiatives recognising women's issues were there and continued to be articulated beyond the broader political goals of the country.

Political Shifts and Changes during the First Three Decades of Bangladesh: Political Underpinnings of the Women's Movement⁴⁹

Although most of the political parties and people in general were in support of independence movement, there were many factions and differences amongst the political parties. There were many trends and political differences even during the War of Liberation. There were fragmentations and divisions even within the major political party i.e. Awami League (AL). Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, titled *Bangobondhu* ('Friend of Bengal' in English), later declared as the 'Father of the Nation', was in confinement in Pakistan during the entire nine months of War of Liberation (25 March, 1971- January 1972). As a charismatic nationalist leader he had accommodated many different political trends within AL. AL had started its political journey as the Awami Muslim League (AML) and slowly evolved into a secular Democratic Party during the 1960's and changed its name to Awami League (AL) (Rahman, 2012). The radical nature of the liberation war further influenced AL to become one of the largest 'left of the centre' parties until 1975, when it again changed its name to "BKSL"⁵⁰. During this long evolution of AL it always contained both progressive and conservative factions within itself. There were other numerous forces and factions dominating the entire assortment existing in the political setting, ranging from pro-Chinese to pro-Moscow, left to right wing. Jamat-e-Islam and other Islamist religious based organisations were factions standing against the independence of Bangladesh (Ahmad, 2014; Hasan, 2010; Rono, 2005).

After independence, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the Prime Minister of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. He was also in favour of accommodating all these major trends of all shades and colours to form a heterogeneous nationalist force under the leadership of AL.

⁴⁹This section draws heavily from Hasan (2010); Halim (2010); Various Volume of Banglapedia (2006); personal communication with M M Akash, Professor Economics, Dhaka University, who also participated in the War of Liberation during his adolescence.

⁵⁰ BKSL - Bangladesh Krishok Sromik Awami League was a political amalgamation of the Awami League with all other pro-liberation parties that supported President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman for his BKSL programme. It was established in June 1975. Other political parties were outlawed at the time. Later, BKSL was dissolved and the related section of the 5th amendment to the Bangladesh Constitution was scrapped after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was killed on the 15th August 1975.

AL was at the time incredibly popular and its leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was all powerful. Under his leadership AL won a landslide victory in the first election of independent Bangladesh in 1973. The Pro-Moscow left political parties and only significant opposition force at the time were defeated miserably (won no seats in the 1973 parliament) and later built an alliance with the AL. On the other hand, Pro-China left political parties formed an opposition party under the leadership of Maulana Bhashani⁵¹. Meanwhile, Old Muslim Leaguers, Jamat-e-Islam and other pro-Pakistan reactionary forces went underground for the time being (Islam, 1993; Rahman, 2007).

The first Constitution of Bangladesh was drafted in 1972. Four fundamental principles were declared in the preamble: Nationalism, Socialism, Democracy and Secularism. Ninety six percent of the industrial assets were nationalised. A land ceiling of 100 *bigha*⁵² per family was announced and major export and import activities were carried out by a state monopoly corporation called TCB⁵³. The first five year plan was announced where the vision of a socialist economy was upheld and Tajuddin Ahmed had become the first Finance Minister of Bangladesh. The Constitution added Article 27 and 28 confirming gender equality and Article 65 declared reserve seats for women in the Parliament to ensure their political participation. Begum Badrunnessa Ahmed joined in the cabinet of the government of independent Bangladesh as the first female minister (state). ‘Bangladesh Women’s Rehabilitation Board’ was formed to address the atrocities committed against women during the WoL. ‘Muslim Marriage Act and Marriage Registration Law’ was also enacted in 1974 during Mujib’s regime. Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) started to promote women empowerment at grass root level at this time (Begum, 2000, 2002).

Anti-Mujib trend, which had always been active within and outside AL, was gradually strengthening itself by drawing support from various platforms who were dissatisfied with the Mujib government. Disappointments and discontent around BKSL one party system, *Rakshi Bahini*⁵⁴ and other steps initiated by him led to many alignments and realignments in the political domain against Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Finally, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his

⁵¹ Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, (12 December 1880–17 November 1976) was a popular rural based political leader in British India, Pakistan and later in Bangladesh.

⁵² In Bengal (both in Bangladesh and in West Bengal, India) the bigha was standardized under British colonial rule at 1600 square yards (0.1338 hectare or 0.3306 acre); this is often interpreted as being 1/3 acre. In central India bighas were standardized at 3025 square yards or 5/8 acre (0.2529 hectare).

⁵³ Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) was established under President’s Order no. 68 of 1972, against the backdrop of scarcities of essential consumer items and industrial raw materials after the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971.

⁵⁴ Para military force parallel to the armed forces. This created discontentment among a section of military officers.

entire family, except for his two daughters (Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana) who were outside the country at the time, were killed by a right wing coup in August 15, 1975. Coup and counter-coup continued for about two years, creating political instability (Roy, 2014; Ahmad, 2014; Rono, 2005; Lifschultz, 1979).

Amidst this chaos and uncertainty, the women's movement continued its journey. Right after independence, a group of academics and researchers began planning to engage in research and data generation on women. Women for Women (WfW), a Research and Study Group, emerged in 1975, but had been informally involved in research, publication and study circles since 1973. Women for Women is the pioneer in the field of research on women and development related issues in the country. Their first publication 'Women for Women: Bangladesh'⁵⁵ was one of the pioneering works on women's status in new Bangladesh (Hasan, 2010).

The 1975 assassination was a shock to many of the respondents of this thesis, particularly key figures largely coming from BMP and WfW who felt betrayed by this political assassination and mentioned the event as a setback for the women's movement. All sorts of political activities including women's organisations remained low key during post-1975 time frame.

Post 1975-1981: Political Alignment and Realignment

Major Gen. Zia ur Rahman⁵⁶ had participated in the War of Liberation and was the head of the renowned Zed Force against the Pakistan military forces. After the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family, followed by a *sepoy* uprising (Soldier uprising on 7th Nov, 1975), Zia ur Rahman was made the Chief Martial Law Administrator in 1975. He became the president in 1977 and after assuming office as the head of the state, Zia issued a proclamation order amending the Constitution to insert *Bismillah-ir-Rahmanir Rahim* in the preamble of the Constitution. He also added 'absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah' in Article 8. It was also added that, "... the state shall endeavour to consolidate, preserve and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity". Socialism was also withdrawn from the constitution. Zia ur Rahman introduced and popularized the new concept of 'Bangladeshi Nationalism' as opposed to 'Bengali

⁵⁵ Women for Women (1975). *Women for Women*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited.

⁵⁶ Zia ur Rahman was the President of Bangladesh from 1977 to 1981. He was well known in history for declaring the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 March from Kalurghat radio station in Chittagong on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Nationalism' which was one of the key terms during the WoL⁵⁷. The implicit ideology was based on anti-Indianism, pro-Islamic non-secular trend. During this period, the Constitution was made subservient to martial law proclamations and regulations. Justice Abu Sayem and Zia ur Rahman brought amendments to the constitution frequently through martial law proclamations during his time (Roy, 2014; Chowdhury, 2000; Kabeer, 1991).

In 1978 Zia ur Rahman floated the Nationalistic Democratic Party (National Democratic Party) and participated in Presidential election (referendum) consisting of six political parties. He won a victory and became the president of Bangladesh. In 1978 a new political party, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was launched with Zia as its Chairman. BNP consisted of pro-China left political parties along with ex Muslim Leaguers including right wing Awami Leaguers and many other small groups of various colours. Some technocrats also joined the cabinet of the Zia regime. Zia ur Rahman won majority of the seats during the parliamentary election held in 1979 and finally martial law, in application since 1975, was lifted after the passage of the 5th Amendment Act (Chowdhury, 2000; Kabeer, 1991).

1975 was the year of women and UN declared 1975-1985 as the decade for women. Influenced by UN-led global feminism, Zia ur Rahman took up initiatives conducive to the women's movement. In spite of the non-democratic political scenario prevailing at the time, the women's movement benefitted as the government led by Zia ur Rahman declared 10% quota for women in all public and private sector jobs. Ordinance was also issued to appoint women in Police and Ansar forces previously dominated by men. 'National Women Association'⁵⁸ was also declared and the first Ministry of Women's Affairs was established in Bangladesh. Passing of Dowry Bill, a milestone achievement of the women's movement, marked the year 1980 (MoWCA, GOB, 2000).

Zia ur Rahman was also assassinated by a military coup in 1981. After a brief period of follow up regimes of BNP, Gen. H M Ershad came to power with military backing. The final effect of Zia's rule was a change in the overall internal and foreign policy from left or centre left to right.

⁵⁷ See Appendix F and Banglapedia (2006) vol. 3 for details.

⁵⁸ *Jatiyo Mahila Shongstha* in Bangla

Decade of the Eighties: Military Rule and Quasi Democracy

After the assassination of President Zia ur Rahman on May 30, 1981, BNP was led by Justice Abdus Sattar for a while. He became the President of Bangladesh for a brief period until he was ousted by the then army Chief, Gen. H M Ershad. The second martial law regime led by Gen H M Ershad began in March 1982, by keeping the Constitution suspended for around four years. He ruled the country as Chief Martial Law Administrator until December 1983. He became the President in 1983 and introduced the Upazilla system. Ershad was later elected for presidency for a five-year term in 1986. He floated his own political party called, Nationalist Party, (*Jatiyo Party*, JP) in 1996. All the major political parties boycotted the election. However, AL along with some left political party joined the election and Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, became the opposition leader in Ershad's parliament. JP managed an absolute majority. Ershad dissolved this particular parliament in 1987. The general election that followed in 1988 which was boycotted again by all major political parties; this time including AL. The Anti-Ershad movement was spearheaded by both the political leaders of AL and BNP and their alliances (Ahmad, 2014).

Naripokkhho (NP), one of our selected organisations, emerged during the eighties. A group of young feminist activists floated Naripokkhkho (NP) in 1983. Its members remain predominantly women working with development agencies at different levels. However, membership is now more mixed than in the 1980s, and currently includes teachers, lawyers, doctors and researchers.

In 1988, through a Constitutional change (8th Amendment Act), H M Ershad declared 'Islam' as the state religion. The women's movement along with civil society representatives were in mass protest against this proclamation. Ershad brought changes in the Ministries. In 1989 the name of the "Ministry of Women's Affairs" was changed to "Women and Children Affairs", which was again perceived as a regression from the earlier gain of a full women's ministry by the women's movement (MoWCA, GOB, 2000).

It is to be noted that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gathered Western support (mainly from socialist bloc) while Zia ur Rahman acquired some from others. Ershad, however, received all out support from USA and other countries in the Middle East and carried out structural adjustment policies (SAP) most faithfully. The amount of aid received was highest during his regime compared to the last two regimes of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Zia ur Rahman.

Even so, 1980-1990 turned out to be a 'decade of stagnation' (Sobhan, 1991). On the other hand, CEDAW was signed during Ershad's regime with reservation on two Articles.

From the mid-nineties onwards, the anti-Ershad movement started to gain momentum. Khaleda Zia, wife of the deceased President Zia, was elected the Chairperson of BNP in 1983. The seven party alliances⁵⁹ were engaged in a struggle against the autocratic regime of H M Ershad along with Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, president of AL since 1983. Jamat-e-Islam and other parties also joined the anti-Ershad movement. Jamat, for the first time since independence, managed to claim a space within the formal political arena. This shift and rise from exile and underground status to a legitimate political force would curb the fate of the women's movement in coming years.

H M Ershad was subsequently arrested and kept in confinement for six years. Interestingly, he participated personally in both the democratic elections of 1991 and 1996 and secured five seats in both during his confinement. After six years of confinement, Ershad was released on bail in 1997 during Sheikh Hasina's government. He still heads one of the factions of JP as Chairman. H M Ershad further consolidated the rightward shifts in the economy, politics, and foreign policy of Bangladesh and has continued to play an 'influential' role in Bangladesh politics till today (2014).

Decade of the Nineties: Process of Democratisation: Era of Female Leadership

Phase I: 1990-1996

After the fall of H M Ershad, power was handed over to a neutral/interim government (commonly known as 'Caretaker government')⁶⁰ on December 1990. The parliamentary election was held under Justice Shahabuddin (Chief Advisor of the neutral government). Election under neutral government was a new concept which would remain crucial to Bangladesh politics for years to come. BNP emerged victorious as a single majority party,

⁵⁹ 'seven party alliance' consisted of AL, BNP, Jamat e Islam and other left leaning parties.

⁶⁰ The Caretaker Government of Bangladesh (বাংলাদেশের তত্ত্বাবধায়ক সরকার) is a form of government system in which the country is ruled by a selected government for an interim period during the transition from one elected government to another, after the completion of tenure of the former. As the outgoing government hands over its power, the caretaker government comes into place. Top members of the caretaker government do not represent any political party; nor are they allowed to contest the elections. The main objective of the caretaker government is to create an environment in which an election can be held in a free and fair manner without political influence by the outgoing government. It is not empowered to take any policy decisions unless it is necessary. The head of the Caretaker government is called the Chief Adviser (in place of Prime Minister) and is selected by the President. The Chief Adviser selects the other advisers. The top positions of the administration are generally distributed among the advisers. The Chief Adviser and the other advisers are committed for their activities to the President.

with Khaleda Zia as the first woman Prime Minister of the country. Khaleda's regime continued from 1990-1996.

She piloted the 12th constitutional amendment bill in 1991 and reintroduced the Parliamentary form of Government in place of the Presidential system. She declared free compulsory primary education and tuition-free education for girls up to grade 10 and a stipend for girl students (MoWCA, GOB, 2000).

Phase II: 1996-2000

Sheikh Hasina, was in self-exile (India) after her father's assassination in 1975. She came back to Bangladesh and was elected the President of AL in 1983. As stated before, she participated in the parliamentary election in 1986 during Ershad regime and became the opposition leader in the parliament. During the 1990 election, she was the opposition leader in the national parliament while Khaleda Zia became the leader of the House.

Hasina's alliance during the late eighties comprised of *Jamat e Islam* and *Jatiyo party* in favour of conducting elections under a neutral caretaker government. This led to the 13th amendment of the constitution in 1996 providing for a non-party caretaker government. During the parliamentary election held under Justice Habibur Rahman (Interim or caretaker government of 1996) AL emerged as the single majority party with Khaleda Zia as the opposition leader in the parliament. Sheikh Hasina's government was formed with support from other left parties. *Jatiyo Nari Unnayan Neeti* (National Women Development Policy in English) was declared on 1996. The signing of Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord took place in 1997 and Union Parishad election took place with the provision of direct election on reserved seats for women in 1996. Sheikh Hasina continued as the Prime Minister till 2000.

The two successive regimes led by Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina have followed more or less the same sets of economic and social policies and had a few differences with respect to foreign policy. Generally the masses were not very happy with the performance of either in the absence of a viable third alternative, the usual Western model of bipartisanship had struck its roots in the political soil of Bangladesh and it is a trend that still continues.

I have tried to present a brief summary of the rise, fall and evolution of the major political trends during the reference period (1971-2000) of my thesis. It gives us only a general view of the political context of the women's movement. However, these political trends never remained static. Many shifts, changes, reconfiguration and realignments took place at different historical junctures. People from one party moved into another, new parties

were floated, new alignments were created and the women's movement had to undergo similar affiliation and association with the mainstream while having to move forward with the ebb and flow of issues and agendas. It is indeed important to be aware of all these major political trends as the women's movement influenced them and was also informed and influenced by them. The interaction between the mainstream political parties and independent the women's movement remains an important reference point for analysis. Despite the risk of being repetitive, these historical trends will be mentioned again in the following chapters in order to establish the context and to link it with the women's movement.

Chapter Two

Violence against Women: One Common Thread in the Women's Movement of Bangladesh

I

Introduction

This trajectory of the women's movement spanning the first three decades of Bangladesh's history has attempted to identify issues highlighted by the key protagonists in selected organisations which are representative of the women's movement here. This chapter specifically focuses on issues raised by the women's movement addressing Violence against Women (VAW). Key figures from the women's movement, purposefully selected to represent the three major selected organisations, have identified three main areas where feminist formulations have been articulated around VAW issues. As mentioned earlier, this thesis has mainly tried to address issues related to i) VAW, ii) the movement for women's rights in family, work and politics and more broadly—iii) around the question of religion as it arises throughout the first three decades of the women's movement in Bangladesh. It was often very hard for the respondents to mark a neat boundary around the issues under discussion. In many ways all the main issues raised by the women's movement can be easily placed under the broad heading of VAW. In other words, this thesis is actually all about identifying major trends and issues related to VAW and the responses of the women's movements as it translates into feminist formulations. However, creation of certain boundaries is often necessary to bring such sprawling issues into order. While key protagonists of the movement have identified certain areas which can be categorised under VAW issues, others might fall under right-based movements (Chapter Three) and negotiations with the question of religion (Chapter Four) or might serve to highlight the complex relationship between the women's movements, the state and global feminism (Chapter Five). This chapter thus isolates issues specifically labelled as VAW around which these leaders are organising their activism, and narrating their experiences, responses and ideas.

As stated before, from an exhaustive list of VAW issues during the period covered, this research has purposively chosen a few which were considered relevant for the selected organisations and identified by the respondents as crucial to the movement. Responses collected through one to one interviews form the core of this chapter in trying to understand

feminist formulation and conceptualisation of VAW in the Bangladesh context. A brief background—introducing the issue, particular event/incident and the context under discussion—is followed by specific responses and formulations on VAW issues throughout the decades. The main issues being highlighted here are:

- i. War time atrocities and rape against women during 1971, War of Liberation (WoL)**
- ii. Death of Shabmeher: Opening up of New Agendas, New Grounds for the women's movement**
- iii. Acid Violence: A Conceptual Leap from 'Victimhood' to 'Survivors'**
- iv. Case of Yasmin: Sexual Violence/Rape and Murder under Police Custody**

Conceptualising VAW as A Common Issue for the Women's Movements across the Globe

It is indeed a very long and complex process to translate misery and desolation—in the form of domestic violence, human rights, rape, murder, suicide, dowry , stalking (more commonly understood as 'eve teasing'), harassment in private and public—into a framework of 'Violence Against Women', especially with the currently added dimension of Girls (VAWG). VAW is largely understood and perceived as 'natural', part and package of 'ideal womanhood', internalised both by men and women, and to some extent, by a section of the women's movement as well. The process of theorising VAW is difficult and a long one. It is even more contentious within the women's movement, depending upon the context and historical setting of any given incident (Ahuja, 2009; BNWLA, 2001; Jahan & Islam, 1997; Jahan, 1994).

Unpacking the already structured notions around gender, femininity, rape and domestic violence, stalking etc., reformulating the notions to reach a transformational level and analysing from feminist perspective is not a smooth journey for the feminists (here my respondents). Moreover, when certain issues are discussed in hindsight, the changes and shifts that have taken place makes the discussion even more complex. However, all over the world it is the presence and active functioning of the women's movements that has played a critical role in this process of transformation, labelling, and identification of issues as feminist and subjugating of women for centuries. Recently published in the American Political Science Review, a new study on violence against women conducted over the course of four decades and in 70 countries reveals that the mobilisation of feminist movements has been more important for change than the wealth of nations, nature of the state, democracy or

left-wing political parties, or the number of women politicians (“Largest Global Study on VAW”, 2012). It was revealed through this global research that the feminist movements that were autonomous from political parties and the state, women were found to be able to articulate and organise around their top priorities as women without having to be liable to broader organisational concerns of the state, national concerns or men’s needs. Across several countries it was found that feminist movements and mobilisations urged governments to approve and ratify global and regional norms as well as agreements on violence. The study also revealed that strong, autonomous feminist movements were the first to articulate the issue of violence against women and the key catalysts for government actions. Strong women’s movements commanded public support and attention, and convinced the media that the issues were/are important for public discussion. In countries that were slower to adopt policies on violence, feminist movements leveraged global and regional agreements to push for local policy change (Htun & Weldon, 2012)⁶¹.

Over the last several decades, the women’s groups in Bangladesh have also taken up issues of VAW and have organised protest and resist alongside formulating feminist agendas. However, the forms were different at different points of time, structured by the context and multiple factors, nature of the state, political alliance of the organisations, strength of collective forces, coalitions and networking, role of critical individual and so on. The responses are varied, heterogeneous, often fragmented, but rich in multiple shades (Butalia, 1997⁶², Manchanda, 2001).

While gleaning the long and elaborate discussions which continued days’ worth of interaction with the respondents, the issues gradually started to emerge, often in retrospect. As the interviews continued, the history of the movement started to unfold and expose its innermost layers. The diversity in responses and formulations often stem from personal awareness or *‘bodh’*—they entailed deep emotions, personalised involvement, often understood in terms of individual choices, characteristics, interests and political leanings as well as personal ideology. Responses are also marked by institutional or collective standing. For example, membership to certain organisations at certain point of time have seemingly shaped the contour of responses and formulations. Differences and diversities were also

⁶¹ The Civic Origins of Progressive Policy Change: Combating Violence against Women in a Global Perspective, 1975-2005’ is published in the latest issue of American Political Science Review and is available online at: http://polisci.unm.edu/common/documents/htun_apsa-article.pdf

⁶² See Communique ,Nos. 42-43, July-Aug 1997, New Delhi

revealed within and amongst the feminist/women's organisations. Relationship of conflict and cooperation, convergence and divergence are common with regard to VAW issues. The responses are also shaped and structured by the nature and form of VAW, degree of severity, when and where, to whom, socio-political characteristics of the perpetrator and the 'victim'. For example there happen to be numerous cases of VAW, murder, killing, dowry death, stalking, suicide, rape and gang rape, but only a few receive public attention or are taken up by the women's movement. In other words, the women's movement often has to 'pick and choose' its battles.

Amidst all this complexity, ambiguity and confusion I would now like to turn the issue of War of Liberation in 1971 as the starting point for the emergence of feminist thought and movement in the new Bangladesh. To begin with, the section will deal with a background of the issue and then move on to responses by the key respondents. The main issues covered are war-time rape, rehabilitation process, abortion of rape survivors, adoption of war children and the state title of *Birangona*. This particular issue occupies significant portions of this chapter as wartime VAW was central to the genealogy of the women's movement in Bangladesh. More importantly it was this one issue that remained as an entry point, as well as the most significant area of discussion for all the respondents in their recollection/retrospection on the women's movement's processes in Bangladesh⁶³.

II

War time VAW and Post War Scenario: Processes of Rehabilitation, Rape, War Babies, Abortion, Adoption and *Birangona*

Rape:

As discussed earlier, mass killing, genocide, wartime rape and atrocities against women were the central features of 1971 WoL. However, layers of dilemma, contradiction, confusion and ambivalence lie around the issue of rape during 1971 and onward.

After independence, the new government established by President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was mainly preoccupied with attempts to deal with the ravages of war, famine and

⁶³The sub-sections below not only contextualise the issues from secondary sources but also heavily draws from interviews and first-hand information gathered by the researcher.

the deteriorating law and order situation. It was difficult for the new state to give specific attention to the situation of women except, in connection with the rehabilitation of war victims. A Relief and Rehabilitation Board was set up on 18th February 1972 charged with the specific duties of providing relief and rehabilitation, on an emergency basis, to women who were raped as well as to women who were widowed, abandoned or otherwise affected by the war (Kabeer, 1991).

It is often quoted that 30,00,000 were killed, 2,00,000 to 4,00,000 women being raped (The Liberation War of Bangladesh: Documents, 1982, Vol. 8⁶⁴; Brownmiller, 1975; Kabir & Mehdi, 2006). However, the number of rapes that actually occurred in Bangladesh will probably–never be known. This is because “... Rape wherever it occurs is considered a profound offence against individual and community honour. Raped women are dejected and ostracised by their husband, families and are often isolated from communities” (Thomas & Regan, 1994; Parveen, 2007; Saikia, 2011). This observation remains crucial to the Bangladesh context till today.

In the context of Bangladeshi culture, as in many others, rape is a matter of shame and stigma (a question of *izzat/honour and lajja (shame)* in English). Women are not likely to report or record rape, which has deep implications for tribunals of war crimes and placement of evidence in relation to rape. Women as part of the larger society have actually internalized the attitude of existing cultural ideology. Her position and decisions around rape and sexual violence are largely shaped and determined by attitudes prevailing within the patriarchal state and society. Despite the pervasiveness of rape, it often remains a hidden element of conflict situations (Mohsin, 1997a; Mohsin, 1997b; Guhathakurta, 2001). Furthermore, rape is seen also as a tangible reward for masculine or victor soldiers, and also as unfortunate but inevitable side effect of sending men to war while leaving women behind unprotected without any males. “To the victors go the spoils”– a war cry for centuries has sort of legitimised rape during conflict/war situation. Raped women are considered the spoils of the war.⁶⁵ Changing their race by raping them, a weapon of war used for ethnic cleansing, remains another ‘justification’ for rape in war (Chowdhury, 2007, 1993; Elshtain, 1982; Papenek, 1994). Bangladesh had to go through similar experiences during 1971 and the new

⁶⁴ Available online: 71.amarboi.com, as of September 2014

⁶⁵ “*Juddha moydaney naari gonimater maal*” in Bangla (women are the booty in the battle field) (Kabir & Mehdi, 2006)

nation of Bangladesh experienced the approximate statistics of three million dead and two/four hundred thousand women raped in a span of nine months (Mookherjee, 2008).

Calculated killing and rape was part of the strategic war plan of Pakistan. Massive number of rapes took place throughout the country during the entire period of nine months in 1971. Afterwards, these affected women were rescued from bunkers, camps, prisons and army stations. Many of them were pregnant, physically and mentally devastated. Many committed suicide when rescued (The Liberation War of Bangladesh: Documents, 1982; Brownmiller 1975, Saikia, 2011).

Bina D'Costa illustrates how Salma Sobhan, an activist and scholar, documented this. Pakistani soldiers and their collaborators raped women in their homes, in their local areas, or forcibly took them to rape camps (D'Costa, 2011). The nation felt 'jeopardised' through this act of violence against women. As women's 'chastity', the central element of Bengali nationalist imagination, was 'lost' and 'the conquered status of masculine impotence' (Brownmiller, 1975) was confronted with the real, at-hand problem of war babies. Rape of Bangladeshi women during the nine months of *Muktijuddho* (War of Liberation) posed a great threat to the national imagination (Hossain, 2009). What to do with the rape victims, what to do with women who are pregnant with 'enemy' children, what to do with the war babies were the main challenges that had to be faced by both the state and the women's movement. The whole range of dilemmas, ambiguities and tension around the issue of rape requires particular attention in order to understand the nation-state relationship and formulation of feminist thought (Gaitskell & Unterhalter, 1989; Huston, 1982).

War Rape, State and the Women's Movement: The Juxtaposed Dilemma of the Rehabilitation Process



Figure 4: Pictures of Rehabilitation Centres.

Source: Collected from personal album of Maleka Khan

The inherent contradictions and notions around the purity-pollution debate concerning rape led to ambiguous responses from different stakeholders. In this section, the interaction with the state and the women's movement is the main focus.

The very 'masculine' Bangladeshi leadership entrusted the social workers and medical practitioners with the primary responsibility of dealing with the 'raped women' (D'Costa, 2011). With rape came the inevitable question of war babies. State was not insensitive to the issue. State declared the violated women as *Birangonagon*; the war heroines, the valiant warriors (female) of the country.

The common story that went around at the time was that when violated women, abandoned by their family came to Shiekh Mujibur Rahman asking him what they would say to the people if they are asked about their identity? He allegedly said "... write my name as your father, address, 32 Dhanmondi"⁶⁶. Nonetheless, he also declared that, "...none of the bastard babies, who carry the blood of Pakistanis, will be allowed *to remain in Bangladesh*" (cited in D'Costa, 2003). *Bangladesh state, which controlled women's motherhood, assumed a strong paternal role* and encouraged women to have abortions. War babies were graphic reminders⁶⁷ of how national events took shape through women's body.

The Rehabilitation Process:

The first response from the state was to establish rehabilitation centres for women war victims all over the country. There were two types of centres, private and state sponsored public centres. Both received direct assistance and support from the government. Within seven days of independence, under the leadership of Sufia Kamal, a group of women took spontaneous initiative to rehabilitate the war victims. This effort later crystalised in 7th

⁶⁶This was vaguely remembered by Najma Chowdhury during a personal communication in her house in 2009. Also mentioned in *Birangona Birmata Jobanitey Ekattorer Voyal Smrity*, published by Director, Reserach & Publication Department, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, ed. Liakat Ali Lucky, Bikash Mudron: Dhaka

⁶⁷During early December 1971, while my father was working as a doctor in Dhaka Medical College, he came up with a proposal to adopt a 'war baby'. My mother, after considering it for a while, gave her consent. However, the whole plan of bringing the baby girl in was dismissed after my maternal uncle (Shaheed Munier Chowdhury) was abducted by the Pakistani collaborators. He was picked up from his mother's house on 14th December (now observed nationally as Intellectual Martyres' Day) and was never found. The apprehension that plagued my mother's mind was, 'Would she remind me of my brother every time I look at her? Would this event affect my behaviour towards the baby?' Nobody had any answers to these questions at that time and, eventually, the whole process of adopting the baby was abandoned. I still wonder, after all these years, what it would have been like to have a sister who was adopted—would she have been a constant reminder of enemy camps? I still don't have the answer.

January 1972 and the “Central Women Rehabilitation Centre” (*Kendriyo Mohila Punorbashon Shongstha*) was established.

After independence, apart from Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, there was Bangladesh Mahila Samity (BMS), the female wing of Awami League (AL) headed by Nilima Ibrahim⁶⁸, all of which were involved in the rehabilitation process. The government established its office in the old office of APWA. BMS started to work under government instruction. There was an open call in the newspapers not to hide war victims but to bring them to the Centres. These Centres did not directly mention victims of rape but declared themselves as an open rehabilitation platform for all victims, such as for women who have lost husbands, children, homes, or have been raped.

There were about eighteen such Centres across the country to accommodate war victims. This was the first institutional attempt to rehabilitate *nirjatito* (raped, violated, tortured and traumatised) women. Maleka Khan, Director of the private rehabilitation centre, has spoke in her interview about her experience with war victims during that period (Tahmina, 2009). During the nine months of war, she heard sporadically about women being kept in army camps. After independence, it became increasingly clear to all that thousands of women had been raped and tortured by the Pakistani army. She set aside her private loss of a brother and other relatives who had died in the war and with the help of Sufia Kamal, Badrunnessa Ahmed, Meher Kabir, Hasna Hazari, Dr Halima Khatun, Sufia Shaheed, Firoza Khatun, Begum Shamsunnahar and others, started to look for a place to house these women. Finally, they were sanctioned with two houses in Eskaton (House No. 88 and No. 2) Dhaka. Mr Bazlur Majid, Director of Social Welfare Department gave his full support to this particular rehabilitation process. Another main centre in Dhaka was located in a deserted house on Road No. 4, in Dhanmondi, operated under the leadership of Nilima Ibrahim and Moshfiqua Mahmud.

Finally, Bangladesh Women’s Rehabilitation Board⁶⁹ was formally established in 1972, partnering with the Directorate of Training, Research, Evaluation and Communication (TREC) of the Bangladesh Family Planning Association, The Central Organisation for Women’s Rehabilitation and The Directorate of Social Welfare and Labour. The Board had two broad goals: i) To organise clinical services wherever it was possible in Bangladesh,

⁶⁸ Nilima Ibrahim, Educationist, Writer and a social worker, founding member of Bangladesh Mahila Shamiti. Closely involved with the rehabilitation process for the war affected in new Bangladesh. Apart from her numerous publications she is well known for her book *Ami Birangona Bolchhi* in Bangla.

⁶⁹ Justice K M Sobhan was appointed the Chairperson of the Board.

within the limited time span of three to four months, to provide medical treatment to the rape victims and ii) to plan, organise and establish facilities and institutions, especially vocational training centres, to effectively rehabilitate thousands of destitute women. Destitute women were not necessarily ‘violated women’ in state discourse but were considered as ‘war affected’ women, who had lost either their husbands or the ‘bread earners’ of the family, or had lost their property during the war (Banglapedia, 2006). Women leaders and activists were involved in this process of rehabilitation and worked in association with the state.

The foremost reaction was of complete shock, fear and sheer lack of words. ‘*Ami nirbak, orao nirbak* (I was speechless and they had nothing to say either)’ (Maleka Khan, cited in Tahmina, 2009). Nevertheless the primary emotion that was at play was sympathy, support and sharing of grief and loss, which had affected almost everyone. The issue of rape turned out to be a great challenge for the newly formed government. Maleka Khan herself had seen 5000 case histories in her centre alone. Although the actual number will never be known, one can easily imagine that the rehabilitation centres could only touch the tip of the iceberg. What happened to those who could not reach the centres will never be known and their stories buried under silence and amnesia.

Right after independence, the sheer magnitude of the violence wiped out all prejudices that had torn down the boundaries of the traditional purity-pollution framework. The patriarchal state was also blaming itself for not being able to protect its women. The main activities of the centre were to rescue and bring back women from cantonments, torture cells and other stations. Maleka Khan and others personally went to the cantonments and brought back women who were a complete wreck both physically and mentally. Freedom fighters, journalists, people from all walks of life came forward to help these women. Rescuing and rehabilitation process continued for about four years in numerous forms (Maleka Khan, interview dated: March 2010)

The immediate need was to provide both physical and psychological support, the former in the form of physical check-ups, treating wounds and physical injuries, and providing long-term treatment for STDs (Sexually Transmitted Diseases). Many of the victims tried to commit suicide; some were completely out of control and had become mentally unstable. In response to the call of the Bangladesh government, foreign doctors came to Bangladesh to treat and perform abortions for the rape victims. There were professional doctors, psychiatrists, medical practitioners from home and abroad for their

treatment and psychological support. Among these professional the most widely quoted was Dr Geoffrey Davis, an Australian surgeon. According to him, about 95% of wartime pregnancies were terminated in Dhaka based centres alone. These centres performed more than 100 abortions during the first month of the women's stay there, and 2500 in total (Mookherjee, 2007).

Abortion

According to Dr Geoffrey Davis, the Australian surgeon, more than 4,00,000 women were victims of rape, violence and desertion. Most of these women were suffering from sexually transmitted diseases, had to undergo abortions, were in risk of not being able to bear children again and may suffer from lifelong reproductive and other medical problems. He also added that before any help from outside the country became available, near about 200,000 pregnant women had already undergone abortions through informal sources like *dai*⁷⁰ or quacks (cited in Kabir & Mehedi, 2006). By the time any formal medical help like Dr Davis and others' arrived, eight months had already passed for many pregnant women. Women had had to fend for themselves with regard to abortions. The rest had to give birth -- some opted for adoption, and some kept their babies with them. Dr Geoffrey Davis accused the government of providing wrong information concerning the number of women subjected to rape during the WoL. In reality, the magnitude of the number was not even comprehended by the Government. Silencing of the cases were also another reason for lack of documentation and proper information about the rape victims.

Taking care of pregnant women entailed a great challenge for the new state. As perceived by the entire nation, abortion was seen as the 'natural and logical' solution for the rape victims. However, the most difficult part was dealing with the young victims. They often did not know what to do. The task of abortion was taken over by the international community, state and the UN. Interestingly, during the war USA was in support of Pakistan but immediately after the war a group of American doctors, along with doctors from Australia, travelled to Bangladesh to aid the abortion mission (Abortion Team to Travel to Bangladesh, 1972).

⁷⁰ Local birth attendant

Creating Exceptional Legal Frameworks to Aid Rehabilitation Process

Abortion was illegal in Bangladesh at the time and still is to this day. However, the Bangladeshi Government introduced two exceptional laws by suspending all existing legal frameworks surrounding abortion and adoption. It is important to note here that no formal legal system or even Constitution of the new nation was at hand during that time. The exceptional measures that are often adopted during times of political crisis need to be analysed in political rather than in solely juridical and constitutional terms (Agamben, 1995⁷¹, as cited in Mookherjee, 2007).

Maleka Khan during her interview (dated: March 2010) also stated that women who were raped needed to be “protected from the emotions of motherhood” (also quoted by Mookherjee, 2007). The only solution to the problem of raped women with babies was made possible by the emotional and physical ‘dekinning’ of the raped women from their children (war babies).

The primary activities of the Board were to provide emergency medical help, including ‘termination of pregnancies and treatment of gynaecological disorders for the victims of the Pakistani army’s physical torture’ (NBBWRP,⁷²1974, as cited in Mookherjee, 2007), which means the existing law against abortion from the former East Pakistan was temporarily suspended through this new government order. The medical care was provided under the management of International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) London and USAID. These two organisations donated money, set up abortion clinics, provided medication and coordinated the services from US, UK and Australia.

It is pertinent here to mention that the right to obtain an abortion, exercise control over one’s own body and movement for reproductive rights did not emerge in newly born Bangladesh as a concrete agenda during the seventies. The whole rehabilitation process emphasised the need for immediate abortion for the rape victims. However, this decision of the state was contradictory to *Shariat law* prevalent in West Pakistan and considered forbidden by The Quran. The Government of Bangladesh later institutionalised this extraordinary step by legalising MR (Menstrual Regulation)⁷³ in 1972, which means

⁷¹ Agamben, G, (1995). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (trans. D. Heller-Roazen). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

⁷² NBBWRP (National Board of Bangladesh Women’s Rehabilitation Program, 1974, Women’s Work. Dhaka Bangladesh Cooperative Book Society.

⁷³ MR is distinct from abortion which is a procedure performed up to and between 24 to 28 weeks after conception. Abortions were done under the semi-legal framework of Menstrual Regulations or MR. Though

termination of the foetus within 90 days became legal. This is not contradictory to Islamic sanctions (Three menstrual cycles are necessary for ensuring pregnancy, as mentioned in Sura Al Bakara, The Quran). MR was the name given to a device in translational family planning circles organised by USAID's office of population and International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF). MR is a regular procedure widely used in Bangladesh even today. Interestingly the practice of abortion was never given a definitive official or legal status in post war Bangladesh⁷⁴. The process of ensuring wartime abortion was enjoined through a governmental order of which no documentation was found. Maleka Begum in her interview with the researcher (2009) vaguely remembers an order which was sent directly to the relevant authorities, but was never documented. The Constitution of Bangladesh was passed only in October 1972, almost a year after the war ended in December 1971. Termination of pregnancies resulting from rape was permissible within this period of ten months (December 1971-October 1972).

These abortions continued to take place mainly in Dhaka till October of 1972. War time abortion was never given any official or legal status and tragic silence shrouds the whole affair of mass scale abortions and adoption. People who were involved in this process—the doctors, social workers, volunteers, and women activist—all deemed it necessary: “We did not know what else to do. The women had to be re-established in their families and homes....how else could we have helped them?” (Maleka Khan, Interview dated: 2010).

Bangladesh circumvented the issues of legality related to abortion, termination of pregnancies was permitted and encouraged during 1972. This has had significant effects on the family planning programme of Bangladesh. Having assisted in wartime abortions, IPPF (International Planned Parenthood Foundation) formally introduced MR in 1973 and relied heavily on trained birth attendants, or female welfare workers for terminating unwanted pregnancies. Mookherjee (2007) contends that a large number of women raped during the war received professional training through this family planning programme and worked as field workers. The introduction of MR not only institutionalised the family planning programme in Bangladesh but also ensured implementation of policies for population control. MR clinics set up in Dhaka with support from the Population Council and the International Women's Health Coalition, a New York based feminist NGO, marked the beginning of the rapid growth of NGOs and the privatisation of women's health services in the eighties. Use of this process became the template for subsequent population control programmes through transnational funding for reproductive health. (Murphy n.d, as cited in Mookherjee, 2007). Reproductive health issues in relation to MR are not in the purview of this thesis but demands attention, and thus will be dealt with in subsequent chapters.

⁷⁴It is important to note here that the women's movement actually gained in terms of reproductive rights because of this exceptional law introduced during an exceptional time. Though this step was initiated by the patriarchal and paternal mind-set of the state and prompted by the international population control network, a separate movement for legalising abortion was not a necessity for Bangladesh women's movement after that time. However, it is important to remember that many abortions are being performed under the umbrella of MR and many are still at work in a very hazardous manner, posing a threat to the reproductive health of the women concerned.

War Babies⁷⁵ and Adoption

Banglapedia (2006, vol. 10) refers to war babies as babies born to Bengali women as consequence of their being raped by Pakistani soldiers and other criminals who took advantage of the situation of during the WoL. They were referred to as ‘unwanted children’, the ‘enemy children’, the ‘illegitimate children’, and more contemptuously, ‘the bastards’. Their birth mothers are also popularly and officially referred to as ‘violated women’, ‘dishonoured women’, ‘distressed women’, ‘rape victims’, ‘the victims of military repression’, ‘the affected women’, the unfortunate women’ and finally as *Birangona*. As discussed in previous sections, despite mass scale abortions, many war babies were born in rehabilitation centres or in homes. Unfortunately, accurate or even fairly reliable statistics and information are not available about these children. Only limited evidences has been found in government and non-governmental organisational records as well as in records of foreign missions and organisations. There lies no other way but to make guesswork and assumptions about the number of war babies.

Newspaper reports of the time, which included interviews of Justice K. M Sobhan, Chairperson representing Bangladesh Women’s Rehabilitation Board (BWRB), Sister Margaret Mary of Superior Missionaries of Charity, and International Planned Parenthood Fund (IPPF) personnel Odert Von Shoultz, reveal that about 300 to 400 children were born on the premises of rehabilitation centres in Dhaka known as *Sheva Shadan*. Again, international reports indicate that the estimated number of war babies was 10,000⁷⁶ which is, by far, the largest number quoted in any records that referred to the birth of the war babies during 1971-72 (Banglapedia, 2006, vol. 10).

The women who gave birth to these children remained yet another challenge for the state. Some of the war babies were absorbed within Bangladeshi families. Some were rehabilitated by SOS Children’s Village International in Bangladesh, (*SOS Shishu Palli*)⁷⁷ situated in Shyamoli, Dhaka.

⁷⁵. During 1972-3, I was a student of Shaheen School and students of different ages from *Shishu Palli* used to come to school in a packed bus. As children of 8/9 years of age, we did not have clear ideas about who they were but we all perceived their ‘otherness’. Now I know that they were war babies and Shaheen School, situated in Mohakhali, had agreed to take them as their students when other schools had refused.

⁷⁶ Executive Director of the Canadian UNICEF Committee, following his visits to both occupied and independent Bangladesh, reported to their headquarters in Ottawa (Banglapedia, 2006)

⁷⁷ SOS Children’s Villages International is the umbrella organisation of all SOS Children’s Village associations worldwide. SOS Children’s Villages is an independent, non-governmental, social development organisation that provides family-based care for children in 133 countries and territories specially of those without parental care.

Adoption

The government established a two-tier ‘cleansing process’— either the women were to abort or they were urged to give up the babies for adoption. The reactions of mothers to their impending motherhood also varied. Some were eager to give up the babies, who were agonizing reminders of the sufferings they had to endure; a reminder of how national events took shape through the bodies of women. As noted earlier, Pakistanis in general were taller and lighter skinned compared to darker and shorter Bengalis. This difference in physical attributes added significant distress and agony to the Bengali women pregnant with war children (D’Costa, 2003; Brownmiller, 1975).

Maleka Khan talked about women who felt close to their babies and did not want to give up the babies for adoption but soon realized that it was necessary to give up the babies so that they could get married and start a new life. Family members, and in fact the whole national feeling, echoed against these babies. Many newspaper articles, letters to editors, state speeches, as well as interviews with social workers, women leaders and activists indicated that the general consensus was that getting rid of the babies as soon as possible was the most desirable option (Mookherjee, 2007).

D’Costa quotes Nilima Ibrahim, the focal point of Government Rehabilitation Centre:

We decided that if any of the foreign countries offered to take the babies, we would give them up for adoption... Many girls did not want to give their babies away. We even had to use sedatives to make the women sleep and then take the babies away (Nilima Ibrahim, 1997, as cited in D’Costa, 2003).

In fact, women were not given any choice about the future of the babies in this country. The social workers were sympathetic to these women and their emotions related to their children but at the end the trauma and distress suffered by the women were ignored as purity was given the highest priority in the discourse of nation-building. Maleka Khan recalled a young girl from her centre who did not want to part with her baby. She was crying

SOS *Shishu Palli* was established in Dhaka under the leadership of Prof. Dr. Hermann Gmeiner, who visited Bangladesh in 1972 immediately after the War of Liberation with his assistant - Mr. Helmut Kutin, present President of the organisation and met with 'Father of the Nation' - Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman with the proposal of establishing SOS Children's Villages in Bangladesh. Bangabandhu welcomed Prof. Hermann Gmeiner's proposal. On behalf of the government of Bangladesh, the then Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare signed an agreement with the organisation on 17 May 1972 to start SOS Children's Village activities in Bangladesh.

desperately, but no one offered to help or said, ‘Let us take care of the baby and the mother’ (Ahmed, 2009). These children were labelled as ‘bastards’ and it was made very clear from the very beginning that they were not wanted. However this decision was not devoid of emotion.

Nilima Ibrahim mentioned in her interview to D’Costa that, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman requested her to send the children away. “They should be raised as human beings with honour. Besides, I do not want to keep those with polluted blood in this country.” (D’Costa, 2003). The dilemma and contradictory emotions here are to be noted. While the war babies were not to be accepted in Bangladesh, the persistent motive was that sending them away was ensuring a good life for them, away from the stigma and hatred that is rooted in their own country.

The Catholic Convent of Mother Theresa in Calcutta offered them shelter. *Shishubhaban* (Children’s Home) was a drop-in centre established in old Dhaka for the unwanted babies from women who were willing to relinquish them (The Daily Shangbad, January 17, 1972). Mother Theresa visited Dhaka immediately after independence and through her colleagues at Missionaries of Charity, and the Government of Bangladesh’s Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, two Canadian organisations became involved in the adoption process.

D’Costa elaborates that families in Canada, France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Australia and Sweden adopted most of the babies. In addition, there were many organisations such as the US-based Holt Adoption Programme, Inc. and Terre des Hommes. Christian organisations were largely motivated by Catholic pro-life principles and their position was against abortion due to their religious beliefs. Mother Theresa reported that, during her visits, she barely found any rape victims in the camps but that there were lots of babies and they were eventually adopted. Dhaka office was supposed to have all the records but none of the researchers such as Nayanika Mookherjee, Rubaiyet Hossain, Shahadat Hossain or Bina D’Costa could trace the records of babies that were given away for adoption.

New Laws to Facilitate Adoption

In order to facilitate the adoption process, the Inter-Country Adoption Law (Habiba, 1997) and the *Bangladesh Abandoned Children (Special Provision) Order* was hastily passed

on October 23, 1972⁷⁸. When the first contingent of fifteen war babies from Bangladesh arrived in Canada on 19th July 1972, they received comprehensive media coverage for days. The key media message was that interracial adoption programmes were positive initiatives and that Canadians of diverse background should endorse such initiatives (Banglapedia, 2006, vol. 10). Apart from international adoptions throughout 1972, various orphanages and the SOS Children's Villages Project were established in Dhaka at this juncture, to facilitate care for abandoned children, some of which are still active in Dhaka. Under this law, people interested in adopting abandoned children applied to the Director of Social Welfare, who took the final decision on their behalf (Mookherjee, 2007).

The main purpose of the adoption law was to ensure safe exit of the 'war babies'. The state order legitimised the adoption process, a practice that contradicted the prevalent Muslim personal law. The law defined abandoned children as those who were 'deserted or unclaimed or born out of wedlock' and authorized the government to appoint 'statutory guardians'—a person or authority entrusted with care and custody of the person of an abandoned child. However, no mention was made about the adoptee's right to inheritance. As per Muslim personal law, inheritance is primarily determined by 'blood'. This lack of clarity regarding inheritance highlights the fact that this particular adoption law was primarily preoccupied in 'providing substitute homes for the *unfortunate* (emphasis mine) children' (Chowdhury & Shamim, 1994), and no record had been kept to track their lives in the foreign lands.

However this is not the end of the story. The first resistance to this adoption law came from the Islamist Party, Jamat E Islam. Their main concern was that these children would probably be converted to Christianity or might be used in child pornography or prostitution in western countries (Mookherjee, 2007). Assumptions about babies born of Muslim mothers being destined to be raised as Christians in the adopting countries made public opinion in Bangladesh quite hostile to the inter-country adoption initiative (Banglapedia, 2006, vol. 10). It is indeed paradoxical that women were neither allowed to choose the fate of their children nor the children allowed to stay in the country. Nevertheless, the question of national ownership was raised around their assumed future religious identities. Interestingly the state was abandoning the children but at the same time claiming their religious identities as per the religious inclination of the state.

⁷⁸ Government promulgated a Presidential Order, No. 124 of 1972, entitled The Bangladesh Abandoned Children (special Provisions) Order. It was later repealed by Ordinance no. 5 in 1982. and replaced with Guardian and Ward Act 1890 which prohibits foreigners from adopting minors who are Bangladeshi citizens (Chowdhury and Shamim, 1994)

The question surrounding war babies came to a close by 1994, when the babies were either transported by then to foreign lands as adopted or began to be raised at home as ‘normal’ citizens of Bangladesh.

Disappearance of Records and Documentations

In the rehabilitation centres, social workers documented the personal histories of rape victims. These documents have, however, disappeared without any trace. Many contradictory comments and information makes the silence around these rapes more eloquent. Maleka Khan alone recalls having records of 5000 women in her centre. There were, no doubt, many more case histories in their keepsake. All the records of war victims were kept in the rehabilitation centre, both at the government and the private one. Maleka Khan in her interview stated that she had heard the documents had been burnt to ensure the anonymity of the rape victims. According to one source, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman personally requested Nilima Ibrahim to destroy all documents in order to protect the women from social stigma (Begum, 2004) for which reason all records were put into an old tank and burnt (Akhtar, et al., 2013). Meher Kabir⁷⁹ on the other hand said that she was closely connected to this rehabilitation process and that there was nothing much to destroy except for notations of the sheer number of women visiting the centre. The record only kept a serial number and address or contact if any.

Maleka Begum on the other hand remembers that documents were given to the *Bangla Academy*⁸⁰ for use in writing a comprehensive history of the genocide. However, all the records were lost; no trace could be found of those records afterwards. Maleka Khan presumes that all the records were actually destroyed after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, by subsequent governments after Mujibur Rahman’s assassination, in order to erase traces and evidences of rape and genocide by the Pakistani army. None of the members of the rehabilitation would have destroyed those records stated Maleka Khan. Despite the contradictory and confusing information, one thing that became very clear was that no trace of the records of the women or children were found in subsequent years. Whatever happened to the records, it is important to understand that the destruction of records hints at two possible motives. Firstly, destruction was considered necessary to

⁷⁹ Meher Kabir was working with the government rehabilitation centres during the early days of the rehabilitation process. She shared with the researcher in 2010 regarding her experiences with the rehabilitation process.

⁸⁰ Bangla Academy is the national academy for promoting the Bangla (Bengali) language in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

safeguard the dignity and chastity of the victims, in order to smooth out their assimilation in society in the future⁸¹. Secondly, destruction of records was purely politically motivated to erase the documentation of rape and genocide by the people rising to power in the post-1975 scenario.

Rehabilitation through Arranging Marriage

The rehabilitation process beyond abortion and adoption entailed certain other activities as well. According to Maleka Begum, advertisements were posted in the daily newspapers regarding the marriage of these women. The Bangladeshi government used to offer gifts like sewing machines or jobs for those who were willing to come forward and marry them. Many such marriages took place during the early seventies. According to Maleka Begum, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad was against such advertisement and of marriages with material incentives being offered. BMP shared their apprehension regarding such marriages with Justice K M Sobhan, Chairperson of the Women's Rehabilitation Centres. However he was convinced that marriage was a necessary step towards the rehabilitation of these violated women. He declared in a press conference during 3 March 1972 that he would personally take up the responsibility of these women like a father (*Konnya dae grosto pitar bhumika* in Bangla) and would try to arrange marriages for the vulnerable war victims⁸². Soon after this declaration, numerous letters started to arrive to the Board from young men eager to marry the victims. Almost all the letters contained demands for a big dowry— 'red Toyota car' was mentioned quite explicitly in many. Begum Fazilatunnessa Mujib, wife of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was once present during such a marriage ceremony and made a gift of her own necklace to the bride there⁸³.

⁸¹ Another event requires examination to understand the mind-set of rape victims in a patriarchal frame work. According to Nilima Ibrahim, during 1972 she met a group of about 40 women who were leaving the country with the war prisoners of Pakistan. They were adamant to go with their rapists, because they knew that they would have no place here in their own country. Nilima Ibrahim personally requested them to stay back and offered shelter to one particular young girl in her own house but she refused saying that everybody would abhor her when they begin to know about her history of being raped by the Pakistanis. The young girl felt that it was thus a better option for her to leave the country and accept whatever lay in her future in a foreign land in complete anonymity (Ibrahim, 1998). *Ain O Shalish Kendro* interviews also reveal the events and experiences of rape victims later in their lives (Akhtar, et al., 2013)

⁸² Also see Mookherjee (2006)

⁸³ Personal communication with Maleka Khan, March 2009.



Figure 5: Rehabilitation through arranging marriage: Sufia Kamal and Fazilatunnessa Mujib, attending the ceremony.

Source: Collected from Personal Album of Maleka Khan

Other Initiatives to Rehabilitate: Creating Employment, Training and the Idea of Sonargaon Craft Village

Apart from arranging marriages using whatever means possible, there were other initiatives attempted to rehabilitate the women which stretched beyond the ‘traditional solutions’. Gradually when the initial trauma had subsided, volunteers started to probe into the personal skills or potentials of the war victims. Women activist like Maleka Khan looked beyond only marriage as a part of the rehabilitation process. Maleka Khan proposed that the government establish a Craft Village at Sonargaon, Panam city. The process was started by leasing 100 acres of land, the outskirts of Dhaka city. The initial plan was to rehabilitate all these women at the craft village where they would become financially independent and later could take whatever decisions they would like to take regarding their lives. The process was initiated but soon deserted after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1975). The plan was not totally abandoned, however. Later in 1976, with the initiative of *Shilpacharya* Zainul Abedin⁸⁴ the craft village started to take shape once again. By this time Maleka Khan had already left the rehabilitation centre and came forward to work with Zainul Abedin, engaged in helping him to establish the current craft village at Sonar

⁸⁴Zainul Abedin (1914 – 1976) was the renowned painter who was famous for his Famine Series paintings of 1943. He played a pioneering role in the modern art movement in Bangladesh that began, by all accounts, with the setting up of the Government Institute of Arts and Crafts (now Institute of Fine Arts) in 1948 in Dhaka of which he was the founding principal. He is referred to with honour as *Shilpacharya* (Great Teacher of the Arts) in Bangladesh.

Gaon. Many war victims also received jobs in the craft village later. There were other efforts for victims as well, such as vocational training, typing, embroidery, designing etc. State initiatives and support to help establish women as independent agents were not completely abandoned. The Board had its training centre situated in Baily Road, Eskaton, where training in secretarial skills, handicrafts and other vocations were introduced. A government employment quota of five percent was reserved for war victims, was never filled, since it merely served to identify who they were (Huda, 1987, as cited in Kabeer, 1991). The government also established "Bangladesh Freedom Fighters Welfare Trust".⁸⁵ This trust was mainly established to rehabilitate disabled freedom fighters along with the dependents of *Shaheeds* (Martyred of WoL), or family members of the *Muktijodhha* (freedom fighter) in distress and requiring assistance. Through this programme many women were rehabilitated with assistance in terms of cash money, vocational training, pensions, scholarships, and stipends for continuation of studies and to make arrangements for unmarried, widowed or abandoned women.

***Birangona* the Heroic Woman/Valiant Warrior/War Heroine: "A Rose by Any Other Name Would Smell As Bitter"**⁸⁶

Apart from the rehabilitation options of abortion, adoption, arranging marriage and training for the victims, the new state took the initiative to recognise the role of rape victims and address their 'sacrifice'. The intention was to normalise the tension around the issue of mass rape. The title *Birangona* or 'heroic woman' was bestowed upon the rape survivors⁸⁷. From the perspective of the state it was an effort to claim respectability rather than ostracism or rejection for these women. Through its rehabilitation programme for the 'violated women', the government sought to enhance the self esteem of the victims and their status as the nation's noble contributors. By honouring the Heroic Woman the government declared that they deserve national recognition for their valiant role in the WoL. The purpose was to find and promote a positive voice around these victims. The government, after several rounds of consultation with interests groups, came forward to honour them with the title *Birangona*. It was also believed that such acknowledgment of their contribution and sacrifice would open

⁸⁵ President's order no. 94, 7th August 1972, official gazette, Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary affairs, Bangladesh

⁸⁶ "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet"⁸⁶ is a commonly quoted line from William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, in which Juliet argues that the names of things do not matter, only what things "are."

⁸⁷ *Dainik Purbadesh*, December 23, 1971. A news was published on behalf of the People's Republic of Bangladesh saying that women violated in the War of Liberation are 'Birangona' (*Juddhe Nirjatito naari ra Birangona* in Bangla)

doors for the *Birangonas* and they would be accepted by the society with respect and honour, as both triumphant and tragic (Banglapedia, 2006, vol. 10).

However, the title of *Birangona* was not unconditional. The issue of rape soon sparked the whole debate of shame and pollution which was being juxtaposed with the idea of honor and pride. Prime Minister Shiekh Mujibur Rahman repeatedly called the *Birangona* women his daughters in public meetings and asked the nation to welcome them back into the community and the family. However, given the cultural context of Bangladesh as of many countries, wartime rape is a phenomena to be kept silent or pushed back into forgetfulness. Instead of doing that, the Bangladesh government declared them *Birangona* in order to rehabilitate them and reduce social ostracism. But the entire effort went in vain. ‘Violated women’ were instead exposed to public ostracism, easily identifiable in case any woman wanted to claim the title. Moreover, the contradictory position of the state was already manifesting through its abortion and adoption proceedings defining the framework of citizenship for the new nation. The state took a clear position around raped women and their children—the war babies would not be allowed to remain in the country. The reaction to these steps was varied. At the beginning many women who had been raped accepted this state recognition but soon to push the title into oblivion, not ready to make this violent event in their lives public.

According to Mookherjee (2007) many social workers also argued that this labelling of heroines actually made these women more visible and prone to social stigma. As stated earlier, the declaration of *Birangona* was never come from any official order except for a press release in *Dainik Purbadesh*, 1971. Nevertheless they were mentioned frequently in government speeches, letters to editors, numerous newspaper articles on the state of ‘raped women’ and their rehabilitation process. Soon, the term *Birangona* actually assumed the meaning of ‘women raped during the war’ in popular phrasing. The declaration unintentionally highlighted the social hypocrisy and ambiguity surrounding the issue of female virtue in Bangladesh. As suggested by Naila Kabeer, “the term was an attempt to disguise the sexual violence of the crime so as to make social ostracism of its victims less severe. It only partially succeeded, and many of the women were unable to return to their homes. A five percent quota of government employment reserved for rape victims was, needless to say, never filled, since it merely served to pinpoint who they were” (Huda, 1987, as cited in Kabeer, 1991).

Following this broad overview this thesis would now like to delineate the responses from the women's movement about the VAW issues during the WoL and the rehabilitation process.

III

Responses From The Women's Movement: The Rehabilitation Process, Abortion, Adoption And *Birangona*⁸⁸

'The Rehabilitation Process: A Historical Necessity'

Apart from the reactions and responses stated above, more detailed narratives are documented below that try to unearth the complexity of war time VAW. Responses around wartime rape, abortion, adoption and the status of *Birangona* are wide-ranging and complex as all the respondents were making a journey to the past, revisiting history and travelling through the volatile days of early seventies. Past and present intermingled with current understanding of VAW and related issues. Responses also sprang from personal consciousness apart from just organisational. One reason for such personal reactions was largely due to the historical fact that except BMP none of the selected organisations were in operation back then. My respondents also had varying situational location. Some were directly involved; some were out of the country and some were too young to be a direct part of it. Nevertheless, all had something to say. Their voices were thus helpful in conceptualising the feminist consciousness during that nascent stage and were helpful in shedding light onto contemporary feminist debate and understanding.

As we have seen earlier, during the war, rape and atrocities against women became a critical tool in mobilising international political support for the newly formed Bangladesh. VAW thus became crucial to nation building. After independence, individuals on their own or from organisations were given the responsibilities of the rehabilitation process by the state. Some of these women were affiliated with BMP, some became engaged through their individual capacity and experiences gained through their exposures to the war and pre-war political and natural crises. WfW and NP were not in existence during the early seventies but respondents representing the organisations had their say on the issue. Given this broad context it is felt that for this section particularly responses must be analysed on an individual level rather than on an organisational level.

⁸⁸ Apart from the seven key protagonists this section also draws voices from two others i.e. Maleka Khan and Meher Kabir as they were actively involved in the rehabilitation process.

The responses were charged with emotion, reminiscence, shadowed by amnesia and lack of accuracy, and analysed in retrospect. Any straight forward answer was difficult to attain as many decades have elapsed. So many things have happened and the respondents themselves have also grown into different people over the years. Despite all these shades and tinges, the responses and views can be divided into two large streams. One group thought that whatever decisions and actions had been taken regarding war time rape and the subsequent rehabilitation process were only what was appropriate at that time. The rehabilitation process taken up only responded to the demands of the time.

According to the first view three of my respondents (Roushan Jahan, Najma Chowdhury and Maleka Begum, and also Maleka Khan as elaborated in previous sections) thought that war time VAW was not at all a simple issue because VAW was not understood in the developed and comprehensible manner as it is today. Rehabilitation programmes encompassing abortion and adoption of war children were also a ‘historical necessity’. Almost all thought that the rehabilitation process planned during those days was the only way to address the situation. Nobody at that time had actually raised any questions or criticised the process. None of the respondents could remember any resistance from any quarter. There was no coercion, except for one or two possibly isolated cases. The rehabilitation centres were for the most part taking care of those who came on their own, responding to the advertisements in the newspaper, or were dropped there by their families. However, the general ethos was to get rid of those babies and the ‘absorption’ of women into the mainstream society, erasing the past for ever.

War babies were unwanted during that time. If we had a more conducive time to welcome and accommodate those babies then we could have thought of keeping them. The decision to push abortion and adoption were responses to the demands of the time and context and the only option available which was both practical and pragmatic. The people who were involved in the process also held the same opinion. However, one must remember that there was no coercion on the abortion issue, and the entire situation led to the only available solution. (Roushan Jahan, Interview dated: June 2011)

The issue of war time rape, the right to abortion and adoption was again brought up by Roushan Jahan on international platforms like the World Conference on Women, Nairobi in 1995. She managed to gain the attention of ‘pro-lifers’ regarding how rape had been stigmatised and war babies were unwanted. To her, right to abortion and adoption are a matter of choice for women and has to be conceived as contextual.

The women's movement also did not see any problem in this.⁸⁹ The rehabilitation centres were largely in the hands of women leaders. The main concern was regarding what the identity of these children would be. Marriage was the only way for these women to integrate into the larger society. According to the respondents all of this was done not with any feeling of guilt or failure. Although there was little dispute over abortion and adoption, marrying them off with an exchange of dowry was not at all acceptable to Maleka Begum. BMP even in those days stood against this paternalistic attitude of the state in its attempts to marry off the victims.

During our discussion with M K Sobhan, Chair, Rehabilitation Board, we were asking him why they are so keen on being the father figure and arranging marriages for them. The answer we received was, 'Who would take care of these women who have never been out of their homes before, who will take care of these unwanted children?' (Maleka Begum, Interview dated: July 2010)

Respondents who were directly involved in the rehabilitation programmes accommodated training for the women, which gradually started to take shape as a result of their discussions. For the after the inception of the Board (1972 onwards), there were various effort to rehabilitate the war victims through vocational training, psychological support, providing jobs for them, arranging marriages as necessary, while the overarching concern was to ensure the privacy of these women. All these initiatives undertaken by the state were arranged through close interaction with women leaders, said the respondents.

Najma Chowdhury like most of her contemporaries thought that however undesired, the entire rehabilitation process was the inescapable demand of the time. However, the process had many pitfalls. Everything was done to clear the 'dirt' away and it was all about cleansing the 'mess' as if nothing has happened to women.

However in final consideration, those two rehabilitation activities were part of the unavoidable responsibility which they had to abide by under the circumstances. Feminist formulations cannot be put into a strait jacket, feminism is flexible and feminist formulation is varied, complex and even contradictory when analysed from in hindsight, thus in many occasions has to be understood as a contextualised reaction. (Najma Chowdhury, interview dated: June 2011)

⁸⁹ Women like Maleka Khan or Meher Kabir who were involved in the process also thought that this was the only right thing they could do for them (Interview dated 2010 and 2011)

Failings, Shortcomings, Loopholes: A Critique of the Rehabilitation Process

The second view was of a more radical and critical tone, accusing the rehabilitation process of being insensitive to women. Some thought that the women's movement to some extent was responsible for the way the issue of VAW was treated.

Ayesha Khanam from BMP and Mahmuda Islam from WfW thought that the treatment of the issue of rape and the rehabilitation process was not right and the case was not handled properly. She regrets this lost opportunity.

....during the entire year of 1972 and beyond, war time rape could have been our prime area. There was immense scope for us to deal with and dwell on the terms of the rehabilitation process of the rape survivors. We could have changed and challenged the entire mind set of this patriarchal society of ours. We had ample opportunities to redefine gender, rape, shame, stigma and glory, both individually and organisationally. We have lost a historical moment and instead of unveiling the truth we had suppressed it, tried to hide it. Women were the victims of a historical situation, had to pay and suffer in body due to the war but again they became victims of state violence through the patriarchal rehabilitation process of abortion and adoption. We who were involved did not question it, did not make any move to challenge the traditional responses—those who were more matured and senior leaders amongst us did not offer any alternatives to the solution of this rape issue (Ayesha Khanam, Interview dated: October 2011).

Mahmuda Islam on the other hand has a more analytical view regarding the rehabilitation process. She believes that, in the post war period, the government had taken some steps to tackle the situation and handed over this responsibility to prominent women leaders. But that does not mean that the women's voice was clearly articulated on the concerned issues. She recognises this particular role of the women's movement as "activities of women's organisations and individuals rather than a concrete feminist articulation under the movement".

Mahmuda reflects,—that there was 'participation', and 'activities' undertaken by women activists with passion, compassion and sincerity, but the conscious 'feminist critique' was absent—no specific feminist voice was raised to critically analyse the steps taken on behalf of women by the state. The critique and the alternative opinions started to emerge only during the eighties. Rape or the idea of domestic violence was not very clear to them then as it is today. Discrimination or deprivation of women was understood as being under the broader umbrella of VAW. Conceptual clarity around women's issues were at a nascent

stage, with a long road yet to be travelled for the women's movement of Bangladesh. Nevertheless, war time VAW was seen by her as the starting point for the movement and the state.

...However, one has to realise that women's issues only started to crystallise in Bangladesh, or started to enter into the state discourse through the incidence of wartime VAW issues. State responses could be first identified through the rehabilitation centres which gave women leaders ample freedom and autonomy to act upon the issues concerned via state machinery. These centres were later turned into formal state apparatus dealing with women's issues. Rape, abortion, adoption of war children, the stigma and shame, rejection and desertion, homelessness, dependency on male counterparts and associated vulnerability, widowhood, the huge death toll - all these issues suddenly came to the forefront so that the state had to tackle. The new state had no data on women in hand and WfW also felt that this should be the starting point to initiate research and create an information base to fight with towards making an impact on the policy discourse. (Mahmuda Islam, Interview dated: March 2011).

Naripokkho (NP) as an organisation was not present during the decade of seventies. The pioneers of this organisation were very young during the war. Responses from Shireen Huq and Firdous Azim reflect yet another level of consciousness which is pertinent to comprehend the feminist understanding and its time-boundedness. Both of them felt that war was something nobody could really escape and they clearly remember being aware of all the political issues but are also completely shocked and surprised at how they managed to remain apathetical to the rape issue. Firdous Azim used to live in Dhanmondi and Moshfiqua Mahmud from the rehabilitation centre was a close family friend.

..It still surprises me when I look back at my own state of apathy—why did I not think or talk about it? The women there would have been of my own age but it really bothers me now that I was not conscious about war time rape at that time. I am indeed deeply disturbed about my own lack of reactions. I still have no idea why (Firdous Azim, interview dated: March 2011).

Shireen Huq, the founding member of NP was found deeply disturbed by the question regarding rape of 1971. Huq remained silent for a while and stated, "Wish I could avoid talking about this. This is a very sensitive and emotional issue for me..." and then continued.

I was young at that time but we belonged to the same generation, young or old. I was 17 then but we could easily identify ourselves at par with people of forty or fifty years old. We were also taken seriously by the adults. Age was not a barrier. We used to take part in family discussions but I am not sure how I failed to take cognizance of this issue of rape and abortion

or adoption. It is most disturbing and perplexing as well why I did not think about these women, why I did not probe, how I was not aware about what has happened to millions of women. I have no answer. I do not even have a clear memory of that time (Shireen Huq, Interview dated: July 2011).

She thinks if asked the same question at that time she might have taken up the same position as others did. During that time she would have answered in favour of adoption, perhaps would not have seen anything wrong in giving away unwanted children for adoption ensuring a stable family life for these children. However, things started to change for her gradually. The book by Nilima Ibrahim (*Ami Birangona Bolchhi*, published in 1998) was a revelation to her and the word which always struck her was *izzat* (honour), which millions of women have sacrificed during the war. According to Shireen Huq, the conceptualisation of VAW, particularly war time rape (and rape as such) has never been analysed from a feminist perspective in Bangladesh, not even within the feminist movement. The formulation around rape is still highlighted as being loss of *izzat*, even after 40 years of independence, and more tragically by the so called progressive government in power. Like Mahmuda Islam, she feels that this lack of formulation and conceptualisation is very crucial for feminist movement.

...For how long will we have to hear this clichéd⁹⁰ glorification of women sacrificing their *izzat* for the country's independence? The sheer callousness hurts me deeply. This attitude to me couldn't be more insensitive or cruel towards those who have borne the burden of violence and shame—it exhibits no awareness of the fact that women who have actually suffered do exist but have no claim in this nationalist discourse! These words have become an oft-repeated phrase. It is even more frustrating when these formulations are made not only by the politicians but by the so-called progressive and cultured people as well. (Shireen Huq, Interview dated: July 2011)

Shireen in despair, anger and frustration states,

“...none of us said, ‘What has happened, happened, now nobody can take away your life!’ Nobody came forward, neither from the state nor from the women's movement, not then, not even now. Everyone tried to tackle the problem with the same patriarchal mind-set, tried to sweep it away as soon as possible. There were women in advanced stages of pregnancy and there were women who did not want to abort but they were not given any choice. Whenever I think of it I wonder that crimes had been committed against them by the Pakistani army, but what about the crime we have committed against them?” (Shireen Huq, Interview dated: July 2011).

⁹⁰ “*tirish lakh shaheed er rokto ar dui lakh narrir izzat/shombrom er binimoye desh shadhin hoyechhe*” :

She was aware of the fact that many women wanted to abort their babies because that was what was expected of them. Even the head of state had stated ‘None of the bastards will remain in this land’. But the opposite could also be true. On the other hand they could have given a choice of keeping their babies, a recognition like Bosnia⁹¹. Actually these women had no decision-making capacity in terms of keeping their children—no scope for this kind of option was present in the popular ethos.

Both Firdous Azim and Shireen Huq detailed that the same attitude was only perpetuated later in free independent Bangladesh, where raped women are advised by everyone to abort their babies, or are coerced to marry their rapists because that is the only other solution. To this day we have not been able to offer any space to the raped women and their children, whether the perpetrators are enemies from outside or fellow citizens of this very country. The decision still lies with society and its hegemonic ideology based on chastity and legitimacy.

Years later in independent Bangladesh, I remember a pregnant girl came to Khushi Kabir⁹² for support and everyone was thinking of how to arrange an abortion for her. She told us ‘All you can do is to advise me how to destroy the baby but can’t you just tell me how I can keep the baby?’ Her words actually made it very clear that our so called feminism has such limitations! We have failed in 1971 and even today we don’t offer any other options to raped women. Thus, the right to abortion is a right with two sides, and should be unconditional making all the options available to her (Shireen Huq, Interview dated: July 2011).

Similar views were shared by Ayesha Khanam. She thinks that although many family members did not want to disclose the rape and did not want to make any claim the state

⁹¹ During the Bosnian War (1992-1995, and the resulting Bosnian genocide, the violence assumed a gender-targeted form, with the Army of the Republika Srpska (VRS) carrying out a policy of genocidal rape against the Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) ethnic group.^[1] Estimates of the total number of women raped during the war range from 12,000 to 50,000. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) declared that "systematic rape", and "sexual enslavement" in time of war was a crime against humanity, second only to the war crime of genocide. After the rapes occurred, married women were often shunned by their husbands for religious or cultural reasons. However, there was a very strong and unique movement in the region: Imams and other male Muslim community leaders encouraged husbands to set aside religious sentiments regarding raped women and take their wives back and support them more as war survivors than as irrevocably marred. It was rather specific to this conflict that rape was seen as a community problem. In addition, Indira Kajosevic, a Bosnian expert, survivor, and founder of some of the first trauma centers and feminist groups in Bosnia, says that women in the region were able to gain status through organizing in a way that was unique to this conflict. The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia was the first international tribunal in Europe to convict for rape as a crime against humanity (following Akayesu in Rwanda). According to the ICTY website, it was also “the first international criminal tribunal to enter convictions for rape as a form of torture and for sexual enslavement as crime against humanity” cited by Michele Lent Hirsch published on February 8, 2012, Women Media Centre. See for detail: <http://womenundersiegeproject.org/conflicts/profile/bosnia>.

⁹²NGO activist, Nijera Kori

provided title, it is also true that society has not changed much in the last forty years of independence on the question of rape and the shame associated with it. According to Ayesha Khanam, rape continued to take place and raped women continued to commit suicide in the free and independent Bangladesh. She could see no fundamental change around the issue of chastity for women.

It is extremely difficult for women to stand on their own in our country where women are considered impure if she is just touched by other men—‘*shatittyā*’ or chastity of a married woman remains crucial and central to women’s identity till today. I think these are the areas where the women’s movement should have concentrated, where there is still ample scope for work (Ayesha Khanam, Interview dated: October 2011).

The above narration not only elaborates on the complexity and ambiguity of the war time rape issue but also connects it with contemporary Bangladesh and challenges our feminist understanding around VAW issues. In fact, the entire debate around *Birangona* remains central.

***Birangona*: The Juxtaposed Burden**

The consent and consensus regarding war time rape, abortion and adoption issue largely reflected the historicity of the issue. Similar arguments and reactions are observed around the state title of *Birangona*. Almost all agree that the title of *Birangona* was bestowed upon war time rape victims by the state with good intentions but failed to bring about the desired outcome. It took great effort for a traditional statist discourse to address the rape issue openly. However, the respondents never failed to analyse the situation and problematic of the title from a feminist perspective located in post-2000 era. They were largely critical of the title which, instead of portraying the women as valiant warriors of the war, could now be easily used to mark and shun them for being ‘rape victims’. As a result their expected assimilation into society was even more difficult to attain. Moreover, it became clear to all that the title of *Birangona* was conditional. In order to become assimilated as citizens into the new nation they will have to come ‘clean’ and be free from any remnants of the enemy. Abortion and adoption was part of the package of this whole assimilation process.

According to the respondents, the entire logic of the title became problematic as it actually attempted to mask the war time rape and atrocities by projecting being raped as a contribution to the nation—a great sacrifice. Maleka Begum thinks that “Rape should have

been articulated as rape, as a clear act of violation of human rights, not be glorified, nor pushed back under the carpet”.

However, according to Maleka Begum,

I myself, like many others, did not want to be critical of the new state right at that moment on these issues. All I was interested in was to build the BMP. I believed that we had commonly fought for a new independent state hand in hand. Our feminist voice was rather cautious of destabilising the new government of the time. The main concern was to give some breathing space to the new government and move ahead with the broader goal (Maleka Begum, interview dated: 2009, 2010).

This cautious and restrained approach was not endorsed by all. Ayesha Khanam again added that instead of silencing, we should have exposed the atrocities done during the war. They were spoken of in order to get international support, but later in the free independent Bangladesh it was concealed from society at large, or minimized. She does not agree that the situation was such that ‘coming out into the public’ for the rape survivors were not a viable option. She thinks, “The situation and reality is never right, we need to create it in our favour and we have failed to do so”.

Even though the respondents are of the opinion that there were inadequacies in their responses at that time, they wanted to just move ahead with other issues in current Bangladesh

The same sense of failure and inadequacy was expressed by Shireen and Firdous from NP. Shireen elaborated on the issue of rape and *Birangona* from a critical standpoint and identified the addressing of the issue as a collective failure of state, society and the women’s movement. She also thinks that it is never late to bring back the issue rather than forgetting and pushing it back into amnesia and invisibility out of shame. According to Shireen Huq, the crime was committed by the Pakistani army but we should also ask ourselves what we have done for them. She compared the case of Bangladesh with that of Bosnia, where similar mass rape has taken place as a tool of reprisal in the name of ethnic cleansing. The Bosnian Government, on the other hand, has taken an entirely different position with regard to raped women. They categorically declared that all war babies are Bosnians. This simple declaration has changed the entire scenario of war time violence from the perspective of gender. While in Bangladesh, the state title of *Birangona* has only isolated the afflicted women. Shireen agrees that the title was given with only good intention, but it was mostly in vain.

Sheikh Mujib thought that this will bring them honour but actually this had looted their life. We could have done so many things....Sheikh Mujib had all the power at that time in his hands, to declare anything, and people would have done whatever he had said without question (Shireen Huq, interview dated: July 2011).



Figure 6: Students prepare for war, 1970 (Rashid Talukder/Autograph ABP)
Source: <http://insurgencyresearchgroup.wordpress.com/2008/04/11/images-from-the-1971-bangladesh-liberation-war/>



Figure 7: Female Muktiyoddhas teaching local women to use rifles.
Source: <http://www.londoni.coindex.phphistory-of-bangladeshid=116sro-dhoro>



Figure 8: Female protesting for Bangladesh Independence in the Shaheed Minar, Dhaka, 1971.



Figure 9: Women taking part in the War of Liberation.

Source:http://www.chapatimystery.com/archives/homistan/towards_1971_v_women_and_the_war_of_1971.html

From Victimhood to Agency

Maleka highlights yet another pertinent contradiction inherent to the title of Birangona. The question of agency of women, she believes, became cloaked by victimhood. Apart from being raped, women had also actively participated in the war, sacrificed their lives and contributed, but they were not recognised as valiant war heroes/heroines. There were many women who engaged in armed conflict directly in the battlefield, worked in the war time field hospitals, took risks, managed entire households in the absence of their male counterparts, offered help to the freedom fighters. To Maleka, all these are a part of the

*Muktijuddyo*⁹³. But their various roles were ignored and forgotten. Thus through the title, a range of contradictions arose around the issue of women's role in the WoL, raising a dichotomous question—who are the main agents and who are the victims? (Akhter, 1991)

While talking about this dichotomous representation of women's agency and victimhood alongside women's role as '*muktijoddha*', Ayesha identifies the weaknesses and failures of the women's movement. She thinks that the movement has failed in many ways to acknowledge the many roles and contributions of women in WoL. Their bravery and sacrifice cannot be compensated only by giving Taramon Bibi⁹⁴ the title of '*Beer Protik*' after 24 years of independence. A big research project should have been initiated to establish women's role and rights in relation to the war alone. Both Mahmuda Islam and Ayesha Khanam contend that the context of 1971 was entirely an extraordinary one. Apart from war rape as a distinct case of violence against women, they felt that women's role in the war was not acknowledged properly. Her right to acknowledgment as participant of the war was denied, her agency muted.

This entire debate can be concluded perhaps with the words of Firdous Azim. She actually analyses the issue as part of the broader conflict between nationalism and women. *Birangona* is the most crucial example of this conflict in the context of Bangladesh. The *Birangona* issue is not yet settled—no solution had been reached on it yet. Firdous observes that, there is no list of *Birangona* till today, nor any list of the children sent abroad for adoption. The history was purposefully erased and evaded in the name of shame, *izzat* and perceived hatred for enemy children. There is still no space for them to come out and speak. There is very little comprehensive research on war time rape and the women's movement has never addressed this issue from a feminist perspective. She is now exploring this issue in relation to the novel *Talaash*, by Shaheen Akhtar⁹⁵.

⁹³ National Council for Freedom Fighters (*Jatiyo Muktijoddha Council*) during its meeting held on 13th October 2014 has declared the *Birangona* as freedom fighters (*Muktijoddha*). The Daily Prothom Alo, editorial, 14.10.2014

⁹⁴Taramon Bibi is one of the two (the other is Sitara Begum) decorated female freedom fighters in Bangladesh who fought for the *Mukti Bahini* (Liberation Army), the guerrilla force that fought against the Pakistani military in 1971. After the war, she was awarded the *Bir Protik* (Symbol of Valour) by the Bangladesh government. Her whereabouts, however, were unknown and the award was never handed over to her. She herself remained unaware of this until 1995, when a researcher from Mymensingh discovered her. The Prime Minister of Bangladesh finally handed over her award on December 19, 1995.

⁹⁵ Shaheen Akhtar is the author of her second novel *Talaash* which won the Best Book of the Year Award for 2004 from *Prothom Alo*, the largest-circulation daily newspaper in Bangladesh. The English translation of the novel was published by Zubaan Books, Delhi, India in 2011.

She is also concerned about the juxtaposed representation of *Birangona* and *Mohila Muktiyoddha* (Women Freedom Fighter) in the liberation war discourse. Concern was expressed around the idea of binary representation of victim hood vs. agency. She is also not comfortable with the idea of identifying the figure of *Birangona* as the freedom fighter who directly participated in war, sacrificing life and limb. On one hand *Birangonas* were not only rape victims but were also part of the *Muktijuddho*, making sacrifices for their country. Then again it was also necessary to acknowledge that they were not freedom fighters but rape victims as well, who were not to be seen as same as the freedom fighters, nor to be placed on two different poles. This contradiction plays a critical role in the war discourse of Bangladesh.

Firdous is of the opinion that rape should be taken as a war crime but is apprehensive about how far the present war crime tribunals⁹⁶ might be able to address the rape issue, a concern which stems from awareness of this lack of clarity of understanding as a whole. The inherent problematic of the rape issue in the context of Bangladesh may lead to nothing as there is little surviving evidence of rape. Women's role in 1971 continues to be an unresolved issue and perhaps will remain an arena of debate and dilemma for years to come.

In fact this oppositional notion overarches the portrayal of women's role in 1971 in the war discourse. The national discourse had little idea about how they would like to project women, or what the construction of women ought to be even during the 1969-70 non-cooperation movement against Pakistani rule. Women were mobilising, participating in militant activities on the streets, undergoing training and conducting march-pasts with dummy rifles, and taking first aid training. Essentially, the the women's movement at that time was preparing them to be a part of the war along with the entire nation. Changes were taking place—older traditional notions were being challenged, boundaries were overstepped but all this was happening without any conscious awareness, without any clear conception on part of the state about how they perceive women. The women before, during and after the war were a vague, undefined and unresolved figure, which is becoming increasingly problematic, even today.

Perhaps it is very difficult to reach a consensus or have a solution to the representation of women in war because of the inherent conflict between woman and nation (Firdous Azim, interview dated: March 2011).

⁹⁶ War crime tribunal is working on the issue under the AL government since 2010.

Firdous believes that the women's movement has to resolve and accommodate the layers of representation of women within the broader frame work of the nationalist discourse.

It is felt here that this particular section elaborated above requires an interim conclusion beyond the overarching chapter conclusion. The difference in views and critiques around the entire length of the rehabilitation process can be largely ascribed to the phenomenon of generation gap. War time VAW and the rehabilitation process by the state were the first entry point for the women's movement in the new Bangladesh. The nationalist movement and the women's movement were largely in tune with their broader goals and objectives. During those early days of the seventies, the first generation involved in the women's movement was maintaining a relationship of a mellowed loyalty with the state. Moreover, there was no direct lack of agreement between the state and the women's movement with regard to the rehabilitation process for the war victims. The rehabilitation process was designed by and entrusted upon the women leaders and key persons of that time. This section of the respondents belonged to the first generation of feminists who had been an integral part of the process. They had to respond to the situation at hand and act accordingly. They agreed that whatever steps were taken in terms of abortion, adoption and state title, emerged from the historical necessity of the time. Furthermore, the very situation around the new state and nation building disallowed them from making any overt criticism against the state.

On the other hand, later generations were deprived of the chance to participate in critical decision-making during the time under discussion. They posed a more 'radical' position in relation to the state and the women's movement. When they started to look at the issue retrospectively, they invariably enjoyed the advantage and distance of time. They had the opportunity to offer alternative perspectives, after looking at similar cases which had by this time taken place in other places. All these alternative possibilities might be theoretically and conceptually more appropriate for women of 1971, Bangladesh, but were actually very difficult to apply at the prevailing time. Decisions and responses usually remain time bound, moulded by the particular necessity of the time and context. Thus the responses analysed by the ones who were active participants in the rehabilitation process and of the newer generation have only enriched the conceptual understanding of war time VAW issues from multiple angles (Banu, 2002).

If analysed from the organisational position it is revealed that the mainstream pioneer organisations like WfW and BMP are less critical of the state's role. Mainstreamers are found to have been more cautious with regard to the new state, as they didn't want to destabilise their positions and hard earned achievements. They wanted to work together with the state, bringing everyone, include men and other power structures, on the same platform. They were carefully strategizing their movement, an act that can be labelled as 'loyal opposition' to the mainstream politics, using every possible sources to influence the state on women's issues. During those early years of independence they were sometimes critical of the state, resisting but also trying to maintain alliances with the mainstream 'progressive politics' of Awami League (AL). Although the women's movement was aware of the limitation of the rehabilitation programme, it remained accommodating so as not to challenge the new state and also gave in to the statist discourse as part of their patriarchal bargain. NP on the other hand is constantly deconstructing and challenging the mainstream, bringing up new issues and new lenses to examine and scrutinise, largely enjoying the opportunity of not having been part of the process at that time. However the debates around the issue of rape victims, *Birangona*, *Muktijodhha*, war babies remain unresolved till today (2014).

I will end this section with an illuminating note from Maleka Khan who still has contacts with rape survivors from her centre. She shared that, at this particular time in their lives, they are ready to bring the issue to the courts. They feel that as they are now at a certain age and their children are all grown up, they can open up about the rape incidents, provided that it is taken seriously by the state and a proper judgment is ensured.

IV

VAW: A Cycle Unending VAW beyond War of Liberation

I would now like to move onto three particular incidents identified under VAW issues extended throughout the eighties and the nineties.

- i. Death of Shabmeher: Opening up of New Agendas, New Grounds for the women's movement
- ii. Acid Violence: A Conceptual Leap from 'Victim' to 'Survivor'
- iii. Yasmin: Rape and Murder under Police Custody

Introduction

The eighties and the nineties were decades that experienced a completely different kind of VAW. For this reason VAW remained the most critical domain of activities for the women's movement. Just to recapitulate the political background, it is necessary to recall that the eighties was a decade of political turmoil encompassing a series of coups and counter coups, political shifts, change and unrest. By 1975, the 'Father of the Nation' Sheikh Mujib had been assassinated. The next military ruler Zia Ur Rahman was also assassinated in 1981. General H M Ershad, the Chief Martial Law Administer, declared Martial Law in 1982 and all political activities were banned, with restrictions imposed on the media and the parliament was dissolved. The Constitution was suspended with curfew in the evenings. Student and other civil movements against the regime started to brew against Ershad's education policy of (Majid Khan Education Policy 1982-1987)⁹⁷. All these movements were brutally suppressed by the military rulers. VAW was on the rise. On the other hand, the eighties is the decade when we encounter the third organisation i.e. Naripokkho (NP) under the purview of this research. Naripokkho emerged in 1983. It is also important to realise that the entire decade witnessed struggles and movements against the military regime and demanded democratisation. The women's movement also became entangled in the mobilisation against the regime, maintaining their own identity by upholding women's issues. However, the responses and formulations around relevant VAW issues were not monolithic. There were many shades and contours to the formulations on the same issue. Varied observations, debates and disagreements, compromises and co-options, factions and divisions surfaced, all of which are analysed by the respondents, in retrospection.

Women's organisations like BMP has had the long tradition of mobilising on the street, demanding women's rights or justice. But all the activities were at a low tide during the period in question.

⁹⁷Majid Khan Education Policy proposed the introduction of Arabic and English in the primary education curriculum, a move condemned by the student's movement and civil society as one through which Ershad attempted to use religion in a bid to safeguard and consolidate his autocratic rule. The policy also proposed to increase the education expenses that would exclude the students who failed to pay at least 50 percent of the expenditure. Dissatisfaction mounted against this move towards communalisation and commercialisation of education. Protests began to be organised across the country. On 14th February 1983 *Chhatra Shangram Parishad* (students' action council), organized the first political platform against the Ershad regime. Police opened fire on the procession brought out by the students against the presiding education minister Majid Khan who had proposed the education policy. A number of students died. See more at: <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2014/feb/14/feb-14-day-resistance-against-autocracy#sthash.ed43ADdE.dpuf>.

The main theme of feminist formulation under VAW during this decade can be identified as ‘woman’s body as site of resistance’, in relation to the death of Shabmeher acid violence and the case of Yasmin, a victim of rape and murder under police custody. There were many other VAW issues around which the women’s movement has articulated their voice. This section would like to pick up only the above mentioned points during the eighties and nineties in order to analyse feminist formulation on the basis of responses made by the selected organisations.

As I have mentioned before, it is often very difficult to draw a clear line between VAW or right-based formulations. The perspective also changes with time. The feminist formulation around body right and conceptualising ‘sex work as work’ were not clearly defined during the eighties. However, the movement was initiated following the death of a young girl called Shabmeher. This is why the respondents felt that this should be discussed under Violence against Women issues. Later in the nineties, though, the movement around ‘sex work’ would take a more concrete form following this very incident which will be discussed under right based movement in Chapter Three.

Death of Shabmeher: Opening up of New Agendas and New Grounds for the Women’s Movement

Shabmeher, who was an adolescent girl, died in Dhaka Medical College Hospital on April 9th, 1985. She had reportedly been brutally tortured for seven consecutive days by Rahima *Sardarni*⁹⁸ in the Tanbazar brothel in Narayanganj, near Dhaka. The women’s movement, primarily led by the BMP, took up the issue. A case was filed against the people involved in the brothel (*Sardarni* and *Bariwala* Momtaz Mia) and they were convicted, but the *Bariwala* was exempted from the case. Following Shobemeher’s death, the Ershad government took up an initiative to rescue underage girls from different brothels across the country. The state also began providing the ‘prostitutes’ an alternative place in Mirpur Floating Rehabilitation Centre (*Bhaboghurey Asroy Kendro* in Bangla).

Following Shabmeher’s death, conservative Islamic groups started to mobilise, evicting occupants from brothels in the name of Islam. Their demand was to build madrasas and masjids in their place, which was actually a land-grabbing scheme. In one such instance, after- Friday prayers, the congregation of a local mosque evicted sex workers from *Kumartoli*

⁹⁸*Sardarni* or *Masi* most commonly refers to the brothel madams. The term *Masi* however more commonly refers to a retired sex workers who work as maids in brothels.

brothel in Dhaka and later established an Islamic seminary there (Weekly *Bichitra*, 26 April, 1985). Many such events followed and the women's movement became involved around the issue of sex workers, which continued to be one of their main agendas for the entirety of the nineties (Tahmina & Morol, 2004, BNWLA, 1999). During the eighties the issue of 'prostitution' dominated the women's movement. They became actively engaged in working against the eviction of brothels. Forced prostitution was helpful for the movement in terms of its visibility and prominence. 'Prostitutes' also started to ~~get~~ gather together to mobilise against the process of eviction. This particular movement during the eighties was in fact the first phase of the 'sex worker's' movement which would finally lead the the women's movement towards a new direction in the nineties to be discussed again under Chapter Three.

Voices from the Women's Movement⁹⁹

The case of Shabmeher invoked broadly three types of responses within the women's movement. Firstly debate was raised around conceptual issues related to women's bodies and sexuality, bodily integrity and body as a site of resistance while secondly the discussion rotated around VAW being used as a political tool during specific historical junctures Thirdly, through Shabmeher's death, VAW found a new space in academia and became an apparatus for creating knowledge and data base in favour of women.

'Patita': A Victim or a Legitimate Choice?

The case of Shabmeher was a revealing one for Maleka (then the General Secretary of BMP) in many ways. She came to know about the death of Shabmeher through an *Ittefaq*¹⁰⁰ article where Shabmeher was portrayed as someone very innocent, pure, and unblemished, whose death had taken her far beyond the clutches of the polluted sex trade. Her death was depicted as her liberation from the filth of this world. A *Daily Ittefaq* editorial was (dated 10.04.1985) in favour of legitimising prostitution through the legal process of affidavit, regular health check-up, age registration etc. This portrayal of Shabmeher as an innocent angel in eternal peaceful sleep infuriated Maleka. She immediately responded through her article in the *Daily Shangbad* (April 4, 1985). She protested against the portrayal

⁹⁹While discussing the issue, respondents were using the word 'prostitute' and 'sex worker' interchangeably. One has to realize that when they were involved in the movement around the Shabmeher issue, the term 'sex work' was not in use. However, when they were making responses from a distance of time, consciously or unconsciously they were often switching to 'sex work' instead of referring to the 'profession' or the 'trade' as 'prostitution'. This indicates the transformation in conceptualisation and perception over time.

¹⁰⁰ A daily news paper

of Shabmeher as a vulnerable victim of the sex trade. Maleka thought Shabmeher was a symbol of protest against this society where sex trade is perpetuated for capitalistic profit. At the time she was not in favour of declaring prostitution as a profession or work. The term ‘sex worker’ was not in use back then. Her main argument was that Shabmeher was not just a ‘prostitute’ who was killed by the pimps; she was brought to Dhaka on the promise of a job and when she refused to enter into prostitution, she was tortured and killed. BMP thought that this was an opportunity to initiate ~~the~~ activism and revive the women’s movement even under the restricted situation created by the application of martial law. Sufia Kamal and Hena Das, the pioneers of BMP, took up the death of Shabmeher as an issue and started to mobilise on the issue ‘sex worker’. This was the event that actually exposed Maleka to ‘sex workers’ issues for the first time. She started going to Narayanganj *Taanbazar* brothel regularly to assist women against forced eviction. BMP (led by Bela Nabi)¹⁰¹ filed a case but Maleka thinks nothing much was achieved in any true sense. Another disturbing fact was that Shabmeher’s parents were also not interested to take the case any further which was, again, understandable from their perspective.

However, through this issue, the women’s movement came into the public eye again, challenging the military restrictions on political activities, and managed to sustain its activities ~~to~~ in the public arena. The main argument for BMP was to portray the incident as primarily a law and order issue, and therefore a violation of human rights and even though Shabmeher died in a brothel, she was not a prostitute, only a victim of poverty.

At that time ‘prostitution’ was perceived by Maleka and BMP as something profane and unwanted in society with ‘prostitutes’ placed at the other end of the binary representation of ideal womanhood. Maleka believes, “Given alternative opportunities, women would never take up prostitution as a profession”. The notion of ‘sex work is work’, that it can be considered a matter of right and choice, was not an acceptable alternative to BMP during the eighties. BMP’s main focus, thus, was to concentrate upon creating job opportunities for women so that women were not forced into ‘prostitution’ as a profession. Maleka recounts that BMP soon realised that lack of social awareness on part of the policy makers was one of the main problem. Awareness that women are in need of employment opportunities was necessary. Opportunities should be created for women to become independent humans so that they are not lured so easily and trapped into unwanted situations due to their social [and economic] vulnerabilities. BMP also started to work against the racket of pimps (*Dalal*,

¹⁰¹Bela Nabi, Member, BMP

Sharder, and *Malik* in Bangla) who are involved in the trafficking of women. BMP tried to put forward the cause into a social and human right movement – mainly fighting violence against women involving the mass.

In order to address the root of the problem, BMP had organised a press conference in May 1985 on ‘*patita problem*’ and recommended education, training, creation of job opportunities and rehabilitation programmes for women. The death of Shabmeher—had actually initiated a series of events and state interventions. One group took advantage of her death and tried to evict the ‘prostitutes’ from brothels in the name of social cleansing. The state response was to put them into a ‘safe home’. The state sponsor rehabilitation process followed a traditional path, i.e. arranging marriages for the prostitutes, and including training and education alongside it (Maleka Begum and Ayesha Khanam interview dated: March and October 2011). The so-called ‘safe home’ was perceived by the ‘prostitutes’ as a prison. All this surely created a range of reactions within the women’s movement.

However, in depth analysis of the recommendation presented by BMP (*Mahila Shamachar*, 1986) in the press conference reveals a specific position. The core idea was to create an enabling socio-economic situation for women where they can earn their living and their demands to the government ranged from establishing work centres for women in both urban and rural areas as well as implementation of rights and laws for working women, including women working as house maids. BMP was more along the line that emphasis should not be put into making ‘sex work’ a government approved profession but should concentrate on creating employment alternatives because their research with 138 sex workers in the rehabilitation centres had revealed that none of the women came into this profession of their own choice or will. Gradual phasing out of the trade and profession was the main objective of BMP. The demand was to clear up the messy legal system that contained numerous loopholes, preventing harassment against the ‘prostitutes’ so as to create an environment where women have better options so that “the sex trade and sex business is removed from the society for ever” (Begum, 2002).

Roushan Jahan was affiliated with all the three organisations under the purview of this research. She was the pioneer member of WfW¹⁰² and later was involved with BMP, NP and ASK. As a first generation active member of the women’s movement her insights and comments align with those of Najma Chowdhury and Mahmuda Islam.

¹⁰²She was the President of Women for Women during 1981-1985.

The case of Shabmeher in 1985 brought us all together—we were much moved and became involved in the movement. I was one of the advisers and prepared a position paper for the proposed rehabilitation centre for the ‘prostitutes’. But it was rather unfortunate that later all they were doing was giving training in embroidery and religious teaching (Teaching of Quran) in the rehabilitation centres, which hardly reflected what we had proposed (Roushan Jahan, interview dated: June 2011)

Not everyone within the movement thought that the approaches of the rehabilitation process was the right ones with regard to ‘prostitution’. Firdous and Shireen from NP had a different view around the treatment of Shabmeher incident. They became really frustrated with this ‘typical’ response to the incident by ‘mainstream’¹⁰³ women’s organisations like BMP or WfW. The general portrayal of Shabmeher as innocent, pure and that her death takes her beyond all the ‘*kolush*’ (filth) was problematic for NP.

Shabmeher was identified as the victim while the solution largely sought by the mainstream in the form of ensuring punishment for *Mashi*’s or madams or *Bariwalas* were too simplistic an approach. As explained by Firdous:

The entire process of Shabmeher case indeed reveals the nature of sexual politics within the women’s movement. It also shows the one-sided, typical and narrow perspectives around women while ignoring the entire structure under which Shabmeher had to die. The blame was put onto *Bariwala*’s and *Mashis*, but it was also necessary to address the whole background and their status as well. These women, apparently powerful, were also equally subjugated and were forced to come into this business. The exploitation was not of Shabmeher’s alone. Moreover we wanted to show that the Shabmeher case is not happening only in brothels. This same violence is taking place within the family, between husband and wife, between mother in law and daughter in law every day, every moment (Firdous Azim, interview dated: April 4, 2011).

NP was going through a period of self-reflection while doing a critical analysis of the women’s movement and the VAW issues during their early days. Their main concern was how the women’s movement was placing women within the broader frame work of gender relations. One major critique of NP against BMP was that instead of building solidarity, the BMP was creating divides by differentiating between ‘good women’ and ‘bad women’, setting up categories of ‘evil and horrible women’ vs. ‘innocent’ and ‘pure women’.

¹⁰³ The activities of BMP and to some extent of WfW were largely labelled as mainstream by the respondents as these were two of the major autonomous women’s organisations during the time frame of this research.

VAW Becomes a Political Tool

As opposed to the ‘mainstream’ reactions within the women’s movement, NP was highlighting VAW as something other than a stray, isolated thing—it has to be understood in a context and VAW to them was definitely not only a criminal or a law and order issue. NP was of the opinion that VAW has to be recognised as also a family issue, a societal and structural issue. Bringing up the issue of domestic violence and analysing women’s sexuality from a different lens was an important breakthrough in the mid-eighties, but perhaps a premature one.

Today (2014) VAW is conceptualised as something embedded in the home and domestic sphere. But previously these formulations were quite a radical challenge to the entire notion of VAW. As Firdous recalls, the time was actually not right for such radical formulations. They were very young and new in the field and they lacked the ‘appropriate and sophisticated’ vocabulary and strategy to address the issue. What NP was trying to say was: VAW should not be taken as ‘law and order’ issue alone and should not be used as a tool to subvert certain political powers, but nobody was interested in their argument. Women’s organisations mainly under the leadership of like BMP, was highlighting the death of Shabmeher as a state failure to ensure security to its citizen – a law and order issue, which became a tool to spearhead the anti-Ershad movement. NP’s alternative argument, though a legitimate one, was seen as bearing a pro- Ershad stance at that time. The mid-eighties was a turbulent time with increasing protest and mobilisation against Ershad regime. Ershad was popularly known as, ‘*Shairoshashok*’ or the autocrat and VAW was taken up as a critical tool to destabilise Ershad. Ershad had banned all other political activities and under the circumstances the VAW issue was seen by the women’s organisations as a crack which could be used to bring down the non-democratic ruler. Democracy at that time was felt essential for the furthering of the movement as a whole.

However, NP thought that while an anti-Ershad movement was necessary, VAW should not be co-opted by political parties for political goals. VAW is to be seen as structurally rooted in family, in society and residing beyond simple law and order situation. It was important to recognise that VAW is located in households and within intimate relationships where the influence/presence of law and order is largely absent. In NP’s perspective, woman’s body and sexuality is to be understood from a feminist perspective. Women’s body is always vulnerable because of the way women’s sexuality is constructed.

VAW was perceived, conceptualised and formulated around the issue of women's body, sexuality and control over one's own body by NP which were largely disregarded by the 'mainstream' the women's movement at that time. Nonetheless, these arguments would be revived again in the future with new strength and legitimacy.

Alliances and Coalitions: Effective but Brittle

During the entire period of the eighties and the nineties there were several coalitions of women's organisations on the issue of VAW. The first such coalition in the independent Bangladesh can be identified during 1982 when eighteen women's organisations gathered in Ramna Park¹⁰⁴, led by BMP, to protest and resist violence against women. Apart from the Shabmeher issue there were many other cases of VAW during the eighties and nineties and as a result of constant pressure from the ever vigilant women's movement, the Ershad government finally proclaimed the law of 'Family Court 1985' (Begum, 2002)¹⁰⁵. Despite the fact that Ershad was trying to make compromises to legitimise his powerbase, the women's movement did not forsake the battle and continued to build alliances and coalitions against him. Both Maleka Begum and Ayesha Khanam from BMP remember coming together with 17 demands under the name of '*Oikkyobodho Nari Shomaj*' (*United Women's Society*) with nineteen organisations in 1987¹⁰⁶. The demands articulated were not restricted to women's issues only but also encompassed resistance against the autocratic regime, thus connecting the women's movement with the broader national demand for democracy. BMP had wide range of experiences in working with such coalitions since the non-cooperation movement in 1968-69, working in preparatory committee for the celebration of International Women's Year in 1975, and the coalition in 1985 to resist VAW (*Nari Nirjaton Protirodh Committee*)¹⁰⁷. All these have enriched Maleka in many ways, although she felt that in most of the cases these coalitions were short lived and very fragile.

In all the coalitions I was engaged in, the most effective one was the preparatory committee for Beijing conference under the leadership of Najma Chowdhury. Other than that, in most of the cases, the coalitions were brittle and often co-opted by mainstream politics. Leaders of

¹⁰⁴ An old and historical place in the middle of Dhaka city well known for mobilisation and demonstration.

¹⁰⁵ Many of the key figures of the women's movement mentioned the positive role of Rabeya Bhuiyan during Ershad's regime. She was advisor to Ershad's government. She was an active member of WFW and also close with BMP.

¹⁰⁶ See Begum, M. (2002). *Nari Andolonar Panch Dashak* [Five Decades of The women's movement]. Dhaka: Onnyoprakash. for the list of 17 demands placed by the coalition. This very coalition would be active again in 1988 when Ershad will declare 'Islam' as the state religion.

¹⁰⁷ Another coalition will took place in 1995 under the name of '*Shammilito Nari Shomaj*' (Coalition of Women's Society) led by Farida Akhter from UBINIG on the issue of rape and murder of Yasmin.

women's organisations were often found to be affiliated with or members of mainstream political parties and they tried to influence the coalition's decisions. Conflicts were also incited around the leadership of coalitions. The strategy of compromising or confronting mainstream politics was misunderstood by many. Finally the coalition became fragmented and destroyed (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March 2011).

This is exactly what happened during the eighties around VAW issue based coalitions. The death of Shabmeher was hand-picked by the coalition of '*Oikyoboddho Nari Shomaj*' to challenge the autocratic regime of Ershad and the main formulation highlighted the VAW issue by criticizing the deterioration of law and order during his time. The death of Shabmeher was indeed a threshold towards reviving the women's movement from its static frozen situation under military restrictions. Most of the mainstream organisations like BMP and WfW took up this approach as a tactic as all of them believed that democracy was one of the important pre-requisites for the women's movement. But the newly emerged NP with its brash young members was not ready to consider such compromises.

VAW as an Overarching area to Engage in Feminist Knowledge Production

VAW remained central to the women's movement. Even during its burgeoning stage in the seventies it was VAW that helped the women's movement strengthen feminist formulations. The Shobemeher case again played a crucial role, not only spearheading the movement but also in creating a space for knowledge creation, particularly for WfW. WfW was mainly a knowledge producing research organisation. Unlike BMP its membership was mainly comprised of a more heterogeneous group of individuals, mainly academics and researchers. They were keen to maintain an apolitical stance. Roushan Jahan from WfW explains,

Our main agenda was knowledge production, data generation, policy advocacy and remaining in the back stage rather than coming forward as an activist group participating in demonstrations on the street. WfW had its representation in VAW issues during the eighties and did support all other movements against the army-backed non-democratic government, even on an individual level. But WfW as an organisation was a bit cautious and restrained as a survival strategy and did not wish to present themselves in public demonstrations (Roushan Jahan, interview dated: June 2011).

Another interesting observation made by Mahmuda Islam was that the women's movement, in most cases, became engaged in national issues and extended its support

whenever and wherever necessary, but political parties or mainstream politics as such are hardly ever found to have come forward on women's issues. Through all its experience during the seventies and the eighties WfW felt that people are not well versed with VAW issues when it comes to policy. While WfW was engaged in preparing a position paper on rehabilitation centres for the 'prostitutes' and VAW as an area of research¹⁰⁸, Roushan Jahan and Mahmuda Islam soon realised that the job was not an easy one. The people who are involved in policy-making have no orientation or idea about women's lives. She gradually came to realise that what the bureaucrats had done so far was the limit of their capabilities — they were not capable of conceiving anything better for women from a gender perspective.

This experience led us to plan gender orientation programmes for government officials. We decided to offer gender training programmes for officials in the public service commission to build awareness in the area of women and gender (Mahmuda Islam, interview dated: March 2011).

They realised that whatever measures the government was taking for the 'prostitutes' were based on their limited understanding of women's lives and livelihood. The idea of adding gender training as a component in the curriculum for government officials emerged from this realisation. WfW started to plan and lobby for gender training for the officials of the Public Service Commission (PSC) to create awareness on gender issues among people employed in the government. WfW at time was working on methodological issues. The main focus was on how to capture VAW issues, how to conduct research on VAW issues, how to work with women who are victims or survivors, discussion and workshop on methodological issues.

Interestingly our efforts to develop methodological issues were laughed at by male academicians¹⁰⁹. As a strategy we then changed the title of our work shop and training programme to "Women in Development (Mahmuda Islam, Interview dated: March 2011)

Throughout the eighties and nineties WfW was largely involved in providing training workshops, and publishing. This period marks a time of development and growth for WfW, establishing the need for research training and revisiting the conceptual issues around women, VAW and gender issues as said by Roushan Jahan from WfW, "I consider this as one of our achievements during the eighties." (Roushan Jahan, Interview dated: June 2011)

¹⁰⁸For details, see WfW (1975); Jahan & Islam (1997); Jahan (1994)

¹⁰⁹ A leading academician and renowned intellectual said "These are nothing but *gal goppo* ('trivial chit chat' in Bangla), can't be called a methodology at all..."

Shabmeher's death actually revealed issues related to VAW to many of the women's organisations, provided a platform to revise their own mind set and assumptions, helped claim areas of resistance and movement towards framing newer agendas, while producing knowledge and data base for and on women. Respondents like Maleka Begum, Firdous Azim, Shireen Huq, Roushan Jahan and Mahmuda Islam, were all engaged in writing about VAW issues. Most of the central characters of the movement believed that the case of Shabmeher and the process of eviction of the brothels in the eighties actually helped sharpen the understanding and conceptualisation of VAW issues on a newer plane, making ideas like 'sex workers movement' possible in the future.

V

Acid Violence: A Conceptual Leap from 'Victim' to 'Survivor'

Acid violence—in the form of throwing acid primarily at women—suddenly surfaced as an insidious form of VAW around the mid-eighties. As a result of lengthy vigilance on the part of the women's movement around this issue, a law was passed in 2002¹¹⁰.

Acid throwing, commonly termed as 'acid attack', is a form of violent assault committed by throwing acid or a similarly corrosive substance onto the body of another with the intent to disfigure, maim, torture, or kill. Perpetrators of these attacks throw acid at their victims, usually at their faces, burning them, and damaging skin tissue, often exposing and sometimes dissolving the bones. The most common types of acid used in these attacks are sulphuric and nitric acid. The long-term consequences of these attacks may include blindness, as well as permanent scarring of the face and body, along with far-reaching social, psychological, and economic difficulties. Approximately 300 people (78 percent of reported acid violence happens to women) experience this attack every year in Bangladesh and 41 percent of victims fall under 10-30 age group (Talukder, n.d.).

The most common reasons for acid attack range from dowry problems, conjugal problems, refusal of marriage proposals or refusal of sexual or romantic advances, land disputes or family feuds. Acid is used as a tool to attack women or others to mitigate conflict

¹¹⁰ Acid Crime Prevention Act, 2002. Apart from compensation and imprisonment, capital punishment was put forward as the highest penalty for an acid attacker. The first ordinance was declared in 1986.

or lack of agreement on any issue. An acid attack is often referred to as a "crime of passion," fuelled by jealousy and revenge (Mannan, Ghani, Clarke & Butler, 2007).

The movement against acid violence was primarily taken up by Naripokkho (NP), along with Action Aid, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, and the electronic and print media. All the other organisations and key respondents of in this thesis were in support of this issue and were involved in the movement. However, it was mainly NP who picked it up as their main agenda during the mid-eighties. BMP and WfW were also involved in providing support in the Dhaka medical college burn unit and demanding legal support against the crime which was finally achieved in 2002.

A Hideous Crime Necessitating Multi-Pronged Response

The first incidents of acid attack was clearly recalled by Maleka Begum from BMP. She remembers the case of Masuda and Kohinoor who were the victims of acid attack perpetrated by Masuda's husband. "I went to see them from BMP and realised the viciousness of acid burn and the inadequacy of care and facilities to tackle the acid burn cases" says Maleka. She gratefully acknowledges the role of Dr. Rawshon Ara, a member of BMP working in Dhaka Medical College, for taking personal interest in the acid victims. BMP had all the support with regard to this issue but it was primarily Nasreen Huq¹¹¹ (and NP) who mobilised foreign funding and continued the struggle against acid violence till her last days, while she was working in Action Aid. *Prothom Alo* the Daily Newspaper also built up a fund-raising programme to initiate treatment and rehabilitation programmes for the 'victims'. According to Maleka, BMP was always active on VAW issues but they were more concerned about the socio-economic or structural causes behind VAW rather than the form of VAW. Their main focus was whether a woman was attacked for dowry, property, domestic violence, rape etc. BMP did not directly involve itself in the analysis of a particular form of violence like acid. More over taking care of acid victims entails long, expensive and complicated treatment procedure. BMP thus left this particular form of violence to be handled or overseen as a priority agenda by other organisations.

¹¹¹Nasreen Huq, pioneer member of Naripokkho, worked at BRAC, Hellen Keller International and Action Aid. She was involved in the movement around reproductive health and rights, women's body issues, and the sex worker's movement. She was the key person engaged against acid attacks. Details are available in Roy, et al. (2007). She died in a tragic car accident in 2006.

According to NP members, they became involved in the process around the mid-nineties. They first started to react to the news in the papers and it all started for NP in 1996 with the case of Nurunnahar from Barisal, who is now working in Action Aid. Nasreen Huq went to the hospital where she found her fighting for her life and appointed two volunteers from NP for her nursing and care (Samia Huq and Rita Das, interview dated April 2011). NP remembers the very positive role of Dr Shamanta Lal¹¹² from Dhaka Medical College. Since then NP started to keep track of acid violence cases, responding in terms of legal, medical, social and psychological support and keeping in regular contact with Dhaka Medical College burn unit.

The main target of NP was to provide comprehensive medical and psychological support to the family members, helping the survivors overcome the state of victimhood and helping them out. Samia and Rita from NP, while discussing the process, remembered Bina, a survivor who was the first to come to NP. Gradually others started to pour in. Bina is now working with the Acid Survival Foundation. NP arranged a workshop in 1997 with the victims and decided to change the vocabulary of ‘victim’ to ‘survivor’, one which constituted a conceptual leap in defining VAW. Shireen, from NP stated in a human right conference in 1997:

Survivors of acid attack are far more isolated than survivors of other forms of violence. These are women who do not have a nose anymore, who do not have a mouth anymore, whose injuries force them into a kind of isolation where families hide them and do not want them to come out... they are very young, hardly fourteen, fifteen or eighteen. We realised that they have had no opportunity to meet among themselves (Huq, 1997, as cited in Reilly, 1997).

NP organised a three day workshop with government officials¹¹³, NGOs, members from civil society, doctors, survivors and their family members. Samia shares,

At the beginning we thought we need to keep the cases discreet. We also used to have small group discussions, motivating them to uncover their face. After establishing the rapport with the survivors, the demand to make their cases public emerged from them. We had the first torch procession with the survivors in Dhaka streets in 1997, we gathered in front of the

¹¹²Dr Shamanta Lal Sen, a renowned burn and plastic surgeon of the country, founder of the Burn Unit, Dhaka Medical College.

¹¹³While I was revising my draft Akmal Hossain, Secretary, of Bangladesh Government passed away. During his term, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) saw it's most proactive and dynamic forward looking period. Shireen Huq remembers in an email in Aug 6, 2014 that he was invited to the NP workshops in 1996 with acid survivors. His contribution was acknowledged by the women's movement during VAW project and for his most productive partnership with Najma Chowdhury during the Caretaker government of Justice Habibur Rahman when she was Adviser responsible for MoWCA.

parliament demanding punishment and legal support. Gradually we realised that these cases need long term multipronged interventions which is not possible to mobilise without state support. (Samia Afrin, interview dated: April 2011)

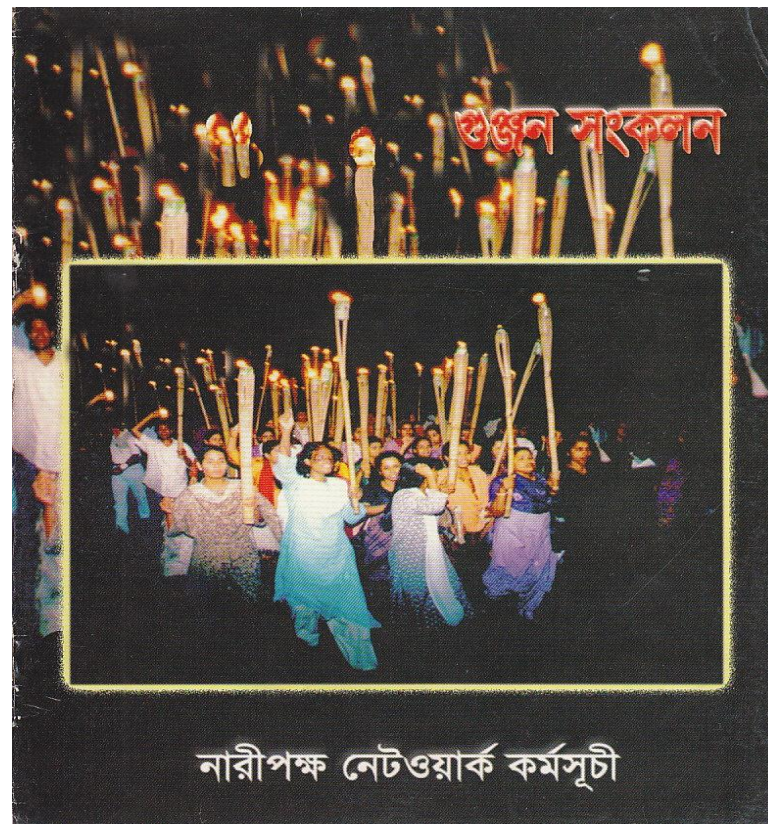


Figure 10: Torch Procession with acid survivors
Source: Collected from Naripokkho

NP realised that revealing the cases to the public was essential to getting legal or police support. Acid cases require a long treatment regime involving both physical and psychological support, plastic surgery, and rehabilitation, with the support of legal and law enforcing agencies. Parents and family members were also interested in sharing their pain. As a non-political organisation, NP was always keen on maintaining networks and connections with relevant people, friends and supporters of the cause. Personal network proved to be a good resource for NP. Under the leadership of Nasreen Huq funds were mobilised through personal contacts, friends outside the country, so that they could continue their studies¹¹⁴, get a job and most importantly enjoy life like any other human being. NP, through the personal network of Perween Hasan (member NP), arranged to take a small group of survivors to Italy¹¹⁵. The purpose was to bring pleasures and enjoyments back to their otherwise bleak life, while integrating them in the mainstream. There were photo journalists, in both print and

¹¹⁴ Yasmin Ali from UNICEF provided funds to help them continue their studies.

¹¹⁵ Such trips to UK, Delhi etc. were also arranged using personal contacts of NP

electronic media, who helped raise public awareness on the issue. Nasreen Huq initiated a groups called '*Pancham Shur*' (The Fifth Tune) with the survivors. Every week they met at her home for music, singing and other entertainment, a practice which is still running. Many of the survivors completed internships in NP. With little financial support they were drawn to the daily office work of NP which included office management, photocopy, filing, phone operator etc.

Through these processes of alternative rehabilitation, the need for a foundation emerged and finally the Acid Survival Foundation (ASF) was established in 1999. The survivors run two networks of their own today. One is located in ASF and the other in Action Aid. The Burn Unit of Dhaka Medical College was also refurbished to accommodate acid victims. NP had a project called "Resisting VAW" and a pilot research project was underway on domestic violence at the time. NP linked the Acid cases with these two ongoing initiatives. According to the members of NP, "Through all these efforts and initiatives, new understanding started to unfold. It was a learning process for all of us, as newer knowledge was acquired and perceptions sharpened shaping our own understanding of VAW and issues around women, gender, body and sexuality".

Creation of New Understanding, New Tools and New Concepts

According to Firdous (NP), working with acid survivors was enriching and a revealing exercise for her. The conceptual leap from 'victim' to 'survivor' was a great achievement necessary for theorising on VAW. As stated before, NP always had a formula—getting started with a workshop or discussion session on the issue at hand. Thus the workshop organised with the survivors and their family members was very productive. Firdous shares two distinct self-revelations related to acid violence.

... Firstly we thought that the survivor and the family have come to Dhaka for the first time and we were unsure about how to handle the media. Media was very eager to cover the story but we did not want a sensational portrayal of acid violence and also wanted to ensure anonymity. I, due to my literature background, thought that media representation may not be correct, but then it were the girls who wanted media coverage. I think that is how the learning process takes place, and becomes a place where the theory and practice get blurred. I realised that there was a big gap between their lived experience and demand and my theoretical position. (Firdous Azim, interview dated: March 2011)

Firdous continues,

One thing was very striking to me. At the beginning they were all hiding their faces and bodies and did not open their coverings. But during the workshop, at some point they took off their covers. They were feeling free and this we thought was an achievement. The torch procession was thus a symbolic event through which we could unveil the faces to the public. (Firdous Azim, interview dated: March 2011)

Secondly, the idea of ‘rehabilitation’ was revisited by NP and Firdous felt that NP had a different vision for these survivors. There were many other organisations that came forward including the leading Daily *Prothom Alo* and men in support of the issue. However NP had a different perspective, a unique angle on rehabilitation strategy. The traditional approach of giving a cow or a shop or a house to the survivor was not NP’s intentions. NP thought that the most important thing was to raise consciousness in public and build confidence in the survivors and consequently change their perspective of life. ASF also did not take up this approach. “We are not directly involved with them anymore. However, acid attack survivors are still coming to our office. Although this communication and network has become weakened after Nasreen Huq’s death, we still have contact with them but we are not taking up any new cases.” said Firdous.

The main purpose of NP was to bring them back to life beyond making provisions for material and physical asset to rehabilitate them. Many of the survivors had shut themselves away from life and NP were trying to get them to enjoy life at its fullest. Some of them were very successful, some failed. Bina is now with her husband in New York and she is still working on the issue, maintaining contacts and networks while building up solidarity with other members of NP on various issues. NP wanted to give them a space and a platform to get together, to give them a feeling that they are part of this society and not outcasts. NP finally handed over the cases to ASF and that was a great achievement.

Another interesting realisation for NP was around the funding issue. There was not lack but abundance of it. Money, funding and donations started to flood in from within the country and from outside. According to Firdous, “We got scared and had to refuse the funds as we did not know how to handle the money. The solution was to organise a Foundation which was finally established in 1999.” (Firdous Azim, interview dated: March 2011)

The case of acid attacks thus fuelled one of the most fruitful movements which entailed both activism and enrichment of theoretical understanding, finally culminating in legal measurement and institutional reform.

VI

Case of Yasmin: Rape and Murder in Police Custody: A Crucial Milestone for the Women's Movement

On 25th August 1995 the mutilated body of a young girl aged around 14 was found on the road-side in Dinajpur, a district city in North Bengal. Yasmin was a house maid in Dhaka who was on her way to see her mother. Police picked her up in their van early in the morning promising to transport her home safely from the bus station. Instead she was raped by the three policemen and brutally killed. Her body was found at the roadside.

This led to mass protests, agitation and mobilisation (*Andolon* in its imagined sense) in Dinajpur, where thousands of people gathered demanding punishment of the police officers and resignation of the State Minister. Anger and agitation was also targeted towards the local MP, who was the sister of the PM, Khaleda Zia. The movement became more militant when the government press release denied the rape and claimed that Yasmin died of an accident. Moreover it was also indicated that Yasmin was a '*patita*' (A prostitute, named Banu)¹¹⁶. On 26th August, the police station was surrounded up by the masses. In order to resist the agitation, curfew (One forty four) was declared and a para-military force was appointed. People broke the curfew and finally police opened fire on the procession leaving at least seven men dead and numerous others wounded. The next day Dinajpur was boiling and Yasmin had become a symbol for the people and as a result the women's movement received support from all sectors of people from all over the country. Women's organisations, NGOs, civil society, writers, poets, intellectuals, political parties all came forward protesting the rape and death of Yasmin under police custody.

As mentioned earlier, a coalition with 19 women's organisations was formed in 1987 on the issue of VAW called *Oikkyobodhho Nari Shomaj* (United Women's Society). This coalition played a critical role in destabilising the non-democratic Ershad regime. The coalition was short lived at the time but remerged on the Yasmin issue with renewed strength and vision along with a much greater number of women's organisations and NGOs as its

¹¹⁶ See Parvez (1996)

allies. This coalition was called ‘*Shammilito Nari Shomaj*’ (Coalition of Women Society). Under the leadership of this coalition a mass gathering of at least 3000 women took place at the Central Institute’s field in Dinajpur city, demanding justice for Yasmin’s death (Parvez, 1996). *Shammilito Nari Shomaj* organised a demonstration in Dhaka and placed a petition demanding justice to the Prime Minister within two week of the Dinajpur revolt.

Mass demonstrations, militant protests and violent agitation around Yasmin became a rallying point for VAW activism and gained mass support where men had to sacrifice their lives for the cause. And later August 25th was declared by the *Shammillito Nari Shomaj* as the National VAW Day¹¹⁷ to commemorate Yasmin’s death. The three accused police officers were ultimately suspended.

The protests and mobilisation were fuelled by general dissatisfaction against the local MP, the corruption in the police force and the chronic poverty of North Bengal. More agitation was created because the people felt that the administration was not taking the case seriously—none of the MPs or ministers visited the spot and the Prime Minister left the country to attend the Beijing conference without offering any resolution to the Yasmin case.

Coalition and Cooperation, Division and Detachment

All of the respondents clearly remember that 1995 was the year the UN World Women’s Conference was held in Beijing¹¹⁸. There was great confusion among the feminist leaders about whether to attend the conference or to abandon going to Beijing and getting involved with this local incident instead. Opinions within the women’s movement were divided on the issue. One group thought they should go to Beijing and others decided to boycott.

Najma Chowdhury, Convener of Beijing Preparatory Committee during that time knew that the Preparatory Committee had been working for a long time to arrange this Conference. She was trying hard to accommodate every one’s views from a neutral position. Najma remembers that,

Shammilito Nari Shomaj was led by UBINIG, Farida Akhter. The case of Yasmin took place right before our departure for Beijing. Some organisations thought that they should not go, but we went ahead and we protested in Beijing in an open forum. UBINIG was a member of

¹¹⁷Mainly by UBINIG, led by Farida Akhter

¹¹⁸See Chapter Five for detail

this Beijing preparatory coalition and Farida suggested going to Dinajpur, at the place of occurrence to protest and show solidarity with the movement. But as a member and Convener of a coalition I thought that we should first decide where we will go and where not. I asked whether we can go to every other place where such occurrences have taken place. Again my position was not liked by many. Some sarcastically remarked that ‘it seems as if we can go to Beijing but not to Dinajpur.’ (Najma Chowdhury, interview dated: June 2011)

Najma thinks that giving support to issues are not an end in itself. The the women’s movement should have a goal and plan of its own and it is not just about grabbing an opportunity to run the show.

Ayesha’s remark from BMP in this regard is of significance here. She thinks that the case of Yasmin’s rape and murder was surely an important milestone in the history of the women’s movement but that there were other issues, other similar cases, murders and rapes through the decades with which BMP had been working since its inception. For BMP the picking up of issues and the question of sustainability is a critical one. BMP works with structural and long term issues like poverty and class issues. As an old and large nationwide organisation BMP prefers to deal with women’s issues with a multi-dimensional approach, preferring not to treat them as isolated events. The activities of BMP to her is thus very complicated and is related to fundamental social reforms, political reforms and structural transformations which are usually long term and complex.

We have a fundamental difference with other women’s organisations. We do not like to pick up issues and then let go of it. We believe that whatever we do has to have continuity, a purpose and a goal. There are organisations who often become involved in issues which they then do not keep track of. Activism should have a clear vision, it is not only about responding with passion and emotion (Ayesha Khanam, interview dated: October 2011).

Mahmuda reflects that in spite of the debates, dilemmas and disagreements, they went to Beijing and WfW, along with other members of the coalition, protested against state violence. All the organisations attending the Conference in Beijing took part in the protest and slogan against ‘state sponsored’ violence against women. Apparently all these protests and demonstrations in Beijing was not liked by the state representatives present there. It was also felt by the representatives of the women’s movement that the state representations should not have come to Beijing without attending to the Dinajpur case with proper attention. According to Mahmuda,

Khurshid Jahan, the accused MP, and Sarwari Rahman, Minister of State of Social Welfare and Women's Affairs 1991-96, were both present in Beijing and they later accused us of tarnishing the image of the state in an international milieu. This really complicated later when we had to again work with Beijing Plus in 2001 with Khurshid Jahan and she reminded me of our role in 1995. We had to defend ourselves and re-establish our 'apolitical' position. We had to clarify that the movement had nothing to do with sentiments against BNP or party politics. We had to establish that the women's movement would work in favour of women and the protest was not anti-government but about seeking justice and proper response (Mahmuda Islam, interview dated: March 2011).

She added that the role played in Beijing by the women's movement had repercussions. The women's movement at large and also on a personal level was perceived as negative and anti-government. Research and project work related to government initiatives were supposed to come to her but the BNP government denied her access to those research work and during the second regime of BNP, WfW was seen as anti-BNP. Apart from these challenges, the women's movement actually gained much through this movement.

According to Roushan Jahan the important achievement of the movement was to bring out the role of the police and to articulate the insecurity of citizens and particularly women when in police custody.

There were quite a few discussion sessions on the issue of police custody and we were involved by BMP to bring out pamphlets, booklets and distributed leaflets on the issue of violation perpetrated by the state machinery. I think these were critical achievements in terms of raising issues against state. We all agreed to the declaration of the National VAW day on 24th August, although later we could not observe the day with the same zeal. Moreover 25th November was later observed by most of us as part of UN's 16 day international campaign to stop violence against women (Roushan Jahan, interview dated: June 2011).

The Yasmin tragedy was significant for the movement in many ways. It bridged the gap between the masses and the women's movement. It strengthened the solidarity between the organisations and within the movement. The case was instrumental in taking the protests and agitation from a national to international level. There was no room for the state to ignore the rape and murder of a 'mere' girl from the margin.

Case of Yasmin: A Milestone or an Opportunity Lost?

The Case of Yasmin was indeed a milestone for the women's movement, one which, according to Ayesha Khanam, had all the potential to become an important tool of the movement as this was an example of state violence against women. But the women's movement could not properly capitalise the occurrence to its fullest to bring transformational change in policy. Rape and murder under police custody should have spearheaded demands for structural changes around the idea of security and rights of women as citizens, as well as her right to claim space in public. This was the issue where the masses participated and Yasmin's fate could mobilise people from all quarters. The issue transcended the narrow boundaries of women's issue to becoming a general issue for all. Bangladesh's women's movement could have made it an agenda of its own which encompassed the intersectionality of women's secondary position as a citizen. Failure of state machinery was another issue which could have been capitalised to address VAW, poverty, insecurity and vulnerability of women's body and sexuality, and most importantly this was an issue which became part of a mass mobilisation supported by all after the early seventies and eighties.

This chapter broadly discusses Violence against Women (VAW) under four sub issues. All four issues were found to be intertwined around one common thread i.e. women's body and sexuality. Among four broad areas covered, the section on 1971 VAW issues occupies a significant space. The expanse was felt necessary as there were quite a number of sub issues, such as post-war rehabilitation process around rape, abortion, adoption and *Birangona*. More detailed discussion was also essential to contextualise the entire range of the women's movement in a newly emerging state. The decade of the seventies is thus critical to understand the background of feminist understanding, construction and conceptualisation. Feminist articulations during the eighties and nineties were grounded on a firmer base, enriched with wider knowledge, awareness and maturity.

Thus responses during the seventies are mellowed down by accommodating carefulness and consisted of cautious trepidation in relation to the state and mostly reactive in nature. War time VAW, more specifically war time rape, was thus cloaked and accommodated in silence. The purity-pollution framework remained dominant in the responses of the women's movement as well as the state. But gradually conflicts, contradictions, critiques and challenges alongside enhanced disagreement with the state and

within the movement started to materialise. Open protests, mass mobilisation and public demonstrations could be observed in later decades.

During the eighties and the nineties many women's organisations were in action and women's organisations started to pick up issues on their own, working to fulfil their own goals and agendas. The murder of Shabmeher and the eviction of 'prostitutes' from the brothels were issues rotating around bodily purity and marginality of women under the purity-pollution frame work. However, the case of Shabmeher had been crucial to the women's movement in terms of placing the 'prostitution' issue under the broader framework of socio-economic marginality of women and cater it towards a right-based movement and addressing women's bodies as a site of resistance. Shabmeher was the first step towards a radical feminist formulation of declaring 'sex work as work' in the future.

Acid violence was a non-disputable case. This issue could draw wide range support from all, particularly from men and the media. VAW was understood and addressed as a multi-pronged issue. The most amazing achievement was around the change and shift in conceptual understand of VAW from 'victimhood' to 'survivors'. The notion of inner strength, personal independence, empowerment and autonomy to claim space in public became an integral part of broader feminist formulations.

Finally the chapter ends with the Yasmin tragedy, which became a milestone in the women's movement in terms of large scale protests, agitation and mass demonstration against the state, drawing the general people into the fold. Alliances and coalitions also played a crucial role in strengthening networks and linkages both on a national and international level. Alliances and coalitions, even fragile ones, proved to be effective instruments to mobilise and uphold issues in solidarity. Coalitions proved to be particularly successful in anti-state activities. During the eighties and the nineties the women's movement is found to have been active and often militant in street mobilisation around acid and state violence, particularly around Yasmin's rape and murder under police custody. Men and other stake holders like the media also came forward to build connections and contacts.

The women's movement was found to be growing through the process of deconstruction and reconstruction, through internal development and dynamism, challenging its own formulations from one decade to another and moving forward with new designs and transformations. The traditional notions around the rehabilitation process also underwent shifts and variations. 'Transformatory' changes took place between 1971 and 2000 around

the perception of women's bodily right and choice. Considerable change could be noticed around the notion of the rehabilitation process within the movement, which moved beyond the traditional idea of arranging marriages or providing material support to women.

The women's movement, through its concerted and continuous effort, was also successful in claiming laws and legal measures advantageous to women. To some extent, during its journey towards making feminist formulation, the women's movement has been successful in transporting certain specific women's issues into general ones, pertinent to all, irrespective of gender and class. As a result, women's issues became a legitimate agenda for the masses.

Regardless of the many challenges, disagreements, divisions and fractions, the women's movement continued with its struggle around VAW issues, which remains the main thread of the tapestry (more clearly understood as *Nakshi Kantha*¹¹⁹ in Bangladesh) of the women's movement.

¹¹⁹ Drapery, hand embroidered quilt, stitched with elaborate designs by recycling saree.

Chapter Three

The Right Discourses: Private and Public Demanding Equal Rights in Family, Work and Politics

I

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the second of the issues i.e. the struggle by the women's movement for equal rights in private and public spheres. The chapter came out as disproportionately larger than the rest of the chapters in this thesis. This is chiefly due to the number of issues raised under the discourse of rights, covering three broad sub topics i.e. family, work and politics. Each component under the broad heading, again, contains two or three sub-issues.

We return here to the three major identified issues, including seven sub-topics that are to be covered in this chapter:

- i.** Rights of women in the family – Three specific issues been addressed here: the Dowry movement, Uniform Family Code (UFC) and, finally, women's bodily rights.
- ii.** Discussion on women's right to work has been kept restricted to the quota issue, in relation to women's access to work and to the movement that recognises 'sex work' as work.
- iii.** Right to politics: This section will dwell upon one major area, i.e. the movement around the demands of direct election in reserved seats of the national parliament and local-level politics.

Before one moves into the three major issues that the movement took up vis-a-vis rights, it is important to point out the fact that the right discourse is closely connected to the legal realm and to the state. One of the reasons behind this is because historically the right discourse is deeply associated with liberalism that traditionally focused on legal rights (Tong, 1998; Bryson, 1999; Jahan, 2004; Chowdhury, 2001). It is thus appropriate to bring forward the issue of the Constitution of Bangladesh before going into the details of feminist formulations and the movement for establishing rights in family, work and politics.

Women's Right in the Constitution: Muted and Fragmented

The Constitution of Bangladesh (*Bangladesher Shongbidhan* in Bangla) is the supreme law of Bangladesh. Passed by the Constituent Assembly of Bangladesh on November 4, 1972, it came into effect from December 16, 1972, which proclaims Bangladesh as a secular democratic republic and declares the fundamental rights and freedoms of Bangladesh citizens. The 1972, the Constitution proclaims the four basic principles noted in the preamble as the national ideals of the Bangladesh Republic- According to the preamble, the fundamental principles of the state of Bangladesh are "nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism". These four principles are respectively defined as Bengali nationalism; social justice and egalitarianism; representative democracy; and a secular republic which upholds freedom of religion. The preamble to the Constitution of Bangladesh is the introductory statement that sets out the guiding principles of the document. It is not an integral part of the constitution in the sense that it is enforceable in a court of law.¹²⁰

Generally as preamble is an introductory paragraph or part in a statute or other document setting forth this grounds and intentions. Not only a Constitution but also most of the statutes contain a preamble. The preamble to an Act contains in a nutshell its ideals and aspirations; in other words, it sets out the main objectives which legislation is intended to achieve. It is a key to the intention of the maker of the Act. Likewise the preamble to a Constitution is its philosophy because it contains those ideals and principals on the basis of which the whole structure of the constitution is erected. But though in case of ordinary statues much importance is not always attached to the preamble, extreme importance is always attached to a preamble in a constitutional statute. The preamble to a Constitution serves the following three main purposes:

It indicates the source of the Constitution i.e. the legal and moral basis of the Constitution. It expresses in a nutshell the ideas and aspirations of the Objectives of the Constitution. The declared objection is the secure justice, liberty, equality and fraternity to all the citizens. Thus, the preamble expresses the political, moral and religious values which the constitution is intended to promote. It works as the guiding star for the interpretation of the Constitution¹²¹.

¹²⁰See Appendix F for full text of the preamble of the Constitution, Parts and Sections.

¹²¹ See <http://www.lawteacher.net/administrative-law/essays/term-paper-the-significance-law-essays.php>

After the Pakistan army crackdown on 25th March 1971, a group of Awami League leaders who fled to India, assembled in Calcutta (now Kolkata) and formed a government in exile (known as *Mujibnagar Government*¹²²) under a proclamation adopted in 10th April 1971. The representatives constituted themselves into a Constituent Assembly for Bangladesh. The first interim constitution was proclaimed under the leadership of Tajuddin Ahmad¹²³. No female members or any representatives from the women's movement were a part of this exercise. Soon after returning from Pakistan prison (after the independence of Bangladesh), Sheikh Mujibur Rahman promised an early drafting of a Constitution and socialist economy for Bangladesh (Jahan, 1980). A constitution drafting committee, consisting of 34 members under the Chairmanship of Dr Kamal Hossain (the then law minister), was formed. Noorjahan Murshid¹²⁴ was the only female member in this committee. On 11 October 1972, the last meeting of the Committee was held where the full draft Constitution was finally approved (Halim, 2010; Huq, 1973). Despite the fact that there were a lot of criticism and reactions from left political parties and factions, and also from some in the women's movement, no serious attempt was made by any party to mobilise public opinion against or in favour of the drafted Constitution¹²⁵.

The committee was clearly underrepresented by members from the women's movement or by women members, and the Constitution was seen as fragmented and muted to many from feminist perspectives. Most of the respondents thought that the first Constitution, in its totality, was a progressive and liberal one. Equal Constitutional rights are granted in Article no. 27, 28 and in other articles but the Constitution— in relation to the woman as a category – is more of a scattered and an incoherent one that lacks consistency compared to other rights and clauses. One feature that is constant among all deliberations by the protagonists of the movement that the Constitution of Bangladesh is that it has many contradictory creaks and caveats. All these contradictions gradually emerged as great challenges for the women's movement that was demanding equal rights for women. Despite

¹²²The place where the oath ceremony for the government in exile (or provisional government) took place is situated

In Kushtia District, Meherpur, later named after the national leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

¹²³Tajuddin Ahmad is the first Prime Minister of the government in exile.

¹²⁴Noorjahan Murshid was one of two women to be directly elected to the Provincial Legislative Assembly of East Bengal in 1954 on a United Front ticket. As an accredited deputy of the 'Mujibnagar Government' in exile she sought the recognition of Bangladesh from the Indian government, essentially to raise support for the Liberation War. That prompted the Pakistan military government to sentence her to 14 years rigorous imprisonment in absentia. In independent Bangladesh, she was appointed in 1972 as state minister for health and social welfare in the cabinet of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. She was elected to the country's first parliament in 1973. See Appendix C for more detail.

¹²⁵See Halim (2010) for detail

the fact that the Constitution clearly states equal rights for women, it keeps many oppositional legal loopholes in its folds. For instance, the presence of personal law has been identified as a threat to women's equal right in the family, while the contradictory package of legal framework creates ambiguity with regard to the rights of 'sex work' or 'prostitution'. Similar, inconsistency is also observed in the area of women's access to male-dominated job opportunities. The patriarchal and paternalistic culture is evident from the perpetuation of constitutional status with regard to quota and selection system in relation to women's political rights in parliament (Rai, 2002). The dialectics of quota and selection system are being favoured by the mainstream power base, while the women's movement are seeing it as a temporary measure to aid women's right in an unequal social milieu. Many of the demands of the women's movement necessitate Constitutional amendments and structural changes in the legal and implementation agencies. The movement has often stalled just because of some constitutional sanctions or non-sanctions that interfered with the demand for equal rights. The women's movement sighs at the fact that many Constitutional amendments¹²⁶ were made on innumerable issues for the last forty years, but not many were made to bring positive transformations in women and gender issues in the Constitution. In this connection, I would like to append some of the comments and discussions on the Constitution of Bangladesh from the women's movement.

Maleka Begum was the General Secretary of BMP since 1972 till 1990. Despite her long exposure and experience in politics she was not a part of the process of Constitution writing. Maleka shares that during those days they were too immature to contest and contribute to the writings of Constitution. New to independent thinking, lack of confidence among women led to non-participation in the process of drafting the Constitution. Moreover, it might be possible that BMP, at the time was too heavily dependent on the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) and thought that CPB would look into these major and complex matters on their behalf. Maleka shares her own reflection on this in retrospection:

Although BMP was already operating independently from Bangladesh Communist Party (CPB) by the time it was the seventies, I guess I was still under the spell of CPB. We used to depend on CPB for making any intervention on political or basic issues related to 'broader state matters'. Now I realise that CPB did not have a proper gender sensitive manifesto but again it is also true that it was through CPB I came into this arena. All I can remember that

¹²⁶ As of 2011 The Constitution of Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh has been amended 15 times. See Appendix F for Constitutional amendments in detail

Moni Singh¹²⁷ or other leaders of CPB at that time were preoccupied with women's role in farmer's revolt and resistance, like *tebhaga movement*¹²⁸ and so on, but failed to guide us in putting women's issues at the constitutional level. We did not imagine ourselves as knowledgeable or capable of getting involved into Constitution drafting. We relied upon the people who were in the committee. One has to realise that it was 1972, and we were all busy with our own agendas in our respective fields (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March 2011).

However, Maleka remembers meeting the two important members of Constitution Drafting Committee Dr Kamal Hossain (Chair of the Drafting Committee) and Amirul Islam¹²⁹, on her own with a feeling of unease regarding clauses 27 and 28, which mention equality between men and women but is contradicted by sub section of 29 .C of the personal law. She had a feeling that this clause of 'personal law' lacks clarity and is oppositional to other clauses of the Constitution. According to Maleka, the issue of quota or reserved seats for women was discussed during those days from the organisational level and there was a debate regarding the number of reserved seats. She thinks that in spite of their political immaturity and lack of experience, BMP did raise the question of direct election. BMP had its first national conference on 8th March, 1972 and drafted a demand list for the government. As mentioned earlier in many instances, Sufia Kamal, along with seven other members, marched to the parliament with this sixteen point¹³⁰ demand memorandum (Begum, 1997). One of the demands of this memorandum was to incorporate the issue of direct election on reserved seats for women in the parliament. This demand was not well received by the authority. People, mostly men, who were in charge during the time thought that given the circumstances of Bangladesh, reserved seats and selection process were the right ways putting women into the parliament. BMP was also not very adamant about this demand mainly because they were not comfortable about getting into any conflicting relationship with the new state. Their political affiliation and support to the new government also shaped their placid responses. Maleka reflects that all these criticisms became clear to her only in the late seventies, when she got acquainted with the Indian women's movement. It is also clear to her,

¹²⁷Moni Singh was the founder of the Communist Party of East Pakistan. After the emergence of Bangladesh, he was elected as the President of Communist party of Bangladesh in the second Congress of the Party in 1973.

¹²⁸The *Tebhaga movement* was a militant campaign initiated in Bengal by the Kisan Sabha (peasant's front of Communist Party of India) in 1946. At that time, share-cropping peasants (essentially tenants) had to give half of their harvest to the owners of the land. The demand of the *Tebhaga* (sharing by thirds) movement was to reduce the share given to landlords to one third.

¹²⁹Kamal Hossain and Amirul Islam are noted jurists and was member of the Constitution committee

¹³⁰See for details, Begum, M. (2000) *Nari Andolonor Panch Dashak* [Five decades of the Women's Movement], Dhaka: Onnyo Prakash, pp. 85-86. Also see Appendix D for the list of 'Sixteen Point Demand' translated into English

after all these years that the the women's movement is acceptable as long as it keeps itself restricted to 'non-political' or safe issues. BMP was criticised in 1972 for raising 'political issues'.

Ayesha identifies the internal contradiction of the Constitution more lucidly. The first problematic of the Constitution was its formulation on women and war. According to her, the Constitution largely failed to address the contribution of women in the War of Liberation apart from highlighting their role as victims. Furthermore, no attempt was made to effectively link socialism and secularism that was declared in the Constitution. Constitutional position around secularism remained obscure as personal laws were also present for each of the religious groups. She stresses on the fact that the entire process of Constitution drafting was a male affair with deep political implications. Ayesha says, "The political process of Constitutional writing is always important and we are still giving the toll of that process for the last 40 years." (Ayesha Khanam, interview dated: October 2011)

According to the respondents, while the drafting of the Constitution was specifically done by male politicians, the women's movement also failed to do their share. They remained muted and did not try hard enough to make themselves a part of the process. The women's movement also internalised the androcentric processes as natural and thought that drafting of the Constitution is not their main concern because it falls under the male realm of 'politics'.

The result was inevitable. The token representation of women in the committee only aggravated the isolation of women's issues in the constitution. The inconsistency and incoherence around the issue of women's equal rights, presence of personal law along with secularism, lack of proper conceptualisation of these issues from gender perspective etc. led to even more confusion and ineffectiveness. It is also important to note that gender awareness and gender sensitivity, as well as political maturity that goes into the policy-making process were not strong at that time. Lack of understanding and confidence within the women's movement was yet another hindrance to the issue. Traditional male-dominated perceptions about women and politics perpetuated the male biases in the Constitution. The Constitution was drafted by people trained in the West and following the British model, which ultimately led to a West-influenced and biased Constitution (Mackay, Meehan, Donaghy, & Brown, 2002; Moore, 1988). Despite the fact that the women's movement at the time was not strong enough to influence the mainstream politics, the issues at stake and important gaps were not completely overlooked by feminists.

Creation of Knowledge: Paving the Path of Alternative form of Activism

Roushan Jahan who was involved with BMP, WfW and also with ASK clearly recalls dialogues with key persons involved in drafting of the Constitution in 1972. She was also in close contact with people from the Planning Commission of the Bangladesh Government during the early seventies.

She realised that though the Constitution gives some rights to women, no special mention is made regarding women except for in the education sector. She felt that ensuring women's equal rights must address sector-wise distribution and policy support.

I also asked Professor Musharraf Hossain¹³¹ and Professor Anisur Rahman¹³² from Planning Commission about what they were doing for women in the Five Year Plan. They, said that it is necessary to have some data, statistics, information and research work in order to integrate women into policy. Reliable facts and figures are necessary for any sort of sanctions or budget allocation. And that is how it started for us (Roushan Jahan, interview dated: June 2011).

Knowledge creation thus became a critical tool for the the women's movement. WfW instantaneously engaged themselves in generating data on women. Research, data generation, publication, dissemination, lobbying and networking became an integral part of the the women's movement and a bridge was established between activism and academia. It is pertinent to mention here that while listening to all these protagonists of the women's movement of Bangladesh, this particular shift turned out to be significant. The need for placing special emphasis on knowledge-creation was felt.¹³³

Najma Chowdhury was in London during 1971, doing her PhD. She, like others, also thought of the Constitution as progressive and that the recognition of the 'secularism' as a clause in the Constitution as one of the four pillars was women-friendly. This clause was conducive for women in the sense that religion could not be used against them. She mentions the importance of research and knowledge production too. She reflects that the women's movement at the time lacked 'political' experience and skill which were required for negotiating with the state.

¹³¹Musharraf Hossain, Noted economist, Professor of Economics, Dhaka University, Member of the Planning Commission of the new Bangladesh. Passed away in February 2013, Just got the news of his death while I was working on this draft in Delhi

¹³²Anisur Rahman, Noted economist, Professor of Dhaka University, Member of the first Planning Commission of Bangladesh

¹³³Another chapter on production of knowledge was envisioned which, was finally abandoned due to the restriction on words of this thesis

Early feminist leaders were aware of the gaps in the Constitution but lacked the tact of negotiation with the state power. Whatever space they gained was through their good will with the new government and through their exposure and participation in the War of Liberation. Limited data as well as lack of necessary databases led to lack of power (Najma Chowdhury, interview dated: June 2011).

One can derive from all the discussion above that during the early days of new Bangladesh (and even later), women's issues were seen as a separate entity and labelled as 'non-political'. This perception was largely internalised by feminists as well. In many ways, they could not make women's issues an integral part of national issues. It is not that the framers of the constitutions were insensitive to women, but they were part of a system caged in that particular moment of history and context which shaped their conceptualisation and image of women. The discussion on image of women as perceived by the framers of the Constitution, as well as by the feminists, is critical here. How this very nature and content of the Constitution that have paved the path for the women's movement by demanding equal rights in family, work and politics is the main focus of the following sections.

II

Women's Rights in Family: The Dowry Movement

Dowry is a major issue that confronts women in Bangladesh (Begum, 1998). Women's organisation like Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) started to mobilise against this practice during the mid-seventies. Dowry was one of the most important areas to intervene for BMP. Soon after the Liberation, the 16-point demand placed to the president had specifically mentioned the dowry issue and demanded immediate action to enact anti-dowry law. By the mid-seventies the dowry problem was prioritised by the women's movement. Although BMP claims its pivotal role in anti-dowry movements, by 1978, a social movement had also been started against the custom of dowry (Begum, 2006).



Figure 11: Movement against dowry and polygamy, during the late seventies.
Source- Personal collection from Maleka Begum

The case of dowry deaths like Saleha in 1978¹³⁴ created a considerable agitation around the dowry issue. Given the fact that there were numerous other cases of violence against women on dowry issue and dowry deaths (Begum, 2000), the case of Saleha in 1978 was an eye-opener, revealing the pervasiveness of dowry which proved to be not an exclusive poverty-related ‘problem’ but also a social practice that cuts across class.

Despite many diversified responses, this movement eventually manifested in a landmark legal achievement-- ‘Anti-Dowry Bill ACT 1980’. Social movements along with the women’s movement against dowry gained momentum through multiple factors, but it also benefitted from a rather grim political shift of power in the late seventies and early eighties, when military autocratic rule was in power. Democracy was curtailed, some started to change their political alliances but the remnant of earlier interactions was still intact between people involved in the women’s movement. Dowry was a sort of ‘safe area’ to work and mobilise in, where there is no significant reason not to support the cause, no hidden threat was associated with it and no structural change was necessary to enact an anti-dowry act. The issue got

¹³⁴Saleha Begum was killed by her husband Dr Ehteshamuddin Iqbal on April 18, 1978. Parents of Saleha arranged to bear the expenses for Dr. Iqbal’s medical tuition and others as dowry. Iqbal insisted on more and finally killed his wife. Iqbal was sentenced death on August 5, 1978. The verdict and its implementation was seen as an achievement for the women’s movement, but on the other hand mothers and women in the area where Iqbal used to live in Dhaka, did not cook as a symbolic gesture to express grief and protest in favour of Dr Iqbal.

support from men too. State was also at a point where it did not want to take any risk by resisting the dowry bill because this would only hamper its attempt to portray a progressive image of itself. It was indeed an easy reaps for the state – by letting it pass was also a way of ensuring its own image without appearing too radical. But to what extent can this be called an achievement remains critical for the respondents. Interestingly, a majority of women’s organisations – while equally concerned about the many manifestation of VAW – often differ about the severity of punishment handed out to the perpetrator (Kabeer, 1989, Monsoor 1999). The debate largely moved around conventions on human rights and international perception on capital punishment, and often led to opposing opinions around the death sentences. In these connections, significant divisions within the women’s movement and public opinion (especially amongst women on the issue of capital punishment) were noted over the following decades. Before going into details of the responses from the women leaders, it is important to lay down the background of the Dowry Bill and the role of Daulotonnessa Khatun¹³⁵.

Anti-Dowry Bill¹³⁶: A Landmark Victory with Hidden Layers of Disappointment

The Bill was raised in the parliament on 26th May 1979 and was titled as *Bangladesh Anti Dowry Act (Bangladesh Jautuk Birodhi Ain)* by Daulotonnessa Khatun as a Private Member’s Bill¹³⁷. The Bill was discussed in detail by ministers and MPs. Many changes and additions were brought into the original Bill proposed by Daulutunnessa. Later, on 13th

¹³⁵Daulotonnessa Khatun was actively involved in Congress politics in undivided Bengal. She was imprisoned twice for her close association with anti-British movement. She was also part of the underground anti British movement and had learnt how to use arms. Daulotonnessa was active during the resistance around Language Movement in 1952 during Pakistan period. She was elected as a member of *Ain Parishad* (Parliament) in Rangpur-Dinajpur-Bogra (North Bengal) Municipality through direct vote of women members only. During the United Front election of 1954 in Pakistan, she was directly elected in the *Ain Parishad* along with Noorjahan Murshid, Badrunnessa Ahmad, Amena Begum, Selina Banu, Razia Banu, Taftunnessa, Meherunnessa Khatun and others (Begum, 1989). She was also appointed as the parliamentary secretary of the Provincial Government along with Noorjahan Murshid and Razia Banu in Pakistan. However, she gradually got detached from politics and devoted herself in literary writings. She was again visible in public arena during 1979 and was *selected* as the Parliament Member from Rangpur under the government of Zia ur Rahman (Kibria, 1999)

¹³⁶ Apart from Dowry Bill two other ordinances i.e. Family Court Ordinance, 1980 and Ordinance to stop Violence against Women 1985 (*Paribarik Adalat Odhyadesh 1980, Nari Nirjatan Nibortan Odhyadesh 1985*) were declared during the eighties.

¹³⁷ According to the ‘Rules of Procedures of Parliament of People’s Republic of Bangladesh’ (as modified up to 11th January, 2007) states that, **any member, other than a minister** (emphasis mine), desiring to move for leave to introduce a Bill, shall give to the secretary fifteen day’s written notice of his intention to do so and shall together with the notice submit three copies of the Bill along with an explanatory statement of objects and reasons which shall not contain arguments. See chapter XIII, Legislation, Part I: Introduction of Bills, Section A: Private Member’s Bill pg 25-27 for details. Six Private Member’s Bill had been passed in the parliament till today (2010). Dowry Bill is one of those. Further research may be required to explore those bills in future.

March, 1980 she placed the revised Bill of '*Jautuk Nirodh Ain*' (Dowry Prohibition Law) in the Parliament in order to enact law and ensure women's rights and status in society.

According to the rules and regulations of the Parliament, Bills can be referred to a Standing Committee or to a Selection Committee for consideration (GOB, 2007, pg 27). This Bill was sent to a Selection Committee in June 1980. The Selection Committee was headed by Sufia Kamal and other representatives from the women's movement and civil society¹³⁸. The Bill was also open for public opinion, discussion and debate in public media like television and radio. A special cell was established to address issues related to this particular Bill. According to Mrs. Farida Rahman, Whip, BNP, not a single comment against this Bill was registered in the Parliament Secretariat. Thousands had registered their support from civil society in favour of this Bill (GOB, 1980a).

Meantime, Sufia Kamal, President, BMP and General Secretary Maleka Begum, among few others, placed a petition to the Speaker of the House (Mirza Gholam Hafiz) to declare 'Dowry Prohibition Act' on behalf of the women's movement on 20th December 1980. The petition contained 30,000 signatures supporting the Bill. BMP also observed demand day (*Dabi Dibosh* in Bangla) all over the country supporting this Act (*Dainik Shangbad*, 21st Dec, 1980).

Passing of the Bill: The Critical Role of Daulotonnessa Khatun

It is important to note that Daulotonnessa Khatun had a long history of political activism and social work (Kibria, 1999). The Bill was a direct result of her experiences in her constituency i.e Gaibandha, Rangpur (Northern part of Bangladesh). Due to her long association with politics, she was on very good terms with the people in power across political affiliations. Before introducing the Bill to the Parliament, she had discussed the issue with members of both ruling and the opposition parties, including the then President Zia ur Rahman. She also got consent from Taslima Abed, minister, Women's Affairs at that time. Interestingly, and in spite of all the support, the Bill was not introduced by the concerned minister and thus was not notified as a Governmental Bill. This particular incident created some uncertainty among the women's movement that the Bill might not be accepted. However, after a detailed discussion in the Parliament, the Bill was passed and finally was

¹³⁸ Collected from the Proceedings of *Bangladesh Jatiyo Shangshad* (Parliament), 1980, Vol V, Part I, 5th Session of Second *Shangshad*, 1980.

signed by the President. It was declared that the Bill would be effective from 1st October 1980 (*Dainik Bangla* 1980).¹³⁹

This particular Bill and the entire process of its passing reveal several important issues that are important to the women's movement. Women have often been found to cross the floor and unite across political parties and ideology. Both BNP and the opposition decided to support the Bill, and the ever-vigilant the women's movement was in action to put forward the Bill in the parliament. Thus, and in spite of being a 'Private Member's Bill', it received support from the state - both from people in power and the opposition. Moreover, demands for an anti-dowry bill or against other 'social evils' had gained wide acceptability in the society. In addition, our colonial history is largely embedded in the reformist movement to eradicate social evils like polygamy, dowry, child marriage or widow burning. The Anti-Dowry Bill was a legacy of all these social movements. Incidentally, addressing the woman as a category was always used as a legitimate arena to establish the state's benevolent and progressive role. The Dowry Bill fell under the same category which served the interest of the state as well as of women. It is important to remember the political ambivalence around women's issues within the formal political structure (Akbar, 2007). Inbuilt resistance towards women within the state apparatus often led to delaying the decision-making process, unnecessarily complicating the situation and making things more difficult for women. Despite this political divergence, instances of cooperation and collaboration are also observed around this Bill, where the women's movement has managed to cross the board for a common cause (Stevenson, 2000).

Discussions with prominent figures of the movement allow us to appreciate both the richness and diversity in the way women's organisations responded to crisis. Dowry was an issue where least conflicts were perceived within the women's movement. It would be interesting to learn how differently or with astonishing similarity have women leaders from different organisations have responded to the issue.

¹³⁹During my research, I, along with my Research Assistant Fhamida Yasmin (now colleague at the Department of Women and Gender Studies, DU, 2014) were granted permission to use the Parliament library for only twenty days (from 26 July to 16 September 2010). Extensive study of the parliamentary debates from detailed recordings of exchanges in various sessions revealed numerous insights regarding the whole process of decision-making and the procedures for enacting a law or an act. The documents clearly show that any discussion around women usually ranged from arbitrary comments to raising legitimate issues. Often comments and discussions initiated by both opposition and ruling party are heavy with nuances indicate attempts to create unnecessary obstacles or to delay the process of passing any Bills relating to women's emancipation.

I had detailed discussions with Maleka Begum and Ayesha Khanam representing BMP, as BMP was the only major women's organisation during the early eighties which was actively involved in the entire process. Maleka Begum, former General Secretary to BMP (since 1972 to 1990) stated that by the time it was 1978, a social movement against dowry was gaining force. There were several social organisations, both in Dhaka and outside, which had emerged and demanded law against dowry. These organisations consisted of all kinds of people: male and female, young and old. Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was in power then and its female leaders were also actively engaged in this movement. A committee was formed for drafting anti-dowry provisions and many women activists were involved in this committee. BMP took a lead in the protesting and demonstration in demand of Dowry Prohibition Act in 1980, June. Later, a demand for 'Legal Aid Committee' was proposed from the demonstration in central *ShaheedMinar*. BMP collected thirty thousand signatures from its members and placed it to the speaker of Parliament.

According to Maleka, Daulotonnessa was displeased with the major changes that were made to the original Bill. She believed that the Bill would remain ineffective largely due to these changes. In relation to this movement, one experience was shared by Maleka, which is essential to understand the interrelationship between state power and the women's movement.

During the dowry movement Taslima Abed was the minister for Women's Affairs. Although she had a long history of her association with Awami League she joined BNP government in 1975. She got very angry with us because we had placed the memorandum to the speaker instead of her. We had to struggle a lot to make her understand that we had only done this to strengthen the case and not to bypass or humiliate her. In fact, we had always used strategies while approaching the people in power. Our target is to make sure that our demand finds its place in the policy level in whatever manner it is possible, but while doing so, we had to face such problems as well. (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March, 2011)

Women activists from that period emphasises on another important dimension of the women's movement, i.e. its strategisation and negotiation with all quarters to ensure rights for women.

Strategisation and Negotiation: Mainstream Politics vs. Feminist Politics

People like Maleka and Ayesha (BMP) believe that the women's movement was successful in maintaining an easy flow of communication across political affiliation on the dowry cause. Regardless of the political disagreement with BNP, Mahila Parishad worked for

the cause and gave all sorts of support to Daulotonnessa, starting from mobilisation, demonstration and collection of signatures. As we have seen earlier, feminist politics often lies upon the power of alliance and solidarity across mainstream political opinion. In this case political difference did not pose any threat to the issue at hand.

Analysis of the movement's journey towards establishing women's rights in the family would reveal points of contestations and disagreements, as well as united action on issues such as the movement for abolishment of dowry. Observable are also the negotiations and strategies deployed. As the political process became diverged and heterogeneous, so did the internal dimensions of the women's movement. The inner dynamics were found to be varied, multidimensional and they often followed conflicting and contradictory paths. However, at certain points in time, on certain issues, the women's movement is found to reach unison - a 'one voice' can be detected. It is also interesting to note that almost everyone held a high opinion on Daulotonnessa and there was little question around her contribution to the dowry movement and the passing of the Bill. Ayesha, like many others from BMP, has narrated that Daulotonnessa played the key role on dowry Bill. Daulotonnessa, Taslima Abed and many others had changed their political affiliation from Awami League (AL) to Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), but all these shifts never became a hindrance for the cause at hand. It is also evident from the respondent that the political culture of working across the political board had deteriorated over recent years (2014). Reaching towards a consensus on the cause is no more a stable ground to work on together, as it has been earlier. Division and polarisation in mainstream politics have co-opted the harmony that existed during the initial days of the seventies. On the other hand, it is noted that the 'perceived homogeneity' might be due to the existence of fewer number of women's organisations at that time.

.. during those days the implications of changing party alliances was not like today. Now a day's people don't even want to see faces of people belonging to the opposition party. The seventies and the eighties were the period when we worked together on the cause and interaction and exchanges were never hampered due to political affiliation. Struggle was continued in favour of the issue. The present party politics (2000 onwards) and severe demarcations are very harmful for the women's movement. Dowry Act got passed only because the women's movement had a strong solidarity beyond narrow political boundaries (Ayesha Khanam, interview dated: October 2011).

Regardless of the fact that feminist leaders and activists had good liaison with the people in power like state ministers or advisors, political hierarchy and power politics within the state apparatus sometimes became a threat to pursue any cause. The women's movement often had to strategize through people to approach and effective entry points at the policy level. In order to infiltrate the state machinery, cutting across political alliances proved to be the most effective strategy. Similar patterns could be seen in many other cases in the next sections.

However, it is also true that passing of a women friendly bill is not the end of the journey. Bills, and legal measures, declaration, signing of conventions etc. all may remain ineffective and serve only cosmetic purposes for many years to come. Anti-dowry Bill was seen as an 'achievement' for the women's movement in Bangladesh and is still regarded as a landmark victory. However, certain flaws and limitations inherent to the Bill eventually made many sceptical about its effectiveness or success in curtailing dowry related violence against women. For instance, Roushan Jahan from Women for Women (WfW), in a more critical tone, reflects:

We all supported the 'Dowry Bill' and thought that we have achieved a big gain, but actually it was only later that I realised that the gain was not as big and one single law is not enough to fight a social vice like dowry (Roushan Jahan, Interview dated: June 2011).

Nevertheless, the Dowry Bill had several reasons to be accepted in the parliament. Introducing a bill for women and having ready access to state power has many features. Firstly, political authority, credibility of an individual, patriarchal bargain, and the interplay within the power-structure occupy critical roles in formulating agendas and successful implementation. Secondly, the Dowry Bill in itself had the legitimacy to be accepted by virtue of its importance in the social milieu of Bangladesh. Resisting the Bill would have only marginalised the one who would speak against it. Thirdly, this Bill had easy and non-controversial political value for both the parties and it was clear from the parliamentary discussion elaborated in the foot note that, this particular Bill (revised by the committee to soften its radical tone) had barely anything to do with bringing 'real' and strategic structural change. Thus, it was not a threat for many of the stake holders. On the contrary, passing of this Bill ensures support from the women's movement to the mainstream power base.

Women, as a group, have become a legitimate mobilising force, pressure group as well as an important vote bank. The Bill was actually seen as a motivating agent towards

fighting a malevolent social practise and to create a moral awareness against dowry by the state. It had little to do with rights for women or transcending any traditional gender boundaries. Victims of dowry are women but it is the men as father or brother who have to bear the burden of dowry. However, dowry received can be switched over from sons to pay dowry for daughters of the same house but it is indeed the responsibility of the men of the house to arrange for dowry for their daughters. The Dowry Bill was beneficial to men as well. The Bill did not have to rearrange channels of resource, e.g. issues of equal inheritance, and nor did it entail any structural changes of existing gender relations.

The above discussion highlights the factors which have actually aided the Bill towards its successful approval in the Parliament. At the same time there were certain hidden layers which also reveal the inherent misogynist mind-set of the men in the Parliament. The entire process of approving the Bill shows an inbuilt resistance and inertia towards women's issues within the state mechanism. In spite of its all-round legitimacy, the Bill had to endure a long and thorough sifting process for more than a year. Moreover, the female MPs who were arguing in favour of the Bill were only highlighting the victimhood of women but were not questioning the inherent problems of the family law or women's secondary position within the institution of marriage. It is also true that this silence was part of the strategies that women leaders were employing. The women's movement was focusing on one agenda at a time. Questioning the entire terrain of personal law was yet to be part of the state discourse as well as for the movement. Anxiety and apprehension were also expressed from the government in connection to the emotional value or significance of parents' desire to present their beloved daughters with marital gifts (argument by Sri Shudhangshu Shekhar Halder, Md Asaduzzaman Advocate, cited in GOB, 1980b).

It was also mentioned and discussed in the parliament that this Bill might lead to misuse, malpractice and may be wrongly implemented in village politics. Concerns were also expressed about the practical implementation of the law, questioning how far this law would be effective in Bangladesh because prohibiting dowry requires radical changes in the mind-set of the people. Despite the legitimacy of these arguments, it can be clearly discerned that these discussions were actually a political one to delay the process and to tone down its radical edges. The typical mind-set to protect men from fine or imprisonment was also revealed from the amended proposal.

However, in the end, a speech from the ruling MP Shah Azizur Rahman served as an impetus and cleared many of the patriarchal apprehension of both the ruling and opposition parties as he indicated the possibility of changing this law as necessary, at any given time:

.. No law is permanent. Stagnation can never be part of any law-making. Laws are for the society and necessary amendments are a part of the process. Today we have taken a bold step, which is just a beginning. We can bring amendments to this Bill in future if necessary and through this process of change and shift, any law reaches its fullest form in course of time. (Shah Azizur Rahman, cited in GOB, 1980b).

After this speech, the Bill was passed and it clearly relieved many in formal politics to accept this Bill as not a radical one but merely as an instrument to create awareness and boost morality in the society. But for the women's movement, it was at least a step forward of their long struggle to establish women's right in the family and to make an effective dent in violence against women.

Women under Patriarchy: Divergence and Contestation

The uncertainty and dilemma around dowry issue is not the sole prerogative of men but also creates division and factional interest among women. Thus, the issue of dowry may apparently be perceived as an uncontested arena which turned out to be quite a complex and debatable issue in everyday lives of women.

As mentioned earlier, women – wives and mothers – have observed a silent protest of grief by abstaining from cooking on the day Dr Iqbal was hanged for killing his wife Saleha for dowry. The argument was in favour of Iqbal, who was a medical doctor and an asset to the nation, a son to a mother. It is significant to note that even crimes like murder recedes to the background in the 'politicisation of motherhood' (Hensman, 1996; Gerami, 1994) where capital punishment for capital crime is dejected from the point of view of a mother losing her son. The issue of dowry, thus, remains debatable among women folk. The dowry issue cannot be assumed to be gaining univocal approval from women themselves. The heterogeneity of interest is a crucial consideration for the women's movement. Divergent interests - both practical and strategic - can pose a threat for the women's movement. Resistance from both men and women can weaken the case if all the pros and cons are not considered and acknowledged carefully.

The Dowry movement and the enactment of an Anti-Dowry Bill was undoubtedly a milestone victory for the women's movement. This movement was able to mobilise people from all sectors of the society and support from the state and civil society. Despite many obstacles, the women's movement could finally negotiate with the state and lay demands on the table. However, successful negotiation, renegotiation, strategic moves, giving in and putting one's foot down were the constant features of this game. The women's movement soon realised that a single Bill is hardly enough to ensure rights for women in the family. Nevertheless, the movement had to be content with whatever was achieved and continue its journey with newer enthusiasm.

III

Movement for Uniform Family Code (UFC)

The lesson learnt from dowry movement led to demands for more comprehensive and structural changes to establish women's rights in the family. This eventually culminated into demands for Uniform Family Code (UFC). The movement around UFC gained momentum during the late eighties.

The British-era legislation was applied in Pakistan after 1947, and post-partition legislation enacted in Pakistan continued to form the basis of Bangladesh personal laws. Warren Hastings, in 1772, settled the decree of 'Personal Law'. The decree denotes that the colonial ruler should not intervene in the religious and family matters of colonial Bengal (Begum, 2009; GOB, 2008). As a result, matters that directly affect women such as marriage, divorce, dower, maintenance, guardianship, custody, inheritance, compensation of conjugal rights etc. were separately governed by each community's 'religious personal law' system. For instance, marriage of Muslims is regulated by, among others, the *Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961* or the *Muslim Marriage and Divorce (Registration) Act 1974*. Hindus are regulated by, among others, the *Hindu Marriages Disabilities Removal Act 1946* or the *Hindu Widows Remarriage Act 1872* (Pereira, 2002; Ahmed, 1991; Bhuiyan, 2010). Thus the term 'religious personal laws' continued to be part of the official documents and vocabulary since the 18th Century.¹⁴⁰ The Bangladesh Constitution drafted in 1972 went through certain changes - regarding the family law. Some elaboration in this regard would be helpful to

¹⁴⁰Personal Law is common to countries under colonial rule. Apart from India and Bangladesh, personal law prevails in Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica and in Middle Eastern countries as well (Begum, 2009)

appreciate the background of the movement for UFC.¹⁴¹ The legal system of Bangladesh is generally categorised in two branches i.e. Constitutional Law and General Law. The General Law, inter alia, included civil and criminal laws under the code of civil Procedures 1908, the Penal Code of 1860 and Criminal Procedure Code of 1896 etc. The personal laws, also known as Family Laws, do not fall into these categories. The existence of separate laws for each community has direct implications on women's lives because the kind of justice meted out to a woman is determined by her respective religious community. Moreover, the dichotomy arising from this practice of dual legal systems that run parallel to the Constitutional rights in Bangladesh is subject to enquiry and critical analysis (UNESCO & WfW, 2005; Khanam, 1993).

According to Faustina Pereira (2002), the inherent contradiction in the Constitution clearly reflects an ambiguous relationship between the state and the individual citizen—more specifically, women. For example, Article 28(1) of the Constitution states that ‘The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.’ But this is immediately followed by Article 28(2), which narrates ‘Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and of *public life*’ (italics mine). This only denotes clear lack of affirmation of non-discrimination in the personal sphere as opposed to clear provisions of state in the public arena (Pereira, 2002). All these contradictions have shaped and influenced the demand for UFC in Bangladesh the women's movement.

A Radical Demand: Unheeded and Abandoned

The demand for UFC was raised during post-independence Bangladesh, but the push for realising it came much later, during the late eighties. The influencing factors to mobilise women's organisations towards UFC were played at both national and international/global levels. While the need for a non-discriminatory personal law system within the country was felt, it was also supported and triggered by international conventions like CEDAW. Two pioneering organisations in favour of UFC- Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) and Ain-o-Shalish Kendro (ASK) – had closely worked for several years in drawing up the content of the probable Code. As one of the main selected organisations, BMP first came up with a draft proposal on UFC in 1989.

¹⁴¹See UNESCO & WfW (2005) for detail

All the way through the late eighties to the nineties, they had arranged series of district-level workshops thought out the country. The draft was prepared by the Legal Aid Sub-committee of BMP, drawing support from noted lawyers and civil society members. In 1992, they presented the first draft in two consecutive national-level workshops, which were attended by people from across the policy level and civil society (BMP, 2006). For the first time in the history of Bangladesh, such a proposal in favour of UFC was placed before the government by the women's movement. According to BMP, despite the fact that the Constitution of Bangladesh acknowledges equal rights for women in Articles 10, 16, 26, 27, 28, 29 and 30 with all its subsections¹⁴², it actually fails to be effective due to the presence of the personal law -which is, by default, discriminatory to women. BMP thinks that UFC is designed and drafted to reflect the basic principles of Bangladesh Constitution and it is in unison with charters and convention declared by the UN from 1945 onwards, particularly with CEDAW. According to BMP and ASK, UFC was thus necessary to bring equity, equal rights and status to women across religious communities. Narration of the UFC revealed that radical demands made by the women's movement ultimately came to almost nothing.



Figure 12: Police resisting the demand for Uniform Family Code.

Source: BMP, 1993: 122, Shmaranika, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad 1970-92, Dhaka.

Both Maleka and Ayesha from BMP report the process of drafting UFC during the mid-eighties till early nineties. They also noted the all-out support of the civil society and of a

¹⁴² The Constitution of Bangladesh, as modified up to 31st May, 2000, Dhaka: People's Republic of Bangladesh

group of experts, consisting of both men and women, many brilliant men lawyers and professionals. The women's movement was most successful in mobilising professional support from many notable men. However, in the end all these efforts proved moot and the agenda could not see the day of light (Ayesha Khanam, interview dated: October 2011).

...it was in BMP where we first began to critically analyse the flaws of personal laws in 1985. Our proposal was for marriage registration under government procedure, which will be applicable for all religious communities. We thought that the social and cultural programmes can be followed at the family level, according to norms and practices of each religion. A group of dedicated and distinguished people like Sufia Kamal, Debesh Bhattacharya, Amirul Islam, K M Sobhan, Sigma Huda, Ayesha Khanam, Rina Helal, BelaNabi, Advocate Ziad Al Mamun and many more were involved during the preparation of the draft. Nonetheless, movement around Uniform Family Code could not mark its space within the broader framework of the women's movement. Many years went by in discussions with various lawyers to accommodate the legal issues from the perspectives of various major religions. The Civil society also thought that this demand will not be sustained because of the religious issue. We soon realised that constitutional amendment is necessary to incorporate the UFC (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March 2011).

The question of Constitutional amendment naturally became a contentious one. The entire process seemed long and complicated. Search for alternatives became imperative. Soon the idea of family court was raised by Barrister Rabeya Bhuiyan¹⁴³ as an alternative. Reformist approaches began to emerge as a response to the challenge. For instance, Hindus have no laws for divorce and a Hindu woman is unable to fight a case in favour of divorce. The noted Lawyer Debesh Bhattacharya, who took the advantage of the Family Court which was established in 1985, won a divorce case for a woman whose husband was involved in extra marital affairs. Following this case of divorce in the Hindu community, the Hindu lawyers began stressing the fact that there is no need for UFC. Favourable change can easily be brought within the existing religious framework. According to Maleka, gradually people from the Hindu and Christian communities started to say that a UFC is no longer essential if necessary reforms are incorporated as required.

What becomes obvious from the above is the struggle, difficulties and technical limitations that the women's organisations, along with their allies, had to face while lobbying for a legal system that ensures equal rights for women. The biggest challenge came from

¹⁴³ Barrister Rabeya Bhuiyan, Lawyer, member of Women for Women, Minister, Women Affairs in H M Ershad's cabinet.

communities themselves, especially from non-Muslim religious groups. Technically, the movement was limited by the Constitution itself which was beyond the scope of women activists to change or alter.

Maleka was not happy with the current fate of UFC and regretted not being prudent enough to incorporate the bill of UFC when the constitution was being drafted. However, the demand petition they carried to the first democratic government of the new Bangladesh in 1972 *did* contain issues related to ‘equal rights of inheritance for both girl and boy child, equal rights for women in divorce and around the issue of age of consent to marriage etc’. But again, the entire sixteen-point demand was kept aside by then Prime Minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to be considered when the time is ‘appropriate’. Historically proven, ‘now’ is always contentious for the women’s movement. Pushing back by saying ‘not now’ is common to many movements across the world (Rai, 1996; Molyneux, 1985; Kandiyoti, 1989). Feminist agendas are typically identified by the mainstream nationalist movements as ‘not a priority’.

Contestation with Religion; Appropriated by the Global Feminism

Apart from not considering UFC as a priority agenda, it was also politicised as being anti-religion.

Soon the demand for UFC became a religious issue and people and men with vested interest started to accuse us for being anti-religion and, so the movement did not get wide range support. Furthermore, our demand was mainly concerned with the Muslim family law; we were not vocal about Hindu or Christian women. People from other communities did not come forward with the demand. Faustina Pereira, a renowned lawyer, tried to propose changes in Christian family law but was vehemently rejected by her own community. We tried to involve leaders from all communities but could not make much progress. In India massive, changes in Hindu family law was made possible because of the presence of secularism in their constitution. We also started to draft UFC in the same spirit. But now, when we are in a point in time where secularism is not in the constitution any more, I see little hope in realising this Code in near future (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March, 2011).

In retrospect and from the movement’s experience, BMP thinks that UFC should not be abandoned in the name of reforms. Although the awareness of the demand is entangled with constitutional change, resistance from religious groups and other challenges like conflict with the question of religion, UFC is still important for establishing women’s rights in the

family. The key protagonists of the movement are aware that under the circumstances, UFC has little chance. Nevertheless UFC has its own logic to be there reflects the feminists.

I still believe that UFC is relevant and it should be the ultimate goal of the the women's movement. But given the current unfavourable situation, we can think of making UFC as 'optional' and bring necessary reforms in personal laws of each of the community as an interim solution. Unfortunately, UFC is not any more in the priority list of the the women's movement. (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March 2011)

Apparently UFC soon lost its spark because many positive changes have already started to take place at policy levels through CEDAW, National Women's Development Policy (2013) and many other women friendly laws¹⁴⁴. BMP believes that despite all these alterations, no real change have taken place in the most crucial areas like polygamy, inheritance and guardianship of children. Registration of marriage and divorce is not yet applicable for all. According to BMP, right now (2000 onwards) the strategy should first ensure registration of marriage and divorce, which is the main pre-condition to move forward with equal rights in family. Till then, presence of a Family Court - which is open for all - is a big achievement. But Maleka thinks they should calculate our steps to reach our ultimate goal to establish UFC (Maleka Begum, Interview dated: March 2011).

Research; Advocacy; Training and Publication

Women for Women (WfW), on the other hand, had a different approach to act upon the issue. Both Roushan Jahan, Mahmuda Islam from WfW, were also in favour of UFC. WfW was always concerned about women's status under the existing personal and religious laws vis-a vis civil law. They were involved in identifying the constraints and loopholes within the laws and focus on discriminatory legal rules that perpetuate gender inequality and ignore human rights. In this connection, they conducted research to highlight the background, the process and efforts of the women's movement and also to propose ways and mechanisms to amend and reform the laws. The entire effort culminated in a publication entitled 'Marriage, Inheritance and Family Laws in Bangladesh: Towards a Common Family Code' (UNESCO & WfW, 2005). It is to be noted that full ratification of CEDAW is one of the major areas of concern for WfW. WfW believes that full ratification of CEDAW will solve many problems related to personal laws of Bangladesh.

¹⁴⁴See www.law.emory.edu for detail on legal status related to women.

Despite all the enthusiasm, passion and labour, the issue of UFC could mobilise only a limited and specialised kind of support compared to the dowry issue. The Dowry movement was successful in mobilising wider support and could at least win a bill in favour of the women's movement. Lack of commitment on the state's part is found to be even more pronounced in case of UFC, if not in the case of Dowry. The weakness and internal dilemma within the women's movement was also responsible for not making any progress with UFC. It was primarily BMP who almost solely took it as their agenda (WfW, ASK also played a critical role) and continued their struggle to establish it. The state turned a deaf ear to the issue as this is in direct conflict with the Constitution. Lack of support from other communities like Hindu or Christian communities also posed as a barrier. Most importantly, it was patriarchal interest that prevailed over the notion of women's equal rights. The women's movement in Bangladesh has mostly worked with women's private life and the movement for the anti-Dowry bill and demand for UFC were two major areas through which strategic gender interests (Molyneux, 2001) were formulated. However, multiple factors led to the dilution of UFC issue.

The above discussions reveals that issues like dowry could attain wide range acceptance but UFC, which demanded structural changes in the Constitution, failed to mobilise similar kind of support especially from the state.

Implementation of the Dowry Bill required a broad spectrum of multi-pronged strategies on behalf of the state and working in close interaction with the women's movement. The actual benefits took a long time to appear and the women's movement soon realised the vacuity of the Dowry Bill. Laws are easy to enact, and although it has its importance in itself, the main challenge remains in the arena of implementation where the state often fails to act. Dowry was, in fact, only one facet of the gender discrimination and it was located in the broader arena of women's secondary position in family, work and politics. The inherent loopholes within the Bill gradually led to 'give and take' practice of dowry custom and changed its vocabulary from 'dowry' to 'gift'. Dowry was perpetuated across class in the name of love and affection for the daughter. The Bill was passed but there was little follow-up on its implementation. BMP played a key role in the process and they continued their struggle at grass-root levels, but in reality, little change or progress been achieved in eradicating this social vice.

Demand for UFC also lost its zeal with the commencement of global demands via UN, conventions around human rights and CEDAW. Same contradictions and conflicts with state vs. global interventions were noted when the state ratified the CEDAW with reservation. The main reservation also rotates around women's rights in family and marriage. BMP had worked hard on the issue and had been successful in mobilising many professionals and men in the movement. The entire effort, however, was diluted by the surge of umbrella formulations of UN and other global interventions. The women's movement had to give in or strategize their actions in favour of reforms rather than facilitate a complete overhaul or structural change. This is one example of national agendas getting co-opted by global agendas which will be again discussed in other cases and elaborated in Chapter Five. As a result of local-global interaction, reforms in gender issues - particularly in connection with rights in the family remained sketchy and fragmented in Bangladesh. The women's movement, through its vibrant initiatives, has tried to make it a comprehensive and coherent one but it often got stalled at the last moment at the highest policy level. Feminist formulations were clearer in case of both the Dowry Bill and UFC, but due to overt or covert changes made to it at the last moment, and by the high level policy makers, it was led to a "*parboter mushik proshob*" (much ado about nothing). As a result of such subtle manipulations, feminist attempts failed to achieve a meaningful result at the end. The Dowry Bill got altered at different stages of scrutiny at the highest policy levels and the women's movement had to remain content with whatever they could attain. The same is applicable for UFC. State interventions and co-option by the global feminist formulations often became an appropriation of indigenous feminist articulation with potential to bring structural and strategic changes.

IV

“Shorir Amar, Shiddhanto Amar” (My Body My Decision¹⁴⁵): Movement around Body Politics

The debates and movements in the sphere of women’s bodies were marked during the late eighties and early nineties. The demand manifested itself around the issue of ‘reproductive body’ (Harcourt, 2009, Cornwall, Correa & Jolly, 2008). A considerable number of debates, dilemmas and differences were observed in dealing with the topic in terms of conceptualisation, formulations, choice of words. Particular emphasis was placed on the issue of body politics amongst the women’s organisations (Jahan, 2005; Afshar, 1989). The issue of body and sexuality was and still is a taboo area and is considered as private, not for public discussion or analysis. In spite of this social and cultural setting, feminist consciousness prevailing within the broader arena of the women’s movement found its own ways to deal with the subject.



Figure 13: Naripokkho Banner with the slogan ‘My Body My Decision’
Source: Collected from Naripokkho Office, 2013, Dhaka.

Many ways of strategisation in addressing these matters were observed during the time frame of this thesis (1970-2000). In most cases, feminist voices were found to be cautious, moving around ‘safe’ and non-controversial area, while some came out as more radical, vocal and challenging to the traditional understanding of the politics of body and sexuality. The nature of responses and formulations were guided by the typology of women’s organisation, their size and class base, their constituency and connection with the grass roots

¹⁴⁵ A slogan by Naripokkho, ‘*shorir amar shidhhanto amar*’ in Bangla was used highlighting their main theme of 8th March, International Women’s Day in 1993.

level, and most commonly, with their political alliances and international exposure. Personal experience, education and influence of western academia etc. also played key roles in shaping the assumptions by individuals. This section on body politics will explore the feminist responses from direct interviews which will be matched with respondents' own writings as necessary.

Population Policies of Bangladesh: Shifts and Changes

The first formulation on body politics (Harcourt, 2009) emerged around reproductive health, methods offered to women and population control policy of the state. Before going into the voices from the women's movement, a brief overview on the population policy scenario is necessary here. From 1973 to the present date, Bangladesh's population policy has evolved in two distinct phases i.e. mainly focusing on population control and later looking at the issue under the larger category of reproductive health. The first phase lasted up to 1996, and it was guided by the objectives and strategies presented in the 1976 Population Policy. The objectives, strategies, and programmes in the subsequent First Five Year Plans through Fourth Five Year Plans (FYPs) were based on and developed from the 1976 policy (GOB 1973; GOB 1976; GOB 1978). This period was marked by the implementation of a target-driven family-planning programme focused on reducing population growth. During this time, developing a Maternity Child Health (MCH)-based service delivery system, deploying field workers to provide services at clients' homes, expanding contraceptive availability and usage, promoting multi-sectorial collaboration, and motivating people to use family planning services (GOB, 1980c; GOB, 1985; GOB, 1990) were in simultaneous action.

The second phase in Bangladesh's population policy development started in 1997 and has continued to the present (as of 2011). This stage was strongly influenced by the 1994 ICPD in Cairo, and it has been characterised by a transition from a target-driven to a client-centered approach, which is reflected in the Fifth FYP as Health and Population Sectorial Programme (HPSP), and this shaped the draft National Population Policy (NPP), (Islam, 2000). Under the Fifth FYP (1997-2002), the emphasis of the population policy was to deal with a broader range of reproductive health issues, targeted at a larger number of population groups rather than only addressing family planning only. The HPSP (1998-2003), (GOB, 1997, 1998) emphasised the concept of integrating health, family planning facilities and personnel to provide an Essential Services Package (ESP) of which reproductive health was

one of its core components. In addition, there has been a move away from the delivery of family planning services directly to clients at their homes and at one-stop clinics to provide the ESP. The draft that NPP builds on the approaches described in the HPSP and the Fifth FYP, and it provides a list of objectives and strategies for providing comprehensive reproductive health and family planning services to a wider segment of the population.

Under this overarching policy approaches by state, body politics carved out its space within the women's movement. Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) was a pioneer in manoeuvring their movement around body issue through women's health. Healthcare, nutrition, maternal and child mortality were defined by BMP under the broader category of violence against women and the body. During the eighties, movement around women's health had two main focuses: safe maternity and child birth, movement against state policy of population control and use of harmful devices and methods for women's reproductive health and rights. BMP's formulation largely fell under the broader guideline of the then state policy. Other relatively new organisations like Naripokkho (NP) or Farida Akhter from UBINIG¹⁴⁶ were looking at the issue from a different angle. NP organised a mass rally with the slogan 'My body My Decision' in 1993, mainly criticising the population policy of the state and harmful methods offered to women in the name of population control. This formulation was heavily criticised by the right-wing religious groups, while the government remained nonchalant. The Bangla formulation of this slogan (*shorir amar shiddhanto amar*) was perceived by the general public and within women's organisations as being overtly 'sexual' in nature, almost obscene, projecting women with this slogan as radical, demanding sexual freedom and was translated as almost demanding promiscuity. Dealing with this perceived notions and linguistic representation of the words used became crucial in addressing women's bodily rights in Bangladesh.

¹⁴⁶ UBINIG (*Unnayan Bikalper Nitinirdharoni Gobeshona*, the Policy Research for Development Alternatives) is a non-governmental organisation based in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Founded in 1984, the organisation has established nine *vidyaghars* (learning places). UBINIG's stated goals include equality and justice, diversity, and the promotion of social rights and responsibilities. It seeks to train communities in environmental concerns, trade policies, family planning, and labour rights, particularly as they apply to women employed in the clothing industry. It has conducted research on the nutritional values of regional food supplies and made major contributions to the formulation of policies protecting biodiversity in the region. UBINIG opposes the use of hybrid seed varieties in the region as requiring burdensome purchase costs along with additional needs for fertilizers, pesticides, and water. In 2008, the organisation expressed its opposition to a leading Bangladeshi NGO, BRAC, which promoted hybrid varieties. Farida Akhtar is the organisation's Executive Director.

Resistance; Mobilisation and Way Forward

Discussions with prominent figures of the movement reveal that unlike the dowry issue, or UFC - considerable diversity could be identified in the way women's organisations responded to body politics. Debates on women's body opened up novel areas of feminist voicing of the 'untold' and 'hidden', and these were brought out into public. Innovative ideas, new forms of articulation and conceptualisation emerged within the movement. Respondents representing each of the organisations came up with multi-dimensional solutions to the problem. This often led to conflicts disagreements on the issue, which again were enriching for the entire range of discourse around body politics in Bangladesh. One of the most critical voices was raised by Farida Akhter from UBINIG (Akhter, et al., 1999). She stood against Norplant, a method of population control and international corporate interests, and was contesting the entire notion of 'reproductive rights' from yet another angle. Reactions, responses and assumptions rotated around Farida's views on population control and woman's body. A little introduction to Farida Akhter's view might be helpful here. Farida is a staunch critic of the western model of development and capitalist corporate interests. On the basis of research conducted on a range of areas in Bangladesh, Farida Akhter (1998) began to shed light on the health hazards of various family planning methods. She spearheaded her movement against harmful and uninformed family planning methods like pills, IUD, Norplant, ligation, Depo Provera, Dalkon Shield, Quinacrine etc. around the late eighties. Under Farida's leadership a 'Resistance Network' (*Protirodh Network* in Bangla) was established in 1989. Members of BMP were also part of this network (Akhter, 1998, 2004). It was active in mobilising protests in order to raise awareness on birth control devices, which were made popular and freely available by the state. The network was also involved in filing a case against Dalkon Shield in a US Court, protesting against Norplant method. UBINIG, and the network became very vocal against the international population policies and its reflections in national arena. A policy of incentives given to the users' without explaining the ranges of risk and contradictions was another area of criticism (Akhter, 1998). Farida views western development agendas as 'inherently arrogant' and harmful for the country (Akhter, 2007). To her, population control mechanisms are highly racist, anti-poor and pose a great threat to women's health. The process, on the other hand, helps the big commercial corporate bodies to make profit and boost the western economy (Akhter, 2003, 1995).

Farida stressed that the women's movement should raise their voice to reject all the population policies propagated by the west and endorsed by the government. Farida's sharp

and staunch criticism and rejection of all western models/methods of family planning (especially propagated through governments publicity of ‘choices’ offered to women as their reproductive rights) was resisted and opposed by another school of feminists who were favouring informed choice but were not supporting the rejection of all methods in the name of resisting multinational companies. Internal disagreements and differences within the movement created division.

Discussion around body politics became engaged in dialogue with Farida Akhter’s standpoint. Organisations like BMP, NP and WfW, were not in favour of rejecting contraception or population control devices altogether but were bent on ensuring safe and informed reproductive rights and access to contraception. Some organisations, like BMP and WfW, kept the boundaries of body politics within the domains of maternal and reproductive health and rights while others, like NP, expanded the discussion into the realm of sexual health and rights. NP’s struggle had a common ground with UBINIG. They were also fighting against powerful multinational corporate bodies, international pharmaceutical companies and donor agencies like USAID. Responses from feminist leaders will expound the above trends within the movement. Since NP took one of the more radical and progressive stance on women’s bodily rights issues, this section’s reflective narratives starts with NP.

Firdous and Shireen, both founder members of NP, were at the forefront of this movement and contributed in creating a discourse on women’s sexuality and body politics in Bangladesh. .According to Firdous:

It all started with Shabmeher¹⁴⁷. As I said before, women’s body is always vulnerable to violence because of the way women’s sexuality is constructed, Shabmeher’s death and the discussions surrounding it gave rise to questions which needed clarification between us. Bringing out the discussion on women’s body and sexuality in public was not easy. While concentrating on women’s body issue and sexuality, we gradually realised that body is also largely related to population control mechanism of the country. Our slogan ‘my body my decision’ was all about women’s control over her own body (Firdous Azim, interview dated: March 2011).

¹⁴⁷See Chapter Two for detail

Shireen Huq from NP, in similar tone, narrates the background of its involvement with the movement against population control and women's right over their own bodies around late eighties (1987), which continued on till the late nineties.

Our involvement started with the news of death of a woman who went to a clinic to get a temporary measure of family planning. The clinic motivated her to do ligation – a permanent method. She died of tetanus. While interrogating the case, we soon realised that the entire process of population control policies of the state - in alliance with the international corporate interests - are problematic. We put up a strong resistance against these policies in the name of efficiency i.e. measures as 'target pressure', 'incentives to the user's or 'compensation payment' which actually led to abuse and malpractice of the policy. We also resisted the use of words or phrases like 'safe population control mechanism' which was actually a lie. It was only a marketing policy that was hiding the risk factors to cover up information about possible health hazards (Shireen Huq, interview dated: July 2011)

As a result of these protests and resistances, finally the pressure of meeting target and 'compensation package for the users' were withdrawn and compensation for victims suffering from bad side-effects (due to use of birth-control devices like Norplant) was secured.

It is important to mark the distinctive difference in approach between UBINIG and NP. While Farida's approach was based on women's power to resist corporate politics and capitalist invasion over their bodies, NP's approach was to give women the power to have control and agency over their bodies, as well as the right to choices that befit her realities. Despite marginal differences in approaches between the two schools of women's organisations, there were also many points of convergence. Azim reiterated about their different bearings in relation to UBINIG.

We were fighting for a comprehensive gender sensitive health system where women could go for medical and reproductive help. We wanted to highlight that body is the essential part of one's right and agency. It is never possible to ignore the body in any circumstance. I believe that NP was the first organisation who brought the issue of body politics out into the open and broke the wall of stigma around these issues, even within the women's movement. Discussion on body also opened up arenas for newer formulations (Firdous Azim, interview dated: July 2011).

New Ideas; Breaking of New Grounds

NP's articulation around body and sexuality was not restricted to reproductive rights or movements against family-planning methods. Tuesday meetings were an important in-house activity of NP. Azim contends that NP, as an organisation, actually emerged from a deeply felt need to *talk*, to have a space of their own where they would be able to bring up issues which had hitherto been muted and silenced. Tuesday meetings, workshops and dialogues informed and shaped NP's formulations around the issue of body politics. NP was deconstructing the concept of public and private, the latter being conceived as the arena for sexual and reproductive issues. Their idea has been to raise matters that were closer to women's lived experiences and formulate the movement's agenda based on this shared knowledge. In this way, the private space permeated into the public arenas of discussions regarding women and gender. Mainstream, 'more liberal' women's organisations like BMP had a larger and wider network to work with, and they perceived sexual and reproductive issues synonymous with tabooed, private issues that are centred around sexualities – which, in the general context of Bangladesh, has always been problematic to engage with openly.

Firdous reflects that NP was supporting UBINIG in their anti-Norplant movement in 1989. Norplant - a family planning method applied to women's body which was hazardous to women's health was resisted by NP). NP had a programme against state policy on population control. The flagship slogan of NP '*shorir amar shidhhanto amar*' (translated as *my body my decision*) created quite a chaotic dispute within the women's movement and NP became isolated and labelled as being too 'radical'. The slogan induced reactions from 'liberal feminist' groups like BMP, who was rather uncomfortable to bring out the issue of women's body and sexuality in public. They preferred to stick to issues related to a much safer and publicly palatable framework of women's health and maternal mortality. The main problem was around the 'wording' or phrasing expressed in Bangla, rather than against the issue itself. Despite the fact, BMP was critical of this slogan mainly because it sounded too 'western'.

Feminist Formulation on Body and Sexuality: 'Orchestrated in Duets and Duels'¹⁴⁸

Maleka from BMP in analyses her position on movements related to the woman's body. She remembers that BMP was always working in the area of maternal and child health. Many renowned doctors like Firoza Begum, Dr Rowshan Ara Begum were involved in

¹⁴⁸ 'Orchestrated in Duets and Duels' cited in Nin (1961)

activities related to safe birth and health issues, including awareness activities. She thinks that although steps taken by the governments were not always conducive to women's health, many women got the chance to be integrated in the work force through its programme of door-to-door-service delivery system. During 1978, there were about 14000 women working in the family-planning department of the state. This was seen by BMP as a step forward in bringing women out in the public. BMP was critical of the implementation of population control but was not against family planning or control. Targeting women as the sole recipient of family planning methods are problematic to her. She thinks that ideologically, there was a little difference between NP and BMP. But they could not be in full agreement with Farida. BMP has never addressed the issue of body in isolation or discussed body politics in the light of sexual rights or sexuality. BMP, from the very beginning, was more concerned with social and economic rights, independence of women, legal rights etc. The 'body' as such, was not their focus. Moreover, according to Maleka, BMP is a large organisation, with members from varied social groups, class and strata ranging from students, from housewives to middle or lower middle class women of diverse backgrounds. Many were from outside Dhaka and rural areas. Thus, it was not easy for BMP to talk about sexuality, body rights and devices of contraception in open forum, the way NP was doing in small groups. However, Maleka, in retrospect, shares that at the beginning of this particular movement, BMP's reactions were 'conservative'. They thought that these issues are imported from the west and proposed by western educated young groups who do not understand the reality of Bangladesh. But gradually BMP realised that NP or UBINIG were talking about birth control and devices which were harmful for women's body.

We also realised that our critical reactions to their slogan of *My Body, My Decision* was not altogether justified. The demand was not merely about sexual rights in terms of sexual behaviour or sexual freedom, but the protest or demand was largely against harmful birth control devices. (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March 2011)

Role of Academia within the Women's Movement: Creating Space for Controversy

Academia and research-based women's organisations were offering yet another space to accommodate all these controversies and differences. On the other hand, Women for Women (WfW) as a research and study group, had a more open and tolerant approach to the issue. They were concerned about giving space to difference of opinions and positions within

the women's movement and anxious about mitigating breaches within the women's movement.

According to Mahmuda, during the nineties, she was exposed to many conferences around body politics worldwide. WfW was also engaged in research and conferences. As a result of all these exposures, certain issues were also incorporated within the women's movement for instance, women's work and its recognition, legal rights, fertility control and women's body and health issues etc. According to Roushan from WfW:

The women's movement became divided on this issue of rights over body. Although I did not fully agree with Farida, I felt that she had a position here and WfW, as a neutral research organisation, should give Farida a chance to explain her position. I was the General Secretary of WfW, and I finally managed to convince others in WfW to give a space to Farida and I succeeded in convincing them to agree upon arranging a national conference on Health and Reproductive Rights. The conference was a big success, attended by academia, donor agencies, government officials, and representatives from World Bank, UNICEF etc. It was really a difficult task to make everyone agree upon having a conference with Farida. But I felt that we need to listen to other voices and Farida also has to listen to others.¹⁴⁹(Roushan Jahan, Interview dated: June 2011)

Despite disagreements, divisions and difference of opinions, these sharing, demonstration, conferences and meetings actually opened up spaces for discussion and were beneficial for the women's movement. Although one group within the movement was not comfortable to talk about body and sexuality while others were in favour of bringing it on the table, body issue, thus, opened up spaces for bringing out taboo issues in public and creating an environment of tolerance on diverse and diverged views. Paths and approaches to address the issue were different but the diversity was helpful for feminist formulations to pave the way and articulate women's right over her own body. This particular movement was also important in the sense that through it, resistance was staged and advancement was accrued against broader power structure, multinational corporations, and capitalist market system and the state policy –attuned to all the above.

To sum up the above, three selected issues that formed the 'private' of women's life were central to the women's movement during the period covered in this thesis: Dowry, UFC and women's bodily right. Among the three, the dowry movement can be identified as the

¹⁴⁹ See for detail, Jahan, et al., (1994). *Reproductive Rights and Women's Health*, Dhaka: Women for Women.

most successful in terms of enacting of an Anti-Dowry Bill. Retention and sustainability of feminist formulations are dependent on multiple factors like the nature of state and political situations, presence of gender-sensitive people in power, level of interaction between the state and the women's movement, the movement's internal consensus and commitment to particular agendas, and strategic tact to cut across differences and divisions. The women's movement, the other hand, had a wide range of network through its formal or informal connections. A culture of free-flowing interaction between the women's movement and people with different political and social backgrounds is critical to women's issues. Strategisation and the maintenance of good relationships with key people are thus vital for success. All these factors played a significant role in case of dowry movement and its accomplishment.

Demand for UFC turned out to be a difficult one compared to the Dowry issue (Gayen, 2011). However, the perception of achievement is a problematic one in the women's movement since each step taken forward was through tremendous struggle, resistance and strategic negotiations. The entire process can actually be termed as a success because the movement, as a whole, leaps forward with each step, no matter how small. Sometimes 'big achievements' are dwindled to meagre gains, or even meaningless struggle, but again in the long run, efforts are turned into a step forward in history. For example, at one point, the passing of the Anti-Dowry Bill was taken as a big achievement. But it is also true that if the new laws are not interconnected with other related laws and with the implementation process, then they often turned out to be meaningless. Similarly, UFC had to face reservations from other communities and was seen as an anti-religion proposal by many. Lack of conceptual clarification and inefficient gauging of the context on certain issues may have led the weakening of feminist agendas. Self-reflection and understanding of the issue at hand, both conceptually and practically, is also crucial for the people involved in the process. Demand for UFC, a radical formulation, is still perceived by BMP as relevant while many others have abandoned the idea as irrelevant especially in the era of global feminism and other new reforms and legal measures.

Nevertheless nothing goes in vain in the movement. Although the feminist articulation around UFC was demanded as a separate agenda and was mainly propagated by BMP, it was indeed interconnected with the dowry issue as well. Both were parts of the private sphere, demanding equal rights in family. In fact, the three issues dealt under the private realm are

closely interconnected with each other. The women's movement's demand for reproductive rights is thus another dimension of the discourse on rights.

The movement around reproductive rights culminated itself through a 'radical' slogan like '*shorir amar shidhhanto amar*'. The articulation of the very word '*shorir*' or women's body was itself an achievement for the women's movement. This particular issue accrued tremendous success both from material and ideological points of view. Despite internal conflicts, disagreements and misunderstandings, the women's movement could fight against powerful multinational corporate bodies vis-a-vis state and emerged successfully. Most importantly, the issue of women's body came into public discussion through this movement for the first time in Bangladesh. Pre-conceived ideas were challenged; assumptions broken and tabooed areas like women's body and sexuality carved out spaces in public discourse and opened up new grounds for discussion within women's organisations. The debates around the woman's body created division within the movement. However, it is also true that the divisions operated mainly at conceptual levels, rather than on the actual issue at hand. A consensus of sorts was reached upon the importance of informed access to contraception. The women's movement can be seen to be gaining strength to stand against both national and international levels to establish its argument about the issues related to population control.

All three issues under discussion had their own logic in being identified as being crucial to the women's struggle for equal rights in family. In hetero-patriarchal society like that of Bangladesh's, taking up agendas like bodily rights, family law, or even dowry – is an achievement. Though, in retrospect, many of the activists are found to be disenchanted and disappointed over the extent of success that such struggles have brought. However, success and achievements, failure and disappointments are all historical constructs and can only be assessed and understood in course of time and context.

V

Equal Rights in Work: Private to Public

কন্যাগুলিকে সুশিক্ষিতা করিয়া কার্যক্ষেত্রে ছাড়িয়া দাও- নিজের অন্ন বস্ত্র উপার্জন করুক ।

(Educate your girls and let them earn their own living, *translation mine*)

-রোকেয়া সাখাওয়াত হোসেন

This section will now look into how claiming rights in the public arena was equally important for Bangladesh's the women's movement. Establishing rights in public has been manifested through demanding equal rights in paid work and politics. This section will elaborate on the state's initiatives and the role of the women's movement with regard to; i. women's right to paid work, with particular emphasis on state decision of 10% quota for women in public and private services, and, ii. The women's movement demanding the rights of 'sex work' being declared as work.

It is indeed a remarkable shift for the history of the women's movement to add the demand for declaring 'sex work as work', while the body issue of body politics was an area of taboo and considered to be highly stigmatized . We have noticed how the women's movement became fragmented on the issue of body politics, even when the discussion was largely restricted to women's reproductive health. Bringing up issues like women's right to paid work, and particularly to sex work, is 'radical' in the context of Bangladesh. The entire debate around women's right to paid work first manifested in Bangladesh through a state proclamation of 10% quota for women. The demand for ensuring women's right to paid work in the new Bangladesh (during the mid-seventies) was only a logical necessity. However, demanding 'sex work' as a rightful livelihood option and making the demand as part of a public demonstration is linked to the gradual development of the movement itself. One has to realise the continuing shifts and changes that took place in the overall socio-political context in Bangladesh leading up to the nineties. *The* following sections of the thesis will now probe into the issue of paid work in the public sector.

The issue of rights to paid work is not new in the subcontinent. Rokeya's statement in the early 20th Century demands economic independence along with education for women. Income earning, engaging in paid work, aspiring for the post of lady magistrate, lady barrister, lady judge, lady Viceroy etc.in the context of British Raj was perceived as necessary for claiming women's space in the male domain of 'work' (Quadir, 1999). In Bangladesh, soon after independence, the need was even more pronounced in the context of

thousands of war-affected women. A comprehensive plan was in process involving representatives of the women's movement to rehabilitate women who were victims of rape, abandoned or widowed. Women's equal rights - creating mass scale employment opportunity and education for women - was reflected in the Constitution, and was also visible through its immediate responses by creating 'Women's Rehabilitation Board' in 1972 (see Chapter Two for details). In fact, state response to war-affected women through the Rehabilitation Board was the first entry point to address women's economic independence and access to paid work. Women's access to paid work was part and parcel of the official document and as well as the ethos of the women's movement during its early days. However, contestation and debates around labour rights and other issues started to surface by the eighties or nineties, against the backdrop of globalisation and women's increasing participation in export oriented industries.¹⁵⁰

The mid-seventies onwards was a period of political turmoil with many changes in the state power. The eighties was the period of capital investment in the third world and Bangladesh entered into this export servicing club which opened up doors for female labour as cheap and economically viable. The growth of employment in the garment industry has resulted both from a change in demand as well as an overall global relocation. The eighties were also marked with liberalisation and privatisation policies and mass scale NGOisation (Jad, 2004) along with microcredit programmes targeting women (Hossain, Jahan & Sobhan, 1990; Goetz & Gupta, 1996). All these global and local variables had shaped the entire scenario of women and paid work and had immense demonstrative effect on conceptualising work and women.

According to Kabeer (1997) absence of consensus appears to reflect differences in context. Nature or conditions of work in question, differences in the context, specific location or points of time and historical periods, cultural significance, social acceptance experiences of paid work in women's lives etc. form the content and nature of the debate. Kabeer also stresses on the importance of focusing on the objective evaluations of the conditions of women's work and on the subjective evaluations of women workers themselves (Wolf, 1992 & Standing, 1991, as cited in Kabeer, 1997). Difference in conceptualisation and use of analytical framework and tools also play a critical role in shaping the variability in responses within the women's movement. Therefore, it is also necessary to explore the capacity of

¹⁵⁰It is important to note that this thesis has not looked into women's work in Garment industry and thus, debates entailing around garments and textile industries are not covered here.

women to organize around their needs, interests and rights that is most likely to result in public recognition of women's rights as workers as well as citizens (Kabeer, 1997). Kabeer's analysis, thus, becomes crucial for both the issue of women's right in paid work in general and 'sex work' in particular.

In the light of the above discussion, two issues under this subsection have been isolated to highlight the forms and content of the women's movement and state-movement interface on women's right to work, namely - quota issue in government, non-government job sector and the movement for declaring 'sex work as work'. Women's right to work - through quota system or affirmative action - would thus dwell upon state initiatives to ensure women's rights to work in both government and non-government sectors and how the the women's movement reacted to these actions. It is to be noted that the first one is initiated by the state and responses of the women's movement were largely in consensus.

But the second issue related to 'sex work' reflected debate, contestation and contradictory responses. Moreover on 'sex workers' issue, the stake holders (sex workers) themselves became merged with the broader umbrella of the women's movements. Movement around 'sex work' is thus was unique to Bangladesh the women's movement which demonstrated confrontational relationship with the state along with mass visibility of the women's movement in the street and media. The movement around demands of 'sex work as work' is also largely related to body politics, which has been discussed above.

Quota for Women in Government and Non-Government Job Sector

Since the independence of Bangladesh, women's rights in public were articulated through access to income earning, work and economic independence. As mentioned earlier, that is the first demand note - containing 16 points - presented to the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh in 1972 and it had two clear points related to women's rights in work. Firstly, equal opportunity and equal pay for women in work, special mention was made for equal rights to female workers of the tea gardens of Bangladesh. Secondly, day-care centres for women in all work areas (Begum, 2002; Guhathakurata & Begum, 1990). Although there was no mention of quota in work sector from the women's movement, 10% quota in government and non-government jobs for women was declared during the year after General Zia had taken over power in 1976. Through another ordinance, Zia declared quota for women in Ansar (Security force) and Village Development Police (VDP). The declaration came through

Metropolitan Police Act 1976. Previously, these posts were exclusively meant for men. However, 10% quota in government job was reserved for women in the 1972 Constitution but the incorporation of women in Ansar and VDP for women was a step taken solely by the Zia government. Sports Control Board for women was also established in the same year. As it was mentioned earlier, Firoza Bari was appointed as the Secretary to the President to oversee Women's Affairs during this time. It was the beginning of a separate wing on women's affairs within the state apparatus. After Bari resigned from the post, President Zia then established the Ministry of Women's Affairs in 1978 with Amina Rahman as the Advisor to this Ministry. She was the first minister for Women's Affairs in Bangladesh. There was no such ministry anywhere else in the world during that time. By the late seventies (Zaman, 1979), Bangladesh was the first to have a Women's Affairs Ministry and a substantial budget allocation for social welfare and development of women was made. These initiatives and appointments indicate that there was an effort to include women in policy and decision-making level, while women's increased participation was being encouraged through quota system at various sectors, some of which being masculine and thus 'non-traditional' and 'revolutionary'.



Figure 14: Women in Ansar-VDP

Source: <http://www.ansarvdp.gov.bd/about/about.php>

How did the then the women's movement reacted to these initiatives is the pertinent question here. It is to be noted that BMP and WfW, the two important organisations were active during that time.

Maleka from BMP reflects that it was not clear to women leaders what prompted such steps to incorporate women in so called 'masculine' sector of jobs but these were largely welcomed by the the women's movement. However, the initiative was not beyond criticism. The main question was raised around the percentage. Only 10% quota in government and non-government job sector was heavily criticised by BMP.

We protested because 48% of the population were women and 10% quota was simply unacceptable to us. There were hardly any women professionals in the top most posts of any sector within the country. The press note declared that this quota will not be applicable for technical line, army and judiciary. This reflects the patriarchal mind-set of the government. However, this order led to recruitment of women in traffic police, Ansar and VDP. This was surely a great change in terms of women's image and representation in public. Many women broke out of their traditional gender role and age-old values and norms. Despite the 'positive' steps taken by the state, women of such professions started to come to Sufia Kamal and complain about sexual harassment, insecurity and humiliation that they were facing in term of promotion and professional status. There was no formal complaint though, and we also thought that women are to fend for themselves to face these new challenges. We requested the government of making formal enquiries on this but government paid no heed to this. The women's movement also did not make any follow up. The issue of sexual harassment and gender discrimination in public job sector was not in the agenda of the women's movement at that time. Actually, we were not thinking in that line. Incorporation of women in public job market was more important to us than all those 'details'. We thought that criticism would only push back whatever initiative was taken by the government. (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March 2011).

Although the women's movement has welcomed most of all the positive initiatives taken by the state, it soon became wary of the real intentions behind state policies, and internal contradictions began to develop. Two of the observations below will shed light on the ambiguity of state discourse around the perception of women as citizen. In relation to the state and its intention towards ensuring women's empowerment, Maleka shares an interesting incident related to this particular state order of 10% quota. The following statement demonstrates the covert role of the state undermining many apparently progressive attitudes of a given government.

Firoza Bari, the Secretary to the President, Zia ur Rahman in the Ministry of Women's Affairs, took the order of 10% quota for women in job sectors very seriously. She began to monitor the status of women in government job sectors and started to send letters to all the Ministries to ensure this quota for women in their recruitment policy. The Ministries did not endorse this and complained to the President. The President asked for explanation of these letters to the Ministries. It was then that Bari realised that she had little freedom to work on women's issues, even on areas where government orders had been promulgated. She

finally resigned from the post and joined BMP (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March 2011).

Apart from sharing the true intentions of the state apparatus, Najma Chowdhury highlights yet another inherent contradiction in the Constitution. She notices that the Article 29, (3), C¹⁵¹ states that “reserving for members one sex any class of employment or office on the ground that it is considered by its nature to be *unsuited* (italic mine) to members of the opposite sex.”

10% quota for women was a positive step taken up by the government. Theoretically speaking, it went against the Constitution where it stated that ‘both men and women will work in which are areas suitable for them’. However, these steps taken by the government violate the Constitutional bar for women to be employed in men’s job sectors. I think that in spite of the fact that the Constitution gave equal rights to women in all sectors, it is also flawed full of internal contradictions. Nevertheless through this ordinance by the military government, the traditional ‘sex-gender’ binary in terms of work segregation got consciously or unconsciously challenged and women’s right to work was taken forward. (Najma Chowdhury, interview dated: June 2011)

Article 29, (3), C¹⁵¹, as mentioned by Najma Chowdhury, needs particular attention here. If the assumption of the state/nation is based on gender differences- which are translated in all spheres of life—the state will not guarantee equal access to resources, employment or rights to men and women. Therefore, whatever “inclusion” of women there might have been in politics or the economy it is bound to remain cosmetic without any meaningful changes. The result is evident from the 10% quota system of the seventies to the failure of securing a Women’s Development Policy that ensures women’s equal right to property and inheritance even today (2014).

Politics of Quota: Still a Stepping Stone for Women

According to the women activists, women’s right to work in the public sectors was initiated by the state itself. Feminist articulation in this regard was largely reactive in nature. These struggles to advance women’s interests did not spring from disinterested motives. Zia came to power by military means, and all such efforts were mainly seen as political tools to

¹⁵¹ 29, 3, C: 29: There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in respect of employment or office in the service of the Republic. 3 (C): reserving for members of one sex any class of employment or office on the ground that it is considered by its nature to be unsuited to members of the opposite sex. The Constitution of People’s Republic of Bangladesh, modified as up to 31st May 2000.

draw national and international support or legitimacy in his favour. It helped to mobilise one of his important constituencies (i.e. women) for himself and his newly floated political party (BNP). Another objective might have been to organise international funding for women and development projects, which had already started to pour in.

Whatever may have been the internal dynamics of the processes, ensuring quota-system for women in the government and non-government job sectors – which included creating opportunities for women to enter Ansar and VDP – was considered an admirable step towards bringing significant change to women. Firdous from NP, feels that whatever induced the Zia government to proclaim this ordinance, it went in favour of the women's movement and that "it still feels great to see women in uniform working in remote rural areas, in charge of security." (Firdous Azim, interview dated: April 2011)

Firdous contends that,

Many progressive steps were taken by Zia's government during his early days of military rule. All these were put forward perhaps because he was seeking popularity and legitimacy in a circumstance that was induced by international pressure in relation to the decade for women during that time. He perhaps thought that by taking these measures, he would be able to make the international community happy and a progressive image could be presented in the both national and international arena. (Firdous Azim, interview dated: April 2011)

Shireen Huq of NP, on the other hand, slightly differs from Azim in her views. She believes that it is not always the case that a military government only takes up reformist agendas to portray a 'modern' image of the state and to legitimise its power base. Rather, it is those inconsequential issues – which have not been taken seriously by the state – that are sanctioned to guarantee a bigger gain with minimum cost (Shireen Huq, interview dated: July 2011).

Insights emerging from the above discussion reflect the fact that during the initial stage of the newly independent country, the nascent the women's movement was not playing any decisive role in bringing conscious transformations but welcomed whatever was offered by the state. As mentioned earlier in Chapter Two, political affiliation and ideological support for mainstream parties influenced the views of women's organisations of the seventies on different policies like rehabilitation processes, or state orders like the 10% quota or establishment of the Ministry of Women's Affairs. These reflexive analytical narratives are proof of the fact that even though women activists' had common agendas, they were

influenced by their individual interests as well. During the seventies, there was only one major political party and only one or two key women's organisations. Therefore, the political equations were straightforward and mainly manifested in terms of cooperation and collaboration with the state. But from the mid-seventies or eighties onwards, politics and the women's movement became much more complicated and began to occupy the grey areas of politics.

A critical voice from BMP could be heard during the militant/autocratic government on the question of the percentage (10%), which was perceived as too small a proportion for women. Interestingly the same percentage was part of the Constitution since 1972, but no protest as such had been staged by BMP. This voice of dissent might be due to the political affiliation of the particular organisation at that time, which thought that the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (in 1975) and militant takeover was disastrous for the women's movement.

As was observed by the respondents, during the seventies women's issues were selectively addressed but there was no space for raising an autonomous voice. The movement had done little to own these positive measures. During the seventies, all these apparently 'progressive' agendas like quota for women in work or the establishment of the Women's Ministry, state-sponsored women's organisations etc. were taken up not because of any specific feminist consciousness at the policy level but were induced by the reality of that decade with war and demand of global feminism (UN decade for women) in the backdrop (Mahmuda Islam, interview dated: March 2011).

However, it would be naïve to conclude that the women's movement of the seventies was completely muted or without any agency. The resignation of Firoza Bari from the Ministry demonstrates a discernment about the liberty of women's voice within this complex game of political affiliation and autonomy.

The most surprising revelation of all the above is that the innate 'sex-gender' flaw within the Constitution was never addressed or vocally recognised as an impediment to women's empowerment by any stakeholders. The patronising convictions at work behind the Constitution in fact, defines the traditional boundaries for both men and women, but also contradicts itself in the name of securing women's right to work in 'masculine' jobs, making it an unreliable point of reference.

Another issue related to women's body and sexuality – that has been silently weaving through the entire discourse of feminist formulation around women's rights is of our next concern below.

VI

'Sex Work is Work'

The issue of body politics was hardly ever resolved within or outside the the women's movement. It was either bypassed or pushed back for future consideration. It is important to note that the occasional emergence of the issue of the body, at different points in time, took different articulation within the VAW or the discussion on rights. The women's movement, from the very beginning, has been avoiding issues centering on body: starting from the issue of rape and *Birangona* debates of the seventies (see Chapter Two for details) to women's public roles. While dealing with such issues, they made 'compromises' in the name of contextualisation and appropriateness. Often the logic was inclined to secure the gains that had been made. While doing so, war-time rape was hushed up, abortions and adoptions were justified, issues of rights and the body were sugar-coated with 'reproductive health' issues, sexual harassment and abuse at work and public spaces were overlooked etc. Women's participation and contribution to education, economy, politics etc. has become impressively high, but on the other hand, Violence against Women (VAW) is on the rise as well. VAW is the most non-negotiable issue regarding women's rights in Bangladesh, till today (BBS, 2013). One needs to ponder on whether or not the compromise regarding women's bodily rights, security and dignity qualify as a prime concern in today's situation of VAW.

In most of the cases discussed so far, women's bodily issues are either averted or reduced to the 'body' only. How far this evasion has actually helped the women's movement to move forward and how effective is this strategy has been towards a collective emancipation is a matter of great concern. It is important to what extent is the concept of women's bodily 'purity' central to Bangladesh's cultural and political philosophy is important to examine. It is also interesting how the controversial, radical and tabooed labels attached to the female body have rendered feminist formulations. Further discussion around the question of 'prostitution' and 'sex work is work' in the next section will reveal new facets of this debate.

The contemporary debates around women in prostitution, is fraught because of the acute divide among feminists, sex workers and not to mention among others in the field. It challenges us, as well, to ask whether ‘prostitute’ interests are being truly represented in these debates. According to Rajan, the nature of disagreement and debates arise not only from the issue relating to ‘prostitution’ but also from the fact that that the prostitution question has gathered around itself many of the issues that remain unresolved in feminism. For example, the relationship between feminists and female ‘victims of oppression’; the construction of the female subject in terms of agency (choice, autonomy, desire); conceptualisation of women’s work and female sexuality, and the public and private domains of these (Rajan, 2003). The following section would narrate the contingencies of prostitution questions in the Bangladesh context.

Unlike in the issue of the quota system, the women’s movement took a more heterogeneous position in regard to the demands of ‘sex work is work’. By the nineties, feminist debates started to witness a transition from being reactive in nature to a more complex and autonomous formulation. Challenging the state in a militant manner was visible in the movement around the question of ‘sex work’. As mentioned earlier, the movement around ‘sex work’ was brewing since the late eighties, around the death of *Shabmeher*. Feminist responses to the case of *Shabmeher* is discussed in Chapter Two because the chief demands were not concerned with claiming work rights as ‘*patita*’ and the movement was categorised under the issue of VAW rather than under the women’s movement demanding rights to work. However, the second phase of similar issues is put under ‘right to work’ issues because the movement succeeded in achieving a high-court rule in favour of declaring ‘sex work as work’.

However, by the nineties, the context changed. The political scenario became different from the seventies or eighties. The women’s movement found a stronger foothold with multiple voices and agendas. Additionally, women themselves have travelled a long journey in conceptualising their own agendas. Contestations, disagreements, debates and dilemmas within the women’s movement were more visible in the case of the ‘sex worker’s’ movement. A background is necessary here to contextualise the movement.

The Politics of Labelling: Ambivalence of the ‘Patita’ and the ‘Sex Worker’

In Bangladesh, the official discourse (until very recently) labelled women involved in sex trade or those in the business of selling their bodies as ‘Prostitutes’, or ‘*patita*’ – ‘the

fallen' in Bangla. As Tahmina & Moral (2004) have noted, a woman who sells sex for a living is commonly called '*patita*', *beshya*, *gonika*, *bajarermeye* etc. in Bangla. The terms used are abusive, a 'fallen' woman whose sexual services are enjoyed by many men, a woman who belongs to the market and her body an accessible commodity.

The phrase 'sex work' has emerged from movement protesting the above mentioned eviction of brothels during the late nineties. Apart from this currently coined conceptualisation, 'women in prostitution' rather than 'prostitutes' are also used in academia or within the women's movement.¹⁵² '*Patita*' or 'sex workers' are considered as marginal and heavily stigmatized, and they are placed in a binary opposition to 'good' or ideal womanhood in a traditional ideological framework. However, according to the conventional law of the country, anyone above eighteen years of age can take up 'prostitution' as a profession. This particular legal sanction puts the issue of 'sex-work' into a wide range of debate and dilemma. Juxtaposition of moral and social stigma, legal rights and criminalisation of the trade against the question of woman's choice (whose marginalised reality may be complicated by poverty) gives rise to an ambiguity within and outside the movement.

Given the socio-cultural milieu of the country, prostitution provides a livelihood. However, it also reflects the vulnerability of the women who are forced to take up this profession because they have almost no other option than to earn a livelihood by selling their bodies. It is also a business involving a whole gamut of stakeholders like clients, housing and rent collection, trafficking, law enforcing agents like police and lawyers who issues certificates for under aged girls to take up this profession, The *Masis*'s and pimps, *Bariwalis* and trafficking agents in this racket cannot be ignored either.

'Sex work' thus entails the question of rights for a legalized professional group as well as the question of justice and rights as a citizen from a 'moral stand point'. Health issues including STD, HIV-AIDS etc. are also a matter of additional concern, as is the profession's association with criminal and illegal activities. Furthermore, the profession has been often justified as being age old and a necessary 'safety valve' for the society to curb male sexual aggression that results in crimes like rape and other such atrocities against women. According to this view, sex-trade thus functions as a sewerage system to clear social *ponko* (dirt). More

¹⁵² Here I will use the term 'sex worker' as the term has evolved through an active and participatory movement in Bangladesh during late nineties. However, as I am really not convinced or comfortable with these two formulations, (neither '*patita*' nor 'sex worker'), I will be using the terms within quotation mark.

conservative views identify prostitution as the ultimate degradation of female sexuality and at the heights of social *onachar* (immoral, abominable). Most believe that this has to be eradicated from the society. One can even think of oppositional views justifying institutionalized prostitution as source of national income, as in the cases of Thailand or Australia. The state exhibits the same ambivalence towards these women who sell sex. The Constitution of Bangladesh says: “The state shall adopt effective measures to prevent prostitution and gambling” (GOB, 2000; Article 18.2). However, it does not say that ‘sex work’ is illegal. It is to be noted that an adult woman can take up prostitution by making an affidavit with a first class Magistrate’s court or with a Notary Public, stating that she is above eighteen and can join the trade willingly and consciously. Although an adult woman has legal rights to opt for ‘sex work’, the state remains ambiguous about her rights to this livelihood. ‘Sex work’ thrives in a grey area of law, with all its crimes and victimisation of the women.

All these debates reached yet another height in 1999, which I am identifying as the second phase of the ‘sex worker movement’. It surrounds the question of the eviction of *Taan Bazaar* and *Nimtoli* brothels of Narayangonj, the port city near Dhaka. A recent study explores that there are about 15,000 registered sex workers and about 16 government-approved brothels in the country (RMMRU, 2001). *Taan Bazar* and *Nimtoli* are one of the most prominent ones situated in the outskirts of Dhaka.

Eviction of Brothels: Question of Human Rights and Livelihood Security

On 24th July 1999, two of these 100 years-old brothels were evicted which created a strong reaction among women’s organisations, NGO’s, international donor agents as well as the civil society and state apparatus. Dwellers were brutally attacked by the police at around 3 AM in the morning followed by rampage and looting of property. These women were termed as ‘vagabonds’ by the law enforcing agencies and were driven out from their lodgings. Prior to the eviction, a series of events created a situation of terror. On 1st July 1999, a ‘sex worker’ was brutally killed and consequently many others started to leave the place out of fear and uncertainty. The eviction process was a result of political and economic motivations, and was planned and manipulated by the then ruling party to over-throw the existing power base held by the opposition party in those areas. It was also done to take control over the valuable land. Notwithstanding the ulterior motives, the eviction faced severe criticism from all quarters.

In response to tremendous pressure, the government declared a high-budget rehabilitation project (two Crore Taka) while another project of 2.17 million Taka by UNDP was in progress prior to the eviction (*Daily Bhorer Kagoj*, 1999 July 5; *Daily Prothom Alo*, 1999 July 7), enabling the ‘sex workers’ can gradually bid adieu to the profession. Following the eviction, most of the ‘sex workers’ scattered: they either took refuge in other brothels or became ‘floating’ while the rest were taken to a rehabilitation centre known as ‘*bhoboghure kendro*’ (centre for vagabonds) in Gazipur (in the outskirts of Dhaka). They were kept there in prison-like conditions and were finally released with a sewing machine and seven thousand takas (about 100 USD at 2011 exchange rates). Only 267 were picked up out of almost 7000 women. The rehabilitation process was identified by most of the ‘sex workers’ as a forced imprisonment, which was absolutely ineffectual, futile and provided unacceptable terms of livelihood and work opportunities. However, about 100 of these women received training – with help from NGOs – and were reported to be working in garment factories till 2001 (RMMRU, 2001). Soon after the eviction, ‘sex workers’ began to assemble themselves and soon demands of ‘sex workers’ were taken up by many women’s organisations.

A special role was taken by NP. In 1997, when *Kandupatti* brothel of Old Dhaka was first attacked, NP got in touch with the women who were residents there, who had arranged a press conference against this eviction on their own initiative. NP immediately contacted them and 19 organisations were formed under their leadership in support of their demands. The main purpose of this coalition was to protest against the threat of eviction and to ensure freedom of choice. Mumtaz Begum¹⁵³ a ‘sex worker’ from *Kandupatti* contacted NP and staged a protest in front of the Press Club and under an organisation named ‘*Patita Shongram Parishod*’¹⁵⁴. There were other committees and organisations protesting this eviction. Finally, with enough support from NP, an organisation called ‘*Ulka*’ (meteor) was established with the ‘sex workers’. It was the first formal representative organisation of ‘sex workers’¹⁵⁵ (Azim, et al., 2002). Following the eviction of *Kandupatti* on 22nd July 1999, a huge rally and demonstration took place in front of Press Club. A petition was placed before the Parliament, including the Prime Minister, ministers and secretaries of relevant ministries. The *patita*’s also prepared a draft reflecting their aspirations, demands and the structure of

¹⁵³Mumtaz passed away in May 2013, while I was drafting this chapter.

¹⁵⁴‘Organisation of Prostitutes’ in English. ‘Sex Work’ was not in use at that time.

¹⁵⁵Prior to this on 8th march during 1997, ‘sex workers’ took part in the International Women’s Day rally for the first time under their own banner. This was their first public appearance where they made demands surrounding their lives and livelihoods.

the rehabilitation process. Immediately after this eviction, 86 organisations formed a human-rights alliance called '*Shonghati*' (Solidarity) and started to organise programmes like press conferences, protests, top-tier meetings with various human-rights organisations, state ministers and policy makers. A written petition, challenging the eviction as a violation of constitutional rights, was filed by 59 voluntary organisations in the High Court. On 14th March 2000, the High Court verdict declared the eviction of *Taan Bazaar* and *Nimtoli* and detainment of '*patita*'s' into 'rehabilitation centres' unlawful. The verdict also ordered the immediate release of the '*patita*'s' and ordained that they never be evicted from any brothel without any respectful and well-designed plan of rehabilitation. 'Sex work' was also declared as 'work', as a profession: although not socially accepted, the profession is not illegal. It was also attested in the verdict that the '*patita*'s' were earning a livelihood from the brothel and regularly paying their rents and other expenses. They were also enlisted in the voter list and have all the rights to live regularly as citizens of the country.¹⁵⁶ This verdict was welcomed by the section of the women's movement who were directly involved in the process.

The main argument emerged from the human rights perspective of 'right to live', against the incidents of eviction and 'living' itself, which is right to pursue a livelihood claiming 'sex work as work'. Debates, divisions and discussions raged in the print media by prominent writers, poets, columnist and social activists protesting the inhuman eviction and rehabilitation processes. Unanimous consensus across the movement and civil society was reached on the incident of eviction of the sex workers. The 'fallen' were out in public, claiming their own rights, in their own voice. A changing attitude was also noticeable both in civil society and the women's movement. As mentioned before, the women's movement occupied an uneasy position, if not from the arguments of human rights but from that in terms of epistemological standing. Through this movement the concept of 'sex workers' was moderately successful in replacing the word '*patita*' in the broader discourse of women and gender studies. 'Sex workers' themselves thought that the verdict was a great achievement. Before going into the details of the reactions on the above issue by the selected respondents, a brief analysis of newspaper reporting, interviews and articles by prominent civil society members reveal an interesting set of heterogeneous opinions.

¹⁵⁶See for details : Azim, et al., (2002)

Popular Responses

Both popular and feminist formulations had a common thread of responses against the eviction incidents, which was seen as a violation of human rights. Irrespective of varied views and positions regarding the validity of ‘sex-work’ or ‘prostitution’, the eviction was seen by many as an act of injustice and prejudiced aggression. The rehabilitation process advocated by the state was heavily criticized for being top-down, hostile, dishonest with ulterior motives, and was conducted without any discussion or dialogue with the women involved. The most common opinion was that the eviction should come with a package of rehabilitation that would involve the women engaged in prostitution, addressing their choice and preferences. Opportunity cost was another important concern – the rehabilitation process should ensure opportunity and access to jobs that paid as much as what was earned through sex-work. ‘Sex workers’ contribute a substantial amount of their income to their families and earn enough to ensure education of their children.

Another common anxiety regarding the eviction process was the question of health hazards, which also included ‘the fear’ of sexual diseases spread by the delocalised or ‘floating’ sex-workers. Women in prostitution were perceived as oppressed, pathetic and are as though living in an eternal intolerable situation¹⁵⁷. This particular view often portrays the women in prostitution as ultimate victims, with a pinch of romantic dispossession– denied of the blissful security and respect of hearth and home, never to attain wifedom and motherhood! (Azim, et al., 2002). ‘Sex work’ is predominantly seen in popular understanding as undesirable, inhuman (*omanobik* in Bangla) and steps should be taken so that it withers away gradually.

On the other hand, there were views which also critically explored the issue and see this particular incident of eviction as motivated by political and economic motives and gain. The events were related to the power structure of the society including the police, law enforcing agencies, political parties, business communities, misappropriated donor funding and many more forces.

The social outlook towards prostitution is full of contradictions and inconsistencies. In one hand, the society believes that prostitution is a threat to the moral characters of its men while on the other, fears that the absence of prostitution would jeopardize the security of the women folk. The rehabilitation processes were also not geared to make a difference in the

¹⁵⁷ See RMMRU (2011), Azim, et al., (2002) for detail.

lives of ‘sex workers’. Rehabilitation of women in prostitution became a farce to the ‘sex workers’ as well as to the women’s movement. The overarching poverty, insecurity, eviction, abandonment and gender discrimination creates and recreates prostitution. Many agree that attempts to forcefully remove prostitution from society are not possible without eliminating the issue of inequality. Again, in the context of Bangladesh’s social and cultural settings, rehabilitation of prostitution is often very difficult. The primary reason behind this is the stigma attached to this profession and secondly, the amount they earn from this work is difficult to compensate (RMMRU, 2011).

Dilemmas and Debates within the Women’s Movement

In spite of diverse opinions, the feminist movement stood beside these women, raising their demands and paving a formal organisational platform to broadcast their voice. I would now like move into the specific responses made by the respondents from the women’s movement, as they narrate their views and involvement with the movement, demanding rights to work for the ‘sex workers’

There was little dispute amongst the respondents surrounding the question of unlawful eviction of the brothels, but some were sceptical about supporting the demands of declaring ‘sex work as work’. Disagreements and dilemmas took place mostly around the labelling of ‘sex workers’ and the ethical question of supporting ‘sex work’ as a legitimate livelihood or profession. Some feminists talked about their scepticism around the issue. A few preferred to stick to the designation as ‘*patita*’ in Bangla and ‘women in prostitution’ in English, but they did not feel comfortable with the new vocabulary of ‘sex work’.

BMP’s position inclined towards the popular responses condemning the eviction and the rehabilitation processes which did not cater to the demands of the women in prostitution. They remained sceptical around the issue of ‘work’ right.

Maleka was shocked at the news of *patita*’s apologising to religious leaders and asking for Allah’s forgiveness (commonly known as *tawba*) right after eviction of the brothels. As already mentioned she is against prostitution, and BMP’s position is to work against the whole racket of this business. She was never in favour of declaring it as a legal

profession. She has strong objections against the clients taking advantage of the ‘pathetic’ situation of women¹⁵⁸.

She remembers Sufia Kamal sharing details of her visit to the social welfare minister of Pakistan during the sixties, with the proposal of a rehabilitation programme for the ‘*patita*’. The minister said to Sufia Kamal that “brothels are the indispensable gutters of the society through which all the grime and filth flows through” and that is how the brothels get informal sanctions from the society. Maleka is also critical of the contradictions in our Constitution’s legal frame work where it clearly indicates that the state would try to eradicate the vice of ‘gambling and prostitution’ from the society but also leave open doors for women to enter this profession through a notary public certificate. She is aware of the fact that prostitution is a source of livelihood for thousands of women in *Taan Bazaar or Nimtoli*. Eviction is also inhuman and there is an ulterior motive behind this sudden desire of social cleansing by vested interest groups. Nevertheless, she stresses on the role of the state in this regard.

I think that the state has to take a very clear position on the issue, i.e. what it likes to do with this ‘so-called’ profession and with thousands of young and old women who are ‘working’ in this sector. It needs to ask relevant questions: what is the plan of the government, what does the state mean by rehabilitation, what are its measures to stop trafficking in women, what are the legal measures against pimps, police and ‘middle’ persons involved in this trade and taking advantage of these women who are in this business against their will and choice etc. (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March 2011)

¹⁵⁸ This view has its root in the activism of ‘All Bengal Women’s Union’ around the ‘problem of prostitution’. The All Bengal Women’s Union, like the *Bangiya Nari Samaj*, was formed in 1932 was formed to organise support for a specific piece of legislation to limit exploitation of women and girls in heh prostitution trade. A proposal was presented to the Bengal Legislative Council in March 1932 to widen the application of Calcutta Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act of 1923 to the entire province. The purpose of the proposed new Act was to control commercial exploitation of women and children. It aimed to shut down brothels that housed commercialized prostitution and to provide mechanisms to rescue minor girls and women held against their will in these establishments. The act would also penalize third persons who profited from the trade, such as pimps, procurers and madams.

The Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act introduced in the Bengal Legislative Council followed the guidelines set out by the League of Nations. It was thus in consonance with the world wide trends in the early decades of the twentieth century with regard to legislation to control prostitution. The position taken by educated Bengali women in the All Bengal Women’s Union in favour of this type of legislation was similar to that of other women’s associations around the world in this era. They were greatly influenced by the philosophy of social reformers in Great Britain., who had taken the lead in promoting legislation and convening international conferences on the problems associated with prostitution.

See for detail, Southard, B. (1996) *The women’s movement and Colonial Politics in Bengal: The Quest for Political Rights, Education and Social Reforms Legislation, 1921-1936*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited.

To Maleka, all these are pertinent questions that need to be addressed by the movement before it proceeds on to conceptualise ‘sex work’. BMP had always worked with issues related to make the rehabilitation process more appropriate to the needs of these women, creating employment opportunities for women, taking legal measures against the criminals involved in this trade, which, she feels, has to be eradicated from the society at some point in time. However, according to Maleka, BMP did support the movement mainly from the point of view of human rights by standing against the sudden eviction of a population from a place where they were renting (Also see her comment in Chapter Two on *Shabmeher* case). She insists:

If you are labelling this work or livelihood as a profession, would you consider this profession appropriate for your daughters? You cannot support a double standard by claiming legal rights for ‘sex workers’, but, at the same time, keeping it outside the realms of your own choice and life option. In my opinion, working for the ‘*patita*’ demands a long-term commitment. We were not in favour of a one-stop solution to the issue. We are fully aware that as long as the women are in this trade, we will have to be there with them, safe-guarding their position but doing something which would legitimise this work as a profession and perpetuate its presence. It is not my cup of tea. (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March 2011)

Ayesha (BMP), in a similar tone, reflects upon her personal and organisational positions:

...we were using the word ‘*patita*’ and not ‘sex worker’. The BMP’s stance on this was in the line of the socialist agenda - fighting against the capitalistic social order and believing in the eradication of this trade from the society. BMP was also critical of the word ‘*patita*’, which was degrading for women. It was around the late nineties that we began to hear about the word ‘sex worker’, but we did not use it. Sufia Kamal was not comfortable with the new word. However, we were working for them, running around courts to stop the evictions and demanding just trials of the people involved with the eviction process and with the trade. (Ayesha Khanam, interview dated: October 2011)

According to Ayesha, the issue of prostitution and rights to sex work is not beyond debate at the international level as well. BMP could not fully agree with UN’s position to recognise ‘sex work as work’ and accept it as an option like other regular professions. She thinks that if any one enters this profession by choice, then she has nothing against it. But again she is sceptical of the word ‘choice’ which is always contextual. Ayesha moves on to state that more than eighty percent of women are struggling in Bangladesh to secure the basic

needs of food, shelter, health and security issues. Women are being killed or raped every day for dowry or for similar reasons. She believes that everyone is aware of the possible backgrounds of women being involved in this profession.

.. and I would like to act on that area. Since ‘sex workers’ are there, I will try to ensure their right to go to work, to live, ensure education for their children, right to perform death rituals, access to health facilities etc. At the same time, I will also work for enabling a situation where women are not forced to take up this profession. Actually, speaking about ‘sex work is work’ is something which is problematic to me ... I cannot own, neither can I disown this demand. (Ayesha Khanam, interview dated: October 2011).

The Women’s Movement Merging with the Movement of the ‘Sex Workers’

As opposed to this position of BMP i.e. not being comfortable with the demands of declaring ‘sex work as work’, NP took an active role in placing this demand. NP picked up the issue as their own and struggled for ensuring the demand for legal sanctions for ‘sex work’, however, not without some apprehension.

Samia Afrin and Rita Das¹⁵⁹ from NP talked animatedly about their experiences during the sex worker’s movement. Samia remembers:

My involvement with this movement started in 1997 when *Kandupatti* brothel was evicted from English Road in Old Dhaka. We thought that it would be difficult for NP to act upon this all by themselves. We got in touch with a few NGOs like Care Bangladesh, Bangladesh Women’s Health Coalition, Nari Maitry, Human Rights Forum etc. We got together (about nine or ten of the organisations) and held a press conference protesting the eviction. Sultana Nahar, a lawyer also filed a case on her personal capacity at that time, but the case got lost as she had no connection with the women’s movement or with the concerned sex workers. Since the *Kandupatti* eviction of 1997, sex workers started to come to NP office and gradually we realised that they needed an organisation of their own. (Samia Afrin, interview dated: April 2011)

NP decided to pay Mumtaz Begum – a sex worker who had leadership qualities – 3000 takas as stipend per month so that she could use NP as her base and work to put together her own organisation. Two helpmates were also provided from NP for this task. Some of the ‘sex workers’ rented a house together where they stayed for one year and worked toward establishing the organisation. Gradually they developed the constitution, resolutions and all

¹⁵⁹Interview with Samia Afrin and Rita Das, member, NP, dated February 2011

the official formalities required for the organisation. Finally the organisation *Ulka* was established in 1999. Another similar project called *Doorbar Network* (The Indomitable) was being undertaken by NP since 1995. This network was established in Bangladesh after the Beijing conference. The main focus of *Ulka* at the time was to remove the stigma and break beyond the ostracised lives of sex workers. *Doorbar* also became a part of his movement. The main agenda of NP was to bring ‘sex workers’ out of socially stigmatised categories and include them in the mainstream movement to give an ownership on their own agenda. Samia and Rita reflect:

...during 1998/1999 we were travelling all over the country to establish *Doorbar* and Mumtaz used to accompany us. Often Mumtaz would initiate the speech and start talking about her profession, ‘... *I am a sex worker, I was in Kandupatti...*’ and so on. At first people used to get shocked with what she had to say but eventually they accepted her. This led us to reflect upon the fact that in order to remove the stigma, it is important to start with the stories of the sex workers, their backgrounds, responsibilities, contributions to their families and children. Interestingly, Mumtaz contested for the post of Chair in the *Doorbar* executive body and on winning the election, she became the Chair of the Dhaka zone. We consider this as our achievement. We believe that we were successful in bringing sex workers in the mainstream of the women’s movement and could make people realise that being women, they were also parts of the broader the women’s movement. *Shonghoti* was also established at the same time with the participation of 86 organisations. NP was their secretariat for many years but now *Shonghoti* runs on its own and the organisational structure has been decentralised. (Samia Afrin and Rita Das, interview dated: April 2011)

All these interactions within NP proved to be a learning process for many. While perceptions gradually altered, the stigma began to wane. Working closely with these women led to more sensitive responses towards ‘sex work’.

Samia thinks that NP has done its part in bringing ‘sex workers’ to the mainstream of the women’s movement. ‘Sex work’ has now become an accepted term. As a result of NP’s close involvement with the movement, sex workers now have their own organisation through which they fighting for their rights and collecting funds from home and abroad. Nowadays it is possible to talk about ‘sex workers’ and their problems and rights openly.



Figure 15: Torch procession by *Shonghati* to protect the rights of sex workers.
Source: The Daily Mukto Kantha. Date-28 August, 1999

However the enthusiasm and satisfaction around NP's success with the matter was not beyond doubt. Following the discussions with Samia and Rita, Firdous Azim from NP elaborates on the internal dilemmas and apprehension from yet from another perspective, which reflects the difference between and within the women's movement.

We had very clear stance on the sex workers movement. The main purpose was to integrate this movement into the mainstream, not to see it as a welfare issue, nor a moral issue. It was to see it as an issue of women's rights and women's position in society. However, we had our own dilemmas as well. We were convinced that 'sex work is work' and they have all the rights available in the society. But again, we are all aware that sex workers belong to the lowest ladder of subordination. Giving them right to their livelihood does not deny the fact that sex work is a service to men, and women's position in the questionable arrangement is that of an object. Sex work is related to poverty, stigma, powerlessness and so many other things for which we do not have any easy solution. We could not resolve this dilemma. We avoided these questions and we went on ahead with our movement to ensure rights to livelihood of the women in this trade. (Firdous Azim, interview dated: March 2011)

Nevertheless, as Firdous does not believe in traditional welfaristic rehabilitation programmes usually taken up by the government and she also does not know how to react to such questions asked by a sex worker; she says:

Once a sex worker was asked that given a choice what profession she would like to choose? Her answer was, 'I don't know which profession you are in. I guess you are a doctor. Given a choice, would you become a barrister? Please think before asking, do you think you can just

pick up any profession and abandon the one you are engaged in now?' I had no answer to this. (Firdous Azim, interview dated: March 2011)

The complexity, ambiguity and variability of responses around the question of prostitution among feminist activists within the women's movement expose layers of debates, differences and consensus around the issue.

The main conflicts and disagreements take place around the debates on, firstly, whether to use 'women in prostitution', 'prostitutes' or 'sex workers'. Secondly, the position and articulation of the the women's movement around the eviction and the issue of human rights and, thirdly, around issues of the movement's mobilisation in favour of sex trade and establishing rights as sex-workers was also a matter of debate

Streams within the women's movement (mainly BMP) are of different opinions regarding the conceptualisation of '*patita*' and/or 'sex workers'. The debate on the 'naming' is varied. The women's movement generally objects the stigma attached to 'women in prostitution'. Bangladesh's society frowns upon extra-marital or marital liaisons of men, but they are seldom considered as 'fallen'. One stream of the women's movement thinks that in light of the fact that labelling of women in this trade stigmatise, acknowledging the profession as real 'work' and legalising it will only heighten the stigma. According to this view, the reality of Bangladesh is such that in most cases, women join this trade 'on their own', driven by poverty, lack of livelihood opportunities and many other push factors. Many are also forced to join by the racket of violence engaged in this trade. Given the circumstances, it is viewed as oppression for women and the main focus of action is to gradually eradicate or abolish this profession. They are also not in favour of using the colloquial word associated with '*fallen*' and degradation but cannot fully accept the term 'sex workers' as an alternative to '*patita*'.

In spite of the dilemma around the linguistic attributions, little disagreement was observed around the question of eviction. The process of eviction – either by the hooligans or state – was clearly resisted as a complete violation of a citizen's human rights. Consensus and full support from all quarters reflects the presence of a 'safe spot' in the midst of dilemma and debates, ambivalence and ambiguity.

As elaborated in the above discussions, the eviction of *Taan Bazaar* and *Nimtoli* brought together 'sex workers' who successfully mobilised an organised movement for themselves. This created a strong alliance between the the women's movement and 'sex

workers'. A case was also filed in their favour in 1997, but not on the issue of eviction but against violence, physical assault, loot and hooliganism. In 1999, a vibrant movement took shape beyond the 'eviction' issue, emphasising rights to work and livelihood, highlighting citizen's right and questioning the ambiguity in our Constitution. Most importantly, the main stakeholders, i.e. the women in this trade, joined together and merged with the women's movement.

The organisation that was closely involved with this process had yet another perspective on the issue. NP wanted these women to render the binary construction of 'good' and 'bad' null and void, and aid 'sex workers' in achieving the necessary means to have their voices heard. Through this process, organisations and networks were born and marginalised women came closer to the centre. The movement did not remain dependent on middle-class leadership. Women in 'sex work' became active agents in the process. While gleaning through other secondary sources, it became clear that many women in this trade want to be identified as 'sex workers' – not as *patita* or as 'women in prostitution'. To them, it is a profession like any other, through which a living can be earned (Tahmina & Moral, 2004). The recognition of 'sex work' as work is of great value to many of them.

The radical bridging between the mainstream women's movement and 'sex workers' led to agencies to fight the state machinery with enough strength and get a positive verdict. The verdict was seen as a victory and recognition of the source their livelihood.

The resistances within the women's movement regarding 'prostitution' or 'sex workers', nevertheless, remained unresolved. It is important to note that different feminist positions on 'prostitution' is contingent on the circumstances of the sex trade that operates in various contexts. According to Rajan (1999) the differences in the understanding of 'prostitution' arise from a fundamental divergence of emphasis: abolitionists read 'prostitution' as structure or *system*, while decriminalisation of 'sex work' advocates the trade as *practice* (sex work). 'Prostitution' as a system is condemned by almost all. Everyone is ready to join hands to rescue and support women who fall victim to such a system. Victimhood and consequent livelihood of women were relatively straightforward issues, but it is the practise of prostitution is where the trouble lies: this position assumes the questionable practice of agency by a woman through her body, as well as being morally problematic for most. In fact, addressing the humanitarian aspect of Bangladesh's contextual

reality was always in dispute with the moral judgment of the rights issue around ‘prostitution’ and/or ‘sex work’.

VII

Equal Rights in Politics

As discussed above, the rights-based movement, as a whole, had been vocal on demanding equal rights in both private and public realms. Apart from interrogating the issue of women’s rights in the family, work, reproductive health and women’s body and sexuality etc. women’s political rights and participation have also been a point of major debate within the movement. This subsection will probe into the two major arenas that mark out the content and forms of the women’s movement connection to-political rights: first, the issue of reserved seats and selection process in the parliament, and secondly, direct election to reserved seats of local level politics.

Demand for Direct Election in Reserved Seats: National Parliament Vis a Vis Local Level

Obstacle to women’s political participation exist throughout the world. The representation of women stands at 15 percent globally as of 2003 (Dahlerup, 2002; Rai & Sharma, 2000). Although this total has increased in the recent years, minimal progress all over the world that the ideal of parity remains a long way off. In order to increase the representation of women and to address the present gender imbalance in decision making, various methods such as electoral quotas¹⁶⁰ have been proposed or implemented. As a result of all these initiatives, governments and political parties have experimented with different types of quotas. Electoral quotas usually set a minimum target for women, and may apply to the number of female candidates proposed by a party for election or may take a form of reserve seats in the legislature (Squires, 1996; Kenworthy & Malami, 1999; Krook, 2007).

Affirmative laws like quota-based representation of women have a long history in Bangladesh. The Constitution of Bangladesh clearly advocates for the equality of men and women in formal politics. There is no legal barrier to women contesting or voting for any elective office, including that of the head of the state. Women are entitled to the same fundamental rights as men. This ideological stance on the equality of men and women is

¹⁶⁰ ‘Quota’ and ‘reservation’ are used here interchangeably.

demonstrated by Article 10, 28 .2, which states that rights span across race, religion or sex without any discrimination. Article 9 specifically promotes special representation of women in local government while Article 65 (3) provides for reserved seats for women in the parliament (Chowdhury, 1994, Nelson & Chowdhury, 1994).

The legacy of Colonial India and Pakistan Constitutional documents influenced the framers of the Bangladesh Constitution in 1972. Together with the right to vote and to run for the 300 general or open seats of the parliament, the provision of reserved seats was considered a way to “safeguard” a minimum representation of women in light of their disadvantaged position in society. Women were provided with “protected”¹⁶¹ representation because they were not in a position to compete successfully with male politicians for territorial constituencies (Chowdhury 2010, Norris, 2000; Kishwar, 1998). Initially, in 1972, fifteen seats were reserved for women for a period of ten years who would be elected indirectly by the Member of Parliaments (MP). In 1978, through a Presidential proclamation by H. M. Ershad, the number of reserved seats was increased to 30¹⁶² and the period of reservation was extended for a further 5 years. In December 1987, this Constitutional provision lapsed, and in 1990 the same system was re-incorporated for 10 years only to lapse again in 2001. After democracy was restored in 2001, the *Jatiyo Sangsad Reserved Women Seats Election Bill 2004* was passed, which increased the number of women seats to 45, and later to 50 in 2001, ignoring the long demand of the women’s movement for direct elections in reserved seats. These reserve seats are allocated among the political parties and alliances on the basis of their proportional representation in the parliament (Mohsin, 2010).

Role of the Women’s Movement: Coalition Building on the issue of Quota

The women’s movement in Bangladesh brought the issue of quotas to public discourse by voicing criticism of quotas as practiced since the independence of Bangladesh. Their main demand centered on redesigning or reintroducing the constitutional provision with some fundamental changes, for example, direct election in reserved seats.

During the early nineties the women’s movement became vocal with their demands, both individually and collectively, in various forums like conventions, seminars and conferences. They argued not only for increase in the number of reserved seats (most put the

¹⁶¹See *Bangladesh Constituent Assembly Debates-1972*, Dhaka: Government Printing Press. cited in Chowdhury, N. (2010)

¹⁶²These 30 MPs were ridiculed as ‘30 sets of ornaments’ by a Bangla weekly *Jai Jai Din* during the Ershad regime.

figure at 64 to correspond with the country's 64 administrative units) but for the introduction of direct election to these seats. Several organisations including BMP and WfW also urged that political parties award a certain percentage to party nominations (the figure ranged between ten and twenty percent) to women for general seats. However, in 1990 the reservation provision was re-inserted into the Constitution for the next ten years. The step actually perpetuated the earlier system and was in no way attuned to the demands of the movement. Towards the end of the following ten years the women's movement again started to mobilise opinion and to create necessary political will in favour of their demand (Chowdhury, 2002).

Following the formulation of National Plan of Action (NAP) after the Beijing Conference, Bangladesh Government (AL, led by Sheikh Hasina) announced a National Policy for the Advancement of Women in 1997. The policy called for an increased number of reserved seats in the legislature for women through direct election. However the provision of the draft fourteenth Constitutional Amendment¹⁶³ Bill prepared by the AL government in 1999, proposing in essence, the replication of an earlier system.

Before the impending dissolution of the Parliament in 2002, some twenty women's organisations and NGOs, mobilized by BMP, lobbied the government, political parties and parliamentarians. Women activists instigated street activism, formed human chains, staged rallies and symbolic protests. However this heightened level of advocacies was unsuccessful¹⁶⁴.

Relative gains achieved through legislative amendments in local-level elections have brought significant changes in women's political rights. This further strengthened the demand for direct election in reserved seats of the Parliament (Reynolds & Reilly, 1997; Reynolds, 1999; Shaheed, Zia & Warraich, 1998).

Dilemma of Representatives in Reserved Seats in the Parliament

Despite continuous demand, considerable dilemma around the issue of reserved seats in the Parliament also dominated the discussion within the movement. Key figures from the

¹⁶³ The 14th amendment to the constitution was passed on May 16, 2004, by which the number of reserved women seats in the *Jaitya Sangsad* was increased from 30 to 45, the age of the Supreme Court judges was increased from 65 to 67 years and provisions for putting portraits of the President and the Prime Minister at the offices of the President and the Prime minister and the Prime Minister's portrait in government, semi-government and autonomous offices and Bangladesh missions abroad were made mandatory.

¹⁶⁴ These discussions are beyond the time frame of this thesis. However, see Chowdhury (1994, 2001, 2002) for detail.

movement largely agreed upon the fact that the specific nature of the political culture in Bangladesh plays a crucial role in determining the nature of women's political power.

According to the feminists, a few women from major political parties held the state power in Bangladesh. They were largely linked with the male leadership through kinship or marriage like many of the countries in the region. A few had political strength accrued from years of association with the party organisation. Another important cultural fact which plays a crucial role is the system of patrilocal system of marriage. Being a transitory member of her natal family, a woman is not in a position to claim her constituency at birth. She remains marginal, a stranger and a newcomer in her husband's constituency area.

While elaborating on the problematics and dilemma of representatives in reserved seats Najma shares that, in the context of a patriarchal political culture, a woman Member of Parliament (MP), despite her commitments, faces some inherent political risks when active as an advocate of women's rights. Selected female MPs are often ostracised by the male MPs elected from territorial constituencies. The process of entry into the legislature devalues the political strength and status of women members in reserved seats. Quotas or reservation came to be viewed as falling short of 'genuine' representation. Relative detachment from the grassroots and dependence on the party leadership marginalised the political status of the reserved seats of the Parliament.

Women in Local Government: Direct Election in Reserved Seats

Perhaps the most significant development for women in the last few decades has been the introduction of direct election in reserved seats for women in local level elections. In the early days, when this move was introduced, there was considerable scepticism. How will women cope? Are they equipped to be leaders? Will this mean any real change, or will it merely mean that the men will take a backseat and use the women as a front to implement what they want? While all these problems still remain, in a greater or lesser degree, what is also true is that more and more women have shown that once they have power, they are able to use it, to the benefit of society in general and women in particular.

The Constitution of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh¹⁶⁵, among other provisions, makes specific references to local government in articles 9, 59 and 60. Article 9, which reads as follows: "the state shall encourage local government institutions composed of

¹⁶⁵The Constitution was adopted on the 4th of November 1972 came into force on the 16th of December 1972.

representatives of the areas concerned and in such institutions special representation shall be given, *as far as possible*, (italic mine) to peasants, workers and women”.

Local-level governments in Bangladesh are widely acknowledged as most conducive to democracy and decentralisation of power. The present system of local government is placed under the Ministry of Rural development and Co-operatives. In rural areas, local governments have three tiers: the *Zilla Parishad* (ZP, district level): *Upazila Parishad* (UPs, Mid-level); *Gram Sarker* (Village level) (Siddiquee, 2004). The 469 UPs are the crucial units of the local government system. They are comprised of 13 members (Panday, 2005).

The 1997 Local Government Act No. 20 introduced three reserved seats for women, each representing thereof the nine UP wards, while men represent only one. In addition to this, women head one-third of the thirteen UP committees as Vice Chairmen that undertake various development activities. They are further mandated to head the committee on women and children’s welfare and sports along with other responsibilities (Gyasuddin & Rahman, 2003, as cited in Mohsin, 2010). The past decade has thus witnessed the huge entry of women in local government bodies. Prior to the reservation legislation, women’s presence within local government bodies was negligible. Current data¹⁶⁶ reveals that during the period of 1995-2000, the percentage of women in parliament has risen from 10.06% to 11.21%.

As result of long demand and mobilisation by the women’s movement in 1993, direct election to reserved seats to women in the Union Parishad (Union Council, the local level tier of the legislature) was provided for through legislation by parliament¹⁶⁷. Under the new provision, the first election of the Union Parishad were held in 1997 and brought into the local government system some 12,828 women in reserved seats through direct election. 110 women were elected as members while 20 women were elected as Chairman directly¹⁶⁸ (Chowdhury, 2002).

The women’s movement considers the 1997 legislation for local government as one of its biggest achievements because it led to women’s empowerment in politics. Significantly feminists from selected organisations recognised that the issue of quota and affirmative action as conducive to women’s empowerment. However, all respondents clearly stated that quota cannot be a permanent system and that it has to evolve according to the demand and the

¹⁶⁶See Appendix G

¹⁶⁷ Ordinance 1983 as amended by Act No. 20 of 1993, section 3. See the *Union Parishad’s Manual*, 1998. Dhaka Law Reports, 2nd edition.

¹⁶⁸Source: Bangladesh Country Paper to Special Session of the UN General Assembly Meeting held on June 2000 and City Corporation Election Result (2002) published by Election Commission Bangladesh

context. Agreement was also reached on demands for direct election in reserved seats, both at the local level and the national parliament until further amendment. However, according to many, the actual rights and empowerment in local level are yet to be implemented due to structural inadequacy, inherent flaws of the state machinery and the patriarchal mind-set of the society.

Pros and Cons of Quotas for Women

The following discussion will concentrate mainly on responses and formulations around the demands of direct election for reserve seats and its challenges at both the local level and the national Parliament respectively.



Figure 16: Leaders, workers and organisers of BMP are resounded with slogans for direct election in reserve seats after the meeting at *Muktangan*.

Source: Bangladesh Mahila Parishad 2005, Movement Profile of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, BMP, Dhaka.

Two of the major organisations (BMP and WfW) under the purview of this thesis, were keen on placing the demand for direct elections both at the local level and in the national Parliament. Representatives from BMP stated that equality in political power and women in decision-making legislations are crucial to women's empowerment. Political empowerment is related to the Constitution, the conducting of elections, elected parliament and local level members, more women in policy formulations and in the enacting and implementation of women friendly laws. Most importantly, all of this has to come about through direct participation of women. The demand for direct election in reserved seats was a

major issue since independence for BMP. It was BMP who was the first to demand direct elections for women in their sixteen-point demand.

Maleka thinks that if they could have pushed it even further to make political parties address the issue during the initial days of independent Bangladesh, by now (and through the process of trial and error) much could have been achieved for women in the political arena. However, almost all respondents believed that the demands of BMP for direct election in reserved seats was a farsighted one, and it was always a matter of critical concern for the women's movement as a whole. Despite the many loopholes, BMP thinks that direct election in local level politics has opened up a new horizon since 1998. The state decision was aided because of BMP's political alliance with the ruling political party.

Despite all the weaknesses it was agreed upon by all the respondents that, while the presence of women in local level over the past decade has not transformed the power structure in rural areas in significant manner (the vested interests have tried to use the provisions for women's reservations to consolidate their position), the overall experience has been positive. Women are engaging in power struggles that used to be dominated by men, sometimes as actors and other times as pawns. However, participation in the public arena for women means that hitherto marginalised groups are finding a legitimate space to articulate their interests and aspirations and although slowly, the women becoming 'political'.

Who could have imagined that women from rural areas could come forward and participate in politics? In spite of the many loopholes and challenges, I think that the 1998 amendment is truly a big gain for the women's movement. I must mention here that that key role played by certain politically committed persons were critical in aiding the bill. Current¹⁶⁹ President Zillur Rahman (2009-2013) was the minister for Local Government and Rural Development (LGRD) at the time. He was sensitive to our demands and convinced his political party to favour direct elections at the local level. On the other hand, Ivy Rahman – his wife and our comrade in many other movements – also came forward to table this demand. (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March 2011)

Had the political parties in power been sincere, they could have brought the bill about not by just raising the number of seats for women but also incorporating provisions for direct election. In 2000, on behalf of the women's movement, BMP prepared and submitted a Draft

¹⁶⁹During the interview held in 2011/12 The president of Bangladesh was Zillur Rahman. He passed away in early 2013.

Bill 2000 on “Increasing Number of Reserved Seats and holding Direct Election”¹⁷⁰ to the government. Various strategies – ranging from demonstrations across the country, holding meetings, forming human chains, sharing of views, organising press conferences, signature campaign, interaction with political parties and members of the Parliament, submitting memorandum to the Speaker and to the Prime Minister and leaders of the opposition etc. Other measures were used to provide the demand with a national exposure. However, system of selection in national Parliament could not be changed. According to Ayesha, it is important to view the demand as a national issue instead of a women’s issue only.

Direct election at the local level is a great achievement and can be seen as a tool for the emergence of ‘ordinary women in an extraordinary form’ (BMP, 2005). The tremendous success at the UP level election only proves that women are ‘able’ to participate in direct elections, and, despite hindrances, they have proven their political self-reliance at the grass root levels. UP experiences are enough to incorporate direct elections at the national level. Ayesha adds that although the women’s movement could achieve its demands at the local level, it could not move forward with its demand to the Parliament, due to lack of political commitment and will.

Apart from supporting the rationale for quota for women and the land mark victory at local levels, Mahmuda Islam, Roushan Jahan and Najma Chowdhury (representing WfW) talked about the loopholes and problems of the agenda in detail. Their views expressed below would also draw from their written and published documents on the issue at hand. Roushan Jahan of WfW was actively involved in the movement for direct election in reserved seats in the national Parliament. The issue was discussed in numerous workshops and dialogues, and were shared in public forums during the late nineties. She soon realised that it was not an easy demand to implement. There were numerous issues that have to be taken account of. She highlights the inherent contradiction of the quota system.

Personally I do not support quota. There is no doubt that women are the largest minority group, and that their representation is necessary through quota system or affirmative action. But, at the same time, the demand for quota is also contradictory to the demand for equal rights. (Roushan Jahan, Interview dated: June 2011)

Roushan stated that quota is one issue, but only raising the number of quota or seats is not the solution. She admits that a direct election for reserved seats is a step forward but,

¹⁷⁰See Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (2005)

again, the administrative complexity of the entire process is not beyond doubt. According to her, for the sake of the implementation process, the size of the quota should be kept small. The state must have a plan on how to handle direct elections for 100 seats in 300 constituencies. Even demanding party nomination is not easy, says Roushan. Finding capable and competent candidates is yet another challenge for political parties. The management cost of this agenda is high and entails risks. The political calculation is and will remain crucial to such decisions. Trial and error methods are required here but the process is long and complicated. Jahan contends:

Although this demand of the women's movement is pertinent to women's political rights, it is not solely about the lack of political commitment or will of the state or political parties. The women's movement should also consider practical issues. (Roushan Jahan, Interview dated: June 2011)

A comprehensive effort involving dialogue with political parties, relevant ministries, election commission, and most importantly, with women's organisations is necessary. She is also sceptical about the realisation of the movement's dream. It was also suggested that the women's movement can take a decision of not casting their vote if the political parties break their promises or do not abide by their manifestos (Ayesha Khanam, interview dated: October 2011).



Figure 17: Women for Women engaged in dialogue with representatives from various political parties to mobilise women's political empowerment.

Source: Women for Women, 2005, 'Tin dashak kichhu srmiti kichhu kotha', Dhaka

Najma, in a similar tone, elaborates on the gaps of the system of quota and reserved seats. In her view, direct elections for reserved seats at the local level is not as rosy as it seems to be. Her comments bring down the initial euphoria of seeing women in local level politics in large number. Bangladesh experience with quotas for women in parliament have largely been negative, says Najma. She believes that the processes of quota as a strategic political tool for ensuring women's voices and their priorities reflected in state policies have generally undermined the effectiveness of quota.

Bangladesh experience shows that quotas are necessary in the decision making body of successive units of the party organisations, stretching from the local to the national level, as well as in other decision making bodies. However, women legislatures and political decision makers on the whole did not attach importance to the need for the provision of quotas to be orchestrated in all representative and statutory bodies in order to maximize its gains. One has to realise that quota is not just a number but involves commitment and capacity of the part of those whose entry was facilitated by the quota to intervene in policy issues.

According to Najma, "The ability and willingness to mediate and negotiate state policies in regard to the gendered interests of its citizens is a prime test for quotas. With a few exceptions, women members of the Bangladesh legislatures have not served as advocates for women's rights in their capacity as legislators" (Chowdhury, 2002).

She added that although more than 12000 women got elected at the local level elections – and this is definitely a gain –the agenda could never be realised or become effective due to lack of necessary pre-conditions that ensures women's political empowerment. Demand for direct election is in conflict with the idea of quota or reserved seats. The debate and disagreements over mutual boundary is a persisting challenge. Even quota and direct election has its own limitations in Bangladesh politics. The very system of politics is not conducive to women. The entire cultural milieu is androcentric. It is very difficult for a woman to work for three constituencies at a time, and even more difficult to establish link and networking with her constituencies. People assume that women are structurally weak and can exercise less power than a man. People, in general, also like to approach men with their demands and problems. Thus, women in politics are systematically ignored. Apart from these administrative and structural issues hindering the real empowerment of women in politics, Najma Chowdhury analyses the reason behind

legislation to promote women's direct election in local level bodies but the denial at the national level. Political equations are at play here:

In my opinion, the gain at the local level was a 'smaller national buy'. Men had a lesser stake here. The larger buy was the issue of direct election at the national level, which was the real demand and which was not bought. Patriarchal power-structure is usually prepared to divide up the smaller cake at the local level, and that is why there was little resistance in passing the bill that amends the local level election procedure. Nevertheless, through this process women did come forward in the public politics. It was an opening of sorts, but it failed to bring about effective empowerment. Moreover, it is very difficult for women to get out of the clout of men in patriarchy. They are usually controlled by their male kin. The same pattern is reflected in our national level politics. Women often get nomination to replace a deceased father or brother. Husbands also place their wives at the *Union Parishad* level while he himself contests for the higher tier of *Upazila*. (Najma Chowdhury, interview dated: June 2011)

Najma, in her writings, has discussed this issue in detail. Like others, she also believes that quota system has its limits. She thinks that the reservation of seats actually reflects a paternalistic approach to women's representation. The patriarchal political culture of society leads to such 'protectionist' approach. According to her, the ruling party did not nominate women for general seats in the first two elections held in 1973 and 1979—but treated the reservation provision as a device to exclude women from the general seats. Thus, these were treated as seats for men. Indirect election to the reserved seats by simple majority vote ensures the control of these seats by the party obtaining a numerical majority in the legislature. Patronage of male elites in the party in power only accentuates women's dependence and subordination in the political sphere. Reserved seats have been considered as block votes for the successive governments till today (Chowdhury, 2002).

Allocation of one-fourth quota for women in the local bodies through direct elections demonstrates a strong political will. But the resistance to reintroduce quotas for women in the Parliament deserve scrutiny here. It is evident from the discussion of Chowdhury (2002, 2001) that the resistance is largely due to the fear of losing the hold of male politicians on the party organisations and electoral constituencies. There are bigger stakes involved in being closer to the state power and higher prospects of access to resources and policies. Moreover, patriarchal apathy towards women's claim to power, policy making and inclusion in the public space could be a factor in shaping the responses of political parties and leadership against endorsing direct elections in reserved seats for women in the Parliament.

Despite the fact that reservation is necessary, Najma thinks that it actually undermines women's representative status. The reserved seats also served as a 'vote bank' for the party in power, because it is the numerical majority of the party that enabled all of its nominees to get elected to the reserved seats. The provision of legislative quotas or reservation of seats for women in parliament is actually benefitting to the ruling party. "The provision also benefited male politicians in control of the patriarchal party machinery, who hardly demonstrated any political commitment to share the general seats, that being directly linked to constituencies, could contribute to or reinforce the political strength of women" (Chowdhury, 2002)

Moreover, the current administrative structure of women representation via direct election in reserved seats only implies feeble constituency linkages and a weak local power-base for women. The recent years (1990 onwards) witnessed considerable change in the Parliament with the increase of women representatives. However, Najma believes that these positive trends – in terms of visibility of women in the Parliament and in the local level bodies– needs to be consolidated by grounding women's political and electoral strength in both local and national level constituencies. According to Najma, the women's movement should try to convince political parties to accommodate female quota for candidature in local level or national elections.

Despite all these negative nuances, quota has its positive impact as well. The electoral history of Bangladesh Parliament shows that, during the first election of independent Bangladesh, in 1973, AL attained majority seats in the general election which had its own women party members elected to the reserved seats. Electoral nominations in the early years indicate that the quota was seen as crucial for women's entry into the legislature. The trend diverged somewhat during the early nineties with the emergence of two female leaders from AL and BNP. They have contested in direct elections in multiple territorial constituencies. The inherent contradiction of the process reveals that although these women leaders have treated the general seats as a reservoir of political power, but have not taken proactive measures to encourage women of their respective parties to contest and claim these seats. This approach to reserved seats has left the electoral field open to the male domination, Najma opines. Quotas in the Parliament on the other hand provided women with the only visible rout to the legislature, opened up a space for them to enter the power sphere. Even when powerful women leaders are defeated in general election can access power through quota and nomination. In Bangladesh, a few of the women whose entry into the legislature

was facilitated by quotas have in course of time been 'graduated' as active participants in the national politics.

Mahmuda, on the other hand, highlights the role of WfW in producing academic discourses on women and politics. Apart from the numerous publications on these subjects, she emphasises WfW's initiatives in conducting a series of dialogues, orientation and exchange programmes with mainstream political leaders and bureaucrats. Special sessions were organised that involved major political parties to persuade them to create a favourable environment for women in mainstream politics. Mahmuda reflects that WfW was always aware of the reality, that the status of women can hardly be improved unless leaders of political parties, policy makers and bureaucrats acknowledge the effectiveness of women's political participation and empowerment.

Najma Chowdhury, drawing observations from her earlier writings (1994, 2001, and 2002) illustrates the internal dynamics of quota debate in relation to women's political rights. According to her the formulations provided by the women's movement, though a legitimate one, created a breach between the women's movement and those elected/selected to reserved seats. Most of the women politicians preferred the existing system, as it made the electioneering process less expensive, less strenuous and less uncertain. As practitioners of politics, they tended to regard the movement's stand as being rather detached from politics as it stands. They also felt that the political trend of high spending and violence in election is disadvantageous for women participating in politics which pitted them against male contestant. Najma highlights the problematics of the issue:

A source of weakness in relation to the movement's agitation reserve seats and direct election has been an occasional tendency to put several issues on the platform, all of which deserved to be regarded as critical; lumping them together appear to dilute the impact. Second, the movement's varied and at times shifting stand on the number of seats to be reserved and the method of election to be adopted appeared to undermine its underlying unity of purpose. ... A third factor that weakened the force of the movement was the occasional regrouping or remapping of strategic options by groups and organisations in order to be in a position to lead the movement and to perform a mediating role in negotiations (Chowdhury, 2002).

The issue of reserved seats and direct elections was not acknowledged by all with the same enthusiasm. Firdous Azim, of NP seems impassive on the question of direct election. Although she believes that quota is still necessary and demand for direct election in reserved seats is important for women, this was never a priority for NP. Considering most cases, NP

renders the parliament as ineffective to ensure women's rights. It was apprehensive about having female representatives in a non-functional machinery.

The feminists interviewed largely believed that advocacy of implementation of quotas in Bangladesh has been always stipulated in a limited timeframe. Quotas are viewed as an interim measure and women politicians in the legislature were expected to build their political bases within the stipulated period. It was largely felt by all the respondents that quotas for women in party nominations to general seats would eventually made quota a redundant issue. It is also believed by many that the success in advocating for the introduction of direct elections and quotas by the women's movement is likely to be contingent on the movement's capacity to build strategic alliances across political parties, women's organisations, women in politics and citizen bodies.

While wrapping up the section, it is interesting that, while one arm of the movement is trying to negotiate with the state to ensure women's political rights through election and formal procedures, the other is found to be disillusioned and nonchalant about the entire political milieu. Nevertheless, the demand for direct election in reserved seats remained dominant in the rights discourse of the women's movement – i.e. under the broader understanding of rights permeated by UN's global formulation in CEDAW and the idea of 'affirmative action' and quota systems. Above all, the integral contradictions of the Constitution remained a big challenge for the movement. The lack of consensus among members of the women's movement, with regard to the procedures and the nature of seats in the election process in the national Parliament, was a big challenge. The internal divisions offer hindrances to forward any agenda. All these internal and external factors – electoral structure and procedure, patriarchal culture, and power play – posed a threat to effective political empowerment of women. The demand for direct election at the parliament remains elusive till today.

In conclusion, this chapter has looked at the women's movement responding to issues related to women's right in private and public spheres. Apart from the roles played and responses made by the women's movement around rehabilitation process (see Chapter Two) of women in the new Bangladesh, the women's movement has been very active in establishing rights within the realm of family – through its mobilisation in favour of anti-dowry bill, Uniform Family Code (UFC) and women's reproductive rights. Mobilisation and demonstration around right to paid work was highlighted by the state's declaration of 10%

quota for women in public and private job sectors. Demanding women's livelihood rights in sex-work was another remarkable area for the women's movement of Bangladesh i.e. in terms of articulating its dilemma and debates around body politics. Movement for women's right in politics was yet to be manifested through the demand for direct election in reserved seats both at local level bodies and the national Parliament. Like any other collective engagement, the the women's movement also had its share of loss and gain. The path was sometimes smooth and even, sometimes bumpy and difficult, but never completely futile or wasted. In a nutshell, the dowry movement was an achievement while demands for UFC remained unsuccessful. Meanwhile, despite the sex segregated sanctions of the Constitution, women's rights in paid work were established through 10% quota and in so-called 'masculine' job sectors. The issue of body politics was on the table too – both in terms of making it a part of public discourse via the debates around reproductive health and also modifying a tabooed area like 'sex work' by incorporating it into the mainstream the women's movement. Women obtained limited access to local level politics through the quota system. Despite relentless effort, the demands for direct election in reserved seats in of the Parliament could not be implemented at the national level.

What needs to be reiterated here that the feminist movement, while raising its voice to establish rights for women, were stalled by Constitutional sanctions. This very Constitution was drafted in the newly liberated Bangladesh and its legacy is carried on by the movement till date (2014). This discussion sheds light on the fact that woman's image has indeed been shaped by the formulations of both the state discourses as well as by the women's movement.

The internal dynamics of the entire rights discourse by the women's movement were largely fashioned by boundaries set for women within the Constitution. The fate of many a demand to ensure women's rights in family, work and politics were pre-destined and limited by the Constitution. The women's movement had to give in to reformist approaches instead of demanding a radical change in society's structure. Progress on the UFC and its current invalid state is the most important example of this compromise by the women's movement.

The Constitution, although very liberal and progressive, lacked certain conditions that were necessary for women's social position. The women's movement at the time the Constitution was formulated was not experienced enough to be farsighted but it would be too simplistic to think that they have not noticed the loopholes. It is possible that the women's movement in depending on political framers were not being unreasonable. It was a time when

everyone felt close to each other and the feeling of comradeship in building a new Bangladesh made them less vigilant to aggressively establish their concerns as separate agendas. Lack of data and factual evidence on women's position and status were a problem. Ironically, women being the fifty percent of the population could not carve out a space within the Constitution because of 'lack of data'.

The complex ambiguity of notions around women's body and sexuality led to even more contradictory responses during the War of Liberation. It is indeed important to consider the general reflection on women's image, which influenced framers' decisions. In spite of women's public role in the Liberation War, the image that persisted within the social mind-set was typical and the private/public divide was reflected in the legal frames work. Private matters like marriage, divorce and dowry and public matters like election, public office and reserved seats were separated. The state became secular but women remained bound by religious sanctions. Women's role in public work restricted access to non-traditional work i.e. not 'appropriate' for women. Anybody who is conversant with laws, could detect the contradictions between secularism and personal laws or reserved seats for women in Parliament. The framers of the Constitution kept these matters untouched and unresolved, as had their predecessors. Women were not considered as citizens with full legal rights as men were. The image of woman remained as traditional: 'pure and pristine' that represents the nation itself, in need of protection, bound by religious sanctions, restricted to the private, and denied public exposure despite her active agency both in the private and public spheres. It is, therefore, important to understand the rights discourse in the backdrop of image-construction of women and how the women's movement engaged itself in order to address these complexities.

Chapter Four

Secularism and Religion: Unresolved Questions in Bangladesh Feminism

I

Introduction

There are two things that have never been clearly resolved in the history of Bangladesh. First, the question of nationalism: how would we like to identify ourselves? How do we like to see ourselves in the international and national context? Do we want to identify ourselves as ‘Bengali’, which is largely language and culture based, or only in terms of citizenship, for example, as ‘Bangladeshi’¹⁷¹? Or, until very recently, do we conform to the common labelling by the west as a ‘moderate Muslim country? This last formulation leads to our second concern: where do we want to place our religious identities in the broader discourse of nationalism? What is the imagined national identity (Anderson, 1991) and the religious identity for us at the formal state level and at the level of our everyday imagination? How far is the question of religion accepted in the personal, public or political realms, or to what extent is religion – as imposed by the state apparatus– crucial to the women’s movement? Whether or not the formal religious position declared by the state poses a threat? How does the women’s movement react, deal and articulate its position in relation to religion? These are the main areas of exploration in this section.

Religion and nationalism have long been contested terms (Asad, 2003). Both the terms and their relationships have many facets. Ideas and concepts such as ‘Nation’, ‘Nationalism’, ‘Nation-state’, and ‘Secularism’ are largely ‘modern’ or western in origin. Evolution and growth of these ideas and acceptance of both at conceptual and institutional levels was the result of a long material and ideological historical process. As Mohsin (1997a) elaborates, during this process of evolution, the West had acquired a certain degree of cultural and political uniformity. However, the ex-colonial states did not undergo this process of

¹⁷¹The first Constitution of Bangladesh (1972) has stated equal rights to all citizens as ‘Bengalee’ (Bangali in Bangla). The Constitution of Bangladesh recognizes no minority in the country and contains no special provision for their protection and promotion of ethnic minority. This has led to deep grudge and dissatisfaction among the indigenous people commonly known as *Adivasi* (Mohsin, 2000). Bangladesh Adivasi Forum has long been demanding to amend the Article of the Constitution stating the people of Bangladesh as ‘Bengalees’ only and to incorporate the word *Adivasi* in the Constitution. However during an inter-ministerial meeting in 2011, the government has decided to erase the term *Adivasi* (indigenous people) from all the laws, policies and publications of Bangladesh Government. The term *Adivasi* will be replaced by *Khuddro Nritattik Jono Goshti* (ethnic minority) according to the 15th amendment of the Constitution of Bangladesh. See article 23A available at: http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/print_sections_all.php?id=367 for detail

transformation, “The nationalist leaders of these states borrowed the idea of ‘nation’ and ‘nation-state’ from the west and attempted to contrast homogeneous nation-states from the west out of societies that, in most cases, were heterogeneous in their composition” (Mohsin, 1997a).

‘Secularism’, in a similar fashion, has emerged as a concept that highlights this ‘worldly’ interpretation of everyday life in the West, espousing separation of private religious beliefs and civil laws for all citizens. Post-colonial nation states have borrowed this idea of ‘secularism’ and transplanted it in a context which is multicultural, multi-lingual and multi religious. In many cases, nationalism emerged from the decline of religion, while in other cases; it rose in an intensified religious climate. Further, to the understanding of religion and state, two main aspects – ‘politicisation’ of religion and ‘influence’ of religion in politics – have been evident in many countries (Brubaker, 2012; Chhachhi, 1991). Colonialism, globalisation, response to modernity etc. have often shaped the relationship between nation and religion.

While looking at feminism and nationalism in the third world, Kumari Jayawardena (1986) has observed that the relationship between the ideas of secularism and nationhood is a historical construct. At some point in history, a new national consciousness and modern secular political structures were forged in many third world countries. Jayawardena noted that the early fervour with which such ideals were pursued has somewhat diminished in many countries, while religion prevailed (Jayawardena, 1986). Revival of religion and excavation of old moral values, norms and cultural heritage became crucial in fashioning a national consciousness and in devising structures that would aid an escape from the domination of western political power. ‘Secularism’, thus is often interpreted in South Asia as being ‘religion neutral’ (*dharma niropekhho* in Bangla) that stresses on equal rights as citizens for all members of existing religion, and peaceful co-existence between them. Thus, as opposed to the west, religion was never completely disentangled from the civil state policies of many nation states of the region.

Streams of feminisms from all over the world had to negotiate with these two contentious but interrelated issues at every turn of national politics (Higgins, 1985; Toprak, 1994). Despite many differences, a ‘western secularist’ bias is present in both discussions of nationalism and feminism. This particular inclination might have long been obscuring interesting connections, affinities and negotiations between religion, nationalism and

feminism. The ‘Great Divide’ (Gellner, 1992) may have not been so ‘great’ in the long run. Religion has been gradually carving out spaces within the idea of modern nation state and crept into the secularist notions of nationalism and feminism. The interconnection of state-religion-feminism is of our next concern.

This chapter attempts to identify the forms and contents of feminist formulations around three selected events: i) state proclamations on religion, ii) change and shifts in dress and deportments and its socio-politico impact on women, and iii) looking at the case of Taslima Nasrin. The case of Taslima is selected mainly as an example of attack, or *fatwa* on women in the name of religion. Feminist responses towards these three events are the main focus of this chapter. I have also tried to incorporate arguments related to personal dispositions of the respondents around the question of religion in order to delineate the interaction between religion and feminist enunciations played out from the private to public arenas.

Before going into details of the religion question in particular, a brief introduction to the background of identity politics in Bangladesh is necessary. The controversial relationship between religion and national identity was often central to Bangladesh politics. Identity is never homogeneous –different layers of politics dominate the notion of identity. Identity is always shifting, flexible and contextual. Identity politics is also important in the context of crisis. At specific historical moments, identities are played out as a political tool. For example, in 1947, the identity politics revolved around the question of religion in the subcontinent and created Pakistan, which later proved to be based on a false notion of nationhood. Again in 1952, during the Language Movement of East Pakistan, the main focus was culture – more specifically, a syncretised (Sobhan, 1994) identity that highlighted both language and culture – that spearheaded the movement for autonomous national identity. In 1971, without clearly resolving all the ‘false notions’ around religion-based identity of nationhood, Bangladesh emerged as an independent country. ‘Secularism’ stood as one of the basic pillars of the first Constitution drafted in 1972, following the broad structures of Britain and India. In Bangladesh, the question around national and religious identities is historically merged with cultural, religious and linguistic identity (Murshid, 2006). The search for a national identity was fraught with uncertainties and ambivalence regarding religion and culture. The ‘Bengali Muslim’ identity remained complicated because the ‘Bengalee’ (*Bangali* in Bangla) culture dominates the region and Bengali Muslim identity remains as

the professed faith of the country's Muslim majority¹⁷². This duality fed into the psyche of Bangladesh nationhood. The reactions and responses towards religion, state discourse, feminism and popular understanding of mass were varied.

II

Rising Religiosity and Feminist Bargains: Interface between the State and the Women's Movement

Feminist responses and articulations around the question of religion are heterogeneous: mainly fashioned by influences of specific historical contexts, political preference or leanings of the particular organisations and personal disposition around religion. Inconsistency and contradiction inherent to the Constitution had to be borne by the women's movement. The ambiguity surrounding state approaches is even more pronounced in other sectors of the state mechanism and little gender sensitivity could be identified throughout the three decades. Although we have experienced many women-friendly progressive policies and laws by the military governments during the late seventies and eighties, the same period also witnessed the repealing of secularism and the declaration of Islam as state religion. It was during the nineties (democracy under two female leaders) that there was significant rise in *fatwa* attack on women, an increase in observance of *parda* (head covering, hijab, *burka*) among women and a fundamental Islamic look (manifested in beard, long *kurta* and head turban and caps) in men became visible in the public arena¹⁷³. The recent demonstrations by Hefazat e Islam¹⁷⁴ in Dhaka in May, 2013 (The Daily Star, 2013 May 6) is marked by this visible religiosity exposing the political nuances of religion.

Apparently, parallel to the secular identity, Islamic norms and sanctions continued to influence popular understanding and were largely shaping the ideology around women's purity, boundaries of respectability and deportment. Global religious revivalism has also fed

¹⁷² According to the data of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS, 2011) 89.7% population of the country are Muslims.

¹⁷³ Personal observation. Also see Rozario (2006); Azim & Banu (2009) and Azim & Sultan (2010) for cross country detail.

¹⁷⁴ Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh, also known as Hifazat-e-Islam Bangladesh is an Islamist group in Bangladesh, formed in January 2010. This group was formed to protest against what it considers to be anti-Islamic policies of the Bangladesh government. It urged them to affirm the Islamic values of the country. In May 2013, they made headlines after holding a huge demonstration and asking the government to take action against the Shahbag protesters, who are demanding capital punishment of Bangladesh liberation war criminals. In the same year, Hefazat-e-Islam presented the government with a 13-point charter, which includes a demand to ban women's right to work outside, execution of atheist bloggers who insult the Islamic prophet Muhammad, and stopping the Shahbag protests. See The Daily Star, May 6, 2013

into the national fabric. Local political manoeuvring, exposure to Islamic countries in Middle East or Malaysia due to labour export mingled with this global revivalism and created a space for Islamic manifestation. These were again shaped and influenced by the state policy, dress and deportments of the female leaders and politicians while they were in or out of power. Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina and most of the other female ministers of the both the cabinets cover their heads in public or use *chador* (Jeffery & Basu, 1998; Bayes & Tohidi, 2001).

Multiple factors were at work in regard to this changing discourse on nation, religion and their relationship with feminism over the first three decades. A series of changes and shifts took place in post-liberation Bangladesh under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. As mentioned earlier, Bangladesh began its journey with a vision of a moderately socialist programme and spelled out ‘secularism’ as one of the main pillars of the state ideology. After Mujib’s assassination in 1975, Zia-ur-Rahman set the country on its pro-Islamic and Pro-US course (Kabeer, 1989). He projected himself as a modernist; espousing progressive versions of Islam as well as bringing changes at policy level that was conducive to the women’s movement. Change was brought to the Constitution and ‘secularism’ was replaced by Islamic proclivity. After Zia’s assassination in 1981, Ershad came to power and throughout his regime; one consistent feature was increasing dependence on foreign aid. As observed by Rehman Sobhan (1982), a significant change took place in the sources of aid during the eighties. Aid from India and the socialist bloc decreased after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman while, gradually, aid from developed countries including the wealthy Middle Eastern countries – OPEC (The Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) and Saudi Arabia started to infiltrate Bangladesh’s economy (Sobhan, 1982). Massive degrees of NGOisation, growth in the private sectors and export oriented economic development led to many changes. ‘Islam’ was declared as state religion during this time. Within decades, a ‘Muslim majority population or country’ has rapidly changed into a generic Muslim country/nation. Wider endorsement and mainstreaming of this altered discourse by the two kinds of politics and cultural transformation has had – and continues to create interference in the progress of women’s rights. Feminists or the women’s movement has found itself fighting increasingly difficult battles to assert its agenda on rights, freedom etc.

Religion has always been used as a political tool in Bangladesh and continues to be so to gain popular mandate. These factors have somehow shaped the responses of the women’s

movement which were often diverse and varied. The ambivalence with respect to religion vis a vis politics and everyday experience of women remained critical to the movement. Seeking an answer to all these issues is not a small task.

Conflict and Confrontation; Conciliation and Compromise: A Feminist Bargain

The women's movement was in a broad-based consensus regarding the role of state up against religion. Secularism and separation of religion from the state was a common demand. Feminist formulations around religion are also not devoid of analysis. The politicisation of religion was identified by all the organisations as one of the major point of criticism. The rise of fundamentalism or extreme religious expression in public life and politics during the nineties was identified as the outcome of global and national interactions. Some identified this overt rise of religiosity as a 'backlash'. Despite the fact that fundamentalism has gained popularity in Bangladesh, Firdous Azim from NP doesn't see this development as a 'backlash'. Firdous believes that fundamentalist elements were always there in the broader socio-political discourse of Bangladesh. This 'rise' was not a new phenomenon to her and the '*mollahs*' alone cannot be blamed for this. Jamat e Islam¹⁷⁵ and the allied forces were defeated in 1971 but they were reinstated through state processes during the martial law and also via democratic regimes.

Firdous contends that both the political parties, Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), have built alliances with religion-based political forces during the early nineties against Ershad regime (three-party alliance by AL, BNP and Jammata-e-Islam). It was not merely an alliance between religious and military forces but the very democratic process invited platforms for religion-based politics. Jamaat-e-Islam and its alliances gradually became a legitimate democratic force, carving out a space for itself in the ministry as well.

I am sort of confused whether to identify this rise as a defeat. If it means that a democratic environment would make available opportunities and rights to religious forces, then what have I to say against it? If Jamaat wins in the election and can build up alliances with dominant political forces, then I must admit that Jamaat has legitimately earned a democratic

¹⁷⁵Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, previously known as Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh and Jamaat for short, is the largest Islamist political party in Bangladesh. The Jamaat stood against the independence of Bangladesh and opposed the break-up of Pakistan. It collaborated with the Pakistani Army in its operations against Bengali nationalists, intellectuals and minority Hindus.

space for itself. We have allowed this to happen and now I don't see any difference between 'they' and 'we'. (Firdous Azim, Interview dated: April 2011)

Maleka Begum's reflections echo the same concern. According to Maleka, the women's movement also had its weaknesses. They turned a deaf ear to many crucial issues and did not protest when they should have. She feels that they should have put up a resistance when *madrassa*¹⁷⁶ education was incorporated into mainstream education system, and that they should have protested when political parties formed alliances with the Islamist conservative right wing parties. She feels equally responsible, on behalf of the movement, for strengthening the religion based compartment of politics in the main political arena. Religion has always been used by the political parties and the women's movement is also indirectly responsible by not addressing the issue properly. The women's movement at the same time is found to be negotiating with the broader political environment. In the name of strategisation, the women's movement have also been treading the field of religion with great caution – always anxious not to portray themselves as anti-religious and antagonize the general mass. Maleka says that this perceived fear and apprehension have increasingly curbed the role of the movement into a continuous state of compromise and concession. The contemporary women's movement (post 2000) is very careful and refrains from getting into any conflict with the state. She finds it difficult to accept the current trends of the women's movement which are often portrayed as strategic, constructive, functional and pragmatic. The main strategy of the contemporary women's movement is to integrate with the political process through sharing, lobbying and to compromise with the stakeholders rather than to confront them. Self-criticism and disappointment is visible when Maleka speaks about the current 'docile' attitude of the women's movement. She thinks that the apprehended fear of being alienated from the people or from the state because of the religion question has in fact alienated the women's movement from its true essence.

To me this is nothing but opportunism. I wonder how far all these political leaders were really religious, how far the general mass is concerned about all these religious games and portrayals? Think about Ershad, the most corrupted man in our political history, has used a *pir*¹⁷⁷ to gain popular support, was overthrown by mass movement and was again reinstated in politics. What had religion to do with all these things? Political regimes following Ershad

¹⁷⁶See Barakat, Ara, Taheruddin, Zahid & Badiuzzaman (2011) for detail.

¹⁷⁷*Pir* or *Peer*, a Persian word literally means 'old' or senior person. A *Pir* usually has authorisations to be a teacher for one (or more) paths. *Pir*, usually a man has followers. In Bangladesh culture and politics *Pir* has found to be playing significant role at different point of time for instance, *Chormonai Pir*, *Aatroshi Pir* etc.

maintained the same principle of using religion as a political tool. Why should the women's movement give in to this 'politics' in the name of strategy? (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March 2011)

Despite the agreement in favour of secularism on state level politicisation of religion, a voice of caution and concern was also raised. According to Firdous, the women's movement has always argued for separation between personal religious choice and politics. But it is a very difficult and delicate balance for many to keep them separate in everyday life. She feels that there exists a large section of the population to whom religion is important and we just cannot ignore that fact. Apprehension, anxiety and dilemma about the ways to deal with the religion issue are evident from her words:

To my experience many Muslims believe that the Quran cannot be discriminatory to women. Again we are in a dilemma—we do not want to make use of religion, neither do we want to reject it. I am really not sure how to deal with the issue. As I said earlier that religion remains an unresolved arena both in national contexts, as well as within the women's movement. Actually everybody wants equal rights but nobody wants to reject religion. (Firdous Azim, interview dated: April 23, 2011)

Maleka and Firdous bring up a very important issue here. Firstly, the the women's movement has almost always stated (from the interview of all key figures in the movement) that they prefer religion to be separate from state and kept within the realm of the personal, but at different points in time it fell short of its expectation in terms of protesting and questioning the controversial dealings of political parties in power in relation to religion. On the other hand, religion was always a part of the everyday lives of women and men in Bangladesh. The women's movement has failed to address this reality properly being largely busy ascribing to Western secular ideas. The state, however was always clear about 'secularism', not in the form of separation of religion from state but rather as the embeddedness and harmonious co-existence of all religions, following a reformist approach to bring changes in different religions when or where necessary. Personal law was thus never replaced by civil code by any of the governments, not even the first government of Bangladesh led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. CEDAW has not been fully ratified during any of the governments till today (2014). Most of the policies related to women's empowerment remained mostly inconsistent, sketchy and reformist in nature largely due to this duality.

This dilemma is not new. The Fourth United Nations World Conference in Beijing saw intense ideological dispute and conflict over the 'religion' issue. Participants of the

World Conference remained divided on issues related to religion and sexuality. The contradiction between their own beliefs in equal rights for women and the official positions of their religious authorities remained unresolved at global level as well (Bayes & Tohidi, 2001). The dilemma and difference of opinion is even more prominent in other instances in Bangladesh. Lack of clarity in conceptualisation of the terms used in the Constitution and in public discourse led to further confusion and misunderstanding which are still a critical concern for the women's movement.

In connection to this, Mahmuda Islam from Women for Women feels that the women's movement has never taken any initiative to explain their position around the question of secularism or Islam. She opines:

We have to admit that the women's movement has failed to clarify its position around religion to the people at large. They could not explain to the public that secularism does not mean rejection of religion; on the contrary, secularism allows space for all religions with the spirit of equality. (Mahmuda Islam, interview dated: March, 2011)

The women's movement and its lack of embeddedness in broader national politics led to challenges that are difficult to surmount. It had failed to foresee how religion was shaping politics, policies and discourses and therefore was unable to negotiate the terrain. Ultimately, inability to realize many demands for women's rights could be blamed on two issues: a) The history of the women's movement in the subcontinent—its rise from charity and often non-political origins—resulting in being exclusively focused on women-specific issues; or b) the women's movement in the newly formed Bangladesh being occupied with addressing pressing women's issues of the time, so much so that it never had the chance to engage with the broader politics of the land. Be it lack of farsightedness, occasional reluctance or at times naivety on the part of the women's movement (and its divided opinions), in reflection it appears to have been unable to address and/or confront forces that would influence the fate of women's rights in Bangladesh. On one hand Bangladesh could have been constitutionally or even philosophically a 'secular' state to begin with, since it has a history of secular culture (in spirit), but again that 'secularism' has to be understood in terms of positive freedom where all religions are given equal rights, not in the western sense where religion is kept outside the civil realm. But common Bangladeshis wouldn't be able to define the content or the boundaries of 'secularism' if they were asked to do so. It is deeply religious and a practicing religious population and 'secularism' as a concept is not easily translatable to common

people. Therefore, the women's movement probably felt this tension and difficulties regarding religion and rights from early on.

The women's movement has always struggled for equal rights of women in every sphere of life. The demands of the women's movement ranged from equal rights in family, work and politics, a notion which was often perceived as 'radical', challenging the socio-religious traditional boundaries. Recent global-religious-political trends linked with modernisation, globalisation and westernisation has led to conflict between the old and the new. The conflict and clash was manifested both in the national and international arena. Bangladesh's feminist forces have been challenging the conservative plea to restore traditional order through religious sanctions. This particular position is generally perceived and stigmatized as anti-marriage, anti-family, anti-natural procreation, pro-death and, in a nut shell, anti-religion. Conservative religious alliances are found to be in opposition to the feminist formulations regarding women's body and sexuality, abortion, equal right in family and inheritance; sometimes even against the issue of 'women's rights as human rights'¹⁷⁸. Dealing with this 'inevitable' divergence is a great challenge for the movement. It is evident from the respondents that despite their personal agreement with religious beliefs, feminists are seen and judged as opposing religion. This 'misconception' has created a breach between the women's movement and the general masses.

The main point of departure between religion and feminism is the attempt to keep it outside the personal sphere which does not necessarily denote rejection of religion.

In response to this dilemma, Roushan Jahan provides a note of concern. According to Roushan, whatever the bargain, religion is not to be considered as devoid of politics and the women's movement should be very careful to recognise and fight the caveats as and when necessary. Rise of extremist religiosity is a threat to the women's movement and they should always keep their vigilance so as to act against any such intrusion in the mainstream politics.

¹⁷⁸ Proposed Nari Neeti or 'National Women Development Policy (NWDP)' since 1997 has been facing resistance from political and religious forces. When revised WDP was again proposed during 2011, mass mobilisation was staged mainly led by the Islamist and allied parties followed by *hartal* and militant resistance. Finally WDP 2011 was resolved with amendments. The area of equal rights in inheritance is still kept blurred in the current policy. See Gayen (2011, May) for detail.

Religion, Constitutional Amendments and Feminist Responses

The Bangladesh Constitution has been amended fifteen times till 2011. This section will only concentrate on the 5th and 8th amendments, which are related to religion. The process of Islamisation started to surface in Bangladesh around the late seventies. From November 1975 to 1977, when Bangladesh was under martial law, President and Chief Martial Law Administrator Lieutenant General Zia ur Rahman passed a presidential decree and removed the principle of ‘secularism’ from the preamble of the Constitution and replaced it with "*Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah*" (5th Amendment, 1977). The decree was later legitimized by the second parliament of Bangladesh.¹⁷⁹

Despite all weaknesses and caveats, secularism is perceived by the women’s movement as less rigid and restrictive to women’s mobility and freedom. Separation between state and religion is found to be largely and generally espoused by the women’s movement. Secularism is believed to offer relatively open spaces to contest and oppose anti-women legislation or popular sanctions. This amendment was seen as detrimental to the women’s movement by feminists. However, it is also understood that secularism per se is not the sole panacea for women’s rights. Secularism as such can remain rhetorical and ornamental to state discourse. In its pursuit of political legitimacy, international aid and support, the state professes to believe in both gender equality as well as its negation (Kabeer, 1989). These contradictory roles of the state continue to present an immense challenge to the women’s movement. The women’s movement also had to constantly negotiate with these shifting ideologies and a need for strategy thus continued to play a vital role in the women’s movement. Although most of the respondents expressed their anxiety and resistance to the repealing of ‘secularism’, little active mobilisation and protest took place due to general

¹⁷⁹ The First Constitution of Bangladesh included secularism as a key political philosophy based in the spirit of the war of independence. After the assassination of Shiekh Mujibur Rahman in a military coup in 1975, the army- led government brought amendment to the Constitution’s guiding principle and penned Bismillahir Rahmanhir Rahim, or Faith in Allah, into it in 1979. Simultaneously, religion- based parties were legalised and ushered into politics in 1979, which is known as Fifth Amendment. In January 10, 2010, The Supreme Court of Bangladesh has imposed a ban on political parties that propagate Islamic ideology, reverting to the first Constitution of 1972. The apex court got rid of bulk of the fifth constitutional amendment, 1979, including provisions that had allowed religious political parties to prosper, and legitimised military dictatorship. Law minister Shafique Ahmed said “secularism will be reinstated in the Constitution” in line with the Supreme Court ruling. According to the law minister, “The amendments that were enforced by military orders from August 15, 1975, to April 9, 1979, have been declared illegal and repealed by the Supreme Court,” However, the 8th amendment made by the second military- backed government during Ershad’s regime will not be affected by the court verdict. See Article by Selim Samad, First published in *The Mail Today*, page 9, July 31, 2010.

political unrest and heightened restrictions during that time. More pronounced reactions were visible against the 8th Amendment.

Proclamation, ordinance, change and shifts around making religion (Islamic religion) the core of the official discourse were all largely associated with the non-democratic army-backed government (1975-1990). Resistance and challenge to such initiatives were thus mixed with the nation's desire for democracy. It is important to note that the contestation between religion and feminism may not always surface in active resistance. Analysis of responses also reveals that despite the fact that secularism is perceived as crucial to the women's movement, the issue had been ignored or side tracked in 1977. The 5th Amendment was a complete reversal from the original Constitutional declaration but created little agitation among the women's groups and organisations.

In 1988, through the 8th Amendment declared by Major General H M Ershad, 'Islam' was proclaimed the official/state religion of Bangladesh. The 8th amendment declared 'The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in the Republic'¹⁸⁰. However, in spite of this declaration, the official attempt to present a more overt Islamic image as the predominant national identity in Bangladesh has been largely muted and cautious. The official discourse is marked by the absence of any specific attack or restriction on women's rights or on women's dress and deportment like other Islamic countries (Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia). Presence of different and contradictory ideologies, along with a lack of clear ordinance or prescription displayed by the state to render its Islamic goal, was actually beneficial to women as a category and to the women's movement at large (Kabeer, 1989).

Ershad, compared to Zia, had to invest more to gain popular support and legitimize his position. Islamisation was a common tool used by both. By the time mid-eighties, an anti-Ershad movement was gaining force. A series of *hartals*, strikes and mass demonstrations were taking place, led by the three party alliances (BNP, AL and Jamat), demanding elections under 'Caretaker/Neutral Government'¹⁸¹. Elections were held in March 1988 and Ershad's Party *Jana dal* swept the polls. It was a meaningless victory. The main opposition parties boycotted the election (cited in Kabeer 1989). A wide spectrum of women's organisations,

¹⁸⁰ See the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, as modified up to 31st May 2000, GOB, Dhaka

¹⁸¹The Caretaker Government of Bangladesh is a form of government system in which the country is ruled by a selected government for an interim period during the transition from one elected government to another, after the completion of tenure of the former. As the outgoing government hands over its power, the Caretaker Government comes into place. Bangladesh had four such governments during 1990, 1996, 2001, and 2008.

supported by civil society, prominent intellectuals and ex freedom fighters, opposed and protested against the Ershad regime, while Naripokkho took the lead in protesting against the 8th amendment. The women's movement became entangled with the anti-Ershad movement through its protests against the declaration of a state religion.

Defiance and Spontaneity; Strategisation and Negotiations: Role of Naripokkho in Protesting 8th Amendment

In spite of the broad based consensus across organisations and individuals being raised about the separation of religion and state, the internal dialectics were different and divergent from each other. This proclamation was seen as a violation of the liberal nationalism which brought Bangladesh into existence, generally articulated as 'the spirit of 1971' (Kabeer, 1989)—*Muktijudhher Chetona* in Bangla. However, the reactions of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) or Women for Women (WfW) were more cautious and tentative at the beginning, while Naripokkho (NP) reacted spontaneously with more vigour and zeal. The difference was largely manifested in terms of intensity, strength and passion involved in the process of resistance. NP organised a large demonstration accompanied by mass gathering, procession, press conference and finally a writ petition was issued against the state. According to Shireen Huq from NP, as soon as they came to know about the declaration, they started to plan a public reaction and protest. They approached other women's organisation like BMP but as it was the month of Ramadan, the month of fasting for Muslims, they were hesitant to do anything rash. After a series of internal discussion meetings NP decided to move forward 'on their own'.

We were not against Islam. We did not ever use the word 'fundamentalism'. Our position was very clear in the sense we were against mixing religion with state affairs. We were actually challenging the very nature of the state, which was not maintaining its civil role but upholding narrow religion based ideology. We thought that if religion (any religion) is made part of the state then it would be detrimental for women. It is not that we were worried that women would be pushed into the home and forced to wear *burka*. The point was about freedom and choice and our right as a citizen. We were fighting for our right to religious practices (and non-practices) across all religions and, most importantly, the right to express as woman, the way we want to. (Shireen Huq, interview dated: July, 2011)

There are many fissures and caveats within the women's movement. Despite consensus and broad agreement on certain issues, not all were ready to take challenging and radical steps. NP, a relatively new organisation with young members, and therefore little

experience with the strategies of movements, thought it appropriate to act when others had decided to be cautious and strategic. Older organisations were more careful, taking cognizance of social, cultural, religious and political implications of visible protest against a military government during the month of fasting (protesting under the coalition of *Oikkyobodhho Nari Shomaj*).



Figure 18: Meeting at the Shaheed Minar and Procession led by Naripokkho protesting 8th amendment of the Constitution of Bangladesh.

Source: 17 and 24 April respectively in 1988, The Daily Shangbad

New Strategies; New Ways

NP, through its social network and personal contacts, managed to mobilise a large number of people in their protest meeting at *Shaheed Minar*, with prominent figure like Ahmed Sharif¹⁸², *Muktijudhha Chetona Bikash Kendro*, *Nari Shonghoti*, Centre for Social Studies and other organisations. The young members came up with innovative ideas for the meeting and added music, song and recitation to enliven their demonstration. They made a great effort to sketch their programme in a style which had never been done before. However, lack of knowledge and experience led to certain oversights. They were negligent in keeping any record of the demonstration. They thought action is more important than record keeping.

It was only later that NP realised that record keeping and archiving is very important for the women's movement. They had their *very own* and first procession from *Shaheed Minar* towards Press Club. They were the first to introduce a fifteen feet long banner—the biggest ever in a street demonstration in Dhaka city. However, they forgot to cut holes in the banner and the wind actually pushed the banner forward and the procession of 150 women almost sailed to the Press Club in record time. The demonstration was a militant one with women shouting slogans like: “*Jar dharama jar kachhey, rashtr ki bolar acchey, Dharma niye rajneti cholbena*” (Religion is a personal matter, state has nothing to say about it. No political games are acceptable around religion, *translation mine*).

Later, other women's organisations under the banner of *Okkyobodhho Nari Shomaj* and students' wings from various political parties also joined and started to collect signatures in favour of a petition against the state decision. Demonstrations and protests continued to take place at various important points of Dhaka city and finally NP issued a writ petition in July 1988 against the amendment declaring 'Islam' as state religion. Members from NP think that the way they reacted was unique and an act of great courage and defiance. They also believe that sometimes it is necessary to be rash and emotional rather than being strategic and prudent.

¹⁸²Ahmed Sharif, Professor of Dhaka University, philosopher, critic, writer and scholar of Bengali literature. Sharif is widely recognized as one of the most outspoken atheist and radical thinkers of Bangladesh. His words and writings have often created furore in academia. He was controversial mostly because of his outspoken views against the establishment, intellectuals and political leaders and above all against narrow religious outlooks. He was often blacklisted from the national media across political parties. He died in 1999.



Figure 19: *Oikkyobaddho Nari Shomaj* protesting 8th amendment

Source: Mahila Samachar, Bulletin, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (May-June, 1988)

Differences and Dilemmas: Loss and Gain

The enthusiasm, passion and excitement of NP were not shared by all. BMP felt that NP was being hasty and irresponsible without any future planning on their part. BMP remained indecisive at the beginning and wanted NP to join in their programme. BMP was planning to stage a protest against the state religion bill with bigger participation from all other organisations and was worried about demonstrating a divided women's forum on the issue. BMP approached NP asking them to wait and join the united programme soon to be staged. But NP was already on the move and could hardly agree with this slow and measured approach:

We had no means to postpone our programme. We had our entire programme chalked out in great detail. The announcement of the programme was already on air and we had no intention to back out. We could not agree with this concern about a divided movement. We argued for a more positive interpretation, for instance diversity and multiplicity of voices, which is not at all detrimental to the women's movement. (Shireen Huq, interview dated: July, 2011)

The way NP handled the protest 'on their own', accrued a variety of responses from within the movement. Some thought the steps were bold and brave; some criticized it as reckless, lacking farsightedness and discretion. Some even thought that the movement and legal steps taken by NP was not conducive to the the women's movement. Interestingly, each of the respondents shared their personal view which was mixed and does not always reflect

their broad institutional position. Both BMP and WfW thought that NP was not sensible enough and should have been more careful with their strategies.

Najma Chowdhury posits that the reactions and responses of the the women's movement are often dependent on various factors. The 5th amendment through which 'secularism' was withdrawn from the Constitution was a major setback in the sense that religion could henceforth become a tool to control women. But the the women's movement remained muffled in its response to this critical amendment. Najma opined that a lack of democracy and prevalence of political uncertainty muted the nature of confrontation with the state. Both the Constitutional amendments were seen as restrictive to women's space and in reality was all a 'political gimmick'. However, a more hard line resistance was observed in protesting the 8th amendment. Despite NP's brave and daring response, she observed certain inadequacies in the process. Media coverage of NP's procession highlighted women having cold drinks during *Ramadan*. This picture of women went against the movement as a whole and the movement lost some ground gained earlier (Najma Chowdhury¹⁸³, interview dated June 2011). Despite the fact that the protest against state religion was a legitimate one, the way the protest was handled by NP was not favourable to the women's movement and "nothing much was gained through this protest" (Mahmuda Islam, interview dated: March 2011).

Unlike NP, BMP and WfW had a more cautious and careful attitude towards protesting against this particular state decision. They preferred to take time and gauge the implications of any sort of rushed protest. One big concern of these organisations was to stage a protest that was, collective, sustainable and had a broad base. Moreover, Islam as state religion was not perceived as much of a threat to them. BMP had long term experience with working on controversial issues like Uniform Family Code, challenging religion-based personal law and they had little reason not to support NP. The state had already gone through a process of non-secularisation which was not protested duly during the announcement of the 5th amendment. Reactions by NP were thus seen as an isolated, emotionally charged episode which could not really accrue any benefit for the movement. Moreover, once a case is under the jurisdiction of the courts nothing can be done around that issue till further notice. Nothing has happened on state religion till date (2011) –“We still have 'Islam' as our state religion and I wonder what difference it has made after all!” (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March, 2011)

¹⁸³ She was affiliated with Women for Women at the time.

Ayesha Khanam from BMP, on the other hand, thinks that NP took a bold step, however weak; their demonstration was a unique one. She has mixed feelings towards NP and its protest.

We were not as adventurous as Naripokkho was. We thought that whatever we do we should be able to continue the resistance. We always had a strategy to create public opinion first before moving into open demonstration. What NP did was a one stop protest. We could not carry it further or failed to really integrate the entire the women's movement in favour of the cause. I think they were young and immature but nevertheless they had a legitimate cause to fight for. (Ayesha Khanam, interview dated: October 2011)

Despite the critique, NP gained a lot, both as an organisation and as a broader part of the women's movement. They suddenly came into lime light and were perceived as a legitimate anti-Ershad force. Their position as anti-establishment was strengthened through this demonstration against the state. NP had always been saying that they were not attached to mainstream political parties. All major women's organisations had their overt or covert links with mainstream politics, but NP still claims that they have none. This non-attachment and apparent political neutrality led to ambivalence and NP had to face much criticism for whatever position they took on their own. Lack of labelling from any mainstream political party was seen as a weakness and NP was under constant apprehension and speculation regarding their intentions and goals. Whatever the criticism and apprehension, NP was very excited and happy about their activities during military oppression and domination of the late eighties. They still feel that the protest against the 8th Amendment was a legitimate and valid one, both for themselves and for the movement.

All three organisations discussed here were fully aware of religion being used as a political tool by the state, but the strategies taken to tackle the issue are different for each.

The honest confession regarding sharing the responsibility of letting religion being used by the state was revealing indeed. The women's movement seemed to be aware that although the process of Islamisation had been initiated during the military rule, the women's movement was also responsible for what had happened in the long run. It is also important to note that patriarchal, misogynist state discourses are not the sole prerogative of male or military leaders. Female leaders under democracy are found to be equally responsible of producing and reproducing androcentric state discourses. Women leaders coming into power through a democratic process are also responsible for perpetuating the same ethos through

their silence, dress code, attire and deportment (Ayesha Khanam & Mahmuda Islam, interview dated: 2011).

III

Politics of Dress and Deportment: A Feminist Critique

The importance of the issue of dress in the political discourse does not only pertain to women, or even to religious dress codes, and has had a historical role to play in various national and anti-colonial movements (Azim & Banu 2009; Rozario, 2006; Amin, 1996; Sarker, 1989). In the erstwhile East Pakistan, power struggle between the two wings of Pakistan played out in the field of culture, with language being the main issue of contention along with sari in black and white during 21st February *probhatpheri*¹⁸⁴, or with festive colours of red and yellow during *Pohela Boishakh*, bindi or teep, as well as Tagore's songs and dance (Sobhan, 1994). In the struggle of Bangladesh's identity, cultural considerations were also expressed through women's dress. Over the decades women's dress has gone through a series of changes and shifts. In its journey, women's dress has been expressed in a range of forms, from *sari* to *shalwar kameez*, jeans and short *fatua* or *kurti*, head cover, *hijab*, *burka*, *chador* or *orna*. Despite evolution of women's dress, whether deliberate or unconscious, the focus remained on chastity and modesty.

The above statement brings us to another area of observation and rising concern (from the voices of the women's movement) related to increased use of 'Islamic dress' by both men and women in the recent past (nineties onwards). This change, particularly in the donning of *hijab* in various forms and at various degrees of intensity since the nineties has been perceived as the rise of 'Islamic' dress in the context of Bangladesh by most feminists.

Given all the factors influencing the interface of religion and feminism, the women's movement is perturbed by the rising religiosity (in this case, rising manifestation of Islamic dress with more and more women adopting the head cover and *hijab*), which, in their opinion, is critical for women's liberation and free expression. However, it is also true that the manifestation of and intentions behind this rise in terms of modes of dress like *hijab* and *burka* is not unilinear. Research (Rozario, 2006; Azim & Banu, 2009; Azim & Sultan, 2010)

¹⁸⁴The morning rally held with the sunrise on 21st February in memory of martyrs of the Language Movement. Women and men clad in black and white with flower reeds walk in procession, with the song (*amar bhaiyer rokte rangano...*) on their lips, heading towards the *Shaheed Minar*, the central memorial for the martyrs.

has revealed that change in dress and deportments are not necessarily indicative of seclusion and confinement. It might be just the opposite. *Parda* and *burka* have been found to be used as a tool to claim new spaces offered against the backdrop of the global market. Other factors influencing dress or other manifestations of rising religious fervour were not only induced by forces affecting the global scenario, like the international labour market or by 9/11, but also by the nature and character of internal political dimensions as discussed above.

Dress: A Political Equation

Apart from official discourses around religion reflected in our constitution, or alliances with Islamist countries, the role of major political parties in their attempts to build political alliances with the right wing religion based parties, with the goal of securing votes, was identified as a major challenge for the women's movement. The increasing observance of *parda* and religious extremism in recent years is considered as a backlash by Najma, a neo-conservative trend to push women back to the hearth. She is not so convinced about the idea of *hijab* offering more space in public for women. In her opinion, *hijab* is not just a choice of dress. Countries like Iran, Maldives, and Malaysia have made negotiations with *hijab* and *parda* and *cover* has not been restrictive to their mobility or participation in the public. Najma thinks such negotiations are not possible here in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has a cultural history where certain kinds of clothing are a part of its heritage and the historical context of interaction between religion and culture and is not same as in other Muslim countries.

The cultural history of secularism is rather strong in Bangladesh. The women's movement would have to work out means how to negotiate with this Islamic 'backlash' and strategize its activism in the near future. (Najma Chowdhury, interview dated: June 2011)

Recent changes in dress code, including the rise of *fatwa*, are not isolated, stray events. *Fatwa* is also not to be seen as a new and recent phenomenon. The recent trends (since early nineties) are inextricably linked with political, economic and diplomatic policies adopted by the state. Both national and international influences have impacted the manifestation of *fatwa* and *parda*. According to feminists, clothing is not to be taken lightly as only personal choice, devoid of any linkages with multiple factors in the society. Dress and clothing is a political statement and has often been used as a tool to mobilise political support. Dress and deportments are significant signals of one's identity and a reflection of one's own culture. Dress reflects the entire notion of sexuality and society's attitude towards women's body. Raushon shared her opinion on the politics of dress and deportment.

Dress is one kind of branding of one's own identity. I am strongly against two kinds of dresses: Bikini and *Burka*—both bear the same connotation for me. Both reflect the same notions attached to women's body and sexuality. I have a very clear position regarding dress. *Burka* to me is a political statement in Bangladesh, loudly declaring one's religious identity only. I don't take it lightly...Although I am a Muslim, I have many other identities and the most important identity to me is that I am a human being. I do not believe in highlighting any single identity at expense of others. For example, I also do not believe that Bengali women are to wear saris only. Democracy means freedom to choose and that space has to be there in every sphere of life. As long as there are no official sanctions on dress, it is fine, but the women's movement has to be very careful about this. (Roushan Jahan, interview dated: July 2011)

She also warns that if choice of dress continues to highlight one particular religion, then this might pose as a threat to the women's movement in future. Freedom to choose one's clothing should not be allowed in case of the neo-conservative forces gaining popularity.

The issue of internal politics and dress statement by the women leaders of the country has also come up as a critical area for discussion. According to the respondents, women in the national media, especially newscasters, were instructed not to wear *teep* (bindi) and to cover their head during the month of *Ramadan*. It was also observed with scepticism that (during the eighties, especially during the anti-Ershad movement, leading female politicians like Matia Chowdhury, Sajeda Chowdhury and many more were active in street demonstration without any head covering. They started to cover their heads as soon as they assumed power and joined the National Parliament during the nineties¹⁸⁵. National politics, as stated before, can be seen using religion based identity through matters of dress and deportment. The movement has observed how posters and festoons of Sheikh Hasina (during 1996) in Hajj attire infested the billboards of Dhaka city. However, critique of dress and the anxiety and apprehension around the issue was never articulated or resisted by the women's movement in any form of public demonstration. Organisations and individuals had their opinions, internal debates and criticisms, most of which hardly ever surfaced in public. The women's movement also kept pace with this stream of compromises and concessions. They refrained from voicing open disapproval. The two female leaders and female cabinet members have perpetuated an image which is perceived as negative for the women's movement. But silence from the women's movement is, in retrospect, seen as a failure by the key figures from the

¹⁸⁵ Personal observation

movement. Organisations like BMP categorically stated: “We in BMP never cover our head.” (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March, 2011; Ayesha Khanam, interview dated: July 2011)

Disputes around the issue of ‘Parda’

The debate on *parda* remains a crucial one for the women’s movement. Dress and deportment represents a range of issues which are often contradictory to each other. *Parda* can be a symbol and a statement used to portray conservativeness, decency, alongside one particular religious identity (Brooks, 1995; Hussain, 1984). On the other hand it can be understood as a tool ensuring mobility and to curb political support, reclaim national identity, to resist Westernisation and imperialist cultural invasion (Mernissi, 1987; Ahmed, 1992; Ahmad & Reifeld, 2004; Jayawardena, 1986). Mode of dressing has also been used as a means of protest and negotiation even within the women’s movement. During the protest against the 8th amendment, debates and divisions surfaced around the question of dress and strategies to negotiate the issue of dress as a tool were discussed and debated. Despite the fact that many within the women’s movement were worried about insurgence of conservative Islamic forces, they were careful not to make any overt statements against the dress issue. Differences, dilemmas and divergences within the women’s movement are visible around dress. It is clear from the statement below that the women’s movement had both a specific and a general position regarding the dress and religion issue.

.. although all of us were fighting against the 8th amendment, we had our differences of opinion. The united front of the women’s movement was arguing that, as Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country, it is absolutely unnecessary to declare Islam as its state religion. Our position was not at all along this line. We were not talking about majority-minority issue. Many amongst us wanted to use a poster of a *burka* clad women with a big cross sign (negation sign: X) over her image¹⁸⁶. I was against using this poster. The point we were trying to make was that our fight was not against any particular religion or deportment or dress code for women alone. Our fight is for secularism. Our fight was to challenge the position of the state in relation to women. Our point of departure was to challenge the way the state was defining women, what are its responsibilities towards its citizen; how their rights as citizens are being curtailed through state declaration and so on. (Shireen Huq, interview dated: July, 2011)

¹⁸⁶A group of young feminists represented by Lila Rashid, Shameem Akhter, and others came up with this poster designed by Dilara Begum Jolly and Dhali Al Mamoon. This group used to bring out a magazine named ‘*Rupantar*’ edited by Shameem Akhter.

Respondents also shared the ambiguity around the dress issue, the idea of modesty alongside the issue of public/private dichotomy as a dominant one in Bangladesh. They remembered the assault of a young girl Badhan on New Year's Eve at Teachers' Students' Centre (TSC) in Dhaka University campus in 2000. The three students accused of being involved in the assault were expelled from the university by the authorities. The incident was a topic of discussion in the National Parliament. A treasury bench member of the National Parliament, Joyнал Abedin Hazari, while discussing the case, said that the assaulted girl Shawan Akhter Badhan should be punished for staying outside at night in a provocative dress and inducing the youths to act violently. The discussion continued on the proper dress of a girl in a Muslim society and on the appropriate time for women to go out and have fun in public. It is interesting to note that Badhan was dressed in a sari (*The Daily Independent*, January 26, 2000). Women's organisations did not get involved in this. This particular incident actually indicated how boundaries of space, women and dress clashed for the first time in the public realm. The entire discourse of dress is associated with borders and 'frontiers' (Mernissi, 1994) not to be trespassed. The women's movement also clearly has its own boundaries which it was not always ready to cross.

Feminists interviewed thought that the women's movement had its weaknesses in terms of explaining the meaning and connotation of terms like secularism, *parda* or those referring to the dress issue. The process of making oneself understood was necessary to establish the arguments of the women's movement around religion issue. Internal conflict and disagreement is also not uncommon, as is the process of negotiation. The state is found to be making compromises with the conservative, fundamentalist and patriarchal forces that shape the political contours of our society. Careful negotiation and cooperation is also part of the strategies of the women's movement, but again all this strategisation may lead to compromise and co-option, which may not be always helpful to the women's movement. Except for one or two exceptions, one common trend is to engage in dialogue with the state and to avoid any conflict. Issues related to religion are considered an even more sensitive and precarious area. More care and caution is observed by feminists while navigating the religion question. The main target is often to not portray oneself as 'too radical', and to avoid directly challenging the patriarchal balance. NP had been spontaneously questioning the state but again had limited its boundary of contestation within the periphery of ensuring rights to citizens, which is a more general and safe zone in which to bring up challenging issues. On the other hand, the women's movement is worried that rash and radical actions may lead to backlash. With

regard to dress, the use of *chador*, *hijab*, *ghomta*, *parda* etc by female leaders in the cabinet is perceived as damaging the women's movement, but nobody concretised this as a problem or made this an issue for the movement.

The women's movement did not raise its voice in other cases where religion was given space or has been used as a political tool within the state discourse. Nothing was said when newsreaders of the national media were instructed to cover their heads. Feminist leaders of the movement were silent when dress and deportment was used by the female political leaders, who became role models for many by covering their head. Some of the respondents thought it-pertinent to raise the question of how far the personal is really political for the movement and how far we should consider our choices and freedom personal. However, the contradictions, controversies, consensus and challenges around the religion question are to be seen in their multiplicity and contextuality, not in isolation of broader socio-political context. Nevertheless, the question of religion remains an unresolved arena in Bangladesh just like our national identity, '*Birangona*' and body politics (as discussed in previous chapters).

IV

Rise of Islamic Extremism/Fundamentalism and *Fatwa*

The rise of religious extremism through *fatwas* attacking women and intellectuals of the country has been of great concern to the women's movement since the early nineties. *Fatwa*, in the Islamic faith, is the technical term for a legal judgment or learned interpretation that a qualified jurist or mufti can give on issues pertaining to the Islamic law. In Bangladesh imams or prayer leaders in mosque and teachers in Islamic schools, acting alone or as part of village arbitration (commonly known as *Shalish*), are found issuing sentences of public flogging, death sentences to women and also against men for having violated what these clerics understand as norms of Islamic laws.

Political instability, lack of democracy, changes in the Constitution, political calculations, changes in the education system or foreign policies, shifts in global and local arenas, manipulation of religious sentiments of the people by political parties—all of these have played a collective role in creating space for rising religiosity (Firdous Azim, Mahmuda Islam, Roushan Jahan, Najma Chowdhury, Maleka Begum, Shireen Huq, Ayesha Khanam, interview Dated: March-July 2011). This section looks at the case of Taslima Nasrin under this broad umbrella of issues related to religious extremism or rise of fundamentalism during the nineties. There were cases like that of Nurjahan¹⁸⁷, victimisation of intellectuals by declaring them apostate, communal riots, attacks on religious minority groups and many more issues that are connected to the understanding of rising religiosity or fundamentalism.

Women are the most common victims of *fatwa* in Bangladesh. Shunning, death threats, direct assault, lashing, whipping, stoning, segregation, forced marriage and divorce mostly target women. As stated before, NGO's and feminists were also not above these threats. The concern around religious extremism and fundamentalism started strengthening in the nineties. Apart from the overt state discourse around Islamisation, rise in incidence of *fatwa* and attacks on secular activities (ranging from celebration of *Pohela Boishakh*, *Ekushey February*¹⁸⁸, NGO activities to integrate women in education and income earning, population control, against intellectual, writers, sculptors, against drama, music, dancing,

¹⁸⁷ In 1993, a *fatwa* was declared against Nurjahan, a young girl from Chhatak, Sylhet. She was half buried in a hole and stoned 101 times. The village court declared her second marriage a blasphemy. Her husband and parents were also flogged in public. Nurjahan, being from a poor rural family, committed suicide.

¹⁸⁸ First day of Bengali New Year and International Mother's Language Day

lighting of candles and eternal flames for the martyrs and many more started to gain force in the public arena. According to Amnesty International (1994) several of NGO health centres and schools were damaged and destroyed and people associated with them have been attacked during the mid-nineties. Writers and journalists commenting on such incidents have been attacked and received death sentences. Mass demonstrations took place in June/July of 1994, which initially demanded the hanging of Taslima Nasrin and then included other intellectuals and prominent figures in the country. Other Islamic groups expanded their demands to include the execution of all ‘infidels’ or ‘apostates’ (*murtad* in Arabic), including writers, journalists, intellectuals and feminists (including Sufia Kamal). Their demands also included the banning of ‘unIslamic’ non-governmental organisations and publications, introduction of a blasphemy law carrying the death penalty and declaring Ahmadiyah as a non-Muslim community (Amnesty International, 1994).

The women’s movement and feminists became increasingly apprehensive about their strategies in such an environment. In spite of numerous cases of *fatwa* on women resulting in deaths and severe physical assaults, little was done against the perpetrators. The women’s movement and human rights activists were very active in protesting these attacks, particularly those on women. The women’s movement was engaged in agitation, protests and demonstrations against these *fatwas*, thus bringing the movement and pro-religion forces into contentious clashes. However, not all organisations or the individuals reacted in the same manner. Many of the women’s organisations were very active against the pronouncement of *fatwa* during the nineties but NP kept its distance from that particular mobilisation. NP felt that this was not a religious issue but a law and order issue and thus did not want to limit the VAW issue to religion only. Women fall victim to violence every day and, according to NP, preoccupation with the *fatwa* is actually distracting the movement from the broader issue of gender subordination and women’s agency. Firdous from NP stated:

Fatwa is created and Islamic extremism is not the only perpetrator here. We are equally responsible for this. Addressing *fatwa* and fighting against it does not necessarily mean addressing the gender issue. What we are doing is constantly creating binary groups of ‘us’ and ‘them’. The point I am trying to make is there is something more to this rise of religiosity than simple religion. (Firdous Azim, interview dated: April 2011).

Although all organisations and individuals under the purview of this research are in favour of secularism and stand against religious extremism, each present a different stance in

terms of their formulation and conceptualisation of issues at hand. Interestingly NP has a broader analysis of religion and its treatment. They defied the state religion not only to challenge the narrow boundary of any particular religion but from the perspective of ensuring rights of women as a citizen. The issue of dress and *fatwa* against women is also perceived by NP in a more critical manner as being beyond simple specific religious sanctions. They have a theoretical understanding of the issue and their conceptualisation is also different from that of other women's organisations. BMP or WfW, for instance, are more specific in terms of their responses, which clearly tell us about their position regarding *parda*, *fatwa* or Islam or secularism. NP's response and formulations, on the other hand, although rich and diverse with feminist nuances, is ambiguous and wide-ranging. One has to note that the diversity in feminist formulations and its unique specificity was most pronounced around the case of Taslima Nasrin. Interesting debates, conceptual divisions and consensus could be traced from the respondents around this particular case.

Case of Taslima Nasrin: “We Could Never Own, Neither Could We Disown Her”

Taslima Nasrin is a physician by profession, but also a writer and poet. Her writings comprised newspaper columns, poetry and popular novels which evoked unprecedented responses both for and against her works. Taslima Nasrin was despised by Islamists and fundamentalists, equally loved and loathed by the reading public, considered with caution by the secular intelligentsia and finally banned by the state (Zafar, 2005). Taslima remained a contentious matter for the feminist movement in Bangladesh.

She began writing in 1975 and published her first collection of poems in 1986. Taslima's writings express her thoughts on religion, feminism, and sexuality—issues that are often controversial and taboo in the traditional Muslim society of Bangladesh.¹⁸⁹ She criticized religion, traditions and oppressive patriarchal cultures and customs that discriminate against women. In her writings she attacks religion and men, talks about women's bodies, pain and pleasure of sexuality, sexual oppression and discrimination of women with graphic descriptions. She has been living in exile since the mid-nineties and has written more than thirty books, many of which have been translated into twenty different languages. She has received numerous international awards over the years but none from her

¹⁸⁹See for details <http://postcolonialstudies.emory.edu/taslima-nasrin/#ixzz2V8ipKkxS>, and www.poemhunter.com/taslima-nasrin/biography.

homeland. The Western media labelled her as the Bangladeshi ‘female Salman Rushdie’ (“The Murder of Fouzia Rahman Champa,” 1994, as cited in Zaman, 1999).

A mass anti-Taslima Nasrin movement was gaining momentum when Islamic fundamentalists launched a campaign against her in 1990. Hostile street demonstrations and processions took place, with crowds breaking into the newspaper offices where she used to regularly write. They sued her editors and publishers and publicly assaulted her several times. In 1992, the ‘Taslima Nasrin Suppression Committee’ (*Taslima Nasrin Peshan Committee* in Bangla), with fourteen different political and non-political religious organisations, was set up, followed by more hostile attacks on her, demanding her death. Ultimately a bounty was set on her head. Faced by increasingly militant opposition, the government, instead of taking any action against the fundamentalists, confiscated her passport in 1993 charging her with ‘blasphemy’. The state issued a non-bailable arrest warrant against her. Later, a negotiation took place between the Bangladesh government and the international community, through Western ambassadors, international writers’ groups etc., as a result of which Taslima was granted bail and was allowed to leave the country. Taslima escaped Bangladesh and received asylum from the Swedish Government. As of 2011, she lives in New Delhi, India.

Both national and international attention was drawn when her novel *Lajja* (Shame) in Bangla written against the backdrop of the attack on Babri Masjid in 1993¹⁹⁰ and highlighting attacks on Hindu minorities, was published. The incidence of Babri Masjid and reactions to her book led to a chain affect, resulting in communal riots in Dhaka and in other districts. The book was banned. In fact both the Hindu and Muslim fundamentalist groups quickly took public stances for and against Taslima. Hindu fundamentalists adopted her as their new ally, distributing copies of her book, whereas Muslim fundamentalists burned hundreds of copies of *Lajja*, and demanded her execution. International publicity in the Western media was at its height within a very short time (during 1993-94). Nasrin was portrayed in such a manner that

¹⁹⁰The Babri Mosque was a mosque in Ayodhya, India. It was destroyed in 1992 when a political rally developed into a riot involving 150,000 people, despite a commitment to the Indian Supreme Court by the rally organisers that the mosque would not be harmed. More than 2000 Muslims were killed in the ensuing riots in many major Indian cities including Mumbai and Delhi. The rally that led to the destruction of the Babri Masjid was orchestrated by the BJP and other allied parties. This in turn led to riots and mob attacks in Bangladesh. Muslim mobs attacked and burnt Hindus temples, shops and houses across the country. An India-Bangladesh cricket match was disrupted when a mob of an estimated 5,000 men tried to storm into the *Bangabandhu National Stadium* in the national capital of Dhaka. The Dhaka office of Air India was stormed and destroyed. 10 people were reportedly killed, with many more Hindu women being raped and hundreds of Hindu temples and homes destroyed. The aftermath of the violence forced the Bangladeshi Hindu community to curtail the celebrations of Durga Puja in 1993 while calling for the destroyed temples to be repaired and investigations be held on the atrocities against Hindus in Bangladesh.

she soon became the spokesperson for the oppressed women of Bangladesh and she as the lone fighter against Islamic fundamentalism. Added to this was the image of Bangladesh as a 'Muslim fundamentalist' country where women's voices are routinely denied.

In 1994, Taslima created division among intellectuals and writers. Her writings elicited both love and hatred. Many went to court to ban her work whereas some stood in favour of her. A human rights organisation in Kolkata, on the other hand, filed a case against the state for banning her book, a move which goes against freedom of expression. Many prominent writers from all over the world were in support of her. The Western media for a time portrayed her as an emblematic bold feminist voice from the south, daring to challenge the patriarchal- religious oppressive norms and customs. However it would be too simplistic to take the case of Nasrin as an issue related to religion alone. Multiple factors that shaped the responses are critical to this analysis.

I can remember a time during the mid-nineties when almost all of us in any international airport were quickly identified as being from 'Taslima's country'. This was an uncomfortable experience for me to be suddenly identified in association with her only. Previously we were associated with our economic or ecological state, i.e., either as a 'bottomless basket' or 'the land of floods' or so. The unease and discomfort around this association with Taslima Nasrin was a new and notable one for me. I was not ready to take Taslima as the sole representative of the feminist consciousness of Bangladesh. I was also not at ease with the way the Western media was portraying the image of Taslima and Bangladesh. Most importantly, although I was impressed by her bold and simple articulation around patriarchal domination (particularly in her book *Nirbachito Column, Selected Columns in English* (Nasrin, 1992), I was not prepared to reconcile her image with the historical role of the women's movement in Bangladesh. I was particularly interested to know how she has been evaluated by the key people belonging to the women's movement in Bangladesh. How did the feminists react to the case of Taslima Nasrin? How did they perceive Taslima and how far do they consider her a part of the women's movement? Why did she fail to draw favourable support from her own people and the women's movement while the Western media and the north have readily come in her aid and highlighted her as a staunch feminist? These questions are the focus of the upcoming discussion.

To briefly recapitulate the political background, following the autocratic regime of H M Ershad, power was handed over to a neutral caretaker government on December 1990.

BNP emerged victorious as a single majority party after the election, with Khaleda Zia as the first woman prime minister of the country. Khaleda's regime continued from 1990-1996. Taslima's case is to be understood with this political background in mind.

Feminist Ethics: Dilemma and Predicament

Taslima was already well-known for her provocative and controversial writings in the newspapers. The most controversial focus of her writings was religion and sexuality. As discussed in Chapter Three, the women's movement in Bangladesh has mostly talked about body rights in relation to health issues and reproductive rights. The feminist resistance around the body issue was largely positioned against the aggression meted out through capitalist, imperialist, corporate bodies of global market and co-opted status of the national government¹⁹¹. Nonetheless, 'body' was hardly brought into public discourses by the movement. Taslima's explicit and open narration on women's body and sexuality was in a way breaking the 'structures of silence' around sexuality in Bangladesh (Riaz, 1995).

Feminist responses around Taslima were found to be three-pronged. On one level, she was evaluated as a writer and as an individual. Responses in this connection are varied and mixed, expressing both appreciation and disapproval. The second position is one that protects her right as a citizen and univocal support from the women's movement was extended on this. The women's movement at large was critical of fundamentalist attacks on her. The third view is largely to examine her role and writings as a feminist. In the end, most of the feminist leaders of the women's movement could hardly acclaim her as a friend to the feminist movement of Bangladesh.

Interestingly Taslima was rarely recognized as a feminist or as a legitimate voice on women's issues within the women's movement. *Nirbachito Column* (1992) was the most admired book and her poems were also well liked by the intellectual community in Bangladesh, but reservations were clearly observed when it came to accepting her as a feminist. Despite the critical position regarding her personal opportunism and standard of literary contribution, there was little dispute was round the fundamentalist attack upon her. The role of the state in this process was seen as undemocratic and undesirable and was severely condemned by all three organisations under the purview of this study. According to Najma Chowdhury:

¹⁹¹ See for details in Chapter Three. Movements were led by Farida Akhter, Naripokkho, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad and Women for Women.

Personally I have never liked her writings. Her writings are not spontaneous. I think she writes purposefully to create agitation. Most of her writings were based upon her personal experiences highlighting women's body and sexuality. She could not draw attention to basic issues related to women's lives. The women's movement had a conflicting relationship with Taslima. Nevertheless, I could never support the way religion-based political organisations have attacked her and threatened her with death sentence. I also could not support the way the state reacted to this attack upon her. During that time we were under democracy and under the female leadership. What happened to Taslima was not expected and acceptable in a democratic country. (Najma Chowdhury, interview dated: June 2011)

All three organisations explored here have echoed similar responses with regard to Taslima's case. Attacks on Taslima were of great concern to all. NP brought out a memorandum supporting freedom of speech, freedom of press and freedom of expression on this occasion. However she was not a case of cause for NP. They thought that Taslima was using herself to become a cause. A sense of distrust could be seen in some:

Our position was very clear. We were concerned about the rights and security of a citizen, freedom of expression and right to talk and live. We could not support the assault on her in a democratic country. We expressed our solidarity with that. On the other hand we were not sure whether she was dramatizing it or not. But we had to respond when she got attacked in the February book fair and finally had to leave the country. Some of her attitudes we found not to be very helpful for the women's movement. Personally I could detect dishonesty in her entire stance. Nevertheless I do regret the fact that she had to pay dearly for the stand she took, not being able to return to Bangladesh and even to see the last of her parent. (Firdous Azim, interview dated: April 2011)

The sense of distrust and doubt actually created a breach between Taslima and the women's movement. Many were apprehensive of her personal stake, which she was keen to appropriate using her writings, which were often seen as purposefully taunting and provocative. Similar reactions were recognised from the words of Roushan Jahan from WfW (Roushan Jahan, interview dated: July 2011). Although Taslima hardly came about as a popular writer amongst the feminists, all thought that she did not deserve either the *fatwa* or the ban.

Taslima's own action and personal motivation alienated her from her own country let alone the movement. Taslima Nasrin appeared to enjoy taking confrontational stances. At times she even appeared to taunt her enemies, smoking a cigarette while handing the Qoran in

BBC television featured filmed before she went into hiding (Wright, 1994, as cited in Zaman, 1999).

The Bangladesh the women's movement was ambivalent if not directly 'against' her. However, the ever present tone of remote detachment was visible. The suspicion and doubt was largely due to her offensive writing style, which actually depicted Bangladesh as a narrow fundamentalist country while deliberately downplaying the presence of rather strong secular forces. The role of a vibrant and pulsating the women's movement was also denied in Taslima's writings. Bangladesh the women's movement, on the other hand, was not excited about Taslima as was the West.

Bangladesh Women's Movement and the Role of Western Media

The vast difference between the treatment of Taslima by the national and international media demands attention here. She became a symbol of active resistance and revolt against Islamic fundamentalism dominated by '*mollahs*'. According to Zaman (1999), the entire event has to be analysed not in isolation but in the context of transnational geo-politics. Taslima Nasrin was portrayed by the Western media as the sole vocal feminist while Bangladesh came into focus as a fertile ground for conservative forces. She became the centre of global attention during 1993-1995 period, but soon lost her shine following her exile. She became a convenient tool for Western propaganda in the eve of rising fundamentalism in a global context. Many thought that her main purpose was to draw western attention and secure her position in the West. Overnight she became a symbol of freedom of expression and women's rights (Weaver, 1994). The Bangladesh government was also not interested to get into a conflict with the Islamist groups jeopardizing its political and religious alliances. In addition, Bangladesh's politics had to relent to international pressure to release her from her warrant and let her leave the country.

In fact Taslima never belonged to the women's movement and neither was she interested in making herself a part of it. Mahmuda from Women for Women states:

We supported her and heavily criticized the fundamentalist attack on her. We invited her to one of our seminars and wanted to give her a space to talk and defend herself. I personally called her to join our seminar and share her experience with us; we were ready to share the responsibility of her writings on behalf of the women's movement. But she did not come. We

gave up. She did not see herself as part of the women's movement. We also could not do much about her. (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March, 2011)

The unease, doubts and distrust were only strengthened when she made personal attacks on intellectuals and feminist leaders of the country. Taslima's particular portrayal of the country as a closed fundamentalist one, and the women here as passive victims was a betrayal to the long and historical role of Bangladesh's the women's movement. The absence of full hearted support to Taslima from the women's movement, on the other hand, presents the women's movement as placid, compromising and easily co-opted by the religious extremism. This representation—fuelled by Taslima's voice—created an even deeper wedge between the two.

Taslima Nasrin: Not a Legitimate Issue for the the Women's Movement

The reasons why there was not wholehearted support for Taslima Nasrin was influenced by many factors that were perhaps not clear to the West. The internal dynamics behind the context, politics and personal motivation led to the fact that she was never really owned by the Bangladesh the women's movement and was hardly ever perceived as a 'feminist'. Taslima was not the only one who received *fatwa* and faced death threats. Many intellectuals, writers, feminists, activists, NGO workers, including Sufia Kamal and her family, had to face *fatwa*. None of them ever thought of leaving the country to seek political asylum. Most of them quietly ignored the threat and continued with their work. Her comments on Sufia Kamal and Jahanara Imam¹⁹² aggravated the bitterness even more.¹⁹³ The following comments from Maleka reveal the internal dynamics more clearly:

We approached Taslima to join the platform of the women's movement but she declined. She liked to fight her own battles individually. We also asked her to stay back, not to flee from the country, but she had her own way. In principle we were in favour of her right to speech and voice but could not give her wholehearted support as her controversial remarks against Sufia Kamal, Jahanara Imam and many more created agitations within the women's movement.

¹⁹² Jahanara Imam (3 May 1929 – 26 June 1994) was a Bengali writer and political activist. She is most widely remembered for her efforts to bring those accused of committing war crimes in the Bangladesh Liberation War to trial. She was known as "*Shaheed Janani*" (Mother of Martyrs). In 1986 she published her wartime diary "*Ekatturer Dinguli*" (The days of Seventy One). Publication of this book was an inspiring event and proved to be a catalyst for the renewal of faith in the destiny of Bangladesh as an independent nation.

¹⁹³ In her interview with *Statesman* she was asked to comment on Sufia Kamal and Jahanara Imam, two highly acclaimed activists of the country – Nasrin by passed the question and commented that most women activists are afraid of fundamentalists and are affiliated with a political party and are happy to be 'housewives'. (Wright, 1994, cited in Zaman 1999)

Nevertheless, when I look back, I think we could have done a bit more for her. She had actually hit the nail on the head and could reach out to many, particularly the young generation who cannot to be ignored. (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March, 2011)

Roushan from WfW further expounds upon the dilemma and divergence within the women's movement with regard to Taslima. She is found to be less compromising and more critical of Taslima's controversial position:

Fundamentalists' attacks on Taslima put the women's movement in a dilemma. In our opinion she was not even a feminist but we had to extend our support to her, and face the question of how far we should go to save her, what should be the organisational response etc. The entire range of debates and discussions was a storm in tea cup to me. In fact the case of Taslima created a backlash which was harmful to the women's movement. (Roushan Jahan, interview dated: July 2011)

The stance of the women's movement on the Taslima issue was diverse, ranging from anger, disregard, silence, to placid support and general reluctance to uphold the issue. In spite of her offensive comments on the women's movement, spontaneous and univocal support was extended towards her in the question of freedom of expression and her right as a citizen. They were not disagreeing with her in terms of the issues she was raising. The main dilemma was around her personal treatment of her own case, manipulation and use of the situation in favour of personal gain, all of which are problematic. Moreover, the case of Taslima was hardly ever discussed in the pretext of the political economy of the historical context and interaction with state religion and feminism.

Zaman (1999) in her article also recognizes that Taslima's case was used by the state to diffuse public attention and create divisiveness within the opposition alliance during the mid-nineties. Taslima was a pawn in a political game played out by various forces for political gain. She personally was largely responsible for the fact that the women's movement did not give her full support. She was in fact not an issue for the women's movement in Bangladesh, but an issue created by the West. Ayesha shares the same feeling and contends that the conservative forces were actually given space consolidated on Taslima. She believes that the institutionalisation of the fundamentalist religious wings was part of a historical process in Bangladesh. The case of *fatwa* against women, Taslima and the trend of declaring the intellectual as '*murtad*' was part of this religious conservatism which begun gaining force over the past few years. All the political parties are responsible for the regressive steps they

have taken during their regimes which only strengthened and perpetuated state violence against women (Ayesha Khanam, interview dated: October 2011).

Taslima Nasrin was there briefly like a shooting star, soon lost in oblivion, creating a ‘storm in a teacup’. The difference of opinion resides in the geo-political context and historical circumstances, shaped by multiple factors in action. This comment of Ayesha amply sums up the case.

...the case of Taslima was part of the broader process of integrating religious violence within the public space. We could never support what has happened to her. On the other hand, we could never make her a part of our movement. In a nut shell I would rather say, we could never own Taslima, neither could we disown her (Ayesha Khanam, interview dated: October 2011).

While summing up, the three issues been picked up in this chapter delineates the ambivalent relationship between religion and feminism in Bangladesh. The interaction was largely manifested through resistance to state discourse and constitutional changes replacing ‘secularism’ in favour of Islamist formulations, change and shift in dress or attire and feminist response to rising religiosity and rise of *fatwa*. While summing up the three issues discussed in this chapter, it was evident that, relative to other issues dealt in other chapters, more consensus was observed in the religion question across organisations and individual feminists.

Rise of religiosity during the nineties was perceived by the protagonists of the movement as part of a process where religion has historically been used as a political tool. This process is still at work. Both non-democratic and democratic, male and female leadership within the country have manipulated religion to mobilise public support. Respondents from the women’s movement also feel that they are partly responsible for what has happened in contemporary Bangladesh around the issue of religion. They have failed in many ways to contest and challenge rising extremism and to mobilise support in favour of the feminist position with regard to religion.

The case of Taslima Nasrin reveals the diversity and contextuality of feminist formulations. The women’s movement of Bangladesh has clearly demonstrated the specific nature of feminist articulation around *fatwa* and attack on women by negating the international manipulation of the case of Taslima Nasrin. Despite large scale ideological

support from the women's movement, Taslima failed to make herself a part of the movement. Soon she became a non-issue because of the multiple factors involved in the process.

Last but not least is the subtle internal dynamics of the nature of movement. All three organisations had followed their own way of responding to each of the issues. Some were prompt and quick, while others decided to be slow and steady so as not to antagonize the power structure. The trepidation arising from backlash, dilemma and ambivalence moulded the strategies employed and has largely shaped the nature of responses and feminist formulation on religion question.

In 2010, the Bangladesh Supreme Court restored 'secularism' as one of the basic tenets of the Constitution but also kept Islam as the state religion. The writ petition by Naripokkho has not been taken up. Religious extremism has carved out a large space in politics and in the public arena. Conservative dress and deportment are still being used as political means while more and more men and women are seen in public with Islamist attire. The women's movement is yet to come up with appropriate strategies to deal with the issue of religion, still to weigh and reflect on how to negotiate with the everyday religious disposition of the mass vis a vie ensuring human rights to women. This 'ambiguity' if not 'conflict' was often mitigated through manoeuvring based on tact and willingness to negotiate. The women's movement has always had to strategize their moves and striking a balance between religion and women's rights is something that remains a big challenge for them. The relationship between religion and feminism remains an unresolved arena for Bangladesh the women's movement to date (2014).

Chapter Five

Global Shaping the Local: Local Shaping the Women's Movement

I

Introduction

This particular chapter was not envisaged during the initial stages of this thesis. This chapter emerged only at a later stage while compiling comments and discussions of the respondents. Because this is beyond my preliminary chapter plan it may be too short or apparently insignificant to place under any heading. This chapter thus materialised as a by-product but turned out to be a significant addition to the entire endeavour. The chapter is short compared to others in this thesis but is sharp and poignant in terms of concluding my reflections on the forms and shapes of the women's movement. As was declared earlier, the main focus of this thesis is to look into the feminist formulations within the women's movement. This is done through looking at some autonomous women's organisations as revealed and discussed by a group of feminists that I purposefully selected. However, feminist formulations are not the sole prerogative of the women's organisations or the feminists alone. There are several sites and platforms where feminist articulations are made. Moreover, the women's movement, while making its own articulations, is also engaged in dialogue with all the other actors in this wider domain of feminism. Among all these actors and sites of feminist formulations, the state and global feminism have come out as two major sites, with whom the women's movement is constantly interacting, shaping and being shaped in its journey of feminist developments. This particular chapter isolates three areas pertinent to the movement: i. Global feminism and its impact upon the women's movement. ii. Role of state and global shifts and changes in shaping the women's movement, iii. Feminist politics towards an autonomous voice.

It is important to note that interaction around these three areas were mentioned at various points while the issue based responses were explored at a micro level. This chapter attempts to look at the interface taking place at a macro level, highlighting the nature of interaction from a broader perspective in relation to the state, global feminism and development of autonomous feminist voices.

The purpose here is to look into feminist formulations around the world and global initiatives, what impact these global scenarios had on local level feminist formulations, what kind of alliances and breaches took place within the women's movement etc. The journey will tackle questions surrounding the role of global feminism and the reactions of the women's movement in relation to the state, and thus, will look at feminist makings that were placed on the table. Ultimately, we will look at the manifestation of these developments and how they reveal the very nature of feminist politics.

As mentioned earlier, all the previous chapters have dealt with issues that were invariably entangled with either state and global feminism or the overarching global socio-political and economic scenario. Some degree of repetition and overlapping is, thus, only natural and also necessary to recapitulate the context.

II

Global Feminism and it's Impact upon the Women's Movement of Bangladesh

Curiously, most of the discussions with the respondents on the movement often ended up relating local agendas with issues and initiatives led by global feminism – particularly feminism led by United Nations (UN). Another reason behind this far-reaching influence that the UN discourse had on the women's movement was the shifts and changes in the broader global scenario. A reference to two basic dates relevant to this discussion will bring the point home. Its needs to be reiterated here that Bangladesh became an independent nation in December 1971 while, the International Women's Year was declared in 1975 and 1976-1985 was declared as the Decade for Women.

Key figures from the women's movement associated their agendas with UN-led global movements –sometimes as a yard stick to their movement or as a tool to justify their struggle on any particular issue. Many of the activities were found to revolve around UN charters, UN World conferences on women, preparations of shadow reports, follow up and implementation, monitoring etc. Many thought that UN World conferences and other global movements have actually strengthened the women's movement, in terms of gaining up-to-date knowledge, policy formulation, conceptual clarification the of issues like feminism, equality, equity, equal rights and opportunities, equal result, affirmative action's, gender lens etc.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the Bangladesh women's movement, at its embryonic stage, were engaged with the Indian and the Soviet the women's movement. BMP, being one of the largest pioneering women's organisations of the seventies had close ties with the two countries. It was also possible because of the political alliance of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's government with India and the Soviet bloc during that time. The global always played a significant role in shaping the women's movement in terms of exposure to western feminist formulations and in constructing their own agenda by following personal and organisational guidelines. After 1975, the focus began to shift to the UN-led the women's movements and soon, the UN became a critical landmark for shaping Bangladesh the women's movement.

Feminists have conferred among each other about this influence of global feminism and attempted to link it with the broader internal political milieu.

The relationship we had with the international the women's movement and other organisations from the Socialist bloc lasted till 1990. But we lost all connections with them after the fall of Socialism. BMP was exposed to the international arena through its association with the former Soviet bloc and CPB (Communist Party of Bangladesh) and its association with Indian feminism during the early days of the War of Liberation. The UN-led global movement was only a sharper continuation of the earlier awareness. (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March, 2011)

The key figures who were interviewed in this thesis represent three main women's organisations. All were largely involved in mobilising for CEDAW and implementation of the UN-led World women's conferences. The women's movement thus was engaged in a tripartite interaction with local-global and state machinery, and dealt in issues related to global initiatives. However, questions were also raised within the movement on the extent to which the idea of indigenous, organic, autonomous the women's movement can be perceived in a globalised world. Interaction, exchange and interfaces between all these factors have fundamentally given rise to new forms within the women's movement, which is quite different from the forms and nature of movements during the seventies and eighties. Among the two most pertinent areas of engagement with UN agendas were CEDAW and World Conferences on Women (WCW). They are the focus of the discussion below.

CEDAW and the women's movement

In Bangladesh, rights in public and private were found to be moulded by global feminism at the state and organisational levels. Many local initiatives were shaped by global

effort while local agendas informed and influenced the global frameworks. Bangladesh is a signatory of various international conventions designed to ensure gender equality, which include Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Convention to Eliminate Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

CEDAW was adopted by the United Nations on December 18, 1976 and entered as an international treaty on September 3, 1981¹⁹⁴. Bangladesh is one of the 160 countries which signed their commitments to the convention. In November 1984, Bangladesh ratified CEDAW—with reservation on Articles 2, 13.1(a), 16.1 (c), and (f) – on the basis of religious sentiments. The reservations are mainly concerned with family matters like marriage and dissolution, guardianship of children and inheritance, which are also related to the personal laws prevailing in the country. While the government feels that these provisions are in conflict with religion-based personal laws, the women’s movement, on the other hand, counters that these reservations are a barrier to the protection and promotion of women’s rights. Feminists and other progressive groups have challenged these reservations by the government, mainly because the personal laws of Muslim, Christians and Hindus suffer from many misinterpretations, distortions, and discriminations against women¹⁹⁵.

A strong network of women’s groups started to advocate at the top tiers of government for full ratification and implementation of CEDAW provisions in the national legislation. A CEDAW Forum was formed and launched in 1992, composed of individuals and organisations that were active on women’s right. Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), Women for Women (WfW), Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA) and Naripokkho (NP) were at the frontline of this Forum. A CEDAW committee was established under the leadership of Salma Khan¹⁹⁶ during the eighties. She was then in an influential post in the Planning Ministry. She played a significant role as an elected president of the CEDAW committees of the UN. WfW and NP also played a crucial part in pursuing

¹⁹⁴See <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/> for details

¹⁹⁵The detail discussion in Chapter Three expounds how the mobilisation and struggle for Uniform Family Code (UFC) was the embryo of this movement at local level and how this issue got diluted because of CEDAW.

¹⁹⁶ Salma Khan, a women’s rights activist at home and human rights practitioner at the international level is the immediate past President of Women for Women: A Research and Study Group- and executive board member. She is the founder Chairperson of NGO Coalition on Beijing Process (NCBP), a network of 624 NGOs working towards implementation of Beijing Platform for Action. She was elected a Member of the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1992 and served three terms in the CEDAW Committee (2003-2006). She was the first Asian to be elected the Chairperson of CEDAW (1997 & 1998). See more at: <http://www.commonwealthfoundation.com/updates/profile-salma-khan#sthash.q4S1SrBb.dpuf>

the issues. With the help of International Women's Rights Action Watch (IWRAP), workshops on how to incorporate the convention into domestic laws and appropriate training were conducted for different groups in order to raise public awareness (WPRN, 1998). A unified effort is more effective than several isolated approaches, opined the respondents. At a later point, they were successful in urging the government to withdraw its reservation on articles 13 [a] and 16.1 [f]. The other provisions remain the top priority of women's organisations and NGOs in their lobbying and advocacy activities. The women's movement has begun to be vigilant and participative in political decision-making processes. The government's action to consult with women's groups and activists for the preparation of the country report to CEDAW and the integration of CEDAW in domestic legislation proves that women's voices can no longer be ignored. This involvement in the law reforming process is by far a great achievement. All these efforts have united the women's movement and other NGOs in fighting for the promotion of women's equal rights.

Additionally, an Optional Protocol to the CEDAW, authorizing communication from individual or groups of individuals, was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1999 and Bangladesh signed the Protocol in September 2000. By accepting the Convention, Bangladesh commits itself to undertake a series of measures, including legislation and temporary measures, to end discrimination against women in all forms. Countries that ratified or acceded to the Convention are legally bound to put its provisions into practice. They are also committed to submit national reports, at least every four years, on measures they have taken to comply with their treaty obligations (Afroz, n.d).

Bangladesh has endorsed most of the provisions of the CEDAW with reservations on article 2 and 16 (c) as of today (2014), because those are in conflict with the personal laws. However, the struggle for UFC is no more on the agenda of mainstream women's organisations. This is because CEDAW is supposed to be the all-encompassing convention that secures rights of women both in the private and public spheres. Hence, an autonomous indigenous feminist formulation has been co-opted by the global frame work. The women's movement became engaged with UN formulations. Days and months were spent on shaping the agendas of the women's groups in conformity with the global outline. In a sense, with a strong ally like the UN backing its formulations, the movement's journey was made easier. This alliance only supplemented their demands and agendas, giving them an international legitimacy which helped the women's movement to form a common platform. BMP remembers that the CEDAW charter was not addressed by the government when it first came

to the ministry. They came to know about it from a personal communication and acquired a copy from UNIC (United Nations Information Centre). Rakhi Das Purakayosthay from BMP translated this in Bangla in 1984. (Maleka Begum, interview dated: 2011)

All the three frontline organisations believe that CEDAW has played a critical role in the women's movement of Bangladesh, forming connections with global and local streams of feminism.

The women's movement, in relation to CEDAW, has yet another dimension to it. WfW or other women's organisations, while taking up issues like CEDAW, also needed to coordinate with the state and act as a pressure group by constantly pushing the state machinery for full ratification and implementation of CEDAW. CEDAW as an agenda has more legitimacy compared to other issues related to the state. The state is important in this context in terms of gaining access and facilitating positive negotiation. Although full implementation of CEDAW will have little direct impact on women in general, it has an international and political value. Implementation of CEDAW by the state has both national and international dimensions. CEDAW is in accordance with the Constitution of Bangladesh and headed the efforts of ratifying CEDAW and removing the remaining reservations is legitimate. International endorsements are critical for Bangladesh. Women's organisations are thus engaged in negotiation with the state for full ratification, but at the same time they also blame the government for not living up to its promises of removing reservations and modifying national laws to be in conformity with CEDAW (Nazneen & Sultan, 2010).

According to Maleka and Ayesha, CEDAW and WCW brought many women's organisations into one platform and thus have strengthened the women's movement. They thought that Bangladesh the women's movement could continue with relentless journey and identify themselves as part of the global movement. BMP had always relied on UN-led feminism and their charters, but not without apprehension.

Ayesha from BMP added:

..till now (2012) the government has not done anything for full ratification of CEDAW. Bangladesh government has been acclaimed with many international awards but none of the consecutive governments have taken the risk to ratify it fully. Everybody wanted to avoid the existing contradictions regarding religion and personal laws in our Constitution and, more importantly, the insurmountable resistance that is inherent to our psyche. (Ayesha Khanam, interview dated: July 2011)

CEDAW, to Firdous, is one of the most comprehensive charters for the women's movement. However, the point of departure for NP is that it believes that the the women's movement should not concentrate only on its full ratification but also to take cognizance of what has already been approved and move forward with its implementation. The movement should also focus the process of feeding CEDAW into the broader policy discourse. Gaps and loopholes –which was an obstacle to realise the goal – were also identified by NP. “When we were busy with ratification of such international conventions, we did not realise that it should come through the parliament – which did not happen in case of CEDAW. In that sense, Bangladesh government is not technically liable to do anything about it” says Firdous from NP. However, it seems that the drive for full ratification of CEDAW has lost its momentum over the years.

World Conferences on Women (WCW)¹⁹⁷ and the Women's Movement

In June 1946, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) established the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) to ensure the empowerment of women and gender equality (E/RES/2/11, 21 June 1946), and to provide recommendations to the Council on obstacles to women's rights in political, economic, civil, social and education fields. Over the years, the CSW has organised different conferences in order to assert and improve the rights of women. So far, four world conferences on women have taken place. The conferences have sought to unite the international community behind a set of common objectives with an effective plan of action for the advancement of women everywhere, in all spheres of public and private life.

The First World Plan for Action, adopted in Mexico City in 1975, called upon governments to develop strategies that would bring gender equality, eliminate gender discrimination and integrate women in development and peace-building sectors. Within the United Nations, the Plan of Action also led to the establishment of the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

¹⁹⁷See www.un-ngls.org FOR detail

The Second World Conference, held in Copenhagen in 1980, brought together 145 Member States to review the Mexico Plan for Action. It was stated that despite the progress made, special attention was required in areas such as employment opportunities, adequate health care services and education.

At the Third World Conference held in Nairobi in 1985, the UN revealed to Member States that only a small number of women benefited from the improvements, and participants were asked to explore new areas to ensure that peace, development and equality. Three sectors identified in Nairobi include equality in social participation, equality in political participation and decision-making. The conference further recognized the need for women to participate in discussions in all areas and not only on gender equality.

The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) was the largest conference the United Nations had ever organised. Over 189 governments, 17000 participants (including 6000 government delegates), more than 4000 representatives of NGOs, 4000 journalists and all the United Nations organisations attended the Conference.

The 189 UN Member States unanimously adopted the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) to ensure the improvement of all women. The BPFA outlined 12 critical issues, which are barriers for the advancement of women, and identified a range of actions that governments, the United Nations and civil society groups should undertake and make women's human rights a reality. All these global initiatives have culminated into the formulation of the National Women Development Policy in 1996.

As mentioned above, the rise of UN-led global feminism – particularly the advent of CEDAW and WCW – was welcomed by the women's movement at large. Unanimous consensus has been observed throughout the eighties and nineties in holding up the UN guideline and in using it as a pressure tool to achieve women's rights. Almost all the key persons interviewed expressed great enthusiasm, zeal and passion with regard to addressing, disseminating, ratifying and implementing the UN declarations.

Maleka narrates the history which is relevant to this discussion. According to her, the first commotion around the Mexico WCW was dissipated by the political shift in 1975, but Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985) were attended with considerable interest. Heightened interest among women's organisations and NGOs was seen around Beijing Conference in

1995. Special committees, alliances and networks were established to aid the collaboration with global UN efforts. Maleka narrates the chronological history which is relevant to this discussion. Maleka continues:

The period of 1976-1985 was declared as the Decade for Women but the first 5 years went by without any real intervention. Mexico Conference of 1975 was hardly represented by the women's movement. However, a few steps were taken up the army backed government of those days female quota in job sectors or incorporating women in para-security forces, establishing of Ministry of Women Affairs etc. It was during eighties that I began to get involved and seized the opportunity to attend the Copenhagen World Conference in 1980, which was a great learning experience for me. I had the chance to compare the global the women's movement with the local one. In 1981, we had another committee consisting of representatives from 95 women's organisations which was inspired by the women's conferences in Prague, Czech Republic; that we attended in 1981 with five representatives under the leadership of Sufia Kamal. We began to weave dreams the way we had done in 1975 we would celebrate World Women's year and the whole decade nationally with women from all over the country. We also thought we would work together with voluntary organisations and NGOs to chalk out a plan for women, but all dreams were shattered again, due to Ershad's undemocratic military rule. However, our dreams were rejuvenated in 1993 when we came together again under the leadership of Najma Chowdhury to work for the preparatory committee of the fourth World Conference in Beijing with 250 members. In 1999, committee was established with 350 members to work under Salma Khan for Beijing + five conferences to be held in 2000. (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March, 2011)

All of my respondents thought that international initiatives like CEDAW or WCW were critical for the women's movement, and CEDAW was the most comprehensive of all the documents on women that ever drafted. Accordingly, WCW became a common platform for all to get together and work, hand in hand, towards a collective cause. To some, CEDAW and WCW were helpful as a tool to spearhead the movement during the restricted political regime.

Western exposure was revealing for us in many ways. World Conferences on Women were effective in uniting us all again during Ershad's regime. WCW gave us a purpose and a target to achieve together in a non-cooperative political situation. I consider CEDAW, an international convention, very significant and of crucial importance for us. It is the most comprehensive document on women's right compared to many others that we have drafted earlier. (Roushan Jahan, interview dated: July 2011)

Of all the WCW, Beijing Conference in 1995 turned out to be the most critical one with far-reaching impact upon the women's movement. Yet, the enthusiasm and fervour was not applicable for all. Despite the same ideological bargain, agreement and common understanding was hard to achieve.

Najma, the President of WfW of the time was the key person involved in the Beijing Preparatory Committee. A resource network was another direct outcome of the impact of global feminism. Although Najma had a track record of working with the government, according to her, her involvement with the women's movement had entailed little activism in conventional sense. It was during the preparation for Nairobi world conferences when she became involved with the global processes of the women's movement. Her work was always limited to teaching, research, and networking and lobbying.

In spite of much apprehension, Najma, representing Bangladesh, was involved in maintaining liaison with the government and international UN bodies in 1978, she contributed to the preparatory phase of CEDAW as a member of the third committee and, again, in 1980 she was nominated for attending UNESCO general conference to lobby for the post of secretary in UNESCO from Bangladesh. In 1984, she went to New York again, to lobby for the post of president in UN bodies from Bangladesh and attended the General Assembly of UN as a nominated representative from the civil society. All these activities have prepared her for the more complex and challenging responsibility of co-ordinating the 'Beijing Preparatory Committee' in the early nineties. She adds:

It was during the beginning of the nineties. Through an internal exercise, the UN realised that the goals which were set during the last conference had not been achieved in many countries. It was decided to have another conference in 1995 to highlight some of the pertinent issues which remain unattained. The UN asked for a national report – a nonpartisan one – that would highlight the progress of women, women's organisations and NGOs. In 1993 there was a South Asian Conference on women in Manila organised by ESCAP. Upon our return, a coalition was established from the need to prepare for the world conferences. ADAB¹⁹⁸ was our secretariat. (Najma Chowdhury, interview dated: June 2011)

¹⁹⁸ Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) is the national apex organisation of the local, national and international non-government organisations (NGOs) working in Bangladesh. It was founded in January 1974 as a loose coalition of some foreign aided NGOs that were engaged in relief and rehabilitation activities. It was known as Association of Voluntary agencies in Bangladesh (AVAB). In 1976, it was renamed as Agricultural Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) as because its members concentrated their activities in the fields of agriculture and food production. A subsequent renaming took place in December 1983 as Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh with its acronyms ADAB remaining unchanged. Since

Najma states that, in her opinion, coalitions are very helpful for a collective voice. But on the other hand, every coalition also creates division, wedges, distance and misunderstandings. The purpose of this coalition was not only to prepare a report for Beijing but also to draft a national report which the coalition was supposed to present to the government for national actions.

I was elected as the convener of the Beijing Preparatory Committee in an open meeting. We had two main responsibilities there: firstly, preparing a collective report through our interaction with all voluntary organisations and NGOs, and secondly, to negotiate a meaningful dialogue between us and the government. Now, after all these years, I feel that we had largely failed on the second. (Najma Chowdhury, interview dated: June 2011)

Najma clarifies that; previously, there were distinctions between autonomous women's organisations and NGOs. But, to the UN, the entire the women's movement was perceived under the broader umbrella of NGO activities, which is not tied to either the state or the government. After the intervention of UN-led global the women's movement, all organisations had to register as NGO to participate in the UN conferences. The distinction between NGOs and autonomous women's organisations became blurred. She wanted to limit the coalition to only NGOs working on women's issues, but other organisations – whoever had any project on women – wanted to join. Thus, the most challenging task was to coordinate between autonomous women's organisations and NGOs. She is still not sure how far she managed to coordinate everything but she enjoyed her work there and had a great experience in learning about dialectics and ambiances of the women's movement. Her experiences in coordinating the Beijing attendance had also reflected upon the dialectic relationship between the state and the women's movement.

I had two very important experiences while working on this coalition. First, there is nothing called an undifferentiated women's movement. It has many ways, many courses of action and multiple layers. It is always a great challenge to negotiate consensus on any issue and to move forward unitedly. The internal contradictions and differences soon started to emerge and conflicting opinion often used to eclipse the purpose of knitting a comprehensive view. As a convener, my main challenge was to warrant a neutral position. Hardest was to ensure incorporation of all the voices. I was very careful not to highlight WfW as the main coordinator. I had to be extra cautious because I was a WfW member and most of the research and academic works was done by WfW. If, by any chance, it was felt that WfW is co-opting

that time, ADAB emerged as the apex body and national coordinating agency of the development NGOs in Bangladesh.

the entire show, then the whole purpose would capsize. Moreover, I had to be very careful to keep my distance from any sort of personal considerations within the coalitions to ensure my impartial position.

Secondly, I also realised that there is a conflicting role between the state and the the women's movement. To word it differently, the state wants to keep its distance from the women's movement because it believes that the movement is always trying to attain some undue advantages from it, while the women's movement thinks that the state is depriving them. I felt that the main challenge for the women's movement is to establish a relationship of meaningful dialogue between the two. In spite of the breaches and wedges, representatives went to Beijing to attend the 4th world conference and had a very successful showcasing there. Some opted for not to attend at all due to their diverged position in relation to global participation and internal disagreement. After the conference, the coalitions were dissolved in 1995. (Najma Chowdhury, interview dated: March 2011)



Figure 20: News on the commencement of the draft of the strategic action plan for development for women in the light of Beijing Platform for Action.

Source: 20 May, 1996, The Daily Bhorer Kagaj



Figure 21: Key figures from the women's movement, attending Beijing Conference 1995.
Source: tin dashak, kisu srmiti kisu kotha, n.d. Women for Women, Dhaka.

The above narration of Najma Chowdhury reflects that conflicts over power, differences of opinions and disputes are parts of any alliance that can challenge the progress of the women's movement. On the other hand, coalitions like the Beijing Preparatory Committee presented a platform where many women's organisations and NGOs could join, share and work on issues related to their existence. Global agendas and activities created a space for local organisations to get together and sharpen their arguments. Women leaders were also engaged in the process of making, coordinating and combining the difference and diversities towards a compromise. The euphoria led to diverse activities like shadowing women's conferences, research and publication, and exploring new arenas for knowledge production and creativity. Most importantly a channel of communication was made between the women's movement and the state.

Naripokkho, on the other hand, had something different in their pocket and approached WCW and CEDAW's involvement with global feminism from a different viewpoint. They thought Global feminism has led to institutional building at the local level with local voices.

NP organised a conference in *Jaydevpur*, on the outskirts of Dhaka prior to the Beijing conference. As mentioned in Chapter Three, due to disagreement on the Yasmin issue, some key figures in the movement and organisations decided to boycott Beijing, while

others thought of creating a similar space for those who could not make it to Beijing. The alternative conference took place with the participation of more than 250 organisations. The experiences of sharing, discussing, articulating, raising voices etc. took place in a manner which none thought was possible earlier. Over the course of the conference, members became attracted to the whole experience and parting became difficult for many at the end of it. They were saying that not meeting again for follow-ups – after all the sharing and eye opening experiences – will harm their goals. Most of the women from the grassroots level had a slogan ‘we will talk and share our experiences and we will sit regularly’ (*Nijeder kotha bolbo, niyomito boshbo* in Bangla). Out of this much-felt need, ‘*Doorbar*’ network was launched and NP played a central role in its establishment.

Finally Shireen Huq (NP) mobilised international funds from Danida, Canadian CIDA, and the Norwegian Embassy for three years, and *Doorbar* was formally launched in 1995. There were eleven sub-committees based on 11 regions of the country to begin with. By the time it was 1999, *Doorbar* was a registered organisation with the ministry of Women and Children’s Affairs, a NGO, receiving foreign funding on its individual capacity. It had its network in sixteen areas, working in all sixty four districts with more than five hundred organisations, and is operating on its own (since 2009) following a formal structure. Firdous thinks that *Doorbar* is one of the greatest achievements of the global the women’s movement because it was a direct positive outcome of the Beijing Conference and later, *Doorbar* became the doorway to the grassroots for NP. *Doorbar* also played a key role during the sex workers movement in 1999¹⁹⁹. Now, it is a separate alliance for the women’s movement, separate from traditional partisan politics. NP is a small organisation, with not more than 100 members, among which only 30 are active members and has no branches but *Doorbar* is like an extension to NP. NP could reach out to the grassroots through *Doorbar*.

The birth of WfW in 1973 also coincided with the preparatory phase on the International women’s year, which culminated in the Mexico Conference (First World Conference on Women) in 1975. This land mark development ushered in a decade of close interaction between the United Nation (UN) and its member states over issues of women’s development as noted in the outcome documents of the world conferences on women. Due to the synergy created by the interactions of the UN, the international the women’s movement, the member states of the UN and the local women’s organisations within the member states, there was also a resurgence of global the women’s movement. These movements carried their

¹⁹⁹Discussed in Chapter Three

agendas through regional and international networks and platforms, often cutting across territorial boundaries. In doing so, they also lent their voices to the aspirations and demands of the local women's organisations. According to Najma, the task of redesigning gender relations, which the UN has mandated to encourage the government of the member states to accomplish, was not easy, particularly in countries where there was hardly any data base which was not infected with patriarchal world view. There was, therefore an urgent need to create knowledge about women so that adequate policies for women's development could be formulated and put into effect.

Women's studies centres and institutes were seen as effective tools for bringing about the necessary transformation through knowledge production, by the successive world conferences on women as well as by women's organisations, NGOs, and forums which detailed the official conferences and provided the space and strength to local organisations and their representative regional platforms and networks to lobby their cause.

Apart from the land mark publication by WfW titled 'Women for Women 1975, another publication, also based on available original sources which received accolade from critics is the study on 'Situation of Women in Bangladesh, 1979'²⁰⁰. The annual convention of the organisation on Women and National Planning in Bangladesh (1990) led to mainstreaming of women in the macro chapter of Fourth Five Year Plan. Activities of WfW also included influencing the government decisions on census report, figures for maternal mortality and morbidity, agriculture and women's work and so on.²⁰¹

However, how far this global influence was benefitting local agendas was a question raised by the respondents. Apprehension, trepidation and a feeling of being co-opted were obvious in some.

Global Co-opting the Local²⁰²

As I mentioned earlier, the UN agendas offered the state an opportunity to portray a modern image while the women's movement also took advantage of these international efforts. The global scenario raised an area for everyone to establish network, build alliances and act as a force that pressurizes the government to comply and conform to the UN

²⁰⁰ See Appendix E

²⁰¹ See speech by Najma Chowdhury during the conference of Women for Women Celebrating Four Decades at CIRDAP Auditorium held on April 27, 2014

²⁰² Alternative voices were also noted much later, beyond all encompassing UN led global feminism from the feminists from the South to form 'People's Union of South Asia' (Sangat, 2010) and through the 'South Asian Declaration, 2006' (Sangat, 2006).

conventions and agendas. Following the CEDAW guideline, local feminists were able to work on a National Women Development Policy in 1996 (*Jatiyo Naari Neeti*), which then became an indigenous feminist formulation for the movement.

On the other hand, a feeble voice could be discerned protesting the overshadowing by the global thus co-opting the local. It was also observed that, since the emergence of Bangladesh, UN-led developments around feminism have been associated with donor funding and the infiltration of globalisation/NGOisation replacing the voluntary nature of autonomous women's voices. In order to attend the UN conferences, WCW and all other organisations had to register as NGOs to fit the requirements of the UN. Since then, theoretically, any distinction between a NGO that provides micro credit and generates employments and a voluntary women's organisation like BMP or WfW or NP ceased to exist. Women's organisations in Bangladesh have long been identified as non-profit, and voluntary organisations were outweighed by the world of NGOs. Meanwhile, the independent voice got lost in the myriad of global commotion.²⁰³ Maleka and Najma also feel that changes and shifts in the political economy of the country since the mid-seventies, including the rise of UN global feminisms, has downplayed local feminism. Local issues got co-opted and priorities became blurred. Small scale and voluntary community-based organisations were overpowered by the multitudes of NGOs and donor priorities. With a note of discontentment, Maleka says, "...no matter what, I still believe that we will have to continue our local struggles hand in hand with the global one. We cannot let go of our autonomous local agendas."

Similarly, NP raises the concerns of placing high stakes on international conventions, which may shift the attention of the women's movement from the vulnerabilities of women within the country. Women are already in disadvantageous positions as victims of injustice due to internal failures of the legal system, challenges of implementation processes, political partisanship, and change in regimes etc. The women's movement should be careful about getting diverted by global agendas ignoring internal challenges.

On the other hand it is also true that the women's movement in Bangladesh have built vibrant transnational networks for peace and justice. They created feminists spaces within international institutions and used them to promote gender justice. They applied their diplomatic skills in the arduous work of crafting international conventions to promote women's rights. Working locally and globally, they pressured national governments to ratify

²⁰³Discussions with feminists from India revealed that feminist formulations in India hardly ever shape their agendas and issues in accordance with the UN guideline.

conventions like CEDAW and other, and they promoted policy learnings, created new knowledge and influenced the policy process in favour of establishing women's rights. Moving from local to global and global to local or indeed working simultaneously at local and global levels - has become one hallmark of transnational activism in the current era (Hawkesworth, 2012).

Given the globalised nature of today's world, the UN interventions were enriching process of 'give and take' rather than merely a hegemonic co-option of the local. It must be recognised that remarkable changes, transformation and new configuration have taken place within and outside the movement due to the changes at the global level which can be termed as 'glocal' (Chaudhuri, 2010)

With this, I would like to move into the most critical arena for the women's movement, i.e. the interaction between the state and the movement.

III

Interface between the State and the Women's Movement: A Bitter-Sweet²⁰⁴ Interaction

The women's movement in Bangladesh has undergone various stages of interaction with the state. Concerns over the nature, extent and intensity of interactions, exchanges and negotiations manifested themselves in many forms and shapes. Women's organisations have adopted different strategies at different points in history, depending on the issues at stake. The love-hate relationship between the state and the movement is not uncommon across the region. The nature of association often shifts with the changes in the political scenario.

The complexities of state-the women's movement relation are not easy to comprehend. This state-the women's movement relationship of the last three decades was discussed in many occasions over the previous chapters. However, specific comments and responses necessitated this separate section in order to highlight the very nature of state-the women's movement interaction.

As is was observed earlier, the relationship is entwined with multiple factors – ranging from the nature of the state, personal standing to organisational affiliation, political beliefs and preferences, former connections and experiences, personal networks and liaisons

²⁰⁴ Acknowledging the name of the café 'Bitter Sweet' in Gulshan, Dhaka

and many more. Despite a long history of association with the women's movement, gender politics have rarely been able to become an effective pressure mechanism for the state.

In most cases, the women's movement, as well as women's issues, remained marginal in the state discourse. On the other hand, state-women interactions are not always oppositional or conflicting (Rai, 1996). The women's movement in Bangladesh from the beginning has been careful not to get into a confrontational situation with the state. A large section of the mainstream the women's movement always tried to maintain an amicable relationship with the state. In most of the cases, the compliance was largely strategic for the insurance of their presence and existence in the broader political arena. They always wanted to influence the state so that their demands would be acknowledged.

Strategies and Negotiations

Interaction with the state has led to apprehension, dilemma and uncertainty for women's organisations. On one hand, feminist formulations need to enter the official discourse in order receive any kind of legal backing. The state's support is also necessary to implement policies and deliver services to women. At the same time, close affiliation with the state may end in fruitless struggles over certain issues that may hamper the progress of women. The environment of interaction with varieties of agencies is dependent on time, space and context. It also varies with the kind of women's organisations. The heterogeneity of women's organisations, in terms of their priorities and focus, can lead to disagreements among themselves and, consequently, to a fragmented movement.

The women's movement strategized its interactions with the state expediently to bring about substantial changes. Using opportunities, tapping personal connections, using media and public sentiments, being pragmatic on certain sensitive issues like religion and body or *parda* etc. are important tactics for the women's movement.

Women's organisations are numerous; their focus, interests and priorities are diverse. Each has its own allies and foes, and each follows different strategies to promote gender justice. However, there is a similarity in approaches and strategies in mobilising bigger audience and greater alliances. The strategies include negotiating with the state in order to put forward issues and create pressure, choosing the right time to stage protest, deciding on when and where to act, making good use of personal networks in the state bureaucracy, donor agencies, key-influencers in the civil society, high profile politicians, pursuing matters at

conducive moments, shifting of mobilisation style from radical to more acceptable, 'soft' issues like violence against women or poverty issues, building alliances with other pro-women organisations, NGOs and international networks. Over and above, large-scale nationalist crisis like education, price-hike or energy issues are visited from time to time, depending upon the condition of the state and space allowed to the movement.

Another consideration entails the population of women folk of the country – the mass – around whom the movement is centred. The success of the women's movement is measured against the extent of impact upon women at large, rights gained and the potential of positive changes in women's lives and towards ensuring gender justice. Interacting with all these stakeholders is not easy. The intricate power hierarchies, individual interests and priorities of each of the actors mould the strategies of the movement. Engaging with the power structure of the mainstream patriarchy is always a challenge. Nazneen & Sultan (2010) recognised the various strategies that women's organisations adopt in formulating their feminist agendas. According to their research, the nature of interaction between women's organisations and the state authorities ranges from cooperation and reciprocity to distancing or ignoring the state and mainstream political parties. The women's movement have to make strategic choices in order to make use of available opportunities. Multiple strategies for organising support and building constituencies—have been helpful for women's organisation to gain greater legitimacy and strength as advocates on women's issues (Nazneen & Sultan, 2010).

It was largely observed by the respondents that the state plays a crucial role for the women's movement. They can never ignore the state, neither can they fully accommodate it. Without the state's cooperation, nothing much can be achieved – bringing changes in policies is practically impossible, declare the respondents (Najma Chowdhury, Roushan Jahan, Shireen Huq). Moreover, the state's approaches towards improving gender relations are ambiguous and often contradictory. Although democracy was perceived by the key figures as conducive but not an end itself, neither is female leadership per se. At times, the state enacts progressive laws and maintains active dialogue with leaders of movements by incorporating women leaders in policy-making procedures (e.g. Rehabilitation centres in 1971-72). Yet, governments at different points—in time, remain overtly patriarchal by perpetuating male dominance, for example, ignoring women-friendly amendments in the Constitution, lack of budgetary allocation etc. The state is essentially arranged in a gender-class hierarchical structure. In Bangladesh, the patron-client relationship and alliances – that is chiefly based on region and kinship – pervade social and political institutions. The nature of such alliances is

dominant and seeps into other organisations and within the civil bureaucracy. Almost all civil-society organisations, institutions, political parties etc. are largely polarized along party lines (BNP, AL and Jamat) which undermine the capacity of actors to articulate collective interests. The state is also fixed on priorities guided by donor communities and politicisation of the civil bureaucracy (Jahan, 1995).

The state, on the other hand, is either apprehensive or slack in terms of responding to the demands of the women's movement.

In Bangladesh, its multiple forms of government (democratic, authoritarian, autocratic, military or army backed, neutral/interim or Caretaker) since inception. Despite all these shifts in forms of government, the women's movement has been successful in negotiating the women's issues. Feminist leaders picked up relatively safe livelihood issues like price-hike or sewerage problems during repressive regimes. Again, VAW being an overarching issue, it was raised repeatedly to fight against autocratic regimes (Maleka Begum, Ayesha Khanam). For some, research, publication and knowledge production was an ongoing process, irrespective of the forms of government and state roles (Roushan Jahan, Mahmuda Islam). Global feminism was another safe arena to keep the candle aflame by the women's movement (Najma Chowdhury, Ayesha Khanam). Some thought that, in spite of the disagreements with state politics, it is often necessary to get involved in government committees of the government in order to influence the policy arena (Shireen Huq, Firdous Azim).

It is also important to realise that the nature and extent of engagement with mainstream politics or state depends on the nature of the state. During the eighties, the women's movement - along with other organisations and political parties were against the autocratic Ershad regime. The women's movement was in a constant state of dilemma of whether to endorse state action. It was anxious about interacting with the autocratic state at the risk of appearing to be legitimising it. This dilemma caused confusion, divisions and contradictory actions within the movement. For example, during the Ershad regime, the women's movement united against Ershad. However, one section of the movement was highlighting VAW as a law-and-order issue while others thought this kind of packaging of VAW would only divert the feminist agenda. Pushing VAW as a case of law-and-order issue might be helpful to destabilise the Ershad regime but would ultimately lead to the bypassing of feminist concerns. The rejection of VAW as a law-and-order issue and placing it under the

gender category was a legitimate move but many thought this as a pro-state attitude, which, in other words, was favouring the autocratic government. It is important to note that the same organisation which rejected VAW as a law-and-order issue became involved in filing a case against the state on the issue of state religion²⁰⁵.

During the nineties and throughout the process of democratisation, two political parties (BNP and AL) were in power with the female Prime ministers as heads of state. The highly polarised political milieu often led to division within the feminist movement. Supporting a women-friendly agenda and affiliating with the state had the risk of being identified as being politically aligned with the power structure. Women's organisations have their own alignments which often are discrete and do not surface unless challenged by circumstances.

Acceptability of feminist issues even amongst women's organisations depends on many factors like time and context, historical juncture and the nature of the issue at stake. For example, if it is about a particular law or the implementation of CEDAW or the removal of reservations etc. It requires constant negotiation and strategisation with the state. If the preferences of the state is against the basic principles of human rights or if the state remains autocratic and oppressive, the women's movement may not want to abandon the issue. Experience has made the women's movement realise that change in governments does not necessarily entail addressing gender issue or leads to hopes for a more cooperative political environment. In many cases, the woman's movement of Bangladesh had to embark on negotiations with the state, irrelevant of its political nature. NP, during the eighties, has campaigned around a gender issue instead of challenging the autocratic regime but took up confrontational roles with the same regime when required. Supporting or opposing the ruling authority is not the issue here. It is evident from the voices of the women's movement that continuing the struggle is of utmost importance, and the question of sustainability becomes the focus for the movement.

Nature of State: Coalitions and Alliances

Bangladesh's the women's movement, as a whole, espouses a collective voice towards formulating demands and rights for women's empowerment. Despite differences and diverse approaches, women's organisations share common interests and often build up

²⁰⁵Personal communication with Firdous Azim, Feb 2011.

alliances and coalitions to further their demands. In the process of alliance-building, the biggest challenge is to deal with state and political parties. If the state is democratic and has the support from the population, the collaboration with the state becomes less confrontational. In case of an autocratic state or state run by military bureaucracy and martial laws, the interaction gets strained and complex. Traditionally the women's movement has found it easier affiliating with the left political forces that favour the idea of secularism. Nevertheless, it is also important to note that political parties usually have their own women's wings which do not necessarily have a specific feminist agenda. Consequently, in the case of an autocratic state, coalition amongst women's organisations strengthens. For example, many coalitions and alliances were formed among women's organisations during the eighties when Ershad's autocratic regime was in power.

The very temperament of an oppressive state brought organisations from various platforms together more effectively. Paradoxically, feminist issues tend to become diluted under such broad coalitions. The focus turns in favour of general demands for independence, freedom or democracy. On the other hand, when the government or state apparatus is democratised, and the political scenario is relatively stable with power consolidation through one or two political parties, differences within the movement surface. Coalitions become brittle and tend to breakup because of political agendas rather than feminist disagreements. The biggest challenge remains for the women's movement to acknowledge the differences for the greater unity of the feminist cause, as opined by the leaders of the movement.

Space Created: Neutral or Caretaker Government

Bangladesh has experienced two neutral or Caretaker governments during the first three decades of Bangladesh. The fall of the autocratic regime of H M Ershad during the early nineties witnessed the assumption of office by a nonpartisan interim government under the leadership of Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed who was collectively invited by the democratic alliances to act as president for the express purpose of conducting a free and fair election for a sovereign parliament. The nonpartisan character of the government and the historic circumstances provided a special opportunity to draw upon the patriotic spirit of professionals to assist the democratic order.

Professor Rehman Sobhan as the member of the Advisory Council in charge of the Ministry of Planning and the External Relations Division, under the Acting President Shahabuddin Ahmed initiated the work in a variety of areas for identifying the development

options which urgently needed to be addressed by the newly elected parliament and the future elected government. 29 Task Forces were set up to review a range of development issues. In each of these areas it was reckoned that action would be immediately required to improve the performance of the economy, identify development priorities and review various policy alternatives for the future development of the national economy on a sustainable and self-reliant basis.

The Task forces were mobilized on transparently nonpartisan lines where the best available Bangladeshi professionals and academicians were drawn from within and outside the government on a strictly voluntary basis to contribute their services to facilitate the decision and policy making process of the new government and the parliament. The work of these Task Forces (published by UPL in four volumes) (Task Forces on Bangladesh Development Strategies for the 1990's, 1991) was to be presented to all the parties elected to the new parliament and placed before the country to promote awareness regarding critical development issues facing the nation and to encourage public discussion of the issues. Each of the issues were contributed by a convener and a group of experts on the area.

The first volume on Policies for Development included a chapter on Women in Development. Salma Khan, Joint Chief Planning Commission was the Convener of this section with members like Najma Chowdhury from Women for Women, Pratima Paul Majumdar, from Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies (BIDS), Sultana Kamal then from Naripokkho, Maleka Begum from Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Shamim Hamid from BIDS, Meghna Guhathakurta, Dhaka University and Gul e Afroz Mahboob, Ministry of Women's Affairs²⁰⁶.

It is important to note that during the second caretaker government led by Justice Habibur Rahman during 1996, Najma Chowdhury, one of the respondents of this thesis was nominated as the Advisor to the Ministry of Women's Affairs. She was at that point in time the only female member of the caretaker government. The selection of the advisors was dependent on their expertise and neutrality, not of their political affiliations. Neutral or interim governments like these were helpful for a nonpartisan articulation and feminist formulations.

²⁰⁶ See Task Forces on Bangladesh Development Strategies For The 1990's (1991) for details

Mainstream Politics Influencing the Politics of Feminism

Although all of the key figures interviewed were keen to stress on their ‘apolitical’ status in relation to state’s political preferences but nearly all had their overt or covert, personal or organisational political leanings if not direct affiliation. Apart from their implicit or explicit connections with mainstream politics, the women’s movement also harbours their own feminist political positions and ideologies, which is different from traditional politics.

This was critical in shaping the nature of responses towards each of the issues discussed. Some forms of governments were conducive for the movement – especially for those organisations who had good liaison with the people in power. Some felt restricted and marginalised. The respondents felt that no matter how volatile the relationships may be, the women’s movement has to seek the support of the state in the end.

As Kabeer (1989) notes, by the time Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated (in 1975), changing currents in the international donor community were obvious. Donor policies began to move away from their earlier single-minded focus on women’s reproductive capacity to addressing women’s productive potentials. Donor funding and budgetary allocation on research and development projects were made available in bigger proportions. The government of Zia ur Rahman took up the causes of WID, WAD (Women in Development and Women and Development)²⁰⁷ with great enthusiasm. The impact was visible in the Second Five Year Plan (1980-1985). Along with a full Ministry for Women’s Affairs, the number of parliamentary seats reserved for women was increased to 30 from 15. As mentioned earlier, 10% quota was declared for women in jobs and a state sponsored women’s organisation (*Jatiyo Mahila Shongstha*) was established in 1976. Special programs to assist poor rural women through various Food for Work and Vulnerable Group Feeding programmes were also put in place. Women became visible in policy making of the government.

The women’s movement found itself in a dialectic and ambivalent relationship with the state – resisting the state and mobilising against it, while at the same time, reaching out for its cooperation and support. One example of this complexity can be cited regard to attending the first WCW in 1975. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated in the same year that Zia ur Rahman came to power. Although BMP was all prepared to attend the first world

²⁰⁷ See Young, K. (1993). *Planning Development with Women: Making A World Of Difference*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.

conference on women in Mexico, they finally decided not to go. Politically speaking, BMP, during the seventies, was largely affiliated with the Mujib government, and the left wing politics which was influenced by Soviet bloc, did not support Zia-ur-Rahman's military government. A few selected women leaders from the government, however, attended the Mexico conference.

As discussed earlier, the women's movement of the mid-seventies was hesitant and ambivalent about these shifts in global and state policies. The women's movement was aware that many of the steps taken up by the state were more of a symbolic kind. However, one faction of the movement thought of using these steps as an opportunity for their own cause (WfW). State initiatives and efforts were seen by the women's movement as a strategy to mobilise political capital to legitimise their own power base. However, some decided to keep its distance from it mainly because of their political alliances (BMP). There were considerable differences across organisations in terms of negotiating with the state during the time. One example that brings this point home is the concern and uneasiness around the state sponsored establishment of *Jatiyo Mahila Shongshtha* – an initiative by President Zia ur Rahman.

BMP, for example, was cautious about the *Shongshtha* and decided to boycott it. All women's organisations were required to register under this overarching organisation. BMP immediately protested against this. The *Shongshtha* was understood to be a female wing of the BNP, Zia's political party. BMP felt that it was a threat to their autonomous existence (Maleka Begum). BMP kept its distance from *Shongshtha* until 1996. BMP started interacting with *Shongshtha* again when AL came to-power in 1996. BMP had good liaison with Ivy Rahman²⁰⁸ from AL, who was in charge of the *Shongshtha* at that time.

This only reflects the political underpinning of the women's movement. The efforts to create a ministry and a state-sponsored women's organisation was partly done as a response to global feminist conventions; but despite its association with UN formulations, political inclination of BMP led to the rejection of the apparently progressive agenda.

WfW, on the other hand, thought of making use of this at the beginning. Later understanding the political motive to co-opt the women's movement, it-decided to move away from the *Shongshtha* but kept up its participation on planning, budgetary and allocation

²⁰⁸Ivy Rahman, an active leader of Awami League and the women's movement, the deceased wife of the current (2013) president Zillur Rahman of AL government. She died of a bomb blast in 2004.

issues (Mahmuda Islam, interview dated: March 2011). Despite the fact that both Zia ur Rahman and H M Ershad's governments attached considerable importance to women's issues by taking up legal initiatives like establishment of the family courts (1985) – and a number of ordinances enacted which made crimes against women (abduction, kidnapping, trafficking, rape, acid throwing and murder) subject to capital punishment, the women's movement was not fully convinced of their intentions mainly because of the non-democratic nature of the government. Sporadic attempts at reconciliation were rebuffed by the very nature of state. The women's movement concentrated on movements for democracy in the late eighties, which turned out to be a national movement to overthrow the Ershad regime in 1990.

Najma draws attention to the state's proactive steps and says that these were the result of the global feminist movement and did not emanate from a gender sensitive state policy. She felt that although these initiatives were not really effective they were an important symbolic important gain. Bangladesh was the first country to have a full Ministry of Women's Affairs (later 'Children' was added to it in and she thinks that was a step backwards) but it was never effective because of its *locational* weakness. Because the position of women is secondary in a society, so is the position of the Ministry. Usually Women's Ministry is positioned in the lowest steps of the ladder in terms of fund allocation and power. At the beginning, Affairs related to women were placed under the Social Welfare Ministry, later – even when it was turned into a full-fledged ministry – it was attached to the secretariat of the president where ultimate decisions lay directly with the head of the state. It was never like in the Philippines or India where the Women's Ministry is powerful independent stature (Chowdhury, 2001).

Changes and Shifts in Global Scenario

Almost everyone thought that the shifts and changes which took place within the women's movement and its relationship with the state as a whole was fashioned by multiple factors like Bangladesh's entry into neo-liberal global capitalism, political and diplomatic relationships with Middle Eastern countries and NGOisation and infiltration of donor money including the rise of UN led global feminism (Najma Chowdhury, Roushan Jahan, Mahmuda Islam, Maleka Begum, Ayesha Khanam).

Another dominant trend during the eighties and nineties in Bangladesh was the steady rise in the numbers of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) that addressed various aspects of women's lives such as health, education, legal literacy, income generation via

micro credit, rights advocacy etc. An NGO Affairs Bureau was established during the end of the Ershad's Regime in 1990. Such NGOs are subject to contradictory scrutiny. One view is to identify these NGOs as a legitimate body that functions in the absence of a full functioning state and gradually moves towards creating a 'civil society' voice. These processes are also seen as a sign of 'bottom up' democracy, opening up avenues for the poor and particularly for women. Through such NGO activities, women are coming out and taking part in development activities through various income-generating programmes (Azim & Sultan, 2010). On the other hand, NGO activities were also viewed as a new and growing form of dependency on the West. Debates and critiques around concerning the ideology of NGOs, their links to their own states and to the states that fund them, and their utility for development and social change, real and sustainable impact upon poverty situation and empowerment etc. a part of mainstream discourses. NGOs are also seen as 'mitigating class conflict, diluting class identities and culture, blurring the borders and blunting the class struggle within nations and between them' (Qassoum, 2002). 'NGO-isation' (Jad, 2004) has also influenced and moulded the women's movement in many other countries.

Similarly, the Bangladesh women's movement was not isolated from global trends and economic order. As Badran (1995) notes, the origins of feminism cannot be found in any culturally "pure" location. External elements - external to class, region, country - are often appropriated and woven into the fabric of the 'indigenous' or local (Badran, 1995). Feminist articulations in Bangladesh became accordingly incorporated within international changes. Contents and forms of the women's movement were revisiting the international agendas in their own terms, in relation to their own society and culture.

In relation to these global shifts, both positive and negative changes were identified by the feminists of Bangladesh. They reflected on how the women's organisations, human rights organisations, NGOs and members of civil society have been playing critical roles in forwarding the issues raised in the global arena e.g. in implementing the Beijing Platform for action (PFA) and have undertaken programmes to eliminate discrimination against women. In 1997, the government adopted a National Policy for the Advancement of Women in conformity with Beijing Declarations and other such Declarations related to women's rights.

Apart from these progressive activities and collaborations, availability of foreign funding, as opposed to state support, was seen as a big challenge by many. Funding is a double-edged sword for women's organisations. Financing is associated with sustenance, but

at the same time poses a threat against its core value of voluntarism and non-paid social work. In many instances, women's organisations had to compromise or strategise their actions for their very existence and survival (Mahmuda Islam, interview dated: March 2011 & Firdous Azim, interview dated: March 2011).

In fact it was not global feminism in isolation but broader global changes that impacted the women's movement and shaped feminist formulations. These influences had two sides: while global influences were conducive to local agendas, the women's movement had to run the risk of sacrificing their own local formulation. National ownership or local voices were co-opted. The women's movement became fragmented, scattered and lost in the ebb of short-term projects like initiatives for women's 'empowerment'. Autonomous the women's movement lost its momentum in the upsurge of NGO activities, losing its distinctive characteristics (Roushan Jahan, Mahmuda Islam, Maleka Begum, interview dated: 2011).

Feminist Politics: Towards an Autonomous Voice

There were many issues raised by the women's movement depending upon particular events, twists and turns in history or specific agendas. Some lasted longer and remained central to the movement while some faded away in course of time; some reappeared after a period of silence. This ebb and flow, formation and transformation, loss and gain is typical of any movement, but what separates the women's movement from any other is its consistency in sticking to its mission of ensuring gender justice. Gaining political power is not part of this mobilisation. Liberty and emancipation of women from their subordinate situation is the main essence of feminist politics. This specific characteristic of the women's movement and feminism led to a continuous struggling of upholding their 'apolitical' stance and defining the 'politics' in their own terms, beyond traditional definition of politics.

Drawing on the earlier discussion of the women's movement being 'apolitical' I would now like to explore the feminist politics of the movement. Most of the interviewees expressed their hesitation to be identified with the formal politics of Bangladesh. This reluctance is indeed to be linked with the historical development of 'politics' as male dominated institution. Politics, per se, is seen by feminists as being male-biased. The claimed 'neutrality' is often perceived as deception, since most of the political theories are written from the perspective of the patriarchal male. Most of the existing states are patriarchal, and most decision-makers are men. Men and women experience politics differently partly

because their lives differ everywhere and partly, because politics occurs in state institutions that are male dominated (Vickers, 1997). Bangladesh politics and state structures are not different from this scenario. As demonstrated in many cases, almost all the major women's organisations have their own political preferences and affiliations, either overt or covert. Despite this association most of the organisations are keen to represent themselves as 'apolitical', neutral and dedicated to women's issues across political affiliation. Moreover, Bangladesh politics is divided into bipolar politics, dominated by two major political parties (AL and BNP), the civil society and many of the organisations, media, and professional communities are fragmented in the same partisan lines. The women's movement labels itself as 'apolitical' mainly to keep a safe distance from this bipolar politics. The following discussions will thus evolve around the relationship of mainstream politics and feminist politics.

Najma and Mahmuda recognise that the women's movement is a form of politics but different from the mainstream partisan politics. The relationship is often conflicting to each other. Political parties are often eager to co-opt the women's movement and keen on placing their own label on the issues raised by the movement. On the other hand, the women's movement is disillusioned by the 'politics' and wants to keep its distance from it. The dilemma is enhanced by the fact that this approach essentially cuts them off from the general mass of people and fails to establish a widely acknowledged legitimacy. Bangladesh politics is highly polarised. The ever-present two party politics of AL and BNP dominates. Society is also polarised in the same manner. For example, if the movement for a women's development policy gets support from AL, then BNP will withdraw its support. On the other hand, if any of the activities of the women's movement is identified with BNP, then it loses its legitimacy to AL. The women's movement is certainly a political body – it talks about and fights for political rights but this two-party faction is harmful for the movement. This is the reason for the women's movement to keep up an 'apolitical' image.

Maleka and Ayesha representing BMP explain the nature of feminist politics from yet another view.

...the women's movement is never afraid of politics; neither does it want to avoid politics. The women's movement is political in every possible way, fighting for women's rights and freedom - fighting against all kinds of oppression and subjugation is the main focus of its politics. What we are against is narrow party-politics (*rajnaitik doliyokaran*) and its co-option of women's issues. We don't want to be associated with any particular political parties. We

work with issues and we will go a long way to realise those irrespective of political parties in power. (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March, 2011)

Ayesha on the other hand is not critical of being identified as ‘political’.

The women’s movement from all over the world has done something for us and we have been benefitted by each of the steps taken. Despite the short comings, I see all this from a holistic approach; as part of our journey towards the emancipation of women. We were often accused of being ‘political’ but I never understood it as a weakness or detrimental to our mission. To me, ‘personal is political’ and there is nothing outside politics and no politics is without gender issue. (Ayesha Khanam, interview dated: July 2011)

Ayesha Khanam thinks that the politics of feminism is different from partisan, mainstream politics and, thus, sometimes it has a conflicting and antagonistic relationship with partisan politics. But on the other hand, alliances are also established with mainstream politics in relation to broader issues like socialism, secularism, democracy, pro-women approaches within the political structure. There are people within the formal political structure who are sensitive to women’s issues. What is important is to reach out and establish linkages and to connect.

The linkages between the women’s right-based movement and politics are complex. The relationship with the state’s nature, forms of governments, particular historical contexts etc. were diverse and constantly changing during the first three decades of Bangladesh. Feminists, who were there in the field from the very beginning, are found to share similar kinds of analysis and assume comparable positions with regard to politics. Respondents also reflect upon the loopholes of interaction between the women’s movement and politics. However, it is very unfortunate for the women’s movement that, none of the political parties perceived women beyond their status as vote banks. The key figures from the movement feel that it is crucial for women to prove themselves as a deciding factor and their votes not merely as a counterpart of their male relatives, but are based on their own judgments – until then, they would not be taken seriously as a significant constituency by the political parties. Some of the feminists, particularly those from BMP, are optimistic the left political parties. It is very unfortunate for these respondents that left-politics disintegrated along with the fall of socialism.

For women who have been systematically marginalised from politics, one of the most contentious problem is that of determining the proper relationship between the women’s

movement, political parties and the state (Nelson, 1992). As Hawkesworth (2012) has noted that one of the most pervasive political myths of contemporary life associates the modern state with the liberation of women. This myth of a benign, progressive state masks gendered state practices, exclusion of women from women's political leadership, governance and political rights (Hawkesworth, 2012). Catharine MacKinnon (1983) took the argument one step further, insisting that state was inherently male. Feminist debates about the nature of the state have resonated among activists and academics alike. Arguing that the state is an instrument of patriarchal oppression, some activists have avoided direct engagement with the state, preferring to organise their political action within autonomous women's organisations. Other activists argued that certain features of the state make political engagement particularly appropriate (Hawkesworth, 2012; Rai, 1996).

In Bangladesh activist from women's movement have argued that the state is a unique vehicle in the struggle for social and gender justice. State has the capacity to bestow equal rights, to legislate policies to redress exclusions and inequities. Some suggest that women can contest the boundaries of private and public spheres by engaging the state. By politicising issues and demanding state actions the women's movement was successful in transforming matters that have been construed as private, intimate, or personal relations into objects of public concern (Anti Dowry Act, Acid Attacks, Reproductive rights, sex work as work, direct election in reserved seats at local level). Indeed the women's movement have made their own marginalisation and exclusion from the institutions of state visible as 'public' issues that require state interventions.

Although efforts to engage the state remain controversial, taking the state as crucial site of struggle the women's movement have deployed numerous strategies and tactics for social change. Banaszak (2009) has argued that the women's movement cannot be fully understood without recognising the presence of feminist activist networks inside the state machinery. Her research reconceptualises the boundaries between social movements and the state, by developing the concept of movement-state intersections, she argues that important social movement and concepts - such as political opportunities, movement institutionalisation, and insider tactics - need to be revisited to apprehend the role of the movement in general and the women's movement and activism both inside and outside the state.

Similar to the findings of Banaszak, in-depth interviews and historical sources in Bangladesh revealed the critical insider activists or one or two key persons inside the government, sensitive to gender issues made significant contributions to the realisation of feminist demands. They have played vital roles in the development and implementation of policies in many areas, including VAW, rights in family, work and politics, women's health etc. It was also found that working inside or with the government did not always co-opt or deradicalise these activists. This causes us to rethink our general understanding of many social movements, concepts and processes, including political opportunities, movement institutionalization, and confrontational tactics, and it alters our conception of the interests and character of the state. Moreover efforts to engage the state also suggests feminist activists have found remarkably creative ways to contest their exclusion from the state machinery and to device new political spaces for activism and advocacy.

In Hope and in Despair

However, after all these years and looking back from hindsight, many felt that nothing much was achieved from all these efforts. They could not really bridge the gap between the people and the policy arena. WfW have been successful in raising issues, but not much progress was made in terms of influencing policies in favour of women. According to Roushan Jahan, the women's movement has undoubtedly made considerable progress in terms of women's rights through local and global initiatives like world conferences, Beijing +five, CEDAW, National Women's Development Policy and so on, but the accumulated result is inadequate. On the other hand, she feels that this is part and parcel of any movement all over the world. In most of the cases, it is all about one step forward and two steps backward. In her own words:

The women's movement is like a river, there are ebbs and flows (*jowar bhata r moto*). Sometime the river of movements is fast and clear, sometimes slow and murky. The women's movement has many faces, has many layers to pursue - ranging from women's most intimate relationship within a household situation, economic scarcity and poverty, VAW etc. to political rights in public. We have multiple identities to follow in our personal lives, so does the movement. We have to address each and every issue as and when it surface, depending on the context. The biggest challenge for the women's movement and feminist realisation is to come terms with-the diversity of these issues. (Roushan Jahan, interview dated: July 2011)

This chapter has primarily looked into the complex relationship between the women's movement and global-local interaction. It has tried to look into the intricate relationship between the main actors shaping the broad umbrella of the women's movement. The global influences have been identified by the respondents as one of the main influencing factors: firstly, in terms of broader political and economic paradigm shifts that took place in Bangladesh over the first three decades, and secondly, the role of global feminism – particularly UN led charters like CEDAW or World Conferences on Women (WCW) – were highlighted as critical lighthouses and a common platform for the women's movement of Bangladesh.

The state, on the other hand, was identified as one of the critical players in shaping the entire form of the movement. The complex and ambivalent relationship with the state has greatly influenced the responses and strategies of the women's movement and have created breach between and the organisations. It, at the same time, brought them together in the same platform as it did in the case of global the women's movement.

However, the need to work on local agendas and priorities and not to be co-opted by external influences remained central to the feminist voices of the Bangladesh women's movement. Furthermore, self-identification, reflectivity and soul-searching led to the justification of articulating 'feminist politics' as a legitimate body beyond traditional politics. It has indeed placed the feminist articulation in a higher plane amidst the volatile political environment of Bangladesh.

Chapter Six

To Conclude or Not To Conclude...

I

A Brief Overview

This thesis attempted to look at the development and evolution of feminist thought by sifting through the voices of the women's movements and activism in contemporary Bangladesh. The focus was to reveal the particular forms and contents of feminist thought, its indigenous and autonomous forms, alongside its contemporary trends and nature, underscoring its distinct features if any.

This entire effort, encapsulated in four major chapters, intended to look into the complex process of issues raised, and responses made by the women's movement. The purpose is not to develop another brand of feminist thought but to reveal the diversity and multiplicity existing within the very nature of feminist epistemology in Bangladesh.

In doing so, this thesis has covered the first three decades of Bangladesh, i.e. the seventies, eighties and nineties (1971-2000). It was soon revealed that feminist formulations were produced and formed at various sites, such as within state discourses, civil society and NGOs, through literary expression, academic knowledge production, media and visual arts, through global feminism, particularly UN-led feminism, and, most importantly, manifested in the broader the women's movement via women's organisations. Feminist ideas, articulations and manifestations have been shaped and informed by the broader socio-political shifts and changes as well, both at the national and global levels. The main focus here was to examine feminist articulation through the activism of women's organisations.

In order to taper this intricate and vast engagement under one umbrella, three major women's organisations were purposefully selected to locate feminist constructions. Each represented their distinctive nature and characteristics, with their own historical rationale that make them worthy of being selected as the most prominent organisations of the country.

During the first phase of data gathering, a long list of issues raised by the women's movement was prepared largely from secondary sources. At this point, seven key figures along with four other significant women activists from the movement were chosen to pick out issues which they considered relevant for the movement as a whole, as well as for the selected organisations. One-on-one interviews helped identify and sharpen the issues,

responses, reactions, activisms and engagement shaping feminist articulations. These interviews were the mainstay of this thesis, conveying the voices of the women's movement, expressed in intimate and open deliberations, sharing both the organisational and personal positioning relating to the issues under discussion.

Through the process of sorting and sifting, mainly guided by the respondents and the secondary sources, three broad areas were categorised under three major issues: i. Violence against Women ii. Women's right based movement in the area of family, work and politics and iii. Religion. Each of the broad areas entailed several sub-issues and concerns around which the women's movement engaged in designing its campaigns, demands and declarations. Three main chapters of this thesis are divided according to these broad areas.

There happens to be another area mentioned and deliberated throughout the thesis yet remained mostly peripheral to it. The women's movement of Bangladesh was not trying to claim its space in a void. It was in constant negotiation with various actors and engaged in debate, contestation, confrontation, conciliation, alliances and agreements. The fourth issue that emerged, highlighting this interaction mainly of the state with global feminism, had not been visualised at the beginning. The last chapter thus ponders on the nexus of state vis a vis the women's movement and the shaping of local formulations by the global feminism.

While wrapping up the thesis, I will start with a brief overview of the decades under the purview of this research. Secondly, three selected organisations, their particular nature and forms will be discussed. The third section talks about the personas who were selected and analyse their personal dispositions in brief. The fourth section will highlight the main features of the issues and sub-issues faced or confronted by the women's movement. The last section will shed light on the overall understanding drawn from the entire exercise.

The First Three Decades: The Seventies, Eighties and Nineties

In terms of the structure and forms of the state machinery, Bangladesh had gone through various forms e.g. democratic, quasi democratic, military or military backed democracy, autocracy and interim/ neutral Caretaker government during the period covered in this thesis.

The seventies were marked by the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. The first Constitution was drafted by the male politicians of the new country under the leadership of the Awami League (AL) as the major political party in power. The decade experienced

political shifts and changes, the assassination of the national leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1975) and the army backed government led by Zia ur Rahman. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was floated by him. Diplomatic relations and alliances changed from pro-Soviet to pro-Islamic countries. The year coincided with the International Decade for Women declared by the United Nations.

Followed by a military coup and the assassination of President Zia ur Rahman in 1984, the entire eighties was dominated by non-democratic government headed by H M Ershad led by the Jatiyo Party (JP). Militarisation, autocratic repression, dissolution of the Constitution, stagnated economy, and crippling corruption led to the mass uprising against him. H M Ershad was overthrown through a nationwide resistance and militant mobilisation nearing the end of the decade.

The nineties experienced democratic forms of government led by two female leaders; firstly Khaleda Zia, wife of late President Zia ur Rahman, with BNP sweeping the poll (1991-1996). Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of the 'Father of the Nation', came to power in 1996 and her regime, led by AL, ended in 2000. In absence of a democratic milieu for decades, and due to lack of agreement on issues related to the election process, to facilitate election a unique arrangement of interim government was agreed upon. Two such governments, commonly known as 'neutral' or 'Caretaker Government' were formed in 1990 and in 1996 consecutively. A space was made for the women's movement during these two brief periods of the interim governments. New knowledge was produced under Task Force Reports and a woman (one of the key respondents of this thesis) was chosen as the Advisor to the government responsible for the Ministry of Women's Affairs along with other two ministries.

The nineties was also marked by the fall of the Soviet Union, rise of liberalisation, free market economy, globalisation, and international capital, donor funding and mass scale NGOisation. Since the late eighties, UN-led global feminism appeared as the most influential factor. During this decade, numerous autonomous women's organisations, NGOs with women focused activities and many other social and academic organisations started to carve out substantial spaces in the domain of women and gender issues. State discourses were influenced by these changes and shifts over the decades, as was the women's movement. The role of the state and UN-led global feminism became the most influential factors for the women's movement of Bangladesh.

It was perceived that during its journey through various political junctures, the women's movement had to deploy various approaches to deal with these complexities. Apart from the very beginning in the early seventies, the women's movement has been very careful to project an 'apolitical' image of itself and has tried to avoid any sort of direct affiliation with partisan mainstream politics. The main attitude towards the state apparatus is often that of disappointment and frustration. On the other hand, in order to achieve any changes in policy, the women's movement was required to maintain a meaningful dialogue with governments. With time, confrontation was avoided, and attempts were made to build a relationship with the state apparatus in order to achieve its goals. This dilemma of maintaining a relationship of 'love and hate' is perpetual and has often moulded feminist formulations at different points in time.

Since the inception of Bangladesh, global feminism, and particularly UN-led feminism, played an influential role shaping the pathway of both the state and the women's movement. All three organisations covered were involved in linking global agendas with the local, were engaged in ratification and implementation of the CEDAW charter, writing reports and participating in World Conferences on Women. These activities created a common platform for the women's movement as a whole, along with NGOs working in the area of women and gender who came together in a fruitful engagement. However, global feminism was a double-edged sword for the movement. On one hand it made the journey easier for the movement by providing an internationally accepted norm and charter for the emancipation and advancement of women, but the flipside of this coin is the shadowing of local agendas, local forms and priorities. Understanding of all this emerged through excavation of the three selected organisations.

Three Selected Organisations

Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), a membership based women's organisation, formally emerged in 1970, the oldest and the largest pioneering with branches across the country. BMP was active in issues including rehabilitation for war victims, price hike, dowry movement, UFC, direct election, protesting declaration of state religion, CEDAW and so on, across all political regimes. BMP was involved in mass demonstrations on the streets in their struggle and campaigns on many other social issues, such as the education policy, eviction of brothels or movement against *fatwa*, demanding democracy while also being entwined with numerous national agendas and disputes. As one of the pioneering organisations it was

widely visible in militant protests, mobilisation, processions, press conferences, placing of memorandum to the state authority etc. during the entire period covered by this study. BMP was largely affiliated with a left wing political party i.e. Bangladesh Communist Party (CPB) and was overtly or covertly aligned with AL during the first three decades of Bangladesh. However, BMP was never disillusioned by the AL government and protested against its oppressive coercion when student union was observing 'Vietnam Day' in 1972 and bullets were charged by the police (Begum, 2002). Despite occasional rifts and disappointments, BMP remained a 'loyal opposition' to AL government during the time frame of this study as part of their feminist strategisation. BMP can be identified with the development of feminism in the east or non-west when (during the colonial period) the emergence of autonomous women's organisations and associations were linked to political groups which played an important role in the nationalist struggle (Jayawardena, 1986).

Women for Women (WfW) was established in 1973 from what was felt as a demand for generation of data on the state and status of the women within the country. WfW is mainly a research based organisation engaged in production of knowledge, dissemination, awareness building, conscientisation raising, training, networking, lobbying and influencing policy in favour of women and gender issues. It would not be an overstatement to affirm that it was through the activities of WfW that the creation of knowledge and its dissemination became a critical tool for the women's movement in Bangladesh, imbuing it with the initial edge to penetrate across political regime and affiliation. Since its inception, WfW has published numerous reports, books, journals, articles which have essentially benefitted both the movement and feminist scholarship²⁰⁹. Issues related to VAW, ratification of CEDAW, direct election, health, methodological and epistemological issues, moulding the role of bureaucracy, state apparatus, lobbying and networking towards women friendly policy milieu continue to be its main concern.

WfW does not have any branches. Because of the heterogeneous nature of academic membership it is often hard to identify their political leanings. Members of WfW are found to be from both mainstream political parties of the country (AL and BNP) and beyond.

BMP and WfW are the oldest and therefore largely dominated by the first generation feminists of the country, who were prudent and cautious in their reactions and responses to the issues at hand. They are more prone to move at a calculated pace, trying not to destabilise

²⁰⁹See publication list of Women for Women in Appendix E

the power structure but to strategise their steps in order to attain a meaningful and sustainable gain from mainstream politics or the state. An affinity between the two could be recognised in terms of their strategies as well as issues raised and pursued.

Naripokkho (NP), on the other hand, consisting of a group of young ‘radical’ feminists, started its journey in 1983. Similar to WfW, NP does not have any branches but reaches out to the grass roots through its various networks and affiliated NGOs. Though working within a limited boundary, NP challenges the traditional formulations within the mainstream the women’s movement by being active in radical demonstration against the state, breaking new grounds in terms of deconstructing then redefining the concepts and epistemological understanding, and thereby forging new paths to address feminist agendas. NP sounds ‘radical’, young and carefree. If there is no one with them, they are ready to continue on their own, if not on the streets then inside the organisation’s office house during their ‘Tuesday Discussions’. Their work includes re-examining areas like sexuality and religion, bringing in a new vocabulary around VAW, patriarchy, sexual rights, sexual preferences and identities, sex work or issues like ‘marital rape’, alongside challenging the patriarchal institution of marriage. They played a crucial role around reproductive health and body issues, acid attacks, sex workers’ movement, religion and CEDAW ratification.

Pioneer organisations like BMP or WfW were not yet ready to question the home, marriage and heterosexuality. They were more concerned about overarching issues like poverty, dowry, violence and child custody. NP, in contrast, perceived the mainstream as ‘*paan khawa khalmmas*’ (Begum, 2002) or oldies, stuck with the same old charity approach rotating around the left political compass of women’s emancipation. NP was also criticised by the others as being ‘Western’, impulsive, out of touch with the masses and pursuing short term agendas without any coherent plan or aim.

NP proclaims its political neutrality by not being affiliated to any mainstream political party. It often prefers to follow ‘*ekla cholo neeti*’ (to move ahead on their own). Although there has been no direct conflict amongst these three, NP is mostly run by a different generation with a different perspective.

In relation to the differences in opinion, deviation in terms, responses, reactions and formulations of NP can largely be identified as resulting from a generation gap as the first generation of feminists largely belonging to BMP and WfW. NP had the advantage of time as being a late comer in the trajectory.

Key Personnas of the Movement

Voices from the women's' movement were captured through interviewing of key personnas within the women's movement. Some are still actively involved in the movement; some have become low key but have kept their connections with the movement through personal as well as organisational affiliations. For a few respondents, the organisational links cut across the organisations, as do their political affiliations. Some were members of more than one of the selected organisations and involved with many other platforms at present. Responses became intertwined with different organisational associations and platforms. It was often difficult to analyse their responses under any specific organisation or boundary.

Their positioning within the movement also varied, exhibiting heterogeneity due to their personal and organisational affiliation. Despite their differences in opinion, approaches, strategies, political leanings, association and preferences, they could move across the board to join the movement for the broader attainment of emancipation for women. They were brought together under the wider canopy of 'feminist politics', beyond the narrow boundary of any specific organisation or mainstream political affiliations. Furthermore, their personal and organisational connections were found to be divergent in many instances when shared 'off the record'. This particular 'problem' actually enriched the understanding of a comprehensive and complex feminist voice across organisations.

Interviewing the key figures from the movement was at the same time inspiring and disheartening. In one hand the process revealed the bold and radical activities of many which were unknown to me. On the other hand it was clear from the narration that their contributions have not been adequately recognised but unfortunately was confined to the footnotes of history. In many cases their achievements are barely recognised and their names are seldom commemorated alongside the male national heroes (Jayawardena, 1986).

Key Issues and Sub Issues Selected

The main understanding that emerged from the entire exercise is hard to summarise in a few pages yet an attempt will be made to pick up the main trends and key features. This study has chosen three broad areas with fourteen sub-issues in total under each category, which again connect and intermingle with each other. While picking up the issues relevant to the movement, it was soon realised that issues have appeared and reappeared at different times in history. Many crucial issues were forgotten (war time rape, abortion, adoption) while

many radical formulations were ignored (for instance ensuring access of women to male dominated spheres like Ansar and VDP), even while others remained muted and unresolved, such as the demand for Uniform Family Code, issues around bodily right and sexuality, the matter of state religion or of amending the Constitution to initiate women conducive reforms. Yet, some continue to be significant, such as the demand for direct elections in reserved seats. Other issues have left long term impact, accruing legal gains or institutional building, like in the case of dowry movement, acid attack and right to declare ‘sex work as work’. Some events could gather mass mobilisation and created a common platforms for all, as around the death of Shabmeher, eviction of brothels, or the rape and murder of Yasmin. At the same time, some were co-opted under the wider umbrella of global feminism, while local issues were submerged under mega conventions like CEDAW.

Among the three broad issues selected (VAW, rights based movement and movement around the question of religion), **VAW** (Chapter Two) emerged as the most common thread for all, overarching the entire array of the movement. Under VAW, the most prominent concerns highlighted by the respondents included the following: *war time rape and atrocities against women in 1971, rehabilitation process* by the state in association with the key persons from the movement, including abortion, adoption and declaration of war victims as *Birangona*. Despite a range of critiques and general ambivalence, emerging at a later stage, around the steps taken by key people within the movement in association with the state, it was broadly agreed upon that the activities were a ‘historical necessity’, and thus unavoidable demands of the time and context.

During subsequent decades, the major issues for the movement pivoted around the death of *Shabmeher* in 1984, *acid attack* from mid-nineties and the case of rape and murder of *Yasmin* in police custody in 1995.

The death of *Shabmeher* in the brothel was able to mobilise support from many and, more importantly, the issue of ‘prostitution’ was brought into public discussion for the first time. The campaign and protest against the eviction of brothels actually became linked with human rights issue. A flurry of activism were entwined with the Shabmeher issue. Coalitions and affiliations were formed across the women’s organisations, although not without rifts and disagreements. The women’s movement soon entangled with the nationwide demand for democracy against an autocratic regime during the late nineties. Furthermore, the struggle

towards ensuring justice for this murder actually led to the most unique kind of movement in Bangladesh context—the sex workers’ movement—to be summarised under rights issues.

Campaign against *acid attacks*, initiated around the late nineties, can be labelled as the most successful engagement in terms of introducing new conceptual understanding of women’s progress from ‘victimhood’ to ‘survivors’. The movement was effective with regard to institutional building (Burn Unit at Dhaka Medical College, formation of Acid Survival Foundation) and legal gains. Despite bureaucratic hassles, the movement experienced widespread support and help both in national and international arenas.

The case of Yasmin under VAW issue was another event which manifested itself in militant agitation, drawing mass scale support from the general public and civil society. It was probably the most important stage in the history of the women’s movement when men sacrificed their lives in support of a cause upheld by the women’s movement, largely to protest state failure and mobilising large scale movement against the law enforcement body.

The second most important of the issues around which the women’s movement in Bangladesh grew most vocal was the demand **for rights in family, work and politics** (Chapter Three). Right based movement focusing on family issues rotated around the demand for *Anti-Dowry Act* in 1980 and movement for *Uniform Family Code (UFC)* in 1992, alongside the movement towards establishing *women’s rights over their own bodies* and body as site of resistance.

In order to establish women’s rights in private or family setting, the *dowry movement* during the eighties was successful in terms of passing the Anti-Dowry Act (1980). This seemed like a great victory at the time. It was only later that the understanding began to sink in about how mere changes in the law meant little unless there exists a machinery to implement them. This again reveals that the root of the problem of VAW resides not only in the law, or with the state, but much more pervasive in the society.

The movement for *Uniform Family Code (UFC)* gained momentum during the late eighties. In spite of long painstaking and diligent work, the demand was finally co-opted with the advent of an all-encompassing CEDAW or other human rights conventions. Contradictions and double standards built into the Constitution around personal law versus civil law led to further disintegration of such radical demands articulating strategic transformation in women’s lives.

The issue of body politics was first raised around reproductive health and women's body as site of resistance and gained momentum during 1993, manifesting mainly around reproductive rights, by demanding choice and access to information regarding available contraception and standing against state policy for population control as well as against the controversial role of multinational corporations. 'Body' by default is associated with women and 'mind' coded as male. Under the system of female dominated infant care, everything pleasurable, and everything terrifying about bodily needs, desires and vulnerabilities are first experienced in the arms of a woman – the mother. As a consequence, the entire arena of spontaneous bodily experience becomes associated with the 'woman' in general the ambivalence towards the body remains culturally unintegrated (Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin & Lydenberg, 1999). The division notwithstanding, significant achievement was made in terms of fighting against the powerful multinationals and state policy. Radical formulation and 'scandalous' slogans created breaches and division within the movement but carved out space for women's body issue in public discourse.

Attempts to establish **women's right in public** spaces and work was demonstrated both by the state and the women's movement. The state declared a *quota for women* in government and private sector jobs. An extraordinary ordinance was issued to appoint women in the Police and Ansar, one which became a complimentary site of feminist formulation in interface with the state (1971-1975). Through this particular ordinance the state contested itself by violating the Constitutional bar preventing women from doing men's job. Unfortunately this agenda was largely ignored by the movement and was not used as a tool to further their demand for more radical reforms.

The most controversial demonstration that took place around women's rights in the public sphere is the demand for declaring '*sex work as work*' during the late nineties. Despite a degree of reservation and ambivalence, the mainstream vocabulary changed from 'prostitution' or '*patita*' to 'sex work'. A meaningful link was established between the women's movement and the 'sex workers' movement. This bond led to success in terms of establishing their rights of women engaged in 'sex work' as citizens, along with their right to work and livelihood. Through a High Court verdict 'sex work' was declared a legitimate profession in 2000. Separate organisational capacities were developed by the 'sex workers' themselves articulating their own demands. However, this euphoria was not shared by all as a stream of the women's movement perceived this verdict as a process legalising 'work' which

puts women at the lowest rung of the ladder in society by not addressing the root cause of this trade.

The movement for ensuring **women's rights in politics** entailed critique of the *Constitution* and identifying the loopholes inherent to it as a recurrent hindrance to women's rights and freedom. Continuous mobilisation demanding *direct election in reserved seats at local level and parliament* finally led to a revolutionary legal gain allowing direct election in the reserved seats for women at the local level in 1997. In spite of many loop holes and shortfall in the outcome in terms of women's political empowerment, this gain led to strengthening of the demand of direct election in reserved seats to the realm of the parliament. Nonetheless, mainstream political calculations and bargain of 'block vote' by the party in power led to increase in the number of selected seats in the parliament but not to direct election. The demand was not accepted by all with the same enthusiasm as some from the movement thought that hardly any good can come out of a non-effective political culture.

The third broad issue that was raised by key figures in the movement was the question of **religion** (Chapter Four). The affinity with secularism and its contestation with the women's movement were largely identified as one of the unresolved arenas within the feminist understanding and of the nation, till today. The strain between religion and feminism was demonstrated through its challenge against the state for declaring '*Islam as the state religion*' in 1984 (the 8th amendment Bill) during Ershad's regime. A visible and militant mobilisation ended with a written petition against the state's decision by a particular organisation. This act of defiance demonstrated the strength and courage of the movement in confronting the state during its autocratic phase, even while apprehension was again expressed from another view within the movement regarding its benefit to the movement and to women at large.

The issue of the politics of *dress and deportment* was also emphasised as a critical arena of contestation for feminist formulations. Rising adoption of Islamic style of dress was perceived with caution by the respondents. A hint of criticism was detected around the observance of 'Islamic deportment' (mainly covering of head) by the female leaders of the country. According to the respondents, this tendency of using dress and deportment as a political tool had not been present in the seventies. The motive behind the portrayal was perceived as problematic. The shifts and changes in the dress of political leaders has little to

do with choice and option but is about the politics of not to jeopardising the perceived Islamic trend of the country.

The uneasy relationship between feminist articulations and religion has been highlighted by many from the movement. *The case of Taslima Nasrin* came under the broad heading of fatwa and other religious sanctions and restrictions imposed upon the women's movement as a whole and on women in particular. Taslima's case can be considered a point of departure highlighting it as a *non-issue* for the women's movement, yet pertinent enough to bring it to the forefront in clarifying the positioning of Taslima Nasrin within the broader framework of the women's movement.

Major Trends and Drifts in the Women's Movement

Some pertinent insights, understanding and observation were accrued during this journey beyond its declared boundaries of discussion, some of which were mentioned throughout the exercise but need to be reiterated at this point.

Unity and Diversity

Firstly, the women's movement in Bangladesh is not a homogeneous one. Although different demands, protest, statements are broadly understood as part of the movement as a whole, responses either reactive or proactive are articulated by different organisations according to their own priority and commitment. There are many layers, shades and contours within the broader frame work of the women's movement. The movement as a whole has addressed numerous issues but some organisations have picked up certain issues as their primary agenda, some have remained silent on these same issues, while others gave their support but did not involve themselves in the process. Their focus and primary concerns are varied. Some are engaged in action based activist approach to conscientisation, providing legal or others support, addressing immediate issues of everyday life and have branches all over the country to reach out. Others are engaged in creating knowledge, compiling database through research and publication and mainly remain engaged in lobbying policy makers into incorporating gender issues. Others are addressing issues like religion, body and sexuality, which are not yet a major concern for the mainstream the women's movement.

The process of feminist formulations is a complex and ambiguous one. One could identify unanimous consensus across the board on certain issues while feminist responses are fragmented, constantly in friction with each other, creating debate and disagreement within

the movement. In spite of these diversified responses, through constant construction and deconstruction, feminist formulations unique to Bangladesh are taking shape. There is not one single cohesive movement but this diversity and multiplicity have in fact strengthened the nature and forms of the movement towards complex but rich feminist designs, making it strong and vibrant in plurality in its specific context.

Strategies Employed, Negotiations Made

During the first three decades of Bangladesh, the movement had to interact and negotiate with numerous agents and actors like the state, various forms of governments, political shifts and changes within the country as well as shifts and swings in the international arena. Despite these challenges, the women's movement had to employ strategies to remain anchored to its main agendas of women's emancipation and to bring transformatory changes in the lives of women. Despite dilemma and disagreement, feminists interviewed stated the inherent 'politics' of feminisms is to ensure liberty and freedom, equality and equity, justice and emancipation for women. Their reactions and responses, strategisation, negotiation, affinity and differences in achieving this goal was indeed the most crucial outcome of the movement. In spite of disagreement and debates within and outside the women's movement, the core value of ensuring women's rights and protesting against injustice, guiding the way forward to safeguard women's position and status in private and public were all inextricably eloquent in unity and harmony. The lack of agreement and consensus can be elucidated as diversity, multiplicity and plurality of voices from the movement, adding an invaluable wealth to feminism in Bangladesh.

Knowledge Production: A Critical Tool

Apparently movements are usually perceived in terms of activism, confrontation opposition and conflict. Knowledge production and creation of feminist scholarship came out as a critical tool to the women's movement. During the early days of the movement, organisations learnt that targeting the state was not enough— victims, survivors and high level policy makers also need support. Thus, awareness-raising, conscientisation programmes became a necessary activity so that discrimination against women could be prevented rather than dealt with only after the fact. Knowledge and data generation on women was recognised as an important need for the women's movement.

Non-confrontational engagement with policy making state apparatus, national and international agents, engaging in dialogue, networking, lobbying, awareness raising activities, training etc. came to be one of the most effective instances of activism under the broader understanding of feminism. This distinctive form of involvement finally culminated in the mainstreaming of feminist scholarship through the establishment of the Department of Women and Gender Studies in the University of Dhaka. Creation of feminist knowledge, an essential feature of feminist articulation, actually needs to be explored separately, something to which this study could not do justice.

Shifts and Changes, New Trends, New Challenges: Some Preliminary Observation

The world has undergone a series of changes during the decades under the purview of this study; so has the movement. Organisations have shifted from their voluntary broad based role to small project-like activities, often without any long term projection, and have often shifted to occupying paid positions within the organisations. Donor funding is shaping and moulding local agendas and priorities. Movements are not visible in militant protests on the street but are engaged in NGO-like undertakings. Forms of demonstration and protest have changed to press conferences, forming of human chain and media demonstrations, placing of memorandum, rallies and silent demonstration through banner, poster, festoons, and advertisement in the media and so on.

From the above deliberation by the feminist voices, a few pertinent challenges can be recognised which need some elaboration here. First of all, the women's movement vis a vis feminism in Bangladesh has to ask itself what strategic changes have taken place to improve women's lives, what changes have taken place in the lives of thousands of poor, rural or urban under-privileged women all over the country as a result of their long and vigilant movement? How far can the movement be called successful in terms of ensuring emancipation of women, ensuring their wellbeing, capability and rights? How far have the agendas pursued been beneficial for the women across the board? The women's movement has to rethink how far the ratification of CEDAW or secularism are meaningful agendas for the majority of women, and finally ask what chances women have to retain an autonomous voice amidst the global changes and rapid NGOisation faced by Bangladesh?

Secondly, how far has the movement been able to address the issue of women's body and sexuality? This is critical, as the root of VAW actually lies within the perceived notions

around sexuality and bodily vulnerability of women. Despite decades of activism organised to combat VAW, it remains as pervasive as ever since the 1971 war time atrocities and beyond. Bypassing the issue as a non-priority in the social context of Bangladesh might be disadvantageous for the movement in the long run.

Thirdly, one of the biggest challenges the movement faced in recent years is the question of religion and rise in religious extremism. Religion remains an unresolved domain similar to body and sexuality in the women's movement. One has to realise that religion is an important consideration for many. The question of religion is often avoided by the women's movement in various instances, or handled with cautious distance so as not to jeopardise the personal disposition of peoples' faith and spiritual leanings. Religion can easily be used as a tool to confine women in their traditional role. Fostering secularism as opposed to strict and rigid religious identification of a state identity or of a collective is a big challenge for feminism. The women's movement has to hit a balance between personal disposition and institutional affirmation vis a vis areas of contestation with women's rights and emancipation.

In fact the issue of body and religion have come out as the most contentious areas within and outside the women's movement. These two issues have created breaches and debates within the women's movement and also with the state decisions.

The issue of body was raised in various layers at different point of time. As discussed by Harcourt (2009) the 'violated bodies', 'reproductive bodies', 'productive bodies', 'sexualised bodies' – all were raised, debated and discussed within the women's movement of Bangladesh. During seventies the issue of violated body was brought forward under the broader canopy of war time atrocities during the seventies. During the seventies the body issue was articulated in a manner which was later justified as being a 'historical necessity'. However debates and difference within the movement surfaced again around the issue of claiming control over one's own body in relation to reproductive rights and decision during the eighties. Death of Shabmeher was another incident where the issue of body was discussed in relation to 'prostitution' and eviction from brothels. This very event eventually led to the most controversial demonstration demanding the declaration of 'sex work as work' during the nineties manifested itself in relation to productive and sexualised bodies. 'Body politics' is not a simple topic. There are layers of meanings and understandings which are often evaded (Harcourt, 2009; Rajan 2003).

Similar to the issue of body, the question of religion and the critical role of women's movement around the issue of state religion, dress and deportments and case of Taslima Nasrin remained as unresolved arenas to the movement. These two issues are critical to feminist formulations and is difficult to arrive in any easy 'solutions' or consensus around these two (Bayes & Tohidi, 2001). The Bangladesh women movement has to cross a long way to find ways to deal and address the issue of body and religion both within and outside the movement. However, debates, arguments, contradictions and confrontations are crucial to any movement and these incongruities have only enriched the women's movement in its diversities.

Finally, the women's movement has to have at least a tentative chart for the future generations of the country to draw in the young and the new to the folds of feminism. Creating a path towards feminist leadership for coming years remain a critical challenge for the current generation of feminists. However, it is important to recognise that, for a country like Bangladesh, it is not easy to attempt to bring changes in gender relations. For every step the movement takes forward, there will be a possible backlash, a possible regression or counter attack.

The women's movement in Bangladesh has been closely linked with the shifting political processes of the country as well as the structure and nature of the state apparatus. Through the processes of negotiation, strategisation, mobilisation, networking and alliance building, the women's movement in Bangladesh has actually gained considerable space in formulating feminist agendas.

However, the shift and changes during the three decades under the purview of this research has created ample cause for disappointment too. Many thought that the women's movement has become diluted, disassociated from the mass, and is hardly recognised as a pressure group, limited to elite and educated sections of the public. Some also believe that substantive changes in everyday lives of women were not achieved, that little change has accrued to the everyday lives of women. Women have not made advancements in terms of livelihood strategies, nor on the personal front. Relative empowerment has accrued in the case of rural women but a meaningful true autonomy across classes is yet to be achieved. Many issues remain unresolved, forgotten and ignored. The radicalism that was voiced, the spirit that was visible during the early eighties or nineties is hardly visible anymore. The

movement is trapped in sporadic, fragmented issue rising, project based small scale activities, or involved in lobbying.

Providing answers to these questions is beyond the scope of this thesis. But in order to address these issues, the women's movement has to find ways to entrench its feminist agendas within the broader framework of socio-political and economic reality of the locale while maintaining the vision of the global.

Feminism in Bangladesh: In its Specificity

Bangladesh feminism, like classical Western schools of thought, has not expressed itself in typical epistemological form such as Liberal, Radical or Marxist /Socialist, post-modernist etc., neither has it followed any unilinear trend or sequence. Like many other forms and expressions in the non-West, it has trodden a unique path. It has hardly ever expressed itself in a coherent or comprehensive arrangement to be labelled as specifically as in the West. Although, through the voices of the women's movement, a hint of liberal, radical or Marxist/ Socialist thoughts could be identified, often the inclinations could not be configured into any typical form or practice. All these various tendencies and trends took their own path, often complementing and competing with one another. Apparently 'Radical' or 'Liberal' formulations have intermingled with each other, crossing their respective boundaries. Constant clash and conflict, merging and assimilation are one of the main features that emerged from the narrations explored.

To some extent traditional understandings of feminist thoughts are inadequate to comprehend the full extent of the feminist trends in Bangladesh. However, the wider and more contemporary definitions of Batliwala (2008) might be more applicable when it comes to explaining the nature and range of feminism in Bangladesh. Understanding based on common concern and vision, with consideration of the geopolitical and regional situation of the South Asia, is helpful in many ways (Sangat, 2006, 2010).

Feminism in Bangladesh is thus to be understood in terms of its historical contextuality, in its multiplicity, complex interactions and interfaces with the local and global, in its embeddedness in the socio-political environment and through its epistemological growth and development. Feminism in Bangladesh is a 'layered mosaic' (Sangat, 2006), historically created by the processes of alignment and realignment, mixing and mingling of diverse interest, priorities and strategies.

In spite of many pitfalls and its inadequateness in explaining feminisms and its political commitment to bring change in women's lives, post modernism is indeed helpful in many ways to explore and explain feminism and feminist scholarship in its diverse multiplicity and shifts. The alliance, though an uneasy one, is enriching in many ways. In fact, feminism, with its political pledge, transcends the tentativeness of post modernism and places feminist scholarship in a more eloquent domain, thus moving towards bringing meaningful changes in everyday lives of women. The beauty of Bangladesh feminism lies in its flux and fluidity while retaining its commitment to eradicate sexual and gender discrimination, alongside ensuring equity and equality between men, women and other marginal identities. This thesis thus attempts to add on a layer to the broader understanding of feminist scholarship in its plurality.

Towards an 'Adequate Understanding of the Reality',²¹⁰

What I have tried here is to capture the voices from the women's movement—voices of only a selected few, but rich in content, brilliantly dazzling with multiple shades and colours. My words are in black on white paper here but these narrations are not only about black and white or grey even. It's a story written in red, yellow, blue, green, pink and purple in different shades and shapes constantly moving and changing, taking many different forms and hues in a range of tints and tones. This narration of the women's movement is like a multi-coloured chequer board, maybe a tapestry, that has a pattern and is yet scattered and sprinkled with unexpected arrays of colours and design which make the drawing more iridescent and at the same time more real—a reality that can only be perceived 'partially' and 'adequately' but not completely enclosed within a finite boundary.

My experience with the key figures of the women's movement was larger than anything I expected. It was an even bigger challenge to confine a narration so sprawling between the two covers of a thesis. I guess, in many instances, I have failed to arrange all the issues and the multi-layered responses into a neat pile. At one point I abandoned the idea of following the rules and left it to find its own sally—like a mountain stream flows where it wills, it will find its own place in history. Complete comprehension of a reality can hardly be achieved in social science scholarship. We can only move towards a partial understanding of the reality, only adequately if not completely in its specificity (Harding, 1987, 1991).

²¹⁰ See Harding (1987)

It's time for me to bid adieu. I must take my leave here in this concluding chapter, but I don't intend to tie the final knot. I leave it open for someone else to pick up and continue the weaving and reweaving the patterns of feminism in Bangladesh.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Organisational Profile (Arranged according to the year of establishment)

Profile of the Organisation: Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP)

Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) is a voluntary, national action oriented mass women's organisation working since 4th April 1970. It was launched under the leadership of Poet Sufia Kamal, the competent successor of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, pioneer visionary of women's emancipation of the sub-continent. BMP, apart from working for women, was found to be engaged in both wider nationalist issues as well. The organisation has been in Bangladesh on voluntary basis for more than four decades and pioneering the women's movement with slogan 'Women's Rights are Human Rights'. For gender equality BMP focuses on activity concerning empowerment of women by enjoying their equal rights & dignity in the family, society and state. BMP is ground-breaking the movement of resisting violence against women, ensuring political empowerment and establishment of Constitutional rights of women since inception. It is working in the light of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC), Human Rights Declaration, Cairo Declaration and Beijing Platform for action (BPFA). Besides gender issue BMP also laid emphasis on promoting peace and democracy to establish equity based society having good governance.

BMP is a membership-based organisation. It has more than 0.135 million general members. It operates in 61 District branches within the country in around 2278 local units at grassroots level. Women aged 16 years or above belonging to any status, occupation, religion, having commitment to women's emancipation and committed to abide by the constitution of the organisation are eligible for membership. Apart from working around VAW issues, the objectives of BMP includes mainstreaming of women in development and policies, establishing itself as a lobby and advocacy agent, ensure sustainability of the organisation, to establish equity based society for man and women.

The following are the major activities that are conducted by 12 units of program of BMP:

1. Policy Intervention for mainstreaming women in national development process; equal & effective sharing of power by women for governing the state

2. Advocacy for one third number of reserved seats for women in the parliament & Introduce direct election
3. Advocacy and lobby to create enable environment for political empowerment & increase women's participation in politics
4. Promote women in electoral politics as political force for establishing a democratic, secular & equity based state; build up movement to resist VAW
5. Extended social and legal support for victim of violence
6. Policy intervention for equal legal status and rights in personal & public sphere
7. Advocacy for Law reform and Uniform Family Code (UFC)
8. Render support services such as safe shelter for victim of violence, medicare, rehabilitation, relief distribution in nation clarity
9. Inclusion of men in women's movement; capacity building of members as women human rights activist
10. Motivation to keep upholds the spirit of voluntarism & commitment to women's human rights
11. Building financial management capacity for institution of the organization
12. Gender and human rights awareness program for professionals, civil society and community people
13. Address the issue of young women and adopt plan of action
14. Effort to unite indigenous women movement in mainstream women movement and adopt plan of action to address their problem

Profile of the Organisation: Women for Women (WfW)

One of the most important women's groups in Bangladesh is Women for Women: A Research and Study Group, located in Dhaka. It is a pioneer non-government, non-profit, voluntary women's organisation, engaged in research and public education programs on gender issues with a view to enhancing the status of women. It was established in 1973 by a group of committed woman professionals, representing a variety of academic disciplines. Women's movement was taken another shift in the arena of academia with the emergence of this organisation. The Group strongly felt the need for developing a sound information base for identifying the issues relating to the disadvantaged status of women in Bangladesh and for creating public awareness with a view to ameliorating the existing situation. Since then,

Women for Women has been engaged in research, information, dissemination, advocacy awareness and motivational programs.

The objectives of Women for Women are:

1. To create awareness among people of Bangladesh, particularly policy planners and public functionaries, about the need for enhancing women's status and moulding public opinion for action against the oppression and exploitation of women.
2. To organise, undertake and promote research and study in all areas of women's life in general, and to focus on the specific problems impeding their integration in development efforts in particular, keeping in view the national priorities.
3. To be a forum for effective advocacy for gender equity through dissemination of policy-oriented research findings concerning women through publications, research, seminars and exchange forums.
4. To inform and educate a wider audience about critical issues, current concerns and to promote interaction through publications and national conventions.
5. To establish and develop linkages and networking with similar groups at home and abroad.
6. To create and develop gender-sensitivity among planners, public functionaries, development agency personnel and program implementors through relevant gender training programs.
7. To extend cooperation and consultancy services to the government as well as to other national and international agencies involved in the area of women and development.

The activities of Women for Women include organising seminars, training, workshops, conferences, national conventions, library development, and publications.

Profile of the Organisation: Naripokkho (NP)

Naripokkho is a membership based women activist organization, which has a strong focus on access to justice for women and children who have suffered violence. Naripokkho's research work on VAW includes a pilot study on VAW conducted in 1995, and the Bangladesh component of the WHO multi-country study, published in 2005. These were major undertakings that involved training and managing a large team of data collectors and interviewers handling a large sample of respondents for the survey and a smaller sample of case studies and life histories using open-ended interview guidelines. The Rapid assessment study on VAW was conducted on a smaller scale using qualitative tools for in-depth

information and case studies; which was a base paper for the government Multisectoral Programme of Violence against women, which Naripokkho helped conceptualise and lobby to establish. In 2001, Naripokkho established a help line aimed at supporting women in violent situations. At the same time, a center-based psychosocial team was developed by Naripokkho to assist in the recovery of women and children affected by sexual abuse. The team works in conjunction with the advocacy and activist side of the organization. It comprised of trainee psychologists from the Clinical Psychology Department, University of Dhaka. It is reported that 70% of their clients were adult survivors of sexual abuse. It was unable to continue the service then due to lack of funds.

Naripokkho implemented an action research project from 1998, which is still ongoing, monitoring accountability of state interventions to cases of violence against women. The focus of the project was to ensure access to justice to women who had suffered violence, through monitoring government facilities especially court, law enforcement agency and hospitals. Through this project Naripokkho able to review Women and children prevention act 2000, review Medico-legal procedures and systems and contribute to reform policy and implementation processes. The project also helped further develop grassroots women organizations to enable them to monitor district level government departments who are working for protection and prevention on violence against women. In addition to that several documents were developed for Govt. officials. These include training materials to be part of police training modules for interpersonal communication skill development, basic communication, medico-legal process kits, address book for survivors, hospital monitoring guideline etc. Naripokkho also recently finished an in depth in-depth study of Male perpetrators of VAW, which targeted a small purposive sample of men convicted for committing VAW and self- identified persons who have committed domestic violence. A confidence building workshop module was developed for survivors of violence, and a workshop was conducted on selected 10 district locations through partner NGOs. Under this workshop survivors were given tools to become emotionally stronger and taught coping mechanisms. Finally, Naripokkho plays a pioneer role in implementing VAW related programmes through ‘Doorbar Network’, a network of women's organizations covering all 64 districts of Bangladesh through 535 members. Recently Naripokkho has received a grant to bring about awareness of VAW in communities, through mono-drama monologues, whereby women's stories are performed in front of audiences to sensitise them to the issues by seeing a human face through theatre.

Primary sources of information include information collected from monitoring of cases of VAW - from courts, police stations and hospitals, as well as communications from women subjected to VAW in the community, who are in touch with any one of 535 Doorbar member organizations throughout Bangladesh. Based on this information Naripokkho is trying to bring about an accountability process with the government relevant departments, by identifying and sharing service laps and gaps in accessing services.

Appendix B

Personal Profile of Key Interviewees (Arranged alphabetically by first name)

Ayesha Khanam
Firdous Azim
Mahmuda Islam
Maleka Begum
Najma Chowdhury
Rita Das Roy
Roushan Jahan
Samia Afreen
Shireen Huq

Personal Profile: Ayesha Khanam

Ayesha Khanam, the present president of the central committee of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad has been a women's rights activist since 1972, working with women's and progressive secular democratic movements. As a student, she led student's movements between 1965 and 1971; and acted as the Vice President of Central Committee of Progressive Students Organisation (alligned with Communist Party of Bangladesh) as well as the Vice President and General Secretary of Rokeya Hall Students Union, Dhaka University. She was also affiliated with the left Progressive Political Party, playing active roles in the anti-military and anti-autocracy movements for establishing democracy and a non-communal government and society. She was a freedom fighter in the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971.

After independence, she joined women's human rights movements and started working with Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) in 1972. Since then, she has occupied positions like the organising secretary for 12 years, General Secretary for more than eight years and presently the president of BMP for the last twelve years.

In addition, Ayesha Khanam was actively involved in the ratification and implementation of CEDAW and South Asian Women Caucus and has been playing a special role in Law Reform Movement since 1990. She is also a member of the Preparatory Committee in Bangladesh for the 50th Anniversary celebration of UN Declaration on Fundamental Human Rights.

Being an active member of women's movements, Ayesha Khanam has provided relentless effort for building up a united, broad based, strong and vibrant women's human rights movement in Bangladesh. Her writings on women's issues have been published in several periodicals, journals and daily newspapers. As a believer of secularism, democracy, human ideology and culture, she has always remained vocal in the civil society movement. She's been acting as one of the central organisers of these activities, being an advocacy and lobby agent for promoting women's Human Rights in Bangladesh. She's been closely connected with UNIFEM and UNESCAP sponsored activities associated with IWRAW Asia-Pacific as well.

Another sector in which Ayesha Khanam has been involved closely is the Post-Beijing activities and the non-government processes of the implementation of Beijing+5 and Beijing+10 declarations and their Platform for Action plan. She is a key participant of the Beijing+10 Process, Implementation & Monitoring Process in Bangladesh and in the region and works through organizing active networks.

Being a part of numerous regional and international conferences related to all her activities and involvements, Ayesha Khanam has acquired a holistic perception of these issues and has been successful in applying and monitoring them in the context of Bangladesh. She has achieved the position of one of the key leaders of women's issues and human rights movement in Bangladesh today.

Personal Profile: Firdous Azim

Firdous Azim is a Professor of English and chair of the Department of English and Humanities at BRAC University, as well as a member of Naripokkho, a woman's activist group in Bangladesh. She also worked as a faculty in the Department of English, University of Dhaka. She was the convenor of Naripokkho, from 1992-1994, a voluntary post, coordinating all of the organization's activities, which covers four fields – Women's Human Rights, Health and Reproduction, Violence against Women and Media and Cultural Representations.

She has published both in the fields of post-colonialism and literature and feminist issues. Her books include *The Colonial Rise of the Novel* (Routledge, 1993) and *Infinite Variety: Women in Society and Literature* (University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1996). As a contributing editor for *Feminist Review*, she has edited a special issue entitled *South Asian*

Feminisms: Negotiating New Terrains. (March 2009). She was the editor of a special issue for the *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* journal entitled *Complex Terrains: Islam, culture and women in Asia* (June 2011). She was the core research team member for the research on “Pathways of Women’s Empowerment”, for the South Asian regional research programme (2006-2011). She participated in the *Feminist Review* panel presentation with a paper on “Feminist Movements in Bangladesh” in 2004. Her current work researches the cultural history of women in Bangladesh.

Personal Profile: Mahmuda Islam

Mahmuda Islam, is an educationist, researcher and activist of women’s movement in Bangladesh. She started her career at the Department of Sociology, University of Dhaka and served as different capacity from lecturer to professor. She worked as Professor at the Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka. Besides, she was a visiting professor; Southern Ilion University, USA. Since spring 2013 Professor Islam has been teaching women and gender studies as part time faculty at the University of Massachusetts Boston, USA. She provided training on gender and development issues in Bangladesh and abroad as gender expert. During last four decades Mahmuda Islam conducted research on wide range of societal, sociological, anthropological and cultural issues and concerns in specific reference to Bangladesh within broader context of South Asian region.

Prof. Islam got her PhD degree on Cultural Values, Beliefs and Practices about Reproductive Health in Rural Bangladesh. Her several writings including *Nritotter Shohoj Path*, *Shomaj o Dhormo*, *Shamajik Itihaser Potobhumika*, *Naribadi Chinta o Nari Jobon*, *Nari Ithihashe Upekhita* are being used as academic selected readings in the different universities. She has more than thirty publications that include articles, books and essays in English which have been published in Bangladesh and several countries including USA, Japan, India, Nepal.

As a prominent activist Prof. Islam is actively associated with women’s movement locally and globally. She is member of various national and international organizations, women’s and human rights organisation. She was the President of Women for Women, founder chair of South Asian Association for Women’s Studies, steering committee member of SAARC NGO Women for Peace, South Asia Women Watch, Asia Pacific Women Watch, member Independent Commission on AIDS in Asia, expert UNDP Gender Equality and

Women's Empowerment Technical Committee, member South Asia Campaign for Gender Equality. Mahmuda Islam was an active member of the Core Group formed by the Government to prepare Bangladesh National Action Plan for the Advancement of Women: Implementation of Beijing Platform for Action.

As feminist researcher Dr Islam involved herself with women's and human rights activism towards bridging the gaps between academics and activists. She played an active role in realising the demand for establishment of the Department of Women and Gender Studies in the University of Dhaka.

Professor Islam travelled extensively throughout the world to attend seminars, conferences and policy dialogues as participant, session chair, resource person, and guest of honor.

Personal Profile: Maleka Begum

Maleka Begum is a women's rights activist and gender practitioner with academic & field-work experience in teaching and research. Currently she is the Chairperson of the Department of Sociology and Gender Studies of Central Women's University, which she joined in 2011 as Professor. Besides, she is also teaching at the Department of Women and Gender Studies of Dhaka University as a part time faculty since 2010. Between 2008 and 2010, she taught at the same department of Dhaka University as a fulltime faculty (project). Besides her teaching skill, she is an established thinker and writer, with a doctorate in Bengali Literature from the University of Dhaka in 2004. She completed her Post Doctorate from Women Studies Research Center, Calcutta University in 2009. She was an External Examiner for Ph.D at Bwardhaman University, India in 2007.

Her publications include books and scholarly articles, some of which are already being used as reference materials at university level. Among others her distinguished books include *Narir Katha* (2012, Oitijjhya, Dhaka), *Rabindra Nather Golpe Jautuk Proshango* (2011, Oitijjhya, Dhaka), *Muktijudde Nari* (2011, Prothoma, Dhaka), *Ami Nari* (2000, The University Press Limited, Dhaka), *Narir Chokkhe Bisshya* (1996, Shahitta Prakash, Dhaka), *Banglar Nari Andolon* (1995, The University Press Limited, Dhaka), *Jautuk* (1995, Shuchi Patra, Dhaka), *Women's Movement in Bangladesh in the Past, Present and Future* (1985, Gaan Prakashani, Dhaka), *Winnie'r Chokkhe Mandela* (1985, Shahittaya Prakash, Dhaka), *Ela Mitra* (1985, Papyrus, Agami Prakashani, Dhaka and also in 2001, Prothoma), etc.

Her ongoing (2012 - till date) research is 'Bangladesher Gonoandolone Narir Bhumika: 1947-1990' which is being supervised by Emeritus Professor Anisuzzaman, Emeritus Professor Najma Chowdhury and Professor Muntasir Mamun, Department of History, University of Dhaka.

From 1960 to till 2014, articles came out in various national & international dailies and magazines including but not limited to Begum, Ittefaq, Sangbad, Ekota, Bhorer Bagoj, Janokantha, Bangla Academy Potrika, Gonoshkhorata Magazine, Unnayan Podokhep (Step towards, Development), Nari Pragati, Itihas Parishad Magazine, Anannya, Jigasha (Kolkata), Prothom Alo, Protichinta, Shachitra Sandhani and Kali O Kalam.

Her direct association with Bangladesh women's rights movement has been appreciated at national and International arena. Her scholarly interest ranges widely from Bengali literature to women's legal and political rights movement and feminism. Besides, she attended a number of conferences and seminars both home and abroad including the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China in 1995, conferences arranged by Women International Democratic Federation in various countries, Conference on Women's Commission of United Nations, New York etc. She is the life member of Bangladesh Asiatic Society, Bangla Academy (Bangladesh), Bongio Shahitto Parishad (Kolkata, India) and Paschimbango Itihas Samshad (Kolkata). She had been the General Secretary of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad for 22 years (1970-1992).

She was awarded 'Ananna Shahitta Puroskar 2012'.

Personal Profile: Najma Chowdhury

Najma Chowdhury, Emeritus Professor, is the founder Chair of the Department of Women and Gender Studies Department (initially known as the Department of Women's Studies) in Dhaka University. She has been closely associated with the academic and institutional developments of the Department. Najma completed her graduation and post-graduation degrees from the Department of Political Science, Dhaka University. She joined the Department as a lecturer in 1962. In 1972, she received her Ph.D. degree from the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University.

Her research looks at political and legislative processes in which women participate, and focuses on different facets of women's political engagement in a patriarchal society such as Bangladesh. Her writings have appeared as chapters and articles in books and journals at

home and abroad. With Professor Barbara J. Nelson, she has co-edited a 43-country study entitled *Women and Politics Worldwide* which was published by Yale University Press. *Of Mangroves and Monsters: Women's Political Participation and Women's Studies in Bangladesh* published by University of Dhaka and Pathak Shamabesh, 2010 is another remarkable contribution in academia. She is also editor of *Protesting Patriarchy: Contextualising Rokeya and Protiboondhokotar Protibade: Bangladesher Nari O Rokeya'r Dorshon* (Bangla), collections of Rokeya Memorial lectures delivered on occasion of Rokeya day organized since 2004 by the Department of Women and Gender Studies.

Najma Chowdhury received the '*Ekushey Padak*' for her outstanding contribution to research in 2008. She was also awarded the "Special Honorary Award" by the Department of Women and Gender Studies of Dhaka University in 2008 for her contribution to the institutionalisation of gender and women education in the country. She also held the UGC Rokeya Chair in 2007-09. She served the Caretaker Government of 1996 as a member of Council of Advisors and held the portfolios of the Ministries of Women and Children Affairs, Social Welfare, and Labour and Manpower. Alongside her professional career, she was widely engaged with global feminism, with other international organisations and UN bodies representing the government of Bangladesh. She served as the President of Women for Women, an advocacy group, that highlights women's issues through research, publication and lobbying. She was Chair of the largest coalition of NGOs in Bangladesh that carried out extensive country-wide mobilisation in preparation for the Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995.

Personal Profile: Rita Das Roy

More than two decades of experience, Rita Das Roy is an actively engaging on women's rights issue in the Bangladesh. She recognized as a capacity building professional and human rights activist. In her current role as Capacity Building Manager for IRSOP project under Role of Law programme of GIZ. She is a core member of Naripokkho and also actively involves with others human rights networks. At present, her working areas are: i) violence against women and human rights, ii) women's health rights, iii) women's political participation and iv) access to justice. She did her first masters in Sociology, Chittagong University and another in Professional Studies in Food & Nutrition Planning, 1996, University of the Philippines, Los-Banous.

Personal Profile: Roushan Jahan

A literary scholar, feminist researcher, and activist, Roushan Jahan graduated from the Universities of Dhaka and University of Chicago. She taught English at the University of Dhaka before leaving academia. She soon got engaged in founding Women for Women, the first autonomous women's research and advocacy organisation in Bangladesh in 1973. Since then, she has been involved in research on women and development. Her areas of specialisation are literacy and education, employment, health and population, violence against women, and cross-cultural studies. During the last two decades she has acted as a consultant to the Government of Bangladesh and various regional and international bodies, including UNDP, UNICEF, UNESCO, APDC, SAARC secretariat, ASPBAE to help prepare national policies and regional strategies in the areas of her specialisation. Roushan Jahan has also represented Bangladesh and presented country reports in many regional and international fora, including UN Women's Conferences in Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995). As a Vice-President of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, the largest women's activist organisation in the country, and an active member of APWLD and DAWN, two international women's networks, she has been a part of the dynamic and international women's movement during the last two decades. She was also involved with Naripokkho.

Her publication entitles *Sultana's Dream and Selections from the Secluded Ones* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1988), is a recommended reading in many US colleges and universities. Her books, *No better options?: Industrial Women Workers of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press Ltd, 1990), *Literacy for Rural Women* (Dhaka UNAB, 1993), *Hidden Danger: Women and Family Violence in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Women For Women, 1994), and *Giving and Fund Raising in Bangladesh* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2002) have drawn critical acclaim both in Bangladesh and abroad: <http://www.feministpress.org/books>

Personal Profile: Samia Afreen

Samia Afreen has been working for the last 23 years in various national and international organisations engaged in promoting women's rights and lobbying for establishing women's right at the policy level of Bangladesh. She is involved with Naripokkho since 1997. She became a member of the organisation in 1999. She was closely involved with the sex workers movement and Durbar network from 1997-2000. She also

worked in the area of reproductive health and rights both at national and international level. Her activism was largely concentrated in the area of health related issues ensuring the role of government and other organisations in service delivery and. Samia is the founding member of 'Break the Silence' and member Executive Board, Naripokkho.

Personal Profile: Shireen Huq

A women's rights activist working on gender, human rights and development, is a founder Shireen member of Naripokkho and has been a long-time advisor to DANIDA in Bangladesh (1987-2001 and 2003-2006). She is an active member of the International Women's Rights Action Watch/Asia Pacific where she serves on its International Advisory Committee and as a member of the international training team.

During her tenure in DANIDA she was responsible for the design and implementation of a Joint Institutional Review on the Government of Bangladesh's WID Capability as well as in the development of the National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. She subsequently led the formulation of the Government of Bangladesh's Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence against Women which involves an integrated response by several ministries/agencies to women who have been subjected to violence. This involved the design of a framework of inter-ministerial and inter-agency cooperation to provide one stop services for violence survivors (medical treatment, psychological counselling, police assistance in the filing of criminal complaints, the conduct of medico-legal examinations, legal assistance and referral services for shelter, etc) as well as the development of individual components aimed at improving investigation, evidence collection and prosecution of VAW cases. The first DNA Profiling Laboratory in the country was set up under this initiative.

One of her responsibilities as Deputy Coordinator of the Danida Human Rights and Good Governance Programme was the development, monitoring and quality assurance of a programme portfolio on Women and Access to Justice. Addressing Violence against Women was treated as a sub-component under Access to Justice with a focus on meeting state obligations. This portfolio included support for non-government organisations working on a variety of interventions addressing prevention of VAW and survivor support.

Shireen has worked on a voluntary basis in Naripokkho's advocacy and campaign work. This has included the development of position papers, protest activities, lobby work

and public awareness campaigns on a range of issues including violence against women and human rights.

On behalf of International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific she has conducted training on CEDAW and facilitated consultations on the CEDAW Committee's Concluding Observations in different parts of the world.

Shireen was educated at the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh, The Evergreen State College in the USA and the University of Sussex in UK.

Appendix C

Key Persons in Women's Movement (Arranged alphabetically by first name)

Personal Profile: Begum Badrunnessa Ahmed

Begum Badrunnessa Ahmed was a social worker and activist of the women's empowerment movement. Also known as "Mati Bibi", Badrunnessa was the daughter of Muazzam Hussain Khan, born in 1903 into the family of Paril-Naohadda under Singair upazila of Manikganj district, Bangladesh.

Badrunnessa started associating herself with some organizations working for the promotion of female education and the welfare of Muslim society in Calcutta. Through such manoeuvres, she came in close contact with influential people like Shamsunnahar Mahmud, Anwara Bahar Chowdhury, Hasina Morshed, Begum Sufia Kamal, Begum Shayesta Ikramullah and others. In 1930, she became a member of the Managing Committee of Abdullah Suhrawardi Girls' School at Mirzapur Street, Calcutta. Becoming an active member of the Mirzapur Mahila Samiti, she took charge of organising several cultural programmes.

Badrunnessa Ahmed gained recognition for showcasing tremendous courage during the Calcutta riot of 1946. The story that is known in this regard is that hearing of Hindus assembling at Sraddhananda Park to attack the Muslims of Mirzapur Street, Badrunnessa, along with a few of her female compatriots, stood on the crossing of Mirzapur Street and Harrison Road in a black veil, and with a white flag in her hand. Getting this invitation for a mutual understanding, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Kiran Sankar Roy arrived there and formed a peace committee on the spot.

After the partition of India, Badrunnessa moved to Dhaka in 1951 and settled in the area known as Gandaria. She formed the Gandaria Mahila Samiti, comprising the female elites of the locality and established Gandaria Primary School along with a Social Welfare Centre. Being a patron of art and culture, Badrunnessa turned her residence into a centre of cultural activities and a meeting place for artists. She was the founder member of the renowned Bulbul Lalitakala Academy (the Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts), popularly known as BAFA.

Badrunnessa was an active member of a number of organizations, such as All Pakistan Women Association, Pakistan Shishu Kishore Council, Pakistan Samaj Kalyan Sangstha, Manikganj Samiti, etc. In recognition of her services to the society, she was awarded the Tamgha-i-Pakistan, an award to recognize her outstanding contribution in the state. She renounced this honour during the mass upsurge of 1969. This brave leader of protest and pride died in Dhaka on 20 April, 1980 but is still recalled by the hundreds benefitted by the organizations and movements she initiated.

Personal Profile: Daulotonnessa Khatun

Daulotonnessa Khatun (1922-), the first woman to raise her voice against the dowry system in Bangladesh. She was born in Bogra district, Bangladesh and did her masters in 1959. She was actively involved in Congress politics in undivided Bengal. Daulotonnessa was active during the Language Movement in 1952 and was elected as a member of *Ain Parishod* in Rangpur-Dinajpur-Bogra (North Bengal) Municipality through direct vote of women members only. During the United Front election of 1954 in Pakistan, she was directly elected in the parliament (Ain Parishad) along with Nur Jahan Murshid, Badrunnessa Ahmad, Amena Begum, Selina Banu, Razia Banu, Taftunnessa, Meherunnessa Khatun and others (Begum, 1989). She was also appointed as the parliamentary secretary of the Provincial Government along with Nur Jahan Murshid and Razia Banu in Pakistan. However, after the death of her husband in 1964, she had to withdraw herself from politics and had devoted herself to literary writings through her years of struggle in life.

She was visible in the public arena once again in 1979 and was *selected* the Parliament Member from Rangpur under the government of Zia ur Rahman. Her role in introducing the ‘Dowry Bill’ was crucial. The bill was raised in the parliament in 26th May 1979 titled as *Bangladesh Anti Dowry Act (Bangladesh Jautuk Birodhi Ain)* by Daulotonnessa as a Private Member’s bill. However, many changes and additions were brought into the original Bill proposed by Daulutunnessa. Later on 13th March, 1980 she placed the revised Bill of ‘*Jautuk Nirodh Ain*’ (Dowry Prohibition Law) onto the Parliament in order to enact law to ensure women’s right and status in society. In spite of the fact that she was the selected MP from the ruling party, BNP, the bill was not introduced by the concerned minister and thus remained a Private Member’s Bill.

This Bill was sent to a Select Committee in June 1980. The Select Committee, headed by Sufia Kamal along with other women leaders. After fighting the infinite inertia of the government officials, with the support of media, the common peoples' petition and the prolonged activities of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, the Bill was declared to be effective from 1st October 1980. (*Dainik Bangla*, 30 September, 1980).

Daulotonnessa had a long history of political activism and social work. The Bill was a direct result of her experiences in her area of work i.e. Rangpur, Gaibandha. Due to her long association with politics, she was in a very good term with the people in power. Before introducing the Bill to the parliament, she had discussed the issue with members of both the ruling party and the opposition, including the President, Zia ur Rahman. She also got consent from Tasleema Abed of the Ministry of Women's Affairs. In spite of all the support, the Bill was not introduced by the concerned minister and thus was not notified as a Governmental Bill. This particular incident created some in-confidence among the women's movement that the Bill might not be accepted. However, after a detailed discussion in the Parliament the Bill was passed and was finally approved by the President.

Personal Profile: Noorjahan Murshid

Noorjahan Murshid (1924-2003) was an activist in women's movement and took part in national politics, war of liberation. She was elected minister in the cabinet of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Born on 19 May 1924 in Taranagar of Murshidabad district, Noorjahan Murshid had her primary education in her native village. She obtained part of her school education in Barisal, and then she moved to Kolkata. She got her graduation and Master's degrees from Calcutta University. Noorjahan began her eventful career as a teacher at Syedunnesa Girls' High School in Barisal. Later, she taught at Kamrunnesa School, Viqarunnesa Noon School, Holy Cross College and Dhaka University.

Before partition of the subcontinent, Noorjahan Murshid worked as a broadcaster with the All India Radio broadcasting career with the Radio Pakistan after partition. Noorjahan Murshid joined politics in the early 1950s. As a nominee of the United Front in the parliamentary elections of 1954, she was elected to the Legislative Assembly of East Bengal and made a parliamentary secretary. As a female lawmaker, Noorjahan made significant contributions in lawmaking processes. She worked as a close associate of Hussain Shaheed

Shrawardy. She was an ardent activist in the War of Liberation. As an accredited deputy of the mujibnagar government, Noorjahan delivered a speech in a joint meeting of the two houses of the Indian parliament seeking recognition of Bangladesh from the Indian government. That prompted the Pakistan military junta to sentence her to 14 years in prison in absentia. In 1972, she joined Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's cabinet as State Minister for health and social welfare. She was elected to the country's first parliament in 1973. She was the first president of the Bangladesh Mahila Samity. She published a short-lived Bangla periodical, *Ekal*. Later, the paper was renamed as Edesh-Ekal. Noorjahan Murshid died on 2 September 2003.

Personal Profile: Sufia Kamal

Sufia Kamal (20 June 1911 – 20 November 1999) was a Bangladeshi poet, freedom fighter, feminist and political activist. Sufia was an influential cultural icon in the Bengali nationalist movement of the 1950s and 60s and an important civil society leader in independent Bangladesh. She died in 1999 and was the first woman to be given a state funeral in the country.

Sufia was born in Shaestabad, Barisal. She was a daughter of a Zamindar family. During her childhood, women's education was prohibited and she could not afford to get academic education. But she learned Bengali, Hindi, English, Urdu, Arabic, Kurdish and Persian language from her house tutors. In 1918, she went to Kolkata with her mother where she came to meet with Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. She was first married at the age of 11 to her cousin Syed Nehal Hossain, then a law student. Together they had a daughter, Amena Kahar. Hossain died in 1932. Five years later, Sufia married Kamaluddin Ahmed.

In 1947, when "*Shaptahik Begum*" was first published, Sufia Kamal became its first editor. In October of that year after the partition of India she came to Dhaka. During riot between Hindu and Muslim of that time she worked towards mitigating the communal riot and joined in Peace Committee. In 1948, when *Purbo Pakistan Mohila Committee* was formed, she became its Chairperson. Her activism continued in 1952, with the Language Movement. In 1961, when the Pakistani government banned *Rabindra Sangeet* (Songs of Rabindranath), she became involved in the movement that ensued in 1961. During the mass uprising in 1969, which demanded the resignation of General Ayub Khan, she promoted the

cause by forming *Mohila Sangram Parishad (Women's Struggle Group)* later turned into Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP).

She actively but covertly helped freedom fighters of the Liberation War. In 1971, several people in Dhaka including Professor Ghyasuddin Ahmed and famous writer Shahidullah Kaiser collected medicine and food and delivered those to the posts of Sufia Kamal's house, from where the freedom fighters picked those up for their training outpost. From July 1971, she used to go to the hospital with food and medicine for the injured people of war. At that time there was an acute crisis of food and medicine in the hospital.

In later life, she made women's rights her top priority and headed Bangladesh's largest women's organisation, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, for many years. Sufia Kamal was also instrumental in getting the first women's dormitory of Dhaka University to be named *Rokeya Hall*, after the name of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain.

Sufia Kamal received nearly fifty major awards, including the Tamgha-i-Imtiaz (1961), a major national award conferred by the Pakistani government, but which Sufia Kamal returned in 1969 in protest at the government's oppressive treatment of Bengalis, the Bangla Academy Award for Literature (1962), the Ekushey Padak (1976), the Nasiruddin Gold Medal (1977), the Muktadhara Puraskar (1982), the Jatiyo Kabita Parishad Award (National Poetry Council Award, 1995), the Women's Federation for World Peace Crest (1996), the Begum Rokeya Padak (1996), the Deshbandhu CR Das Gold Medal (1996), and the Independence Day Award (1997). She also received a number of international awards, among them the Lenin Centenary Jubilee Medal from the Soviet Union in 1970, and the Czechoslovakia Medal in 1986.

Appendix D

16 Points Demand of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP)

16 points demand of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) placed before Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Independent Bangladesh in 1972. Translation from Bangla to English mine. See Begum (2002) pp. 85-86 for detail

1. Ensuring women's emancipation and status in every sphere of life and establishing the rights of women in economic, social, political arena including jobs and profession, freeing the women from all sorts of social oppression and discrimination.
2. National Education Committee should take up the responsibility to eradicate illiteracy of the mass and women.
3. Increasing the number of girls' educational institution at primary and secondary level.
4. Immediate implementation of free and mandatory education for girls up to grade eight.
5. Special education programme for adult women
6. Increasing the opportunity for women in higher education and vocational training.
7. Legal measures to stop dowry system and implementation of the law against polygamy
8. Realising the equal rights of women in case of divorce. Stopping coerced marriages of adult women against their will
9. Establishing equal rights in inheritance for both boys and girls. Proposal for removal of the law of transferring the portion of inheritance claim in absence of a son to the paternal uncle's sons, despite having a daughter of his own
10. Ensuring security and mobility of women both in public and private and in every sphere of life
11. Equal opportunity and pay scale for women in all job sector, eradication of extreme unequal situation in Tea industry
12. Establishing day care centre for women working in education institution, office and industrial organisations.
13. Taking up alternative measures to stop child labour
14. Ensuring availability of daily necessities via government sponsored subsidy shops

15. Dissolving the system of selection system in reserve seats for women. Increasing the number of reserve seats in the parliament from fifteen and ensuring direct election in those seats.
16. Providing support to disadvantaged women by creating legal aid committee by the government

Appendix E

Publication List of Women for Women During The First Three Decades of Bangladesh (Source: *Empowerment* 2010)

1. Women for Women: Bangladesh 1975, Dhaka: The University Press Limited.
2. Ekattorerer Prochchhonno Prochchhod (Bangla), 1987
3. Nari O Gonomadddyam (Bangla), 1987
4. Women Representatives at the Union Level as Change Agent of Development, 1987
5. Women Development and Technology, 1988
6. Mainstreaming Women in the Fourth Five Year Plan: A Suggested Approach (Mimeo), 1989
7. Women and National Planning in Bangladesh, 1990
8. Education and Gender Equity, 1990
9. Eshon, 1992
10. Women in Urban Informal Sector: Employment Pattern, Activity Types and Problems, 1992
11. Emerging New Accents: A perspective of Gender and Development in Bangladesh, 1994
12. Reproductive Rights and Women's Health, 1994
13. Women and Politics, 1994 (also published in Bangla)
14. Wither Women's Studies in Bangladesh?, 1994
15. Energy and Water Crises in Rural Households: Linkages with Women's Work and Time, 1994
16. Hidden Danger: Women and Family Violence in Bangladesh, 1994
17. Empowerment: A Journal of Women for Women, 1994 onwards
18. Women in Politics and Bureaucracy, 1994
19. Workshop Report: Empowerment: Voice of Grassroots Women in Bangladesh, 1995 (also published in Bangla)
20. Nari O Unnayan: Prashongkik Porishongkhan (Bangla), 1995
21. Union Parishod: Nari Prekhhit: Rajnoitik Khamotayan (Bangla), 1995
22. Women and Politics: Orientation of Four Political Parties on Women's Empowerment Issues
23. Women and Politics: Empowerment Issues: A Seminar Report, 1995
24. Environment and Development: Gender Perspectives, 1995
25. Empowerment of Women: Nairobi to Beijing (1985-1995), 1995

26. Rural Women in Poverty: NGO Interventions for Alleviation, 1996
27. Naribarta (Newsletter in Bangla), 1996 onwards
28. Violence against Women in Bangladesh: Analysis and Action, 1997
29. Women and Poverty, 1997
30. Beijing Process and Follow up: Bangladesh Perspective, 1997
31. Voting Behaviour of Women in Dhaka City and Some Selected Districts in Bangladesh, 1997
32. Bibah Bichchhed ebong Mohila Odhikar (Bangla), 1999 (also published in English)
33. Local Governments and Union Parishad, 1999
34. Current Status of Health Care System in Bangladesh Women's Perspective, 2000
35. Urban Female Entrepreneurs: Their Socio Economic Status, Needs, Problems and Future Possibilities, 2000

Appendix F

Relevant Sections from the Constitution of Bangladesh

Two Preambles from Two Different Sources

Preamble 1

Source: <http://www.commonlii.org/bd/legis/const/2004/preamble.html>

**[BISMILLAH-AR-RAHIMAN-AR-RAHIM
(In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful)]**

PREAMBLE

We, the people of Bangladesh, having proclaimed our Independence on the 26th day of March, 1971 and through [a historic war for national independence], established the independent, sovereign People's Republic of Bangladesh;

[Pledging that the high ideals of absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah, nationalism, democracy and socialism meaning economic and social justice, which inspired our heroic people to dedicate themselves to, and our brave martyrs to sacrifice their lives in the war for national independence, shall be fundamental principles of the Constitution;]

Further pledging that it shall be a fundamental aim of the State to realise through the democratic process to socialist society, free from exploitation-a society in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice, political, economic and social, will be secured for all citizens;

Affirming that it is our sacred duty to safeguard, protect and defend this Constitution and to maintain its supremacy as the embodiment of the will of the people of Bangladesh so that we may prosper in freedom and may make our full contribution towards international peace and co-operation in keeping with the progressive aspirations of mankind;

In our Constituent Assembly, this eighteenth day of Kartick, 1379 B.S corresponding to the fourth day of November, 1972 A.D., do hereby adopt, enact and give to ourselves this Constitution.

Preamble 2

Source: http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/print_sections_all.php?id=367

We, the people of Bangladesh, having proclaimed our Independence on the 26th day of March, 1971 and through a historic struggle for national liberation, established the independent, sovereign People's Republic of Bangladesh;

Pledging that the high ideals of nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularity, which inspired our heroic people to dedicate themselves to, and our brave martyrs to sacrifice their lives in the struggle for national liberation, shall be the fundamental principles of the Constitution;

Further pledging that it shall be a fundamental aim of the State to realise through the democratic process, a socialist society free from exploitation, a society in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedoms, equality and justice, political, economic and social, will be secured for all citizens;

Affirming that it is our sacred duty to safeguard, protect and defend this Constitution and to maintain its supremacy as the embodiment of the will of the people of Bangladesh so that we may prosper in freedom and may make our full contribution towards international peace and co-operation in keeping with the progressive aspirations of mankind;

In our Constituent Assembly, this eighteenth day of Kartick, 1379 B.S corresponding to the fourth day of November, 1972 A.D., do hereby adopt, enact and give to ourselves this Constitution.

The Constitutions, Sections, Subsections and Schedules

The constitution of Bangladesh is divided into 11 parts, which are further subdivided into 153 articles. In addition, there are 7 schedules. 11 parts are detailed below:

Part I: The Republic: This section defines the nature of the country, its state religion and other national issues. According to it, Peoples Republic of Bangladesh is a unitary republic consisting of the territories of the former East Pakistan and also included territories (some enclaves exchanged with India). The state religion is Islam, but all other religions can be practised in peace and harmony. The state language is Bengali and the national anthem is the first ten line of the song Amar Sonar Bangla. The national flag is a red circle on a green background. The national emblem is the national flower Shapla (*nymphoea-nouchali*) resting on water, having on each side and ear of paddy and being surmounted by three connected leaves of jute with two stars on each side of the leaves. This section also mandates that the portrait of prime minister must be displayed in all government, semi-government and autonomous offices. The capital of the country is Dhaka. The citizens are to be known as Bangladeshis.

Finally Part I asserts that all powers belong to the people and the constitution, being the supreme law of the country, will supersede any other laws and regulations.

Part II: Fundamental Principles of the State Policy:

This part describes the fundamental principles. The original 1972 constitution had 4 basic principles: Secularity, Nationalism, Democracy and Socialism (meaning economic and social justice for all). However, later amendments replaced Secularity with "Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah shall be the basis of all actions."^[2]

Part II's article 9, 10, and 11 declares the rights of the people. Article 9 provides guidelines for quotas for the underrepresented communities, women, and peasants. Article 10 states the equal rights of women. Article 11 states that Bangladesh would be a democracy,

with guaranteed human rights. Article 13, 14, 15, and 16 deal with principal of ownership, emancipation of workers and peasants, provision of basic necessities, and rural development. Article 17 states that the basic education will be free and compulsory for all children until the age of 18. The remaining articles (18-25) provide various guarantees for public health and morality, equality of opportunity, work as a right and duty, duties of citizens and of public servants, separation of Judiciary from the executive, national culture, national monuments, and promotion of international peace, security and solidarity, respectively.

As of 2011 the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has been amended 15 times

Constitutional Amendments:

First Amendment: The Constitution (First Amendment) Act 1973 was passed on 15 July 1973. It amended Article 47 of the Constitution by inserting an additional clause which allowed prosecution and punishment of any person accused of 'genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes and other crimes under international law'. A new Article 47A was also inserted, making certain fundamental rights inapplicable in those cases.

Second Amendment: The Constitution (Second Amendment) Act 1973 was passed on 22 September 1973. This act: amended Articles 26, 63, 72 and 142 of the Constitution; replaced Article 33; and inserted a new part (Part IXA). Provision was made through this amendment for the suspension of certain fundamental rights of citizens during an emergency.

Third Amendment: The Constitution (Third Amendment) Act 1974 was enacted on 28 November 1974. This amendment altered Article 2 of the Constitution to give effect to an agreement between Bangladesh and India for the exchange of certain enclaves, and the fixing of boundary lines between the two countries.

Fourth Amendment: The Constitution (Fourth Amendment) Act 1975 was passed on 25 January 1975. Major changes were brought into the Constitution by this amendment:

- a presidential form of government was introduced in place of the parliamentary system;
- a one-party system was introduced in place of a multiparty system;
- the powers of the Jatiya Sangsad were curtailed;
- the term of the first Jatiya Sangsad was extended;
- the judiciary lost much of its independence; and
- the Supreme Court was deprived of its jurisdiction over the protection and enforcement of fundamental rights.

This Act:

- amended articles 11, 66, 67, 72, 74, 76, 80, 88, 95, 98, 109, 116, 117, 119, 122, 123, 141A, 147 and 148 of the Constitution;
- replaced Articles 44, 70, 102, 115 and 124;
- repealed Part III of the Constitution;
- altered the Third and Fourth Schedules;
- inserted a new part (Part VIA); and
- inserted new articles 73A and 116A.

Fifth Amendment

Fifth Amendment: The Fifth Amendment Act was passed by the Jatiya Sangsad on 6 April 1979. This Act amended the Fourth Schedule to the Constitution by inserting a new paragraph 18. The effect of the amendment was that all amendments or repeals made in the Constitution from 15 August 1975 to 9 April 1979 (inclusive) by any proclamation or Proclamation Order of the Martial Law Authorities were deemed to have been validly made, and could not be called into question before any court or tribunal or other authority. (See also the Seventh Amendment.)

Sixth Amendment: The Sixth Amendment Act was enacted by the Jatiya Sangsad; it amended Articles 51 and 66 of the Constitution.

Seventh Amendment: The Seventh Amendment Act was passed on 11 November 1986. It amended Article 96 of the Constitution; it also amended the Fourth Schedule to the Constitution by inserting a new paragraph 19, which amongst other things provided that all proclamations, proclamation orders, Chief Martial Law Administrator's Orders, Martial Law Regulations, Martial Law Orders, Martial Law Instructions, ordinances and other laws made from 24 March 1982 to 11 November 1986 (inclusive) had been validly made, and could not be called into question before any court or tribunal or other authority. (See also the Fifth Amendment.)

Eighth Amendment: The Eighth Amendment Act was passed on 7 June 1988. It amended Articles 2, 3, 5, 30, and 100 of the Constitution. This Amendment:

- declared Islam as the state religion;
- decentralised the judiciary by setting up six permanent benches of the High Court Division outside Dhaka;
- substituted the spelling 'Bengali' with 'Bangla', and 'Dacca' with 'Dhaka', in Article 5 of the Constitution;
- amended Article 30 of the Constitution by prohibiting the acceptance of any title, honours, award, or decoration from any foreign state by any citizen of Bangladesh without the prior approval of the president.

The amendment of Article 100 was subsequently declared invalid by the Supreme Court, as it altered the basic structure of the constitution.

Ninth Amendment: The Constitution (Ninth Amendment) Act 1989 was passed in July 1989. This amendment provided for the direct election of the Vice-President; it restricted a person in holding the office of the President for two consecutive terms of five years each; and it provided that a Vice-President might be appointed in case of a vacancy in the office of President, but that such an appointment must be approved by the Jatiya Sangsad.

Tenth Amendment: The Tenth Amendment Act was enacted on 12 June 1990. Amongst other things, it amended Article 65 of the Constitution, providing for the reservation of thirty seats in the Jatiya Sangsad exclusively for women members. The reservation was to last for 10 years, with the members holding the reserved seats to be elected by the members of the Sangsad.

Eleventh Amendment: The Eleventh Amendment Act was passed on 6 August 1991. It amended the Fourth Schedule to the Constitution by adding a new paragraph 21, validating the appointment and oath as Vice President of Shahabuddin Ahmed (Chief Justice of Bangladesh), and the resignation tendered to him on 6 December 1990 by the then President Hussain M Ershad. This Act ratified, confirmed and validated all powers exercised, all laws and ordinances promulgated, all orders made and acts and things done, and actions and proceedings taken by the Vice President as acting President from 6 December 1990 to 9 October 1991 (when Abdur Rahman Biswas became President following his election). The Act also confirmed and made possible the return of Vice President Shahabuddin Ahmed to his previous office as Chief Justice of Bangladesh.

Twelfth Amendment: The Twelfth Amendment Act, passed on 6 August 1991 and approved by referendum in September, brought about a fundamental change to Bangladesh's constitutional arrangements. It amended Articles 48, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 70, 72, 109, 119, 124, 141A, and 142 of the Constitution with the following results:

- the parliamentary form of government was re-introduced;
- the President became the constitutional head of the state;
- the Prime Minister became the head of the executive;
- the Cabinet headed by the Prime Minister became responsible to the Jatiya Sangsad;
- the position of Vice President was abolished;
- the office of President now became elected by the members of the Jatiya Sangsad.

Through the amendment of Article 59 this amendment also ensured the participation of the people's representatives in local government bodies, thus stabilising the base of democracy in the country.

Thirteenth Amendment: The Constitution (Thirteenth Amendment) Act 1996 was passed on 26 March 1996. It provided for a non-party caretaker government which, acting as an interim government, would give all possible aid and assistance to the Election Commission for holding the general election of members of the Jatiya Sangsad peacefully, fairly and impartially. The non-party caretaker government, comprising the Chief Adviser and not more than 10 other advisers, would be collectively responsible to the president and

would stand dissolved on the date on which the Prime Minister entered upon his office after the constitution of the new Sangsad.

Fourteenth Amendment: The Constitution (Fourteenth Amendment) Act, 2004 was passed on 16 May 2004. This amendment amended several articles of the Constitution:

- a new Article 4A was inserted, for the preservation and display of the portraits of the President and the Prime Minister;
- clause (3) of Article 65 was amended regarding the seats reserved exclusively for women members in the Parliament;
- Articles 96 (1), 129, and 139 were amended to raise the retirement age of the Judges of the Supreme Court, the Auditor General, and the Chairman and other members of the Public Service Commission (PSC); and
- Article 148 was amended, to provide for the administration of the oath to newly elected members of Parliament by the Chief Election Commissioner.

Fifth Amendment repealed: Secularism in Bangladesh as prescribed in the constitution was never allowed to be practised after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League government. From November 1975 to 1977, when Bangladesh was under martial law, President and Chief Martial Law Administrator Lieutenant General Ziaur Rahman passed a presidential decree that removed the principle of secularism from the preamble of the constitution and set in "*absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah*". The decree was later legitimized by the second parliament of Bangladesh.

In February, 2010, the Bangladesh Supreme Court observed that parliament does not possess any authority to suspend the constitution and proclaim martial law and, hence, it cannot legitimize actions of martial law regimes. The judgment paved the way for restoring the original four fundamental principles declared in the preamble of the constitution, including secularity.

The Supreme Court followed with a July 2010 ruling scrapping provisions which allowed political parties with a manifesto based on faith doctrine to flourish after 1979. As part of a series of rulings following from the February Supreme Court ruling, on 4 October 2010 the High Court ruled that Bangladesh is a secular state.

Appendix G

Women in Politics

Source: www.lcgbangladesh.org/

Women in Parliament

	1995	2001
Women Candidate in the Parliament Election	1.5% (1991) 1.3% (1996)	2.0%
Reserved Seat for Women	30 (1991) 30 (1996)	x
Total Successful Women Candidates	06 (1991) 07 (1996)	6 1.62%
Percentage of Women in the National Parliament	10.06% (1991) 11.21% (1996)	2.00%
Women Participation at the Ministerial Level	3%-8% (1991-96)	3.3% (2002)

Source: Bangladesh National report to the 4th World Conference on Women
Bangladesh Election Commission

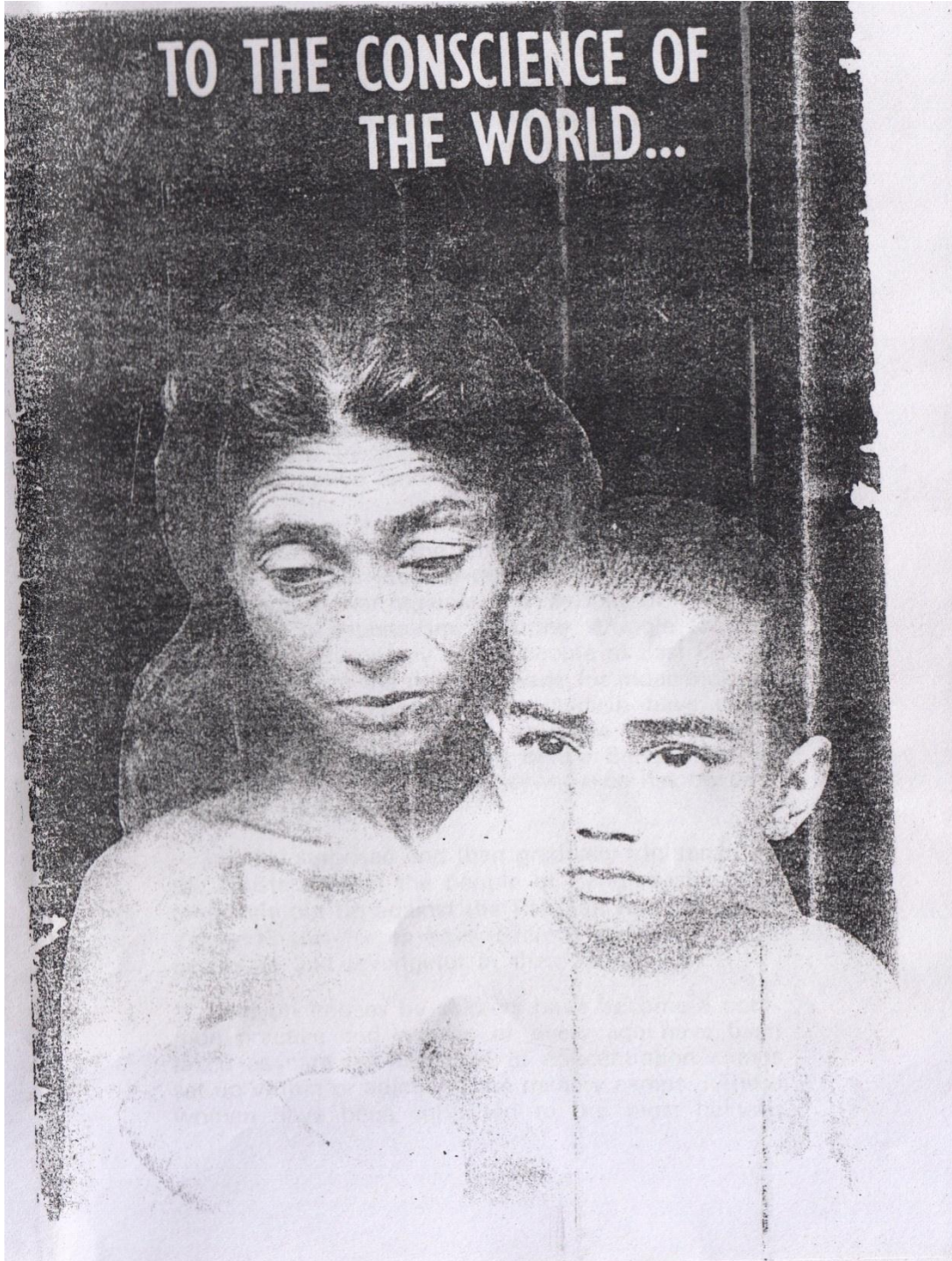
Women's Participation in Parliament Election

Year	No. of Seats	No. of Women Candidate
1991	46	39
1996	48	36
2001	47	37

Source: Bangladesh Election Commission

Appendix H

“To the Conscience of the World...”



An undeclared war is being waged today upon seventy-five million people in a corner of Asia by a military junta, perpetrating ghastly barbarities upon unarmed men, women and children. Since March 25, 1971, General Yahya Khan, who had foisted himself as the ruler of Pakistan, has let loose his blood-thirsty army upon the people of Bangladesh (former East Pakistan).

The acts of barbarism that the Pakistan Army is guilty of, would put the most savage murderers of history to shame. Pakistan Army's open acts of genocide on the people of Bangladesh, now confirmed by observers from many countries, has been so shocking and devastating in their dimension that no amount of condemnation can even wipe off their crimes against humanity.

It is to right this wrong, to liquidate these butchers, that the people of Bangladesh have taken up arms and have launched a life-and-death struggle for liberation. 'Give me Liberty or give me Death!' is the one single slogan that echoes in the heart of every Bengali. As our liberation struggle is gathering momentum and so becoming increasingly effective, as we are turning into an effective fighting force, with the passage of each day, more acute is becoming the crisis within the rank and file of Yahya Khan's Army. The more powerful we become, the more desperate becomes our enemy.

Unable to withstand the assault of the Mukti Bahini, the Liberation Army, the Pakistan Army goes in for more and more desperately retaliatory measures against the unarmed peoples in the towns and villages of Bangladesh. To suppress the legitimate aspirations of the people of Bangladesh, the Pakistan Army has brought into use all the deadly

weapons in its armoury, from tanks and mortars to rockets, bombers, and even napalm bombs and flame-throwers.

Along with the wholesale massacre, our women are being subjected to unspeakable brutality, including rampant physical assault. Rape of women of every age—their organs cut to pieces as the victims die screaming—pregnant woman having her unborn child bayoneted inside her stomach—infants snatched away from their mothers' arms and thrown into flames—young children being thrown up in the air and then spiked with the bayonet-tipped rifles as the body falls—these are but a few of the horrors being perpetrated by Yahya Khan and his bloodhounds.

The people of Bangladesh have suffered exploitation ever since the birth of Pakistan, twenty-four years ago. Their only crime was that they wanted democracy and economic advance to alleviate their lot. For this they had to wage tireless struggle.

In 1952, they faced police bullets for demanding that their mother-tongue should be one of the official languages of Pakistan, in which they constituted the majority. In 1954, when the elections to the Provincial Assembly took place and a United Front Government was formed, the Central Government of Pakistan dismissed that lawfully elected Ministry and imposed Martial Law in East Bengal; and against this, we had to wage a struggle for the restoration of popularly elected Government. In 1968, the people of East Bengal were in the forefront of the struggle which led to the overthrow of the military dictatorship of Field Marshal Ayub Khan. Then came the struggle against the military dictatorship of General Yahya Khan, and in course of it was formed, in 1969, a Women's Committee, leading next year to the formation of a powerful women's

organisation in East Bengal, Mahila Parishad. It formed a part of the democratic movement which swept the polls in December 1970, in which the record victory of the Awami League reflected the urge of East Bengal people for autonomy and democracy.

But the Yahya regime would not keep to its own word and refused to call the elected legislatures. Under cover of negotiations with political leaders, General Yahya Khan moved a large body of troops and air force into East Bengal in March 1971, and on the night of March 25, 1971, unleashed his bloody terror on the people of East Bengal. This still goes on unabated, forcing nearly ten million people to leave their native land.

It was when the Pakistan Army launched a full-fledged war with all the latest weapons at its command, largely provided by the very power which has been waging war against the people of Vietnam, namely, U.S. imperialism, that the struggle for democracy and autonomy of the people of East Bengal transformed into the noble crusade for independence of Bangladesh. People of Bangladesh have come to realise that within the structure of Pakistan, democratic and national right of the Bengali people can never be won. Thus independence has become the only alternative.

Initially surprised and then gradually frightened by the resistance that the people of Bangladesh spontaneously put up against the Pakistan Army, General Yahya Khan's forces have become more and more desperate and revengeful in their attack.

Raid on houses by soldiers have become a common practice and women of every age have been taken as captives and held in concentration camps set up within or adjoining the military camps. These women have been subjected to the most heinous



A pregnant woman who escaped after being hit by Pakistan Army bullets, with her new born baby in a refugee camp Hospital.

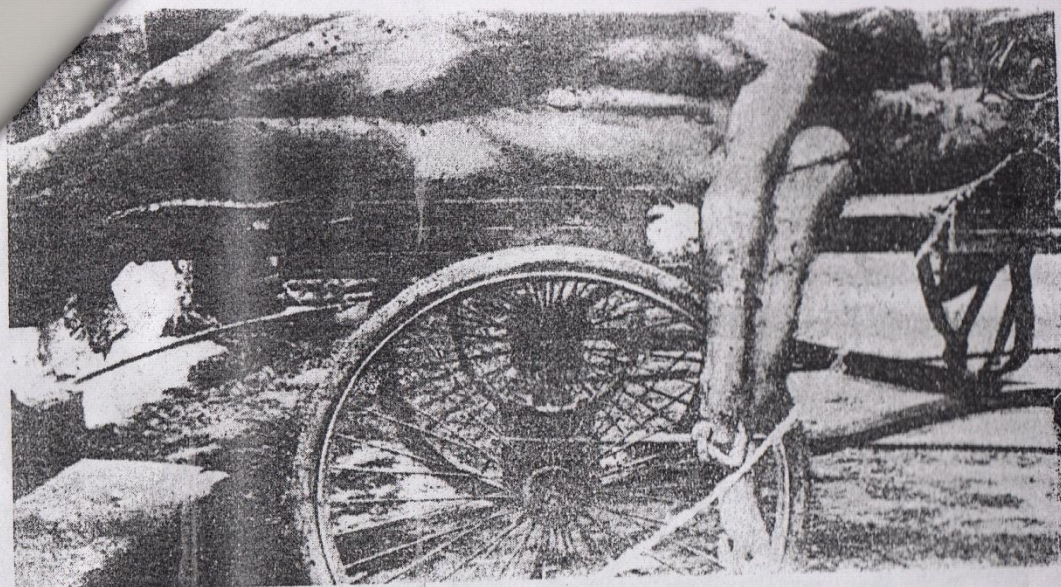
degradations. Many of these women are usually later released when they become pregnant, disease-stricken or mentally unbalanced. Camps of this nature have been set up all over the occupied territory of Bangladesh.

A report from Patia, in Chittagong district, says that the enemy, after having set up a camp in the local Teachers' Training College, kidnapped girls from the surrounding villages. According to an eye-witness account, women of this camp were subjected to the most horrible physical torture.

In Bowal Khali Thana of Chittagong district, Pakistan Army set up its camp and then under the pretext of house-to-house raid for the resistance forces, the soldiers subjected the women of the nearby villages to constant assault. The following is a typical example of their operation: After entering a village the soldiers loot the inhabitants of all their worldly possession. This done, they set fire to their huts and dwelling places and collect the surviving women at one particular spot. Then from the assembled women they choose a requisite number, letting the rest to go. Those women who have the misfortune of having been so chosen, are taken away to the Pakistan Army camps and forced to serve the soldiers' perverted lust.

A similar picture of life is available from Jabbergange area of Mirar Sharai Thana, where 100 women are held captive to serve 700 jawans in satisfying their animal lust in a local high school. Thirty of these women later died in this camp due to physical torture.

In a report from Chandpur, it is stated that in the local Madhusudan High School a similar camp has been set up with the rounding up of the beautiful women of the area. In this camp women have been



Hundreds and thousands were massacred. Dead bodies so many that usual methods had to be abandoned and carried openly on handcarts and improvised cyclo rickshaws for burial in a common grave.



Body of a raped and murdered woman thrown away by the Pakistan Army brutes to be devoured by hungry dogs.

classified in two grades, one for the officers, and the other for the jawans.

At an earlier stage of their attack upon the people, the Army had set up a similar camp at Tongi Telephone Corporation Building, eight miles from Dacca. With the help of the local collaborators, six nurses of Tongi Public Health Home, women from family quarters of local Fire Brigade and women from family quarters of Pakistan Pharmaceutical Industries, were brought into this camp and subjected to incessant rape and assault.

In some of the camps, the women are kept totally naked and whipped at the slightest expression of unrest. Many women die at the very time when they are being raped. Some die later due to profuse bleeding and many become mentally unbalanced.

Gruesome reports of this nature are available from hundreds of places, with barbarities committed frequently. Events of this nature have become part of the everyday experience of the people of Bangladesh.

Here is a narration of an eye-witness of an incident in Comilla: "I reside in Chadda Gram village in the south of Comilla. An old woman along with her 20-year old pregnant daughter named Batisha, were walking towards their home, about two miles from the local police station. On the way the Pak soldiers beat the old woman and took away the pregnant girl. Two days later the girl was discovered dead. Her body carried marks of the most brutal treatment. Her sexual organ presented a grotesque sight. Besides her lay the unformed body of her still-to-be-born child.

In a shelter in Chittagong, I met an old woman. Her face was blank, her eyes though gazing at me

seemed to be always remembering the harrowing experience of the last few days. Her voice rang the spirit of revenge. Everyday in Chittagong the women used to run away to the outlying areas at night to protect themselves from the clutches of the Pak Army. We have even heard of accounts where women were raped as their houses were set on fire. These women, somehow freeing themselves from the arms of the soldiers and threw themselves into the same fire. Many of our sisters have committed suicide when they became certain that their honour could no longer be defended. Daughter of a local judicial clerk, named Babli, was kept captive by an Army Major in his house so long as he was posted there. He satisfied his perverted and animal lust upon her and then left her behind.

In the Kharam Pal area of Kishoregange, one girl and a newly wed wife were mercilessly assaulted and their organs were cut to pieces. Both these women had their breasts cut off which were later hung up in front of their houses. In the same area from a hospital in Kishoregange, 50 to 60 nurses and young patients were subjected to a brutal assault. They were indiscriminately raped and later many died.

The military junta of Pakistan has resorted to this campaign of atrocities as an act of revenge upon the people of Bangladesh who have been struggling for democracy and autonomy. Students, teachers, intellectuals, workers, peasants, along with middle and lower-middle class people, numbering over a million have been killed, the properties of millions more have been misappropriated, village after village have been burnt. Having done all this, the blood-lust of Yahya Khan still seems unquenched.

Defying all this terror, our liberation struggle is forging ahead steadily but surely. Tanks, mortars, machineguns and air force bombings brought in to



Like her, many were raped and killed by the barbarous soldiers of Yahya Khan's military junta.

crush our resistance have all become ineffective against our valiant freedom fighters. To avenge its defeat on the field, the Pakistan Army demonstrates its valour by assaults upon our defenceless women.

In relating a story of three women of Nabi Nagar town of Comilla district, a freedom fighter said: "When these women were being taken away, repeated pleadings made for their release went in vain. About a week later, dead bodies of these women were discovered just outside the village. When in the cover of night these bodies were picked up by their relatives, it was discovered that, satiating their animal lust was not enough for the Pak soldiers.

They disfigured and cut to pieces their sexual organs with bayonets." In similar fashion thousands of young women of Bangladesh are meeting tragic death at the hands of the barbarous Pakistan Army.

In the Pakistan-occupied areas of our Bangladesh, our mothers and sisters are being subjected to dishonour and brutalities. There is not a single village in Bangladesh where Pakistani troops have set foot without resorting to loot, arson, massacre and mass raping.

To the conscience of the world let us put a single question: Shall we not expect the support of every decent man and woman in every land in our efforts to put a stop to these atrocities and the aggressive war waged by the Yahya Khan clique against the 75 million men and women of Bangladesh? Can we not count upon the support of the democratic and progressive forces in the world in our just struggle for national liberation?

To every democrat in the world, to all peace-loving people and specially to the women in every country, we appeal for support. To every women's organisation in the world, our appeal goes out for the active demonstration of solidarity with our struggle for emancipation of 75 million people of Bangladesh. This way, not only shall Yahya Khan's assassins be driven out but the cause of emancipation of women of the whole world may be further strengthened.



Smt. Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, listening to harrowing experience of refugee women in one of the camps.

Bangladesh Facts ●

Refugees: The generally accepted estimate of the number of Bengali refugees in India is over 9 million. The cost to India of providing minimal shelter and food for the refugees is estimated at \$ 3 million per day.

Something of the background to the present situation can be seen by comparing the following statistics. They reveal the exploitive relationship between West Pakistan and East Bengal (Bangladesh).

Population (1971 estimate)

West: 56 million
East: 75 million

Literacy (1961)

West: 5,380,308 (12.55%)
East: 8,955,501 (17.6%)

Orgin of officials on Pakistan Government Central Secretariat, 1962:

Secretaries: West 19, East Nil.
Joint Secretaries: West 39, East 7.
Deputy Secretaries: West 100, East 24.

Later observers assert there has been little change.

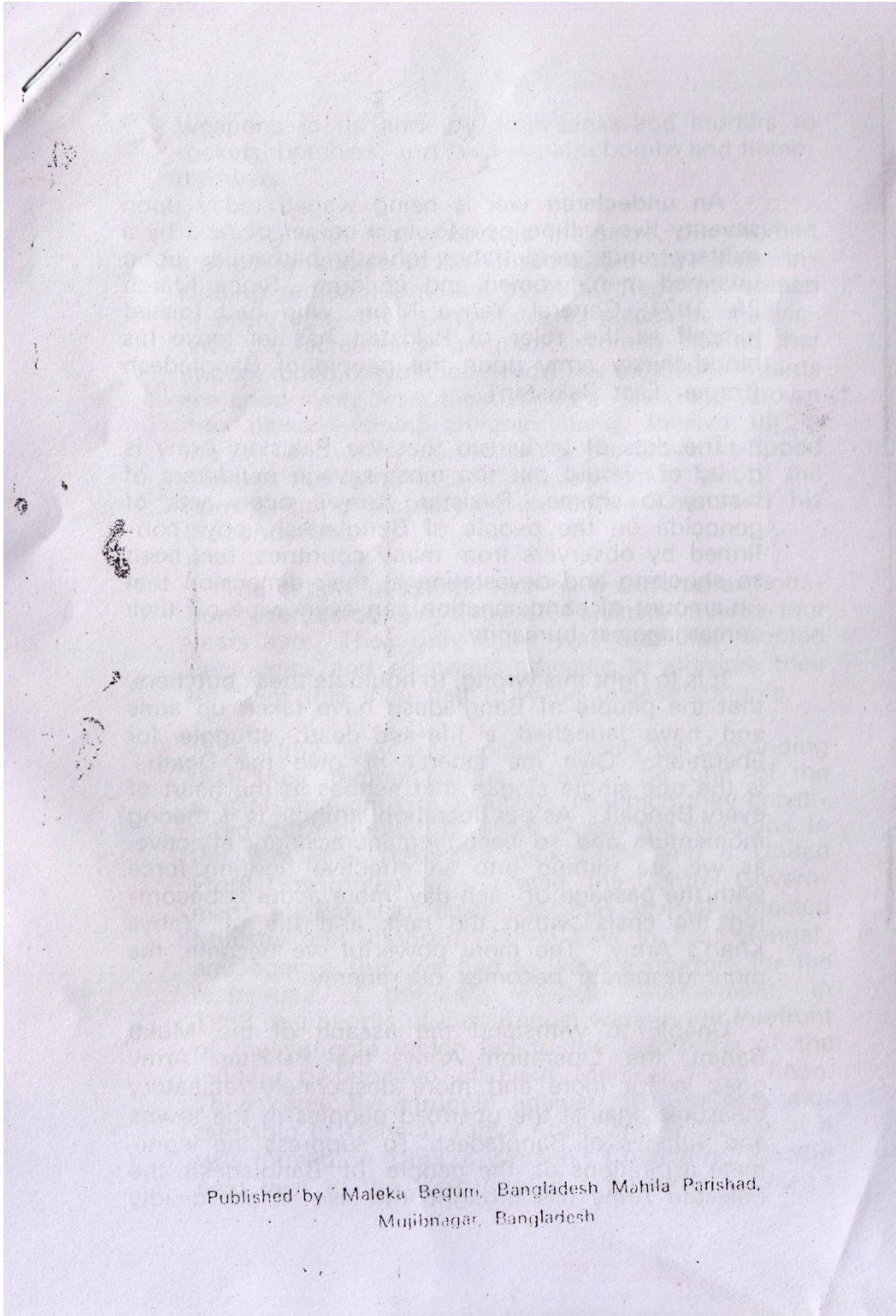
Expenditure of public money through economic plans (in millions of rupees):

Pre-plan (1950-1955):	2nd Plan (1960-1965):
West: 2,065 (68.7%)	West: 7,695 (55.2%)
East: 940 (31.3%).	East: 6,255 (44.8%).
1st Plan (1955-1960):	3rd Plan (1966-1970):
West: 4,630 (70.2%)	West: 13,700 (54.8%)
East: 1,970 (29.8%).	East: 11,300 (45.2%).

"West Pakistan's growth rate in recent years has been 6%, East Pakistan's 4%. The West's share in gross national product increase is 59.4%, the East's 40.6%. . . . Out of Pakistan's total bank deposits of 15,000 million rupees, the western wing keeps as much as 12,500 million rupees. The eastern wing's jute and tea earn most of Pakistan's foreign exchange, but the bulk of these earnings are used for the western wing's industrial development and imports. During the last 20 years, West Pakistan imported goods worth more than 30,000 million rupees, three times as much as East Pakistan—and 20,000 million rupees in excess of its own export earnings. The pattern extends to fund allocations also. In the second five year plan (1960-65) development expenditure per capita stood at 521.05 rupees for West Pakistan and 240 rupees for East Pakistan, revenue expenditure at 309.35 rupees for West Pakistan and 70.29 for East Pakistan. The disparities have since grown. Only some 20% of the total foreign aid received has gone to East Pakistan." (T.J.S. George, "The Cross of Bengal",

Far Eastern Economic Review, 24/4/71/

Pakistan elections: In the national elections in December 1970, the Awami League won 167 seats, Pakistan Peoples' Party 85 seats, and other parties 65 seats. Following the conduct of these elections the ruling military junta in West Pakistan refused to call together the newly elected National Assembly.



Published by Maleka Begum, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad,
Mujibnagar, Bangladesh

Appendix I

Consent Form

Consent Form: Introduction

Title of the Thesis: **Feminism in Bangladesh: 1971- 2000**
Voices from the Women's Movement

Supervisor: Dr Najma Chowdhury, Emeritus Professor, Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka

Co Supervisor: Dr Firdous Azim, Professor, Chairperson of the Department of English and Humanities, BRAC University, Dhaka

Researcher Identity:

Ayesha Banu

PhD scholar and Associate Professor, Department of Women and Gender Studies,
University of Dhaka

Email: ayeshabanu23@yahoo.com

Cell: 880 1713 016 255

Focus and Purpose of the Research

This thesis attempts to explore the specific shape and form of feminism in Bangladesh. While doing so it has looked into the history of women's movement focusing onto the first three decades of Bangladesh, concentrating on three major women's organisations. This study attempts to examine a period of Bangladesh history from the perspective of women's movement towards making a feminist articulation through the voices of a few key protagonists of the movement.

In depth interviews and life stories of selected personas of women's movement are the mainstay of this thesis. In depth interviews will be coded, analysed and quoted in the thesis using the name of the interviewees with interview dates (month and year) in the thesis purely for academic purposes, to obtain a doctoral degree.

The research is conducted to fulfil the requirement of obtaining a PhD degree under the University of Dhaka. The PhD Programme was supported by the project entitled "Institutionalising the Department of Women's Studies", funded by the Royal Netherlands Embassy and managed by the Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka and Institute of Development Studies (ISS), The Hague.

Expected Outcomes of the Study

I hope that the study will contribute in creation and dissemination of feminist knowledge and unfolding of voices hitherto marginalized in the history of women's movement of Bangladesh.

However in case the degree is awarded, the author may like to use the data and information in summary form for journal publication or in a form of book in future.

Selection of Interviewee

You have been selected as one of the key figures of the women's movement in Bangladesh along with few others. The research has also selected three pioneer women's organisations i.e. Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Women for Women and Naripokkho. Your involvement with these organisations is another reason to be selected as one of the main source of information. It was felt that your experience, involvement and understanding would contribute in creation of feminist knowledge in Bangladesh.

Please note that because of the very nature of this explorative study, it is necessary to reveal your name and identity as the key source of information in my thesis and also in future probable form of publications. Please indicate if you have any objection to that. I would also like to add that your voice and the recorded interview will be provided to you in a CD for your reference.

CONSENT FORM FOR:

RESEARCH TITLE: Feminism in Bangladesh: 1971-2000
Voices from the Women's Movement

RESEARCHER: Ayesha Banu, Associate Professor, Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka

I have been given information about the doctoral thesis titled **Feminism in Bangladesh: 1971-2000, Voices from the Women's Movement** and discussed the research project with Ayesha Banu who is conducting this research as part of a PhD degree supervised by Dr Najma Chowdhury and Dr Firdous Azimin the Department of Women and Gender Studies at the University of Dhaka. I was provided with a detailed interviewee guideline prior to the interview session.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time.

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact (Ayesha Banu, Associate Professor, Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka, email: ayeshabanu23@yahoo.com, cell: 88101713 016 255)

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used primarily for a PhD thesis, and will also be used in summary form for journal publication or in a form of book and I consent for it to be used in that manner. I have no objection in mentioning my name as one of the interviewees.

Signed Date

...../...../.....

Name (please print)

.....