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Firdous Azim

foreword from the panel 'creating collectivities/doing transnational politics', ESF 2004 (London)

This paper was presented by our international corresponding editor from Dhaka, Firdous Azim, when she participated in the panel *Creating Collectivities/Doing Transnational Politics* at the European Social Forum on 16 November 2004. Her contribution is incredibly significant to the dialogue Feminist Review seeks across borders, globally. The panel was organised by Feminist Review in collaboration with Scovegno (Italy), NextGeneration London, the Turino SambaBand and the BSA Race Forum. It included people and groups who were already working or starting to work with each other.

The event was an opportunity to 'think' *together* about creating collectivities/doing transnational politics. The two words transnational and collective are often 'doused in syrup', they are often mentioned as good words and good ways of working. The discussions reflected on – What is the substance of local and transnational collectivities? What is their mood and how are they created? Why is the transnational sought? How do our local ways of organizing and connecting mediate these global relations? Within this there is a need to acknowledge and work with the 'fragility' and 'precariousness' of the collective.

Nirmal Puwar

Women's movements in countries such as Bangladesh can be seen to operate within a cleft stick – under the shadow of a growing Islamization, on the one hand, and under Western eyes on the other.

Women's movements have to grapple with issues such as violence, women's subordination, the special religious strictures on women, as well as social practices that keep women in a position of subservience. As women highlight incidences of dowry death or acid-throwing, or of women being stoned to death, the Western representation of eastern or 'Islamic' societies as backward and barbaric seems to be vindicated. At the same time, feminists are branded as Western within their own societies, and as complicit with the Western stereotyping of women from 'Islamic' and 'third world' countries.

The case of Taslima Nasreen immediately comes to mind in this context. She has been celebrated in the west as a brave lone voice who has protested against Islamic strictures on women, and who has had to pay the price of exile as a result. Within Bangladesh, extreme religious groups have not surprisingly castigated Taslima Nasreen as a woman who has gone against her own religion and people. But what has been surprising is that other writers or women's groups have not championed her cause either. It seems that she was seen to be somehow complicit with the prevalent Islam-bashing.

The feminist task is indeed very difficult – to constantly hold the critical mirror upto social inequities which keep gender discrimination in place, but not to fall into the global vilification that Muslim cultures and so-called backward cultures are subject to. Feminist and nationalist interests need to be seen to coalesce, and women's struggles have to consciously formulate their critiques and their demands with these constraints in view.

Hence it is difficult to carve out spaces where demands can be articulated from within this very fraught terrain. I would like to use this presentation to look very briefly at how issues of women's work and women's sexuality are merged and play themselves out within the feminist discourse in Bangladesh.

The decade of the 1990s has been dominated by the issue of women's work – one, low-paid women's work in the then newly emerging ready-made garments sector within the country, and the low-paid and menial jobs that women were engaged in as migrant labour in the Gulf States. To this was added the emerging sex workers' campaigns, based on issues of housing and security. The issue of women's work thus came to the fore, played within the globalized economic arena.

The first obstacle to women's work in garment factories or sweat shops came not from religious groups or conservative forces, but from the most liberal forces in the west, who at one point threatened to boycott garments with the 'Made in Bangladesh' label, on charges that the industry was based on cheap and exploitative labour – 'five cents an hour' – including child labour. There was a

period when there was a real possibility of this industry being moved out of Bangladesh, thus depriving the country of hard-earned foreign exchange and also putting women workers at greater economic risk. The point is that while progressive forces, including feminists, discuss issues of fair wages and working conditions, the context in which work is available or not, and what this work may mean in the lives of the women concerned is often ignored. Easy formulations of fair wages turn out not only to be glib, but may also be guided by concerns other than the welfare of the workers – to do with labour protectionism and so forth. Naila Kabeer (2001) has effectively argued the case of garments work in Bangladesh, meticulously documenting the influence this work has had on individual women's lives. The point is that issues of women's work and working conditions need to be examined from the ground, perhaps even case by case, rather than be put under an ideological or theoretical mantle.

One of the concerns raised during the debate over the conditions of garments work, was that this was a deliberate ploy taken by Western trade union movements to protect their own labour, which in the globalized economy was being transferred elsewhere – that what was at stake for Western campaigners was not the issue of workers' rights but of their own work. The unification of the world economy that may be part of the processes of economic globalization, nevertheless divides the terrain and pits east against west, really making it difficult to decipher where capitalist interests lie. As feminists, we have to struggle from our own positions, and as far as women's work in Bangladesh goes, the struggle is not only for better conditions of women's work, but also to work to keep the work – to make sure that the work remains here, and that more women can enter the labour market. Bargaining positions for women can improve gradually, but our first struggle is to hold on to our new-found position in the labour market.

The issue of women's labour migration faced a challenge from another perspective altogether, guided by the impulse of patriarchal protection. As horror stories of torture, and sex 'slavery' filtered back, the government decided to ban all kinds of female labour migration, relaxing the rule slightly in the case of trained nurses. Women's labour migration merged into the issue of trafficking, and the government's ban indeed made all women's labour migration into a case of trafficking. Again, legal protection for women was not sought – it just seemed easier to withdraw women from the global labour market.

Trafficking thus became the mode through which women entered the international labour market. It was only through intense campaigning that the ban on women's work was gradually relaxed, and more government involvement in the condition of Bangladeshi living and working abroad was sought. Trafficking also brought the whole issue of sex work to the fore, and horrible stories of being sold off into brothels in Pakistan and India filled the pages of our newspapers. Anti-trafficking campaigns even by women's groups sought to raise awareness about the dire fate that could be awaiting women when they left the protection of their family and

their country. Keeping the issue of women's work in the forefront of this debate was indeed difficult, and continues to be so, as the Western media is also replete with horror stories of 'trafficked' women.

The anti-trafficking campaign hardly took notice of a strong campaign mounted by sex workers' groups along with women's and human rights' groups for the right of sex workers to work, their right to living and working in brothels, and their demand for security and protection from the state. These campaigns used the rights framework to gain recognition for sex workers as citizens of the state and as legitimate workers. In a famous court ruling sex work was indeed declared to be legal, when plied from the precincts of brothels, and the government made responsible for the welfare and protection of these women. Interestingly this campaign had succeeded in turning attention away from the exploitative nature of sex work, whether it was a desirable arena of work or not – to the reality of the lives of women who were sex workers, to the reality of what 'rehabilitation' may mean for these women, and to the larger questions of the definition of women's work, of how the sex industry is organized and its relation to the entertainment industry, and so on. Issues of poverty rather than sexuality gained dominance, which in turn raised the question of whether this is, of necessity, how sex work would be debated in the 'third world', whereas in the west sex work debates seem to centre around issues of pleasure and choice.

It is useful and important to keep these points in mind while setting up transnational feminist dialogues – how lives of women in countries such as Bangladesh are affected by transnational forces, how their position as workers are determined by transnational capital, and hence how we as transnational feminist networks can work for the advancement and betterment of women's positions.

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