

Refugee Review Tribunal

AUSTRALIA

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

Research Response Number: BGD30751
Country: Bangladesh
Date: 2 November 2006

Keywords: Bangladesh – Women’s organisations – Domestic violence – State protection

This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

Questions

1. Please provide information on the organisation known as SDS.
2. Are any Islamist parties or religious extremists opposed to the SDS?
3. Please provide information on the situation for married women in Bangladesh who are victims of domestic violence.
4. Can female victims of domestic violence seek assistance from police?
5. Can female victims of domestic violence seek assistance from any other organisations?

RESPONSE

1. Please provide information on the organisation known as SDS.

No women’s organisation by the name SDS in Bangladesh was found in the sources consulted. It is not one of the major women’s organisations in Bangladesh. There is one high profile women’s organisation with a similar acronym - CDS (Centre for Development Services) - but it is unlikely to be this organisation. (Further information on the CDS can be found at International Development Exchange 2005, ‘Support Women Entrepreneurs in Bangladesh’, 15 June, Globalgiving website <http://www.globalgiving.com/pr/600/proj580d.html> – Accessed 2 November 2006 – Attachment 1; ‘Annotated List of Organisations and Individuals’ 2000, in *State of Women in Urban Local Government Bangladesh*, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific website, 11 February <http://www.unescap.org/huset/women/reports/bangladesh.pdf> – Accessed 27 July 2006 – Attachment 3)

Background information on the Bangladesh women's rights movement, which consists of hundreds of organisations, follows (taken from RRT Research Response BGD30397 of 7 August 2006):

Contemporary Bangladesh is home to what has been described as a “vibrant” women’s rights movement. It is comprised of several hundred grass-roots groups and a number of larger organisations. The largest is the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad with a claimed membership of around 130,000 individuals and a total of 52 branches in various parts of the country. Other prominent organisations identified in the literature include: Ain O Salish Kendra, Mahila Samity, Proshika, Bangladesh Rural Development Committee (BRCA), Mohila Awami League, Nijera Kori, Nari Pragati Sangha, Karmojibi Nari, Samata, Usha, Step Towards Development, Nari Pakkha, PRIP Trust, Bangladesh Muktiyoddha Sangsad and Samajik Protirodh Committee. An annotated list identifying some of these organisations appears in a United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) report on women in local government. The list provides information on their respective aims and activities and a snapshot of the overall diversity of the women’s rights movement in the country. Some, like Proshika and BRAC, are involved primarily in micro-economic empowerment; while others, like Ain O Salish Kendra, are concerned primarily to promote legal rights (Tahmina, Q. A. 2005, ‘Bangladesh: Women’s policy sneakily changed by gov’t’, Peace Women website, 27 July <http://www.peacewomen.org/news/International/July05/Bangladesh.html> – Accessed 27 July 2006 – Attachment 2; ‘Annotated List of Organisations and Individuals’ 2000, in *State of Women in Urban Local Government Bangladesh*, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific website, 11 February <http://www.unescap.org/huset/women/reports/bangladesh.pdf> – Accessed 27 July 2006 – Attachment 3; Ain O Salish Kendra *et al* 2004, *Shadow Report to the Fifth Periodic Report of the Government of Bangladesh*, International Women’s Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific website, May http://www.iwraw-ap.org/resources/pdf/bangladesh_SR.pdf – Accessed 1 August 2006 – Attachment 4; Huq, N. 2002, ‘470 women’s organisations participate’, *Weekly Holiday* online edition, 1 February <http://www.weeklyholiday.net/010202/met.html#A3> – Accessed 28 July 2006 – Attachment 5).

As the country’s largest organisation, the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad states that it:

has struggled to promote women’s rights, gender equality and to protect women from violence in the public and private spheres. It has campaigned for a uniform family code for all communities in Bangladesh and for reservations to ensure women’s political participation through direct elections to the national Parliament (Ain Salish Kendra *et al* 2004, *Shadow Report to the Fifth Periodic Report of the Government of Bangladesh*, May, p. 4 http://www.iwraw-ap.org/resources/pdf/bangladesh_SR.pdf – Accessed 1 August 2006 – Attachment 4).

Another well-known women’s rights group, Naripokkho, describes itself and its activities as follows:

Organisational profile and mission

Naripokkho is a membership-based women’s activist organization founded in 1983, working for the advancement of women’s rights and entitlements and building resistance against violence, discrimination and injustice. Naripokkho’s activities include advocacy campaigns, research, discussions, cultural events, and lobbying on issues of gender justice. Naripokkho’s work can be clustered under the following four themes:

- Violence against women and human rights
- Reproductive rights and women’s health
- Gender issues in environment and development
- Representation of women in media and cultural politics.

Background of the issue

Naripokkho's principal focus has been the assertion of women's citizenship and their claim to equal rights and equal treatment. In its various campaigns, Naripokkho has kept the agenda of equal rights of women as citizens in the forefront... ('Bangladesh Projects' (undated), Royal Tropical Institute website

http://www.kit.nl/gcg/html/bangladesh_projects.asp – Accessed 27 July 2006 – Attachment 6).

The organisations that comprise the women's rights movement in Bangladesh may be divided into various categories. As categorised by Naila Kabeer in an article from 1991, they are represented by the women's wings of Bangladesh's main political parties, grass roots and independent organisations, and professional bodies. The concerns of each are distinct and sometimes limited. Writing about the women's wings of the Awami League and BNP, for instance, Kabeer observes that their demands, in 1991 at least, were practically limited to "putting pressure on the state to reform family and personal-status law" (Kabeer, N. 1991, 'The Quest for National Identity: Women, Islam and the State in Bangladesh', *Feminist Review*, No. 37, Spring, pp. 53-54 – Attachment 7).

Writing about the history of the women's rights movement in Bangladesh in 1991, Tazeen Murshid comments that the movement "has been weak because it has largely been an urban, middle-class phenomenon"; but "with increasing participation of rural women in the economy... has acquired a wider support base". Murshid notes, in particular, that the movement "has achieved some success in negotiating policy changes at the state level"; and that between the nineteen fifties and nineties, "women's concerns... widened from personal laws, to issues of economic empowerment, domestic violence and their public roles". (Murshid, T. M. (undated), 'Women, Islam and the State: Subordination and Resistance', The University of Chicago Library website <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/su/southasia/Tazeen.html> – Accessed 2 August 2006 – Attachment 8).

A much more critical assessment is provided by Meghna Guhathakurtam, who notes that the women's movement in general has taken a myopic "development outlook on the women's issues". She writes that this outlook has "avoided resistance on gender specific issues" and "failed to take into account the various resistance movements at the national level" (Guhathakurta, M. 2003, 'Religion, Politics and Women: The Bangladesh Scenario', Women Living Under Muslim Laws website <http://www.wluml.org/english/pubs/rtf/dossiers/dossier25/D25-06-reg-pol-women.rtf> – Accessed 2 August 2006 – Attachment 9).

Other reports note the importance and limitations of law "in the history and politics of the women's rights movement". As noted by M Rahman, for instance:

Many campaigns have been fought and won to secure legal rights for women. While these strategies have served to improve women's position, they have not fundamentally transformed the reality of women oppression. Efforts at law reform have been translated into measures that have only marginally improved the day-to-day reality of women's lives (Rahman, M. 1998, 'Our women and children are victims of social apathy and neglect', *The Independent*, 17 November – Attachment 10).

A report on the Banglapedia website provides background information on the history of the women's rights movement in Bangladesh. In brief, the report indicates that the movement

was initially centred on “welfare activities” and that its early development was “stunted” by the “deterioration” of democracy in the country. The report follows in detail:

...

In 1980s there emerged women's movement in Bangladesh, which many apprehended would be a replica of the West, but the movement soon was founded on indigenous feminists issues, roots, new leadership, new organisations and new modes of organisational behaviour. As the decade of 1980s rolled on there also emerged a new breed of women's organisations and leadership in Bangladesh besides hundreds of existing ones delivering social services and skill training. The new brand has more specific programmes in order to end discriminatory practices against women. Issues like violence against women, rape, dowry and fatwa deaths, trafficking of women, unequal wages, exploitation of women in labour intensive industries like garment, apathy of the traditional trade unions towards women labours' needs, rights of access to credit and means of production like land, unequal political and social right became rallying points for the women's organisations. **Both urban and rural women were mobilized significantly, on the issues of violence, rape, dowry and fatwa deaths, acid throwing and the like which indicate the powerlessness, subordination and vulnerability of women in the society.**

Violence against women has, thus, become the most emotive issue around which women came together on non-partisan basis. However, neither large-scale policy initiatives from the government have come forth to alleviate the situation for the women nor the women's organisations have been able to organise large-scale help, support, and shelter and provide alternative ways of living for the victims. At present, various women's organisations are working for the strategies adopted at the Platform of Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference in Beijing in 1995.

(Choudhury, P. (undated) 'Women', Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Banglapedia website http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/W_0067.htm – Accessed 17 July 2006 – Attachment 11).

2. Are any Islamist parties or religious extremists opposed to the SDS?

As noted in the previous question, no women's organisation was found with the acronym 'SDS'. The following information discusses attacks by Islamist parties or religious extremists against the women's rights movement in general (and was taken from RRT Research Response BGD30397 of 7 August 2006).

According to a number of reports, the women's rights movement has increasingly been the target of Islamist groups in Bangladesh. Among earlier reports from the mid-90s, a conservative group of Muslim clerics was reported to have accused a leading women's rights advocate and BNP parliamentarian, Farida Rahman, of apostasy and demanded that she be put to death. Rahman had earlier criticised the Islamic inheritance code. In the same period, Islamist groups were also reported to have targeted NGO development workers ('Chronology of Events: January 1994 - December 1995' 1995, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees website, sourced from the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/openssl.htm?tbl=RSDCOI&page=research&id=3ae6a81b0> – Accessed 3 August 2006 – Attachment 12; 'Sultana Kamal – A Voice for Equality' 2004, Qantara. De Dialogue with the Islamic World website, sourced from Amnesty International

http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/c-478/nr-196/i.html - Accessed 2 August 2006 – Attachment 13).

Reports from the current period note that Islamist groups have continued to target groups working for women's rights. Recent incidents have included separate bomb attacks on the offices of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and the Grameen bank. The attacks would appear to be part of a broader campaign waged by Islamist groups against the allegedly "anti-Islamic" activities of the non-government community. Writing about the Islamic resurgence in Bangladesh, Taj Hashmi, for instance, notes "the average Mullah's revulsion for NGOs" and portrayal of "NGOs and their urban patrons...as *murtads* [apostates], enemies of Islam and agents of [the] neo-imperialist west". Writing about NGOs in Bangladesh, Mokbul Ahmad likewise observes that Islamic fundamentalists have attacked a range of NGO activities, from microcredit initiatives to tree planting. Riaz Ali, writing about the use of traditional institutions as tools of political Islam in Bangladesh, also observes that *fatwas* have principally been used against women and developmental non governmental organisations in Bangladesh ('Bombs hit Bangladesh NGO offices' 2005, *BBC News*, 17 February http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4273193.stm - Accessed 3 August 2006 – Attachment 14; Ahmad, M. M. 2001, 'The State, Laws and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Bangladesh', *International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law*, Volume 3, Issue 3, March http://www.icnl.org/journal/vol3iss3/ar_ahmadprint.htm - Accessed 3 August 2006 – Attachment 15; Hashmi, T. I. 2005, 'Islamic Resurgence in Bangladesh: Genesis, Dynamics and Implications', Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, August <http://www.apcss.org/Publications/Edited%20Volumes/ReligiousRadicalism/Pages%20from%20Religious%20Radicalism%20and%20Security%20in%20South%20Asia%20ch3.pdf> – Accessed 28 September 2005 – Attachment 16 ; Riaz, A. 2005, 'Traditional institutions as tools of political Islam in Bangladesh', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Volume 40, Issue 3, 1 June – Attachment 17; Ahmad, M. M. Undated, 'Roots of Funding, Roots of Trust: The Struggle for Survival and Credibility among the Religious NGOS (Non-Governmental organizations) in Bangladesh', South Asia Research Network website <http://sarn.ssrc.org/sarfp/publications/MMA.pdf> – Accessed 29 September 2005 – Attachment 18).

3. Please provide information on the situation for married women in Bangladesh who are victims of domestic violence.

4. Can female victims of domestic violence seek assistance from police?

5. Can female victims of domestic violence seek assistance from any other organisations?

The issues surrounding domestic violence in Bangladesh are covered the following attached research responses:

- RRT Country Research 2006, *Research Response BGD30121*, 19 May (Attachment 19). This covers domestic violence, protection, support organisations in Questions 1, 2, 6 & 7.
- RRT Country Research 2004, *Research Response BGD16559*, 17 March (Attachment 20).

List of Sources Consulted

Internet Sources:

Google search engine <http://www.google.com.au/>

Databases:

FACTIVA (news database)

BACIS (DIMA Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

ISYS (RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)

RRT Library Catalogue

List of Attachments

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<http://www.globalgiving.com/pr/600/proj580d.html> – Accessed 2 November 2006
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10. Rahman, M. 1998, 'Our women and children are victims of social apathy and neglect', *The Independent*, 17 November. (FACTIVA)
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