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NEXT STEP

Up close and personal with Naripokkho



Naripokkho is one of the earliest women's activist organizations in the country, with a legacy of 30 years now. Mrs. Shireen Huq has been with Naripokkho since its conception, and as we talked about the organization and its challenges, perks and quirks, she laughed, made snide remarks, expressed concern and rage and even cried. Years of experiences have made her ripe with knowledge, attention and courage, but nothing has strained her and Naripokkho's commitment and dedication to making women's lives better in Bangladesh.

MALIHA MOHSIN



Beginnings stem from unprecedented realizations

Mrs. Huq believes that various factors play their roles when making such major decisions to move into activism. While the factors are more individualistic when it comes to one's personal journey, there is an organizational journey too.

In 1983, around 33 women from various NGOs had participated in a sponsored workshop for women's development workers. They dedicated the session to the workers themselves, to listen to their experiences and challenges in doing a job considered very courageous at the time for a woman. They found that the women were very reluctant at first to answer questions about themselves because their work had always put the needs and struggles of other struggling women first.

It was then that they had realized that amidst all the existing women's committees and women's wings of political parties, they also needed a third voice that would dedicate itself to what they believed none of the other organizations did.



Every mistake and challenge is a lesson and a stepping stone

As a group of middle class women with very little resources, their societal and financial constrictions, taught them that some changes don't really need much. As they began working, they realized that instilling values such as education, consciousness and awareness of others' basic human rights, tolerance, empathy etc. was something they could aim for without a very large financial reserve.

With every motto, slogan and theme, they've had to face backlashes from critiques that represented all of society. Mrs. Huq says that with time, they've learned to be diplomatic and better equipped to handle such harsh backlashes; their experiences have taught them better to not rely on expectations of support from even the self-claimed progressive members of the society. With sex and gender issues being very sensitive subjects in our largely conservative society, bold moves such as criticism of yellow journalism and media sensationalization of sex-scandals were met with negative portrayals of them.



The snowball effect of priorities

They started functioning in weekly meetings arranged in their residences, organizing projects to create awareness and raise funds. Only in 2009 did they finally move into an office. Year after year, their causes grew bigger— women's issues grew on to entail the need to fight discrimination against sex-workers,

removing the stigma on sexually harassed women, establishment of one-stop centers for abused and harassed women and emphasis on DNA tests and forensic evidence etc.

While the central focus had always been on women, the issues weren't always standardized or one-dimensional. And it has been this basic priority to truly help women that eventually led them to grow larger, older and multi-faceted as an activists' organization.

"This is my life, and everything else, other jobs and research works for other organizations were only jobs" - Shireen Huq

What strikes me the most is this organization's dedication to inclusiveness. The members do not talk of themselves; they talk as a collective that is represented only by Naripokkho. I believe that it is in the living example of such dedication to causes and movements that instills these values on a personal level. Ultimately, Naripokkho has stayed true to its cause, not distracted by media, publicity, or even recognition.



DON'T SETTLE!

Activism may be your full-time job, passion or career, but try to move as far up the hierarchy as possible. Aim for a higher degree because it will open more doors for your movement.

16 questions before you launch

1. What does your target community need?
2. Are your skills and services needed?
3. Are you starting a new organization or with an established one?
4. Are you creating challenges for other organizations?
5. What resources and how much time will the project require?
6. Can you follow through with your commitment?
7. Is your project sustainable?
8. Can you meet your goals on time?
9. Do you have the relationships you need in the community?
10. Who will help you navigate culture, expectations and needs?
11. Can you facilitate focus groups?
12. How will you communicate with stakeholders?
13. What evidence or data will you need to gauge impact?
14. How will you share results and metrics?
15. Can you evaluate your own personal growth?
16. How will you get feedback from the community and stakeholders?