‘Transnationalism reversed’: Engaging religion, development and women’s organizing in Bangladesh

Elora Halim Chowdhury

Women’s Studies Department, University of Massachusetts, Boston, Boston MA 02125, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 12 October 2009

SYNOPSIS

This paper situates women’s activism in Bangladesh within the intersecting forces of rising religious extremism, transnational feminism, and global capitalist development. My work here seeks to illuminate intra-movement tensions in the context of women’s organizing in Bangladesh to theorize and imagine feminist alliances that are more equitable and just across borders of nation, class and community. At once complicit and transformative, I look at the contradictory spaces women’s groups are carving out within multiple constraining power structures. Moving beyond a dualistic framework that posits development and women’s rights in opposition to religion and oppression, which serves a narrow and elitist agenda, I call for a more serious engagement with the transnational dependency links and accountability on all sides for forging more equitable and democratic struggles and alliances.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

As a feminist activist and scholar interested in women’s transnational organizing in Bangladesh, I have followed with curiosity a sudden soar in the Western media over the last several years of reports depicting the nation as alternatively “the site of the next Islamist revolution” and a model developing nation. The first of these images of Bangladesh was tied to a series of attacks on NGOs, women clients of NGOs, progressive intellectuals, and leaders of a secular leaning political party by Islamist groups, many of whom claim transnational allegiances with growing networks of extremist organizations in the region. The second image is associated with the globally acclaimed Grameen Bank and its founder Professor Muhammad Yunus winning the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize. Development initiatives empowering poor brown Muslim women through micro loans, and Dr. Yunus as the moderate brown Muslim male voice have both gained prominence in the context of a global climate of stark contrasts between Western “civilization” and Islamic reticence to join it. Several questions come to mind in response to these categorical representations of the third largest Muslim majority nation:

1. Why the shift from a developing nation status to that of a moderate/violent Islamic country?

2. In what ways are women perceived to be the measure of development or lack thereof?

3. In the age of transnational feminism, what kinds of mobilizations and alliances are possible as women activists in Bangladesh face the multiple challenges of neoliberal development, patriarchy, and rising religious extremism regionally as well as resurgent Orientalism globally?

My positions and perspectives are shaped by the multiple roles I occupy as an academic from a third world country located in the North American academy writing and teaching about women in ‘Other’ contexts, and as an activist in Bangladesh who has worked with both local and international NGOs in mobilizing campaigns against gender violence. In the post September 11th climate, discussions about women’s emancipation in the Muslim world have taken on a new kind of intensity. However, the concerns of transnational feminists located primarily in the North can be perceived as overly “academic” (focusing on important and vigorous debates over location, privilege and colonial baggage) and derailing the practical and exigent issues on the ground (such as mobilizing global awareness and resources for constituencies in immediate need of assistance). Some would consider these debates even “dangerous” or unnecessary while giving voice to faith based constituencies, which are at times uncritically perceived by certain progressive circles as furthering women’s oppression.
As a feminist scholar occupying multiple and often contradictory locations, I fully understand the importance of scholarly concerns problematizing Orientalist framings of gender violence in non-Western locations. Yet I am equally cognizant of the difficult conditions in which local activists organize; conditions which involve time and resource constraints, working with recalcitrant state services and international aid agencies, and making use of transnational networks which can perpetuate unidimensional images of women’s oppression under indigenous patriarchy. These conditions may render irrelevant or suspend the pertinence of scholarly concerns that in theory should inform activist agendas. Here, I do not mean to reify the activist/academic binary nor do I intend to suggest that activists are not aware of complex global power configurations shaping local contexts. Instead I suggest that a) these debates may very well be more pressing for academics located in the North and b) in the process of instigating urgent action and forging complex negotiations they may lose pragmatic relevance. My purpose is to open up a more honest and nuanced discussion around transnational feminist praxis that addresses the troubling yet real disconnect between criticism and urgent action. How do we address feminist complicity in and mount dissent against the institutionalized feminisms of neoimperialism, fundamentalism, and patriarchies?

The available literature on Islamization in Bangladesh has focused little on its relationship to the national women’s movement, which historically has been aligned with the nationalist movement for liberation. This movement has remained secular in orientation as a means to create a distinct identity from the colonizing West. Post-independence, the women’s movement has been equally influenced by ‘modernizing’ forces of international development initiatives. The secular–nationalist stance of the women’s movement understands Islamists as a force external to the nation and bolstered by the unpunished war-collaborators from 1971 who have gained prominence in the political life of the nation over the years. In fact, the very visible urban based progressive movements in Bangladesh have collectively taken a strong stance against Islamization, perhaps at the expense of attention to the complex ways in which the contemporary social and political landscapes have shifted since 1971 leading to a strengthening in national and local based Islamist politics. Although the Liberation War, and women’s important role in it, is undoubtedly an inspiring legacy for women’s activism in Bangladesh, the framing of all contemporary feminist struggles in that light — as the women’s rights leaders often do — leads to the marginalization of other struggles incommensurate with the politics of Bengali nationalism and development. The challenges that the women’s movement in Bangladesh currently confronts require a more nuanced analysis that goes beyond the Islamist/secular–nationalist binary and engages a more self-reflexive lens to acknowledge the linkages that connect disparate power structures, including feminist ones, that have differential implications for differently located women.

The landscape of contemporary Bangladeshi politics is such that divisions like nationalist, secularist, and Islamist are no longer clear, if they ever were at all. Historians Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal (1998) encourage understanding “regional dissidence” in the subcontinent, as it is manifested in secular democratic as opposed to authoritarian and Islamic government in terms of the “historical dynamics of the transition from colonialism” (Bose and Jalal, 1998, 203). They point out that historically these modalities of governance: democracy, authoritarianism, secularism, and religion-based, “have co-existed if not been thoroughly imbricated” within the nation (Bose and Jalal, 1998, 203). Too often the women’s movement (and feminist politics generally) in Bangladesh is uncritically coupled with the secularist one of the civil society or the NGO sector. These groups in turn are deemed as the progressive voice in the backdrop of a weak state with dubious allegiances to Islamist parties. Both the state and the civil society, however, are implicated in donor-driven modernization and “nation-building” initiatives with contradictory consequences not always entirely ‘emancipatory’ for women. In such an intricate web of relationships it is difficult to tease out autonomous agendas for any of these constituencies. Nor is it easy to understand the specific constraints that the women’s movement must negotiate, constraints that might involve confronting instead of aligning with so-called secular/modernizing forces of NGOization. Indeed, the interface of globalization, national development, and rising militant Islamic politics is where the women’s movement’s attention needs to be shifted. Therefore, in this paper I argue for a more nuanced analysis of the perceived dichotomy of Islamist/secularist politics in Bangladesh and the class based women’s movement’s responses to it such that the women’s movement/feminist agenda is not uncritically conflated with a secularist/democratic one. Moving beyond this dualistic framework that serves a narrow and elitist agenda, we must call for more serious attention to the links between Islamist and secular agendas, and imagine feminist dissent that is more accountable to those constituencies that are seemingly ‘benefiting’ yet abjectly affected by the promise of secular development.

**Women’s NGOs: Complicit or/yet dissident?**

As Najma Chowdhury’s (2001) account of implementing women’s rights in Bangladesh shows, the impetus behind women’s organizing post-1971 reflects the merging interests of state and economic development strategies from international organizations such as the United Nations, donor agencies or “development partners,” and global corporations that bring capital into the country in the form of direct foreign investment. She asserts that women specific NGOs as well as those with a major focus on women, are an important part of the national women’s movement in Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2001, 212). The leadership of women-focused NGOs is provided by women while most of those that are not women-focused are led by men with women serving at mid and lower levels. Chowdhury points out that some women’s organizations distinguish themselves from NGOs because their service is not salaried but voluntary. Nevertheless, they too solicit donor funds for projects and often partner with NGOs who provide them with the infrastructure to access subjects of development, namely poor women. One of the major predicaments then for the women’s movement is to carve out an autonomous space from colonialist discourses of donor–driven development agendas, the state’s conflicting ideologies subscribing to these agendas, and the Islamist visions of a moral society.
In Bangladesh the headquarters for women’s NGOs are primarily concentrated in urban areas and are largely led by Western-educated urban elites who advocate women’s rights within a secular modernist framework. This class-based women’s movement is highly visible and active in the public arena. On any given day if one were to look through the national newspapers there would be a plethora of seminars and workshops on topics related to women, gender, and development and featuring familiar speakers: professors, lawyers, researchers, NGO advocates and professionals who circulate with high frequency in national and international conferences. The large rural population in Bangladesh is mostly poor, illiterate, unemployed/underemployed, and alienated from the nation building project. This nation building project, however, does not exclude women entirely. Leaders of the two major political parties are women and the position of prime ministership has been held alternately by these two women from 1991 until 2006. Bangladesh has a Ministry of Women’s Affairs, Women In Development (WID) focal points, a National Policy for the Advancement of Women, reserved Parliamentary seats and non-professional and clerical and custodial posts for women, and a national umbrella women’s organization entrusted with improving conditions faced by women. These opportunities benefit mostly certain sectors of the population, namely educated and urban based women rather than women in rural areas (Karim, 2004, 301).

Women’s rights organizations are using the UN mandate for gender mainstreaming and international human rights treaties to put pressure on the government. Moral shaming of the government in the global community by pressuring it to comply with the international treaties has been an effective mobilizing tool for women activists in the global South even as it means integrating gender mainstreaming as an ‘external’ discourse rather than an organic ‘internal’ one to define movement agendas. As Liz Kelly (2005) has suggested, mainstreaming a gender perspective into development and human rights discourse and practice has been more of an exercise in mainstreaming activists than ensuring gender human rights discourse and practice has been more of an exercise in mainstreaming a gender perspective into development and movement agendas. As Liz Kelly (2005) has suggested, mainstreaming a gender perspective into development and human rights discourse and practice has been more of an exercise in mainstreaming activists than ensuring gender human rights discourse and practice has been more of an exercise in mainstreaming a gender perspective into development and movement agendas. This point emerges more clearly when we take into consideration Chowdhury’s (2001) point that as the time for submission of the Bangladesh report to the CEDAW drew closer in 1995, the government surreptitiously withdrew some of the reservations to Article 2 having to do with equal enjoyment of family benefits and guardianship and custody of children. By not publicizing the withdrawal of reservations and keeping it out of a public debate, the government chose to maintain a “politics of silence” presumably to protect itself from appearing inconsistent in revising yet supporting gender discriminatory policy (Chowdhury, 2001, 226). The NGOization of women’s organization in this sense depoliticized a nascent women’s movement in the post-independence era.

In an interview, Bangladeshi feminist scholar and activist Meghna Guhathakurta suggests that Islamization has tended to influence restrictions on women’s rights in the legal arena to a greater extent than the mainstream political and economic spheres, which are most heavily determined by the flows of the political economy than by Islamist ideology (Eclipse, 1994). Official policies have espoused the Beijing Platform of Action and passed the National Women’s Advancement Policy crafted with progressive feminist and human rights groups. In contrast to this track record however, in 2004 the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) government secretly introduced changes to the National Women’s...
Advancement Policy (NWAP) without discussing it in Parliament or with women’s groups (Siddiqi, 2006). Moving away from the principle of equality found in an earlier 1997 document formulated under the Awami League (AL) government, the revised policy restricts women’s rights to inheritance and control over resources, employment, political and economic autonomy. Dina Siddiqi suggests that, “In terms of employment, the new policy calls for efforts to employ women in ‘appropriate’ professions. What constitutes appropriate is left open to interpretation” (Siddiqi, 2006). Furthermore, women are barred from holding the highest positions in the judiciary, the diplomatic corps, and key administrative bodies. The government has neither formally endorsed nor rejected the revised documents but the common understanding is that these changes were brought on by the Islamist parties with which the government was in alliance. Curiously, adds Siddiqi, the donor endorsed Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper still reflects the principles of the 1997 document. She also notes that a group of 35 women’s and other social justice based organizations have formed a coalition, the Shamajik Protirodha Committee, to protest the underhanded revisions to the NWAP. This coalition protests the BNP government’s secretive alliances with Islamists, however is not equally critical of the limited ways that gender mainstreaming has translated in economic and social arenas for diverse groups of women.

In a recent conversation with a women’s movement activist in Bangladesh, I learned that the emphasis on Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) by the government reflects its class-based top down approach. The PRSP, which is developed by member countries along with the World Bank and the IMF is an imposed agenda, one that is not grounded in country-specific needs and realities. Together with the implementation plans of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), donor-driven gender mainstreaming overlooks differential realities of women by class, ethnicity and religion. While the national government historically laid out program goals for development in five-year cycles, that strategy had been replaced by gender mainstreaming through MDGs and the PRSP mandates. Further, the push for gender mainstreaming puts the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs at the lead for ensuring the integration of gender in other government sectors. This, according to sociologist Dr. Sadeka Halim, is not an effective strategy given the marginalization of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs in relation to other Ministries. The “burden” of gender integration remains with the Women’s Ministry, with its members approaching other sectors for assessment of gender component in their work. Dr. Halim maintains the onus should actually be on the other ministries to approach the Women’s Ministry, which they rarely do because gender is not a priority for them. Replacing national five-year plans with the imposed agenda of the PRSP is “unconstitutional” according to Dr. Halim and perpetuates the elitist vision of donor and urban based women’s development (Halim, 2008a,b).

Furthermore, MDG assessments often do not pay close attention to local complexities of gender relations on the ground. Naila Kabeer (2005) argues that the third Millennium Development Goal, gender equality and women’s empowerment, is clearly an important goal yet disappointingly narrow in its vision of implementation. It ignores the crucial reality that unequal social relationships result in differential access to resources that are understood to ameliorate women’s participation in education, employment and politics — the three indicators of gender equality and empowerment. For example, in a report on “Gender Needs Assessment of MDG-3” commissioned by United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Dr. Halim notes, “Bangladesh has made considerable progress in terms of reducing the discrimination between men and women” (Halim, 2008a,b, 2), and that gender parity has been achieved in primary school enrollment. However, the report goes on to reveal that not all regional divisions (there are six in total) have reached the aforementioned parity, and surprisingly the division with the highest literacy rate has not reached gender parity in primary education. In addition, in the last five years, five divisions have shown a negative annual growth rate of primary school enrollment. Although no conclusive data is yet available, Dr. Halim notes areas with high populations of minorities (defined by ethnic, religious, socio-economic status) have less parity and enrollment.

Gender parity in secondary school enrollment has also been reached in Bangladesh. In the last fifteen years, enrollment of girls have surpassed that of boys and between 1991 and 1995 enrollment of boys witnessed a substantial decrease. Dr. Halim, author of the UNDP report notes that the impressive enrollment of girls in secondary school can be attributed to the government assisted Female Secondary School Assistance Program (FSSAP) launched in the late 1980’s. The program offers cash incentive or stipend to secondary school girls to cover a large portion of direct school expenses and provides tuition assistance to the schools. As at the primary level, secondary school level growth rates also differ according to division with three divisions noting a decrease in enrollment. Between the years of 2000 and 2005, growth rates in rural areas were negative and urban areas witnessed a decline.

At the tertiary level, however, by 2005 women’s enrollment targets stood at 24%. Between 1997 and 2005 female enrollment declined from 31 to 24% while male enrollment increased from 61 to 76%. Dr. Halim notes in the report that stipend-related interventions must be available at the tertiary level to address gender parity. In the area of non-agricultural employment, by 2005 the male to female ratio reached roughly 85:15. The annual growth rate has decreased for females in recent years. In the area of political participation, the numbers are most disheartening with women holding 12.6% of the seats in National Parliament (which allocates 30 reserved seats to women out of 330), reflecting a decrease from the two previous parliamentary democracy governments (Halim, 2008a,b, 3).4

Kabeer explains that education increases women’s ability to deal with matters in the public sphere more effectively as well as exercise more control within the family and community. However, in the context of societal gender inequality the effects of education may take on different meanings. For instance, where women’s roles in society are defined by their reproductive function, education is seen as a means to acquire suitable husbands and take on subordinate roles within family and wage work spheres. Social inequalities are also present in the delivery of education where gender discrimination leads to lower expectations and
achievements among women. Moreover, a hidden content of education curriculum usually is the devaluation of work that is generally taken up by the poor and women. Kabeer observes that policy makers recognize that educating women leads to the improvement of the welfare of the family, but they neglect to emphasize education that is geared towards better equipping women as equals in society. Based on these observations, we can see how the attainment of MDG goals can be illusory because the effects are not uniformly experienced by all women.

In other goal areas Kabeer shows that women's participation in wage work increases self-esteem and confidence among women. Wage work is a way for women to achieve greater respect within the family and community as well as acquire skills to negotiate with various actors in wider society and participating in political activities. Women workers in the garment industry expressed that they are able to negotiate marriage relations and oppressive family and community structures by moving away from home and developing alternative communities of support in their new work and living spaces. However, paid work often involves harsh and exploitative working conditions with little recourse for organizing against or protesting them. In the area of political participation, notes Kabeer, greater attention needs to be paid to strengthening women's voices in local rather than national government. The later tends to draw its members from more elite factions of society who may not respond to the needs of poor women. Kabeer concludes that while the formulation of the MDG might reflect the success of global movements for social justice, the translation of them "into a series of technical goals, to be implemented mainly by the very actors and institutions that have blocked their realization in the past" minimize their potential for greater change (Kabeer, 2005, 22). Policy changes have to allow women to participate more effectively, she suggests, so attainment of goals can be tested beyond the numerical parity of capacity to challenge and question unjust practices. Kabeer asks the key question, "...to what extent the international community is prepared to provide support to women at the grassroots — support which will ensure that they have the collective capabilities necessary...." (Kabeer, 2005, 24). Exercising collective capability is connected to having transformative agency, not hollow "empowerment" indicators.

Lamia Karim (2004) and Elora Shehabuddin (1999) have criticized the urban based women's movement for either exploiting unequal social relations with their clients or having little understanding of women's realities in rural Bangladesh. These scholars bring to our attention that women who staff and run NGOs lead vastly different lives from the women who are their clients. While not intending to lessen the very important work that women's rights organizations do, it is nevertheless critical to acknowledge that privilege based on religion, ethnicity, and class result in perpetuating the clientelist social structure of Bangladesh and hinder feminist alliances.

The consequences of unacknowledged privilege is brought up by Meghna Guhathakurta (2004) in a discussion of the contested ways violence and victimization have been understood by the mainstream women's movement and the state and indigenous community struggles for citizenship, particularly women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh. While the state conceptualizes violence against women primarily in its physical manifestation, the women's movement has also located its causes in patriarchal and class based structural inequalities. Critical reading of the writings of Kalpana Chakma, the organizing secretary of the Hill Women's Federation (HWF) — an organization that mounted a powerful response to the state brutality of the Jumma people5 — reveals the multiple challenges facing indigenous women against "politicomilitary" interventions of the Bengali state, patriarchal oppression in the Hill Tracts, poverty, and struggles to retain cultural identity. Guhathakurta surmises, "...Kalpana's feminism also differs sharply from that of her middle-class Bangali sisters because unlike them her life struggles force her to confront and engage military and ethnic/racial domination in a way that is not easily comprehensible to the privileged Bengali" (Guhathakurta, 2004, 201). Her writings also frame struggles for gender and ethnic justice within the broader struggle for Bengali democracy, nationalism, and freedom: "...we are part of the student's movement who had created '52, '69, '71. And '90!" (Guhathakurta, 2004, 202). Although Jumma struggles are labeled as a threat to the sovereignty of the Bengali nation, this statement casts them as a democratic movement for self-determination within the nation of Bangladesh.

Despite the flourishing civil society sector in Bangladesh, very few organizations have expressed interest in the CHT issue. Following the abduction and alleged murder of Kalpana Chakma in 1996 and the subsequent organizing among the Jumma people as well as various human rights reports in the mainstream media, the women's movement has joined together with the indigenous women's group, albeit not along the conceptualization of the larger struggles so eloquently defined by Kalpana Chakma. Guhathakurta notes that although the HWF participated in the International Women's Day Rally in 1994 and went to the NGO Forum of the Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995 (although Kalpana Chakma could not go because of lack of funds) with their slogan "Autonomy for Peace", barely two lines appeared about their struggles in the summary of the official NGO report. Middle class Bengali organizations are so driven by the development discourse and its narrow conceptualization of gender mainstreaming, that there are serious limitations to engaging more critically in questions of ethnicity and nationality as they intersect with gender. While showing support to the hill women around generalized notions of human rights violations by the state, the same women's organizations fail to interrogate notions of citizenship, nation, self-determination and ethnicity — the very ideals upon which the Bengali nationalist movement was mobilized.

Women activists in Bangladesh work within the development focused NGO paradigm, thus we have to analyze the limits of it on feminist praxis. NGOs, with their dependent links to the government, multinationals, donors, and other NGOs hinder forceful criticisms and acknowledgements to the limits of a developmentalist paradigm. These institutional structures may provide feminists opportunities to mobilize resources and forge alliances particularly in the transnational arena and in the realm of policy advocacy, but they may also inhibit forging more radically transformative alliances across class, ethnicity, grassroots agendas.

In a 2004 study commissioned by CARE Bangladesh that explores current initiatives for women's empowerment
undertaken by the NGO communities, Santi Rozario convened 25 organizations involved in promoting women’s rights. An important observation made in her report is the extent to which the agenda of the groups are donor driven, manifesting in project-based work that is time-bound and product-oriented. This kind of programming did not foster collaboration among women’s groups around common themes. Instead, the donor driven agenda engenders a climate of competition among these groups. The most significant common issue among the groups is violence against women, not surprisingly since the global women’s movement has been most successful in leveraging this as a common platform. However, the framing of gender violence within this platform has limitations in enabling a fundamental critique of women’s role in society because of the way physical violence (understood as a consequence of patriarchy) is considered detached from structural violence (requiring an analysis of global capitalism and racism). This issue based strategy tackling violence against women facilitates generating publicity and criminalization of spectacular acts of violence, but it has not effectively confronted social conditions that enable gendered violence nor has it dealt with women’s lack of access to due process and the ability to lead secure lives. For instance, Rozario reports delivering legal aid in and of itself would not make much difference to the practice of dowry as reflected in the statement of a young man: “I can tell you this, if there is one case against dowry from this village, no man will come forward to marry any girls from this village” (Rozario, 2004, 18). Challenging patriarchal norms that measure women’s worth by her marriageability are as important as providing legal services. Rozario’s report makes the important point that despite laws against the giving and taking of dowries, most dowry-related violence cases are only reported when a woman has been assaulted because of unmet dowry demands, not when a dowry transaction has been made. This brings home the earlier point made about the success of global feminism and gender mainstreaming in criminalizing violence against women yet the inability in confronting structural violence.

Another striking gap in women’s NGO organizing is the lack of solidarity across and even within class lines. Programs that foster competition instead of collaboration perpetuate the patron–client relationship between urban elite feminists who can participate in and are conversant in the language of global feminist platforms, and their counterparts, women often based in rural contexts or even urban contexts but lacking the professional skills required to be participants in global development apparatus. The competitive model is replicated even in development programs for women who have to become members of NGOs in order to avail services. Rozario reports that while in theory NGOs are supposed to provide health/legal/educational services to all members of any given community, in reality they do so only to their members while charging non-members higher fees.

Organizations are further polarized along party lines, seriously influencing the kinds of responses they mount towards important campaigns such as Uniform Family Code and female students’ movements against sexual harassment. There is a tendency for women’s organizations, following the general trend among civil society, to line up alongside the Awami League (AL) or the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), the two major political parties who have ruled the nation for much of its thirty seven years of independence. Although policies regarding gender do not differ in any great detail from one political platform to another, they do capitulate to alliances with the Islamist parties to varying degrees, thereby consolidating the “Islamic”/ “Secular” bifurcation. The AL was the political party that led the secular nationalist independence struggle and, while both parties have embraced secular modernist development initiatives for nation building, the BNP has made more overt alliances with Islamists over the years. The AL’s more recent support of Islamist platforms has been met with harsh criticisms from progressive constituencies including women’s groups. These vacillations clarify the intricate co-dependencies between various state and non-state actors and the need for analysis that recognizes the cross-fertilizations in discourses of religiosity, secular development, and global feminism shaping women’s organizing strategies in Bangladesh.

**Brahmanbaria Rally – Vying for social control**

The complex positionality of NGOs and their contradictory relationship to their constituencies are crystallized in the competing representations of a women’s rally led by the NGO Proshika in Brahmanbaria, Bangladesh in December 1998 in the work of Ali Riaz and Lamia Karim respectively. Riaz (2004) describes the events of that day as an attack by Islamists on women who took part in an NGO-led rally to celebrate the liberation of Brahmanbaria from Pakistani Army in 1971 while the local police failed to intervene. Lamia Karim’s (2004) account of the same event however, exposes how democratizing impulses of NGOs are in conflict with the clientelist relationship they have with their women constituencies whom they profess to empower. Here, the secular progressive underpinnings of NGOs which are heralded as democratic and modernizing forces in Bangladesh come to be seen as making poor women particularly vulnerable and accessible to physical and structural violence.

The late 1990s witnessed a spate of violence against NGOs, their staff, women clients as well as poor women. According to most media reports and women activists, these were symbolic of the threat modernization projects posed to more orthodox factions of society, namely Islamists. Anthropologist Dina Siddiqi’s analysis of Eclipse, a film made by women activists in Bangladesh in response to fatwaa related violence against women in the 1990s, demonstrates how similar ideas are reflected within progressive organizing as well. She argues, in Eclipse, Islam is seen as an ‘external threat’ to the nation and its women and “Islamist violence” is carried out by those groups who opposed the nationalist struggle of Bangladesh. Analyzing the attack on the Proshika-led women’s rally in December 1998 sheds light on this particular debate pitting Islam against nation, and framing women activists’ agendas as secular nationalist.

In December 1998, Proshika, one of the biggest NGOs in Bangladesh organized a Mela (village fair) for its women members in Brahmanbaria. The location is significant because it is where a historic victory was won by the Bengali Liberation forces against the Pakistani army in 1971. Moreover, it is known as a conservative and influential hub of Islamist groups and Qwami Madrassas. Melas and folk
Westernization and even Christianization (Karim, 2004). The NGOization of society within the context of globalization is perceived to go hand in hand with a layered threat. The NGO staff in particular have been attacked by religious extremist groups as have NGO schools and offices. Ironically, despite the anti-Christian rhetoric no missionary schools have been attacked nor the more radical NGOs with overt feminist agendas. It is the large NGOs of Bangladesh (such as BRAC and Proshika) which have been at the brunt of much of Islamist attacks. Siddiqi connects BRAC’s iconic position and visibility to these attacks. She astutely states, “This kind of movement (Islamist) must ultimately be located within the specific predicaments of modernity, in particular the tensions of the postcolonial nation-state and the contingencies of global capitalism.” In the context of Bangladesh, she concludes, politicization of Islam has been state-sponsored rather than a “fundamentalist” people’s movement (Siddiqi, 1998, 212–213). In other words, the allegiances forged between ruling political parties and Islamist parties at the national level have emboldened Islamists’ power at the local levels.

The rally was attended by approximately 10,000 impoverished women and men where madrasah students and clergy launched an attack. It sent the NGO staff scattering to take shelter in the nearby homes of villagers. Women attendees in particular were beaten, their clothes were torn off and insults were hurled at them for daring to gather in public in spite of the fatwa. For at least two days following the rally, NGO offices, schools, and staff homes were looted, burned, and torn down. The presence of state law enforcement was notably absent despite existing laws against issuing fatwas. Riaz sees the event as a clash between Islamists and secular progressives. According to him, “Their [NGO workers] only crime was that they didn’t heed the warnings of the Islamists to join a gathering deemed ‘un-Islamic.’...The NGO activists in particular were forced to flee the city. Thus, twenty-seven years after independence, Brahmanbaria returned to the media spotlight, once again as a battleground, this time between the secularists and the Islamists. And this time, the secularists had to take cover, at least for that day” (Riaz, 2004, 90). In contrast, Karim notes not without irony that the leaders of the NGO having fled to the capital “in their imported SUVs” began holding seminars to raise awareness and support to mobilize against Islamism (Karim, 2004, 306).

She further notes that feminist leaders in Dhaka also responded by blaming the gradual Islamization of society as the source of violence against women leaving the opportunistic NGO politics in this case unscathed.

Lamia Karim notes that her interviews with men and women borrowers of the NGO revealed that they had little choice in the matter of attending the rally in the first place as their loan approval depended on it. What is more, the attendees were unaware of the fatwa issued by the Islamist group against potential attendees and they did not know that the Mela had been changed to a rally by the NGO in an attempt to challenge the Islamists’ move. Karim further shows that the Islamists’ reaction towards women — particularly poor rural women — was class based since a women’s rally attended by middle class women activists from Dhaka a few days earlier had gone unchallenged. In a climate of increasing socioeconomic disempowerment of both men and women, and the loss of employment and underemployment of men, ‘modernizing’ forces of NGOs represent a layered threat. The NGOization of society within the context of globalization is perceived to go hand in hand with Westernization and even Christianization (Karim, 2004).

As Dina Siddiqi (1998) has argued, NGOs have become a powerful symbol of change in the domain of gender relations and the social order. The hierarchical gender practices that Islamist parties seek to protect overly clash with the seeming modernist ideologies of NGOs (Siddiqi, 1998, 216–217). Women NGO staff in particular have been attacked by Islamist parties themselves. And this time between the secularists and the Islamists. And this twenty-seven years after independence, Brahmanbaria...
development structures (galvanizing bodies of poor brown Muslim women in the public space) as in attaining goals of gender mainstreaming. As Liz Kelly (2005) points out, the turn to gender mainstreaming has resulted in increased donor support for NGOs, although not always for feminist ones who have thought through these issues. Intergovernmental organizations have become major players in choosing large NGOs over smaller standing feminist ones to be their service providers thus entrenching new hierarchies.

Feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty (2003) has argued that much of the literature on globalization has marked the centrality of race, class, and gender in critiquing global capitalist development but racialized gender still remains a largely unmarked terrain. In other words, poor women constituencies of state, NGO and Islamist group-led social mobilization are subject to racialized patriarchal marginalization in the context of globalization. Furthermore, the political economy of capitalist development brings into sharp focus the intersections of colonialism, capitalism, race, class, and gender as they discipline the labor and public and private lives of the poor in the third world and other women of color disproportionately. The abject victimization of the impoverished women and men at the Brahmanbaria rally is an instance where we see the intersecting forces of global capitalist development through NGOs who are integrating poor women into the market through micro-credit initiatives. Rising religious extremism itself is a complex phenomenon inseparable from the particular dynamics of modernization and global capitalism, and global feminism’s resolute allegiance to the so-called belief of progressive development.

Conclusion

In 2000, I was in the audience of a forum in Dhaka where women activists were presenting an appraisal of the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) five years after its declaration. Speakers and audience included representatives from prominent national and women’s NGOs. Also in the audience were staff and clients of NGOs, many of whom had traveled long distances to be part of a ceremony, which clearly had a celebratory ring. Following a presentation by a representative of BRAC – known globally as a model development organization whose education and health programs have been replicated worldwide — a member of the audience who identified himself as an ordinary citizen of Bangladesh who worked hard to provide for his family and who had traveled from Kishoreganj to hear the “national development plan” for Bangladeshis said, “I did not come hear to listen to a progress report from BRAC. I want to know what plans the NGOs have to improve the lives of the poor (gorib manusher jonno apnara ki korchen?)” This man did not get an answer that day and the stir he momentarily created in the room was quickly suppressed as the facilitator stepped on to the platform and moved on with the program.

As an inside-outsider, I have often wondered about the relative absence of critique on the ground of development and social mobilization in Bangladesh. I have seen first-hand the difficult terrain of transnational organizing treaded by devoted feminists in Bangladesh, even as they depend on framing issues in essentialist terms to mobilize disparate communities to take urgent action. NGOs occupy such a powerful social space in Bangladesh that they seemed to have appropriated the space of dissent even among progressive intellectuals and activists. In fact, much of the organizing, production and dissemination of knowledge, and social mobilization occur through NGOs and not against them. NGOs contract professionals as consultants and researchers, organize national, regional and local forums, employ increasing numbers of graduates interested in grassroots development work, and mobilize constituencies for social and political action. How do we have conversations in this context engaging the particular ways in which NGOs have become the vehicle of neoliberal governance, control and disciplining of post-colonial subjects even as they produce new identities and meanings, in smaller scale, that disrupt the global order?

I would like to return to the question of what kinds of mobilizations are possible as women activists in Bangladesh confront the scattered hegemonies of rising religious extremism in the region, neoimperialism and Islamophobia globally, and neocolonial development initiatives that make use of poor Bangladeshi women’s participation to bolster their own sustainability. Although I agree with much of Karim’s (2004) astute analysis of unequal power relations between NGO-based urban feminists and poor rural women clients of NGOs, I am not comfortable in relegating urban women’s activism as wholly uninformed and clientelist. As this paper has shown, the urban based women’s movement in Bangladesh has flourished as a result of transnational networking and availing global feminist instruments. At the same time, such alliances hinder a more nuanced engagement with diverse women’s realities on the ground. This contradictory consequence of global women’s organizing efforts whereby new kinds of hierarchies emerge and only certain kinds of organizing are visible has been noted by Elizabeth Friedman (1999) as an example of “transnationalism reversed.” Anthropologist Sally Merry’s ethnographic work on the making and implementing of human rights policy on gender in the UN reveals how participants seem to perpetuate an image of a national culture with regard to women’s status in order to maximize the impact of their situation. Instead of explaining how culture is used in struggles over class, kinship, ethnic or religious identity, activists often invoke an essential culture as detrimental to women’s emancipation. Sally Merry writes “…in the context of an international setting and universal principles, acknowledging such complexity would diminish the political impact of her [the woman activist’s] statement” (Merry, 2006,18). International documents and country reports on Bangladesh are rife with such “progress narratives” where women are perceived to be victims of culture and indigenous patriarchy deflecting attention from other kinds of analysis. Even if feminists use essentializing discourses of gender and culture consciously and strategically, we must persistently ask about the implications for transnational solidarity and praxis. Saba Mahmood’s work (2005) is especially insightful in this discussion as she astutely observes that feminism is both an analytic and political project, and while the two certainly inform one another they ought not to be collapsed in to one. There is value in keeping the possibilities of the analytic project open in the interest of thinking beyond immediate or urgent political action. The expediency of mobilizing campaigns under difficult circumstances may lead to silencing critical voices, as we saw happening in Beijing related
organizing as well as the constructing of a nationalist identity to counter Islamist “threat.” Nevertheless, ongoing reflection and dialogue are essential if NGOs are to effectively serve and integrate their constituencies in to development initiatives.

Minoo Moallem (1999) views both feminism and fundamentalism within modernity instead of as competing discourses. Just as Islamic fundamentalism in the West is linked to the racialization of Muslims as a peoples without history and the demonization of Islamic masculinity as barbaric and Islamic femininity as victimized and subordinate, Western egalitarian feminism is tied to the notion of feminist progress narrative of women’s emancipation from backwards tradition to enlightened modernity. Moallem sees cross-fertilization between feminism and fundamentalism and co-complicity in, “…perpetuating power relations, either by sustaining the boundaries of a totalistic ideology (in the case of fundamentalist feminists), or by creating restricted boundaries through a replacement of patriarchy with matriarchy, or by limiting women’s issues to only one set of relations, and thus putting an end to any constructive sociological discussion” (Moallem, 1999, 325). Sometimes these forces can function as rivals, but they can also act together in their rigidified positions and categories. Subject positions emerging from such formations remain cut off from historical and geopolitical contexts. Moallem proposes “...embracing a transnationalism rooted in the recognition of the various intersecting social relations or nation, “race,” ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality and the positonality of the self” (Moallem, 1999, 342). Further, feminism must disrupt its own complicity with perpetuating rigidified analysis of women’s oppression within transnational spheres of mobilization. Following this line of thinking NGO based organizing, important as it is as a venue for social change, must interrogate this rigid dichotomy between secular development and religious oppression and find more nuanced causes of conflicts such as the one that unfolded in Brahmanbaria.

Raka Ray’s (1999) work conceptualizing women’s organizing in India within Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of political fields is instructive here. She suggests that organizations are embedded in and respond to a set of unequal socially constructed structures and relations. They act not as free agents but rather within the context of asymmetrical power relations within a given field, which ought to be understood “both as configurations of forces and as sites of struggle” that perpetuate yet disrupt existing dynamics (Ray, 1999, 7). Instigating action within the structure of global UN-based feminism is imbricated within the culture of such a field that inhibits multi-axial analysis of diverse women’s positionalities and realities. Ray explains, “The political field includes such actors as the state, political parties, and social movement organizations (in which I would add international organizations who push the agenda of gender mainstreaming in local contexts), who are connected to each other in both friendly and antagonistic ways, some of whose elements are more powerful than others, and all of whom are tied together by a particular culture” (Ray, 1999, 7). Based on this understanding of women’s movements location within a political field, one can surmise that the notion of autonomy is illusory. Rather, Ray presents the term “protest fields” to imply subgroups and networks that oppose the logic of power relations in the larger political field even as they are constrained by them. Ray’s analysis of women’s movements juxtaposed with Moallem’s assertion of Western egalitarian feminism’s (one that appears to dominate global feminist scripts of fashioning ‘other’ women’s needs and desires in the image of the liberated western subject) complicity in furthering imperialist discourses of modernity and development opens up an important dialogue. Binary analysis of women’s organizing as secular/Islamist or modern/underdeveloped freezes up conversations that recognize the heterogeneous ways in which women activists negotiate their environments. My work here seeks to illuminate intra-movement tensions in the context of Bangladesh in an attempt to theorize and imagine feminist alliances that are more equitable and just across borders of nation, class and community. As feminist activists, scholars, and practitioners we need to be more attentive to the protest field conversations that rupture the asymmetrical plane of political fields and open up more productive dialogue for effective transnational praxis.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers, and the editor of Women’s Studies International Forum for their incisive and insightful suggestions on the earlier drafts. Thanks are also due to Riva Pearson for her help with the research and editing.

Endnotes

1 A term widely used to describe South Asians as a racialized community in the West.
2 In the context of Bangladesh, secular at the nation’s founding and as defined by ‘father of the nation’ Mujib implied co-existence and tolerance of plural religious beliefs and practices as opposed to a strict separation of religion from state. Subsequent regimes however as a result of complex global and regional social, economic and political forces dropped secularism from the Constitution and declared Islam as the state religion. Increasingly however and particularly in relation to current global politics it is important to keep in mind for any discussion on Islam vs secularism the ways in which the latter has been deployed in the service of imperialism by idealizing a linear narrative of progress and development in opposition to the term religious/Islamic. Gil Anidjar (2006) quotes Talal Asad, “the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ are not essentially fixed categories” but gain in prominence and hegemony by the culture — more specifically, “Western Christendom” (Gil Anidjar, “On Secularism” pp.57–8). Furthermore, Ashis Nandy (2002) has argued that the birth of secularism as an ideology in modernity makes it deeply intolerant because modernity undermines faith in favor of secular values of rationality and development which is achieved by abandoning or devaluing “traditional” belief systems. A belief in secular development, constructed as the opposite of traditional belief systems, overlooks the accommodating ways faith systems co-existed historically.
3 The state of Bangladesh has ratified CEDAW with reservations to Article 2, which has to do with the implementation of shari’a law in personal/family matters.
4 It should be noted, the report was published before the outcome of the latest election in 2008.
5 The ethnic nationalities of the CHT are collectively known as Jumma people.

References
