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SANGAT: Stark differences, same successes

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Weekend

Women from different backgrounds discuss dreams, struggles, and hopes at peace table organised by feminist organisation SANGAT



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Six months ago, Anowara Begum took her comrade of 25 women to fight a group of youth from polluting her community with their regular gambling. And she won.

“Local youths used to gamble in the area, and this was affecting our children,” Anowara, who hails from a village in Nilfamari, tells me. “They were infecting the minds of these children – including my own son. So I went and threatened them to stop.”

However, the young boys were relentless. In groups that had around five to nine members, the young boys used to wreak havoc through their lifestyle choices of gambling – and got away with it.

“Whenever I told them I’d call the police, they’d mock me,” she says. “They’d dare me to go ahead. So I did.”

On Wednesday, Anowara Begum stood proudly among 100 other women to tell her story at a peace table discussion that

included women and girls from various backgrounds. The room burst out in applause and cheers as Anowara shared her story at the Peace Table on UNSCR 1325 (women, peace and security).

Coming together for peace

The peace table was organised by SANGAT, a south Asian Feminist Network and PeaceWomen Across the Globe, Nijera Kori, and Praggoswar.

The United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) on women, peace, and security was unanimously adopted in 2000. It has four pillars dedicated to women in war and conflict: participation, protection, prevention and relief and recovery.

Wednesday's discussion was held for women from all echelons of society to gather and discuss issue of women's rights and struggles in Bangladesh,

"We tried to include different sectors, in order to ensure equality, irrespective of who has education, religion, race and ethnicity," says Muktasree Chakma Sathi, one of the core SANGAT members, tells me. "We wanted to create a platform where they could talk about women's rights and how they establish peace in their own area."

In that regard, SANGAT's efforts paid off. The room, brimming with a crowd of at least 100 women, included indigenous women, activists, lawyers, researchers, farmers, household help workers, villagers, journalists and students.

Many addressed the issue of violence against women (VAW) being used as a war tool, while others discussed the lack of recognition of women for their contribution in peace-building across history.

"Many women participate in the peace processes, but are not given due recognition. In war and conflict, they are the most affected," said Fawzia Khondker Eva, one of the other core members of SANGAT.

Echoing Fowzia, Meghna Guhathakurda, executive director at Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB), said: "In 1997, when the Peace Accord (CHT Accord) was signed in Bangladesh, we did not see pictures of women who participated in the process."

Other participants also shared stories of struggles and success across a variety of topics such as women's mobility, safety of women, and indigenous women's rights.

The event was held at Bishwa Sahitya Kendra, from 9am till 5:30pm.

SANGAT: Bringing home unity

SANGAT, although a current project of Jagori in New Delhi, originated at a workshop held here in Dhaka back in 1998. It has been working for 25 years, coordinated by Kamla Bhasin during the entire time.

SANGAT was born out of the realisation that the space for transformatory gender work in South Asia was declining steadily, according to their website. In Bangladesh, there are three core group members: Fawzia Khondker Eva, consultant at UNDP Police Reform Programme, rights activist Khushi Kabir, Coordinator at Nijera Kori, and Muktasree Chakma Sathi, columnist and activist. Cultural anthropologist Dr Dina M Siddiqi and lawyer and human rights activist Sultana Kamal serve as advisers from Bangladesh.

"This is quite historic since as it is rare for women from such diverse backgrounds to meet in one place for a discussion on feminism," Khushi Kabir, said while addressing the participants on Wednesday.

"There is a misunderstanding that feminism tends to be anti-men, and that is the kind of myth we want to break," Muktasree said at the session. "All we want is equality across all genders."

Gender equality has been a struggle for decades. It has been fought by generations before us, and will continue to be a fight for generations ahead.

But that is no reason for hopelessness – just because the struggles do not seem to end does not mean we are not progressing. It is a climb uphill, but increased awareness – not just about each others' struggles, but also about each

others' successes – only make the unity within the fight stronger. Bringing women from such starkly different backgrounds strengthens the fight as it serves as a reminder that we all come from the same point of struggles – and thus can strive for similar successes.

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