

Political Mobilization of Grassroots Women and its Implications: A Case Study of PROSHIKA in Bangladesh

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Abstract

PROSHIKA, the second largest NGO in Bangladesh, follows the ‘participatory development’ approach for the socioeconomic development and empowerment of poor women in Bangladesh. However, PROSHIKA is heavily criticized and opposed by some quarters, especially Islamic groups, for its alleged controversial activities. This paper examines PROSHIKA’s participatory mobilization activities with reference to a specific women’s political mobilization incident in 1998, the final objective being to underline the implications of NGO-led political mobilization of women in Bangladesh. In so doing, it analyzes the differences in views and opinions of PROSHIKA and its women members on three important issues: PROSHIKA’s mobilization programs, the opposing Islamic community, and PROSHIKA’s decision-making process. This research finds that the perception of women members of PROSHIKA about these issues differs significantly from that of the NGO. The women feel that their views and opinions are not properly reflected in PROSHIKA’s mobilization and decision-making process. This finding goes against the very basic principles of the participatory development approach in PROSHIKA. The paper argues that this contradiction is due to PROSHIKA’s top-down approach to decision-making and its impositional type of mobilization that is heavily loaded with partisan political rhetoric. Consequently, serious political implications of the incident limit the prospect of political empowerment of grassroots women in Bangladesh. It implies that political mobilization as a means of political empowerment for women may not be as simple as women’s empowerment theories suggest. To maintain “political” neutrality and to balance between partisan and nonpartisan aspects of “political issues” are important for the empowering agencies.

Introduction

The alleviation of poverty and empowerment of women through participatory development have become the major objectives for non-governmental development organizations (NGOs) working in Bangladesh.¹ Their main method in achieving such objectives is microcredit intervention by providing women with access to credit facilities, improving their capacity to be involved in self-employment, and for income generating activities. However, some NGOs believe that credit intervention remains largely

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ineffective in improving women's conditions unless other sociopolitical conditions are adequately addressed. Therefore, some NGOs, such as PROSHIKA,² have undertaken the sociopolitical empowerment of women through participatory programs such as consciousness raising and sociopolitical mobilization. However, in the recent past PROSHIKA's mobilization programs have come under criticism from women members and other quarters; the Islamic religious communities being the most vocal. Consequently, the Islamic community and PROSHIKA have become seriously opposed to each other. The issue of NGOs and Islamic opposition has become a part of the national political agenda to such a degree that "the poor and women are helplessly witnessing that their two patrons-religious leaders and NGOs- are confronting in the name of helping them" (Mannan 2000:14). Why is PROSHIKA under criticism even by its own members? Does this imply that its mobilization programs are inconsistent with the perspectives of its participants?

This paper examines whether PROSHIKA's mobilization programs are consistent with its proclaimed method of participatory development, with an objective to underline the implications of NGO-led political mobilization in Bangladesh. This paper draws upon the analysis of an incident in 1998 that took place in the district city of Brahmanbaria, where the Islamic community opposed a particular women's mobilization program of PROSHIKA and ADAB (Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh) leading to a violent clash. In examining this mobilization program, the paper looks into three aspects of this particular incident: one, what are the views and perceptions the women members of PROSHIKA maintain regarding the Islamic community; two, how the members view the mobilization program of PROSHIKA; and three, to what extent PROSHIKA takes these views and perceptions of its members into consideration in its decision-making process. The Islamic community in this paper refers to the teachers and student community of *madrasa*,³ and the *Imams* of the mosques, to whom people turn to in order to receive ritual services or seek religious advice on legal issues regarding marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

The study of this particular incident is significant in the wider context of Bangladesh. First, it gives an opportunity to reflect on the importance of opinions at grassroots level in political mobilization. Second, it affected sociopolitical empowerment programs of NGOs in general and that of PROSHIKA in particular. Finally, the incident underlines the political risk of such mobilization for NGOs in Bangladesh as various political decisions of the subsequent government purposively limit the wider jurisdiction of NGO activities.

Fieldwork was conducted during the months of June-July 2002 through using open-ended individual interviews and Focus Group Discussions to collect opinions from a total of 122 women members of PROSHIKA. By reflecting on their experience and views, this research finds that there is a substantial difference of opinions between PROSHIKA and its women members on the issue of women's mobilization and the Islamic opposition. This paper argues that this difference is because of the contradiction that exists between the "participatory" rhetoric of PROSHIKA and its top-down

approach to women's mobilization.

The first section of the paper presents an overview of the importance of NGOs and their mobilization potential recognized in the participatory development discourse. It describes the mobilization strategies and methods that PROSHIKA follows, and presents the issue of Islamic opposition to NGO mobilization programs in general and the case of Brahmanbaria mobilization incident in particular. Drawing upon fieldwork, the second section presents the views that the women members hold regarding the Islamic community and the mobilization incident. The third section makes an analysis of the earlier discussion and argues that PROSHIKA's mobilization program in Brahmanbaria reveals elements of contradiction in its "participatory approach." It further shows that this particular mobilization program produced several political implications that affected women's mobilization and empowerment programs of all NGOs in a wider context.

I. NGOs' mobilization programs and Islamic opposition

1. NGOs and mobilization

Mobilization as a means of empowerment is well recognized in development literature. It refers to both "action (i.e. people being involved in doing things) and organization" (Joshi & Moore 2000: 3). It is especially emphasized in 'participatory development' that NGOs can facilitate local people to set their own agendas of development based on their own priorities, to make decisions, organize and mobilize themselves to demand rights and greater access to various resources, and participate in decision making apparatus. The central method in this process is that people at the grassroots level, both men and women, behave both as actors and participants, while outside agencies such as the NGOs merely play the role of catalysts (Chambers 1997; Edwards and Hulme 1992; Korten 1980, 1990; Uphoff 1993; Esman & Uphoff 1984).

However, those, especially feminists, who take the view that gender holds a paramount importance in development discourse and practice, contend that unless gender discrimination and hierarchies are addressed and unless particular initiatives are taken to mobilize women, balanced empowerment will remain questionable. This gender-concerned approach maintains that women in particular should be mobilized in order that they have access to resources, have control over decisions that affect their lives, and can ultimately change the gender-biased power structures that make them subordinate. Though the approach acknowledges the importance and potential of NGOs in general, it suggests that women's organizations, networks, and their collective self-mobilization should be the most important means to empowerment (Boserup 1998; Molyneux 1985; Sen & Grown 1988; Moser 1989; Batliwala 1993; Kabeer 1994, 2000; Rowlands 1995, 1997).

PROSHIKA's development and mobilization programs combine the above two approaches. PROSHIKA believes that organizing the grassroots women and mobilizing them against their disempowering conditions is the best way to achieve their empowerment. In order to do this,

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PROSHIKA states that it follows “participatory” method and its “ideas and programmes are never imposed upon the groups...”(Kramsjö and Wood 1992: 30). Rather, it lets the rural groups “articulate their problems, as well as formulate programmes and action” (Huda 1989:49). In Kazi Faruque’s (the head of PROSHIKA) own words: “people must be given the opportunity to think for themselves, speak for themselves, work for themselves, and even make mistakes by themselves” (quoted in Huda 1989:49).

2. PROSHIKA’s mobilization programs

PROSHIKA emphasizes that building “poor people’s own organizations” at the grassroots level is the most pragmatic way for a fruitful mobilization. The aim of these organizations is to “help indigent people unitedly fight the structural factors that perpetuate poverty, and claim their rights. When organized, they can make their presence felt and bring about changes in the institutions that control their lives” (PROSHIKA 2000: 1). This spells out the strategies of its collective mobilization. At the rural level PROSHIKA forms Primary Groups (PG) consisting of 20-25 members from various poor classes such as the landless, marginal peasants, and women. It also forms PGs among slum dwellers in urban areas. These members are provided with Human Development Training (HDT) and Practical Skill Development Training (PSDT) to help them improve their social and economic conditions. In the next stage, it forms Village Federation (VF) and Slum Federation with the representatives from the PGs. This federation building continues upwards in a similar manner at the Union level (Union Federation) and Upazila level (Upazila Federation), and in urban areas Area Federation.

PROSHIKA provides training to these PG and Federation members on activities such as building and managing organizations, gender rights, health and nutrition, people’s theatre. They receive adult literacy, awareness education regarding elections, human rights, dowry, illegal divorce, polygamy, and unequal wages. The members are encouraged to mobilize themselves collectively to access local institutions and resources. For instance, they try to enter into the local *shalish* body (arbitrary councils) and contest the local level elections. Entering into a *shalish* body is seen as important, because in a *shalish*, which is administered by influential village heads as well as the rich, oppressive arbitrary decisions are often imposed on poor women. Similarly, the local administration is often under the control of those influential people who use public resources for their own benefit thereby depriving the poor. The evidence of PGs activities of PROSHIKA suggests that it also encourages its members to resort to physical confrontation, when necessary, to gain legitimate control over their rights (Kramsjö and Wood 1992).

Reflecting on PROSHIKA’s mobilization programs, the concept of *awareness-raising* as a strategy for organization building and mobilization becomes clearer. In its *awareness-raising* activities, women are made aware of their various situations such as the causes of poverty, the bad effects of dowry, the illegality of verbal divorce and hilla marriage, and the oppression of Fatwabaz on women (for details

see Moniruzzaman 2003).⁴ A large part of PROSHIKA's efforts in awareness-raising refers to oppressive aspects of women's position, for which the Islamic communities of madrasa are by and large held responsible. Its adult literacy text called *Resistance to Oppression on Women* reads as follows:

The *fatwabaz* people are the greatest enemy to women's development. They always want to keep women subservient; they do not consider women human beings; they prohibit women from work, from going out; they do not allow women to become self-sufficient, literate; they declare *fatwa* on women through *shalish*. This way they have killed many women, insulted many other. We need to become united against them to stop oppression on women (Parvin 2002: 22).

By making them aware of their situation, PROSHIKA encourages the members to organize themselves and make collective efforts in resisting their opponents (PROSHIKA 2000). In certain cases such resistance leads to confrontations. PROSHIKA's experiences indicate that such confrontational actions often involve demands on *khas* lands and public bodies of water (Ahmed 1995; Huda 1989; Kramsjö and Wood 1992). In confronting those who oppose, block, or deny their rights and claims, the members sometimes find themselves in violent clashes. The Brahmanbaria incident to which this paper refers is an example of such a confrontational action.

It should be mentioned here that BRAC, the largest NGO in Bangladesh and in the world, also follows similar strategies of mobilization- organization building and awareness-raising (BRAC Annual Report 2001). BRAC differs with PROSHIKA to the extent that it does not lead its members to the confrontational action. It prefers "not to hit the system, but take it along with us."⁵

3. Islamic opposition to NGO activities in the past

Islamic opposition to the NGO activities in Bangladesh has been felt throughout the last thirty years but it did not lead to any organized and physical resistance until recently. A series of violent incidents took place during 1993-95 against BRAC and a few other NGOs. Several BRAC offices were shut down in Narayanganje district and a number of BRAC non-formal primary schools were burnt down in various other places (Khan 1996). In 1997, BRAC experienced similar oppositions to its posters depicting Human Rights in the nearby district but to a far lesser extent. Studies on BRAC's Human Rights and Legal Education (Rafi et al. 1996; Ahmed & Mustafa 1993; Chowdhury 1991) and PROSHIKA's social awareness programs (Huda 1997; PROSHIKA 2000) have indicated that Imams and others such as husbands and village leaders always oppose NGO teachings regarding marriage, divorce, *Hilla* marriage, and inheritance laws on the grounds that those teachings are un-Islamic. The "Islamic community" of *madrasa* has been directly or indirectly forming this opposition.

4. The mobilization incident of 1998 and Islamic opposition

In December 1998 the most violent clash ever erupted between an Islamic community and NGO grassroots members in the Brahmanbaria district. The Islamic community was comprised of teachers and students of the largest and dominant *madrasa* called Jameya Yunusia Brahmanbaria, its affiliated *madrasas*, and the Imams of different mosques in surrounding sub-districts.

Trinamul, the grassroots organization with the support of PROSHIKA and ADAB, decided to celebrate the Month of Independence on December 7-11⁶ by organizing a *Bijoy Mela* (victory fair) for twenty thousand or so poor grassroots women members in Niaz Muhammad stadium in the district town in order to foster the spirit of independence (*Muktijudhdher Chetona*). However, during the week of preparations the *Imam* of the nearby mosque intervened and asked to stop the *mela* on the grounds that it would bring about the mixing of men and women in public which is “be-shariyati”⁷ (un-Islamic). The *mela* organizers ignored the request, and in response the *Imam* declared a weeklong alternative Islamic program in the same place and at the same time. Due to sensitivities on the issue, the Deputy Commissioner (DC), the highest-ranking local civil administrative authority, placed a temporary ban on the *mela*.

The central issue of the *Mela*, the Independence War, is itself an issue of persisting political controversy in Bangladesh. Independence came about through a nine-month bloody war against the Pakistani military. For both political and ideological reasons, Islamic political parties such as the Muslim League, and Jamat-e-Islami opposed this war. It was the secular and leftist political parties that led the war and favored separation based on Bengali nationalism. During the war it was commonly held that the *madrasa* community in general (teachers, students, and Imams) opposed the war, and hence have continued to be regarded by the secular political parties as the “enemy of national independence.” Therefore, when the DC placed a ban on holding the *mela*, the organizers considered it a moral defeat of both NGOs and the local government to the “Islamic fundamentalists” and “the enemy of national independence” (*shwadhinator shotru*). As such, the *mela* organizers rejected the ban and decided to confront the Islamic community by mobilizing their grassroots women members into a large-scale protest *Shomabesh*⁸ (public meeting).

The Islamic community, on the other hand, was also determined to resist any procession, gathering, or showdown by the women. On December 7, the *shomabesh* organizers under the leadership of Kazi Faruque of PROSHIKA chose a venue different from the one originally planned. The only way to go to the venue was taking the main road, passing by the largest *madrasa*, the center of Islamic opposition group. According to the Daily *Ittefaq* (Dec 11 1998), the women participants of the procession started chanting abusive slogans against the Islamic community, which in turn infuriated them and made them attack the procession. This escalated into a violent confrontation between them and the *shomabesh* participants. Many women were beaten and harassed in public. In the following

day, the Islamic community began attacking and setting fire and looting different NGO offices.⁹ A village (*chhoibaria*), consisting of 26 homes, many BRAC, PROSHIKA and Grameen Bank offices were burnt down and their properties looted.¹⁰ Though big NGOs like BRAC and ASA (as well as Grameen Bank)¹¹ did not take part in the program, they were equally implicated. All NGO operations remained on hold for a long time. According to some oral reports, some opportunists made use of the situation in order to make personal gains by looting NGO offices in disguise of 'Islamic' uniform.¹² Others contend that local opposition political activists were also a major part of the Islamic opposition.¹³

According to press releases by PROSHIKA and ADAB, they considered the Islamic "group" as an "anti-liberation force," "anti-women," and the "madrasas in Brahmanbaria as a center for producing terrorist Taliban force."¹⁴ PROSHIKA reasoned that the *shomabesh* was necessary because it believed the Islamic opposition was a "threat to the liberation," and it "undermined *muktijuddho*" (liberation war). So, submission to the Islamic opposition would amount to a moral defeat of *muktijuddho*.

These were the official views of PROSHIKA, but what were the views of its women members at the grassroots level regarding these two issues? The views of the women about the Islamic community against which PROSHIKA mobilized them are highlighted below. This will clarify the differences of views between PROSHIKA and its members.

II. Women's views regarding the Islamic community

Given the context and location of the study, it is natural to expect that local women would be very critical of the Islamic community or the *huzurs*.¹⁵ However, the interview data suggests mixed results (see Table).

1. Personal religious concerns

Personal concern for religious obligation was found to be a strong factor for women when they evaluated their position in relation to the *huzurs*. There are three factors that make the women view the *huzurs* in this way. First, fulfillment of their personal religious obligations, such as daily prayer and monthly fasting, does not depend on having any interaction with the *huzurs* in most cases. In this respect the women do not consider the *huzurs* in opposition but rather as complementary service providers.

Why should we have conflict (gondagol) with the *huzurs*? They do religious activities; we also need to do our religious obligation (dharma-karma). Of course many of us don't do, but the *huzurs* don't come to beat us. Besides, we need to have their religious services in many cases (PROSHIKA member, personal interview on July 1, 2002).

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Table:Views of PROSHIKA women regarding social, religious and NGO issues

Socio-religious issues	Strongly Positive	Positive	Neither/nor pos/negative	Negative	Strongly Negative	Total 100%
Are you scared of social sanction and intimidation?	109(89.3)	4 (3.2)	7 (5.7)	2 (1.6)	0	122
Do you feel dependent on the rich and influential people?	36 (29.5)	13 (10.6)	32 (26.2)	41 (33.6)	0	122
Can you act and move freely without social consideration?	12 (9.8)	3 (2.4)	10 (8.1)	72 (59.0)	25 (20.4)	122
Do you feel courageous to protest unjust treatment of poor and women?	4 (3.2)	3 (2.40)	5 (4.0)	65 (53.2)	45 (36.8)	122
Do PROSHIKA teachings make you disrespectful towards religious rules and authorities?	0	0	25 (20.4)	46 (37.7)	51 (41.8)	122
Do you depend on local Imams for marriage/divorce issue?	113(92.6)	6 (4.9)	3 (2.4)	0	0	122
Do you feel religious people give incorrect teaching about purdah, role and status of women?	2 (1.6)	11 (9.0)	56 (45.9)	34 (27.8)	19 (15.5)	122
Do you feel NGOs give correct teaching about the role and status of women?	14 (11.40)	32 (26.2)	29 (23.7)	16 (13.1)	31 (25.4)	122

Second, the women perceive that the *huzurs* know religious matters best, so feel dependent on them in respect to religious knowledge. This prevents them from casting a doubt on the *huzurs*, believing that it might make their own religious beliefs corrupt as many stated, “the *huzurs* are knowledgeable about the *Qurān* and the *Hadith*, how can we blame them? Allah will become displeased with us.”

Third, the women expressed deep concern about some personal religious matters such as after-death ceremonies that directly involve the *huzurs*. This concern makes them believe that the *huzurs* are an inseparable part of their life. For example women came to learn through rumor that the NGOs encourage using *kalakafon* (black cloth) for burial,¹⁶ and religious leaders warned that anyone involved with NGOs would be denied *Janazah* (prayer on dead body before burial) after death.¹⁷ Since *janazah* matters much to Muslims, the fear of ‘no-janazah’ and *Kalakafon* created ambiguity and made women largely critical of NGOs. At the same time absence of any instance of *kalakafon* in their area made them question the validity of the claim of the *huzurs*.

Furthermore, personal religious concerns also make women themselves take up the role of the *huzurs*. One PROSHIKA women leader (45) was found to be involved in teaching the *Qurān* recitation to female children. Asked why she did this, her reply was:

There is a lot of reward for this in the *parokal* (hereafter), besides it is our obligation to teach our daughters how to recite the *Qurān*, otherwise Allah will hold us responsible in the *parokal* (PROSHIKA member, personal interview on July 1, 2002).

2. Public mobility and family-status concerns

Purdah is the central issue over which the Islamic community lashes out at the NGOs. PROSHIKA maintains that it is the Islamic insistence on *purdah* which effectively prevents women from activities at wider level and denies them of their rights (Sen 1992). The Islamic community maintains that it opposes NGOs because they encourage women to abandon *purdah* in public life, which is equivalent to deislamization of the society (Mobarak, 1999). In fact, the local women, whose economic conditions define the elasticity of the concept for them (Kabeer 2000; Abecassis 1990:55), maintain a quite different perspective of *purdah* that neither reflects the imposition by the *huzurs* nor the inspiration of NGOs. Prior to the incident of 1998, women members enjoyed greater public mobility though not compromising much with their individual sense of *purdah*.

We used to go out freely, attended weekly meetings, went to the office (NGO office), went around alone, but no one prevented us. Many women pass even through the *madrasa*, the *huzurs* never said anything, because we do our own *purdah*. Of course there are some women who don't do proper *purdah*, may be because they don't care, but even then when they pass by some *huzurs* they show respect somehow like instantly covering head or body parts. This is how our *shomaj* works, we know who to respect and when (PROSHIKA member, personal interview on June 30, 2002).

However, due to the severity of the experiences during and after the incident of 1998, 89% of the women interviewed (See table) developed a sense of social intimidation. Subsequently, a majority of them became more afraid of being exposed to NGO involvement.

The women also relate the mode of public mobility (*cholafera*) with the status and dignity of their family members in society.

If we don't do proper *purdah* outside, people will say bad things about us as well as our family. Why should we make our family lose its *maan-shonmaan* (reputation)? (PROSHIKA member, personal interview on July 4, 2002).

In Addition, sometimes the style of public mobility affects ones future relations (an offspring's marriage for instance) because the prospective relatives take the style of mobility into consideration.

If we don't go around with proper attire and behavior (*thikmoto cholafera*) people will say bad things about our family and we will face difficulty in marrying off our daughters. Reputation of a mother is also a reputation for her daughter in our society. We need to

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observe *purdah* whether the *huzurs* tell us to do or not, it doesn't matter. Besides, the *huzurs* don't prevent us from going out when we maintain *purdah*, even they don't say anything when some women don't. So what's the problem? How are the *huzurs* problems for us? (PROSHIKA member, personal interview on July 7, 2002).

So, women do not consider the Islamic community as anti-women as it does not prevent them from public mobility. Rather, the norms of public mobility are defined by different realities that the women feel important to observe.

3. Economic concerns

In terms of economic or income earning activities the women hold a critical view of the Islamic community. The factor that is strengthening the women's perception in this regard is the opportunities, such as credit, that PROSHIKA is creating for income earning activities. The women often sarcastically accuse the *huzurs* saying, "are *huzurs* going to feed us if we stop working?" This remark is indicative of a common belief among many women that the *huzurs* oppose the credit activities of NGOs.

The credit activities dominate the relationships between the NGOs and their clients. Therefore, the incident of 1998 affected the credit facilities most as the Islamic community wanted to shut down all NGO activities. Thus, they prevented women from going to NGOs for loans. This created a perception among the women that the *huzurs* were blocking their ways of subsistence. Due to this understanding, the women were more sympathetic to PROSHIKA and critical of the *huzurs*.

What is the fault of PROSHIKA? It gives us loans; we use them in many activities and earn some money. This is how we survive. The *huzurs* should not say anything about it, should we die out of hunger? Yes, PROSHIKA takes *shud* (interest), but *mohajonra* (local moneylenders) take more. Why the *huzurs* don't say anything against them? (PROSHIKA member, personal interview on July 7, 2002).

Women felt that informal moneylenders were also the major obstacles in their relations with PROSHIKA. The Islamic opposition in 1998 was an opportunity for these moneylenders to raise their voice against NGOs in general, because the moneylenders maintain patronizing relation with the Islamic community. The relationship between the famous Ashraf Vendor and the Jameya Yunusia is well known in this regard.¹⁸ In their interviews, 37% of women indicated that the *huzurs* were actually used by local influential people who controlled the informal money lending business.

We couldn't believe why the *huzurs* became so angry at NGOs all of a sudden. Why they

threatened us and warned us not to go to NGOs for loans or to have any relations with them. We have been taking loans from them for a long time. NGOs are here for ten-twenty years. We go out, work for living but the *huzurs* never said anything against them or us. Why this time did they become so furious? We know who are the people behind them (PROSHIKA member, personal interview on July 3, 2002).

This account from the women also supports the claim of the *huzurs* that they regard credit as a social service of the NGOs to the poor, and therefore they have never opposed NGOs in Brahmanbaria.¹⁹

4. Socio-legal matters

PROSHIKA's textual materials intend to make women aware that the giving and taking of dowry, hilla-marriage, and verbal divorce are prohibited by law. These text materials are based mainly on the Muslim Family Law (MLF) of Bangladesh. The Islamic community resists such teachings as it rejects the MLF totally as un-Islamic (Mobarak, 1999; Moniruzzaman, 2003). But the interviewees suggested that they find the teachings about these issues very beneficial. As such, the members were expected to hold a negative attitude towards the *huzurs* for their opposition. But quite unexpectedly 41.8% of the interviewees thought that PROSHIKA teachings did not make them disrespectful towards religious rules and authorities. The fact that 92% (See table) of them consult local Imams regarding marriage and divorce issues instead of following civil procedures taught by PROSHIKA, buttresses this view.

Why this is a contradiction can be explained for two reasons. First, due to the prevalence of social practice they cannot follow the teachings of PROSHIKA regarding these socio-legal matters. Specific mention was repeatedly made that avoiding dowry was impossible in cases where prospects for their daughters' future life was promising, but a refusal to pay a dowry would create an opportunity for others to sway the grooms, or that it might lead to further problems. Second, social pressures also cause the continuation of the dowry system even in unwanted situations. For instance, delay in marriage of an adult girl in rural Bangladesh might require a greater amount of dowry, or she may even face rumormongers or false scandal causing further distress. Under such conditions an early marriage by paying dowry is sometimes the best option for practical reasons.

Social conditions also influence the behavior of women members in the same way with regard to divorce, the second most widespread problem faced by women (Hossain and Begum 1999). The members are taught that verbal divorce is illegal, and they are encouraged to take legal action in case of arbitrary divorce. The members find such education encouraging as new knowledge, but in practice most of them (89%, see table) said they could not follow such advise. A divorced PROSHIKA women leader (45) was asked why she did not take legal action against her husband. Her reply was-

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What's the point? I can make my own end, and by the grace of Allah, I am much better off now. Besides, my only son says 'mom, since you didn't do so when you were in severe hardship, what is the point doing it now when you are better off.' Again, what else I can expect from him (husband) because he also has nothing. Rather it is better that he comes sometimes to see his son and daughter. I wish he could make his days well (Moniruzzaman 2003: 35).

The above views of women illustrate that in personal, economic, socio-legal, and issues related to public mobility, the women do not necessarily consider the Islamic community as anti-women, as PROSHIKA has tried to illustrate. In the following section, the views of those women members regarding the mobilization against the Islamic community are presented.

III: Womens' views regarding the mobilization incident

1. The issue of mobilization

The initial objective of PROSHIKA in organizing the *mela* was to commemorate the victory in the independence war. However, women members contend that they were not even aware of the details of the event.

All we knew was that there would be a mela where people would bring handicrafts, sweets, potteries etc to sell, and of course some *gaan-bajna* (music). We didn't even know that it was especially for *muktijuddho* (independence war). We didn't know this was the month of celebrating it because we don't maintain English calendar. We were told to give some *chanda* (financial contribution) for the *mela*, and we did (PROSHIKA member, personal interview on July 6, 2002).

The initial Islamic opposition was the beginning of the actual political mobilization process that drastically changed the objective of mobilization from a simple *mela* to political *shomabesh*, protest and demonstration against the Islamic opposition. Upon hearing the Islamic opposition, PROSHIKA and ADAB authorities in Dhaka unsuccessfully tried to convince the DC of Brahmanbaria to lift the ban on *mela*. Their unsuccessful attempt led the NGO authority (Kazi Faruque Ahmed, then president of both PROSHIKA and ADAB as well as a "freedom fighter" at the time of the independence war) to change the program from *mela* to *shomabesh* and a protest rally, rejecting the request of the DC not to come to Brahmanbaria in order to avoid further worsening of the situation. In Kazi's own words:

They are scheduled to hold *muktijuddher anusthan* (programs on independence war) and it's a matter of defeat for me not to attend it. I will go to Brahmanbaria at any cost (CBS:

162).

This view of the PROSHIKA authority indicates that it was preoccupied with the prestige and image of *Muktijuddho*. So, the authority was moved by its own agenda for the physical mobilization of women. Even when the actual *mela* program was changed to a political *shomabesh*, the women remained uninformed about the situation as well as the objectives of the *shomabesh*.

We heard that there would be a *shomabesh* instead of *mela* and Faruque bhai would come from Dhaka. But we were not told why the *shomabesh*, what we were going to do, and why not *mela* (PROSHIKA member, personal interview on July 7, 2002).

Why Faruque bhai didn't inform us earlier that the *huzurs* were opposing the *mela*? Why he didn't warn us that there might be violence in *shomabesh*? Now that we were publicly harassed on the road and *shomajer lokera* (people) are saying bad things about us, can Faruque bhai compensate us for that? (A former PROSHIKA member, personal interview on July 7, 2002).

This indicates that the decision made on *shomabesh* and the protest rally completely ignored the local people who were to be mobilized. This raises a well-known concern in the participatory approach of "who controls the agenda" of grassroots mobilization (Farrington 1993:115). However, it is not clear whether the PROSHIKA authority deliberately kept the women uninformed about the change in the decision or about the details of the various situations.

2. The need for mobilization

The women members were also critical of the need for such mobilization. For many of them, the issue of *muktijuddho* is a luxurious thought compared to their daily concerns such as earning enough money for subsistence and in making enough in daily savings for the repayment of loans. According to a BRAC member's account:

Does it fit for us to think about *muktijuddho*? We survive like hand to mouth. Our concern is how to make enough money for the family, and how to save so that we can repay our loans in time, other wise we will be in trouble. NGOs don't forgive us for default (Personal interview on June 25, 2002).

At the same time the members also question the usefulness of such mobilization. Their views reflect that they are reluctant to follow activities of the NGOs, which they feel are largely irrelevant to

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their needs and concerns.

Muktijuddho took place thirty years ago, what's the point for us now to cry out for this? The *huzurs* opposed the *mela*, so what? If we cannot do *mela*, does this mean that we lose our independence? Is it possible for us to turn the entire people of Brahmanbaria by *shomabesh*, misil-meeting? Could we do that? On the contrary we got beaten on the streets, we cannot work freely as we could do earlier, and we are downgraded in the eyes of others (PROSHIKA member, personal interview on July 3, 2002).

Then why do they take part in such activities? The women indicate that there are two reasons for such participation. One, the members feel that they are under certain types of moral obligation to shoulder such activities due to their credit relations with PROSHIKA. Two, in this particular incident, they were neither aware nor informed about the on going political crisis regarding the *shomabesh*.

What can we do? We are poor, we take loans from NGOs so we are tied to them. We need to listen to them otherwise they will stop giving us loans, then we will have to go to *mahajans* again. And had we known earlier that the *huzurs* would insult us in public, we wouldn't have gone there in the first place. For us *maan-sonman* is greater than *muktijuddher chetona* (amader jonno ki maan-sonman age na muktijuddher chetona age?) (A former PROSHIKA member, personal interview on July 7, 2002).

This view suggests that the women members did not agree with the mobilization agenda because such issues of mobilization were not in their primary interest. Consequently, the immediate internal effect of this program was that some of the members lost faith in PROSHIKA. The switching of a group of PROSHIKA members to BRAC following the incident of 1998 on the grounds that PROSHIKA did not respect their dignity substantiates the point.

3. The form of mobilization

The members also criticized the specific way of mobilization. Most of the women were unfamiliar with the roads and traffic system of the city of Brahmanbaria. Many of them came for the first time along with young children. For most of them the whole concept of *shomabesh* was new and exciting. Having gone through the experience of the *shomabesh*, however, they were of the opinion that such a showdown was unnecessary. For them the PROSHIKA authority could have thought of alternative ways of protest against the *huzurs*, rather than dragging them into a helpless situation.

We are poor women. Is it appropriate for them (NGOs) to bring us into misil-meeting? It's

like taking us intentionally to be beaten on the streets. If *muktijuddho* was such a big thing for them, then why Hasina *sarkar* (government of Sheik Hasina) didn't help them? Hasina's *sarkar* is a *sarkar* of *muktijuddho*; Faruque bhai could have gone to her and she could give a good lesson (*size korte parto*) to the *mullas*. There was no need to take us to the streets (A former PROSHIKA member, personal interview on July 7, 2002).

They maintained such critical attitudes because of the severe family problems they suffered afterwards. Among the interviewees there was one woman, whose husband abandoned her and her three children, and disappeared. The reason for such abandonment was that she had been beaten and harassed by the *huzurs* in public. Such discontent against PROSHIKA, on family grounds, was quite observable among the women.

Of course there were some members who were not only critical of PROSHIKA, but also of the *huzurs*. They argued that such *mela* was not entirely new in Brahmanbaria, so the *huzurs* should not have opposed it in such a strict way. Besides, they did not agree completely with the point of the *huzurs* that collective mobility of women goes against the teachings of *Shariah*. They argued that as long as women do not grossly violate the fundamental norms of *Shariah*, then why should their collective public mobility be considered un-Islamic?

IV: Analysis

1. Participatory approach, mobilization and decision-making of PROSHIKA

The aforementioned views and opinions of the women members make two points clear. First, regarding the Islamic community, the members perceive that the Islamic community is an integral part of their daily life, and is not (in most cases) detrimental to their development and empowerment. Second, the members were critical of PROSHIKA concerning its confrontational attitude in the incident. The women felt that they agreed neither with the issue of mobilization nor with the specific way and form of mobilization. So, it appears that PROSHIKA was more concerned with its own sociopolitical agenda and thus followed an impositional type of mobilization while ignoring the opinions and preferences of its members. While PROSHIKA felt that the confrontational way of mobilization was appropriate to challenge the Islamic opposition, its members felt that it was heavily loaded with political rhetoric that did not concern them much. These two points lead to the argument that PROSHIKA's claim of participatory development contradicts its actions.

The participatory approach requires that the local people must be considered the real actors, and so, their concerns, perceptions, and preferences must be put first (Chambers 1990; Cernea 1991; Burkey 1993). Decisions and actions must be taken based on the knowledge, suggestions, and preferences of those actors (Long 2001; Holland and James 1998). In this study, it is found that PROSHIKA failed to take the perceptions and preferences of its members into consideration.

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Theoretically speaking, it implies that in the case of opposing the Islamic community, PROSHIKA should have considered first whether its members perceive any reason to such opposition. Similarly, in the case of the protest *shomabesh* and rally, the NGO should have considered first whether the cause of *Muktijuddho* was a reasonably preferable issue for the *shomabesh* to them. Furthermore, participatory decision-making requires that PROSHIKA should have consulted with its members on whether they preferred a public protest rally as an acceptable and reasonable form of mobilization.

Why PROSHIKA failed to take the views of its members into consideration can be explained in various accounts. First, PROSHIKA's adult literacy texts indicate that it holds a preconceived idea about the Islamic community of *madrassa* in general: that they are among the most oppressing patriarchal institutions for women; and they are invariably against the interest of women's empowerment and development. PROSHIKA intends to transmit these ideas to its grassroots members and make them aware of such characteristics in the Islamic communities. Contrary to this, the members perceive that not only they need the Islamic community for religious services, but also they feel that the community does not generally create impediments towards their empowerment. They point out that the *huzurs* do not actually oppose the credit delivery services of PROSHIKA (and other NGOs as well). Furthermore, while the women maintain a positive perception about the patriarchal Islamic community (contrary to what PROSHIKA wants them to believe) they also depend on PROSHIKA for loans and other services. This substantiates similar findings in other regions of South Asia where women are found to be capable to simultaneously accommodate traditional patriarchal institution with the new empowering institutions that attempt to liberate them from the influence of the former one (Unnithan and Kavita 1997:157).

Second, PROSHIKA probably did not take into account the reality of what attitude its members maintain towards the Islamic community because it perceives local poor women as naïve. However, the experience in other South Asian NGOs such as SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) of India suggests that PROSHIKA's consideration of its members as naïve is tantamount to undermining their agency and capability. The members' perception about the rationality of coexisting with patriarchal Islamic institutions, instead of confronting them physically, corresponds perfectly with the experience of SEWA that "direct confrontation could never accomplish all the long-term, structural and social changes needed to seriously change women's lives" (Rose 1992:22).

Finally, the participatory approach dilutes catalytic leadership and instead turns an empowering agent into a mere facilitator (Chambers 1999; Wignaraja 1991). However, the case of Brahmanbaria indicates that the PROSHIKA leadership overwhelmingly overpowered the local women in the process of decision-making and mobilization. This is probably due to the personal characteristics of the leadership of PROSHIKA as well as its management style. Smillie and John observe that PROSHIKA maintains "a highly personalized management style and operational orientation...it uses ad hoc teams to problem-solving"(2002:57). An external evaluation report on PROSHIKA in 1997 also found that the

nature of its origin as a small collectivity of strong personalities directly makes “an important influence over its organizational culture and actions. It retains a personalized senior management style [with]...limited accountability for senior staff...”(Smillie and John 2002:125). This personalized management style of PROSHIKA was evident in the Brahmanbaria incident because the women were unaware of the change of *mela* to *shomabesh*, and that they were not part of the decision-making process.

2. Wider implications of the mobilization incident

The wider implications of the Brahmanbaria incident on the role of NGOs in women’s mobilization appear most severe. The incident was a consequence of an NGO’s attempt at empowering women politically, but it demonstrated that political mobilization involves various risks. First, successful political mobilization may depend mostly on the nature of its “political” issues. The incident demonstrated that in the name of opposing Islamic resistance, it became overtly political as it was led along the theme of the Independence War, which is heavily politicized. In the politics of Bangladesh, reference to the war of independence creates political divisions and controversy instead of cohesion. Therefore, in such a political context the very basis of the mobilization was controversial, and as such, the political consequence of such controversial mobilization was found to be severe.

Second, the presence of ADAB in the program was extremely significant as it represented the entire NGO community. But the views of ADAB as an independent body were probably influenced by the personal leadership style of the head of PROSHIKA, because the head of PROSHIKA was the head of ADAB as well. The entire NGO community did not possess the same view regarding the Islamic community and the justification of the mobilization program. This is supported by the views of some local and national level ADAB members. For example, BRAC and Shapla Manobic Unnoyon Kendro of Brahmanbaria remained critical of ADAB for “overdoing” in the Brahmanbaria incident.

Three years after the incident, the change in political power in Bangladesh in 2001 brought the NGO-Islamic-political issue into a renewed public political debate. Following the setback in the 1998 incident, PROSHIKA wanted to marginalize the influence of the Islamic community. So, PROSHIKA and ADAB were believed to have actively campaigned in favor of Awami League (AL) against other political parties in the 2001 general election. Ironically, the AL was defeated and the new political power was composed of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (which is very hostile towards PROSHIKA and ADAB), Jamaat-e-Islami (which is very critical of NGOs), and Islami Okyo Jote (the Islamic political party that belongs to the particular *madrassa* system of Brhmanbaria with whom direct confrontation occurred). Two types of effects of this political change were observable. One was related to the internal relationship within the NGO community and the other was the GO-NGO relation. The question of the inclusion of “political” issues in the development agendas of NGOs divided the NGO community into two rival blocks leading to the breakdown of the apex body,

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ADAB.²⁰ BRAC softened its position regarding women's political empowerment. For instance, taking a more liberal position compared to the radical one of PROSHIKA, BRAC actively backed down from fielding its grassroots members in the local election contest.

The GO-NGO relations became more tense and conflicting. The government became increasingly critical of political involvement of NGOs. It has been reluctant to recognize the proper contributions of NGOs. The March 2003 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) by the government describes NGOs exclusively as only service providers, while in fact they are also making enormous contribution in advocacy, governance, and monitoring. The PRSP seeks the "democratization of NGOs" which indicates the government's intention to exert more control over NGOs. Though sociopolitical mobilization programs of the NGOs correspond perfectly with the objectives of the PRSP, the government is very reluctant to let them engage in "political" empowerment activities. This could be interpreted as the risk to partisan politics by NGOs. Such a risk is manifested in a recent Ministerial Committee report (May 2003) that made three particular recommendations affecting all NGOs, saying that those organizations must be prohibited from engaging in political activities; the government should appoint a public official to head an NGO in case it is found corrupt; and NGOs should introduce public curriculum in their non-formal primary schools instead of following their own. This indicates a number of points. First, the prohibition on political involvement would significantly curtail the potential of NGOs for political mobilization, particularly for voter awareness programs. Two, appointment of public officials would virtually eliminate the NGOs' autonomy. Three, introduction of public curriculum in NGO schools would effectively terminate the 'conscientization' education, the very philosophical basis of mobilization and collective empowerment.

Such implications of the incident suggest that political mobilization is a risky business for NGOs. An earlier attempt by Gono Sahajjo Songstha (GSS), another NGO, met with similar consequence in the early 1990s and eventually it had to drop its political empowerment programs (Ahmed 2000). Being dissatisfied with the prospects and effectiveness of grassroots political mobilization, ASA, the third largest NGO, drastically shifted its empowerment strategy from radical political mobilization to only credit based economic approach to which the poor people give primary importance (Rutherford 1995). Therefore, in the context of Bangladesh it appears that women's empowerment through political mobilization has lesser prospects for NGOs as long as the attempt fails to reflect the people's own choice and preferences.

Conclusion

This paper examined whether PROSHIKA's mobilization programs are consistent with its proclaimed participatory development approach. Evidence from women members in Brahmanbaria suggests that there are contradictions between its participatory approach and its mobilization program in practice.

First, PROSHIKA influenced the mobilization incident against the Islamic community based on its perception that the community is detrimental to women's development. Mobilization was legitimized with particular emphasis on the reference to the morals of the war of independence because of the controversial role of the community in the war. However, contrary to this perception of PROSHIKA, its members held the opinion that the Islamic community was largely not detrimental to their development. With regards to mobilization based on the morals of the independence war, the members agreed neither with this issue nor with the specific way and form it was carried out. This demonstrates that PROSHIKA's mobilization program did not reflect its proclaimed "participatory" approach. It appears that PROSHIKA was more concerned with its own political agenda and thus followed an impositional type of mobilization ignoring the opinions of its members.

Second, wider implications of this particular mobilization incident proved enormously grave both for the internal cohesion of the NGO community and for women's mobilization and empowerment programs of all NGOs in general. Though it cannot be said with certainty, due to lack of evidence, that taking into consideration of the views and opinions of the women members would have avoided such consequences, the incident nevertheless suggests the risks of grassroots political mobilization especially when it is led along partisan political lines. Therefore, political mobilization as a means of political empowerment for women may not be as simple as empowerment theories suggest, especially those by feminists. Particular attention is to be paid to the delicate balance between partisan and nonpartisan aspects of "political issues" as well as to maintain the "political" neutrality of the empowering agencies.

Notes:

1. For example BRAC, the biggest NGO states its objectives as the "Alleviation of Poverty and Empowerment of the Poor" and PROSHIKA, another NGO, focuses on "poverty" and "empowerment". Both of them work almost exclusively with rural poor women. BRAC's members are 98% women, while the figure for PROSHIKA is 85%. See PROSHIKA, Conceptual Framework and Summary of Five Year Plan for Phase-VI (July 1999-June 2004); BRAC Annual Report 2002.
2. PROSHIKA is a combination of first three initials of three Bangla words- *Proshikkha*, *Shikkha* and *Karma* (Training, Education and Action). PROSHIKA is the second largest private NGO in Bangladesh.
3. *Madrassa*, an Arabic word for school, refers to an institution where Islamic religious education is given. In Bangladesh there are two parallel educational systems: one is secular general education and the other is religious *madrassa* education. Both systems, however, partially include religious and secular subjects. Among *madrassa* there are again two systems, one is called *Alia*, which is recognized under public curriculum, and the other is called *Qawmi* or *Khareji*, which is outside public curriculum. Secularist groups in Bangladesh, including NGOs, do not necessarily distinguish between the two *madrassa* systems. *Imam*, an Arabic word for leader, especially refers to a person who leads in prayer. In Bangladesh this is an institutional post of the

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mosques. Imams play important roles in social activities. I personally interviewed this particular Imam. The mosque is on the opposite side of the stadium.

4. *Hilla* marriage is an intervening marriage required for a divorced woman, according to the Islamic law, when her husband wants to remarry her. The intervening marriage is legally prohibited in Bangladesh, but widely practiced. *Fatwabaz*, literally, a person who has a mania for giving *fatwa*. It is a derogatory term used for the Islamic community.
5. Personal interview with a BRAC executive officer on May 15, 2002.
6. December 16 is the Independence Day for Bangladesh. Since 1971 the month of December has been celebrated as the Month of Independence.
7. The daily *Prothom Alo*, Dec. 6, 1998. This Imam mentioned the same word in my interview with him.
8. The ordinary people and the grassroots women frequently referred to the event as *shomabesh* during interviews.
9. For a detailed description of the incident and individual experience of women participants, see CBS 2001.
10. The daily *Bhorer Kagoj*, *Prothom Alo* and *Banglar Bani*, Dec. 12, 1998.
11. Officially Grameen Bank is not an NGO, but the common people do not necessarily distinguish it from an NGO because of the similar service delivery.
12. This view was expressed by the local NGO officials, common people, professionals, and the women members who I interviewed during my fieldwork.
13. Personal interview with the principal of Industrial School of Brahmanbaria. Also I met a student leader of Chhatra Dal (BNP student wing) who gave me a detailed account of how he and his associates were involved in the process of organizing political strike following the event.
14. See the daily *Prothom Alo*, *Ittefaq*, *Inqilab*, *Independent*, *Observer*, *Bhorer Kagoj*, *Janakhantha* and *Shangbad*, Dec. 9, 1998.
15. *Huzur* literally means 'sir' but it refers to Islamic religious figures of *madrasa*, Imams of the mosques. During interview, the women frequently referred them as *Huzurs*.
16. Muslim burial is done by wrapping the dead body with a piece of white cloth, where as using a black cloth is believed to be a practice of the Christian faith.
17. *Janazah* is the funeral prayer which is undertaken by a religious man usually an Imam. This prayer is a crucial one for a believing Muslim. Denial of such a prayer would amount to dieing as a non-Muslim which has severe implications in the afterlife.
18. Ashraf Ali vendor was an influential donator to many *madrasa*, but he made his fortune by selling fake legal stamps and rent seeking. He was arrested by the Joint Forces in December 2002 and upon hearing his arrest many students and teachers of *madrasa* went to meet him in the police station. The Daily *Prothom Alo*, December 22, 2002.
19. Personal interview with Mufti Nurullah and Maulana Abdul Hafiz of Jameya Yunusia. 26 Oct 2001.
20. ADAB was the apex body of NGOs in Bangladesh until April 2003. It has been accused since early 1990s of

getting involved in partisan politics. In fact in 1992 its registration was once cancelled by the NGO Bureau of Bangladesh due to its controversial political involvement. It came under renewed attack after 1995, 1996, and 2001 parliamentary elections in Bangladesh on the grounds that it directly campaigned in favor of a particular political party against others. In the event of Brahmanbaria, ADAB played a prominent role in the process of women's mobilization because it was headed by the president of PROSHIKA as well. After the 2001 general election both government and other NGOs became strongly critical of both ADAB and PROSHIKA and eventually ADAB was broken apart. A new NGO apex body called Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh (FNB) was officially formed under the breakaway leadership of BRAC in April 2003. The FNB is more collaborative with the government. The *Daily Prothom Alo*, April 30, 2003.

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