

GLOBAL-LOCAL INTERACTIONS: FIRST THREE DECADES OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN BANGLADESH*

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Abstract

The main focus of this paper is to look into the feminist formulations with particular emphasis on global–local interactions and its impact in shaping the contours of the women's movement in Bangladesh. The time frame of this study covers the first three decades of Bangladesh i.e. 1971-2000. The paper reveals that the 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. The women's movement, while making its own articulations, is also engaged in a dialogue with other actors in the wider domain of feminism. Among other actors and sites of feminist formulations, the state and global feminism have come out as two major sites, with which the women's movement is constantly interacting, shaping and being shaped in its journey of feminist developments. This study made use of qualitative research methodology, conducting in-depth interviews and collecting life stories of key protagonists of the women's movement, and blending such primary data with secondary source materials.

Introduction

This paper 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 at the local level. The purpose here is to look into feminist formulations around the world to understand what impact these global scenarios have had on local level feminist formulations. The article also explores what kind of alliances and breaches took place within the women's movement. It tackles 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

* The article contains long and detailed excerpts as quotations. The length is intentional as I wanted to record the voices in verbatim from the key protagonists of the women's movement in Bangladesh.

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were placed on the table. This paper would specifically highlight the role of two global initiatives: the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and UN led World Conferences on Women (WCW).

A large part of the data and information for this paper was drawn through in-depth interviews conducted with eleven personalities in total, seven of whom are considered as the key protagonists of the women's movement of Bangladesh. The interviews focused on a wide range of issues within the feminist movement during the specific time frame. These key figures of the women's movement are also associated with three major autonomous women's organisations, namely Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), Women for Women (WfW) and Naripokkho (NP). Most of the interviews were conducted March 2011 to September 2011. The interviews also turned out to be an account of life story, reciprocal discussions and dialogue between the interviewee and the interviewer, simultaneously creating an oral history of the women's movement. These detailed life stories eventually revealed the inner dynamics of the movement and various facades of its global-local interactions, usually absent in secondary sources.¹ In fact the interviews were abundantly complementing to the secondary sources.

Global Feminism and its 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 the global feminism – particularly feminism led by the 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. It 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.

As mentioned earlier, key figures from the women's movement were often found to be associating their agendas with UN-led global movements –sometimes as a yard stick to their movement or as a tool to substantiate their struggle on any particular issue. Many of the activities of the women's movement in Bangladesh were thus found to revolve around UN charters, UN WCW, and preparations of shadow reports, follow up and implementation and monitoring of CEDAW or other charters. Major figures from the movement thought that WCW and other

¹ For the sake of reserving the anonymity of the respondents I will avoid directly revealing the names of the respondents while the representative organisations might be mentioned where and as necessary.

global movements have actually strengthened the women's movement, in terms of gaining up-to-date knowledge, policy formulation, conceptual clarification of issues like feminism, equality, equity, equal rights and opportunities, equal outcome including affirmative actions, and gender lens. On the other hand, there are voices, however weak, confessing the co-option of local agendas under the broad umbrella of the global women's movement or feminist schemas.

Global women's movement always played a critical role in shaping Bangladesh women's movement. Looking back in history, Bangladesh women's movement, at its embryonic stage, was engaged with the Indian and the Soviet women's movement through Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) and Indian Women's Federation (IWF).² Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (it was known as East Pakistan Mahila Parishad and later prior to the War of Liberation (WoL) named itself as Shongrami Mahila Parishad), being one of the largest pioneering women's organisations of the 1970s had close ties with India and the former USSR. It was also possible because of the political alliance of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's government with India and the Soviet bloc during that time.

Building up of International Alliances: The Decade of Seventies

Discussion with one of the pioneering activists of the movement revealed that after the West Pakistani military crackdown on Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) on 25th March 1971, one of the key figures from the movement went to India along with other leaders of the then Communist Party. Despite their differences in party-wise political affiliation, women leaders like Maleka Begum³, Matia Chowdhury⁴ and Sajeda Chowdhury⁵ were given the responsibility, by the male political leaders, of creating awareness about Bangladesh War of Liberation and the ongoing violation of human rights while they were in exile in India. The first initiative taken by them 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

2 Maleka Begum, "*Bangladesh Nari Progoti Andolon: Shomoshha O Kaaq*", Ekok Matra, Vol. 3 (2), 2002.

3 Maleka Begum, a women's rights activist and gender practitioner with academic and field-work experience in teaching and research. She had been the General Secretary of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) for 22 years (1970-1992).

4 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.

5 Sajeda Chowdhury, MP, senior member of Awami League (AL) presidium and Deputy Leader of the House in 2014, an activist during the War of Liberation.

(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, and providing nursing services. 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 worth mentioning efforts related to women's issues were made.⁶

Firstly, establishment of international networking and contacts with women's organisations was crucial to the women's movement in independent Bangladesh. Through Indian connections, Bangladesh's 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 Mohammed Farhad,⁷ 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 booklet in Bangla with photographs and information on VAW and 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.

Feminist leaders, 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. In July 1971, Freda Brown⁸ 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.⁹

6 BMP a, interview dated March 2011.

7 Mohammed 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.

8 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.

9 Maleka Begum, *Shangrakkhito Mohila Ashon: Sharashari Nirbachan* [Direct Election in Reserve Seats], (ShuchiPatra 2000); BMP a, interview dated March 2011.

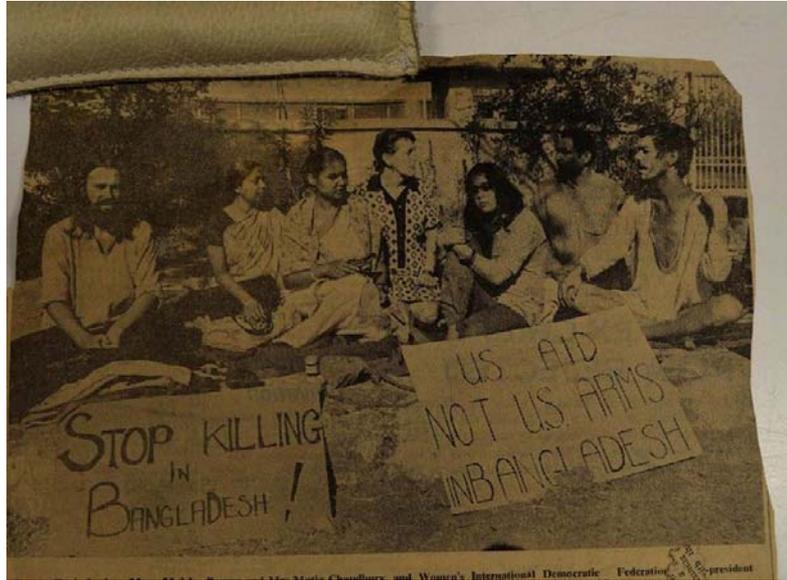


Figure: Maleka Begum, women activist; Motia Chowdhury, current Minister for Agriculture to be seen picketing with Freda Brown, renowned women activist from Australia, with others protesting shipment of US arms to Bangladesh in 1971, Kolkata.

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

Other international mobilisation through networks and linkages were also critical. Indian IWF arranged a meeting with women in Indian Association Hall on 1st April 1971.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

International networking was extended by these activists further during October 1971, when they requested the United Nations to constitute an investigative committee to explore the genocide and war crime against the women of

10 Hasan Hafizur Rahman, '*Bangladesher Swadhinota Juddho: Dalilpatra* [The Liberation War of Bangladesh: Documents]', Hasan Hafizur Rahman (ed.), Vol. XII, (Ministry of Information, 1982).

11 Hasan Hafizur Rahman, '*Bangladesher Swadhinota Juddho: Dalilpatra* [The Liberation War of Bangladesh: Documents]', Hasan Hafizur Rahman (ed.), Vol. VI, (Ministry of Information, 1982).

Bangladesh. The same plea was sent to the women's group of the Soviet Union who declared their support for Bangladesh and demanded justice.¹²

These were strategic initiatives from the women's movement. Instead of shrouding the rape and wartime 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 within and beyond the borders of Bangladesh.

The global feminist movement played a significant role in shaping the women's movement in Bangladesh 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 women's movements and soon, the UN became a critical landmark for shaping the local women's movement. Feminists interviewed 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 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 in 1971. The UN-led global movement was only a sharper continuation of the earlier awareness.¹³

The key figures who were interviewed represent three main women's organisations of the country. All were largely involved in mobilising for CEDAW and implementation of the UN-led WCW. 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 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. The following sections argue how the global-local interfaces influenced the local agendas like demand for Uniform Family Code (UFC).

12 Maleka Begum, *Ekattorer Nari* [Women of '71], (Dibbopokash 2004).

13 BMP a, interview dated March 2011.

Uniform Family Code (UFC) and CEDAW

In Bangladesh, rights in public and private arenas 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 most importantly for the women's movement—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, 1981¹⁴. 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, Christian and Hindu suffer from many misinterpretations, distortions, and discriminations against women. In this connection, before going into details of global feminism, a brief discussion on demand for Uniform Family Code (UFC) by the Bangladesh women's movement is necessary here.

Movement for Uniform 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.¹⁵ As a result, matters that directly affect women such as marriage, divorce, dowry, maintenance, guardianship, custody, inheritance, compensation of conjugal rights etc. were separately governed by

14 See <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/> for details

15 Maleka Begum, *Byaktigoto Ain Porjalochona: Bangladesh O Poschim Bongo* [Revisiting Personal Law: Bangladesh and West Bengal], Mimeo of Post-Doctoral Research as Visiting Professor to Kolkata University, India, (India 2009); Government of Bangladesh, *Laws and Issues Related to Women Affairs in Bangladesh (Manual)*, (Ministry of Women and Children Affairs 2008).

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*.¹⁶ Thus the term 'religious personal laws' continued to be part of the official documents and vocabulary since the 18th Century.¹⁷ The Bangladesh Constitution drafted in 1972 went through certain changes regarding family law. Some elaboration in this regard would be helpful to appreciate the background of the movement for UFC.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

According to Pereira (2002), the inherent contradiction in the Constitution clearly reflects an ambiguous relationship between the state and the individual citizens - 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

16 Faustina Pereira, *The Fractured Scales: The Search for a Uniform Personal Code*, (Popular Prakashan 2002); H. Ahmed, *Divorced or Married: the Position of Bangladeshi Women Between English and Bangladeshi Law*, LLM Essay (Unpublished), (London 1991); R. Bhuiyan, *Gender and Tradition in Marriage and Divorce: An Analysis of Personal Laws of Muslim and Hindu Women in Bangladesh*, (UNESCO 2010).

17 Personal 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).

18 See UNESCO & WfW (2005) for detail.

19 UNESCO & Women for Women, *Marriage, Inheritance and Family Laws in Bangladesh: Towards a Common Family Code*, (Dhaka 2005); A. Khanam, *Bangladeshi Narir Moulik Odhikar Ebong Ekivuto Paribarik Ain* [Women's Basic Human Rights in Bangladesh and Uniform Family Code], (Bangladesh Mahila Parishad 1993).

provisions of state in the public arena.²⁰ All these contradictions have shaped and influenced the demand for UFC in the women's movement of Bangladesh.



Figure 1: Police resisting the demand for Uniform Family Code.

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

A Radical Demand: Unheeded and Abandoned

Although the demand for UFC was raised in post-independence Bangladesh, the push for realising it came much later, i.e., 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 worked closely 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.

Organisations like Women for Women was also involved in identifying the constraints and loopholes within the laws and focus on discriminatory legal rules

²⁰ Faustina Pereira, *The Fractured Scales: The Search for a Uniform Personal Code*, (Popular Prakashan 2002).

that perpetuate gender inequality and ignore human rights. 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'.²¹ WfW believes that full ratification of CEDAW will solve many problems related to personal laws of Bangladesh.²² Creating a knowledge base in support of the issue was one of their main concern.

All the way through the late eighties to the nineties, women's organisations, particularly BMP, arranged a series of district-level workshops throughout 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.²³ 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 subsections²⁴, 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 the Bangladesh Constitution and it is in unison with charters and conventions 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.

Two of main respondents representing BMP report the process of drafting UFC during the mid-eighties until early nineties. They also noted the all-out support of the civil society and of a group of experts, consisting of both men and women including many brilliant male 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.²⁵

21 UNESCO & Women for Women, *Marriage, Inheritance and Family Laws in Bangladesh: Towards a Common Family Code*, (Dhaka 2005).

22 WfW a, Interview dated: March 2011. WfW b, Interview dated: June, 2011.

23 Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, *Somnilito Paribarik Ain* [Uniform Family Code]. (Dhaka 2006).

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

25 BMP b, 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,²⁶ Debesh Bhattacharya, Amirul Islam, K M Sobhan, Sigma Huda, Ayesha Khanam, Rina Helal, Bela Nabi, Advocate Zead 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.²⁷

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 Bhuiyan²⁸ 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 Hindu 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 and gradually people from the Hindu and Christian communities started to say that 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 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.

26 Sufia Kamal, (20 June 1911–20 November 1999) was a Bangladeshi poet, freedom fighter, feminist and political activist. Sufia Kamal was an influential cultural icon in the Bengali nationalist movement of the 1950s and 60s and an important civil society leader in independent Bangladesh. Her feminist activism dates from pre independence period. She was the founding leader of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad. She died in 1999 and was the first woman to be given a state funeral in the country.

27 BMP a, interview dated March 2011.

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

Activists from BMP were not happy with the 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 demand²⁹ was kept aside by the then Prime Minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to be considered when the time was 'appropriate'.³⁰ Historically proven that 'now' is always contentious for the women's movement. Pushing back by saying 'not now' is common to many movements across the world.³¹ Feminist agendas are typically identified by the mainstream nationalist movements as 'not a priority'.

More Challenges: 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. 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.³²

29 See Appendix 1. Sixteen Point Demand of BMP.

30 Maleka Begum, "*Bangladesh Nari Progoti Andolon: Shomoshha O Kaaq*", Ekok Matra, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2002.

31 S. Rai, 'Women and the State in the Third World: Some Issues for Debate', S. Rai and G. Lieslesley (eds.) *Women and the State: International Perspectives*, (Taylor and Frances 1996), pp. 5-22; M. Molyneux, "Mobilization without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State and Revolution in Nicaragua", *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1985, pp. 27-54; D. Kandiyoti, 'Women And The Turkish State: Political Actors or Symbolic Pawns?', N. Y. Davis and F. Anthias (eds.) *Women-Nation-State*, (Macmillan 1989); M. Molyneux, "Mobilization without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State and Revolution in Nicaragua", *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1985, pp., 27-54; D. Kandiyoti, 'Women And The Turkish State: Political Actors or Symbolic Pawns?', N. Y. Davis and F. Anthias (eds.) *Women-Nation-State*, (Macmillan 1989).

32 BMP a, 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.

On the other hand, 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 laws.³³ BMP believes that in spite of 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 be to first ensure registration of marriage and divorce, which is the main pre-condition to move forward with equal rights in the family. Till then, presence of a Family Court - which is open for all - is a big achievement: state the feminists from BMP.

CEDAW: One of the Major areas of Concerns for the Women's Movement

Despite the co-option of UFC by the global feminism, all three organisations explored here unanimously agreed upon the prime importance of CEDAW for establishing women's rights. Since the declaration of CEDAW and lack of full ratification, 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 during the early eighties. A CEDAW Forum was formed and launched in 1992, composed of individuals and organisations that were active on women's rights. 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 Khan³⁴ during the 1980s. She was then in an influential post in the Planning Ministry, Government of Bangladesh and played a significant role as an elected president of the CEDAW committees

³³ See, www.law.emory.edu for detail on legal status related to women.

³⁴ 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>

of the UN. WfW and NP also played a crucial part in pursuing 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.³⁵ 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.^{36,37}

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.³⁸

35 Women in Politics Resource Network, (1998). *WPRN Newsletter, Vol. 1, No.3*, (Women in Politics Resource Network 1998).

36 Sardar Shaheen Ali, 'Conceptual Framework', Sardar Shaheen Ali (ed.), *Conceptualising Islamic Law, CEDAW and Women's Human Rights in Plural Legal Setting: A Comparative Analysis of Application of CEDAW in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan*, (UNIFEM 2006); Mahmuda Islam, 'CEDAW and Bangladesh: A Study to Explore the Possibilities of full Implementation of CEDAW in Bangladesh', Sardar Shaheen Ali (ed.), *Conceptualising Islamic Law, CEDAW and Women's Human Rights in Plural Legal Setting: A Comparative Analysis of Application of CEDAW in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan*, (UNIFEM 2006).

37 Mahmuda Islam, 'CEDAW and Bangladesh: A Study to Explore the Possibilities of full Implementation of CEDAW in Bangladesh', Sardar Shaheen Ali (ed.), *Conceptualising Islamic Law, CEDAW and Women's Human Rights in Plural Legal Setting: A Comparative Analysis of Application of CEDAW in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan*, (UNIFEM 2006).

38 Tureen Afroz, 'CEDAW and the Women's Rights in Bangladesh- A Promised Silver Lining', <http://www.worldnewsbank.com/tureen-seminar.html> (accessed 24 September 2014).

As stated earlier, 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 1984.³⁹

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. Women for Women (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. Most importantly, CEDAW is in accordance with the Constitution of Bangladesh and thus the efforts towards ratification of CEDAW and removing the remaining reservations is legitimate. International endorsements are critical for Bangladesh in this regard. 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.⁴⁰

According to the respondents, CEDAW and WCW brought many women's organisations into one platform and thus have strengthened the women's

39 BMP a, interview dated: March 2011.

40 S. Nazneen and M. Sultan, M. (2010). "Reciprocity, Distancing, and Opportunistic Overtures: Women's Organisations Negotiating Legitimacy and Space in Bangladesh". *IDS Bulletin*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2010, pp. 70–78.

movement. They thought that the Bangladesh women's movement could continue with its relentless journey and identify themselves as part of the global movement. However, full trust on CEDAW was not without apprehension:

...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.⁴¹

CEDAW, to Naripokkho (NP), 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 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 the respondent from NP. However, it seems that the drive for full ratification of CEDAW has lost its momentum over the years. Despite taking CEDAW as a yardstick in favour of realising local demands, the women's movement often feels that activities around CEDAW has dwindled down into mere preparation of shadow reports and attending to WCW in New York.

World Conferences on Women (WCW)⁴² 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,⁴³ 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.

41 BMP b, interview dated: July 2011.

42 See www.un-ngls.org for details.

43 ECOSOC Resolution establishing the Commission on the Status of Women. E/RES/2/11, 21 June 1946.

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).

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 were 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 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 on gender equality only.

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 1980s and 1990s 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.

The interviewee from BMP 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 were seen around the Beijing Conference in 1995. Special committees, alliances and networks were established to aid the collaboration with global UN efforts. She narrates the chronological history which is relevant to this discussion:

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 by the army backed government of those days like female quota in job sectors or incorporating women in para-security forces, establishing of Ministry of Women's 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 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 that 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's⁴⁴ 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, a committee was established with 350 members to work under Salma Khan for Beijing + five conferences to be held in 2000.⁴⁵

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 despite a non-cooperative political situation.⁴⁶

Of all the WCW, the Beijing Conference in 1995 turned out to be the most critical one with far-reaching impact upon the women's movement. Yet, the enthusiasm

44 H M Ershad, ruled during the period of 1982-1990.

45 BMP a, interview dated: March, 2011.

46 BMP a, interview dated: July 2011

and fervour was not applicable for all. Despite the same ideological bargain, agreement and common understanding was hard to achieve.

Beijing Preparation Committee: Coalition, Consensus and Conflict

Najma Chowdhury, the President of WfW of the time was the key person involved in the Beijing Preparatory Committee. Najma Chowdhury, 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 the 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 had prepared her for the more complex and challenging responsibility of co-ordinating the 'Beijing Preparatory Committee' in the early 1990s.

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. ADAB⁴⁷ was our secretariat.⁴⁸

In this connection, the respondent representing WfW states that, coalitions are very helpful for a collective voice. But on the other hand, every coalition also creates division, wedges, distance and misunderstandings. The coalition had to address two main responsibilities: firstly, preparing a collective report through interaction with all voluntary organisations and NGOs, and secondly, to negotiate a meaningful dialogue between the movement and the government. Now, after all

47 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) 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 that time, ADAB emerged as the apex body and national coordinating agency of the development NGOs in Bangladesh.

48 WfW b, Interview dated: June 2011.

these years, leaders of the women's movement feel that they had largely failed on the second.⁴⁹

The above respondent clarifies that: previously, there were distinctions between autonomous women's organisations and NGOs. But, to the UN, the entire 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 the UN-led global the women's movement, all organisations had to register as NGOs 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. Her experiences in coordinating the Beijing attendance had also reflected upon the dialectic relationship between the state and the women's movement.

In this connection, it was revealed to the leaders of the movement that 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 and conflicting opinion often eclipse the purpose of knitting a comprehensive view. According to the key person of the Beijing Preparatory Committee:

I soon realised that there is a conflicting role between the state and 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 1995.⁵⁰

The above narration of the leader from the women's movement 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

⁴⁹ *Ibid*

⁵⁰ WfW a, Interview dated: March 2011.

differences and diversities towards a compromise. The euphoria led to diverse activities like attending and shadowing of women's conferences at the local level, research and publication, and exploring new arenas for knowledge production and creativity. Most importantly, a channel of communication was opened up between the women's movement and the state.

CEDAW and WCW: Institutional Building at the Local Level

Naripokkho, on the other hand, had something different up their sleeve and approached WCW and CEDAW's involvement with global feminism from a different point of view. They thought Global feminism had 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. Due to disagreement on the Yasmin issue⁵¹, 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' ('*Nijederkothabolbo, niyomitoboshbo*' in Bangla). Out of this much-felt need,

51 Yasmin, a fourteen year old house maid was gang raped and killed by three police officers on her way to her hometown Dinajpur in August 24/25, 1995. Spontaneous processions and rallies took place demanding that the police be tried. Yasmin's mother recognised her daughter from a newspaper photo, lifeless as she lay strewn in an open three-wheeled van. Soon, a people's movement emerged. *Lathi-charge*, followed by firing by the police, killed seven people. Public outrage swelled. Roadblocks were set up, curfew was defied, police stations were besieged, and arrested processionists were freed from police lock-ups by members of the public. Outrage focused on police superintendent Abdul Mottaleb, District Commissioner Jabbar Farook, and Member of Parliament Khurshid Jahan, the-then Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's sister, perceived to be central figures in the cover-up. *Shommilito Nari Shomaj*, a large alliance of women's organisations, political, cultural and human rights activists joined the people of Dinajpur, as Justice for Yasmin turned into a nationwide movement. Three policemen, Moinul Hoque, Abdus Sattar and Amrita Lal were found guilty. Women's organisations were highly agitated and disappointed with the role of state on this issue at that time. Finally in 2004, they were executed.

See A. Parvez, *Yasmin: Biplobhinotar Kaley Ekti Roktopater Shironam* [Yasmin: A Story Written in Blood During The Period of Absence of Revolution], (Shommilito Nari Shomaj 1996).

'*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. The key respondents from NP think that *Doorbar* is one of the greatest achievements of the global 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 1999. 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 of 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 landmark development ushered in a decade of close interaction between the United Nations (UN) and its member states over issues of women's development as noted in the documents that were the outcome of the WCW. Due to the synergy created by the interactions of the UN, the international 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 the global women's movement. These movements carried their 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 the feminists interviewed, 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 the 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 (WfW c, Interview dated: March 2011).

Apart from the landmark publication by WfW titled 'Women for Women 1975, the annual convention of the organisation on 'Women and National Planning in Bangladesh' (1990) led to mainstreaming of women in the macro chapter of the Fourth Five Year Plan. Activities of WfW also included influencing the government decisions on census reports, figures for maternal mortality and morbidity, agriculture and women's work, women in politics, so on and so forth.

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 concerns in some.

Global Co-opting the Local⁵²

As 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 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, working towards developing new institutional arrangements.

On the other hand, a feeble voice could be discerned protesting the overshadowing by the global thus co-opting the local in that manner. Despite painstaking efforts, demand for UFC lost its zeal with the commencement of global demands via the UN, conventions around human rights and CEDAW. 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-

52 Alternative voices were also noted much later, beyond the all-encompassing UN led global feminism from the feminists from the South to form 'People's Union of South Asia' and through the 'South Asian Declaration, 2006. See South Asian Feminist Network, 'South Asian Feminist Declaration 2006' <http://www.sangatsouthasia.org/sites/default/files/safm%20declaration%202007.pdf> (accessed 10 September 2013). South Asian Feminist Network, 'Feminist Response to the Proposal for a People's Union of South Asia', http://www.sangatsouthasia.org/sites/default/files/sangat_a%20feminist%20vision%20of%20a%20people_15-4-2010.pdf (accessed 10 Sept. 2013).

opted by global agendas. 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. As a result of subtle manipulations, changes and shifts at the global level, feminist attempts at the local level failed to achieve a meaningful result at the end. The women's movement had to remain content with whatever they could attain. State interventions and co-option by the global feminist formulations often led to appropriation of indigenous feminist articulation which, had the potentials to bring structural and strategic changes.

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"⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ Almost all of the respondents 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, one of the key respondents from BMP 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.

53 I. Jad, "The "NGOisation" of the Arab Women's Movement", *IDS Bulletin*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2004, pp. 34-42.

54 Discussions with feminists from India revealed that feminist formulations in India hardly ever shape their agendas and issues in accordance with the UN guideline.

In Hope and in Despair

However, after all these years, and looking back retrospectively, many felt that nothing much was achieved from all those efforts. They could not really bridge the gap between the people and the policy arena. The women's movement has been successful in raising issues, resisting injustice and denuding rights, but not much progress was made in terms of influencing policies in favour of women. According to the leaders of the movement, 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, some felt 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.

The women's movement is like a river, there are ebbs and flows (*jowarbhata 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 surfaces, depending on the context. The biggest challenge for the women's movement and feminist realisation is to come to terms with the diversity of these issues.⁵⁵

On the other hand, it is also true that the women's movement in Bangladesh has built vibrant transnational networks for peace and justice since the very inception of Bangladesh as a nation. It has created feminist spaces within international and national institutions and was used by the women's organisations and feminists to promote gender justice within the country. Diplomatic skills were applied in the arduous work of crafting international conventions to promote women's rights. Working locally and globally, the movement acted as a pressure group at the national level to ratify conventions like CEDAW. Women's organisations were able to promote 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.⁵⁶

Given the globalised nature of today's world, the UN interventions were an 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

⁵⁵ WfW a, Interview dated: July 2011.

⁵⁶ M. Hawkesworth, *Political Worlds of Women: Activism, Advocacy and Governance in the Twenty-First Century*, (Westview Press 2012).

configuration have taken place within and outside the movement due to the changes at the global level which can be termed as ‘glocal’.⁵⁷

Concluding Comments

This paper has primarily looked into the complex relationship between the women’s movement and global-local interaction. It has explored the intricate relationship between global feminism, the state and other organisations and institutions shaping the broad umbrella of the women’s movement in Bangladesh. 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 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 both breaches and bridges between organisations. 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.

57 N. Chowdhury, *Of Mangroves and Monsters: Women’s Political Participation and Women’s Studies in Bangladesh*, (Pathak Shamabesh 2010).

Appendix: 1

16 Points Demand of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP)

Sixteen 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, M. 2002, *Nari Andoloner Panch Dashak* in Bangla (Five Decades of the Women's Movement, Onnyoprakash: Dhaka, 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