

# The personal is political: Emotional performances and political mobilisations among Bangladeshi women

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## Abstract

This paper analyses the role of emotions in women's political mobilizations in Bangladesh. Reflecting on how the political platform *Gonojagoron Moncho* updates discourse on Bengali nationalism and the traumas of Liberation War, I focus on the non-verbal aspects of the emotional performances of female activists in order to understand how they use their bodies to mobilise people politically. Their embodied challenge to religious and cultural restrictions on their behaviours – both on and offline – points to the importance of their performances for acquiring more powerful positions in the group and society. This research was developed through the combination of different qualitative methods, particularly participant observation and photographic documentation.

**Keywords:** performance, emotions, activism, women, Bangladesh.

# O pessoal é político: performances emocionais e mobilizações políticas entre mulheres bangladechianas

## Resumo

Este artigo analisa o papel das emoções em mobilizações políticas de mulheres em Bangladesh. Partindo da reflexão sobre como a plataforma política *Gonojagoron Moncho* atualiza o discurso nacionalista Bengali e o drama do trauma da Guerra de Libertação do país, eu foco em aspectos não-verbais das performances emocionais de suas ativistas para compreender como as mulheres utilizam seus corpos para mobilizar pessoas politicamente. A forma corporificada como desafiam as diversas restrições religiosas e culturais impostas ao comportamento feminino – no mundo *online* e *offline* - apontam para a importância de suas performances na conquista de posições mais poderosas no grupo e na sociedade. Esta pesquisa foi desenvolvida através da combinação de diferentes métodos qualitativos, mas especialmente da observação participante e da documentação fotográfica.

**Palavras-chave:** performance, emoções, ativismo, mulheres, Bangladesh.

# The personal is political: Emotional performances and political mobilisations among Bangladeshi women

*Fabiene Gama*

This article<sup>1</sup> analyses the role of emotional performances in women's political mobilisations in Bangladesh. I focus on the female activists of *Gonojagoron Moncho* ["The People's Uprising Platform"], a political platform<sup>2</sup> that emerged from the mass protest that took place in Shahbag<sup>3</sup> in February of 2013, and which championed the same cause as the protestors: to push the government to prosecute and punish criminals of the Liberation War<sup>4</sup> with the maximum penalty - death by hanging - and to ban Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami<sup>5</sup> and its student branch, Jamaat Shibri, from Bangladesh politics.<sup>6</sup>

By "emotional performances" I refer to performances enacted in order to experiment with and express emotions<sup>7</sup>. Emotions are at the centre of performance in *Gonojagoron Moncho*. Young women who shout out slogans are responsible for conducting these performances in relation to their audience. I take emotions to be "communicative performances", as defined by Lila Abu-Lughod and Catherine Lutz (1990); a kind of communication that exceeds discourse. More than words, they are a kind of practice (Scheer, 2012) in which many other elements - bodily, expressive and personal - are at play (Leavitt, 1996). They involve the whole person, as stressed by Michelle Rosaldo: "Emotions are thoughts somehow 'felt' in flushes, pulses, 'movements' of our livers, minds, hearts, stomachs, skin. They are embodied thoughts, thoughts seeped with the apprehension that 'I am involved'" (Rosaldo, 1984: 143). In other words, they result from a combination of thinking and feeling, experienced and expressed through the body (Leavitt, 1996, Pernau, 2013, Rosaldo, 1984).

Emotions are embodied practices that can occur consciously or inadvertently. Performances, on the other hand, help channel both positive and negative emotions and to minimize or maximize their power. They can be seen as "emotional practices": manipulations of body and mind that help us to achieve certain emotional states and feelings that we can experiment with (Scheer, 2012). They can be carried out alone, but they are frequently embedded in social settings for inducing feelings. And the way they are experienced and expressed depends on where, how, by who and to whom they are performed. We see and feel things differently in different places/spaces (Gammerl, 2012).

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2 "Platform" is a doubly apt term to refer to the group, since it is mostly composed of bloggers and members of different political parties and organizations.

3 Shahbag is an important place for social, cultural and political manifestations in Bangladesh.

4 Islamists who committed several crimes against civilians, fighting against the Independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971.

5 The largest Islamist party in Bangladesh.

6 In 2009, the government of Bangladesh (Awami League party) created a domestic tribunal called "International Crimes Tribunal" to prosecute Liberation War criminals. The tribunal is polemical and has been criticized by many international human rights organizations for its lack of transparency, harassment of witnesses and especially for the deployment of capital punishment to the defendants, mostly from the political party opposed to the one that is in power.

7 In this way, the performances that I will discuss in this article are both 'emotive', in the sense that they induce emotions in the audience and the performers, and 'emotional', in the sense that they display and reveal the emotions of performers and audience. Indeed, the performances largely efface or elide this distinction. I have preferred to use the adjective 'emotional' for political implications.

In this article, I take a road march organised by *Gonojagoron Moncho* in the beginning of 2014 as a case study for demonstrating how a cultural trauma (Eyerman, 2004; Alexander et al. 2004), updated and imagined collectively through a process of agentive emotional practices, can mobilise communities – and specially women - around political issues. Although not a ‘women’s movement’ per se, it gathers an exceptionally large number of women who belong to different groups and institutions. This high coefficient of women is particularly remarkable when compared to the relatively low involvement of women in political demonstrations unrelated to women’s rights in Bangladesh.

By focusing on women’s demonstrations, I analyse the roles of these women, how these roles were negotiated, and what I could learn about them by observing and documenting their performances in political mobilisations. To investigate their embodied emotions in detail, I have chosen to focus on the visual aspect of the performances through photography. Reflecting on the aesthetic component of the performances is an innovative approach. However, it stems from debates regarding the limitations of thinking about emotions essentially through their discursive elements, which is a highly developed theme in Emotion Studies. This research therefore follows the ground-breaking lead of pioneering studies that aim to bridge persistent dichotomies such as body and mind, structure and agency, nature and culture, expression and experience.

I will begin by explaining my methodology and stressing the importance of using photography and Facebook as tools of investigation. I will then contextualize the group’s demands and the role of women in the political sphere, followed by a reflection on the group’s performances and emotions, indicating how they renew and update the trauma of the war. Finally, I will conclude by analysing the contemporary performances of women in political mobilizations in Bangladesh.

## Note on Methodology

This research combines different qualitative research methods, such as participant observation, open interviews, focus groups, and photographic documentation. Adherence to the research method of ‘ethnobiography’, which consists of combining biographical and ethnographic methods (Gonçalves et al., 2012), compelled me to work with the emotions transmitted by leaders to the audience rather than with the latter’s responses.

Emotions and performances were observed in political manifestations, but also in other public and private activities. They were analysed as reflections on the different degrees of theatricality of the activists’ performances (Goffman, 1959), as well as on how their gender identity, or their becoming *female* activists, was being produced and reproduced in their actions (Butler, 1990). I incorporated Butler’s (1990) notion that gender is not just *performed*, but is also *performative*: it produces a series of effects through its everyday confirmation. I thus also seek to assess how gender norms were being established and policed in Bangladesh.

To think about aesthetics, I chose to use photographs at different stages of the research, including during moments of data collection, when expanding my network in the field, interviewing, and presenting the results of my research to the activists. Photographs helped me build a relationship of trust and to garner interest in my research. At first, some activists were suspicious of my curiosity. It was only after seeing the first photos I published on Facebook, their main means of online activism, that some changed their behaviour towards me. Facebook, in particular, was an important research tool. Through the activists’ networks, I could reach out to them and follow them as fast as they could check on me.



Lucky Akter using one of my photos of the road march on her Facebook page

The fact that their activism also took place online and the images that I was producing were useful to them meant that I had become an activist too. They started asking me to photograph them in different situations and to publish the photos as soon as possible on the Internet. Their reactions to my representations of them helped me understand which images were important for the group, and which were not, as well as what was or was not a good performance. The photos in this article reflect this.

Photography has proven to be very effective in the study of social relations mediated by gestures and performances (Guran, 2000). The distinctive perception of reality afforded by photography enables researcher and reader to dedicate themselves to the exchanges that take place through silence, glances, facial expressions, gestures, etc., and to take notice of the trivial aspects and the indeterminacies of what is happening in front of the photographic apparatus (Piette, 1992). But it takes time to fully appreciate a photograph, and one must allow oneself to be guided by emotions (Achutti, 2004).

Photos reveal a common sensitivity that is emotionally laden, yet often ignored. At the same time, they play an agentive role in mediating emotions and performances; they actively incorporate all the three actors into their domain: the photographer's point of view, the pro-filmic performances of the object of the photograph and the interpretation of the viewer. It is also important to point out that the current investigation was carried out using two other methodological approaches: shared anthropology (a concept developed by Jean Rouch<sup>8</sup>) and symmetrical anthropology (Latour, 1991). The first consists of creating knowledge in the field through a reflexive process where the anthropologist presents his/her analysis to his/her interlocutors, who offer feedback that can affect the research. The second aims to situate anthropology at the centre of an egalitarian relationship where the differences between the actors can be perceived (rather than preconceived or even obfuscated).

### **Mobilised Emotions: war trauma and collective identity**

In Bangladesh, memories of the Liberation War are very present in people's everyday lives. Most of the adults experienced the war in one way or another. Those who had not been born at the time constantly hear stories from older family members and friends (Guhathakurta, 2013). Many have not recovered from their grief.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Colleyn (2004).

Cultural processes of remembering the past are frequent, serving to (re)build the foundations of shared identity as Bengali Muslims. They stimulate imaginings of the war and collaborate with the cultural trauma related to the origin myth of Bangladesh. According to Jeffrey Alexander (2004), to experience a cultural trauma one need not have experienced the traumatic event itself; it is enough to be part of a group that has the event as its formative myth. The trauma is established through an on-going process that is constantly reaffirmed through the 'trauma drama', an agentive and creative process of mediation and representation (Eyerman, 2004). National holidays, monuments, films, and music function as shared recollections of past experienced in the present.

Some of the *Gonojagoron Moncho* activists suffered traumatic experiences during the Liberation War. But many of them were not even born at that time, nor did they lose close relatives in the war. The stories of 1971 are nonetheless part of their imaginary of Bangladesh. Most Bangladeshis today see themselves as part of a group that survived massacres and cultural and religious violence. First, after the partition of India, when West Bengal became East Pakistan and many Bengali Muslims felt disrespected and exploited by the western part of the country. Then, after independence, when Muslims around the world considered it an anti-Muslim act and rejected the new country. (Van Schendel, 2013; Sobhan, 2013).

The war was obviously a "critical event" (Das, 1995) that generated new forms of action, gave new meanings to politics, transformed social identities. The violence shared by Bengali Muslims created a "moral community" bound by the experience of suffering. Some of them – the activists - also formed a "political community" in the process of engaging with the State to demand justice and punishment for the war criminals. But there were differences in experiencing religion and politics, and these were more significant for women used to the traditional norms of *purdah*, but who also lived a public life attached to cultural practices (music, literature etc.). Consequently, the war had a greater impact on them (D'Costa, 2011).

Although Bengali Muslims share a sense of collective identity that emerged from the Liberation War, men and women embodied these experiences differently. According to Yasmin Saikia,

The strategic claim that the enemy Pakistanis had raped two hundred thousand Bengali women transformed the real women into an abstract number of bodies. Reduced into objects, survivors could not tell who had raped them, but the omnipotent government decided that rape of women was done by Pakistani enemy. The revenge rhetoric that followed made the rape of women during the war of 1971 a spectacle without the backing of an investigation and allowed for continued gendered subjectivity (Saikia, 2011: 1207).

*Gonojagoron Moncho* appropriated the Bengali nationalist narrative without taking gender issues into account, which provoked criticism of the group, but also reveals a political strategy. According to Yasmin Saikia (2011), silencing women's voices in order to establish a collective memory of Bangladesh as a secular ethnic Bengali nation ravaged by Pakistanis and their collaborators justifies a call for revenge and hate. By claiming that, despite a Muslim majority, Bangladesh is a secular country, *Gonojagoron Moncho* furthers the Liberation War myth of a democratic, secular and socialist nation, free from conservative Islamists "made in Pakistan". But by ignoring women's narratives of the war, which include references to Bengali violence, they reproduce revenge rhetoric and stimulate feelings of moral outrage against Islamists and Pakistan. For Jasper (1998: 409), "[a]ctivists work hard to create moral outrage and anger and to provide a target against which these can be vented." Negative emotions are powerful. A sense of threat, outrage, anger, or fear moves people into action much more readily than positive emotions. In social mobilisations, anger is more than a desired feeling; it is also a requirement for engagement (Hochschild, 1975).

Since the first years after the Liberation War, many activists have demanded justice for the victims. Different artists, movements, political parties, and organisations emerged demanding the punishment of war criminals and the banishment of Jamaat-e-Islam. In their actions, they usually re-stage emotional practices (discourses, art, performances) of the war, taking advantage of meaningful places and dates. The examples are endless, and *Gonojagoron Moncho* is just the latest one. Music, theatre, poetry, and drawing are the most important types of performances related to Bangladesh's trauma drama, and they are often staged in political mobilisations. They have an important role in stimulating and incorporating feelings of political activism, as evidenced by Scheer:

Conceptual knowledge that war crimes are morally wrong (...) can be transformed into bodily knowledge and thus be buttressed by reading or hearing of concrete details, viewing photographs, discussing with others in shared outrage, marching and chanting at demonstrations, or watching others do so (Scheer, 2012: 210).

In the process, hate and anger, as well as a desire for revenge, assume an important role. They are strong characteristics of the platform's struggles, stimulated through their discourses and performances inspired by the Liberation War, as we will see shortly. And despite the fact that their main demand – the punishment of war criminals with the maximum penalty, death by hanging – is highly criticized by most human rights activists, it is presented by the group as an honourable feeling that moves people to fight injustice and violence.

### **Gender activism: women and their bodies in the political sphere**



Women marching in the street of Dhaka, 1971. Photographer: Rashid Talukder.

Women have occupied very active roles in Bangladesh's political scene since the birth of the country, establishing a presence in different spheres of public life. From political parties to artistic organisations and educational projects, many of them are activists in women's associations, while some of them engage in non-gender related programmes. Bangladesh has numerous groups dedicated to and led by women. However, despite the huge female activism in the country, they are forced to be silent on certain issues, such as their participation on the Liberation War.<sup>9</sup>

Stories of the war are basically told in four genres: narratives of male freedom fighters, district reports, documents of war crimes, and novels and other writings on civil society (Saikia, 2011). In these stories, women are relegated to subsidiary roles, usually as victims: the muted *birangonas* [the raped women]. These gaps in history produce a type of memory regarding women that contributes to the cultural norms of gender: when they are not altogether absent, they appear as passive and silent victims (Mookherjee, 2002; Saikia, 2011 and D'Costa, 2011).

In Bangladesh, as elsewhere, women are expected to be constrained and discreet. They must cover their bodies, speak softly, and not direct their gaze toward men. Their place is in the home, not on the street, and strict control is exercised over their bodies, their behaviour, and their sexuality (Huq, 2003). According to Shiren Huq, women are

socialized into 'becoming woman' on the basis of a combination of Islamic strictures and Bengali cultural norms of gender propriety whereby we are not to be seen or heard. We are expected to speak quietly, to keep our eyes downcast, to cover ourselves in the presence of strange men and to eat when everyone else has eaten. (Huq, 2003: 169)

Furthermore, the "woman outside the boundaries of her family and home is [...] either destitute - an object of pity - or immoral - an object of shame." (Huq, 2003:169). One can easily understand how this image of secluded women can be disfigured by war. For Bina D'Costa (2011:133), "[i]n a country such as Bangladesh, where virginity was considered the 'virtue of chaste women', the issue of rape sparked an immediate debate about honour, shame and 'pollution'". In the name of preserving their dignity, women who had been raped suffered social exclusion and the silencing of their voices and experiences. The Liberation War had a devastating impact on all Bangladeshis, but especially on women.

The dominant representation of women who endured the war as *birangona*, therefore, aligns with the nation-building project by equating the rape of women by the Pakistan Army<sup>10</sup> with the rape of the country itself.

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<sup>9</sup> Some recent and exceptional publications address this gap and deal with the different roles women played in the Liberation war. See: Shahen Akhtar et al. (2013), Nayanika Mookherjee (2002), Yasmin Saikia (2011), Bina D'Costa (2011).

<sup>10</sup> Rapes committed by Bengalis are ignored.



Raped woman, 1971. Photographer: Naib Uddin Ahmed

Silencing occurs alongside images of (silent) naked women's bodies, becoming part of the imaginary of the Liberation War. This photo of a dead, anonymous raped woman is one of the most famous pictures of the violence that occurred in 1971. The process of silencing women and making a spectacle of their bodies is a powerful way of objectifying and disempowering them. A strategy updated and intensified through the wide availability of images and technology in the present, as I will demonstrate later.

Today we often see opponents trying to delegitimise female activists by publishing photomontages of their faces on naked bodies. The images seek to provoke fear, shame and dishonour. They also intend to push women back into the house and out of public life. But many young female activists resist these intimidations, using social networks like Facebook to empower themselves. So, even if social networks are of little use as a long-term mobilizing tool (Lewis et al., 2014), it is a place for affective expression and social influence. The ways that women are resisting, as well as the ways they are being threatened, therefore reveal to us important battlefields in Bangladesh and abroad. Investment in the moral de-legitimisation of the performance of the activists points to the place and space of women and the female body in political struggles.

### **Gonojagoron Moncho: Gender roles in the People's Uprising Platform**

*Gonojagoron Moncho* is a platform composed of groups that have different interests and functions. There are civil society activists, nongovernmental organisations, and political parties on the left and centre-left of the spectrum, and organisations<sup>11</sup>, bloggers (mainly men in their thirties and forties, responsible for the group's speeches), *slogan konya*<sup>12</sup> (mostly young girls, students in their twenties who shout slogans and organise students), other students and student union leaders, videographers (women in their thirties, like myself), and other activists between fifty and sixty years of age engaged in different organisations (political parties, NGOs, the UN, etc.).

<sup>11</sup> Mainly Awami League, the Communist Party of Bangladesh, and Chhatra Union [Bangladesh Students Union].

<sup>12</sup> Slogan Konya [Slogan Daughter] is a term exists only in a female version, although in Bangladesh there are also boys shouting slogans.



The women in the group are mainly middle class and live in the urban area of Dhaka. They are educated and have a politically active background. They have university degrees (sometimes a MPhil or PhD.) or they are currently studying in one of the universities of Dhaka. Most of them are Muslims, with a few Hindus, but none of them follows religion traditions faithfully. There are artists, teachers, filmmakers, former UN officials, leaders of political parties, members of NGOs, feminists, and others.

Two activists became the most well-known faces of the group: Lucky Akter, an English student in her twenties who was the General Secretary of the Bangladesh Students Union; and Imran Sarker, an anaesthesiologist in his thirties, member of the Blogger and Online Activist Network. Each one of them has a function in the group, coordinating different emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). Akter mobilises the students and shouts slogans at the audience before formal speeches and during the marches. Sarker has become the spokesperson for the platform and is responsible for giving interviews and official statements. He does not have a venerable political background, and is called Dr. Imran Sarker as a sign of respect.

Akter, who is called *slogan konya*, prefers to define herself as an activist, as does Sarker. The difference in the treatment given to Akter and Sarker is related not only to their age difference and performances, but also to their gender differences. In connecting with the public, however, Akter is responsible for adding a great deal of emotion, especially through her performances. By her own account, she establishes a true connection with the audience. While her male counterpart has a restrained and distant relationship with the public, her performance engages the audience through sensorial experiences (sounds, rhythms and bodies).

Students have been responsible for various political uprisings in Bangladesh and they have actively participated in many historical moments in the country. According to Meghna Guhathakurta, “[t]he students’ movement in Bangladesh has always been in the vanguard of progressive democratic protests against militarisation, cultural repression and economic exploitation.” (Guhathakurta, 2013: 319). Students have always played and continue to play important roles in turning political grievances into popular resistance and forcing governments to change their policies. They put on the most energetic performances, bringing emotions to every stage of their protests.

Akter’s role also reveals important aspects of women’s activism and resistance in the country. While Sarker was chosen by his peers, Akter has to fight every day for her position within the group. Yet, because she was recognised by the public as the poster child of Shahbag’s new generation of freedom fighters, people developed a charismatic relationship with her, which, in turn, obligated the elders to accept her and her demands. She is proof that her fight for recognition as a leader, rather than a “cheerleader”, is a political struggle, even within the movement.

Regarding the play on the term “cheerleader”, some feminists complain that Akter’s function within the group is restricted to entertaining audiences. They see no leadership in her and consider the *slogan konya* performances to be a new way of objectifying women’s bodies. But Akter is not silenced, as were her predecessors, nor does she remain accommodated in a subsidiary position. Slogans have an important role in political mobilisations, captivating audiences and succinctly communicating the messages of a group. They present what the group represents. Even if they are expressed through language, they are strongly intensified by the place, the rhythm and the form in which they are spoken. Their meanings are affected and reframed by the ways they are embodied. Akter’s performances, as I will demonstrate, are capable of provoking - in herself and the audience - small trances capable of stimulating certain states of mind in the audience, creating an atmosphere within which her message can be effectively transmitted.

## Road march: emotional performances, mobilisation, and community of sentiments

In late 2013, the government of Bangladesh hanged Abdul Quader Mollah, a leader of Jamaat-e-Islami charged with war crimes. The sentence, along with the protests against the general elections of January 5, 2014, created an atmosphere of great turmoil. Islamists attacked Hindu communities and strikes were called all over the country. *Gonojagoron Moncho* organised two road marches to cross the country protesting against communal violence, in support of the victims of the attacks and hoping to attract new activists to their cause. The first road march went to Jessore (southwest Bangladesh) and the second one, which I joined, went to Takurgaon (north Bangladesh).

The trip to Takurgaon lasted four days and involved around two hundred activists in eight buses, visiting over ten cities. Several activities took place on the road, both inside the buses and in the cities: music and slogan performances, speeches, meetings, parades, etc. The collective manifestations were strongly performative, and performances were intensely emotional. We travelled in the buses, but when approaching a village some activists moved to an open truck to shout out slogans. Activists who were documenting the group's performances followed them. Only a few activists were allowed to be on the truck and there was a hierarchy of functions (*slogan konyas*, security staff, filmmakers, coordination team, students etc.).



Activists entering a village

When in a city or a village, we were sometimes allowed to get off the bus, depending on how dangerous the place was considered to be (the group was being threatened by the Islamists that they were protesting against). When we could attend the manifestation, we were divided into groups: some of us went to the stage where some people spoke, others protected them (security staff), others still were filming and photographing. Some of us joined the audience, and a few activists took the opportunity to arrange a parallel political meeting with local organizations or parties.

The public ceremonies were deeply regulated and each character had a defined role and specific times for expressing outrage, compassion, hatred, or angst. As Marcel Mauss (1979 [1921]: 147) has pointed out, “a whole series of oral expressions of feelings are not exclusively psychological or physiological phenomena,

but social phenomena marked by non-spontaneous demonstrations and more perfect obligation.” So while leaders demonstrated anger and outrage on stage, when they were with the victims they were caring and compassionate.

During the march, certain scenes repeated themselves: when we reached a designated place, young activists from the security team encircled Sarker and Akter and led them to the stage. Meanwhile, other activists tried to prevent the public from approaching the two. In a routine reminiscent of a performer arriving at a concert venue, a chain of activists segregated leaders from the audience. Once they were on stage, a local union leader or political authority affiliated to the group introduced them and passed the microphone to one of the *slogan konya*, who started shouting slogans.



Imran Sarker, Lucky Akter and Shammi Haque on stage during the road march.

One of the few women on stage were the *slogan konya*. While the men remained restrained, their performances were very corporeal. They shouted, shook their bodies and engaged the audience via emotional performances. A great part of the emotional labour was under their responsibility. This gendered division of emotional labour (Groves, 1995) may suggest stereotypes related to gender in the West (emotional women versus rational men), but in fact they invert Bengali and Islamic gender codes of behaviour: while the women engage in a loud aggressive performance, the men remain reserved.

When there were scheduled visits to the houses of victims, these mimicked a parade: a mass of locals followed the leaders, who were protected by the Dhaka activists. Sarker and other bloggers led the main parade. But Akter took advantage of these moments to create a parallel march, imposing her leadership.



Lucky Akter with the student activists during the road march.

In Akter's parade, local student activists followed her, while Dhaka student activists protected her, generating a scene where she focused attention on herself. She also had a personal photographer documenting everything in order to later to post it on the internet, especially on Facebook. These situations empowered Akter: for a few moments, she occupied a prominent place in the platform, eliding her position either as a *slogan konyā* or as a sidekick to Sarker. During her march, she went as far as to invert roles, having boys shouting slogans while she marched.

Akter and Sarker sometimes visited the same houses, sometimes they visited different ones. The visits were also highly ritualized (and intensely documented). Once we reached the houses that had been attacked, only the leaders, photographers, and videographers were allowed to enter and speak during the encounter or record it. They lasted just a few minutes, purportedly for security reasons. The threat of an Islamist attack was always present. The visits were prearranged by local partners who directed the activists to the selected victims. Meetings were very emotional and important for both the victims – who had the opportunity to approach the leaders, tell them about their suffering and get support – and for the leaders, who could show empathy for the victims.



Lucky Akter with one of the Hindu victims.

The leaders examined the burnt objects and quarters, embraced the victims, said words of comfort, recorded their (very emotional) testimonies and pledged to keep on fighting the Islamists. Sometimes the leaders and other activists cried. All the meetings, speeches, and performances were well documented by the group to be circulated online. In fact, many activities were organised precisely in order to affect an audience that could only be reached through the Internet. A great part of their activism happens online. The documentation hence functioned as ‘awareness-raising devices’ (Traïni, 2012) that helped to shape the emotions of the cause, giving strength to the group. According to Christopher Traïni (2012: 573),

[l]e terme dispositif de sensibilisation désigne l’ensemble des supports matériels, des agencements d’objets, des mises en scène, que les militants déploient afin de susciter des réactions affectives qui prédisposent ceux qui les éprouvent à s’engager ou à soutenir la cause défendue.

These awareness-raising devices also strengthen their “community of sentiment” (Appadurai, 1996), online and *in locus*. According to Arjun Appadurai (1996), communities of sentiment are created through collective experiences and imaginings. They are groups that imagine and feel things together and that carry the potential of moving from shared imagination to collective action. Imagination is a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity, a real social practice. As an “emotional practice”, it needs to be constantly re-enacted through performances, thus yielding “performances of community”<sup>13</sup> that produce emotional identification. Places, music, photographs and people are means through which we can reach some states, which may provoke performative effects on the constitution of feelings.

The presence of numerous famous Dhaka activists in a house that has been attacked, in a small village, was in itself an emotional encounter. The victims were grateful for the visit and hopeful that they would not be abandoned. For the activists, the meetings were also a deeply emotional experience. While smelling the burnt houses, seeing what the victims lost and hearing their tragic stories, they became embedded in an emotional knowledge learnt through their own bodies and senses, and they could demonstrate their emotions in a very personal way.

<sup>13</sup> Performances referring to shared emotions and values (Cf. Margrit Pernau, 2013).



Lucky Akter with a Hindu victim during the road march.

Meetings between women, in particular, were very affectionate. Akter frequently took the victims in her arms, sometimes with tears in her eyes. The performances on and off stage were enacted to experiment with emotions and sought to engage the public and the activists of the group through sensorial means. As in the Australian funerary cults studied by Marcel Mauss (1979), the activities organised by *Gonojagoron Moncho* included a compulsory expression of feelings, with fixed times, conditions and agents for expressing it. It functioned as a kind of ritual where the actors participated in the performances by recognising and accepting the authenticity of the other's intention and duty. According to Jeffrey Alexander (2004b: 527),

Ritual effectiveness energizes the participants and attaches them to each other, increases their identification with the symbolic objects of communication, and intensifies the connection of the participants and the symbolic objects with the observing audience, the relevant "community" at large.

For the author, there are a number of elements that must be fused in a social performance in order for it to succeed: the background representations; the scripts of the performance; the embodied performer; the audience; the means of symbolic production; the *mise-en-scène*; and the power dynamics of the society. The road march had all of this. Through the shared narrative of the Liberation War, enacted by the leaders, embodied by the *slogan konya* engaged with the audience in meaningful places, the activists of the group participated in a ritual that inserted them in the very core of Bangladesh's history. In this experience, women had a central role: conducting audience involvement through their bodies. If people were quiet and distant during the speeches, they were fully engaged through the slogans.

During the road marches through the country, the activists themselves experienced Islamist attacks. On the first day of the march, Molotov cocktails were thrown at our buses.<sup>14</sup> The attack frightened the activists, who threw themselves on the ground, fearing for their lives. When we left behind a dangerous zone, in contrast, everyone got very excited and started to sing songs from the Liberation War, convinced that they were the new generation of freedom fighters.

<sup>14</sup> According to the activists, the march was being attacked by supporters of Jamaat-e-Islam who did not want the movement to continue. The bomb attack event is itself an important moment of the road march that I will be unable to address in this article.



Objects found in a victimised house.

To see, touch, and smell burnt places while hearing details of how the events happened on location affected the group in many ways. It provoked sensorial experience of the violence inflicted on Hindus, as well as on themselves. At the same time, it evoked an emotive image of the Liberation War itself, increasing the feeling of community of the group. They sang songs, shouted slogans, and recreated performances of the war. Struggling to bring closure to the events of 1971, the activists were able to construct their roles as (the new generation of) freedom fighters, thereby inserting themselves in the history of their country and of the Liberation War. In this new story, women have prominent roles.

### **Slogan Konya's Emotional Performances**

With almost 50,000 followers on Facebook, Akter usually speaks of political topics, shares her thoughts, comments on articles and publishes images on her page. So even if most of the people do not take Akter as seriously as her male counterpart, she is nonetheless recognized as a leader. Her emotional performances associated with the slogans communicate in a special way, particularly to young women. The act of shouting, clenching their fists in the air as if punching something, and shaking their bodies from back to front is an aggressive performance by the *slogan kaya*. It challenges the image of *purdah*, the secluded woman.



Shamima Shawan, vice-president of Students Union of Bangladesh and *slogan konya*, shouting slogans on the stage during the road march.

The body movements of the activist while shouting slogans is strengthening, and the audience recognise it as an act that conveys power and emotion to the people. First, she bends backwards, pushing against the air to start proffering the slogans. Then she bends forwards to finish it. For the classic “Joy Bangla” [Victory to Bangla], for example, she would lean backwards while building up the “Joooooooooy”, and then shout “Bangla” in the forward motion, simultaneously punching the air with violence, thereby energising the audience.

The slogans address contemporary topics as well as the Liberation War: they challenge Islamic fundamentalists, demand an end to communal violence, and commemorate the struggles of the freedom fighters. Almost all of them refer to Muslim and Hindu men. That is, *Gonojagoron Moncho* describes Bengali people as a masculine entity, much like the Hindu nationalists of RSS studied by Paola Bacchetta (1999). But some female activists have begun to change the lyrics to incorporate women, indigenous groups, and religions that had been left out in 1971. The Samati women studied by Bacchetta do much the same. Thus, slogans like ‘Hindu-Muslim bhai bhai, ekshathe bachte chai’ [Hindus and Muslims are brothers, they want to live together] became ‘Hindu-Muslim bhai bhon, ekshathe bachte chai’ [Hindus and Muslims are brothers and sisters, they want to live together].





Lucky Akter shouting slogans on the stage.

The messages transmitted by the *slogan konya* provoke performative effects in themselves and their audience. They modulate their voices and bodies to induce emotions to be experienced during the demonstrations, all the while conducting the intensity, the volume, and the speed of the audience's response/performance. Participants must react to what the activist says, engaging in the message that is being shouted. For example, the latest slogan goes as follows:

Akter: Hindu-Muslim bhai bhon

Public: ekshathe bachte chai

The slogans are repeated several times. Sometimes the order of those who speak each part of the slogan changes. The words are adjusted throughout the repetitions, since the audience does not always have time to reflect on what they will say. Occasionally they repeat the slogans automatically, and occasionally they react to the changes. The tempo, volume, and performance linked to the slogans push participants into a trance. Akter herself became famous in 2013 after spending days shouting slogans in Shahbag until she became ill. Many people join *Gonojagoron Moncho* to experience the emotions enacted by the *slogan konya*. By mobilizing people, they are particularly inspiring for young women.

Finding women managing experience through their bodies in political mobilisations in Bangladesh is special. It challenges the multiple restrictions Bengali women face concerning their bodies and behaviours (Chatterjee, 1989). But it is dangerous at the same time. As we have seen, a woman who does not behave modestly and discreetly, upholding 'feminine virtues', is seen as sexually promiscuous and thus unworthy of respect. This is an indictment that all the women activists face throughout their lives, and one that they must fight against if they are to achieve powerful positions. It is a high-risk daily struggle, as we will now see.

## The meaning and feeling of being a “risk taker”

Criticising the modern Western way of thinking in dichotomies, John Leavitt (1996) argues that emotions are special because they do not fit into them. They implicate meaning and feeling, body and mind, culture and biology. It is impossible to think about emotions and performances as the product of one thing or the other. In this sense, certain analyses of emotions as ‘emotional performances’ work best if we think in terms of ‘emotional complexes’, rather than individual emotions. Love and hate, happiness and sadness, and desire and guilt are emotions frequently tied to the same experiences.

During my research among women activists in Bangladesh, I realised that being characterised a “risk taker” was a trait valued by interviewees. It involve both courage and fear, and meant that one was brave enough to deal with dangerous situations. In Bangladesh, violence and the fear of violence are the greatest obstacles women face when they decide to participate in political mobilisations. Sexual violence tops the list of violent acts committed against women, and although the platform attracts a large number of female activists, women do not exceed 10% of the participants. This means that every woman who decides to participate in the activities of the platform often finds herself surrounded by a mass of men.



Rowshon Ara Nipa, video maker, during the road march.

According to Shiren Huq, “fear about their personal safety acts as a crippling constraint on what women can be and do in Bangladesh.” (Huq, 2011: 170). Rape, often referred to as “the loss of honour”, is both a memory of the war and a contemporary threat. Anonymous phone calls, photomontages of their faces on naked bodies published by fake users on Facebook, and text messages sent from unknown phone numbers are some of the strategies used to scare women in the country. Threats of rape and lewd comments about their bodies appear alongside pornographic images on their personal Facebook pages.



Reactions to one of Akter’s profile pictures on Facebook.

Receiving sexually explicit messages on their phones, or having pornographic messages and images posted on their personal webpages by strangers, can cause girls to question their real interest in political actions. Fearing they might lose their honour, some girls become terrified and ashamed when they are threatened by phone or on the Internet. Harassment is itself equated with dishonour. The mere suggestion of a sexual act can be a sign of pollution or promiscuity.

On the first day of the road march, for example, Sonika, my assistant, who was in her early twenties, received a Facebook message on her cell phone that said: “Muio tuk sath phuto khichbar chai pasa dul kahibe” [I too wanted to take photos with you while your ass dances]. Not knowing who sent the message nor how it appeared on her page, Sonika was so embarrassed and scared that she did not dare to speak of the incident with anyone.

I was really fused up by the message and also got a paranoid feeling that someone is following me, otherwise how come someone knows I’m back to Shahbag and started sending me dirty messages? I felt bad and started thinking whether it was a good idea to join the road march. And then, only an hour or so later the cocktail exploded. I actually lost my voice in fear and couldn’t chant slogans though I wanted to. (...) I was actually trembling inside and felt so lonely. (...) But then I felt that in the bus I can’t really talk to my friend, besides he is my male friend and I don’t want him to read this either. Also dealing more with these things makes you more afraid. (...) I was afraid that if I read the whole thing or saw any porn photos I would never be able work for the rest of the days among this crowd of unknown people. (Sonika, in a personal communication in 2014).

She had already been harassed in previous participations in *Gonojagoron Moncho* activities, which distanced her from the movement for a time. When she received this message inside the bus, Sonika feared she was being watched and kept silent. It was only when panic seized her, moments after our bus was attacked by molotov cocktails, that she decided to share what had happened with me. Despite her fear, she decided to continue the trip because she believed leaving the group would be more dangerous.

Pornographic photos and messages, as well as sexual threats and harassments are part of the everyday life for many women activists in Bangladesh, as we can see on Akter’s Facebook pages.



Reactions to one of Akter's profile pictures on Facebook.

Whenever Akter changed her Facebook profile picture, or someone tagged her in a photograph, fake Facebook accounts published hundreds of comments and pornographic images, as in the images above. The images do not only seek to provoke fear, but also to dishonour her through her profile page. A selfie of an erect penis with sperm, for example, did not only indicate a man masturbating to her picture in a demonstration, but also carried with it the threat of rape, and was hence itself dishonourable.

Activists engaged in political parties or organisations devoted to women's rights tend to understand these attacks as strategies meant to frighten them, and they therefore do not feel intimidated by the publications. Akter, for example, uses these comments to get empowered. Allowing anyone to comment on her Facebook page, she does not react to the aggressions, but lets her supporters do so. Remaining silent while her opponents publish lewd images, she conveys that she is not a silent, naked, unnamed victim (like the women of 1971), but a leader who does not need to be afraid of the threats: she has a whole army to defend her. And everything is public, there for everyone to see.

Were her privacy settings restricted to friends, Akter would not receive as many threats as she does, her supporters would have less space to react on the Internet and she would convey a weaker image. The more indifferent she remains to the violence directed at her, the stronger she appears to her admirers, especially girls. People come to see her as a brave young woman, a "risk taker", a girl who ventures.

To be a "risk taker" is thus a key means for women to acquire more powerful positions in Bangladesh; but it is also a fundamental characteristic for a girl to become an activist in the country. The image (and the feeling) of being a risk taker is what allows Akter, as well as other female activists, to be respected and to remain in powerful positions inside a political organisation.

## Final comments

In this article, I have analysed the role of women in political mobilizations in Bangladesh. From the Liberation War trauma drama, updated to take into account the contemporary context, adding - with reservations - gender narratives, *Gonojagoron Moncho's* activists not only struggle to push the government to punish war criminals, but also to inscribe themselves in Bangladeshi history as the new generation of freedom fighters. In this story, women have an interesting role: they are responsible for managing audience involvement through their performances.

Stimulating certain states of mind in themselves and in others while managing experiences is exceptional due to the multiple restrictions women face in Bangladesh concerning their bodies and behaviours. There is a range of dichotomies - home/world, spiritual/material, feminine/masculine - that shape the everyday life of a Bengali woman with regard to their dress, food, behaviour, education, and their role in organising life at home and in the public sphere (Chatterjee, 1989).

Historically, women have been present in the political sphere in Bangladesh. Violence against them is one of the most stirring issues that bring women together in a non-partisan manner. And the country has an increasing number of groups dedicated to and led by women, which also struggle against conservative and fundamentalist groups and regimes. As pointed out by Shahen Akhtar et al.,

Women's struggles in Bangladesh both individually as well as in the form of social movements have historically been located in the civil rights discourse accompanying the process of democratization, which included struggles against military regimes, national liberation struggles and anti-fundamentalist struggles (Akhtar et al., 2013: xiv).

However, despite the prominence of female activism in the country, many women interviewed for this research claimed that they were usually pushed into secondary positions in political organisations that were not directly concerned with women's issues. Even those who took up arms in 1971 and led underground guerrilla groups never attained positions of leadership in their parties, despite their experience. They were always relegated to domestic activities, as Jolly, a former member of the Communist Party, confessed: she and other women were frequently requested to prepare coffee and snacks for the men at the headquarters of the party as soon as public demonstrations were over.

Some of these unequal gender relationships are reproduced in *Gonojagoron Moncho's* platform. For example, during the road march I participated in, women were responsible for organising the buses, the food, and places to sleep. They ensured the safety of the women in the group, guaranteeing that women would be free from male harassment. But their duties were not restricted to these. Women also arranged political meetings by organising activities, visits, and demonstrations. There was even a small quorum of activists engaged in the women's rights movements that led women's demonstrations within the platform. They were responsible for presenting women's demands to the group. Creating a core of women within a group is a strategy that many activists in Bangladesh and India use to articulate their demands (Bacchetta, 1999).

In the platform, women play a central role in shaping emotions. Through slogans, emotional performances, songs and images, the means by which people reach emotional states, they provoke performative effects on the feelings of the audience. As highlighted by Jasper (1998), many people join a social movement to enjoy the pleasures of the protest. Through their performances, women direct the emotion of the other activists and, in the process, acquire more powerful positions in the group and in society.

The expression chosen as the title of this article, "the personal is political", is a well-known motto of American feminist movements. But it is not restricted to it. Using Ron Eyerman's concept of cultural trauma (Eyerman, 2004), I have demonstrated how personal (or personalised) stories and emotions provide a foundation for the political actions of activists engaged in *Gonojagoron Moncho*. Bringing to the fore memories of the Liberation War, including slogans, performances, music and speeches, even the calls to ban Jamaat-e-Islam and Jamaat Shibir, are recurrent practices that can be found in different historical moments of Bangladesh (Guhathakurta, 2013). The platform only renews the (Bengali) nationalist discourse.

Many feminists in the country argue that controlling women's bodies is part of nationalist discourses in Bangladesh (Huq, 2011; D'Costa, 2011; Akhtar et al., 2013). In this sense, *Gonojagoron Moncho's* discourses partially converge with traditional constraints on women. But it also offers women a freer and less conservative atmosphere for their engagement (Akhtar et al., 2013). As with Hindu nationalism studied by Bacchetta (1999), *Gonojagoron Moncho's* Bengali nationalist discourse becomes, for each women in the group, "a point of referentiality, a position from which to speak and act with a maximum of agency and personal safety". (Bacchetta, 1999: 126).

There are foci of resistance inside the group, especially in the performances. Yet when activists point out that women's engagement in the group is a symbol of being modern, or of showing respect toward women – a fact that would ostensibly differentiate them from conservative Islamic groups – they also indicate that women and their bodies are still "the conquered subject on which national and community boundaries were marked." (D'Costa, 2011: 10).

What motivates women to join in political action and what keeps them involved in it is strongly related to their experiences as women in society. The platform offers a space of safety and relative freedom to women, affording them situations where they were able to smoke, travel and spend the night outdoors, among men. The freedom provided by a safe environment is an important element for experimentation and the expression of emotions in political contexts in the country, where extremists frequently kill "secular activists". As Paola Bacchetta observed, "Participation allows [women] to move freely in public space and simultaneously retain (or even gain) respect from their immediate familial milieu as well as wider sectors of society". (Bacchetta, 1999: 125-126). For the author, women experience a mechanism of expansion/adjustment: i.e., they join the movement because of their desire for expansion and the obligation they feel to adjust.

One can think of their manifestations – on and offline – as rituals where emotions are not only expressed, but also felt. They happen individually and collectively at the same time, and both the person and the group display agency. John Leavitt (1996) talks about a "stereotypical set of emotions" in rituals. For him, collective rituals operate through common symbols shared in a process of cultural stereotyping of experiences. In this process, expectations, imaginations, and memories are shared; and feelings and depend "on personal elements that to a large degree are common to those who share common experiences and a common exposure to stories, songs, images, and ritual practices" (Leavitt, 1996: 527).

During the road march, various events were organised to strengthen the community of sentiment (Appadurai, 1996). The preparations that took place inside the bus, on stage, or in the encounters with the victims were part of a program that gave meaning to the march and to the platform at the same time. Women – in particular the *slogan konyas* – led many of them. They served to remind the participants of their moral commitment and to reinforce a sense of we-ness in the group.

Collective rites remind participants of their basic moral commitments, stir up strong emotions, and reinforce a sense of solidarity with the group, a "we-ness". Rituals are symbolic embodiments, at salient times and places, of the beliefs and feelings of a group. (Jasper, 1998: 418)

The different elements brought together during the manifestations (the cultural trauma, the Bengali nationalism, the gendered division of emotional labour, the *slogan konya's* emotional performances, Shahbag, etc.) assured the effectiveness of the group's ability to mobilise.



Lucky Akter on the stage during the road march.

At the same time that women's performances in the platform mobilised old and new activists, they offered daring examples to women in the audience. By participating in the mobilisations of the group as a photographer, I had a double function: I was a (foreign) researcher and an online activist. The camera provided the researcher with a function, but it also elicited performances, which then helped me to understand the dynamics of their activism. Through my own behaviour (on and offline), as well as through the performances of the activists, I understood the importance of images and women's bodies in *Gonojagoron Moncho's* activism.

Highly attentive to the images they wanted to be shown, the activists used Facebook and other social networks to mobilise people for their cause. If online mobilisation has limitations regarding the long-term engagement of the activists, it works as an important battlefield for the supporters and the opponents of the group. At a distance, abetted by the security of anonymity for displaying their engagement, and through its simple interface, people used Facebook to support, but also to threaten the activists of the group. This generated even more violence toward women. If in 1971 people photographed the dead, naked bodies of women to denounce rapes, at present they produce photomontages of the young female activists on naked bodies to dishonour and threaten them with rape. As in the past, their bodies are intimidated.

On Facebook, they are not silenced but rather choose to be silent. When they provide a platform for the followers to react, they stimulate their performances and become empowered. By using their bodies to resist through emotional performances, on and offline, these activists challenge their opponents and mobilise other activists – especially young women – through gender performative practices; which produce series of effects through sensorial experiences.

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