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Rethinking feminist activism in the digital era: A case study of a social media campaign from Bangladesh

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Abstract

Contemporary feminist activism's deep engagement with social media and popular culture is offering women opportunities to mobilise for women's rights. The introduction of hashtag activism (e.g. #MeToo, #ShoutingBack, #Followed and #Grabbed) as a form of feminist movement to address sexism, misogyny, rape culture and sexual harassment (SH) in public spaces, has taken social media by storm in recent years. Although, these hashtag activisms were introduced in the West, they soon arrived in the Global South. Women in Bangladesh welcomed and actively participated in #MeToo on Facebook. Motivated by #MeToo, a number of Bangladeshi women also introduced a women-only Facebook group titled '*Nari: Mohila Bus Service Limited*', translated to English as 'Women': Ladies Bus Service Limited. This group aims to ensure women's safe travel by introducing women-only bus services to the major Dhaka city routes. The existing SH literature (Rahman, 2010; Rahman & Nahrin, 2012; Zohir, 2003) fails to address this new dynamic of women's movement in Bangladesh. Therefore, this study uses a qualitative research approach that include ten life story interviews to explore the nature of this Facebook group's initiative to address SH on public buses in Dhaka.

Introduction:

In recent years, the issue of women's empowerment in Bangladesh has advanced tremendously with a study by the World Economic Forum (2018) showing an increased level of female labour force participation and an escalated female educational enrollment, exemplifying the extent of women's advancement. However, the alarming increase in the statistics of gender-based violence is largely hindering these advancements. Sexual harassment (SH), as a form of gender-based violence, has become a major concern for the country, with an alarming rise in reports of women and girls being harassed in public spaces including streets, markets, public transport, workplaces and educational

institutions (Mahtab, 2012). A Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2014) survey found that 43 percent of female respondents reported having been sexually harassed in a public space, mostly on the street, in markets and on public transport (Islam, 2014). The statistics related to sexual harassment on public transport are even more alarming. In addition, a recent study conducted by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (2018), found that around 94 percent of female commuters in Bangladesh experienced verbal, physical and other forms of sexual harassment while commuting on public transport. As well as initiatives adopted by the Government of Bangladesh and a range of NGOs, female commuters in general are also collectively trying to find a solution to this problem.

Using Facebook, a very popular form of social media in Bangladesh, female commuters are sharing their experiences of sexual harassment on public transport in order to raise awareness of this issue (Panday, 2018). A number of women commuters, mostly from middle class backgrounds with tertiary level educational qualifications¹, have engaged in Facebook-oriented activism. They established Facebook groups to offer a platform for women commuters to share their SH experiences and to collectively find solutions to SH on public transport. An example of such a Facebook group is 'Nari': Mohila Bus Service Limited. The group aims to reduce sexual harassment on public buses travel by launching women-only bus services on the major routes of Dhaka city. Further, the objective is to create awareness by motivating members to talk about their personal SH experiences, by soliciting donations and by drawing to the attention of the Government of Bangladesh and NGOs the need to secure monetary support to introduce women-only buses ('Nari': Mohila Bus Service Limited, October 14, 2017).

This study considers this 'Nari': Mohila Bus Service Limited Facebook-based initiative as an example of women's autonomous digital media activism. Using a qualitative research approach, the study documents the narratives of Bangladeshi women engaged in the Facebook activism. The study analyses these narratives to answer the following questions: 1) what motivates women to participate in Facebook-centered initiatives, 2) to what extent are these initiatives influenced by similar initiatives in the West, and 3) to what extent do these initiatives influence feminist movements in Bangladesh. Thus, this study explores the nature of the Facebook-centered activism in Bangladesh and concludes that the Facebook group has been directly influenced by contemporary global feminist activism, exemplifying a new form of digital feminist activism in Bangladesh. The women participants of this Facebook group have been identified as women activists in this study.

Literature review

The Second Wave Feminist Movement's emphasis on sexuality, family, workplace, reproductive rights in the 1970s has resulted in drawing scholars' attention to SH as a form of gender-based violence (Gerhard, 2001; Herzog, 2010). Sexual harassment is defined as 'any unwelcome sexual behavior which is offensive, intimidating or humiliating. It can be obvious or indirect, physical or verbal' (Mahtab, 2012, p. 157). According to Mannan and Ahmed (2014), SH takes the form of ogling, winking, passing comments in the form of sexual innuendo, touching, groping, stalking, sending lewd text messages, 'prank' calls, display of pornography, threats and intimidation, acid attacks, and unwanted 'love' proposals. Sexual harassment of women is prevalent worldwide (Harding, 2015). Feminists and human-rights activists in Bangladesh have always protested against gender-based violence issues including domestic violence, child marriage, sexual harassment, rape and acid attacks (Mahtab, 2012; Hossain, 2017; Nazneen & Sultan, 2012; Banu, 2016), but although the Government of Bangladesh is strongly committed to eliminating gender-based violence, the number of sexual harassment cases is on the rise.

Contemporary feminist activism depends largely on popular culture and digital media to collectively work for attaining the goals of feminism (Crane, 2012; Jansen, 2011; Budgeon, 2011; Mendes, 2015; Genz & Brabon, 2009). The introduction of hashtag activism such as #MeToo, #YesAllWomen, #ShoutingBack, #Followed, #Grabbed, and #EverydaySexism are a few examples of such feminist movements that use digital media to collectively protest for women's rights (Mendes, 2015; Nally & Smith, 2015; Crane, 2012; Jansen, 2011). Although these activisms, credited with addressing sexism, misogyny, rape culture and sexual harassment in public spaces originated in the West, they soon arrived in the Global South (Peters, Besley & Araya, 2014). India-based organisation Blank Noise introduced #INeverAskforIt in 2010 and #SafeCityPledge in 2012 in order to raise awareness of sexual harassment in public spaces (Kearl, 2015, p. 57).

Likewise, women in Bangladesh are also actively participating in #MeToo. Sexual harassment experiences of women on public transport occupied most of these 'Me Too' stories shared by Bangladeshi women on Facebook. The Government of Bangladesh's 'Vision 2021' branded as 'Digital Bangladesh', is committed to providing citizens access to fast, efficient and reliable digital technology (Rahman, 2015). The number of mobile subscribers in Bangladesh rose from 120 million in 2016 to a little over 140.7 million in 2017, an 18 percent growth in just one year. Almost 73.8 million of those mobile subscribers access the internet with Android mobile phones, making up 93 percent of the total number of users ('Mobile phone users in Bangladesh', 2017). This increasing digital connectivity has provided women in Bangladesh access to digital media. More and more women in Bangladesh are now using Facebook as a platform to protest and are raising their collective voice against SH. An example of how middle-class, educated women commuters in Bangladesh have also participated in this contemporary global trend of using social media to protest SH, is the introduction of the Facebook group being discussed, 'Nari': Mohila Bus Service Limited.

However, there is little qualitative analysis of the specific SH narratives of women commuters in contemporary research (Rahman, 2010, Rahman & Nahrin, 2012, Zohir, 2003) or related to SH in Bangladesh. While several studies investigating incidents of sexual harassment on public transport have been carried out in response to the unprecedented increase in reported cases on public buses, these studies adopt quantitative data collection approaches that only measure numbers of incidents of violence. They only show that women face multiple problems such as unwanted touching, sexual comments and sexual molestation when using public transport in Dhaka (Rahman, 2010, Rahman & Nahrin, 2012, Zohir, 2003). So, while these studies illustrate the problem of SH on public transport, they have largely failed to acknowledge the presence of recent autonomous digital-media-centered initiatives by women in Bangladesh to examine these issues on public buses. This paper addresses these knowledge gaps in research on sexual harassment of women on public buses in Dhaka by exploring the nature of women's digital media initiatives. This study sets out to enrich and deepen research in the areas of gendered space and sexual harassment of women in the Bangladeshi context.

Research method

This research design uses a qualitative research approach including life story interviews to document the narratives of Bangladeshi women engaged in the Facebook activism. In the contemporary world, social media has emerged as an important tool for feminism (Crane 2012; Jansen 2011). This study considers social media (i.e. Facebook) as a research tool and a space for soliciting and collecting data. However, to collect the data on women's engagement in a Facebook-oriented activism, this study appoints life story interview (LSI) technique. According to Atkinson (1998, p. 8), 'a life story is a fairly complete narrating of one's entire experience of life as a whole, highlighting the most important aspects'. Eight general members of the Facebook group along with the two

Administrators² of the group were interviewed following LSI approach to document their narratives on their engagement in the Facebook group 'Nari': Mohila Bus Service Limited. The narratives collected from LSI have been shaped by larger public narratives forms, local narratives that circulate in families and communities and individuals' social relations. Therefore, these narratives of women activists have been analysed in this study not just empirically but as detailed texts that can reflect their understanding of SH as well as the nature and dimension of the activism they initiated (Gagnier, 1991; Kuhn, 2000; Anthias, 2004; Morgan & Nelligan, 2018). All these interviews were conducted face to face during a six month's fieldwork at Dhaka city.

The research participants were aged between 16-30 with a middle-class economic background and they were recruited using the snowball sampling procedure. Each interview lasted around 45-50 minutes. Participants were asked open-ended questions structured under four sections:

1. The emergence of this Facebook-centered activism.
2. Women's understanding of SH and how that has motivated their activism.
3. The actions adopted by this group till date
4. The initiative in relation to feminism

These allowed each participant to share ideas, experiences, and the reality of their SH initiative using social media. The subjective meaning carried within their stories helped to explore new dimensions of feminist movement occurring in Bangladesh in a Facebook-centered activism.

Each of the ten interviews were recorded using high quality audio recorders and these audio files were later transcribed in a word document. Thematic analysis procedure has been followed to analyse the gathered data. Western Sydney University, Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this study and all the ethical code of conducts suggested by the committee have been followed accordingly. Before commencing each interview, written consent was recorded from participants confirming that identifiable information (e.g., name, age, cell phone number) would never be disclosed at any point of the study. Therefore, in this paper the names of the research participants have been replaced by pseudonyms.

An overview of 'Nari': Mohila Bus Service Limited

The members of the Facebook group 'Nari': Mohila Bus Service Limited, identified this group as an initiative aimed at ensuring women's safe travel by introducing women-only bus services to the major routes of Dhaka city. According to a Facebook post by the founder Administrator ('Monika', aged 26) of this group:

We all have experienced sexual harassment in buses in Dhaka city at some point of our life. Very few of us may not have such experiences but I have seen many women to get off from bus before reaching her destination because they were afraid of travelling in a bus at night with no other female passengers. Even rapes inside buses have become common incidents now-a-days. We cannot change the behaviours of these male perverts, but we can take an autonomous action to initiate a new women's safety project to save ourselves from harassment. 'Nari': Mohila Bus Service Limited project aims to launch women-only bus services to some major routes of Dhaka- Mirpur to Motijhil, Mirpur to Azimpur, Uttara to Shanir Akhra, Gulshan to Shanir Akhra, Khilgaon to Azimpur. We will finalize these routes according to commuters' (women) opinion. This project requires collective action of women and so as a first step of the initiative we have opened this Facebook group. We are expecting women to join this group, like this group and to share the links of this group so that we can have as many members as possible. The group is only for women because it will be a collective project of women commuters. The more members we have, the easier it will be for us to take the second course of action. I would also request the members to share their stories of sexual harassment in buses in the group to create awareness about the necessity of introducing such a project ('Nari': Mohila Bus Service Limited, 22 September 2017).

When Monika (aged 26) was asked about the activity of the group so far, she further explained the group's plan of action:

SH on public buses has been a part of our lives. As men are the one who act as SH perpetrators, I felt that women-only bus services can be a solution. From our experiences of boarding government-initiated women-only buses, we found that this can be an effective way to address SH. However, Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation introduced two women-only buses on Mirpur-Motijhil route, which used to provide services twice a day. As a result, very few women could avail this opportunity. Therefore, I attempted to introduce 5/6 buses on major Dhaka city routes. My initial plan was to launch to buses on Mirpur-Motijhil route and on Mirpur-Magbazar route because there is a high demand for buses on those roads. It is not possible to take care of this huge initiative all by myself. So, for financial aspect, I firstly aimed to collect donation from the members. I thought to reach most of the women using public transport in Dhaka city through this group. Then, I would ask them to donate a minimum amount of 1000 BDT. I thought if I can get at least a million members and ask them to provide 1000 BDT each, I can raise up to ten million BDT, enough for buying at least two buses. The rest can be bought with a loan. I am not at all interested in the profit. I planned of handing over all the money to the bus management committee.

In another post made in the Facebook page, the two Administrators of the group expressed their interests to seek financial help from the Government of Bangladesh and NGOs as well. As another administrator of the group ('Mishty', aged 23) explained during LSI:

After we create a cooperative association of women according to our initial plan, we aimed to go to different governmental or non-governmental organisations to ask for financial help. However, I do not want to dump the full responsibility of financing on Government of Bangladesh or any other organisations. It is because I know their primary intention would be profit gain, whereas I want this initiative to be a not for profit venture.

During interview, when one of the active participants of this group ('Rabeya', aged 22) was asked how far they have advanced with their formal procedure to launch buses, she argued:

I am aware that two admins of our group along with 4/5 other members went to meet with the heads of the Bus Owners' Association to seek their approval for launching buses ... As far as I know we were on process of submitting formal application for getting route permit. Unfortunately, we did not get that much response from other members and the plan did not go as we expected.

The narratives of these participants shed light on the fact that this initiative using Facebook as a platform was introduced with high expectations of reducing SH on public buses. The initial plan of creating a women-only transport option was suggested because the admin founder identified male perpetrators as the primary cause of SH. It was perceived by the founding members of the group that women's mutual experience of SH would motivate them to spontaneously participate in this initiative. Therefore, the group's initial plan of action for carrying out this initiative included motivating women commuters of Dhaka city to participate with both financial and voluntary support and soliciting monetary and legal support from Government of Bangladesh and NGOs.

Factors stimulating women's participation

Following on from the action plan of the Facebook group outlined in the previous section, the question of what motivated women to be a part of such an initiative to reduce SH is further explored in this section. Most of the interviewees of this study claimed that they have faced various forms of sexual harassment while boarding public buses. The administrators of this Facebook group aimed to use this common experience of sexual harassment to mobilise general women commuters to take a collective action against SH. As one of the administrators (Monika, aged 26) reported:

I want to share my experience of SH on public transport with you. A year ago, while travelling to Mirpur, I was sitting on a window seat and a man sitting behind me tried to grope me from behind. I did not notice at first but when I did, I became so traumatized that I could say nothing. It affected me for a long time, and I used to get afraid to board any public transport. Even if I managed to board a bus, I used to get very frightened thinking someone might touch me inappropriately. This traumatizing incident motivated me to take an action to address SH on public buses. I felt that even if I stop using public buses to avoid SH, there will always be women and girls who would experience SH on public buses. Hence, we do need to initiate necessary actions to stop SH. Women-only bus services can be an effective way to deal with these incidents. I assumed that as most of the women members of the group would have similar experiences of SH, they would come forward to offer both financial and moral support to implement this initiative.

Another general member of the group ('Fatema', aged 24) also echoed this statement:

Every girl who commutes on public buses has multiple experiences of SH. Therefore, when a senior of my university told me about her plan to initiate a Facebook group that would unite women folks to introduce women-only bus services within Dhaka, I was interested to support her whole-heartedly. Both of us felt that as women go through this experience of SH on a regular basis, many of the women would feel enthusiastic to support this noble cause financially.

Participants also cited the social and legal obstacles faced by Bangladeshi women seeking justice after SH incidents. Sexual harassment as a form of gender-based violence has gained little attention in the existing violence prevention laws³ in Bangladesh (Mahtab, 2012). During interviews, participants from the Facebook group acknowledged this problem. When asked, none of the interviewees were able to identify any specific laws in the Bangladesh legal justice system, which is active at present to stop sexual harassment. The interviewees felt that there are inadequate laws to address SH in Bangladesh and therefore they themselves should come forward to take actions to stop sexual harassment and introduced this Facebook group under discussion. The way that social barriers such as victim blaming, and patriarchal legislature structures (where most of the judges, police and legal practitioners are men), makes women more vulnerable to SH, is also reflected in research participants' responses. As two participants summarised:

There is an inadequacy of specific laws against SH. This encourages men to commit sexual assault inside a bus. Moreover, the victims have nowhere to go with a complaint. In most cases of SH, all other passengers take the perpetrators' side and start blaming the victims. Who am I going to complain? To the police? They will mock me because to them, it has happened either because of my attire or it is just another trivial case of 'eve teasing' that does not require any action! ('Sumaiya', aged 27)

It is hard to get justice in Bangladesh. If I protest SH, I will be blamed. One day while I was travelling by a public bus, a young boy who was standing behind me pressed my breasts and was planning to get down in a hurry. I instantly reacted by slapping him. To my surprise, I found that no one in the bus came to support me. Instead, I was being interrogated by the passengers for slapping him! This encouraged that boy to be more aggressive and he kicked me twice before getting down. Had there been any law or implementation of law, neither the passengers nor the perpetrator would have dared to behave this way! ('Monika', aged 26).

The above-cited statements force us to consider SH as it illustrates rape culture and victim blaming. Rape culture is a set of general cultural beliefs that support male sexual aggression and trivialise violence against women and sexual coercion by establishing the idea that women are passive, and that men have a right to sexual intercourse with these passive women (Phipps et. al., 2018; Harding, 2015). The claims of the research participants illustrate their belief that certain elements of rape culture are institutionalised in Bangladeshi society. Examples cited include the perceived apathy of law enforcement agencies when considering SH allegations, victim blaming during SH incidents as well as the tendency by other bus passengers to sympathise with perpetrators. These manifestations of rape culture likely encourage more serious sexual offences like rapes on public transport, something that is supported by the alarming statistical rise of

reported rapes on public transport in Bangladesh is increasing. According to one source, 'at least 21 women were either raped or gang-raped on public transportation across the country since January 2017 to February 2018 ("Report: 21 women raped", 2018).

The participants of this study also argued that SH on public buses does not receive adequate attention from either the Government of Bangladesh or the private sector. According to the women activists, the inadequacy of necessary laws to address SH indicates the apathy of the Government of Bangladesh towards this issue. The lack of policy on the part of either the government or NGOs to reduce SH on public transport is also acknowledged by the participants. As 'Himi's (age 23) shared:

I am not informed whether the government/ NGO initiated projects addressing SH on public buses. Rather, women are asked to hold the responsibility of being safe. Women are taught to avoid risks of getting harassed. There may have been projects by Government of Bangladesh to address SH. However, I do not remember watching any advertisement of any Government of Bangladesh project on SH. In most cases, NGOs introduce projects to deal with gender-based violence in Bangladesh.

When this participant was asked to further elaborate her understanding of NGOs' SH interventions, she failed to identify any NGO-driven SH projects. Moreover, many participants also noted the ineffectiveness of NGO initiatives in addressing gender-based violence:

Justice is often denied in Bangladesh. Even during rape incidents, mass protests demanding justice continues only for a couple of days and then everyone forgets. We say NGOs introduce many interventions but, in my opinion, they do nothing. They might demonstrate their agitation on roads with placards demanding women's rights, justice to the rape victim. This is just it! Then there would be absolutely no buzz about this incident because everyone will forget about it! ('Sumaiya', aged 27)

These narratives from the research participants exemplify the factors that have motivated a group of general women commuters to come together as activists to critically address SH on public transport by participating in a social media activism. According to the participants, women's shared experiences of SH, inadequate legal attention by law enforcing agencies, prevalent rape culture of victim blaming, insufficient interventions to reduce SH by Government of Bangladesh and NGOs, have acted as catalysts to motivate women to be proactive and to create the Facebook group. According to the founder Administrator ('Monika', aged 26):

It is high time we took initiatives to reduce SH. SH has become a much-talked concern for every working women and students commuting through buses in Dhaka city. We are not receiving any support from Government of Bangladesh or any other private sectors. I felt that social media's widespread popularity can be utilised to initiate a Facebook-centered activism to reduce SH. Although, the plan has not been initiated yet, I have high hopes.

Social media raising awareness and creating a space for solidarity

The emergence of social media is providing a new window through which to explore individual experiences and their interpretation of their outer and inner worlds (McKenna et al., 2017). Hashtag campaigns such as #MeToo, #ShoutingBack, #Followed and #Grabbed in social media play a significant role in raising awareness, and sensitising the broader society about women's rights issues, often in innovative, creative, and thought-provoking ways. The Facebook-based SH prevention activism like several other anti-harassment campaigns in Bangladesh has taken the opportunity to use social media as a space for solidarity to raise collective awareness on SH.

In Bangladesh, the news of SH incidents occurring on public transport receive less media attention than other forms of gender-based violence. Newspapers and television channels only forecast news when an incident of SH on a public bus takes a serious turn like rape. 'Sufia' (age 18) clarifies this observation:

I have learned about all the SH incidents from the social media. I think the newspapers or television channels do not consider SH on public buses seriously enough until it turns to a rape incident.

As social media acts as a platform to facilitate expression of an individual's personal thoughts without external coercion, women in Bangladesh prefer telling their personal stories of SH on social media to inform as many people as possible:

I am more comfortable to share my SH experience in the Facebook than I to share it with my family. It is because if I share it with my parents, they would be scared and might put a restriction on my mobility. In contrary, when I share it in the Facebook, a lot of other girls may become aware and girls with the same experience may come forward to console me ('Sumaiya', aged 26).

This opportunity for creating awareness using social media has been further used by the Facebook group 'Nari': Mohila Bus Service Limited. The group provided its members with a space in which to share their personal experience of SH on public buses:

I asked the members of the group to share their personal SH experience on the group's closed page. My intention was to inform all the members about the extremeness of this problem, which would motivate them to participate in the noble initiative of launching women-only bus services ('Monika', aged 26).

As this is a closed women-only group, the members perceived this page as a safe space in which to share their personal thoughts on, and experiences of, sexual harassment. Thus, this group not only raised collective awareness of SH but motivated its members to mobilise collectively against SH. Keller, Mendes and Ringrose (2018) note by creating an activist space to collectively fight for gender justice, social media promotes 'affective solidarities' among women and girls. Similarly, this Facebook group's initiative is using Facebook as a platform to create an opportunity for affective solidarity so as to launch a collective effort by women to introduce women-only bus services.

Social media activism: A new form of feminist movement in Bangladesh

Social media has opened a new frontier for women's rights movements. By emphasising shared experiences, social media is encouraging solidarity among women to lobby for women's rights (Keller, Mendes & Ringrose, 2018). The 2010 Global Media Monitoring Project reports that women are significantly underrepresented and misrepresented in

traditional media. The report suggests that 46 percent of news stories reinforced gender stereotypes, while only 13 percent of news stories focus centrally on women (Bartlett, 2010). Further, women in occupations outside the home are not represented in proportion to their real presence (Bartlett, 2010). As a result, women's voices are not equally heard in mainstream media including newspapers and televisions. The expansion of social media in the present can mitigate this gap by offering women a platform to unite for a common interest, which Phipps argues will benefit mainstream feminism in the long run (Phipps et al., 2017). The introduction of Web 2.0 has reshaped contemporary feminism activism by mixing it with digital media and popular culture (Mendes, 2015) and has introduced hashtag activism like #Metoo to fight sexism, misogyny and rape culture for ensuring a harassment free public space for women (Peter, Besley & Araya, 2014). This has had a positive influence in the feminist movements in Bangladesh as well.

Women's movements in Bangladesh provide attention to a variety of issues, including women's economic empowerment, political participation, violence against women, legal reforms and gender mainstreaming in public policies (Zaman, 1999; Guhathakurta, 2006; Banu, 2016; Nazneen & Sultan, 2012). Feminist activists' awareness-raising campaigns on gender parity positively influenced overall gender equality in Bangladesh with achievements like low maternal mortality rate, gender parity in primary education, increase in women's labour force participation and decrease in child marriage rate (Hossain, 2017). Feminists in Bangladesh also pro-actively mobilised to protest gender-based violence issues including domestic violence, child marriage, sexual harassment, rape and acid attacks (Mahtab, 2012; Hossain, 2006; Nazneen & Sultan, 2012; Banu, 2016).

The rise of NGOs in Bangladesh has also been important. Bangladesh witnessed an NGO boom after its independence in 1971 and NGOs played an important role in women's movement in the country (Hossain, 2017). The expansion of the garments industry and the subsequent increase in the number of NGOs, have increased women's participation in the labour force and ensured women's emergence into public spaces as economic agents (Panday & Feldman 2015; Chowdhury 2010; Hossain 2017) and donor-funded NGOs have also emerged as strong actors in promoting women's empowerment agenda in Bangladesh (Nazneen & Sultan 2012, p. 90). NGO and donor collaboration with feminist movements to address gender-based violence issues including sexual harassment in Bangladesh is evident. This collaboration has influenced research in gender-based violence, movements to reform existing legislature, as well as the establishment of victim rehabilitation centres and designing of projects in collaboration with the government to support victims of gender-based violence (Nazneen & Sultan, 2012).

In addition to these advances, contemporary global feminism's deep engagement with social media and popular culture has resonated in contemporary feminist movements in Bangladesh. The Facebook group under discussion is using the social media platform to create a form of 'affective solidarity' among women to introduce women-only buses (Keller, Mendes & Ringrose, 2018). Introduction of these women-only buses, according to the Facebook group members, is a new way of protesting sexual harassment on public transport. The emergence of a Facebook group aiming to dismantle the mobility constraint of women in Dhaka city, therefore, exemplifies a new form of digital feminist activism.

Hence, when the women activists of the Facebook group were asked whether they consider their activism to be a part of feminist activism, most of them responded positively.

According to me, feminism is women's empowerment. The activism to ensure women's equal access to all opportunities is feminism. Therefore, our activism aiming to create a safe space for women's travel is also feminism. We cannot sensitise men at once. We are also not being able to take all of them under immediate legal procedures. In such a situation, our initiative is attempting to create a separate space (without men) to ensure women's mobility.

('Monika', aged 26)

Feminist movement is protesting discriminatory attitudes towards women, drawing attention to the fact that women are belittled everywhere, promoting equal rights of women and ensuring safety for women in public space. In this sense, our activism is also connected with feminist movement. It is because we are trying to protect women by removing the obstacle in their freedom of movement. ('Tania', aged 28)

In the past, women's activism in Bangladesh, relied much on the support from either the government of Bangladesh or NGO. In contrast, the expansion of social media in this contemporary digital world has reshaped feminist activities in Bangladesh to a great extent by offering women a new scope for engaging in an autonomous social-media centered feminist activism.

Conclusion: Why the Facebook project is yet to become successful

Although this social media initiative emerged with great enthusiasm, currently its progress is at a halt. The primary cause of this unexpected pause is a lack of support from the members of the group. According to 'Monika' (age 26), the founder Administrator of the group:

There are almost 2000 members in our group, but we did not get as much responses as expected. At the very beginning everyone was excited about the initiative. Then, when there was a conversation about collecting money from the members, there was a huge dispute in the group about the outcome and profit. Many of the members assumed that the Administrators might extract financial benefit from the intervention and did not want to co-operate. When we came to know about such demotivating thoughts of many of our members, we thought of not continuing the initiative. Consequently, the group's activity is at halt now.

Bangladesh has been a role model in women's empowerment in South Asia and 'has topped the South Asian countries in gender equality for the third consecutive year, ranking 47th among 144 nations' (The Daily Star, 2017). Both the government and non-government sectors' collaborative efforts have played a significant role in this progress. NGOs are labelled the 'magic bullets' of development (Edwards & Hulme, 1995) because they are flexible, innovative and efficient in comparison to governments in terms of ensuring basic human rights including female empowerment (Islam 2014; Islam 2016; Hossain, 2017). Similarly, the Facebook group under discussion aims to promote women's empowerment by addressing the issue of mobility restriction women face due to SH. Despite this, it failed to receive any support from the Government of Bangladesh or NGOs. As 'Sumaiya' (age 27) described:

The group started with a great enthusiasm but failed to create enough buzz. The admins planned to create an association of women commuters from the group who would look after the whole matter. There would be group leaders from each area. The major fund for the initiative was supposed to be retrieved from the members of the group. Each member was expected to contribute 1000 BDT in the group's fund. After the collection of money from the group's member the next approach was to seek help from Government of Bangladesh and NGOs. However, it did not work in the way it was planned. The general members of the group were dubious about the expenditure of the profit and soon they lost interest to participate. So, the plan of uniting all the members of the group and lobbying for financial support from Government of Bangladesh or NGOs failed abruptly.

These narratives from the participant members of the group indicate some of the reasons for the failure of this example of digital feminist activism. The group's plan of action was hypothetical to a certain extent and did not take into account the possible problems that might arise while collecting funds from the group members. The members of the group were assumed to be the primary donors of this initiative, but many were skeptical about how the profit would be used because there was no concrete plan or committee in charge of the money. The administrators of the group assumed that they could motivate the members to continue to contribute financially and therefore asked all the general members to share their personal experiences of sexual harassment on buses as a way of stressing the severity of this problem. However, it was not successful as many of the participants did not feel sufficiently secure to share their SH experience on the group's page. Several members were also doubtful about the effectiveness of the social media initiatives to address SH:

I do not think such an initiative in social media can bring any change in society. Creating awareness using social media is a vague process. I have seen many commercial advertisements on SH awareness in social media but has anything changed? The perpetrators will not change their mentality based on certain Facebook status sharing SH experiences ('Rabeya', aged 22).

A significant cause of the failure of this initiative is that inexperienced members and administrators of the Facebook group had only a vague idea about the formal procedure required to launch women-only bus services. Therefore, they literally did not take any formal action except meeting with the leaders of the Bus Owners Association for advice. As mentioned by the administrators, the initiative's second course of action was to seek financial support from the Government of Bangladesh and NGOs. However, they did not arrange any sort of formal or informal meeting with any representatives of these two groups.

In a nutshell, this new form of digital feminist activism aiming to mobilise women to protest SH collectively using Facebook, failed for several reasons. Firstly, a number of inexperienced women commuters adopted a faulty plan of action which was not pragmatic. Secondly, the group's defective action plan – with no specific details about management or expenditure of funds – failed to motivate members to actively support the initiative. Thirdly, overdependence on donations from the group's women members, jeopardised this initiative. Finally, although, the members and administrators of the group were disappointed in not receiving any support from the Government of Bangladesh or NGOs working in a similar arena, the inexperience of the initiators contributed largely to its lack of success.

Final comments

This paper outlines the initiative of the Facebook group: 'Nari': Mohila Bus Service Limited as an example of contemporary digital feminist activism in Bangladesh that has been highly inspired by the recent global trend of relying on social media to lobby for women's rights. Though the initiative emerged with a great enthusiasm creating solidarity among women to achieve a common goal of reducing SH on public transport, it failed to attain its major objective of launching women-only bus services. Lack of mass support, ineffective management plan, inexperienced women activists', the complex formal procedure to launch bus services and failure to draw the attention of the Government of Bangladesh or NGOs have contributed to this failure. Nevertheless, it is equally important to acknowledge that this initiative used social media to create affective solidarity among general women commuters and gave them a voice to protest and an opportunity to raise awareness on sexual harassment and thereby offered the feminist movement in Bangladesh a new course.

Notes

¹ Most of the women members of the group under consideration, were aged between 16 to 30 years and have reached the tertiary level of education. These young, educated women participants have an average annual household income of US\$5,000 people, which justifies their middle-class economic status (Hashim, 2015). The statistics of SH in general as well as the arguments of the research participants establish the fact that middle-class women are the primary targets of sexual harassment on public transport because they avail public transport the most for their travel. Therefore, this study has found that the Facebook activism, under consideration, only utilised young peers (aged between 16 to 30) with first-hand experience of SH, educated enough to understand the activism and who possessed a financial stability to contribute for the successful implementation of this project.

² A Facebook group Administrator or Admin is the top manager of a Facebook group, who gets access to both administration and management levels. He/she is responsible for the overall activity, day to day operation and management of a Facebook group. (Facebook Groups Admin and Moderator, What Do They Do, 2016)

³ Sexual harassment as an offence is not identified in the Penal Code 1860. However, there are several provisions under which charges could be brought. In addition to this, following a special verdict by the High Court on 25.01.2011 and 26.01.2011 on Sexual violence, an amendment has been proposed to the Repression of Violence against women and Children Act 2000 by incorporating a new section 10 Ka addressing 'Penalty for Sexual Harassment' (ActionAid, 2014; Mannan and Ahmed, 2014; Zaman, 1999). Nevertheless, none of these laws specifically address sexual harassment on public transport.

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