

Mobilizing Support and Negotiating Change: Women's Organizations Building Constituencies in Bangladesh

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Acronyms

ASF	Acid Survivors Foundation
BMP	Bangladesh Mahila Parishad
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
CEDAW	Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSO	Civil Society Organization
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
NP	Naripokkho
PFA	Platform for Action
PP	Public Persecutor
VAW	Violence against Women
WFW	Women for Women

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Summary

This paper describes and analyzes how three national level women's organizations in Bangladesh mobilized support around a particular issue among their membership and allies. The paper uses social movement/resource mobilization theories and feminist studies on the state and social movement for grounding this research. The focus is on the decade of the 1990s and the present decade. Through these case studies the research aims to capture the diversity of the strategies used by these organizations for building constituencies--internally and externally, i.e., within the civil society organizations, media, political parties and state bureaucracies.

All three case study organizations, have strategically packaged the issues differently for their own members and external supporters depending on the emotional response they want to invoke and the social costs involved in packaging an issue in a specific way. The strategies these organizations used to build support within the state, political parties and the civil society are influenced by the following factors: i) the contradictory positions of the Bangladeshi state on gender equity issues; ii) aid dependence and politicization of the civil bureaucracy. These factors have led feminist organizations to engage with the state in a strategic manner i.e. seizing opportunities, as and when they arise, to further their cause. This type of behavior is motivated by the need to preserve autonomy, organizational legitimacy, and on the use of personal connections to access state machinery. Generally, women's organizations have tried to distance themselves from the political parties and have not directly lobbied for their issues to be incorporated into the agendas. This is due to the fact that the costs of engaging with political parties remain high and these organizations have not established themselves as major players in the political system. The nature of exchange with the civil society is marked by considerations for mutual reciprocity based on personal obligations, legitimacy concerns, and asymmetrical power relations, which at times have adversely affected accountability relations within coalitions.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Women's Movement, CEDAW ratification, Acid violence women's political participation, Naripokkho, Women for Women, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad

1. Introduction

This paper explores how three national level women's organizations mobilize various constituencies including their own members and negotiate with political parties, the state bureaucracy and allies within civil society, for attaining specific gender justice related goals. The focus is on two processes: i) how these organizations 'create meaning' around an issue (i.e., justify and represent) for constituents, members and allies;¹ ii) how they create support for their cause among potential supporters and allies. In other words, the paper investigates: i) 'activation of commitment' (Ryan 1992); and ii) strategies used and activities undertaken for mobilization. The study is not comparative but seeks to capture the diversity of experiences between the organizations studied.

The three case study organizations, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), Naripokkho (NP), and Women for Women (WFW) vary in terms of their size, ideological leanings and organizational structures. The societal support they received for their movement, the resources they have (i.e., money, expertise, time) and the constraints they may face related to organizing are different. The majority of the existing literature on women's organizations in Bangladesh (not women's development organizations) is either descriptive or narrative based (M. Begum 1998). Some of these include retrospective analyzes of factors that led to change² or the differences between various feminist groups and their engagement with the state (Kabeer 1989; Jahan 1995). However, there has been a lack of analytical studies on the national women's movement and national level women's organizations since the mid 1990s. This study seeks to address this gap by focusing on constituency building strategies and focusing on taking the analysis further, exploring issues around legitimacy, representation, accountability (both towards core constituents, and allies), within and outside the movement.

This research focuses on the decade of the 1990s and the present decade, the time when Bangladesh went through a democratic transition. Initially, this created a scope for raising feminist issues in the wider political arena and

¹ Members of an organization may not necessarily be a constituent group. Constituents of an organization, if it is an other-serving organization (Batliwala 2008) are those groups whose interest the organization tries to meet. So the organization's members may work for/and with the constituents.

² See reports produced by different women's organizations about their history. These groups may not aim for changing gender power relations, thus be counted as feminist organizations.

negotiating with the state. This was partly due to the following: i) the Beijing process in the mid 1990s created a willingness within the state to engage with women's organizations; and ii) the feminist groups were less confrontational given the autocratic nature of the state had changed. The study focuses on women's organizations as the primary unit of analysis and not the women's movement. In order to bring the case study women's organizations to the forefront while grounding the paper within the larger theoretical body of literature, we used ideas and concepts forwarded by a diverse set of literature: the social movement literature, particularly Resource Mobilization theory; feminist literature on women's mobilization and women in politics literature.

The basic tenets of resource mobilization (RM) theory allow us to focus on movement organizations and the opportunities and constraints that influence organizing (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tarrow 1998; McAdam *et al.* 2001). The RM theory focuses on how a movement creates support for its interest and its goals. Resource refers to: money, power, expertise, media attention and mobilization, and how these will be used to get people organized for promoting their interests (Ryan 1992). However, we also take into account the role played by ideology and symbolism to create commitment among constituents (ibid 1998; Gamson 1975), which initially was not incorporated in RM theories.³ These were later incorporated by Tarrow (1998) in analyzing social movements. Social movement theories are particularly associated with the political opportunity structures, which allow for exploring how, when and why opportunities arise for contention/negotiation are taken advantage of by organized citizens (McAdam *et al.* 2001). In investigating the organizations' relations with the state and how the feminist agenda is represented and accountability for promoting gender equity is pursued, we use the analysis forwarded by Molyneux (2001), Rai (1998), and Basu (1995). All of them argue that the key factors that differentiate feminist organizing from other types of women's activism⁴ are: a) autonomy (i.e., in

³ Some have critiqued the rational choice focus on the RM theories and argued that this body of theory is not well suited for investigating feminist movement building. We use this approach as it allows us to focus on the how social movement organizations (women's organizations) create support. Also how the political opportunity structure (McAdam *et al.* 2001), even in its narrow sense can yield useful analysis by focusing on when paces is created to deal with the state, the importance of the relationship that exists between women's organizations and state bureaucrats or political leadership etc (see Randall and Waylen 1998 for a discussion on why social movement literature /concepts are useful).

⁴ There are different types of women's activism and female collective action. Women can mobilize for better service delivery but may not focus on changing gender power relations. In certain instances, women's organizations may form 'associational linkages' with other organizations and movements but lose their autonomous character. There is evidence of state sponsored women's activism in socialist states.

identifying and formulating agenda, goals, group interests) and b) explicit feminist character (i.e., use of feminist principles and analysis in movement building).⁵ For analyzing the strength of coalitions/alliances⁶ formed by each case study organization within the three arenas (civil society, political parties and the state), we use the concepts forwarded by Goetz and Hassim (2003). They argue that to have influence in these arenas women need access (availability and opening up of space) and presence (institutionalization of women's participation).

We argue that the manner in which the organizations studied package the issues selected by them and the strategies they use to engage with the state, political parties and the civil society are influenced by the following factors: i) the nature of Bangladeshi-state and civil society relations; ii) the incentives and costs that are incurred by the women's groups and their allies for promoting gender justice related issues; iii) the strength of personal connections that these organizations' members have with the members of these institutions; and iv) the various developments in the international human rights and women's rights arena. The contradictory positions of the Bangladeshi state on gender equity issues, aid dependence and politicization of the civil bureaucracy have led feminist organizations to engage with the state in a strategic manner i.e. seizing opportunities, as and when they arise, to further their cause. This type of behaviour is motivated by the need to preserve autonomy, organizational legitimacy, and dependence on the use of personal connections to access state machinery. Women's organizations have generally tried to distance themselves from the political parties and have not directly lobbied for their issues to be incorporated into the party agenda (except for Bangladesh Mahila Parishad which lobbied the two major parties). This is due to the fact that the costs of engaging with political parties remain high and these organizations are not major players in the political arena. As for the nature of exchange with the civil society, it is marked by considerations for mutual reciprocity based on personal obligations, legitimacy concerns, and asymmetrical power relations.

The paper starts with a brief overview of the Bangladesh context, focusing on the history of the feminist movement, the nature of the relations between the state and the civil society actors which frames the role played by feminist organizations and the impact of development aid on the context within which women's claims are framed. Sections three and four discuss methods and contain a brief overview of the three case study organizations respectively. The next section focuses on strategies for building support. It explores how each group mobilized consensus

⁵ See Batliwala 2008.

⁶ Coalitions have a more formal structure than alliances

by generalizing specific 'grievance' through evoking a particular emotional response and justifying the claims (Gamson 1975) and their impact. How each organization built coalitions within the civil society arena is also explored and comments on the nature and the impact of these coalitions building strategies on the success, legitimacy, and sustainability of, and accountability towards the allies. It also investigates the role of personal connections in garnering support among civil society and within political parties and state bureaucracy. The section also explores the implications of using personal connections in a patron clientelist society. The sixth section investigates the strategies each organization used to access and build support for their agenda within the political parties and the state. It comments on the impact of these strategies on movement building and ensuring accountability from the political parties and the state. The final section synthesizes the findings in the previous sections and considers to what extent the strategies (framing, negotiation, coalition building) served to define and broaden constituencies and were useful in ensuring legitimacy of the cause and sustainability of the different movements.

2. Context: women's movement, state and development

The nature of the Bangladeshi state and its relationship with society, the history of the feminist movement and the changes in the wider social and political systems influence the strategies used by feminist organizations for mobilizing support.

Bangladesh became independent through a war of independence against Pakistan in 1971. It is relatively homogenous in cultural and linguistic terms and social hierarchies such as caste are largely absent. However, the state is built on a social structure that is hierarchical by gender and class (Goetz 2001). Patron-client relationships remain the dominant form of social organization for structuring relationship between classes (Hassan 2002). These have influenced the type and nature of strategies used by women's organizations for mobilizing support.

Bangladesh went through alternating periods of democratic (1971-1975; 1979-1982; 1991-2006; 2009-present) and military rule (1975-1979; 1982-1990; 2006-2008).⁷ This alternation between different forms of political systems created a repressive and confrontational form of political engagement that had discouraged women's organizations from engaging in formal party politics. Despite the thirty per cent quota for women in the parliament and the local government bodies and the two centrist parties being led by women, women's rights/gender equity concerns do not have strong currency in formal politics. The two major parties--Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) do not differ significantly when it comes to women's rights and empowerment issues, focusing largely on uncontroversial issues such as, girl's education, women's formal and informal sector work and maternal health care (Nazneen 2009). Another reason women's organizations are reluctant to engage in the formal political arena is the role religion plays in national politics and the risks associated with being branded as either pro or anti-religion, especially where Islam is concerned. Though women's organizations have protested the introduction of Islam as state religion in 1988 by the military dictator General Ershad and also the use of religion in politics, in the post authoritarian period (1991 onwards) the space for raising women's rights/gender equity concerns linked to religion is shrinking.

⁷ Military intervened in 2007 and installed a care-taker civilian government given the political instability in 2006.

Awami League and BNP spearheaded the anti authoritarian movement in the 1980s and have dominated the political scene since then. The power struggle between the Left and Awami League led to the weakening of the Left in the 1970s. This created a *de facto* two-party system. In the parliamentary system of government, both centrist parties have entered into tacit and overt alliances with *Jamaat-e-Islami*, the main Islamist party, for winning elections and forming a government (Nazneen 2008). In the post authoritarian period, both centrist parties highlighted the role of Islam and emphasized the construction of a Bengali Muslim identity (Nazneen 2008). This emphasis on Islam and the tacit or overt alliances with *Jamaat* have affected the space and the way issues that are linked to religion are raised in the public sphere by women's organizations.

The interactions between the two centrist political parties and civil society organizations are dominated by concerns on the part of civil society organizations about how the relationship affects their own legitimacy and autonomy. The politicization of civil bureaucracy by Awami League and BNP has severely undermined the capacity of the state. Almost all significant civil society organizations, ranging from professional associations such as associations of doctors, engineers, lawyers, and NGOs to organized groups of 'intelligentsia' such as associations of university teachers, cultural activists have been polarized along party lines (Hassan 2002). This has significantly undermined the ability of civil society organizations to articulate their collective interests and increased clientelist control by the ruling parties. It is in such a context that the women's organizations studied are struggling to remain autonomous. The state has emerged as the preferred key actor with whom the women's organizations negotiate directly rather than pursuing their agendas within the formal political sphere.

Though women's rights/gender equity concerns carry less weight in formal politics, women's organizations had participated in the pro democracy movement during the 1980s. They have established strong links with human rights, social movement and cultural organizations. These strong links and the polarized nature of the civil society influence who women's organizations choose as allies and how they build coalitions on certain issues.

The women's empowerment agenda is promoted by different actors in Bangladesh: women's organizations, local and international non- governmental organizations (NGOs), the government and the donor community. In the 1970s and 1980s, the availability of donor funding for gender related projects created an incentive for the Bangladeshi state to promote the gender and development agenda (Goetz 2001, White 1992). Availability of donor funding also fuelled the

expansion of the development NGO sector. This has led to the development of a particular type of women's empowerment discourse that promotes women's productive role, economic empowerment, and family welfare. The proliferation of donor funding for gender and development (GAD) projects allowed women's organization to strategically use their links with donors to put pressure on the state. However gender mainstreaming in the 1990s led to a context, where though aid dependence has decreased, women's rights issues were interpreted within the gender mainstreaming framework and seen as 'Western imports' or as development issues by some scholars, public officials and the general public (Nazneen and Sultan 2009). Women's organizations have constantly struggled against this form of labeling. The later discussion will show that the expansion of the NGO sector had allowed women's organization to increase their number of allies and reach out to the grassroots through NGO networks, but the NGOization process had affected the ways in which women's organizations mobilize. It has also compelled women's organizations to differentiate themselves from mainstream development NGOs in their mobilization strategies to enhance their legitimacy as social actors.

3. Methods

Our objective was to capture the diversity of strategies used by the selected women's organizations for creating and mobilizing support around particular issues. Our starting point was to explore the movement building process through the eyes of the activists. This is why a single issue was chosen for each organization. As the research progressed, we realized that though these organizations were diverse, there are commonalities in the strategies they use to form alliances within the civil society; in the way they negotiate with political parties and the state. The commonalities in strategies indicate how structural factors influence organizational behaviour; which became a key research focus.

The research process was reflexive, reiterative and action oriented.⁸ Each organization selected issues that they felt they were successful in mobilizing support. Since answers to the research questions required insider knowledge, open ended interviews with key persons was a major method for collecting data. For the initial interviews, we asked the organizations to provide the names of the persons who have played key roles. After these initial interviews, snowballing method was used for selecting interviewees. Documentary analysis (of leaflets, posters, organizational records of the movements) was carried out for supplementing and cross checking the information collected from the interviews. Previous research on organizational history and construction of organizational timelines helped to contextualise these issues within the broader societal context. The research was conducted in 2008/9.

Our insider status⁹ helped us to gain access, create space for the interviewees to reflect freely, and build easier rapport since we were perceived as persons who had knowledge of the organizations and the feminist movement. Our own positions as outsiders (i.e., researchers and academics) and grounding our work theoretically helped us to use a different lens to reflect on what the organizations did and also to be aware of our own subjectivities. We also cross checked our findings and interpretations with the interviewees. Our advisory board members,

⁸ Action oriented because one of the objective of the research is to understand how these organizations build support and help them develop more sophisticated analysis of the process (See Fonow and Cook 1991).

⁹ One of us is a member of NP and the other has personal relationships with BMP and WFW members.

who are either members of these organizations and/or are involved in the feminist movement, were also consulted regarding our interpretations.¹⁰

¹⁰We also held validation workshops with the case study organizations in 2009.

4. Case study organizations

The reasons behind choosing the three organizations Women for Women (WFW), Naripokkho (NP) and Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) are the following: i) all three are regarded as premier women's organizations in Bangladesh and possess a wide sphere of influence; ii) they serve as role models for other women's organizations as they have pioneered many different movement building strategies on a wide variety of causes; and iii) finally, the diversity these organizations offer regarding the strategies used for constituency building and mobilization creates scope for gathering insights. The remainder of the section provides a brief overview of each organization and the issue they chose to mobilize around. Each organization has a more diverse range of strategies and experiences related to constituency building and alliances around other issues. However, the research limited its scope to looking at only one issue for each organization (see section 5).

BMP was established in 1970 and is the pioneer and the largest women's organization in Bangladesh, with about 150,000 members. BMP has a clear command structure (Kardam 1997) with hierarchical decision making and implementation processes. It has branch offices in every district of Bangladesh. All members are volunteers. It describes itself as a movement oriented, activist and lobby organization. Initially, it had a strong left leaning, but in the mid-1980s it moved away from the Marxist influence. However, it still has strong links with leftist political parties. Although initially wary of liberal and radical feminism, their discourse around women's rights has evolved and it is now more similar to the other two. Initially, the majority of BMP members were from middle class backgrounds and many of them were involved in social reform movements and student politics. Now the membership composition is more diversified.

The paper analyzes BMP's work on the political empowerment of women, on which it has been working since 1973. Key demands have evolved over time but now include the demand for direct elections of women to 100 additional parliamentary seats (in addition to the existing 300 parliamentary seats) for two terms; increasing the number of women in decision-making positions and bodies; for political parties to ensure 33 percent nominations of women for parliamentary elections and to internal committees and creating a conducive environment for women in local government. BMP also works on eradicating

violence against women, introduction of a uniform civil code, CEDAW and providing legal assistance and shelter to women.

NP was established in 1983 by women who felt that there was a need for an approach that would promote women's equality and rights in a way that seeks to transform existing unequal structures and power relations. NP describes itself as a women's rights activist organization, emphasising a participatory style of decision making, a flatter hierarchy and a loose command structure. Membership is small with about 120 members.

The paper analyzes the movement against acid violence which was taken up in 1996 as part of the overall movement against violence against women begun in the 1980s. This happened in reaction to specific cases of young girls who had been attacked with acid and who were struggling for their lives and for justice. Key demands of the anti-acid violence movement included the prevention of acid attacks, adequate treatment of victims, enabling them to be regarded as survivors rather than victims and seeking changes in social attitudes and women's control over their bodies and sexuality. NP also works on the cultural representation of women; gender and development; women's health, reproductive rights and sexuality and provides support to the sex workers' movement.

WFW was established in 1973 and now has about 46 members. The members are volunteers, mainly academics and researchers from elite or middle class background. They mainly focus on policy research and advocacy. The organization has a long record of work in the area of mainstreaming gender into development. In this context, it decided to work on Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), seeking removal of reservations and implementation of the Convention, the movement by WFW the paper will be analyzing. As part of the follow up of the Beijing conference, CEDAW was seen to be an instrument that would help the women's movement in its attempts to make the State understand discrimination and its impacts and take corrective action with regard to its laws and programs. Other areas of work for WFW include violence against women, education, and micro and macro-level policy research.

5. Strategies for mobilizing support

5.1. Packaging: 'naming and framing' the issues for mobilization

The way an organization chooses to package or 'name and frame' an issue (Gamson 1975) plays a key role in building consensus among members and allies. The naming and framing of an issue are influenced by the following factors: i) the ideology of the mobilizing organization; ii) the nature of the allies and supporters that the organization tries to influence; and iii) the types of emotions that the organization want to evoke among members and supporters (Tayler 1991). In addition, packaging of an issue has an influence on whether feelings of solidarity and trust develop among the participants in the movement (Tarrow 1998).

This section analyzes the following issues: i) how the three case study organizations 'packaged' the issues they were mobilizing on; ii) whether there were differences in the way these organization 'framed' the issue for different allies; c) what was the impact of such packaging strategies on the success and sustainability of the movement.

We found that all of the three organizations packaged their issues differently for their core constituents/members and their allies. The BMP framed the issue of women's political empowerment for its core constituents, the elected female representatives at the local level and BMP members, as a matter of entitlement. The emphasis was that in order for women to enjoy equal rights in economic, social and other spheres, women need to participate equally in all decision making processes. In addition, barriers to political empowerment of women were also presented as an injustice to women as a group. The emphasis on these aspects was aimed to do the following:

..[M]ake our members and women realize that unless women have the decision making power they will not be able to change their position in other areas such as economic and social... The women representatives are aware about their rights being denied. They cannot carry out their duties because of the discrimination they experience at the hands of their male colleagues and at the institutional level. It creates anger and frustration among them about the injustice. We are there to provide support and to create a general awareness among women about this injustice. (interview BMP 1, 14.07.08).

In fact, this 'injustice framing' (Tarrow 1998) was crucial to building a collective identity among BMP members, elected female officials, and women in general. The stress on grievance was successful in developing a sense of solidarity as '[t]hese create *shathis* (comrades) for the movement' (interview BMP 2, 18.07.08).

Similar types of framing strategies were used for creating a consensus among different women's organizations and civil society organizations who BMP tried to recruit as allies. This is because there is very little disagreement on the matter of women's political empowerment and the demands regarding this issue (see previous section). It was pointed out that, '... [O]n certain issues, such as, national women's policy, seats for women in the parliament, ...the forty organizations of *Shamajik Protirodh* Committee (BMP coalition) are in agreement....' (interview BMP 2, 18.07.08).

However, the naming and framing was done differently when BMP approached the political party leaders and state officials for support. The approach was strategic, focusing on the promises made in the election manifestos and highlighting the gender biases with the political system that hindered full participation of women. Currently, BMP sees itself as a lobbying organization when it comes to interacting with state apparatus and political parties on this issue. This was a result of the following factors. First, there is awareness within BMP that the major political parties do not share the same commitment towards women's political empowerment. However, they will respond to BMP's demands if BMP is able to highlight the costs and benefits of supporting this agenda. Second, there is a realization that the state executive branch is a key instrument for change. Third, the reforms of state agencies, particularly, the Election Commission, has opened up a space for policy recommendation through lobbying (interview BMP 1, 14.07.08).

The impact of the above packaging strategies on the sustainability and success of the movement was mixed. BMP has been successful in building a strong sense of solidarity and trust among its members, female representatives at the local level and to a large extent among women's organizations. The campaign was sustained and it has evolved and spread: the issue is now widely recognized. However, the impact of the strategic framing approach to negotiate with the state and political parties has not been as successful. Holding the political parties to account for the promises they make has proved difficult for BMP. Political parties do not perceive that the failure to meet demands of BMP and other women's organizations would lead to a significant loss of votes or support. Moreover, BMP's framing strategy was unable to address the perceived high political costs for the parties (i.e.,

opposition within the party itself; fear of losing seats to other parties, etc.) associated with increasing the number of reserved seats for women or direct elections to these seats.

NP used a very different approach in framing the issues regarding the acid survivor's movement. One of the key constituents of this movement were the acid survivors themselves, which implied that the issues needed to be framed in a manner so that the different needs and demands related to medical treatment, rehabilitation and justice, for this particular group were met by the state. However, ensuring gender sensitive service delivery and justice for the individuals was not the only goal; it was to create social awareness and movement against the crime itself. It also required a focus where the acid survivors were identified as 'persons' who had survived a heinous crime and not as 'victims.' In order to meet these diverse goals, NP decided to package this issue as a matter of social justice, stressing how the 'personhood' of a survivor is violated by the crime and the consequent suffering experienced by the survivor and her family. This also created a space for raising demands around how the health care and legal needs of survivors are met, while raising awareness to prevent this crime.

For the survivors, this way of framing legitimised their demands for medical treatment, justice and rehabilitation. For supporters and allies, by framing the issue as a matter of social justice, NP emphasized the need for reflecting on the nature of the society that gave rise to, enabled and tolerated such a heinous crime (interview NP3, 13.09.08).

NP deliberately tried to evoke empathy for and protectiveness towards the survivors among the judges, police personnel and doctors by framing this as a social justice issue. This was to motivate the service providers to increase their service quality and create an enabling environment for the survivors. One NP activist explained:

[O]ur target was to use emotions, and we used it to our advantage (advantage of the survivors), we encouraged the girls to speak out, to describe their traumas, pains, and their family.¹¹ It is difficult to ignore if you see it, if you hear it, if they are a person to you (interview NP 2, 10.09.08).

The other reason for using this strategy was to circumvent the judgments made by these service providers about the survivors' (usually teenage girls/young women) moral character and speculation about premarital 'romantic' involvement. This was particularly useful in court where these issues were

¹¹This was also part of a healing therapy.

dragged in by the defendant's lawyers. One NP member, a lawyer, detailed her strategy:

If I had tried to challenge society's views about who a good girl is I would have hit a wall! Instead I tried to use emotions. I argued that whether one was involved did not mean that she deserved to have acid thrown at her. Her misdemeanour does not match the treatment she received. That the defendant's lawyer who is like her father/brother... should not be making such dirty insinuations... (Interview NP 3, 14.09.08).

However, since the stress was on evoking empathy for the survivors by highlighting their suffering, the movement against acid violence did not challenge the social definition of the acceptable behaviour of a 'good girl,' upfront. Issues around adolescent romance and sexuality were explored with the survivors in 'safe' environments, not necessarily in the public domain (interview NP 4, 02.12.08).

In order to overcome this challenge, NP tried to link the decision of the young women to say no to a romantic proposal or the right to end a relationship in different ways, particularly by tying it to the issues around bodily integrity and reproductive rights. This issue was raised during rallies and meetings held on International Women's Day and at other forums. The slogan that was used was '*Shorir amar, shidhanto amar*' (My Body, My Choice). However, this caused strong reactions, both for and against. Another aspect of the framing was integrating this issue with the existing movement on violence against women by showing acid violence as a new form of violence directed mainly at young girls and women (interview NP 4, 2.12.08).

Women for Women chose to frame the full ratification and implementation of CEDAW for the constituents (i.e., NCBP members)¹² in the following manner. First, CEDAW was presented as a 'bill of rights for women' (interview WFW 1, 30.07.08). Second, the different articles of CEDAW were linked to different articles of the Platform For Action (PFA), in order to contextualise and illustrate the nature and types of discrimination faced by women. This helped to concretise the issue at the grassroots level. The WFW members had to research, translate documents, and develop these linkages and organize workshops for grassroots women (and other interested constituents such as students). A WFW member explained the process:

¹²See section 5.2.

[W]e worked on CEDAW, where it came from, what does it say, how would women benefit.. We went to the field. The first question we got was ‘what is CEDAW?’ we started by saying it was a *dalil* (legal document), and they thought it was a deed for land! So we decided to link it to women’s rights issues, to the PFA... (interview WFW 3, 30.07.08).

However, WFW deliberately chose to take what they term as a ‘legalistic’ approach in framing this issue, particularly when this matter was presented at public fora or when negotiating with state officials. This was done to circumvent any accusations of being anti- Islamic and create space for negotiations with the State. The removal of reservations from CEDAW and state obligation to ensure gender equality were presented as mandatory since the state is a signatory to the Convention. Moreover, the arguments in favour of ratification of the remaining articles of the Convention are based on the following arguments: i) CEDAW does not violate the Constitution, and is in fact in accordance with the Constitution; ii) other Islamic countries have reformed Islamic Laws; iii) Bangladesh does not have an Islamic Constitution but a secular one; iv) many of the laws are discriminatory. A WFW member observed:

Our arguments are not based on emotions and nor are they targeted to evoke any emotional response, but to convince a person through logical argument...Our examples show how religious personal laws can be discriminatory; why the government is accountable under CEDAW to address gender inequality... We used the Constitution to argue our case...we approached the government/state diplomatically, keeping the pressure on, because of the conservative elements... (interview WFW 1, 30.07.08).

WFW was able to sustain pressure on bureaucrats for an extended period (up to the early 2000s although it now is decreasing) without incurring any backlash from fundamentalist quarters. The ability to exert pressure may have been affected by the fact that many WFW members and their acquaintances were in key positions. However, the stress on the state being under international legal obligation and on secularism has limited this issue to concerned women’s groups, particular state officials, and certain sections of the civil society. It has not been accepted by any of the political parties as a mainstream issue, neither is there a debate or inclusion of this issue in the wider civil society arena.

The key insights that emerge from the analysis of packaging strategies of the three organizations are the following. Both BMP and NP packaged their issues in a manner that created a strong group identity among the core constituents (i.e., the survivors and members and women’s networks for NP; the locally elected women representatives and grassroots members of BMP). It is difficult to assess the success of WFW among the smaller NGOs and at the grassroots level.

The 'packaging' strategies used by the three women's organizations created a sense of solidarity among other women's organizations around these issues (see section 5.2) and enhanced their legitimacy as actors. This is partly due to the fact that there were very few disagreements among the women's organizations about the merit of these issues. These packaging strategies were successful in ensuring the types of support needed from other civil society groups, particularly on women's political empowerment and acid survivor's issue compared to CEDAW. The reasons behind success being: a) only organizations, which were 'like minded' and sympathetic towards these causes, were approached; b) these issues were packaged in an uncontroversial manner, and the cost of publicly supporting these causes would be low.

The strategic approach taken by BMP and WFW, and the 'experiential' approach of NP helped them to avoid controversy and access state officials, particularly since state officials saw that these issues had merit and would not jeopardise their positions. It allowed NP to demand from the state a stronger role in prevention and redressal of violence. It also indicates that the organizations correctly assessed how to appeal to the State and play a more direct role in monitoring state activities which indicates a shift from the confrontational relationship they had with the state during the 1980s (see section 6.2). This approach has also enhanced the position and legitimacy of the women's organization in the eyes of the state (see section 6.2)

However, these 'packaging' strategies have had limited impact on the opening up of a space for instilling these as 'women's agenda' within political parties. The reason behind this is largely due to the fact that politically these issues remain costly to address. The nature of the interactions between these groups and the implications that political associations may have on the legitimacy of these women's organizations have also limited the impact of these packaging strategies on political parties (see section 6.1).

5.2 Coalition, network and alliance building within civil society¹³

The three organizations have created coalitions, networks and alliances with civil society organizations, particularly women's organizations, as a means of increasing the support for their issue, visibility, and strengthening the cause that they were advocating. This has been a general strategy going beyond the three

¹³By civil society we refer to – NGOs, small community based organizations, professional associations, media, women's rights groups. All of these types of CSOs may or may not be funded by donors. They may or may not be registered as NGOs, which is required if an organization receives foreign funding.

movements the research was analyzing. An unspoken but implicit principle for entering into and forming alliances is that of reciprocity. There is an expectation that it will be to the mutual benefit of the various parties: the initiator and those joining and also that the giving of an organization's support entitles it to the support of the other organization. This is evident when building coalitions/networks and choosing whom to approach and include and whom to exclude. The legitimacy of an organization to form a coalition and bring together a group of organizations around a specific issue has to be established. This also brings in the question of hierarchy with certain organizations having more weight through greater resources in terms of information, connections, mobilization potential, visibility, than others.

Besides these concerns, these coalitions/networks take into consideration the nature of civil society organizations and their relations with the Bangladesh state. As the discussion below will show, the polarization of civil society groups into two party camps implies that the three case study women's organizations have to take into account which partners to choose and who belongs to which party camp, and how that may undermine/facilitate the activities of the coalitions/networks. Given that the case study women's organizations have a strong commitment towards secularism and reservations about the controversial role played by the Islamist political groups during the war of independence in 1971, civil society groups aligned with these parties have been shunned by the case study women's organizations. In addition, the development NGOs are a large part of the civil society in Bangladesh, and have actively promoted women's rights and gender equity, with many of them mainly focussed on establishing women as clients of services and creating access to micro-credit for income/employment generation. Most of these development NGOs have an apolitical focus on women's rights, although many promote participation and consultation with grassroots women. Including the development organizations as members of networks and coalitions, have increased the outreach of these case study organizations. However, the women's rights organizations have had to contest the apolitical framework of their partners. The ubiquitous presence of the NGO model for advocating rights, has influenced the overall context and discourse within which women's rights are framed in Bangladesh. In formulating strategies and action plans for the coalitions and networks the case study organizations have had to deal with this framing.

In the case of NP's movement against acid violence several types of coalitions, networks and alliances were formed.¹⁴ The most formal coalition has been the

¹⁴NP did not consciously create the associations discussed here as alliances but they did become formal or informal associations bringing together persons and organizations on the issue of acid violence.

Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF), formally registered as a Trust. The main objective was to bring together the organizations working to combat acid violence while coordinating and bringing together the services and advocacy that was needed by/for the acid survivors. As mentioned above NP had decided that the role of service provision was not a part of its mandate but wished to ensure that an advocacy platform be built around this.

There were different views about the formation of the ASF and also the kind of role it would play. While from the NP had expected that the survivors would be more active in the organization, but most of the other board members felt that it was something that ASF would provide services and do advocacy for the survivors. Some of the human and women's rights organizations felt that survivors were partners in the movement, whereas other board members felt that ASF would be a service provider for survivors. The divergence of views on the role of the members of this trust illustrates the influence of the NGO model of service provision and advocacy (although it must be pointed out that service for the survivors was a much needed area). NP was isolated and in spite of being one of the initiators it felt it was sidelined in the design, conceptualisation and later running of the foundation. While the issue was 'mainstreamed' it was at the cost of losing the more feminist or 'radical' edge that NP had wanted to give it. (Interview NP 4, 02.12.08).

Another kind of network was partnerships with twenty-eight smaller women's organizations and NGOs who were involved in NP's project on Monitoring State Interventions on Violence Against Women. They were given technical assistance and training in monitoring of police stations, hospitals and courts. Acid violence was one of the key categories monitored. The rationale for involving local organizations was strengthening local level follow-up and activism. NP provided them resources such as information, the service and access to national level lawyers and strengthened them organizationally. Although mutually beneficial the relationships within this network were hierarchical. The forming of this network to monitor the state's role and make it accountable indicates a shift in how women's organizations perceived their role in engaging with the state directly than advocating women's rights from the margins. (see section 6.2)

NP members and volunteers active in the work promoted the building of networks among survivors, the main objective being to contribute to their sense of empowerment and facilitating the process of moving from being victims to being survivors. This networking is continuing among survivors.

NP strategically reached out to and created alliances with the media to ensure a more positive coverage and ownership of the solutions. Although first attracted by the news value and sensationalism of the issue, various media persons and institutions became genuinely committed to combating acid violence. Prothom Alo, a national daily, has since created an Acid Survivors Fund for which they receive donations and make regular grants to acid survivors. Internally NP had to struggle with issues of representation of the acid affected women and whether the sensationalization would objectify them. NP realized that the survivors themselves wanted the media attention and felt in control of their relations with the media. The media protection NP had wanted to give was neither needed nor wanted! (interview NP 4, 02.12.08).

Other alliances formed included those with individuals, doctors and international organizations which served to mobilize resources for the acid survivors. A number of doctors, both individuals in Bangladesh and abroad, as well as institutions such as the Dhaka Medical College Hospital and Gonoshasthya Kendro Hospital, became committed to providing medical care to the acid burn victims on a voluntary basis. This even led to the creation of a specialised burn unit at Dhaka Medical College Hospital. NP was able to facilitate international alliances with donors, international NGOs, expatriates, with various roles for each.

In the case of Bangladesh BMP, the *Shamajik Protirodh* Committee (SPC or Social Resistance Committee) was set up in 2001 in response to the then electoral violence against minorities. This then took on the issue of political empowerment of women. BMP felt that they would be stronger if they could be joined by a larger number of organizations, which would provide an 'umbrella' i.e. they would be stronger and less exposed in the case of any backlash. These coalitions were seen as instrumental and context specific. A BMP member opined 'If a strong democratic government were to come along then slowly this platform will dissolve ... it won't be as essential.' (interview BMP 3, 29.07.08)

In 2009, there were 46 members. It is a 'loose (informal) platform' which concentrates on two or three issue. These have been the post election violence against women and minorities, the changes in the Women's Advancement Policy and the provisions for reserved seats for women in the Parliament (and more generally women's political empowerment). Programs are taken on the basis of joint decisions and organizations contribute to the joint budget. Not everybody has the capacity or resources to contribute equally, nor is everyone equally active on all issues. This is recognized by BMP (and also other members) and accepted. The Committee members are women's organizations, human rights organizations, NGOs, and cultural organizations. Interest in the Committee is growing and it is

perceived as a legitimate platform for those working together on women's rights. BMP is very much the leader of the coalition: 'Now BMP is the secretariat and we want to continue (to coordinate and give the leadership). We have the space and a permanent office so it is easy for us.' (interview BMP 2, 18.07.08).

Due to the variety of types of organizations involved in women's rights and development, many of the development related organizations are happy to give the leadership to a recognized and established organization which is one of the founders of the women's movement in the country. Though the inclusion of development NGOs/women's NGOs increased access to the grassroots; many of these organizations receive donor funding for advocating women's political empowerment and frame the agenda within a particular instrumentalist discourse. The number of organizations claiming the capacity to give alternative views on women's rights and have the 'legitimacy to do so' is limited. As mentioned by BMP, 'There are only 2-3 real women's organizations. The rest are working on gender issues because there is money in it.' (interview BMP 3, 29.07.08). In this context, the space is created for women's rights organizations, like BMP with a long track record and little dependence on donor funding, to take a leadership role. While most women's organizations acknowledge BMP's leadership in the SPC, however there were complaints from both NP and WFW that this is not reciprocal i.e. BMP does not recognize their leadership in other areas.

BMP recognizes that there are issues on which members respond more easily and on which they can have joint positions. There would seem to be an increasing acceptance of differences of approach. There are attempts to negotiate, discuss and come to common understandings. When asked if there were conflicts between different organizations the response was 'Each organization deals with various issues in their own way. There are differences.' (interview BMP 3, 29.07.08). However it was perceived that now organizations were more willing to work with each other:

Organizations have a more similar understanding of issues than before and perhaps the context has brought together organizations and helped them to work together. There is a greater unity among the organizations now. (...) There is greater maturity now and demands are stronger now. The blockages from government i.e. not keeping their promises, has raised people's awareness. (...) the alliance between organizations, the coalition has become much stronger (interview BMP 1, 14.07.08).

BMP also forms alliance with 'civil society personalities' i.e. figures and lawyers in civil society that it considers as its constituents. It chooses them consciously

taking into account the political alignment and loyalties of these persons, as string alignment with any political party may reduce the credibility of BMP's activities. BMP states, 'Our allies are 'those who will help us with our work, have a facilitating role and are progressive (*mukto moner manush*)...' (interview BMP 2, 18.07.08). The use of the word progressive also implies those who subscribe to secularism and also the four key principles enshrined in the Constitution of 1972 (from which secularism was later removed).

As an extension of these forms of alliances BMP is trying to reach and convince a wider population and public opinion: 'We also want to involve men/convince them of our cause: we have been trying to reach out to ordinary people through meetings, discussions. Before we did less of this.' (interview BMP 1, 14.07.08).

BMP has been successful in making the media interested in the issue of women's political participation. This is partly due to the fact that many of the BMP leaders have close personal connections with the print media (see 5.3). Media coverage has amplified the efforts of these organizations and hold up to public scrutiny the role the parties or the government plays or does not play in furthering women's interests.

WFW has formed fewer coalitions and networks and participated in a smaller number of movement based alliances than the other two organizations. One major exception was the work they did to reach out to women's organizations during pre and post Beijing process, including grass-roots ones. The results of a needs assessment process showed that there was a lack of information on the Beijing process and CEDAW. In response the National Committee for Beijing Preparations was created which later was transformed into the National Committee for Beijing Plus with 625 members (both individuals and organizations). CEDAW documents and Platform for Action (PFA) documents were translated into Bengali and sent to members. The information provided focused on what would be done at Beijing, who the contact persons were, the 'macro picture of Bangladesh' (interview WFW 2, 16.08.08).

The NCBP network created an outreach for WFW. They considered the NCBP members to be allies who believed in the same issues. Through WFW the members had access to various kinds of information which was considered to be a resource in itself and were brought together in national level workshops. At the national level WFW has to struggle to establish its identity, credibility and legitimacy to lead on a particular issue (as do other national level women's organizations), with little contestation coming from the organizations outside

Dhaka who are more compliant and happy to be included in as many networks or alliances as possible.

Problems related to smooth functioning do not take place with organizations based outside Dhaka. However, the problems rise with Dhaka based organizations. These organizations at times do not focus on the larger picture but want to highlight their own achievements. There is conflict over 'who owns' the issue. So the network is not as supportive as it could have been.(interview WFW 1, 30.07.08).

WFW was conscious of rivalry and factionalism which they feel has adversely affected their work. Another alliance related to CEDAW that WFW belongs to is the Citizen's Initiative for CEDAW which is drafting the Alternative report for the CEDAW Committee for 2009.¹⁵ This enables WFW to be part of a larger group of more than forty members. They are able to influence the analysis of the country context and progress on CEDAW by using the CEDAW conceptual framework. They can also use the platform to lobby for the removal of remaining reservations to CEDAW.

While Women for Women has contacts in the media and working relations with the Nari Sangabik Kendra (Women Journalists Centre) for whom WFW has provided training, there is disappointment that the alliance with the media is not stronger and that the media has not taken on a more proactive and progressive role (interview WFW 2, 16,08.08).

An approach specific to WFW is reaching out to the student community as a constituency and allies who then become spokespersons for the issues, which is related to so many of its members being from the academic community. Constraints included a lack of funding for continuing these programs. Sustainability was difficult since follow up is difficult and student turnover is high with alumni associations not being strong (interview WFW 1, 30.07.08).

In conclusion, we can see that the strategy of reaching out to various civil society organizations and individuals and forming coalitions and networks is a common one with varied degrees of specialization, sustainability, institutionalisation and also effectiveness. Each of the organizations has established coalitions which it has led (except for NP which has tried to pass on the leadership) and this leadership has given them additional strength and legitimacy in advocating their issue. Mutual gains and interests motivated members, both women's organizations and other different types of CSOs to join these coalitions and

¹⁵BMP and NP are also members.

networks. The coalitions and networks were largely composed of human rights, social movement, cultural organizations and development NGOs who subscribe to secular ideals. These coalitions and networks have given the case study organizations additional visibility, presence and credibility. By including development NGOs, women's NGOs and local organizations increased their outreach beyond their organizational membership to smaller and often local level organizations which is one of the key indicators of presence in Goetz and Hassim (2003) framework. The smaller ones local level organizations, in return, gained increased visibility and access to national level networks. The large service delivery development NGOs have benefitted from being perceived as a progressive force within the civil society arena without having to move away from their apolitical development activities at the local level. Though expectations of mutual benefit and an unspoken principle of reciprocity have motivated members, none of the three organizations had provided examples of accountability functioning within the civil society coalitions that were set up (except for ASF which became an NGO). This then raises questions about which voices are heard or marginalized with these coalitions and networks, thus about the representativeness of and accountability within these networks/coalitions.

In choosing partners and members, the case study organizations were careful of the political leanings of these organizations since being perceived as an appendage of a political party/or inclusion of overtly political groups may undermine the credibility and legitimacy of the coalitions. This strategy had served the organizations well. However, it has also perhaps limited their engagement to a particular set of actors and led to their leaving out on exploring alternative groups that may have played an effective role. This approach may have unintentionally limited the women's rights discourse within the civil society, good governance, and development discourse.

5.3 Using personal networks

Unsurprisingly, given the context of Bangladeshi society, this emerged as a key feature that all three organizations have used to access state officials, civil society groups, and political parties. In movement building, personal networks play a key role in determining who decides to join the movement, rather than ideological influence (Tarrow 1998). Personal connections, either familial or other types, create a sense of obligation to reciprocate and evoke trust, which are key factors in influencing people to act. In the case of the three organizations, the networks helped to open up policy and organizational spaces to present their case.

However, for the three case study organizations, the primacy of the personal networks is also influenced by the following factors: i) the contradictory position of the state on gender equity issues (given the ‘moral conservatism’¹⁶ that exists within state bureaucracy and the unwillingness to rock the boat when it comes to religion) ; ii) politicization of the civil society; iii) the dynamics of reciprocity and asymmetrical power relations that are at work within the civil society arena (see section 5.2) . These factors influenced how each actor (i.e., state, political parties, civil society groups) was approached by the three organizations and why personal networks became key to promote one’s issue.

NP used personal networks to approach the state for the following reasons: i) to overcome the initial resistance NP faced in trying to access state services provided to the survivors; ii) to manage the disagreements among the service providers about NP’s role; iii) to create an immediate and large impact on the issue. Initially, NP’s proposal to monitor health care service providers at public hospitals and police stations was resisted by government employees. They feared that monitoring could reveal inefficiency, corruption, and insensitivity on the part of service providers. This required a series of negotiations about the role of NP with the police, doctors, and medical staff. The interviewees pointed out that though NP was diplomatic in its approach and assured the state officials of confidentiality, it also gained access due to the fact that some NP members knew key people in decision making positions. The member’s personal relations with the hospital heads or the Inspector General of police ensured the required permission and access. An NP member commented:

We had gained access because X or Y knew someone –either the law minister or the health secretary or the senior physician... [W]e knew we had to get the BIG heads first to agree with what we were doing. The initial meetings were difficult and chaotic as each group—doctors, lawyers, police, blamed the other. The ministers or concerned high officials handled these situations... (interview NP 2, 10.09.08)

Initially, NP member’s personal connections (familial connection or friendship developed through advocacy work) with the health and law ministers helped to give this issue a high profile and coverage in the media. NP members who were lawyers used their contacts to organize awareness raising sessions for the judges on regarding the procedural obstacles and the difficulties experienced by the acid survivors in court. The strength of personal networks had allowed NP to access the concerned officials and establish these issues as a legitimate concern.

¹⁶Interview, senior bureaucrat (Nazneen 2008).

WFW had also used the member's own connections to lobby the state for the ratification of CEDAW. Many of the WFW members are academics and have family members or former students working within the state bureaucracy. This created an opportunity for the organization to lobby key persons and access state machinery. A WFW member explained:

All of us have links with the bureaucracy... [A] lot of the government secretaries are our students. Some of them were our juniors (studied at the same university). Our family members work as state officials. We used that network... If we asked for a meeting, if we made a request ...they could not just overlook it. (Interview WFW 1, 30.07.08)

Moreover, in the 1990s when WFW started working on CEDAW, many of the WFW members were in key positions and one of its members¹⁷ became a member and then chairperson of the UN CEDAW Committee. This allowed them to bring up gender equity issues in various state forums, build rapport with key officials and identify obstacles. One WFW member observed:

We had the right people in the right places. They were in strategic positions. One of our members¹⁸ was an advisor to the government. We were in the Planning Commission, also working in donor agencies. We were able to bring in gender issues at different levels of the policymaking process. Since we were in key positions, we did not face bureaucratic resistance. We could negotiate... (interview WFW 2, 16.08. 08)

BMP also used personal networks to access state officials. The interviewees pointed out that in dealings with the state this is a primary strategy that produces results. Garnering support among political parties was also done on the basis of personal networks. One BMP interviewee explained that personal connections with party leadership were used strategically:

We try and work with people who are progressive within the party, whom we may have known... though personally I am unhappy to work with BNP..[a]s for AL we call on X, or Y or Z—they do not subscribe to our philosophy but we have a personal claim on them .. (interview BMP 2, 18. 07.08).

BMP was able to trace how personal networks played a key role in determining which groups BMP approached within the civil society. The presence of particular individuals within the group determined whether a particular group would be asked for co-operation. The interviewees explained that this selection approach

¹⁷Salma Khan.

¹⁸Najma Chowdhury served as an advisor during the caretaker government (CTG) in 1996.

was due to the partisan nature of the Bangladeshi civil society and the implications of being labelled as a 'friend' of a partisan group. One BMP member commented:

We do not approach groups, we approach individuals who are progressive, who believe in women's empowerment. So among the judges, I would approach X, Y, Z, among the barristers I would approach A, B, C, and not the lawyers association. Given that a lot of the groups can be partisan, our allies are not groups but specific persons who we can trust... (interview BMP 2, 18.07.08).

Interestingly, NP and WFW interviewees did not categorically state that they approached allied organizations based on who were in these organizations, but based their selection on what types of services these organizations could provide to the core constituents. However, the effectiveness of NP or WFW within these alliances and the nature of the relationship with allies are influenced by personal relations.

The use of personal networks has also expedited the process of accessing the state, and in certain cases ensured collaborative relations with the state. However, personal networks have not been effective for dealing with political party leadership. This is partly due to the fact that for some of the organizations, such as WFW members, the party leaders were not from the same social background. The experience of BMP in dealing with political parties shows that they were marginalised in mainstream politics, despite their use of their personal networks with both male and female politicians. Moreover, all of these organizations, perhaps to a lesser extent BMP, have kept a distance from the political parties for the fear of being labelled as an appendage of these parties which would impose a significant cost on the credibility and legitimacy of any civil society organizations. However, this also limits the possibility of the issue being mainstreamed within the larger political debate. In addition, none of these organizations seem to have developed new approaches to deal with the political parties.

The above discussion also raises questions about the impact personal networks may have on issues such as sustainability and the success of the movement. Undeniably, the strength of personal networks had allowed these organizations to access the state and facilitated advocacy. It has also helped them to use personal obligation as a basis for mutual reciprocity in building alliance among civil society. However, it may have also adversely influenced the sustainability and effectiveness of the movement, given that in certain cases the gains made in negotiating with the state or the political parties relied upon having a previous

personal link with certain individuals within these institutions. If those individuals are not present or lose their positions of authority then the effectiveness of the three organizations may diminish.

5.4 Delegitimizing/disarming the opponents

Mobilizing support requires identifying different categories of opponents and formulating strategies to limit/ constrain their activities. Each of the three case study organizations had to identify who may oppose the issue they are advocating for and devise counter strategies to delegitimize their opponent's claims or constrain the opponent's ability to act.

In the case of WFW, who were raising demands for full ratification of CEDAW, this meant that state had to agree to changing discriminatory laws, including family laws which are based on religion. As discussed in section 5.1, WFW had decided to target the state as the key actor for their campaign. They had to deal with resistances within the state to 'altering' or reforming what are considered to be Islamic principles enshrined in the Islamic personal law. Their opponents, who were bureaucrats in the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs as well as in the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, based their arguments on the provisions in the Bangladesh Constitution that states that women and men are equal only in the public sphere. In the private sphere the various religious family laws would prevail. Interviews with WFW members reveal that they felt the bureaucrats were influenced by or felt accountable to the various conservative religious forces active in society and in politics, even though these conservative forces in 1990s were not in the forefront regarding CEDAW ratification (interview WFW 2, 16.08.08).

WFW was conscious of possible opposition and strategic in raising their demands. They aimed at delegitimizing the arguments forwarded by the bureaucrats without alienating them. WFW also stressed on the primary identity of the state officials as public servants that catered to the needs of different section of the people, including women. As the discussion in 5.1 shows, WFW did not raise the issues in such a manner at the public level that people could label them/ or the bureaucrats as anti-Islamic. They used the same Constitution as did the bureaucrats as a basis for their arguments. WFW referred to changes in other Islamic countries to present cases of how CEDAW was ratified and national laws amended accordingly, even within Islamic countries. It also used research to show how CEDAW's articles were in accordance with the spirit of the Constitution. An argument was also presented that Bangladesh does not have an Islamic Constitution i.e. it is not an Islamic state. They used the 1961 Muslim Family Law

Ordinance as precedence and argued that Islamic family law was itself changed during the Pakistan period. WFW also pointed out that the people have accepted various modifications to family law over the years without backlashes against the state. WFW also came to realize that external pressure was needed to push the cause for CEDAW ratification and accordingly built the NCBP network. This strategic placement of arguments and research on the one hand illustrated that the resistance put up by the bureaucrats did not have a constitutional/legal basis. On the other hand, it helped to demonstrate that there were other constituencies that the bureaucrats needed to serve. Most importantly, WFW's actions created space for dialogue within the higher echelons of the state.

NP faced a range of different kinds of opposition. The perpetrators of acid violence were the foremost opponents of the movement, given the movement was seeking to bring them to justice. Criminals often seek political protection in Bangladesh, and local politicians at times would also oppose the cases. Given this context, as section 5.1 showed, the judges, public persecutors, police and others involved had to be sensitized to the cases and the suffering of the victims/survivors. The framing in terms of rights and the eliciting of empathy from individuals helped to deal with the resistance. This type of framing delegitimized the counter discourse forwarded by the perpetrators that the acid survivor's had somehow 'deserved' the violent treatment. One NP member stated,

The survivors — were suffering because the perpetrators were roaming freely, or not being punished. They (victims) were being threatened. Also their family was being threatened. Also perpetrators got away by giving bribes ... the numbers were increasing. So we started looking for allies (interview NP 3, 14.09.08)

Resistance came from people in the law enforcement agencies, judicial system and health system from the state as NP had proposed monitoring these agencies. In this regard, NP tried to disarm the opposition and win them over. Various people had to be reassured that they were not being targeted/or that the monitoring was not being done to blame inadequacy of service provisioning. NP constantly highlighted in their negotiations that it understood the difficulties faced by these state actors but that monitoring was being done to provide better justice, care and services for the survivors. The state actors had to be brought over to the side of NP and other activists. There was a sustained and strategic process, which included involving key officials, local level service providers, and resistance was slowly transformed into cooperation.

In the case of BMP's work on political representation and empowerment, they identified religious conservative forces and the *Jamaat-e-Islami* as the opponents

of the cause. Though the Islamic political parties, especially Jamaat had benefitted from the provision for reserved seats for women, these parties have publicly opposed women's leadership in formal politics and their world view on women's political participation is limited. These parties have also at times mobilized around anti women's rights issues using people's emotions and religious sentiments. One of the BMP interviewees explained this in the following manner:

The strength of the fundamentalists is our biggest challenge, for the women's movement, all progressive movements and all movements for equal rights. (...) They do not want women to get out of their homes, to have equal rights. It is easier to reach people with religion than with other messages. Because people believe in religion therefore the fundamentalists are strong. It is difficult to establish that people can have their individual religions but that the State belongs to all. (interview BMP 2, 18.07.08)

BMP also stressed that from the time of since the right wing revival during the decade of autocratic rule (1980s), they were criticized because of their stand in favor of secularism¹⁹. For BMP, promoting secularism meant respecting various religions as having equal value and allowing these to co-exist, with religion remaining a personal matter. One interviewee stated that: 'BMP is criticized and members are said to be heretics (*murtaad*). We don't pay attention. (...) We want to see how far they will go' (interview BMP 3, 20.07.08). BMP continuously collects newspaper clippings of the statements made by their opponents and track their actions. They have also openly dealt with their opponents, delegitimizing their arguments on women's political participation and other issues²⁰ through court cases, public statements, and rallies.

In summing up, the discussion above shows that all three has been successful in packaging their arguments and mobilizing in such a manner that has delegitimized their opponent's discourses and constrained opponent's actions, and enhanced legitimacy of the discourse forwarded by women.

¹⁹The conservative political forces portrayed secularism as implying that those who were promoting it were anti-religious.

²⁰Fatwa (religious edict)

6. Influence of women's organizations

6.1 Negotiations with political parties

There are divergent views in the women's movement about relations with political parties and how far they are able to promote and protect their autonomous space and voices within political parties. Women for Women and NP's approaches were similar in that they were dismissive of the political parties and felt they had very little to gain but everything to lose from engaging with the parties. The analysis was the opposite for BMP who felt that the parties were their allies and would espouse their cause. Consequently, the three organizations studied took two very different strategies to begin with but have converged more and more after the disillusionment that BMP faced in working with allies within the parties.

Traditionally, BMP considered the Awami League and the various left parties to be their allies, particularly various 'progressive' persons in leadership positions²¹ who were seen as supporters. BMP as an organization supports the four core principles of the Constitution (democracy, secularism, socialism, nationalism) and Awami League was seen as the party responsible for the framing of the Constitution. Due to the BMP's origins, its founders coming from a background of student politics, and the fact that ideologically they still identify themselves with those parties (some being card holding members, others having family members who are card holding members), their relationship with Awami League and left parties is special.

There has been a shift in principle with which BMP is justifying itself, moving away from the political party norms to standards which it feels are particular to the women's movement. BMP itself acknowledged that earlier when the political climate and context were different. Mahila Parishad was closer to the political parties, now we have moved away" (interview BMP, 29.07.08). Since then there has been a gradual disillusionment and a feeling of betrayal when the various political figures and parties have failed to deliver on their various commitments.

²¹Implying those who subscribe to secular ideals and supported Bangladesh during the war of liberation.

Now we do not attend the meetings of the two big political parties. The nature of politics has changed. But we now have our own politics ... now we say that the women's movement has its own politics (interview BMP 3, 29.07.08).

Interestingly, BMP does not clarify what the women's movement's 'own' politics may be and what is their position regarding this politics. It also appears from these statements that BMP had retreated from the formal political arena given their lack of impact on getting the political parties on board with their agenda to politically empowerment women (see below).

Strategically BMP still continues to work with the centrist and leftist parties. Although there may be a reluctance to work with certain political parties, BMP is willing to work with the party in power except for *Jamaat*, trying to identify the right persons who can facilitate in achieving their goal. One interviewee stressed:

When I think about things politically and need to think of issues of voice then we call them too. We try and work with those in BNP who are more progressive such as X, he is not like *Jamaat* (interview BMP 2, 18.07.08).

There is a regret expressed that none of the parties lives up to the expectations that the women's movement, in this case BMP, has of them. The parties that the BMP members feel reflect their political positions are also felt to be very weak or even insignificant, which has limited the influence of BMP in emerging as a channel for representing women's voice in formal politics and influencing the political party agenda to change.

In spite of the close work with some parties and the success before the 2001 elections in getting both major parties to agree to direct elections to reserved seats for women, neither party was willing to take this up in the next Parliament. The parties perceived the costs in terms of loss of their male power base (i.e., men being sidelined in constituencies reserved for women, not being able to use these seats to distribute as patronage to men) to be higher than any potential benefits of ensuring women's effective representation.

For both NP and WFW, there was a feeling that they would lose their credibility and autonomy if they engaged with the parties. Various assumptions were made about the political parties being interested in cooption. In the context of a polarized civil society, where close relationship with a political party leads to a loss of credibility and legitimacy as social actor (see section 2), these organizations have had to 'jealously guard their non-partisan position' (interview NP 4, 02.12.08) and fought off party labels that have been applied to them from time to time.

In the case of NP there was a conscious strategy to avoid political parties. An interviewee pointed out that the organization, '[W]e did not know how to speak the language the politicians would understand. We knew how to talk to the secretaries of health and women's affairs...' (interview NP 4, 02.12.08). In fact, the organization has engaged with local politicians, e.g. the local MP, and has found it easier to engage on concrete issues rather than with the national level party and its politics. This is because the local political actors need to appear responsive on issues such as violence against women, given their proximity to the populace. In addition, issues such as dowry, domestic violence etc does not require redirecting/redistribution of material resources (i.e., government contract, license etc) so they are politically less costly. NP argues that this was a common failing of feminist organizations that of staying away from political parties.

WFW also acknowledged that their relationship with the political parties was weak. One interviewee stated, 'We were unable to use political contacts. We tried many ways through NCBP, we arranged seminars, but never got their support' (interview WFW 2, 16.08.08). The follow-up did not materialize. WFW were also dismissive of the women as well as men in the political parties:

We never had any respect for each other as a group, we never could build a rapport with them. They didn't think much of us either. .. we fully ignored them. We always though of them as someone's sister-in-law, sister or mother. So there wasn't much we could get from the political parties. They felt the same. We did call on some of the male leaders...However, their mindset is different—not that they are gender biased, they are consumed by their party politics and hierarchy. ..this is the limitation of this movement.(interview WFW 2, 16.08.08).

In summing up, all of the three organizations were disappointed in political parties and their lack of responsiveness and commitment to gender equality in general and the various issues these organizations were pursuing. In the case of BMP, there was disillusionment because earlier there had been hope but in the case of the other two organizations the approach was to distance themselves from the parties. The women's organizations would have stood to gain a great deal if the parties could have been brought on board on the issue of women's political participation. However, apart from taking a moralistic argument that this is good for women and the state, there were no arguments to convince the politicians on their own terms. The political parties also do not seem to consider the women's organizations to be part of their constituency and do not feel the need to justify their actions or lack thereof. (The same can be said of their own electorate, accountability still not being part of the political party culture!)

BMP's agenda on political participation has become part of political party rhetoric but there does not seem to be any real commitment towards it. CEDAW has not entered the political vocabulary. However issues of violence against women are increasingly addressed in the documents of the parties (see *Jamaat* and BNP election manifestoes and their promises to prevent acid violence). However whether this is in response to the demands of women's organizations or in response to the wider social mobilization, is not clear.

The question is why did the issue of violence enter the political agenda and not the other two issues? This is partly because of the following: i) acid violence is an extreme form of violence which had created a mass public demand for redressal which the other two issues lacked; ii) both CEDAW and political participation required changes that would lead to redistribution of male power and privilege and political patronage in a manner that the better services and treatment for acid violence survivors did not (even if the issue of violence is linked to male power). In fact, research on women's movement and their impact in other countries shows that women's organizations have had less success in engaging the political parties to promote women's agenda (Goetz and Hassim 2003) and that they have had more success in highlighting violence against women than in pushing for political participation of women (Basu 2010). This is partly because women's organizations have an antipathy towards politics/political parties, but also because of the dominance of the developmentalist agenda and GAD where the state emerges as the key actor to whom that women's organizations make demands (Goetz and Hassim 2003).

While there might have been costs of engaging with political parties (such as loss of credibility and legitimacy, co-option) there have been costs of not engaging with them, the most crucial one being the inability of the women's organizations to influence the wider political agenda and feminist demands entering the political discourse. The result of the lack of real engagement with the political parties is that the influencing potential of the women's organizations is limited and they do not have the access or recognition by the parties.. In the face of the current stalemate in relations with the parties, none of the three organizations seem to have come up with any new forms of engagement with political parties.

6.2 Negotiations with the state

The women's movement in Bangladesh has had strong views on whether to engage with the state or not, on what terms, for what purposes and also which government. During the 1980s the key concern was whether engagement with an autocratic state meant legitimising the state. These organizations questioned how

to balance between confronting and cooperating with the state to bring about greater accountability, responsiveness and change? This was in the context of a Third World State which is the main development actor and responsible for the fulfilment of various state responsibilities. As Rai (1998) argues, for the Third World feminists the concern revolves around when to be 'in or against the state?' While there were strong ideological views about this, there were also strategic options that selected organizations took during the authoritarian period. During the 1990s, in the post authoritarian phase, women's organizations have taken the opportunity to enter institutional spaces created by the state, voice demands and negotiate with the state. In the pre-and post-Beijing climate the State was re-valored as having a key role in ensuring gender justice by the women's organizations. This re-valorization was reinforced by the fact that women's organizations had little influence on the political actors in the formal political arena and the dominance of the development discourse when it came to women's rights issues in Bangladesh.

The transition to democracy in 1990 and the changing international discourse on good governance and participation during this decade also created pressure on the state to engage a wider set of actors, including women's organizations. This created a different 'political opportunity structure'²² (McAdam *et al.* 2001) for negotiating women's rights with the state. It also signalled a change in the role played by civil society organizations, including women's organizations which were willing to take on a more direct engagement in accountability functions (see discussion on NP's role in monitoring health and justice services to women by state actors), rather than advocating from the margins (Goetz and Jenkins 2005). As the discussion shows this shift in the nature of the relationship has increased women's organizations ability and legitimacy to represent women's interests.

For WFW, especially on an issue such as CEDAW, the State had the primary role to play. WFW felt that the Bangladesh Government machinery is more aware about CEDAW compared to many other countries and that there has been a high level of collaboration with the state. It was able to benefit from close relations with the bureaucracy and with the presence of their own members in positions of influence within the Government machinery at crucial points in time.

The argument for the full implementation and removal of reservations on CEDAW was based on a reference to the national Constitution (see section 5.1). WFW was able to establish various grounds for which it was in the Government's interest to

²²This includes: the relative openness of or closure of the institutionalized political system, the stability of the elite alignments, the presence of elite allies, the state's capacity and propensity for repression.

first ratify CEDAW, report regularly on it and also move towards removing the reservations on it. The international reputation gained has been important to the Government, whichever the party in power. The costs were perceived to be limited since the Government has been able to sign such Conventions without the effort needed to implement these in national laws, policies and programs. The women's organizations have tried to increase the costs by using the CEDAW Committee platform to publicly shame the government for not living up to its promises to remove the reservations and undertake modification of national laws to be in conformity with CEDAW.

NP's strategy was to make the state responsible for ensuring women's rights. The rationale for this was sustainability: 'Because we might be here today as an organization (and gone tomorrow), but the government machineries will stay. You need to institutionalize...' (interview NP 3, 14.09.08). One of the interviewees explained: 'We were not against the state. Our role was to enable the state. So the issue was developing capacity' (interview NP 3, 14.09.08). This meant looking for gaps in capacity, systems and resources in order to identify what should be advocated for. NP stated that they wanted to promote or encourage the state to provide services or even recognize the need for certain services that NP was piloting e.g. psychological counselling for victims of violence.

It was felt that public offices need to be strengthened and encouraged to deal with cases of acid violence. For example, the Public Prosecutor should be followed up and assisted for carrying out his responsibilities with regard to the prosecution of acid violence cases. An interviewee explained: 'We cannot create an alternative system. We need to fix the (existing) system' (interview NP 3, 14.09.08).

Invariably, influencing the government is much more difficult, time-consuming and laborious. The experience with policy and institutional changes agreed to by the Government has shown that there is a big gap between policy and implementation and that unless there is a pressure for implementation, many of the legal or policy level gains remain on paper. NP's strategy emphasized the creation of working relations with various levels of the state – e.g. with police head quarters, police stations and hospitals (see section 5.2 for hospitals). In fact, a member commented on the extent of responsiveness of government officials to the issue of acid violence and felt that it was much more than the organization had experienced before (which can be explained by the framing of the issue) and felt that 'active citizenship' can lead to a qualitative improvement in services and responsiveness of the government (interview NP 4, 2.12.08).

The approach of monitoring state interventions on VAW (health services, courts and police stations) developed by NP was a means of holding the state to account and also enabling evidence-based advocacy to ask for reforms or new policies, procedures or laws. The models developed by NP for monitoring state services used participatory processes involving the police, judicial system and medical practitioners for formulating guidelines of what should be monitored, how and when. This indicates a collaborative approach towards the state, where the state parties could also identify the benefits of a using these monitoring models. The quote below, on how NP tried to make doctors employed in the public health sector accountable, shows how a new relationship with the state was imagined by NP, and how it took a direct role in ensuring accountability:

We defined what the function would be, we developed the form that is used by the Director General (DG), the health complex... As for accountability, we tried to make it as participatory... For example, on the use of these health forms, we were consulted by the Ministry, we also invited medical experts — they provided inputs... When we presented it to the members we invited different types of stakeholders... (interview NP 3, 14.09.08).

BMP as an organization coming from a political background found it harder to engage with the state, especially during periods when they did not approve of the political ideology of the regime. After the initial reluctance, BMP decided to work strategically with the state apparatus and continued to take up opportunities to petition and lobby the state. An interviewee explained:

If we want to change laws then we have to go to the “State apparatus”. We will have to approach the PM and ministers. We cannot avoid the state structure to bring about such changes... [W]hen the BNP government came into power, Mahila Parishad felt isolated but kept on working as a lobby/pressure group... we are dealing with a position, not an individual. That is why we gave our petitions (to the BNP government)” (interview BMP 2, 18.07.08).

The pressure was kept up despite their reluctance to engage and apprehensions of being negatively received: “*kanai diaichi tula, pithai bendhaichi kula*” (we shut our ears with cotton and padded our back against blows; interview BMP 2, 18.07.08).

BMP interviewees pointed out that the state also acknowledges them as a legitimate spokesperson for the women’s movement: ‘We are sometimes called by the State to give our opinions on various subjects e.g. the Women’s Development Policy’ (interview BMP 1, 14.07.08). However, on the issue of

political empowerment the State never called BMP but they have approached the state:

We have worked with all the political governments. In the last government, we were never able to meet Khaleda Zia but we met her Law Minister. In the Awami League government, we were able to meet Sheikh Hasina. The impact in both cases was nil. But for a demand such as ours we had to approach the government... (interview BMP 2, 18.07.08).

In conclusion we see that all three organizations have been able to engage strategically and substantively with the state and bring about various changes. They took up whatever opportunities were available to them, as and when they arose. They have tried to establish state responsibilities in a number of areas, recognizing that some issues can only be done by the state. In the case of WFW it has meant using the opportunities afforded by the CEDAW reporting procedures to follow-up on full ratification and implementation. For NP, the engagement with the state was at various levels and in various forms: from service monitoring to policy advocacy. For BMP, it meant sustaining the movement with whatever party came into power. These types of engagements indicates a shift in women's organizations advocating change at the margins to a more direct engagement with the state through participation in various state committees and policy spaces. As briefly mentioned in section 2, what this shift also indicates is that given the dominance of the developmentalist discourse on how women's rights agenda had unfolded within Bangladesh, and the lack of influence of women's organizations in the political realm (and costs associated with engagement in that realm) had led these organizations to focus on the state as the key actor for making changes.

7. Conclusions

We sought to gain insights about constituency building strategies and their outcome through an in depth analysis of a number of women's organizations. Our analysis shows that the strategic packaging of the issues selected and engagement with their supporters/allies have allowed these organizations to: a) establish legitimacy as representatives of women's interests and b) space for the particular issue. Their strategic engagement allowed them to promote demands for gender justices and mobilize a wider audience and set of actors, other than their own membership and like-minded groups. The fact that groups were able to make opposing these agendas difficult for other social groups and organizations shows the strength of the constituency building process.

Interestingly, though these organizations mobilized supporters for different causes, their strategies in dealing with actors within the state, political parties and in building coalition and networks with other civil society groups, were similar. It is this similarity in strategies that draw attention to the importance of the wider contextual factors and political opportunity structure that influence the decisions of the organizations in movement building. These also highlight issues such as: a) whether the strategies used create sustainable movement; and b) the tensions that exist between the realities these organizations face and the feminist principles that these organizations profess to follow.

All of these organizations have assumed a leadership role over the coalitions and networks formed with other women's groups and CSOs. In forming these coalitions and networks, these organizations have tried to control the agenda and negotiation process. The impetus to control partly results from the polarized context within the civil society space where agenda could be co-opted by politically aligned groups that would reduce the effectiveness of the coalition. Interestingly, these organizations profess to facilitate a more participatory approach and equality among partners and this created difficulties in how the coalitions and networks operated. The power asymmetries and resulting 'facipulation' by the larger/powerful groups indicate that a disjuncture exists between how the values promoted by the organizations and the reality within which they operate. It also raises questions about accountability issues within the network/coalitions towards their members. Undeniably, there are also questions about marginalization of smaller, local, grassroots groups, which may leave out

certain specific concerns being unvoiced within these national level networks/coalitions. This has led to some questioning (including within feminists) of the extent to which these networks/coalitions are able to accommodate the diverging/differing interests of Bangladeshi women.

Personal networks and certain individuals have played key roles in launching and providing leadership in these movements. However, this raises questions about sustainability of the movement relying on these strategies. Two of the organizations have had to deal with their departure, loss or absence and had to struggle to continue the movement.

Non-engagement or ineffective engagement with political parties has had certain costs in terms of reduction of influencing possibilities in the wider arena. One of the key elements in making women's voice effective is through incorporation of feminist agenda into mainstream politics. The nature of partisan politics in Bangladesh and the inability of the women's organizations to change the incentives for the political parties make the engagement with these parties difficult and costly. However, none of the organizations have thought of alternatives ways of engagement other than the usual methods of engagement. This has limited the influence of the movement.

In the above context, the state has emerged as the key actor to whom women's organizations make demands for change. The organizations have selectively targeted responsive parts of the state, increasing their possibility of generating support within the state. We also see a shift in how women's organizations are engaging with the state in the post authoritarian period, moving from advocating at the margins to a more direct engagement in policy spaces and program implementation. This has strengthened the legitimacy of the women's organizations as interlocutors/representatives of women's interests. Their influence with the state has also been facilitated by the current good governance and other developmentalist discourses which has led to the creation of these new spaces for engagement and framing of measuring the success of women's rights movement in terms of policy and programmatic changes.

In terms of constituency building, all of the case study organizations have been successful in establishing their legitimacy as actors promoting women's interests. All of them had a broad understanding of their constituencies. This included membership, allies such as like-minded women's groups, NGOs, civil society actors, sympathetic state officials, political party leaders and the media. This particular way of understanding is a departure from the way in which traditional membership based organizations used to identify their constituencies. The

strategies of packaging and alliance building were influenced by this understanding. All of these organizations sought to reach out to these diverse groups and bring them on their side. This entailed making certain compromises, such as how issues were 'named and framed', how meanings were negotiated with allies and according to the context they were placed (see 5.1). For example, NP emphasized on invoking empathy for acid attack survivors. This was done through portraying them as people and highlighting how their family's suffering. They did not debate the comportment of 'good girls' with the police and court officials. WFW took a legalistic approach for promoting the ratification of CEDAW. This was done to provide both the organization itself and the state with the space to sidestep the criticism that it was being un-Islamic, thus, allowing potential allies within the state to push the issue forward. This also included trying to convince potential allies of their interests and the benefits that can be derived from supporting an issue or cause. These well chosen compromises helped the organizations to create space and legitimacy both for the issue or agenda put forward.

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