The Women's Movement in Bangladesh
A Short History and Current Debates

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FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

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■ Since independence, Bangladesh has made significant gains in empowering women. It has formulated and implemented policies and programmes that improve the conditions for women. Bangladesh has reduced maternal mortality and fertility rates, attained gender parity in enrolment, introduced gender quotas in government and enacted laws that address violence against women. Women's movement played a critical role in bringing about these changes.

■ Bangladesh has a long history of women organizing to claim their rights which can be traced back to anti colonial struggles. The actors in women's movement have mobilized over the years on many different issues which include: violence against women, gender equality in securing economic opportunities and participation, equal representation in politics, reproductive rights, family law reforms and gender mainstreaming in public policies.

■ From a movement that was mostly urban and composed of professional and middle class women in the 1970s and 1980s, it has expanded to include a diverse set of actors and women's rights discourses. The growth of the NGO sector and donor funding for Women in Development (WID) projects expanded the movement's outreach and made a positive impact while dealing with the state. However, these were also double-edged swords as projectization and NGOization of women's rights organizations has led to deradicalization of the movement's goals.

■ Given the rapidly changing economic and political contexts on both the national and global levels, today, the women's movement faces many different challenges which are linked to the movement's sustainability in the future. They include: being able to attract and retain younger activists, the decrease in international funding for small and medium sized women's groups, the conservative backlash against the movement, and the shrinking space for political activism due to the rise of extremist groups. How women's movement actors will deal with these challenges in the coming years remain to be seen.

REGIONAL
PROGRAMME ASIA

Contents

List of Abbreviations

AIWC	All Indian Women's Conference	CHT	Chittagong Hill Tracts
AL	Awami League	GAD	Gender and Development
APWA	All Pakistan Women's Association	GOB	Government of Bangladesh
ASK	Ain O Shalish Kendra	MFLO	Muslim Family Law Ordinance
BLAST	Bangladesh Legal Aid Services Trust	PIL	Public Interest Litigation
BMP	Bangladesh Mohila Parishad	UCC	Uniform Civil Code
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party	UFC	Uniform Family Code
BNWLA	Bangladesh National Women Lawyer's Association	WFW	Women for Women
BOMSA	Bangladesh Ovibashi Mohila Sramik Association	WID	Women in Development
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women		

Foreword

The women's movement in Bangladesh is characterized by its great diversity with regards to its goals, strategies and its own processes of formation. Long before the independence of Bangladesh, various women's rights groups have challenged gender discrimination in the political, social, economic and cultural spheres and have achieved remarkable successes. Yet, power, resources and influence are still far from being equally distributed between men and women as the structures in theses spheres are often more favorable for men. Furthermore, women's rights movements are confronted with a growing global backlash against emancipation and equal opportunities for all. Multiple crises at the national and global level, such as increasing inequalities, natural disasters and extremism are examples of additional challenges to women's rights movements. For socially just and gender equal responses to these challenges, solidarity and coalitions among the various movements in Bangladesh and in Asia are essential.

It is against this background, that the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), the oldest German political foundation, has started the project "Political Feminism" in countries across Asia. The project aims to revive the debate of "the political": a debate about visions, goals and strategies on how to shape an inclusive society. In full awareness and appreciation of the rich diversity within Bangladesh and especially between Asian countries, the project aims to facilitate bridges between the various school of thoughts and movements.

Within this framework, a series of country studies in Asia have been undertaken. The following study by Dr. Sohela Nazneen, outlines the history of women's movement in Bangladesh, its achievements and internal as well as, external challenges for a sustainable movement in Bangladesh. We would like to express our gratitude to our partner Dr. Nazneen for her hard work and thorough research which materialized into this excellent study.

The country studies which are available on the website (http://www.fes-asia.org/) serve as a first step to the broader goal of stimulating debates among various schools of thought in Bangladesh and Asia with a vision to build a stronger alliance between them.

We hope that this study can contribute to a fruitful discussion and provide valuable insights for future initiatives.

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

Feminism and women's movement and activism[1] in Bangladesh cannot be identified within a singular framework. What marks women's movement in Bangladesh is their diverse and vibrant nature. Feminist activists and women's rights organizations[2], despite their smaller numbers, have made their presence felt through their engagements in various social movements, development activities, and protests against fundamentalism, violence against women and state repressions during authoritarian rule. In this paper I aim to do the following:

First, I will trace the history of women's movement in Bangladesh and how the agenda, strategies and ideas about women's rights evolved.

Second, I will focus on the nature of the current debates and activism, the challenges that feminists and actors of women's movement face, and the influence women's movement has had over the years.

My particular focus is on the following challenges: the difficulties of building an intergenerational movement, the changes in funding and resourcing for women's rights work, the shrinking nature of civil society space, and the rise of women's religious groups and what it means for the kinds of claims feminists are able to make of the representation of women's rights concerns.

In this essay, I set the parameters and define the terms and concepts related to feminism. In South Asia, feminists distinguish political feminism from development feminism by delineating between the respective spaces within which feminist struggle against patriarchy takes place and where feminist activists locate themselves (Devika, 2016). Political feminism is located within the oppositional social movement, whereas development feminism has a more reform-oriented focus, stressing engagement with the state. In Bangladesh, this distinction is hard to maintain.

The blurring of boundaries takes place because of the following reasons: First, many of the actors who are a part of the women's movement would locate themselves in both of the spaces. Second, using relationship with the state as a characteristic to differentiate between the two streams is not effective given that many of the actors in both streams simultaneously work with the state while taking part in the oppositional social movements. Given this context, I will also focus on those women's rights actors who are generally categorized as development feminists or would be referred to as development practitioners.[3]

The remit of the paper is to trace the history of women's movement(s) and feminism in Bangladesh and discuss the nature of contemporary women's rights and feminist activism. The historical roots of women's movement and the shaping of discourse on women's rights require an understanding of the influence of colonialism and the nationalist struggle against the British and Pakistanis on women's rights. Contemporary feminist politics has also been shaped by its interaction with the wider social, economic and political changes that occurred in Bangladesh within which feminist activism took root and changed over the years. In this paper, I weave in those broader historical changes and discuss the nature of the current political context where relevant. It should be noted that I will only discuss those social/political issues that are significant for the analysis presented here.

My paper begins with a brief description of how Bangladeshi women's status has changed over the years. In the second section, I present a brief sketch of the history of the evolution of women's rights movement and the issues that the women's rights actors struggled for. The third section focuses on the current debates within the women's movement and the challenges that the movement faces in Bangladesh. My conclusions are drawn in the basis of these analyses.

Situation of Women in Bangladesh:
Uneven progress and Persistent Inequalities

Bangladesh is currently categorized as a lower-middle income (LMIC) country which has been experiencing a steady rate of economic growth in the last two decades. A country with Muslim-majority[4] with a parliamentary system of government, it gained independence through a war against Pakistan in 1971. Bangladeshi society is hierarchical with opportunities and has access to and control over social resources being determined based on class, gender, and location (e.g. urban/rural; also connections made through being from the same district/village). Bangladeshi society is patriarchal, patrilineal (descent through male line) and patrilocal (relocation to husband's house after marriage; Jahan, 1995). Bangladeshi society is categorized as a 'classic patriarchy.' Classic patriarchy is characterized by a corporate form of household and kinship structure, where household resources are pooled and men have control over women's labour, sexuality and mobility out-side the household. The ideology of female dependency and male guardianship is promoted through segregation of sexes in the public[5] and rigid gender division of labour (Kabeer, 1994). Traditionally women's role in society was limited to the private sphere. Women are primarily responsible for the household chores, child rearing, and caring for the extended family members living in the marital home. While the dominant view of women's role in society places emphasis on their role as mothers, wives and daughters in law, over the last 40 years this view has been challenged as more and more women enter the labour market and political, policy and cultural spaces (Hossain, 2017).

The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal participation and rights to women in the public sphere. In the private sphere women are not equal to men, as women's rights within marriage and their rights to divorce, custody, inheritance are governed by religious personal laws (Pereira, 2004; Hossain, 1994). Marriage is deemed as universal for women for economic and social security. About 66 percent of the girls are married by the time they are 16 (Save the Children, 2016) although child marriage has been banned since 1929.[6] Most of the rural women are married outside their natal villages, and

live with their in-laws in a joint household immediately after their marriage (Save the Children, 2016).[7] This limits women's agency when they are young wives, as women's access to material and social resources is restricted after relocation to a different village where she has no kin support. Social norms and norms on sexuality (i.e., control over women's interactions with non-related males) and segregation between what is perceived as a male space (e.g. village markets) and female space, limit options for participation in labour market and paid work. Women also experience high-levels of intimate partner violence and domestic violence (BBS, 2011).

In spite of the social, cultural and structural barriers, women have made considerable gains since Bangladesh became independent in 1971. The nature of progress made by women is uneven and some gender inequalities remain persistent. Various measures and actions by the state, NGOs, women's rights groups have led to legal changes and improved women's health and increased opportunities for education, economic participation, and presence in politics. In 2016, Bangladesh ranks as the 127th country in UNDP's Human Development Index. While this indicates that there is much to be done, the pace with which changes in women's health, education, economic participation was achieved is remarkable; particularly because Bangladeshi women had a lower starting point compared to other countries in the region and the rate of poverty reduction was modest compared to the improvement in social development indicators (Hossain, 2017). The fertility rate in Bangladesh is currently 2.3, a significant decline, compared to the total fertility rate of 7.4 in 1974. The maternal mortality deaths by per 100,000 live births were halved within a 15-year period by 2001. Gender parity in primary and secondary education was attained by the end of 1990s from a situation where in the 1980s when the gender gap in enrolment was significant (Nazneen et al. 2011).

A much debated pathway through which Bangladeshi women have participated in market activities is through microcredit, which allow women to participate in income generation activities based at home.[8] Women's

formal wage employment has increased steadily over the last decade, with over 2 million women working in the ready-made garment sector (World Bank, 2008). Women have also entered public sector employment in education and health sectors in larger numbers, about 60 percent of the primary school teachers are women (Hossain et al. 2017). In urban areas, more women are entering the formal sector jobs as the number of women graduates increase, women's presence in the private sector such as telecommunications, banking rises (World Bank, 2008). However overall women's labour force participation is low compared to other countries which is about 36 per cent during 2006-2010 (Rahman and Islam, 2013). The majority of the women are engaged as home-based workers or working in family farms or engaged in the informal sector, which indicates they face specific vulnerabilities related to absence of formal contracts, work security, and do not have access to social security.

Women's presence in parliament and local government has increased, about 18 percent and 25 percent respectively, largely due to gender quotas (Akter and Nazneen, 2014). However, at the national level women's presence in leaderships positions inside the key political parties remain limited (Akter and Nazneen, 2014). In the local government, women representatives experience various attitudinal, cultural and structural barriers (Pande, 2008) although there seems to be a growing acceptance of women representative's role in dealing with disputes on family matters.

These changes mentioned above have been brought through the implementation of state-led health and population-control programs, universal primary education provision and secondary school stipend for girls, various income generation schemes for women promoted by the state and NGOs. While the state and NGO actors have created these development programs

Table 1: Situation of Women in Bangladesh

Category	Status
Women's Suffrage	1947
Life expectancy	72
School Enrolment (primary and secondary)	Gender parity in enrolment
Literacy rate	56 per cent adult women
Labour Force participation	26 per cent.20.8 million micro-credit borrowers are women; over 2 million garment workers)
Domestic violence	87 percent of the ever married women in nationally representative surveyed (2011) said they had experienced some form of domestic violence in the last year
Representation in Parliament	18 per cent (300 general seats ; 45 seats are reserved)
Representation in local government	25 percent (each union has three reserved seats for women)
Quota in government	15 per cent
Child Marriage	66 percent of 16 year olds are married
Equal rights in marriage, divorce, inheritance, custody	No (for Muslim and Hindu women)
Law banning child marriage	Yes; 1929
Laws against domestic violence	Yes; 2010
Special Law preventing violence against women and children	1998
Signatory to CEDAW	Yes (reservation on article 2)
Women's Ministry established	1979
National women's development policy	Yes, 1997 (amended 2004; 2011)

Source: Nazneen et al. 2011; Save the Children, 2016, BBS 2011;

and policies, a key thing to note is that Bangladeshi women were willing and able to participate in these various schemes to improve their lot and make the most of these opportunities (Mahmud, 2017). Women's movement actors, as we will see in sections III and IV, were pivotal in mobilizing for policy change, pressuring the state, raising general awareness and challenging the debate around women's rights.

In spite of these rapid gains, the table above shows that the progress has been uneven. Moreover, some of the gender inequalities have remained persistent which are reflected in women's lower nutritional and health status compared to men, the gender wage gap, the smaller number of women in political and economic leadership positions and the high levels of violence experienced by women inside the home and in the public sphere. Women are still primarily responsible for undertaking unpaid care work in the family and the community, which leads to women having longer workdays and less time for leisure (Huq, 2013). Ideas around gender division of labour and complementarity of gender roles remain resistant to change. While women are participating in significant numbers in the workplace, the market remains highly sex-stereotyped with certain professions deemed 'suitable' for women such as teaching, nursing, domestic work, home-based entrepreneurial work. It is argued that increased women's presence in public sphere has also drawn attention to high levels of incidence of sexual harassment of women in public and in the workplace. While women's presence in formal political institutions has increased, gender equity concerns have little currency in mainstream politics.

While these persistent inequalities indicate there is a long-road ahead for attaining gender equity, the hope lies in the fact that Bangladeshi women have demonstrated ability and leadership in organizing for their rights and demanding societal change and the integration of gender agenda into the national development agenda. In the following section, I will trace the history of women's rights movement in Bangladesh and its impact on shaping discourses around women's rights.

The History of Feminist Movement in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has a long history of women organizing and mobilizing to claim their rights. This can be traced back to the anti-colonial struggles against the British, and in the nationalist struggle against the Pakistanis. The development of women's rights discourse and activism may be 'historically divided into three distinct phases, each with its own focus and level of gender awareness' (Jahan, 1995:90).

The Emergence of 'the Woman Question' among Bengal-Muslims (The British period-1900-1947)[9]

The social reform movement of the 19th century laid the foundation for women's equality through reforms in education and abolition of practices such as sati (widow immolation), child marriage, infanticide, etc.,-where men carried out these reforms, on behalf of women who largely acted more as passive recipients (Brote, 2013). These reforms were largely spearheaded by the Hindu (or Brahmo) social leaders in Bengal targeting practices within their community, but debates on social reform also engulfed the Muslims of Bengal. In fact, the 'woman question' (Jayawardena, 1986) was central to the identity and nation building debate among the Muslim social leaders and intellectuals in Bengal. These two groups differed on strategy with the traditionalists advocating for revival and preservation of gender norms and custom and the modernists advocating adaptation and change. Modernists advocated for women's access to education, so women would become good mothers and wives. They also called for the relaxation of extreme segregation and women's increased participation in public through welfare and social work, arguing that purdah norms are about maintaining modesty of dress and behaviour in public. They were inspired by the example of countries such as Turkey which was experimenting with modernization after the revolution led by Kemal Ataturk (Jahan, 1995).

Urban educated middle-class and upper-class women from modernist families actively participated in this debate through writing in magazines, literary journals and pamphlets. They also engaged in community welfare activities through charity and relief work.[10] These activities, of course, indicate the dominance of a particular class in shaping the discourse around women's role and rights in society. While women's participation in these public debates was intense and led to women having a public 'voice' and expressions of selfhood (Azim and Hasan, 2014; Amin, 1994); their views were influenced by the mainstream modernist (male) discourse although there are exceptions (Azim et al., 2009). For example, Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), a prolific writer and social reformer, made incisive and trenchant critiques against women's subordination, purdah norms, the patriarchal nature of Islam (Jahan, 1995). She was an original thinker and drew on political thought and philosophy from both Eastern and Western tradition. Rokeya passionately advocated for women's education, autonomy, economic independence and mobility and set up a school for Muslim girls (Jahan, 1995). Rokeya and her associates found support among the modernists for their work on education and social reform; however neither the modernists nor the traditionalists supported Rokeya's critique of patriarchy and its link to religion (Azim, 2016). Her writings still inspire Bangladeshi women and provide an important historical and cultural background to contemporary women's movement and feminist thought and activism in Bangladesh.

The Swadeshi movement in Bengal in 1905 (protesting the division of the Bengal province) created scope for women's participation in nationalist struggle for independence in colonial India. However, Muslim women were not largely part of this struggle as Muslims were largely in favour of the division. The women's movement in colonial India is said to have taken off in the 1920s by building onto the social reform movement. Women in Bengal voluntarily participated in the Non-Cooperation movement (Osohojog Andolon). The majority of the women's organizations were linked to political parties. While anti-colonial struggles created scope for women's participation in politics and the public sphere, issues relating to women's emancipation were relegated largely to the social, cultural and spiritual realm (Roy, 2010). During this time, the issue of women's equal rights in marriages and inheritance and the idea of a uniform civil code (UCC) was raised by the All Indian Women's Conference (AIWC-established in 1927, affiliated with the Congress Party) and regional women's organizations led by the Communist women. But these demands did

not lead to wider social or political support for radical restructuring of familial relationships (Roy, 2010). This lack of wider social and political support for restructuring familial relationship still holds true for India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

By 1930s and 1940s, Muslim women in colleges and universities, albeit in smaller numbers, participated in the political movement for the creation of Pakistan (a separate state for Muslims, comprising of the Muslim majority provinces of colonial India). Women's active participation in this national movement 'resulted in the idea of national independence being imbued with the notions of women's rights and freedoms' (Azim et al. 2009: 1), although as history would show this was not without its problems.

Increased Presence in Challenging the Nation Building Project: Pakistan Period (1947-1970)
Pakistan, formed on the basis of a common religious identity, was geographically divided into two wings-East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and West Pakistan. In the early years, gender issues were subsumed under the nation building project and later on in the larger political and national struggles. Like earlier efforts by women, urban middle class and upper class women engaged in relief work and rehabilitation of the migrants and refugees from India (those who left India after partition). These women were members of women's wings of political parties, and some also established voluntary organizations. However, their numbers and activities were limited to urban areas. Many, because of restrictions of mobility, were not aware about the issues and realities face by rural women.[11] Among the women's organizations that were formed during this time, a prominent role was played by the All Pakistan Women's Association (AWPA), a state sponsored national level organization led by the wives of government officials (Shehabuddin, 2008; Jahan, 1995; Kabeer, 1988).

The first organized nation-wide activism around women's issues was the demand for the reform of Muslim family laws. The movement was led by APWA in both wings, which collected about 55,000 signatures in favour of the reform, engaged in debates through writing and public meetings (Khan, 2016; Shehabuddim, 2008; Jahan, 1995). The broad based alliance that APWA created

with other organizations led to the development of a sense among women that they could mobilize around issues that affected all women (from different class and locations) and challenge the state. The state, at that time, was willing to change the law as it wanted to project a 'modern' image and ensure its legitimacy. The movement was successful and led to the formulation of the Muslim Family Law Ordinance (MFLO) in 1961 that curtailed unilateral rights of Muslim men in divorce and polygamy and set a minimum age of marriage (Mansoor, 1999; Hossain, 1994). The influence of this history of how women mobilized for reform under military rule, would inspire women's movement actors and feminists in Bangladesh to organize around family law reform and also challenge the military rule during the 1980s, and later on, to organize under democratic rule in the 1990s. While the movement for family law reform was a shining period for solidarity among the women's rights activists in the two-wings of Pakistan, this did not to last. The differences of culture and language between the two wings (where Urdu language and West Pakistani culture was emphasized). Attempts were made by the military rulers to Islamize at the state level which led to the creation of a movement which stressed Bengali identity and culture. Female students at the universities and colleges actively took part in these movements. Women (their attire, cultural activities) became powerful symbols of Bengali nationalism (Jahan, 1995). Issues related economic equity between the two wings and repression by the military dictators of political freedom led to the demand for the autonomy of East Pakistan, spearheaded by the Awami League (AL). Urban women were a part of this collective struggle. The first national level women's rights organization in East Pakistan, Mohila Parishad (later Bangladesh Mohila Parishad, the largest national level membership based women's rights organization), was established during this time. Young women activists linked to the left parties, along with senior leaders of Awami League's women's wing, played a pivotal role in the formation of the organization (Jahan, 1995). They advocated for the release of political prisoners, protested against military rule and for democratic elections. Women's active role in the national struggle would lead to consciousness among women's about their economic and political entitlements and raise expectations about how state should ensure gender equality in public and private life (Jahan, 1995; Azim, 2016).

The Bangladesh Period (1972- present)

Over the years, women's organizations and feminist organizations have mobilized around various issues including: women's political participation, economic empowerment, gender mainstreaming in public policies, religious-personal law reforms, violence against women etc. (Kabeer, 1988; Jahan 1995). There is a wide diversity among the women's groups and feminist organizations in Bangladesh- ranging from small, local-level samities to larger membership-based associations to mass-level national organizations. I explore the following issues: a) how the women's rights agenda have evolved over the years; b) the strategies women's movement actors have used to engage with the state and the international development discourse, and c) how the movement was influenced by the wider national political, economic and social contexts and negotiated its position vis a vis Western feminist thought.

Gathering Strength, Broadening Scope, and Consolidation

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the government of Bangladesh faced the challenge of rehabilitating the victims of rape (by the Pakistani army and their local collaborators) and the war widows. While the plight of the rape victims had been used to mobilize public opinion nationally and internationally, the state and societal response in terms of rehabilitation and support for the rape survivors were inadequate (Saikia, 2011). The interventions- suspension of law against abortion to permit abortion on an industrial scale, a temporary law to permit international adoption of war babies, and the various integration efforts signalled the transfer of responsibility to 'protect' women from the society to the state (Mookerjee, 2007). The reintegration schemes for survivors of rape through marriage and equipping them to earn a living were underlined by the fact that the restoration of the social order depended on the restoration of the sexual order.

Many of the urban based women's organizations and feminist leaders took part in the relief and rehabilitation work. State and society's inadequate response made them acutely aware about the vulnerable position of women in the society (Shehabuddin, 2008). The women's rights groups were newly formed, with limited membership, and feared patriarchal backlash against the survivors of rape, and did not mobilize around this issue

(Jahan, 1995). However, the continued marginalization of women in public and policy space further heightened their awareness against gender discrimination. For example, the First Five Year Plan only identified women's development need in terms of motherhood and rehabilitation of war victims. This led to the formation of Women for Women (WFW) by feminist academics as a research and advocacy group to produce policy relevant research and gather data on women. The first Bangladeshi publication of a comprehensive report on women's situation in Bangladesh was by this group in 1975 (Jahan, 1995, Banu, 2015).

Political instability, a series of military coups, famine and economic crisis during the early and mid-1970s led to increased insecurity and erosion of traditional kinship support networks. It also led to a growing awareness among the women's movement actors about the difficult conditions faced by rural women. This awareness also deepened through women's engagement in the non-governmental sector as workers and also in implementing international development projects. It was during this time, that we see the beginnings of women headed development NGOs, such as Banchte Shekha (Learning to Live) outside of Dhaka (ibid, 1995).

Breakdown of the law and order situation led to increased crimes against women such as acid attacks, kidnapping, murder etc. Class and gender inequalities also deepened during this time, and increased impoverishment in rural and urban areas led to increased demand for dowry and dowry related violence.[12] Increased incidence of violence against women led to the formation of legal aid organizations for women, such as Bangladesh National Women Lawyer's Association (BNWLA) to provide support to the victims. By 1980s, the authoritarian ruler was entrenched in power (General Ershad) and civil and political rights were further eroded. General Ershad attempted to legitimize his rule by Islamizing the state. It was in this context that autonomous feminist organizations such as Naripokhkho (For Women) were formed who were willing to forward feminist critiques of the state outside the development paradigm (Azim, 2016). This decade also witnessed the formation of women's groups such as Karmojibi Nari (working women) that focused on women worker's rights. These groups emerged as more women migrated from rural areas for formal and informal work.[13]

Ideological Positions

Ideologically, the women's groups that were formed between 1970s and 1990s had many different positions. Marxist thinking and analysis had inspired Bangladesh Mohila Parishad (BMP), Karmojibi Nari (Working Women) and others and they had links with the left political parties (Banu, 2015). Women for Women and other organizations working on development policy research and implementing development projects were influenced by liberal feminist analysis and the women in development (WID) discourse.[14] Groups such as Naripokkho were perceived as radical by other women's rights groups as they stressed women's autonomy and were willing to publicly raise concerns related to women's sexuality and bodily integrity (Azim, 2016). All of these groups laid claims to the feminist analysis by Rokeya and other writers to stress that the ideas about women's rights had its historical roots in Bangladeshi society (Nazneen et al. 2011b). They were also inspired by the ideals of the liberation war. Over the years the ideological distinction between the different groups has blurred.

Alliance and Coalitions Building around specific issues: violence against women, religious personal laws, reproductive rights and challenging Islamization

During the 1980s women's movement actors galvanized and challenged the state on many different issues. The ones that stand out are the movements for: an anti-dowry law,[15] a special law on provisioning deterrent punishment for violence against women,[16] and establishment of Family Courts (Jahan, 1995; Mansoor, 1999). Parts of the women's movement were also at the forefront leading the protest against the Eighth amendment of the Constitution which declared Islam as the state religion under General Ershad's rule (Azim, 2016). They formed a coalition to protest these developments and filed a court case challenging the amendment.[17] Violence against women and Islamization of the state would be two themes that women's movement actors will continue to mobilize against throughout the decade of 1990s and also the last decade.

In the 1990s, women's movement played a key role in legally challenging and building across the nation a public support against fatwa (religious edicts given by rural imams and mowlanas that are often detrimental

to women). They also were at the forefront in the movement against trafficking of women and children, rape in police custody, rape by the police, and acid violence against women and girls.[18] These movements led to the enactment of special laws addressing violence against women and children-the Nari o Shishu Nirjaton Domon Ain- of 1998 (amended 2000). The 1990s, also witnessed issue specific coalitions being formed around reproductive and health rights. Women's organizations providing legal aid to women also pushed for changes and reform of family laws.[19] This was partly inspired by the Convention of Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW's Article 2), and partly by the experience of the legal aid organizations that tried to assist women in matters related to divorce, inheritance etc. The women lawyers and women's movement actors researched and developed the draft of a Uniform Family Code (UFC) and held consultations at the national and local levels (Pereira, 2002, Banu, 2015). However, the draft was resisted by religious minority groups and the state was unwilling to reform religious personal laws for the fear of an Islamist backlash (ibid; Shehabuddin, 2008).

Tensions within the Movement

During the early years after the democratic transition and throughout the decade of 1990s, Bangladesh witnessed an opening of space and vibrant debates among the women's movement actors and feminists about whether the movement was inclusive or not. These debates on inclusivity focused on whether issues and concerns of women from different classes, ethnic minority and religious minority groups and marginalized communities were adequately represented. The movement was also tested by the various political developments that brought to the forefront tensions within the different groups.

The discussions around the formulation of a Uniform Family Code (UFC) highlighted to the feminists the legal inequalities that existed among the women belonging to the different religious communities (Pereira, 2002;Banu, 2015). For example, Muslim women in Bangladesh have the right to divorce but Hindu women do not. However the drafting of the code meant that the system of religious personal law needed to change. This placed women's rights activists from religious minority groups in a difficult position as in many cases their activism for reform pitted them against their community's position to

secure their religious freedom and maintain a separate identity in a Muslim majority state (Nazneen, 2013). The movement actors were also divided over how to position themselves in relation to the fatwa issued against Taslima Nasrin (a writer who had critiqued various provisions in the Qu'ran).[20] While these actors agreed on defending the principles of freedom of expression and stood against the act of *fatwa* against writers, they were divided over the insensitivity demonstrated by the author (Azim, 2016; Banu, 2015). Moreover, many of women's movement actors are practising women themselves and found the remarks made by the author offensive.

The conflict between the Bengali community and the Hill people (ethnic minority groups based in Chittagong Hill Tracts)[21] and the military presence in the CHT region gained national attention during this decade. The Hill Women's Federation highlighted their experiences of marginalization and vulnerability during decades of conflict in this region (Azim, 2016; Mohsin, 1997).[22] The issues raised by the Hill women led to the questioning of whether the movement was inclusive or not and whether it had been able to take an effective position in addressing these concerns (Azim, 2016). The movement also had to explore whether it promoted Bengali/ Muslim identities over non Bengali/non-Muslim identities.

Another issue that sharply divided the women's rights activists is whether the movement was able to effectively represent the concerns of various marginalized groups. This was sharply brought into focus when the sex workers were being evicted from brothels by the powerful elites in their communities in the 1990s. Eviction increased the vulnerability of the sex workers and the workers organized to resist these moves and to ensure their right to work (Azim, 2016). This raised questions within the movement in terms of whether the movement was effective in providing support to marginalized groups[23].

Evolving relations with the state and its challenges

During the late 1980s and the 1990s women's movement actors, particularly Women for Women, organized various national conventions on specific themes that brought different women's rights groups, policy actors, state officials and political leaders together. These national conventions provided recommendations to the state for making changes and were effective platforms for exchanging ideas with a wide range of actors, including the state officials and political leaders. While in the 1980s, the women's movement had taken an oppositional position in relation to the state after the democratic transition in 1990, the relationship with the state had evolved to be a more co-operative one (Azim, 2016). The Beijing preparation process also opened up spaces for engagement with the state, and the state was willing to engage on women's rights issues (Banu, 2015). The state has always maintained a contradictory position when it comes to women's rights. On the one hand, it has enacted and implemented progressive laws and policies for promoting women's rights. The availability of donor funding for women in development projects and the international development discourse around women's rights (i.e., the UN Decade for Women) influenced the state to focus on women's education, fertility control and economic participation for building women's ability to contribute to the national development process (Jahan, 1995). The state was also motivated to focus on these issues to gain international legitimacy. On the other hand, the state has many times acted to sustain male privilege as seen in its reluctance to reform religious personal laws (Jahan, 1995). The espousal of Islam by the military dictators in the late 1970s and 1980s, and tacit and overt alliances formed by the two main centrist parties (the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party) with the Islamist parties to form governments after the democratic transition have limited space for raising women's rights issues that are linked to religion.[24]

Influence of International development agenda and expansion of the NGO sector

The feminist organizations and their actions in Bangladesh have also been influenced by the following factors: a) the role of the international agencies and the gender and development discourse which created scope for funding various gender projects and programs; and b) the expansion of the NGO sector in the 1980s and 1990s (Banu, 2015). These contextual factors have worked as double-edged swords. The availability of donor funding for gender and development created space for feminists to enter and participate in various policy spaces. The UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) and the Beijing conference preparation process opened up policy spaces for women. The Beijing consultative process also created scope for national and local level consultations among different groups in and outside of

Dhaka on women's rights issues. These consultations led to the creation of national level women's networks, such as the Doorbar Network, that brought small women's organizations outside of Dhaka in regular contact with Dhaka based organizations. However, external funding and relationship with donors have also placed feminist / women's organizations in a difficult position, where their activities have been characterized as 'Western imports' by the wider public (Nazneen and Sultan, 2014).

The expansion of the NGO sector in the 1990s created scope for feminists to increase the number of allies and expanded their outreach. Bangladeshi NGOs have actively promoted women's rights and gender equity, with many of them targeting women as clients of services and creating access to microcredit for income/ employment generation. The NGO sector also employs a significant number of women and many women's rights activists have also established or worked for development or rights-based NGOs. However, the expansion of the 'NGO-model' of implementing women's empowerment projects/ programs has depoliticized the women's rights agenda to some extent. This is because the NGO-model of work led to a focus where the women's empowerment agenda had shifted towards individual empowerment and women's development work, and less emphasis is placed on collective mobilization for structural change (Halim-Chowdhury, 2009; Nazneen and Sultan, 2009; Sabur, 2013)[25].

The Present Day Feminist Activism —Challenges and Debates

The last decade and the present decade witnessed rapid changes in the wider political and social contexts. Ideas on women's rights have been 'side-streamed' (Alveraz, 2009) into other movements and the official policy documents routinely recognize women as development agents. The movement oversaw some hard won legal and policy changes. These include: the formulation of laws addressing domestic violence (The Domestic Violence Act of 2010) and the Hindu marriage Registration Act; the enactment of the National Women's Development Policy, 2011; the legal recognition of transgender identity; the repeal of two-finger test in rape cases. The movement has been effective in creating various policy coalitions for mobilizing on specific issues. The women's movement actors have learned to work closely with the mainstream print media to garner attention for their demand over the years, however feminist discourse is largely absent in the electronic media. Through alliance and coalition building the women's movement actors have also maintained its ties with rights based NGOs and other social movement actors. The leadership of the coalitions and alliances have been largely undertaken by the established women's rights organizations such as those discussed in the previous section. Although there are instances where a new network organization has served as the secretariat on a specific issue based network. For example, We Can is currently serving as the Secretariat for the domestic violence campaign network and STEPS has served as the co-ordinator for the network on CEDAW shadow reporting. However, the creation of these board alliances and coalitions on specific issues does not imply that the movement was able to successfully address the hierarchies within that are based on class, age, locations.

The last decade also witnessed the rise of many different types of challenges to women's rights organizing and activism. The women's movement is grappling with the complexities of entering a phase where the forms and ways of organizing and mobilizing had dramatically altered from the previous decades. The ascendency of the conservative religious forces in politics means that the space for engaging the state on women's rights issue is shrinking. The generational shift within the movement has created further challenges to feminist organizing. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the various challenges and the kinds of debates these have raised within the movement.

Partisan Polarization of Civil Society Space

In the post authoritarian period, particularly in the last decade, many civil society actors became sharply aligned with one of the two mainstream political parties. In a polarized civil society space, the perusal of particular rights-based agenda may be interpreted as aligning with either the Awami League (AL) or the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), leading to losing one's credibility and standing. In this polarized context, women's rights organizations have faced difficulties in building wide alliances and coalitions on gender transformative issues as they feared that alignment with particular groups may lead to a loss of credibility. This has limited the movement's ability to interact across a wider section of political and civil society and street activism.

Polarization of civil society space and increased marginalization within the mainstream political space have made the women's movement actors dependent excessively on personal relationships with the state bureaucracy and policy actors to exert influence and advance gender equity concerns in policy spaces (Nazneen and Sultan, 2014).This, of course, leads to women's movement actors behaving as 'interest groups' or 'pressure groups' when it comes to interacting with the state and not as an oppositional force that takes the state to task (Azim, 2016).It also raises questions about whether reliance on personal networks is a sustainable strategy as the class composition of the movement and of the political elite changes (see discussion on generational divide). As the nature of politics changes in Bangladesh, where the space and voice for non-politically aligned smaller groups shrinks, women's rights organizations face a challenge in maintaining its influence over national policy and political debates. These developments have led to questions within the movement about how feminist organizations may position themselves and build feminist constituencies (Azim, 2016).

Impact of NGOization and Coping in a post-NGO-ized phase

NGOization[26] has affected the autonomy and accountability of women's rights organizations in different ways depending on their size, resources, leadership and location (whether local or national). The national-level feminist organizations have been able to manage the NGOization process in a strategic manner compared to the smaller local-level women's organizations.

Smaller women's rights organizations, set up in rural areas, adopted the developmental NGO model of funded projects, professional staff, and management by a more formal board. For these organizations, engagements and working with development NGOs in funded projects built management skills. Interactions with other NGOs, women's rights networks and groups promoting human rights, enhanced the capacity of some of these smaller organizations to contribute to debates around women's rights and gender equality. Inevitably, the activities of the smaller organizations had to be tailored to the funding environment and had created difficulties for them to act autonomously (Nazneen and Sultan, 2009).

While the national-level membership based feminist organizations were able to raise funds through provision of consultancy and training services, the impetus for seeking donor funding arose out of the realization that voluntary activism had its limits and that they needed to expand and sustain their outreach services such as pro bono legal aid, shelters for women etc. Some of these organizations, such as the Bangladesh Mohila Parishad (BMP), Naripokhkho, Women for Women, Bangladesh National Women Lawyer's Association (BNWLA), attempted to ensure that there was a consistency between the organizational goals and specific donor mandates when securing funding. They also tried to retain control over their agenda and protect their autonomy by keeping their core activities separate from project-funded work (Nazneen and Sultan, 2012).[27]

While the above strategies helped in maintaining autonomy, nonetheless these organizations have been influenced by the process of NGO-ization. The organizational procedures are standardized, formalized and somewhat bureaucratic. Styles and forms of mobilization used by these organizations have also changed. There is an excessive emphasis on advocacy-related activities that are media and event focused, and can be easily quantified for the donors. Project-ization and NGO-ization have also led to member's time being monetized in women's rights organizations, leading to a division between paid staff and volunteer members. The senior members of national-level women's organizations still devote a considerable amount of volunteer time for the development of the organizations, however recruiting and mobilizing new members has been difficult (Nazneen and Sultan, 2012).

In short, though NGO-ization of the movement had some positive impacts in terms of capacity building and increasing outreach of the women's rights organizations, it has changed styles and forms of mobilizing and affected the autonomy of the movement. In the post-NGOized phase it has raised questions within the movement about whether the movement has been de-politicised given its excessive policy-focus work to fit donor funded agenda (Sabur, 2013; Halim-Chowdhury, 2010, Banu, 2015). NGOization also raised concerns about the sustainability of and the solidarity within the movement as the funding for women' rights related work shrinks for small and medium sized organizations.[28] The smaller organizations struggle for survival as they face increased competition from sister-organizations who are competing for the same resources. As bi-lateral and multilateral funding reduces women's rights work, there is an increased need to emphasize and rely on the non-monetary resources such as, member's time, relationship with allies, partnerships that organizations' possess. However the challenge remains for the movement to devise strategies that deepens the solidarity within the movement to weather out the difficulties posed by shrinking resources.

Generational Divide

Younger urban-based feminist activists use the term 'feminist impasse' (Siddiqui, 2011) to refer to the divergence between the different generations of feminists in the way they choose to engage with the feminist movement and mobilizing activities. National-level women's rights and feminist organizations are facing difficulties recruiting and retaining younger members in the urban areas. There are many reasons that contribute to the declining numbers. NGO-ization of the movement has led to conceptualization and framing of women's rights in a particular manner. The

veterans of the movement argue that their younger members, who grew up during the time when NGO-model of doing gender/ women's rights was ubiquitous, have a more professionalized approach to women' s rights rather than a movement-oriented approach. While the younger members admit to this point made by the veterans, they also argue back that a 'professionalized' approach does not mean they are less committed. Some have also argued that there is a tendency among the veterans to idealize a specific type of movement building approach which constrains innovation (Nazneen and Sultan, 2012).[29]

What both groups agree on is that NGO-ization's influence on monetizing the labour used for organization building and mobilizing had increased tensions between the paid staff and younger members of these organizations. The younger members feel that they should be compensated for their time for doing similar kinds of work that paid staff undertake. There is a sharp decrease of voluntarism among many of the younger members of women's rights and feminist organizations partly due to their more professional approach (Sultan, 2010; George and Nazneen, 2010). However, there are socioeconomic realities that contribute to younger members investing less time. Younger members have less family support with the breakdown of extended families and they face increased financial pressure and these contribute to the younger members having less time for uncompensated work.

There are many reasons why young middle-class urban women have not joined/or continued as members of different women's rights and feminist organizations. Focus groups among students, young professional women and development workers reveal the following. First, they argue that there is a lack of space and democracy within some women's rights and feminist organizations (not an uncommon feature in Bangladeshi social movement organizations), which discourage young leadership. Second, the vanguards of the movement have failed to engage with the issues that attract the younger women and men, such as sexuality, web based activism, climate change, transparency in corporate and energy sectors; thus feminists have lost relevance to the younger crowd (Siddique, 2011). Many of the urban-based younger feminists (development professionals, cultural activists and students) argue that modes and

forms of activism are different, and the older generation had not effectively deployed the use of social media and other innovative means (e.g. cartoon competition, photo exhibitions, movie screening, school tours, quiz contests etc.) to draw in the younger crowd. In fact, some of the other social movements, such as the anti-corruption movement, organizations on environmental movement have successfully used these strategies and are popular among the young (Nazneen and Sultan, 2012). This has raised questions within the established movement about the strategies to draw in younger members.

Online writer groups and student organizations at public universities have mobilized around women's rights issues, particularly on sexual harassment in university campuses and consequently, are active on the social media. In the last few years there have been episodic collaborations between established feminist organizations and these groups. These include the established feminist groups participating in the specific events along with digital activists and students such as protest against violence against women (for example, One Billion Rising in 2013), or women's legal aid organizations providing legal counselling to victims of sexual harassment at public universities or coming out in support of student movements against harassment. However debates exist within the women's movement and among the younger generation of activists whether these collaborations would lead to a lasting relationship. Interestingly, the number of younger members of the women's organizations in district towns is rising. These members of small local-level women's organizations[30] join feminist networks to access donor funding, strengthen their social capital and deepen their belief in women's rights (George and Nazneen, 2010).

Middle class bias within the movement and working class women's organizing
Another key issue that has been heatedly contested within the movement and by feminist academics is the middle-class prejudices present within the women's movement. As we have seen, most of the women's rights organizations and feminist organizations in Bangladesh were initially composed of urban-based professional, elite and middle-class women. They were able to volunteer their time. Being able to volunteer time for an organization and movement building in Bangladesh is distinctly linked to class (Roy, 2011). Socioeconomic

conditions limit working-class women's ability to volunteer for movement activities. It was only in the 1990s, that the availability of donor funding for associations composed of working-class women, led to the establishment of independent working class women's associations. These include, for example, Bangladesh Ovibahsi Mohila Sramik Association (BOMSA), migrant women's association or Awaj Foundation, an organization set up by a garment worker. Establishment of these associations opened up routes for their participation in women's movement building activities. Previously working class women were unable to volunteer their time and needed to work.[31] This socioeconomic class dimension of voluntarism, have raised question within women's movement, particularly among the young feminists, about the normative ideal that voluntarism occupies within the Bangladeshi feminist movement (Nazneen and Sultan, 2012).

While the last two decades have witnessed the emergence of working class women's organizations (such as Awaj Foundation, BOMSA), which may lead to a shift in class composition of the current movement, the impact of this shift is yet undetermined. Networks of working women have been facilitated recently by established groups such as Karmojibi Nari, however the effectiveness of these networks are yet to be seen. Women's voice inside most of the trade unions, despite having a few strong women leaders in the ready-made-garments sector, is marginalized in most formal sectors. This is partly because apart from the ready-made-garment sector, where most workers are predominantly women, other formal sectors are largely male-dominated. The trade union culture in Bangladesh remains patriarchal. The possibility of violence and confrontation with the police discourages many female workers to participate in trade unions (Mahmud, 2010).[32] In recent years, Bangladesh has witnessed the rise of participation of women workers in various kinds of protests related to wage, work hours and work safety. Whether this increased participation will lead to change and the creation of border alliances remains to be seen.

It should be noted that feminist academics and women's rights workers have raised these concerns at the policy level for many years. There are possible areas for creating boarder issue based alliances within the movement on issues such as housing for working women, work safety concerns, transport, decent work opportunities, safe public spaces that are free from sexual harassment etc. Instances of effective collaborations between trade unions or workers organizations and women's rights movement are few, but exchanges have taken place over the concerns mentioned.

Growing Presence of Women's Religious Groups
In the last two decades, Bangladesh has witnessed the growth of a wide variety of women's religious groups (Huq, 2010; Shehabuddin, 2008). Previously, some women were active as members of the student wings of Islamist parties and within the party itself, though their role was largely limited to raising funds and support for the party among women (Shehabuddin, 2008). Recent years saw the rise of informal discussion groups on the Qu'ran for women, popularly known as taleem groups. They are popular in both urban and rural areas and span across classes. These groups provide religious guidance on matters that are relevant for the women members and are largely non-political. While these groups emphasize the complementarity aspect of gender roles, they also use the language of rights and entitlements for women to be able to exercise agency within the home and in public (Huq and Khondakar, 2011).

The appeal the above discourse couched in the terms such as empowerment and rights have raised difficult questions for the women's rights movement. The discourse on the empowering aspects of Islam for women has shifted the ground on which so far the links between women and religion have been discussed in the mainstream (Azim, 2016). The entry of the religious women's groups into the 'public domain that has been the general purview of the feminists' (Azim 2016:220) using the language of rights, have eroded the claim that organized religious groups tend to work against women's interests. The growth and popularity of these groups have raised many questions among the feminists and women rights activists. Should the growth of these groups be interpreted as a 'weakening of the ground on which secular feminism (division between private piety and public action) rests' (Azim, 2016: 220)?It also raised questions if women's religious groups that emphasize women's rights and entitlements could be allies on specific issues such as, violence against women (Huq, 2010). The women's rights groups were split on this issue. The secular feminist groups, who espoused a separation between the state and the private sphere,

took the position that collaboration was not possible given the ideological differences. Some women's rights activists and writers were open to consider these issues.[33] However, the rise of Hefazat-e Islami, a loose Islamic platform, that specifically mobilized against the online activists in *Shahbag* in 2013, also had an explicitly anti-women's rights agenda had restricted the space available for dialogue between the different groups.[34] This development changed the wider context, and collaborations with women's religious groups have been pushed to the side-lines.

Conservative Backlash

The conservative backlash against women's rights is nothing new in Bangladesh. In the decades of 1980s and 1990s contestations were explicit between the NGOs and Islamist groups (political parties, *ulema* or religious scholars) in the rural areas. NGOs faced resistance against their work on microcredit, and for organizing women to be involved in market activities and participate in public meetings. They also faced resistance for providing training on women's rights at the community level. In many areas this was motivated by the local level religious leaders. At the national level, Islamist political parties campaigned against women's work in the RMG sector and also NGO membership (Shehabuddin, 2008). In 1994 and 1996, local area offices of BRAC, Grameen and Proshika were attacked-when civil society actors (including women's rights actors) and NGOs mobilized nationally. As women's movement actors organized against the use of fatwa in village *shalish* (local arbitration), they became specific targets of these conservative groups. Women's movements' activities around reforming family law and of a uniform family code also made them unpopular.

The rise of Hefazat-e-Islam in 2013 as a popular force on anti-women rights agenda and the wide scale mobilization by the Islamist parties in 2008 and 2010 against the National Women's Development Policy[35] made it clear to women's rights actors that gender equality in matters that challenge deeper power structures is yet to gain a wider acceptance among the public. The public discourse in the digital space around specific incidents related to sexual harassment and assault also revealed that the society is still deeply patriarchal on these issues. This was apparent in the debates that took place after the *Pohela Boishakh* (Bengali New Year) incident in 2015 where women were sexually molested by groups of men at an event celebrating the Bengali New Year. The discourses were similar to what a certain MP had voiced after the New Year's Eve incident in 2000, when a woman was publicly stripped by a male crowd on Dhaka University campus after midnight. The entrenched nature of patriarchal public discourse on women's sexuality, particularly questioning the freedom of movement and blaming women for sexual harassment and assault-- indicates that women's increased public presence and new roles evoke male insecurity and conservative backlash. Village studies show that men complain against the state for creating opportunities for women. These include complaints against quotas for women in primary school jobs, gender quotas in local government and the passing of tougher laws on violence against women that curtail male control over women (Schuler et al., 2013; Schuler et al. 2017). Women's empowerment by many is accepted within certain boundaries (e.g. income generation, better child care) when it is for the benefit of the family and larger community and as long as it does not threaten male patriarchal power.

Women's rights groups are aware of this perception. There are debates within the movement as to how to frame issues around women's autonomy and rights. They are aware that framing of demands in terms of the how women's empowerment contribute to the larger development goals and national welfare is strategic however these forms of framing overlook the intrinsic value of women's empowerment.

Conclusion

At present, the challenges faced by women's rights movement are many and complex. What does the future hold for women's movement and feminist activism? This is hard to predict as the outcome is contingent on many factors.

Undeniably, the women's movement actors in Bangladesh have gained significant advantages in attaining gender justice by challenging gender discrimination in political, social and economic spheres. The demands for change has led to significant shift in state policies. The state had been able to meet several of the MDG goals. The state has significantly reduced maternal mortality and poverty and gained gender parity in primary and secondary education and made significant strides in ensuring women's representation through gender quotas in the national and local government.

However as I have shown the movement faces significant challenges. NGO-ization of the movement, while it increased organizational capacity, outreach of the feminist organizations and their access to alternative spaces, has changed the ways of mobilizing, and in many cases altered the way women's rights and feminist agenda are framed. In the post NGO-ized phase, scarce external funding, poses further challenges around sustainability and mobilization for the women's rights/ feminist organizations.

Inevitably, NGO-ization has contributed to professionalization of feminist activism for the urban middle- class women and has widened the generational divide within the movement. Recruiting and retaining younger members are harder. The disconnect between the urban young professionals and the feminist movement also results from the movement leaders failing to engage effectively with the issues that are important to these groups and use new modes and spaces for mobilization. As the socioeconomic class composition of the movement changes, with women from peripheral urban areas joining in and new types of organizations created by working-class women increase in numbers, the possibilities for expansion and strengthening of the movement may emerge. Whether this potential is fulfilled will depend on how established women's rights/ feminist groups respond to these new groups and members. It is difficult to elaborate on the process of this collaboration as there are no studies that explore the links between working class women's organizations and mainstream women's movement and how they have influenced each other. There are also very few studies on the changing class composition of the movement (as most of them are critiques of the middle class bias of the movement), at the district level.

Apart from gaining new members, the sustainability of the movement also hinges on the success of exploring alternative resources(partnerships, constituency building etc.) by the established women's rights /feminist organizations and means for mobilizing (e.g. social media etc.). In fact, the women's rights organizations and feminist activists could benefit from accessing and using these new modes and spaces that the younger generation uses and inhabits. Whether the younger generation is interested in collaborating with/ or joining the women's rights group or feminist groups is difficult to comment on. While there have been episodes of successful collaborations between the generations, they have yet to turn into long term co-operative endeavours. It is also difficult to comment on what the younger generation of activists may do and what possible impact they may have. There are gaps in our knowledge about the extent of effectiveness of online activism, both activism on feminist issues and also anti-women's rights campaign.

What remains to be seen is: how would the women's rights organizations and the movement respond to the declining influence of women's-rights agenda and 'secular' civil society groups among Bangladeshi political parties and in Bangladeshi politics? As 'patriarchy,' where political parties monopolize state organizations, civil society and political processes(Hassan et al, 2013), takes deeper roots in Bangladesh, declining influence poses an enormous challenge for women's rights organizations, as they have relied heavily on personal networks and state agencies and had stayed removed from the political space.

What the different generations within the women's rights organizations and feminist movement have to unpack is: how do they want to engage with increased religiosity (for example, Qu'ran reading groups which are not necessarily engaged in formal politics; see Huq, 2010) that have an influence on women's claims and entitlements, and separating this increased religiosity from the context where there is a rise in extreme political Islamist groups.

The discussion above shows that there are significant research gaps when it comes to women's rights movement in Bangladesh, which needs to be addressed for us to be able to comment on whether women's rights actors will be able to tackle the various challenges identified in this paper. These gaps are as following:

First, there are very few studies on the views held by the religious women's groups on the wider political and social issues and how they see women's rights activism, to provide us with the knowledge on whether collaboration between women's religious groups and women's rights group is at all possible, and how this may unfold. Second, as mentioned previously, there are fewer studies on working class women's organizations and their collaborations with the mainstream women's rights organizations, and what may be the possible areas where they may collaborate in future. Third, apart from the focus on female workers in the garment industry, most of the studies on women workers focus on women's role in home based work and agriculture, and very few on the informal sector work undertaken by women in urban areas. There are fewer studies on how women may be affected by the rapid global economic developments, changed structures of trade, and digitization and automation of production. These macro changes may translate into fewer work opportunities for women in the global South, including Bangladesh, and may have implications for how women are able to participate in the economy. Women's rights actors have not effectively engaged in the debate on economic justice issues when it comes to global economic transformations, and there is limited research on Bangladesh to address the concerns raised by these changes. While there are these knowledge gaps and we need to know more, the recent developments around demands for addressing violence against women and decent work opportunities indicate that there are emerging areas where broader alliances could be built across class. These issues include housing for working women; safe cities and public spaces; safe and low cost public transport for women; work place safety; decent job opportunities for women; measures for addressing sexual harassment in public and digital spaces, and social spending for reducing the burden of unpaid care.

Whether the women's movement actors are able to successfully deal with these new issues and contextual changes, in addition to the generational divide within the movement in a post NGO-ized phase remains to be seen.

Notes

1. I have chosen to use the terms women's rights activism and women's movement because Bangladesh has witnessed various forms of mobilizations around women's rights issues and not all women's organizations/human rights organizations that were part of these, claim to be feminists.

2. Not all women's rights organizations claim themselves to be a feminist organization in Bangladesh even though they may work on challenging subordination of women.

3. Some women's rights actors would prefer not to categorize themselves as feminists.

4. About 90 per cent of the population is Muslims, others include Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists. The majority of the population is ethnically Bengali; about two percent of the populations are ethnic minorities. Non Bengali groups include: Biharis (who migrated after the partition of India to Bangladesh in 1947); and ethnic minority groups concentrated largely in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (about 13 different tribal groups) and ethnic minority groups who live in the plains.

5. This does not mean women are not outside in the public domain but that access to certain public spaces are restricted such as the village-market, mosques etc.

6. Child marriage was banned in 1929 under colonial rule and in recent years the law has been amended.

7. In recent decades Bangladesh is witnessing a growth in nuclear households.

8. See Goetz and Gupta (1996); Kabeer (1998); Mahmud (2003) for debates on whether microcredit is empowering or not.

9. The British colonized Bengal (current Bangladesh, West Bengal and Orissa) in 1757.

10. Urban based educated middle-class Bengali Hindu women also engaged in similar activities and participated in the movement for independence from the British. Some of the women also participated in the armed underground struggle against the British. During the struggle against Pakistan, Bengali women drew inspiration from these traditions.

11. This does not imply that rural women did not mobilize; women from ethnic minority groups in the plains mobilized around land rights (for example, the Tonk revolt), organized by the Communist party and participated in peasant movements. The state managed to repress peasant movements (for example, tebhaga), however, women's role and participation created a legacy that was later drawn upon by women's rights activists of the Left and the feminist groups for inspiration against state repression.

12. The reasons behind why the practice of dowry intensified are difficult to pin down. Dowry was not prevalent among Muslims in Bangladesh and the practice took root in the late 1970s and 1980s. There are many theories related to why the practice became prevalent. These include devaluation of women's work/ labour, hypergamy in marriage, changes in the marriage market etc.National statistics on dowry related violence during this time is not available. See White's (1992) village study for an analysis of how incidence of dowry changed over time period.

13. This is because mechanization of agriculture led to loss of women's traditional work (rice husking etc), and export oriented light industrialization created jobs for women in the ready- made garment (RMG) industry.

14. Alam and Matin (1984) in their article critiqued feminists for the class and Northern bias in the gender and development thought prevalent at that time in Bangladesh. However some of the leaders of the movement were aware about the power relations that existed between the Northern and the Southern countries and were critical of the idea that all women (Northern and Southern) were homogenous and also of the global development policies and organizations.

15. The law was enacted in 1980, BMP spearheaded the movement and collected 17,000 signatures (Jahan,1995)

16. Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Ordinance, in 1983.

17. The case was resolved in 2015.

18. Anti-fatwa movement was triggered by Noorjahan's case, where she committed suicide after being publicly humiliated by having small stones pelted at her at a village arbitration. The action was based on a fatwa that pronounced her second marriage to the same husband as invalid. This was because she had not gone through the hilla marriage (marrying another man before remarrying one's husband as prescribed under the Sharia law—but a practice banned under state law). The two movements against rape by police and rape in policy custody were triggered by specific events. Yasmin, a domestic worker who was picked up, raped and left for dead by the police in 1994. In 1998, Seema, a garment worker was picked up by the police under dubious charges, raped and who died of injuries. Acid violence was perpetrated against young girls and women who had rejected 'romantic' proposals (see Halim-Chowdhury, 2009 for details of the movement).

19. Bangladesh Mohila Parishad led the process.

20. The dominant position within the feminist activists' movement has been that the interpretations of the Quranic provisions by men has been gender biased.

21. For details of the conflict see Mohsin (1997).

22. For example, Kalpana Chakma was taken in for questioning by the military and never returned. The case has not been resolved.

23. See Azim (2016) and Banu (n.d.) for debates on the different positions feminists had vis a vis sex work and body politics.

24. However, the actions of the Islamists groups opposing both the implementation of the gender and development projects by NGOs and the women's rights agenda, helped create issue-based coalitions and solidarity movements among feminist organizations and development NGOs (Azim, 2016).

25. During the military dictatorship in the 1980s development NGOs were penalized for political affiliations. Most NGOs chose to pursue an apolitical agenda and focused on service delivery and awareness-raising rather than structural change (Kabeer, 2002; Hossain, 2005; Rahman, 2006).

26. The NGO-ization of the feminist movement refers to the process by which issues of women's collective concerns are transformed into isolated development projects without taking the social, political and economic context into consideration (Jad, 2004). It is closely connected with the promotion of modes of organizational forms and practices based on neoliberal values (Alveraz, 2009).

27. Apart from this study, empirical studies researching how NGO-ization had affected individual organization's autonomy and accountability are very few, most discuss women's movement in general.

28. Post Paris Agenda (2005) that emphasized aid harmonization has meant that funding has decreased for small and medium sized organizations and also for women's rights work and women's empowerment work is limited to 'economic agency building' and VAW (AWID 2008). For how Post Paris Agenda has affected funding related to the work of women's rights work-- see Nazneen et al (2011b).

29. Apart from this study there are very few studies that uses empirical data gathered on the younger generation of feminists.

30. Membership for BNWLA, Karmojibi Nari (these are professional women's associations) increased in the last decade. So did the numbers joining various feminist networks (Nazneen and Sultan, 2012).

31. Working-class women have participated in political/social movements and/ or demands for women's rights. They participated as NGO members or as part of other political/ labour groups. There was a qualitative shift in the 1990s, when they had their own 'women's rights' organizations and participated in their own right.

32. See studies by Dina Siddiqui (2009) and also Naila Kabeer (2004) and Simeen Mahmud (2010) regarding the politics surrounding the labour standards issues.

33. See workshop report on Women and Religion by Pathways of Women's empowerment program.

34. The *Shahbag* movement was primarily started by the online activists protesting the verdict of Quader Mollah, a senior leader of Jamaat-e-Islami, who was tried for crimes against humanity committed during the war of 1971. The movement organizers actively celebrated the International Women's Day and also participated in One Billion Rising (against VAW) activities, and highlighted the war crimes and sexual violence committed against Bangladeshi women during the war. Most of the women's rights groups supported the Shahbag movement although some were on principle against the death penalty and stayed away (Azim, 2016).

35. Islamist groups claimed that the policy advocated for equal rights for women regarding inheritance is against the Shariah. The policy does not state equal rights for women in matters related to inheritance but ability to control acquired assets

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