

## Fighting gender based violence: Inclusiveness is the key

Feminists and activists should bring in the marginalised issues and groups that are left out of the mainstream feminist movement. To counter everyday misogyny, we need to practice everyday feminism and that is only possible when activism and movements are inclusive

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This year, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General's 'UNiTE' Campaign celebrated 'The 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence' under the theme: "Orange the World: Fund, Respect, Prevent, and Collect!" The UN has declared violence against women to be a "shadow pandemic".

In addition, it is proposing strategic political engagement to unite activists around the world under an umbrella with prioritised funding for a minimum package of essential services to combat gender-based violence. While it is important and positive news for the non-government organisation (NGO) sector of Bangladesh, which already experienced 17 percent decrease in funding in the 2019-2020 fiscal year due to the pandemic, it is appalling that violence against women is being seen only as a gender and development-focused issue.

The 16 Days of Activism (which is an international campaign that is arranged annually) of this year, which started on November 25 and ran until December 10, was observed in Bangladesh at a crucial time. Data by Ain o Salish Kendra

(ASK) recorded 1,349 incidents of rape and 271 attempts to rape during the period from January to October 2020. The numbers are slightly higher than that of the same period last year, which recorded 1,253 rapes and 200 attempts to rape.

The difference between the numbers may not be of much significance for many but the response from certain factions of the population to these numbers has been very consequential. This year, the country has seen a strong cross-generational feminist movement against rape. The movement called "Rage against Rape" is a visible demonstration of the pent up rage from the feminists of the country. Although not large in size, the movement has been increasingly visible across the country and has also caught the attention of the international media. Within a short period of time, it has been able to bring changes to the discourse of victim-blaming. The common practice of blaming female attire or the victim's clothing for the incident of rape has been challenged and dismissed by this activist group, creating greater public awareness regarding this topic, as observed in social media.

There have been many discussions regarding the causes of rape. In many of these discussions, patriarchy and the persisting patriarchal system have been identified as the root cause of violence against women. Though there is no denying the fact that patriarchy or male dominance causes most of the gender-based violence, there are, however, other structural inequalities and relations of dominance-subordination that also contribute to gender-based violence.

Yes, violence against women is a gender issue and it is the everyday patriarchy and misogyny that create and sustain this discriminatory oppressive culture. But when an act of violence is not carried out by an individual actor or a man, rather by a system, funding in gender-responsive service delivery can do little to combat the violence. Let me explain.



Illustration: TBS

About 60 per cent of the labour force of the ready-made garments (RMG) sector in Bangladesh is female. Many NGOs and organisations are currently working to protect workers' rights. Their range of activities includes raising awareness, leadership building, advocacy with factories to protect occupational health and safety (OHS). The funding model may help facilitate all these activities but it is unable to address the fundamental problem of low and exploitative wages that these workers face, as well as the gender stereotyping that is responsible for the majority of women being at the bottom of the pay scale.

At the beginning of the pandemic when the buyers and brands cancelled orders worth \$3.18 billion, it directly affected the livelihoods of these workers. It affected their identity as earning women and sent them back to their homes with little to no savings. Consequently, many faced both economic hardships as well as domestic violence, as they were not earning anymore. They work in an industry which is built on cheap female labour; one that does not allow them to save for a crisis nor does it provide them with any social protection for unemployment. Stating that violence is a result of unequal gender relations of power does not capture this violation of the right to decent work and a living wage.

This violation of workers' rights is not done by any single actor nor can we hold the owners alone responsible. Owners of the RMG industry are powerful to some extent but they also are dependent on the brands and buyers. A recent example of the latter's role is how abruptly they cancelled and suspended orders and delayed payments at the beginning of the pandemic (brands like H&M first said they would not pay the dues to suppliers and later agreed to pay but said payments would be delayed). Their willful disregard for the workers resulted in a livelihood crisis amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. The feminist scholar Nafisa Tanjeem has identified the neo-liberal framework of economic development as the oppressor of our women workers who contribute most (84 percent) to the national export earnings and thereby to the gross domestic product (GDP).

In the discussions on various forms of violence against women during the 16 Days of Activism campaign, hardly any women's rights organisations talked about the violence faced by women garment workers. The female RMG workers are not only victims of exploited labour but they also face gender based violence both at work and home. An Action Aid report (2019) showed that 80 percent of the female garment workers face sexual harassment at workplace. There is very little action to prevent this. We see news reports of RMG workers being raped and murdered on their way to home from work.

On account of Covid-19, 152 factories permanently shut down according to the 'Mapped in Bangladesh' report published in July 2020. Workers from these factories along with several others who are victims of retrenchment or termination have faced domestic violence which I mentioned earlier. We know development organisations, UN organisations, women's rights groups and activists all aim and work to prevent all forms of gender based violence against women (with sexual harassment and domestic violence being issues of utmost importance) it is important to specifically mention violence faced by female RMG workers and the specific measures these situations need.

The example of the discrimination and violations faced by women in the RMG sector shows that unless we can bring about structural change and transformation, violence against women will not end. The funding model of the UN cannot address or bring the necessary change in the social structure or social practices and ensure justice.

Therefore, for a movement to be strong enough to bring about changes in structure, solidarity has to be built within the organizations and activists who want to bring about the change. The ongoing anti-rape movement, which is being led by prominent feminists and young generations of feminists, is a great opportunity to revive the feminist movement in Bangladesh which was overshadowed by the all-encompassing development sector for the last few decades.

This movement is giving new hope for change. Feminists and movement activists should take this opportunity to bring in the marginalized issues and groups that are left out of the mainstream feminist movement. To counter everyday misogyny, we need to practice everyday feminism and that is only possible when activism and movements are inclusive.

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