

# Starting at home

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**H**ISTORY is obnoxiously irritating at times. Ours will often cite the roles of women in 1971 as victims rather than participants of the Liberation War. Check out the Liberation Museum War website (a curious man's first few clicks towards understanding the history of Bangladesh) and you would spot a few paragraphs on women: One, about their massive contribution towards the language and national movements and two, on them as protectors of wounded war men and lastly, as rape victims of the war; where the last one even today seemingly implies a sense of national shame.

There is a quick mention of the Gobra Camp where women were trained for the war but Mumtaz's story in Yasmin Sakia's *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* would tell you otherwise about the involvement of women in the supposed 'male space.' "I have told them that I have come here to fight, not to do bloody stitching," she had said to them at the camp.

Naturally she found alternatives to finding arms and fighting the war, but what she did leave behind was a strong message that much of the contribution required from women

was and is often at home or expected to be within that sphere. They are after all the ideological, cultural and biological reproducers of the nation and much of what they set as examples for a progressive nation is pretty much internalised within children and their surroundings; giving birth to the immediate 'new' nation and of course the one that will be carried on for generations through their children.

Stepping over the 40 years of democracy, militancy and even the caretaker government's short visit to the country, one thing has definitely neither been addressed nor changed the various ideas of women empowerment. It is usually simpler to estimate a woman's state of empowerment through financial independence, as is being thoroughly exercised within the rural sector of the society. But how often can you measure the well-being and empowered mind-frames of the middle or upper-middle class females walking amongst us? Does the woman with her BA certificate scared of crossing the streets alone make her independent and powerful? Or do those who work two jobs yet beat their house helps feel more empowered backed up by their social status, thanks to the money they

make?

The third wave of feminism that started in the 90s celebrates the empowerment of women not just politically and economically but also on an acute individual level calling it the "personal empowerment." Women here can recognise and establish their identities which can even be contradictory. But the identities that most women create come mainly from their homes. Whether within the slums or from a lavished apartment in Gulshan, the lessons learnt at home are the ones that eventually shape up the basics of any women.

When those from the 50s and 60s sit next to their house helps discussing the arrogance of some daughter-in-law and mother-in-law dispute on cheap and yet amusing TV shows, you know that the "awareness programs" your local NGOs are trying to diffuse into the minds of young poor girls are going to be more challenging than anticipated. And why wouldn't they enjoy the bashing and trashing of upper-class Barbie look-alikes and the foul attitudes of modern rich women who are terrible wives and mothers? These are the times you wonder whether it is the TV representing the world or the world representing TV shows. The point is

that the messages that are being passed to both classes of female viewers, sitting next to each other, only strengthen a particular set of moral ideologies, which not only fail to often represent reality, but also effects the actions and behaviours of the women in the household.

The social evil of a "good girl" versus a "bad girl" or the portrayal of a socially inferior girl getting a man's attention only through her looks, or the label given to the rich woman in her sleeveless top failing to be morally stable are just some of the key ideas tossed around by TV channels as forms of entertainment. There is nothing educational here and one does not learn anything new about the world.

But that in itself is just one-sided. The shows can control how we may start to think but never vice versa. It is when these very actions and relationships or ideas are practiced behind every closed door that we have something to worry about. It is how your mother, who may be a school teacher, an NGO employee, an economist or even a homemaker abuses or treat those socially below them at home or on the streets that ultimately transmits this culture to the "new nation-builders" who later end up carrying the same old habit

and attitude for a never changing rudeness that most people in the country seem to exercise so well.

Honestly, where does the empowerment lie when women get together and complain about how awful it is that female garment workers and slum dwellers these days dare imitate the same fashion and clothing as themselves. So then who is more empowered? The house help who now owns a cell phone or the begum of the house who complains that maids these days are too distracted by such gadgets, better cosmetics and constant demands of higher wages? Amartya Sen reminds us that when a woman knows that she has a choice and she can exercise her "agency," she is empowered -- thus he is talking about this very class of women who suddenly realise that they too can choose the kind of bags they want, and they realise they can afford to buy the same beauty products bought by a well off woman once enough money is saved. But why does the fact that she owns the same product irritate the well off woman? Is it because she is buying something beyond her capability or is it because she, as a member of the marginalised group, now smells the same as the richer woman?

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AMJADUL HUQ/DRIK NEWS



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# Mainstreaming Resistance?

SUSHMITA S PREETHA

**A**S the generation born well after the establishment of an independent state, we accepted some truths as self-evident. Without ever having to fight for them, I, for one, took the grandiloquent ideals of democracy, equality and freedom for granted. Of course, as I grew older, I slowly realised that independence didn't always mean freedom; democracy didn't denote the will of the people and equality was often just an attractive catch-phrase used in development discourses. Disillusioned, but not yet disheartened, I sought to figure out what role we, as the symbolic future that soon will be present, should play in the shape of things to come.

My generation is often blamed for its unapologetic apathy, its unwillingness to take ownership of this country's problems and its contemptuous disregard for anything political. Perhaps the older and wiser generations wonder why they lost us along the way, why we don't embody the revolutionary zeal of the 1960s and the 1970s. Perhaps we, too, wonder what happened to that indomitable spirit of revolution that had made our parents and grandparents take up arms to fight for what they believed in.

Is the fault all ours, though? Or have the colours of revolution faded from everyone's lives?

As a 'degenerated youth of today', I

find myself struggling to figure out a meaningful way to resist the violence and violations that surround us on a daily basis. Perhaps I am too cynical for my age, or too idealistic, but I feel disenchanted with our civil society (a large part of it, at least) and its attempts to provide technical, bureaucratic solutions to issues of poverty, injustice and oppression. Is this what resistance looks like, I ask myself time and again, as I bury my nose in detailed multi-year proposals for funding for microfinance or awareness-raising projects, and participate in workshops where development workers sit in air-conditioned conference rooms in expensive resorts and talk about "empowering" the "poor".

Lest anyone misunderstands my sentiments and accuses me of harbouring vindictiveness against NGOs, let me just say that I come from a family of unrelenting NGO activists. For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to be a part of that illustrious circle of people -- the do-ers of our country who spearhead programmes on poverty alleviation, formal and non-formal education, health, family planning, agriculture, water supply and sanitation, human rights and advocacy, legal aid, women's empowerment and so on. I realise that Bangladesh's achievements in poverty reduction and human development over the last three

decades would not have been possible without the pioneering approaches of its development NGOs. However, I'm wary of the rapid NGO-isation of our civil society and its implications for our country in this era of neoliberal globalisation.

Post-independent Bangladesh was built on the four pillars of nationalism, secularism, socialism and democracy, but internal division, external pressure, corruption and successive military regimes had the effect of diminishing the progressive ideologies of the state in successive years. Increasingly dissatisfied with the state, many left-leaning activists initiated the NGO movement as a way of furthering their political and social goals. However, their radical edge was soon replaced by a focus on policy assessments, project executions, and social services delivery. This shift reflected donor preferences for a less radical model of civil society and for more emphasis on service provision. During the late 1980s, donors began to fund NGOs on a large scale. By the 1980s, small scale credit was recognised as an important potential means of tackling economic oppression, empowering poor women, and channelling resources to poor rural 'target groups'. Many NGOs began to emphasise the delivery of services, particularly credit, and to reduce its focus on strategies of social

and political mobilisation. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, they started to develop their managerial capacity, program design and organisation features that paved the way for their rapid growth. The process of expansion was facilitated by the simple, standardised nature of the product being offered. The microfinance model was widely accepted by the donors, who poured in money to expand the development sector of the country. This expansion continued apace through the mid 1990s. These NGOs argued that empowerment could come through equipping the poor with organisational and practical skills, supporting them with needed resources and instilling them with the confidence necessary for taking actions to improve both their social and economic lives. No longer interested in movement-oriented goals, structural analyses of power or class struggles, these NGOs began to promote an approach that treated the symptoms rather than the causes of poverty. Implicit in this development model is the assumption that the market is benevolent, and that providing the poor with access to the market means that they can successfully compete in it and find solutions to their livelihoods needs. The individual, under this paradigm, is "posited as both the problem and

the solution to poverty," which, as Sangeeta Kamaat points out, is oddly reminiscent of the World Bank's own notion of empowerment. The World Bank's Participation Sourcebook states: "As the capacity of poor people is strengthened and their voices begin to be heard, they become 'clients' who are capable of demanding and paying for goods and services from government and private sector agencies. ... We reach the far end of the continuum when these clients ultimately become the owners and managers of their assets and activities."

But is that really our notion of development, whereby the citizen is reduced to the client and the market replaces the state as the distributor of social services? The new role of the state, under this paradigm, becomes the removal of any obstruction that may come in the way of market-led growth and development instead of the provision and equal allocation of social welfare. Consciously or otherwise, mainstream NGO discourses depoliticise the poor, by taking the focus away from the state's redistribution policies and/or global trade policies. What happens, then, to the idea of resistance when civil society itself loses its radical potential? What happens to the spirit of subversion when the 'progressives' can no longer critically analyse their

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