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Bodies as sites of struggle: Naripokkho and the movement for women's rights in Bangladesh

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Introduction

Women in Bangladesh suffer both an unequal legal status with regard to many important rights and an inferior position with regard to cultural beliefs and practices. This situation is aggravated further by what appears to be a lack of social and political will to deliver justice on violations that women routinely suffer, and, on the part of women themselves, by a lack of knowledge, confidence and skills to challenge such situations. The most frequent violations that women suffer in Bangladesh have to do, first, with their personal status and cultural identity as females – they are frequently treated as minors with few rights but disproportionate responsibilities – and, second, with their legal status as unequal citizens, because of which they are routinely and systematically the recipients of lesser resources, opportunities and rights.

Attempts to challenge women's subordination in Bangladesh reflect a number of different forces. Bangladesh's independence in 1971, a few years prior to the United Nations International Year of Women, meant that, from the outset, policy interest in 'women's issues' tended to be subsumed within the rubric of 'women and development', in particular women's contribution to production and a preoccupation with family planning. The interest in women's issues among even progressive political parties tended to be rhetorical and limited in scope, these limitations arising out of their own adherence to middle class norms of gender propriety.

This chapter deals with the experiences of Naripokkho,¹ a women's organization that seeks to carve out an autonomous space for feminist politics in Bangladesh that is neither driven by the women and

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development agenda nor subsumed within a male-dominated party politics. This has allowed the organization to bring onto the public agenda various new, often controversial, issues that emerge out of the organization's commitment to link the personal experiences of women to a political analysis of their subordination. One of the issues, one that constitutes a continuous and central thread in its activism is related to women's bodies as a site of oppression. This chapter will deal with the reasons why this politics emerged and the form it has taken.

The founding of Naripokkho

A number of us, all women who were engaged in one way or another with the situation of rural women in Bangladesh, had come together in 1980 to try to forge a collective identity from wherein we could intervene on the woman question. We wished to pursue, both professionally and politically, our vision of social change and women's emancipation. The choices we had made in our personal lives reflected our desire and our determination to be free and different from what was destined for women in Bangladesh.

Naripokkho was founded as a result of that collective desire. The catalyst was a three-day workshop on women and development, organized in 1983 by the Asian Cultural Forum on Development (ACFOD), that brought together 33 women development workers from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) all over the country. They came to the workshop expecting to make, and listen to, the usual presentations about their organizations: how many women 'beneficiaries' they were reaching, what kind of income generation programmes they were supporting, and so on. However, a number of us felt that there were ample opportunities to talk about what development NGOs were doing about 'poor and disadvantaged women', but few or none to talk about the women employed to reach them.

Despite initial resistance to the idea of talking about 'ourselves', I was able to use my influence as one of the facilitators to help transform the workshop into a first-person discussion of the life and experiences of the women who were attending: the women *in* development work. Who were these women? How did they end up in jobs that represented a dramatic and often unacceptable break with tradition?² What life circumstances had led to the choice of a job or a career that required women to be visible and mobile in unprecedented ways? Frontline female development workers, going from village to village, many on bicycles, were considered by some as pariahs and a bad omen. They represented a significant departure from the cultural norm of remaining

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within the confines of one's home and at best venturing out into 'accepted' female occupations, such as teaching in schools. What did these women face that their male colleagues did not? What problems and challenges did they face in the villages they worked in? What problems and challenges did they face within the organizations that employed them? These questions had never been addressed.

The workshop allowed us to reflect on a number of questions that touched on our personal experiences: our first memories of being discriminated against as females; the circumstances that had led us to opt for a role different from those destined for the majority of women in Bangladesh; and the problems we faced in our personal and professional lives that male colleagues did not. We had no idea of the intensity of the sense of injustice that lay beneath the surface, ready to explode. Many women had *literally* never spoken about themselves before. A few still could not say the words, and simply cried. Others could not stop speaking, describing events and situations that testified to how deep, how widespread and how constant the experience of discrimination was, and how poignant and long-lasting the pain it inflicted.

Charting new territory: the first 'small steps'

By the end of the workshop, we were clear that we did not want this process of discovery to end and that we wanted to stay connected. The genesis of Naripokkho was thus in the realization of the links between personal experience and societal discrimination, and this formed an important dimension of its organizational strategy from the outset. The seeds of the organization were laid at a workshop, and workshops have remained an important way in which the organization has sought to achieve its goals.³

The discussions at our workshops have evolved over the years to encompass a number of different issues. One set of discussions, which stems from the questions we set ourselves at that first workshop, focuses on women's observations and experiences of gender discrimination at home and at work, and what these might have in common with those of the women who were targeted as beneficiaries by the development NGOs that employed them. This helps both to establish the grounds for a personal engagement with the issues of discrimination, violence and injustice, and to form the basis for identification with 'others'. This has become a significant feature of Naripokkho's strategy for change – *a first person engagement in the movement for change and the emergence of a collective 'we'*.

A second set of discussions focuses on the position and treatment of women in law. The first workshop had revealed how little women