

Bangladesh at 50: Women's Empowerment: From Home to Factory and Beyond

List of speakers:

Hameeda Hossain, Ain o Salish Kendra, Forum Magazine

Shireen Huq, Naripokkho

Naila Kabeer, London School of Economics

Khushi Kabir, Nijera Kori

Moderator: Marty Chen, Harvard Kennedy School; WIEGO

Transcript Begins:

Chelsea Ferrell: Without further ado, I'd like to introduce Marty Chan who's the moderator for our next panel -- Women's empowerment from home to factory and beyond. Marty Chan is a lecturer in public policy at the Harvard Kennedy school and co-founder Ameritas international coordinator. And senior advisor of the global network women in informal employment, globalizing and organizing known as WEIGO and experience development practitioner and scholar. Her areas of specialization are employment, gender, and poverty, focusing on the working poor in the informal economy.

Before joining Harvard in 1987, she had two decades of resident work experience in Bangladesh, in India. Dr. Chen co-founded and for 20 years led the WIEGO network, which is well-known worldwide for its work to improve the status of the working poor in the informal economy, through stronger organizations, improve statistics and research, and a more favorable policy environment. Dr. Chen received a PhD in South Asia, regional studies from the University of Pennsylvania. She was awarded a high civilian award, the Padma Shri by the government of India in April, 2011, and a Friends of Bangladesh Liberation War award by the government of Bangladesh in December, 2012. Thank you, Marty.

Marty Chen: Thank you, Chelsea and thanks again to the Mittal South Asia Institute for hosting this conference. Welcome back to those who attended the first half day of the conference yesterday. And welcome to those who are joining today. If you missed some of the panels, the conference is being recorded and there is a link, um, already on YouTube for the recordings.

Today, the three panels are on women's empowerment, The role of civil society in Bangladesh's development and the Future of Bangladesh. From 1975 to 1980, I worked at BRAC, a very large NGO from Bangladesh. It was small at the time, and I worked in the women's program. My life and career were shaped by the inspiration knowledge I gained working with village women in Bangladesh.

Those were the early days of women's empowerment and much has happened since both practice and thinking on women's empowerment have evolved significantly, not only in Bangladesh, but around the world. So it is a distinct pleasure and privilege to introduce the speakers on women's empowerment today. Four pioneering champions for women's rights and

human rights, more generally.

Hameeda Hossain started her career in publishing as an editor with the Oxford university press. She was an editor of Forum, a political weekly banned by the Pakistan army in 1971. She obtained a PhD in modern history from Oxford university for her thesis company, Weavers of Bengal, textile production for the East India company, 1750 to 1830. As a freelance writer, her articles in defense of human rights, women's rights, workers' rights in Bangladesh have been published widely, and she has engaged actively with women's rights and human rights movement in South Asia.

Khushi Kabir began working on citizens' rights immediately after the liberation of Bangladesh in 1972, in 1980. She joined Nijera Kori, a national NGO known for creating strong autonomous organizations of the rural poor to assert their rights and ensure their entitlements as citizens. And she remains passionately involved in promoting women's equality, rights of marginalized communities, environmental justice, food sovereignty, democratic practices, and accountability.

Naila Kabeer is a joint professor of gender and international development in the departments of international development and gender studies at the London school of economics and political science. She has extensive experience in research, teaching and training concerning gender, poverty, labor markets, livelihoods, social protection, and collective action. She has published many books and articles and advise many bilateral and multilateral organizations.

Shireen Huq is a women's rights activists working on gender human rights and development. She is a founding member of Naripokkho, where she has worked since its founding in 1983. She is also a founding member of the committee for the protection of fundamental rights, a platform of human rights defenders in Bangladesh, and is a co convener of the Bangladesh civil society platform on justice for the Rohingya. Most recently she has been involved with the founding of Feminists Across Generations, an intergenerational Alliance to combat gender based violence.

So I can't imagine a better set of speakers on the topic and the overarching questions that the four speakers will address are -- In what domains or aspects of their lives have Bangladeshi women of different classes, experience, change, positive or negative. What factors have contributed to this change and what are the future frontiers, challenges and opportunities for the empowerment of Bangladeshi women of different classes?

The flow of the panel is as follows. We'll start with initial reflections from each of the speakers for about 20 minutes total. Then we'll have a sort of round table discussion with, uh, some additional questions from my side, for the speakers. And then we'll turn to the questions from the audience. So please do put in your questions in the Q and A function, and then we'll have a round of closing remarks by the speakers. So lets us start with Hameeda.

Hameeda: Thank you, Marty. And I should thank Mittal's for sponsoring this subject. I know that 50 years of Bangladesh has bought everybody's fancy, but very few centers have talked about

women as usual. So thank you very much for inviting me. We are now meeting about five days before the international women's day. So I hope we have something positive to say though I must admit that I haven't followed your brief very strictly. I just kept saying whatever I wanted to say. I hope it fits into the larger pattern that you have suggested. Let me first briefly mention how women's lives may have changed in the last 50 years. It is a mixed bag of positive initiatives and negative outcomes.

Women may have moved forward, some steps in political participation and economic opportunities, but have they gained freedom and justice? I would then like to talk about how women strategized against discrimination and even to resist violence. This has happened in both their public and private lives. In the last 50 years, women have emerged from the invisibility to feature in Bangladesh's development discourse.

Official reports acknowledge them as drivers of the economy and as peacekeepers. Posters of a woman, government worker or another in a uniform jealous of women's contribution to the family economy and their entry into the market. To some extent national policies have followed international plans to encourage women's education, but in recording successes and women's development, we must recognize their limitations.

First there's a wide disparity between women of different communities owing to their class, their ethnicity, their location, and their religion.

Gender, maybe a common mark of discrimination. We have to take account of the disparities in economic, political, and social relations between different communities of women and between women and men of the same community. Let me just give you a few examples that we can discuss in more detail later, I suppose. Official statistics show, an increase in girls education or advances in maternal health. But even if education has increased in terms of numbers, we need to look at what the content that education is. Because a few years ago, I remember that there were some stories or articles by women writers, which had quickly been removed from a great reader in one of the primary schools and removed by the government schools.

So I hope they've been put back again because otherwise one would question, what sort of education women would be getting, or the young girls would be. But women's access to facilities is more so in urban areas, which leads to lower education standards in rural areas, while investment opportunities have expanded for women, for women entrepreneurs and they are now having access to various bank credit facilities. And with some of them even receiving awards in Dhaka women of the rural community in the Chittagong Hill tracts are losing their land in favor of commercial or tourist projects, which is going to be owned by other capitalist owners.

In contrast to this, let us look at women's strategies. Because the women's struggle for change has had a long history. We can go back from long before independence, in fact, how they were struggling for their facilities or for their rights, even under the colonial system. But then beginning in the fifties that is even before Bangladesh came into being, women's demands for equality in the family hold for reform of personal rights through a uniform family court.

Although, this was not acceptable to the minority communities because they thought that they would be deprived of what little rights they had, or they will be deprived or disoriented from their religion. Then these communities pushed for reform laws within each community. But even, so this has yet to take place and there have been no discussion in the skate sector or outside to see how these laws can be changed and to see how women would have equal rights under these laws.

At the workplace, women have demanded equal wages and safe conditions, but industrial accidents have left workers without work and without compensation. Promises of compensation and insurance schemes have yet to be met. I think we all know what has happened Tazreen and run Rana Plaza where over 2000 workers were affected, where many died over 1100 died in Rana Plaza.

Over 200 died in Tazreen, and their families were left without compensation. And the workers who remain injured continue to feel the need for help, for support system to enable them to survive. But this has not been done yet. And I think this is an area which we need to look at because we can't constantly be drawing upon the work and contribution of the labor, even the cheap labor of women's workers and not do anything in compensation. In the villages, traditions, and customary practices have made women vulnerable to oppression within the community.

And they have permitted village elders or religious leaders to dictate a moral pole that subordinates women to not only within their own family, but to village elders or to the local religious leaders. It's interesting, women's movements have used the legal strategies to assert their rights under the constitution. They have said that they would not, particularly since the constitution itself talks about secularism in its preamble, it seems sensible for women to argue that we would want our rights under the constitution. Let me give you a few examples. The basic principles of the constitution of a democracy, nationalism, socialism, and secularism, and the women very early on, were part of the national struggle.

And as part of the national struggle, they also claimed their own rights. And under these rights, particularly of secularism, they expected equality and justice, but in many villages in Bangladesh, particularly the more remote villages there is a practice, or there has been a practice of fatwa or religious edicts, which has prevailed in conservative villages, particularly here. We find that village women have been forced to accept these codes, which sometimes result in violence. And many times it's results in subordination and exclusion. In 1993, as an example, for the first time, a report appeared in a local newspaper that a woman had been penalized by a fatwa given by an Imam, Noor Jahan was living in Morby, Bazaar, near Sylhet. She was made to commit suicide by what the Imam and his followers pressed upon her.

This media report caught the eyes of a woman activist who on behalf of a party filed a case. Several women's groups then got together and pursued the criminal and civil charges up to the Supreme court. Finally, in 2014, the Supreme court gave a ruling that fatwas giving penalties were illegal. You must realize that took over 20 years to get this judgment. Whereas in the

meantime, women continue to be subject to such measures, but once, this constitution ruling was dictated by the court, women were free then to use this judgment, to see that such fatwas were not given. During the session I may mention that there was a rash of fatwas in other villages as well. Obviously not after the Supreme court ruling, but between 1993 and 2014. And during this period, because we had been activated by the death of Noor Jahan, every time there was a fatwa in some village women lawyers then would pursue these cases when other activists campaign in public to raise awareness and the collective awareness led to collective action.

This judgment has been used by women in different places now to resist the power of the Imams or the village elders. It has helped them to appeal to the police, to complain to the police whenever they feel that there is an attempt by a village elder or any Imam to take action against women and to oppress them. In another incident of sexual harassment by a group of students whose impunity came from their belonging to the ruling party, women students took up the challenge and filed a writ petition in the high court. The court issued guidelines for both educational institutions and workplaces to set up anti harassment committees.

In their place, whether this work effectively remains to be seen, whether in fact they've been set up in all places we don't know yet, but I think there's an opportunity for us to use the court judgment and to see that whatever laws and judgements there are. We should try and monitor, if you can use this as a framework for action against the perpetrators.

Marty: Hameeda, time is nearly, nearly up.

Hameeda: Contesting violence or subordination women's groups had worked together along with legal aid groups and human rights defenders, to sustain campaigns for -- one -- creating a collective consciousness or awareness of rights under the constitution. And this has been done not only in urban areas, but in many other villages as well.

Second -- challenging dictates from village elders, which violate their rights. Three -- setting up support systems for legal defense and for enforcement of rights. We now of course have a fourth generation of women, activists, and even feminists the ones that she didn't really be talking about, but there are also others and we will then see what are their demands and what are their preferences and how they intend to work towards implementing and enforcing their rights.

Marty: Thank you Hameeda, that provides a wonderful historical overview and some of the legal and collective action strategies. Thanks so much. Next, Kushi.

Kushi: I think I leave out all the statistics and the changes that have happened over the 50 years. Since we'd been Bangladesh, we've been an independent country because we have Naila on the panel. And I can just say that since my work immediately after liberation and going off into the villages to work and still working with rural women and with urban women too, I see

a lot of differences and changes. Changes that are positive, but have also things.. changes that we could do without.

The changes that are positive. The first thing that hits me is that the life expectancy of the average Bangladeshi citizen, whereas it used to be about 53 or 4 years around at the time of the liberation war after we got independent, It's now 71 point something. And before it used to be like women lived three years, less than men average.

And now women outlive men three or by three or four years. So this shows a trend that there has been quite a lot of changes in terms of providing the kind of healthcare services, et cetera, which has ensured people could live the life as they're supposed to be living. It has also, we have also seen that, maternal mortality rates have gone down, et cetera. From a very personal point of view, what I've seen as in the early seventies and even up until the late seventies going into the beginning of the eighties -- there used to be, the really poor in the village would either have one cooked meal a day and sometimes they would have to forage for whatever they could find to eat. This was in the seventies, late seventies, especially after the flood and the famine in the aftermath of which and everything left its impact on a lot of people.

And that was most of the time when I spent most of my time living in the village itself. Now everybody has at least two cooked meals a day. In their homes, you can see the difference and the quality of what they're eating and the quantity of what they're eating has changed too. So I'm just giving some examples, showing that there has been changes. Women before in the economic and the rural areas, they were involved in agriculture, only the post-harvest technology that is within the homes.

Since mechanization and rice mills, and even the thresher is now mechanized and it has been taken from home to home and sort of commercialized now, women are now working on the fields. And I remember when I started working in the villages, people would think that if you walked through the fields, the crops would all shrivel up and wither. That's not the case anymore. Now that women are working, of course, women are getting less wages than men would get. It was very big wages in those days. Then it was 10 Taka was an average wage. Whereas now you can get about 400 to 500 Taka, but for the women, it would be 300 to 350 Taka for the 400 to 500 taka that the men would get.

So though the wages may have increased between the men and women, the kind of disparity that existed then still exists now. And that continues despite the fact that what Hameeda has also spoken about and others will speak about that. Women are now out doing every single kind of work possible. They're out in the markets, they're out doing small businesses. They are growing their own food. They're into all kinds of economic activities, but even then there is a dichotomy in the homes, et cetera. You can see that the wages and the work that they do is not counted as being the main economic, since 72, there was a well law that cost land that is government owned land agriculture land, which is not in use, would be given to the land peasant. It would be distributed amongst the peasants especially those who are criteria of those who are Revit loaded, et cetera. Women were not included then.

Later on in 87, women did get included. As spouses. So it will be in the name of the husband and wife, but when there was a divorce or when the man left, it would mean that he would say you're getting it only as my wife. And so he would take her portion too. And she never had the agency to be able to say that that's in my name and I'll get, take control of this.

Women who are single women, women headed households by then, this was, these policy changes started coming in 87. So women as head of households was accepted as there are women, but women headed households don't have a man. It was stated that women would get it if they only had an able-bodied son. Now, which is still, despite all the movements, all the pressures, all the petitions that have been given, there still continues to remain. So we can see that disparity and discrepancies remain quite strongly. In many cases where changes have been made in terms of inheritance the inheritance laws still remain very archaic, no matter which religion you belong to.

And that the governments are not willing to touch. I think Shireen would, at some point I hope touch on the CEDAW and the reservations Bangladesh has on the CEDAW. But I hate, because I'm conscious about time, I don't know how much more time I have.

Marty: Four minutes

Kushi: One of the big major things that women face now. I mean, before I think the first thing that like in 72 or right up to the whole of the seventies, anyone visitor visiting Bangladesh, the first thing that they would say was we don't see any women visible on the streets publicly anywhere. Now, women are visible everywhere, but for those of us who did go out and went on public transport. I think we were much more secure at that time. And now there are more women who are out in the workforce. As Hameeda mentioned, women, as I said, are also working as agriculture labor, and all kinds of jobs, every single job that is possible, and that is available, whether it's in rural area, whether it's in urban area, But the violence and harassment on women have increased a lot.

The insecurities women face have become even more acute and much more pertinent now than it used to be when we were working. It wasn't that there wasn't any human rights violations. There was always human rights violations. It wasn't that there was no harassment of women. There was harassment of women. It wasn't that there was no violence. Of course there was violence. It was not that there was no insecurities. Yes, there were insecurities. But the fact is now the kind of violence being used in not just gang rape, but the kind of, it's just the intensity and the brutality I find has increased so much.

And if with all the positive steps that we've been able to take so far, in terms of women's empowerment, economic empowerment, if your basic security is threatened, your ability to walk, to work, to live, to survive, to have a house you can call your own. If all that is threatened, then this whole economic security doesn't really mean much.

Marty: Yeah, you're right.

Kushi: From the state, the security, the digital security act, which is in place, acts as a curb. So one of the main to your ability to be able to speak and to ask questions, to ask for accountability. So democracy, which was one of the major principle pillars of the constitution, and the reason for Bangladesh to be created for us all, for the whole liberation war to have happened. So that democratic spaces now sinking to such a level that there's hardly any democratic space left for anyone to speak. And a lot of us also do self-censorship for fear of the references reprisals that we may be facing. So in this context, while we have many areas that are positive, I think there are also areas that we need to look at very thoroughly and very scrutinized... very strictly to see that. Yes, are we actually at the path we are supposed to be going and do we, as citizens of this country have agency, do we have real citizenship or are we just citizens in name only? Do we have the right to be able to question to demand answers? Do you have a say in what we want to be able to do? So, and in this context, I'll just say there's a growing trend of religious backwardness and trying to control where you are for women. And I'll just say that often religion is used as a means of control for women, rather than religion being something that people believe in that field, a solace in their own personal lives.

So this, it's been used politically and I did raise a lot of the issue, which doesn't mean that we have not had some very positive steps too, but I think it's been a mixture. Of 50 years of Bangladesh, we've had both very positive steps and we've had areas that you're very concerned about.

Marty: Thank you Kushi for bringing out the positive, but also the lingering persistent inequalities, disparities and the newer forms of setbacks, Naila, over to you.

Naila: I think I'm very glad that the question asked us to distinguish between how gender relations may or may not have changed across different classes. And I think Hameeda said at the very beginning that people from different classes, religions, ethnic groups, et cetera, have not experienced the last few years in Bangladesh in a uniform fashion. On the other hand, I think it is important to acknowledge which the other speakers have done that change has happened and that a great deal of it has been positive.

Women from very affluent families and they are still a small minority, have been the main beneficiaries of the steady growth and income inequalities that we have witnessed over the past decades. They are much more likely to be integrated into the global economy and into global patterns of consumption. But we have also seen changes lower down the income distribution. One of the most important and one that does not get much airtime in the literature of 50 years in Bangladesh is what it has meant for women to control their own fertility, to put an end to the endless cycle of childbearing, to have to be reliant on methods that their husbands control. To look forward to life expectancy. That now resembles what the life expectancy of other women in countries at the same level of development is. We have also, and others have spoken of this, seeing the expansion of economic opportunities for women in the form of export garments business, community expansion of services, overseas migration and of course micro finance.

I've always been struck by almost all the changes and interventions that have taken place in women's lives have been accompanied by major controversies, not just between those who are opposed to gender equality, but also those who support it. And that is whether we talk about family planning, we talk about export factories, whether we talk about micro finance, what reason of course is that these seldom form of rights, they are generally backed by instrumental rationales, whether it is population control, child nutrition, foreign exchange earnings, or something else that those in power consider important.

But as a friend of mine once said, it is not good to treat people as instruments, but we must remember that instruments can fight back. We have seen women from poor and lower middle class families take advantage of these opportunities and use them to renegotiate the relationships that matter to them on terms that they consider to be more acceptable. Those who are worried that this will lead the breakdown of the family need not worry. Well, what they will lead to, hopefully it's likely more democratic families. And I believe that we are seeing that in Bangladesh. We may look at a lot of the violence in the public domain, but the research that I do suggest that women have much greater voice within families than they had before.

And as all of these economic opportunities, our research tells us that it is micro finance that has reached the most within not only women and poor families, but the better off as well are taking advantage of it so much. So as the controversies continue to range microfinance has become a routine aspect of the lives of women and one of the main routes through which they are able to earn an income of their own. It may not see them become political actors. But it has seen them become economic actors within the boundaries of their home.

What else has changed to a variety of routes? NGO, discourses access to media, public discourses, education migration is an expansion of horizons. Women no longer refer to themselves as frogs in a well, as they used to do when I did my PhD in a field work in 1979. And even if they cannot change their own lives, they want to change the lives of their daughters and some level of education that will allow their daughters some degree of independence in marriage is a key route. I don't want to dismiss the political changes that have taken place over the last several decades, whatever we may think of them, several decades of having women as prime ministers of this country has had an effect on the popular imagination. And I hear it in the voices of women in the village. We have seen greater opportunities to participate in local government. We've seen voting rights and we have seen encounters if not active involvement with women's rights groups, human rights groups, and social mobilization organizations of the kind that are represented on this panel.

And all of these have had some impact on women's consciousness and the recognition of their own humanity. If not necessarily of their equal citizenship, there is far less female deference on display when we go to the villages of Bangladesh or to the slum areas of Bangladesh, but the blockages and the barriers remain.

The speakers ahead of me have spoken of some of these. I want to focus on two extreme forms of influence that I think have exacerbated the problem. On the one hand, an Orthodox form of

Islam imported from the middle East that requires women and men to abandon the somewhat more tolerant form of Islam that prevailed in favor of a less tolerant and a more austere form of Islam that frowns on the singing and dancing that has been the essence of Bangladeshi culture.

And on the other hand, the sexualization of women's bodies through social media, through Hollywood and Bollywood and the West. Once again, antithetical to what we regarded as Bengali culture. If women remain confined to their homes, if their economic activities are curtailed to those that are considered socially respectable, it is because both these kinds of influence, not only do little to challenge the male breadwinner ideologies, but they continue to regard women in the public domain as open to harassment and violence.

Public safety is something that any country should undertake any country that takes the rule of law seriously should seek to uphold. But we are yet to see that happen either in Bangladesh or in South Asia. More generally.

Marty: Thank you so much for bringing out all of the hidden contradictions within some of these areas of progress and the ongoing debates. Shireen over to you.

Shireen: I'm sorry. There was an internet disruption. I was gone for a while. So I missed what Kushi had said, and I think I missed most of what Naila had said, but anyway, from my vantage point, I think what I would like to start by talking about is, despite all the gains and advancement, what seems to have persisted throughout these five decades is a continued prevalence of a culture of misogyny on the one hand and a growing culture of impunity on the other and together make for a particular kind of vulnerability that women and girls are particularly vulnerable to.

And the culture of impunity particularly important, because it indicates a situation where perpetrators who are connected in one way or the other to political power, be it at the local level or at the national level seem to get away with all kinds of crimes. So this is a situation, but women are finding that, especially in this pandemic period actually. And before, of course, we are finding that very brutalized forms of violence have surfaced and whether the reporting has increased or whether there's an actual increase in incidents, it's difficult to say right now, but there's certainly what has surfaced is very, very brutal forms of violence that women are being subjected to them. The other one thing that has persisted is discrimination both in the law and in social practice. And again this is an important factor in undermining women's achievements over the five decades. And the two together threaten to actually undo a lot of the development gains over the last five decades.

Kushi has already mentioned that in terms of life expectancy, we have seen tremendous gains. For both men and women. The sex ratio has improved between a situation between males and females have improved and there is greater literacy and also more and more women entering higher education. Now these are also actually creating new challenges for society. I mean, particularly for men that women are entering professions, diverse professions. And in a way challenging to what exclusively male domains.

So these are some of the things, some of the changes that we are seen. The new Alliance that we have formed, and this is what gives me hope. Is that young women are coming out and saying, we are not really going to put up with this. What are young women saying? They are saying that not only are they not willing to put up with it, but they are also prepared to go out and confront some of these situations and what they're focusing is on working with schools, working with even younger people and particularly on comprehensive sexuality education. And so there's a great shift from my generation. To those who had unwittingly maybe considered legal strategies as a way out and younger women are saying no. We have to actually work on challenging the culture of gender-based violence and the one way to do that is to actually work with young people. I think this is the first round, so I will just end here.

Marty: Thank you very much. What I'm finding, which is so important in all of your remarks is this. Women have moved out of the private sphere into the public and the violence and all of that is also moved out somewhat from the private to the public and that contradiction I'm feeling that the gender based violence is not only at the hands of the men in the family, but it's at the hands of men in the general public and by the state.

So the gender based violence has spread out. I'm pleased that we've talked a lot about the intersectionality of gender, class, ethnicity, community, because I do feel that's the future of a feminist analysis and also of gender action, if you will. And I'm intrigued by this shift that Shireen talked about, but Hameeda had also foreshadowed, which is the education curriculum and the culture of being a focus for future action, not just changing laws, right. That you're changing the soft norms, if you will, not just the hard norms. And the one thing I want, I'd like to hear your thoughts on all of that mix of things, but I'd also like to hear about collectives and collective action, because I've heard about collective action a bit, but how much are we helping women organize themselves around these issues? And I know that we are, but I'd like to hear more about that. So I'm just throwing out those issues. And if each of you would have around further reflections on that cluster, and maybe I'll start, I'll go in a different order. Maybe I'll start with Naila.

Naila: I think the legal strategy was one strategy. It was not the only strategy ever. I think what you were familiar with Marty and Kushi was familiar with was about grassroots mobilization, was about trying to build up awareness from the grassroots level pro collective action through association. In some cases organize around access to microfinance or savings and so on. So the legal strategy has always been important. One of the elements of the grassroots mobilization was to educate people about their rights, what the constitution told them about their rights. What I am very troubled by is as the financial sustainability agenda of micro finance has overtaken development, the agenda that aspect of the microfinance organizations has disappeared. And you see organizations like Asha that shifted from being quite active at the collective mobilization level to becoming very narrow and microfinance financial sustainability agendas.

So I think what is missing? And again, attempts here and there was how to change at the level of schools. I think that is something that there was attempts at adult education, but less fewer

attempts I'm looking at schools. So I think the collective action aspect of it is now having to be manifested in other ways to what we had seen.

And it is becoming more difficult for the reasons I think, perhaps Kushi talked about the closing down of space for democratic activism. So that part of it is I think difficult. The changes that I've talked about have been very much at the level of individuals, you know, the political awareness that comes about to people being free, to come together and to deliberate and to discuss. I think that that side of it has been shrinking so my focus has been very much on... the others may disagree.

But certainly the conversations I have with people in the countryside is that that level of domestic violence that we used to talk about does seem to be less, there are women who will say it's gone down, but the level of domestic violence in the public domain, on the buses and going to the market, all of that has grown and it has taken some of the frightening forms I think the others talks about.

Marty: Thank you. Kushi, do you want to pick up on that? You're on mute Kushi. You're on mute.

Kushi: Can I come later?

Marty: Alright. Hameeda, can I call on you?

Hameeda: Yeah. Just taking an Naila's point where the domestic violence has gone down. That's very difficult to say actually, because earlier periods, there was not that much reporting, but women are now actually reporting it. And the numbers are quite.

Naila: I'm not basing it on people's reporting

Hameeda: But I think it could be that women are now actually filing complaints, which would to me, seem like a positive thing to do. But Bangladesh, Marty I think is a very conflictual society, like even in the time that Kushi was talking about it earlier, when there was more cooperation and during this, conflictual society, But it is very violent at times and leading to public violence. I think whenever there exists violence, whenever society is violent, the first ones to go under are obviously women and I think sex baseline is, becomes much easier, particularly in a culture, a gang culture, which is, now seems quite a prominent in Bangladesh, a gang culture, which is encouraged by all perpetrators.

Were encouraged by the political parties because they had the impunity to escape, whatever things happen. I think one has to look much more closely at how women's groups are working together to some extent, more perhaps than they used to before. And these are just some, maybe NGO, some maybe just volunteer, but I think they have taken on different kinds of strategies. Legal being one, because it brings things to the fore and certainly changes in the culture is what we all want, but how do we bring it about, because there are also people on the

other side, I would say the more conservative, Orthodox, religious, whatever you want to call them, who're trying to impose their own culture.

And it is also, they're working together on the basis of various other political failings that we seem to be seeing in Bangladesh today. So if there's greater authoritarianism, authoritarianism, which prevents people from speaking out and here, I think, I would like to mention that I think women have been quite active in speaking out, particularly on issues concerning their own freedom of speech and freedom of speech of other people.

Like recently the use of the DSA act. I remember a long time ago. Many many years ago when Taslina Nasreem had written up poetry there were lots of women's groups, actually women's groups who called themselves also believing in fundamental human rights, who were opposed to what she said. Some of us work actively in her defense, not because we supported what she said, but because we felt, she had the right to say, and I think many of us felt that this is one way of encouraging people to come out.

No matter what they want to say is their business, but this is probably shrinking now. And one is looking behind one's shoulder. Who's listening to me, shall I say it or not? So I think these are the things we have to look at, and I think we have to work actively towards. Also it's true that legal strategies can't work by themselves, but on the other hand, laws are being enforced, are being forced down our throats and we need to protest those. And we need to see that our laws are based on international standards today. Everybody from the UN down to the human rights commission has talked about how the DSA should be abolished. I think we need to look at these factors.

Marty: Kushi

Kushi: Yeah. So I just like to say that it's an interesting discussion that's taking place and interesting takes that we are taking from our own experience, our own perception, our own contacts with people that we have.

It's true as women, as you were saying, women are more moving, more and more into the public domain. The violence, public violence against women has increased much more, domestic violence in the sense may have decreased because women who are now out in the public domain, working, earning, and having access to other organizations and people are being able to speak out and find that they may have a support group.

I find that wherever women have found that they have a support group they feel that they can speak out but it's in the public sphere where the impunity, the issue of impunity comes out is where those who feel that they can get away with the kind of extreme violence of the worst kind, as I first said, I haven't seen the kind of brutality and the horrific kind of violence being pushed on women and young boys too. And very often it's people who either have the support of the religious communities or the support of the political party, or they have the finance or the money to be able to buy their way through.

And I do see here a lot of women, young girls saying that they want to fight back. They have the strength to be able to want to fight back, but they don't know how long they could last without having a sort of support system. So at least I can see what the change I see in this 50 years is that women are more aware that just being beaten up every day of their lives is not something that is acceptable.

Being a woman means that they would like to speak out more. A lot of women do speak out and go to court. Yes. But also violence has also increased publicly in the public sphere much more. And it's also used politically, like in 71, rape of women was used fully as a political tool, even now in the villages, those who are trying to, or in the different areas, even those who are trying to gain control in that area, these young thugs are using rape as a means of control in that area to show how powerful they are and how much impunity they have. So that exists.

But I think on the other hand, also, there are laws and women are aware of the laws. I see across the villages because I still work in the villages. Most of my information comes from all the women that I work with in the villages. They know the number nine, nine, nine, and very often when they are being pushed, they may even, a lot of them do have phones, click photographs, or just click nine, nine, nine, and that I didn't see in the seventies. I mean, people didn't have mobile phones in those days at all, but even then it was something that I see now that people are much more aware of in saying that they can get a support group. They can get support groups of seeing that whether they can get help from somewhere.

The laws are there, but the laws are not implemented. So there are people who are trying to gain their own strength by trying to ensure, can we ask for accountability? Can we ensure that the law is in our favor? So there's, you know, I think in 50 years we've moved in a way of being passive recipients of what is being done to us as women. To someone who has a voice, but we don't have control. We don't have control and we are not sure. And this is not just women. It's for a lot of others, those who are less powerful, the more marginalized you are, less control and voice you have.

Marty: All right, Shireen, I'll let you come in and then we'll turn to some questions from the participants, the audience sharing.

Shireen: You wanted to know about collective reaction. Naripokho initiated a national network of local level women's organizations, local women's clubs, women's associations, women's meet et cetera. And we formed a network, which consists of the 530 such organizations across the country. And that was our first experience in trying to create a kind of national voice which is not based on just people in Dhaka. And the two things that the network chose to focus on was that one was again, violence against women, because that is what threatens everything they had gained through education, through income generation activities, through employment, et cetera.

So violence was one of the issues. The other one is political participation. I won't use the term empowerment, but political participation as a way of gaining some kind of social capital that

women can then stand on in terms of confronting attacks, confronting various ways that women are undermined by society. So in its initial, I would say in its initial 10 years saw quite a lot of success in confronting issues locally, but with the power of a national collective behind it. And unfortunately the issue then that came up was resources. Because to maintain such a national network actually requires resources, which these organizations on their own do not have.

So we saw a very good first 10 years and then the not so good second, 10 years in the sense that the first 10 years we had donor support from agencies. And when that ended, we actually, unfortunately saw that this was not working. So it is still there. It's not as active as it at me, but I think that that is one of the models, uh, that we need to pursue is bringing together local level women's groups and into larger, uh, platforms.

It's not as active as, but I think that that is one of the models that we need to pursue is bringing together local level women's groups and into larger platforms. The other thing that I think is important to mention here is women in local government women being elected into seats in union councils, union positions upazila.

I think the fact that women in these two levels are directly elected wrote about a sea change initially that this meant thousands and thousands of women across the country were sitting in local councils. Although there was a lot of issues about their terms of reference, whether they were allowed to function, whether they were allowed to exercise their authority or, or whatever powers they were given. But I think those were those feeding problems that there, but the fact is now that there are women who are in local councils in and union level upazila and I think that also has brought them out. It changed both in perception as well as in behavior, towards women, in rural areas, as well as urban areas. So for me, I can just do our very important is that autonomous platforms, as well as local, local elected bodies.

Marty: Let me just bring out a couple of... three questions that have come in through the chat. One is the issue of child marriage and I have heard that with COVID, child marriage is actually increasing so that issue is sort of reflection of cultural concerns. And then there is a issue of which women in particular are left behind based on disability, based on single, widowed. And another one is, the third one is political participation, local and symbolic of the women as the head. But there was a question about more political involvement. So in your final round of remarks if you could pick up on one or other of those themes. The child marriage, the women left behind, political participation. So I think that I will go in the order that you spoke at the beginning for the final round. They will be Hameeda, Kushi, Naila and Shireen. Thank you so much. Hameeda over to you.

Hameeda: In the issue of child marriage, I think the government has recently enacted a law. Not a law, not very clear about this. It seems to be a ver regressive law as it allows the parents to decide whether a couple can get married. The important thing is the official age of marriage, but whether this should be left in the parent's decision because from what I gather from people I have met, from other women I have met. In some cases, it could be quite a few cases, where young girls were being forced into relationships that they didn't want to engage in. But the

parents were using this law as an excuse and saying that we think it is okay, so that was giving them a special out.

On the issue of political involvement, I am not sure really what we mean by politics. If we mean by politics in parliament then that's a very authoritarian system that we have right now. It is a one party dominated system. Even if there were more than one party, there were particular class of people who get into parliament. As we can see from the debates in parliament with what is going on outside the parliament, none of those issues, particularly issues maybe relating to women's violence or their opportunities at work whatever else we are talking about outside, it doesn't feature very much in parliament. I haven't noticed members picking up issues and even submitting, I don't know really if they have submitted any bills in parliament. I think one of the reasons this is happening is because -- kinship is a very important factor in politics in Bangladesh. When women are getting into parliament or even local government, many of them are related to the powers that be, one way or another.

And so when they get into parliament or when they get into local council they're also reflecting, the party, the ideas and thoughts of the party that they belong to. And not only that, but also within their own small circle who they represent are mainly people of the same set. So perhaps they are not speaking as feminists, but as members of some other thing and today's parliament, I mean the vast majority belongs to the Awami league.

And so are the women, and when any issues come up relating to women, I think they tend to look towards the party leadership or even the party's speaker who was also a team member and decide on those. So I'm not sure how much that is going to make a change to women's lives, but I think there is a different kind of politics outside that, and think there are women and the village communities and village of women, whether they're members of NGOs or whatever, the organizations they tend to come together. And it's an issue based discussion that they're engaged in. I think that is likely to take us somewhere. Thank you.

Marty: Kushi...

Kushi: What was the second point that you had raised Marty? One was the child marriage, the other was the political group...

Marty: Different groups of women that are sort of left behind

Kushi: Start with that first. I think disability is very much... women who are physically disabled or even intellectually in some ways, mentally disabled or whatever word one uses have borne the brunt of being left behind, also of being violated the most. So that's a group of people we have to think of. The indigenous communities, the religious minorities. Absolutely. I would say is if you come from a class background that you don't have the money and you don't have the ability to build up the kind of rapport and systems and the support systems and get support from others, they would be the ones. Women from those backgrounds would be the ones that are the most vulnerable and they are the ones who, even if they do go to the police station, the police

station will never take their cases seriously. The village will force them to compromise and not take things seriously. So, when we talk about development we are reaching a middle income or whatever income country now the gap, the divide between the rich and the poor has exacerbated. Also, you have a much wider range of disparity amongst the poor and the rich. So amongst the poor, the women from those that are mentioned are, of course, those with different sexual orientation, which is commonly, everyone is called the hijra though there are many nuances between that.

Also, when Hamida mentioned the law, the law states that the parents can make the decision, but the court has to, the magistrate has to give the permission and so on certain cases, et cetera, et cetera. And I know one case which we are dealing with now in which.. our groups are dealing with now actually when I was talking about having support systems, it's what Shireen was talking about just having a collective. Support of different women's organizations, whether they're village women's organizations or different NGOs or different women from different leaders -- lawyers or journalists or whatever, or even just thlandless groups.

We find that where a landless group, the women are very strong. They're taking part in all the local shows. So they're also being the people who are doing the, who are actually the judges. I wouldn't like to call it a court, but that informal system of mediation. So we have a lot of women who are now on those committees. We have women who are aware of what the roles are, who just go and observe and raise issues, saying that we don't agree with what you're saying, because this is against the law and this cannot be, you cannot make this kind of a decision.

So yes, where there is awareness and where there is a collective organization and collective strength, there has been changes. So in such a case, there's a young girl who was raped by and she, her father wants her to bury the rapist who's a Imam. She went against the father, rang nine, nine, nine, and has moved out and has the courage to say that I know that I wouldn't get any support, but I'll stay. I mean, that kind of courage that somebody in the village has is something that makes me think that things may be changing more than we know.

Marty: Thank you. That is a powerful example. Naila...

Naila: Times are changing much more than we know. And I think we need to acknowledge both what is changing in positive ways, as well as being aware of what is getting exacerbated in negative ways? One politics. I think I was doing research around the time that the law change around the way that people got elected into local government.

And it went from being kind of nominated to being directly elected. And you could just see in front of your eyes, the quality of the candidate, when you have to be directly elected was so much better because she had to go out and mobilize support. So, you know, the form of the way that politics operates in the formal domain, I think makes a huge difference.

You know, whether it's direct election, whether you build a constituency or not. I think secondly, the issue of law comes up again and again, and I think it's very important. I think this business

of having a law around child marriage and making it easier for parents to marry off is awful because they used to be, the fact that the law forbade it was a huge defense that young girls had, who didn't want to get married early.

And the other thing I think is when I look at change, it will not happen uniformly. What happens is about the multiplication of possibilities. So I talked to two women, both of whose husbands have left them in a very bad situation. One said all my life is a sea of ocean and I'm drowning. Right. The other said I'm going to take the bastard to court.

That woman would never have been able to say that in the seventies. But now she is aware that there is a possibility to do something about this. So it's that alteration possibilities, which I think is positive change, but we have forces against it. And they're coming from many different directions that a lot of the people in the panel have talked about the way that politics has become a very negative force in people's lives. I don't know who's left behind. I think I am very aware of how it has excluded indigenous groups. You know what? I certainly look at religious minorities and so on, but partly because of the geography, my own research has been guilty of kind of marginalizing the experiences and lives and trajectories of indigenous groups and of women within those groups.

Marty: Thank you, Shireen...

Shireen: Yes. Couple of things. I think on the issue of child marriage, it's persistently been high and I think Bangladesh is the fourth highest, prevalence of childhood lives in the world. And I think the amendment that Hameeda mentioned or referred to was a kind of clever move by the government to change the age of what would we call child marriage, as a way of reducing the figures, but it was actually that, that amendment did no good to anybody. But anyway. Child marriage, I think one reason why persists is that parents worry a lot about so-called honor that resides in women's bodies. So the fact that there is generally a absence of rule of law does not help.

It's parents are worried about their girl walking to school two miles away or coming back late in the afternoon. One of the things is that it's not that they don't want their daughters to be educated. They do, but they worry about a loss of honor. And so it's better to get her married. And then she is the responsibility of another family. And so this is one of the things that's driving the figures of child marriage. Figures continue to be high, the pandemic hasn't helped and it is reported that during the pandemic child marriages have gone up.

So this is one, I think one reason. But I think until we actually attack this whole notion of honor residing in our bodies, this fear of loss of honor is going to continue to make parents want to control their daughters. And one way of doing that is get them married off.

There was a question about trade unions. Do we think that trade unions could be a positive. I'm forgetting exactly how it is phrased, but anyway, yes. I think in terms of gaining workers' rights and benefits, yes. Trade unions can be an important route. However, I think we see now two

kinds of scenarios. One where we have the traditional trade unions. And one where we have independent trade unions, even independent women's trade unions. And I think in both cases, the fact that women are participating more and more in unions, is it positive?

Yeah, but of course on the whole, the worker's rights are being attacked. I think Hamida is better placed to talk about all this because she's working with trade unions directly and with so many end up with the forum, which is the workers safety for them. But I think in that whole sector, it would be good if women's organizations actually got more involved, either through dialogue or and Nariphoko has now taken up in the last couple of years in particular, in the ready-made garment sector unions. So we hope to see some positive outcomes that comes from this collaboration, from this interaction. So that is definitely a positive.

I think the other issue is on the whole women feel very let down by our politicians. And this is where I think there's a lot of disappointment and anger at how politicians have repeated and consistently... what is the word... consistently kind of deprioritized or invisibilized issues related to women's rights and women's benefits and particularly the issues related to equality. So we still have 50 years later, we have discrimination in law, which no government, even governments, which are sweeping majority will, whether it's through election the night before or whatever, but even with the sweeping majority, they have not been prepared to take on these kinds of nail reforms, which would remove formal discrimination at least.

Marty: Well I just want to thank the four of you. This has been so richer discussion, and I think what the future I hear going forward in terms of analysis and action is the intersectionality that we've talked about. The cross issue alliances that become important. The women's organizations teaming up with the trade unions and other groups around these really critical issues. And then the hope in the next generation, the intergenerational alliances around gender based violence. And in the next panel, we will hear from a younger generation feminist activist.