

Interview

Bangladeshi Women Organise for their Rights

Saturday 20 May 2006, by [FERNANDES Sujatha](#), [KABIR Khushi](#), [TARDIF Michael](#) (Date first published: 12 May 2006).

Bangladesh is often portrayed in the Western media as a place where women are victimised and subordinated by Islam. Fundamentalist outrage against writer Tasleema Nasreen has reinforced this image. But Bangladesh also has a very vibrant and strong women's movement. Green Left Weekly's SUJATHA FERNANDES and MICHAEL TARDIF talked to KHUSHI KABIR, women's rights activist and chairperson of ADAB (Association of Development agencies in Bangladesh) about the issues facing women and the response of the women's movement.

In what ways are Bangladeshi women oppressed?

Bangladesh is a very patriarchal society, where the male plays the dominant role within the family, the community and the society as a whole. Economic institutions and trade are also male-dominated.

Particularly in the villages the strong, hierarchical order is prevalent. For instance, all decisions in the village are made by a body of males called the Shalish. Religion has also been used traditionally to limit the economic, political and social role of women.

How has the recent rise of fundamentalism impacted on women?

It has traditionally been the case that the oppression of women by religion has been tied to their economic oppression by the state. In this way, religion has been used all over the world to relegate women ideologically and economically and

to suppress them so that there is no resistance.

The recent rise in fundamentalism is closely linked with the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the collapse of what was seen by most people as socialism, and the need to find an alternative ideology. Religion is being used as an alternative to capitalism. It has experienced an expansion all over the world, both politically/ideologically and financially.

Fundamentalism is also a way of suppressing women in an age when they are gaining greater freedom and independence. Bangladesh has been through many liberation struggles in which women have participated. There has been an increase in poverty, forcing women into work and out of their traditional roles. The impact of non-governmental organisations has also resulted in the creation of alternative employment for women. Women are being given more options and are emerging as a force, and it is this that the fundamentalists want to suppress.

Tasleema Nasreen has been portrayed as a champion of women's rights in the Western media. What impact has she had on the women's movement? Tasleema Nasreen has been very strong and direct in addressing issues regarding patriarchy. But the media in the West and outside of Bangladesh have given her the image of being the vanguard of a movement, which she is not. The women's movement in Bangladesh is a strong, unified movement with a long history. Tasleema has played no role in that movement.

The Western media portrayed Tasleema as the victim of an oppressive society where women are cloaked in silence. They gave the impression that as soon as anyone resists fundamentalists, they are crushed. This denies the reality where hundreds of women, every day in their ordinary lives, are confronting fundamentalism and resisting it. When you are an individual like Tasleema fighting the fundamentalists, it is a lost cause. The only effective way to resist and survive in a country like Bangladesh is to be part of a movement. The women in the villages can fight the mullahs and landlords because they are united and have the numbers.

How have women organised themselves?

Women have largely been organised under NGOs. There are many progressive NGOs doing consciousness-raising work among poorer women and village women.

Trade unions have only recently started organising women. Previously women have worked mainly in the unorganised sectors, but more and more women trade union activists have been working with these women.

Women in the garment industry, where there are no trade unions, have recently been organising strikes and demonstrations.

There are also various middle class organisations, such as the research organisations into issues such as dowry and violence against women. Professional women's organisations such as lawyers and teachers are quite strong and progressive. There are also many women students' associations in the schools and universities.

All of these different groups work together around various issues. There is a very strong support network. For instance, if a dowry issue arises, the lawyers' organisations provide legal representation, the research groups provide material, and the mass organisations do propaganda work and organise demonstrations.

This uniting of broad layers of women around particular issues usually cuts across class lines. It means middle and upper class women are being made aware of the rights of lower class women.

How successfully has the left taken up the challenges that the women's movement has put forward, not only in terms of policy and action, but also of training women in leadership roles?

One of the biggest threats facing women now is fundamentalism, and the left is the main political force taking up this issue. The major political parties, even the ones that consider themselves secular, have compromised on this issue.

Therefore the coming together of the left and the women's movement is crucial. Women are very affected by the destruction of the environment.

Here again the left is doing a lot of work, drawing out the ways in which capitalism and the dictates of the international economy are depleting the environment.

There have been strong individual women in both left and right parties in Bangladesh. Individual women leaders are seen as acceptable because they are considered to have transcended their sexuality and “become like men”. But, as a general trend, women are not involved much in political organising.

Socially and culturally women are at a disadvantage because they do not have the same space for growth and development as men. I don't think that the left has made enough of an attempt to encourage women. But I think that in the next decade we will see many more women becoming involved in left parties, not as an organised women's faction, but actually taking up leading roles.

In what ways are women affected by the policies of the World Bank and IMF and agreements such as GATT?

Traditionally, women have played a large role in the agricultural sector. They would decide which seeds to plant, which environment was best for which seeds. They would do all the processing of the crops. Women had a strong role within the economy even if it was not materially valued.

Under the New Economic Policy [the government's austerity policy], embankments are being built which prevent water from irrigating the crops.

This means that there is much greater dependence on pesticides and fertilisers. Crops are becoming commercialised so that seeds are not locally stored and must be procured from the seed dealer. Women are becoming much more like paid workers and labourers on their land to service the needs of an international market.

The government is trying to create the ideal conditions for an export-oriented economy. This has resulted in small shareholders losing their land to landlords for large commercial crops. To maintain this land, the landlords employ small armies to repress the villagers. Women bear the

brunt of this violence, especially in terms of rape.

The damage that commercial farming does to the environment is recognised by women. They, much more than men, talk about the different types of birds, fish and insects that are lost and how the use of pesticides damages the soil and harms their children and animals.

An export-oriented economy also requires cheap labour, and women in the industrial sectors form a large proportion of this.

What links can be made between the women's movements in the West and in Third World countries like Bangladesh?

In many areas we have commonalities. The whole growth of religion and social controls against women's rights and women's choice is something we need to be clear about.

Some Western women feel that they cannot talk about Islamic fundamentalism because that denigrates another's culture.

But religion is used everywhere to justify the oppression of women. It is a trend deliberately organised to stop any strong, active movement of women coming together. In the US doctors performing abortions are being shot by Christian fundamentalists. In India there is the rise of Hindu fundamentalism.

As the economic institutions become international, we have to counter this by having much stronger links. We can no longer fight solely in the villages, we must link up with the urban centres and also internationally. For instance, we need to let you know the stories about what goes on here in the name of economic development, so that the movement in Australia can be aware of what your government is doing. If we can share our experiences, we can be much stronger.

P.S.

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