

## **Youth activism against rape and the culture of impunity in Bangladesh: street protests amidst COVID 19<sup>1</sup>**

**Hosna J. Shewly and Eva Gerharz**

In October 2020, despite the fears surrounding COVID 19, protests erupted in the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka and some other areas of the country. Spearheaded by students, but also supported by young and older adults, the protesters rallied against rape and the culture of impunity surrounding it both on the streets and social media. Demonstrators directed their anger towards government inaction and the failure of the law enforcement agencies to stop the ongoing violence against women. This protest movement did not emerge adventitiously, however, but rather it is the result of long-suppressed anger and frustration with an ineffective judicial system when it comes to resolving cases involving rape.

The spark for the current protests flickered to life on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October when a video was uploaded to social media showing a group of young men surrounding a 37-year-old woman- they strip her naked, bolstered her, and then begin to beat and drag her through a village in Noakhali. The video shows the woman crying as she begs for mercy while holding on to one of the men's legs. One of the offenders recorded a video of the whole scene, which originally took place on the night of the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September, and uploaded it a full 32 days after the incident on social media. The woman later told the press that the offenders had used the video of the assault to compel her to comply with their subsequent demands for sex. An investigation by the country's National Human Rights Commission found that the woman in the video had been raped and terrorised repeatedly over a period of almost a year. Police and media outlets, however, only started looking into the matter after the video had gone viral. A few days before the Noakhali video was made public, public anger had already been brewing after several members of the Bangladesh Chitra League, the student wing of the ruling party, had been arrested and charged with gang-raping a woman in the northern town of Sylhet. The video quickly went viral, taking social media channels by storm.

Students, feminist activists, left-leaning political parties, and cultural organisations regularly organise protest actions against rape in Bangladesh; such actions frequently spurred on by incidents of rape or violence against women, which go viral on social media. While news of rape is not uncommon in Bangladesh, the conviction rate for rape in Bangladesh is below one per cent (HRW, 2020). *Ain o Salish Kendra* (ASK), a Bangladeshi human rights organisation, tabulated 907 cases of rape of women or girls in just the first nine

---

<sup>1</sup> This write-up is an output of a German Research Foundation (DFG, Project Number 395804440) funded research on 'Youth movements and changes in political cultures in Bangladesh and Senegal'.

months of 2020. According to them, four women are raped every day in Bangladesh, and many more cases go unreported (ASK, 2020). The brutality of the publicised cases and a culture of impunity which increasingly characterises Bangladesh's political culture resulted in a collective rage particularly amongst young people which led to them claiming the streets in the middle of pandemic.

Contemporary social movement activism protesting against sexual violence differentiates itself from previous forms of mobilisation. In fact, Bangladesh has a long history of women mobilising on the streets in order to make demands for rights, a tradition which can be traced back to the anti-colonial movements in the former British-Indian territories. Building on the momentum of the social uprising, protests have addressed such topics as family law reforms, sex workers' rights, transgender rights, and violence against women, resulting in an immense contribution in the fight to change women's social, political, and economic situation in society. Over time, ideological divisions or those over political party lines, and the "NGOisation" of the women's movement, which resulted in an increasing institutionalisation and de-politicisation, weakened the ability of women's groups to develop effective alliances. The protests which took place in October 2020, however, offer new opportunities for renewed movement alliances and public activism. The week-long, largely uncoordinated, and geographically scattered protests are significant not only for the women's rights movement in Bangladesh but also for challenging the country's culture of political impunity. Therefore, this protest movement can be seen as vital for three significant reasons: its timing and spontaneity, its inclusivity, as well as the specific strategies and demands of the protesters. In the following pages, we will highlight these aspects in detail.

## **Notable aspects of this movement**

### **Spontaneous street actions when freedom of speech is in quarantine**

These protests found their spark at a time when participating in protest is virtually non-existence, with the fear surrounding COVID 19 resulting in strict government vigilance, off-the-record censorship of demonstrations, and legal actions against protesters. Like in many other countries, particularly those in the Global South, a young generation of Bangladeshis mistrust political parties altogether. This social phenomenon is exemplified by the last three major political movements between 2013 - 2018, which were organised by ordinary students. The government has tried to find ways to decoy and veer off the momentum of popular mandates taken up by these movements. Opposition political parties, often involved in violent protests, have also not been safe from forceful government suppression. When they tried to capitalise on the "road-safety movement" in 2018, the ruling political party branded the movement as an "oppositional party conspiracy" and therefore successfully disbanded and discredited it without responding to the movement's popular demands. At the same time, the government is underhandedly suppressing any opposition to government policy through various legal and extralegal actions, including the

Digital Security Act of 2018, an act which was passed after the success of the road-safety movement, which foresees imprisonment without bail for even Facebook posts criticising state ministers. Participation in protests today, therefore, brings with it some tough circumspections – nobody wants to ruin their lives for the interests of a political party.

Under such suffocating conditions for prospective protest, tens of thousands of college and university students spontaneously protesting in the street, shouting their slogans and demands are a significant break to the previous silence. Bangladesh has never before witnessed such large-scale protests against sexual violence over such a prolonged period. Although the pandemic has often been considered an impediment for protest movements, Bangladesh still experienced spontaneous street mobilisations, with the participants braving their fear of COVID 19. The protective face mask, in fact, has become a new textual political space, with protest slogans written on it (fig 1).



*Figure 1: Slogans written on face masks. Source: Dhaka Tribune; photographer: Mahmud Hossain Opu*

**“In hills and plains, the fight will persist uniformly”<sup>2</sup>:  
a new inclusivity**

This protest movement shows inclusivity at various levels, manifesting potential for changes in the movement's demands. The ethno-linguistically majority Bengalis are forming coalitions with women from the country's minority indigenous populations, exhibiting solidarity amongst differently situated women in society. Constituting a tiny minority, indigenous women and girls are the most marginalised and more likely to be victims of sexual violence (Guhathakurta, 2004; Nasreen, 2017). Frequently, rape tactics are used to evict indigenous people, in hills and plainlands of the country, from their land or more generally, to suppress indigenous communities' movements for autonomy in the past and present (The Daily Star, 2020). The protesters, including Bengali and indigenous activists, were marching and occupying the city spaces together and chanting the slogan “In hills and plains, the battle will persist uniformly”. This is an essential step towards a unifying voice speaking out against violence against women. Another significant characteristic of this movement is that it has not been predominantly led or dominated by left-liberals, a problem which other movements have when it comes to being accepted by conservatives in society. Notwithstanding, the conservative backlash against women's rights is nothing new in Bangladesh. In an extremely patriarchal society where the belief that “clothing invites sexual harassment” still endures so strongly, women protesting while wearing various attires (religious, traditional, and western) and the slogan that “only the rapist is responsible for rape” provides a clear message to society. More and more men are participating in the protests. This inclusivity raises new hopes for the success of political and societal changes in Bangladesh.

**“Break the culture that breeds the violence against women, stop victim-blaming” – uncoordinated yet powerful**

The protest over the video from the 5th of October began on Facebook as thousands of users all changed their profile photos to an empty black space to denote their anger. Social media platforms were used to disseminate information related to protest activities – human chains, rallies, and demonstrations took place in different parts of the country. Musicians and artists also took to the streets and performed in various squares in the capital. An anti-rape photo exhibition showcased hundreds of photographs to portray social and political power imbalances and the patriarchy's role in the rape and oppression of women. A film festival, women's rallies, signed petitions, and a bicycle rally in Dhaka were just some of the actions associated with the protest that has taken place. And although actions did take place at the student protest

---

<sup>2</sup> Geographically, Bangladesh is a broad deltaic plain along with a small hilly region. Its population consists mostly of Muslim, Bengali speakers, it also contains a variety of other ethnic groups. Most of the Bengalis live in the plainland and the majority of the indigenous communities inhabit the district known as the Chittagong Hill Tracts, a region of hills and forests. The slogan indicates that anti-rape protests will go on across the country.

hotspot, Shahbag, a central square close to Dhaka University which became famous due to the protests demanding the punishment of war criminals in 2013, it was not the only focal point; instead, multiple demonstrations spread to various parts of the capital.

Although the occupation of streets or squares in different parts of the capital by various groups and organisations could be seen as somewhat uncoordinated, it has still been an extraordinarily powerful demonstration of disapproval by a cross-section of society on state inaction against rape. Fragile alliances were formed in recent social movements in Bangladesh among many different groups. However, these alliances broke because of contested political agendas, perhaps forgetting their commonalities and forgoing the chance to continue alliances. This in-fighting provided ample opportunity for the government to contain the splintered movements using law enforcing agencies or party goons. It is important to factor in these interconnectivities and complexities when talking about the fate of bygone protest movements in Bangladesh. This time, however, protesters were the claiming streets in a very individualistic manner and respecting each other's actions. "Co-presence" exhibited in various locations of the capital and other parts of the country is a new strategy enabling protests to be held peacefully.

Although they took place spatially separately, it came strongly from the majority of the rallies, and sit-in demonstrations delivered strong messages: "Justice has to be ensured in any case of rape", "Break the culture that breeds the violence against women", "Stop victim-blaming", and many more. The performative dimension of the protests and their slogans, clearly communicated to society, enabling the ordinary citizen to form a deeper understanding of the matter. This resulted in increased participation with each passing day, despite police and party goons orchestrating attacks on the peaceful rallies and sit-ins at various sites. There did indeed exist some divisions amongst the protesters, for example, over whether the death penalty is appropriate punishment for rapists. And beyond the dominant chants of "we want justice", some protest camps were calling for the Prime Minister to resign, accompanied by social media campaigns to overthrow the government, as protectors of the culture of impunity.

In this phase of mobilisation, therefore, we see how the protesters were deploying numerous forms of space appropriation and how their messages are slowly working in transforming some deep-seated perceptions related to rape and women in general. Coming from diverse social and political backgrounds, the activists and participants have a similar focus on the causes of rape, while differing on the solutions - particularly concerning the death penalty.

### **Government action and an end to public protests**

The escalation of demonstrations resulted in the government passing a swift change in the law, to dismantle the momentum which was building across the country. On the 12th of the 12th of October the cabinet hastily approved a

proposal put forward by Aninsul Huq, Bangladesh's Law Minister, to allow the death penalty for all of the four types of rape defined under Bangladeshi law. This amendment actually fails to address the root causes which make obtaining a conviction for rape so challenging. Learning the lessons from the previous social movement's unpleasant end of late withdrawal, activists now continue with the longer process, using the transformative potential of the movement to change the stereotypes related to rape; and implementing such actions as organising a rally to Noakhali, the village of the victim, or communicating their messages to ordinary people through grass-roots activism; such as rickshaw arts (fig.2).



*Figure 2. “Rapist is responsible for rape, not the dress”.  
Source: P Ashe Achi Initiative, Rickshaw art project*

## **Conclusion**

In recent years, the government has strictly monitored, controlled, or prohibited street protests. The city's public spaces are instead associated with government control and one which is rarely challenged. For a week, the emancipatory potential of the streets, roundabouts, and central squares was taken up by



peaceful demonstrations and artistic performances, showcasing a movement of activists and supporters, young and old, men and women. This movement exhibits a different kind of collectivity by its sheer volume (i.e. the number of participants) in reclaiming the public space. By sharing the space, activists with different agendas are ultimately embracing the possibility of building a new form of political collectivity where disjointed actions and demands come together to stop incidences of rape.

Generally, the entrenched nature of patriarchal public discourse on women's sexuality – particularly in questioning women's freedom of movement or blaming women for sexual harassment and assault – means that an increasing public presence and new societal roles for women evoke male insecurities and a conservative backlash (Nazneen, 2017). Protest slogans and art performances by the movement in Bangladesh drawing attention to the culture of impunity as a root cause for the widespread instances of rape not only addresses patriarchal public discourses and corrupt political cultures but also unites women from various socio-political backgrounds. Alongside the possibilities of a new collectivity in the form of co-presence, the movement contests typical stereotypes connecting dress-styles and rape. The political significance of the anti-rape movement and its transgressive practices, expressive nature, and transformative potential is enormous for the prospects of future movements in Bangladesh.

## References

- ASK (Ain o Salish Kendra), 2020. "Violence Against Women - Rape (Jan-Sep 2020)", 06 October. <http://www.askbd.org/ask/2020/10/06/violence-against-women-rape-jan-sep-2020/>. Accessed on 15 November 2020.
- The Daily Star. 2020. "Rape used as weapon." <https://www.thedailystar.net/rape-used-as-weapon-35181> . Accessed on 29 November 2020.
- Guhathakurta, M. 2004. "Women negotiating change: The structure and transformation of gendered violence in Bangladesh", *Cultural Dynamics*, 16, 2/3:191-211.
- HRW (Human Rights Watch), 2020. "Bangladesh: Protests Erupt Over Rape Case", 9 October. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/09/bangladesh-protests-erupt-over-rape-case>. Accessed on 12 October 2020.
- Nazneen, S. 2017. *The women's movement in Bangladesh: A short history and current debates*. Country Report, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bangladesch/13671.pdf>. Accessed on 20 October 2020.
- Nasreen Z. 2017. *The Indigeneity question: State violence, forced displacement and women's narratives in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*, PhD thesis, Durham University. Available at <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/12063/>. Accessed on 06 June, 2021.

### **About the authors**

**Dr. Hosna J. Shewly** is a senior researcher at the Department of Social and Cultural Sciences, Fulda University of Applied Sciences, Germany. Currently, she is conducting an ethnographic research in a DFG funded project on ‘youth movement and changes in political cultures in Bangladesh and Senegal’. Her research interests include everyday resistance, vulnerability and sovereignty at the borderlands, city and gender, mobilities and transnational activism of the stateless people. Corresponding author: hosna.shewly AT sk.hs-fulda.de

**Dr. Eva Gerharz** is a professor at the Department of Social and Cultural Sciences, Fulda University of Applied Sciences, Germany with a focus on globalisation, transnational youth movement, and indigenous activism and social mobility in South Asia. She is the PI of several collaborative research projects including the above mentioned DFG project. Email: eva.gerharz AT sk.hs-fulda.de