

# THIRD SPACE FEMINISM

**EXPLORING THE POTENTIALS OF DIGITAL THIRD  
SPACES IN CO-CREATING GENDER INCLUSIVE  
SUSTAINABLE FUTURES IN A PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY**

TRISHIA NASHTARAN

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# ABSTRACT

**T**his project explores the potentials of women-centric digital spaces that attempt to co-create feminist futures with women in a patriarchal society. The main objective is to investigate how women-centric digital spaces can act as third spaces and impact the future of gender equity. The context of the research is urban Bangladesh, involving adult women and men from Dhaka, the capital.

Despite remarkable economic progress and empowerment of women, gender injustice and violence with widespread gender inequalities persist in both the public and private domains of Bangladesh. Spaces are often restricted and limited for women because of the dominance of patriarchy. In a culture where women are expected to be domestic, quiet, and passive, women are finding their voices through digital technology in the 21st century, thus breaking the boundaries of physical spaces. In the current literature review, a significant limitation discovered is the sustainability, physical impact, and future scopes of these spaces. This study uses evidence from academic literature as well as primary research to understand the context and challenges and explores the possibilities within different parts of the system.

**Keywords:** activism, co-design, collaboration, community, digital culture, gender-based discrimination, human factors, human-computer interaction, participatory design, social innovation, social media, technology, strategic foresight, intersectionality, interdisciplinary, interconnectedness, inclusive design, domestic violence

# DEFINITIONS\*

## **FEMINISM**

The advocacy of women's rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes.

## **PATRIARCHY**

A system of society or government in which the father or eldest male is the head of the family and descent is traced through the male line.

## **SEX**

Either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and most other living things are divided based on their reproductive functions.

## **GENDER**

Either of the two sexes (male and female), especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones.

## **DIGITAL**

Involving or relating to the use of computer technology

## **EQUALITY**

The state of being equal, especially in status, rights, or opportunities.

## **EQUITY**

The quality of being fair and impartial.

## **SUSTAINABILITY**

The ability to be maintained at a certain rate or level

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\* Source: <https://www.lexico.com/> (powered by Oxford Dictionary)

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# FOREWORD

I believe in utopia. When the surrounding reality is too hostile to dream, I create my imaginary perfect world. That is what my parents did for me when I was growing up as a girl in a patriarchal society. That is what my school did for twelve long years. And finally, that is what I did with Meye, my organization. We all in Meye created a utopian bubble to make ourselves believe in a present that did not exist, to reach a future which was still attainable.

My inspiration for this research project was my journey with Meye, the feminist grassroots organizing platform I initiated eight years ago, as a response to gender discrimination in my workplace. The platform grew up into a perfect little world where people thrived on love, equality, empathy, and friendship. It kept growing and stepped into the real world, where people live by profits and positions of power. How do you survive in a world that does not believe in your utopia?

That is a question I faced when I stepped into the real world as a young adult looking for a job. I was an engineer from a reputable university in Bangladesh. I wanted to have a career, earn well and travel. But the employers had other ideas for me. Some employers would reject my application because of my gender. Some would say I could not do the jobs involving field visits as a woman.

Some would ask if my parents would be okay with me traveling for work. What if my husband did not 'allow me' after I got married? What if people refused to accept a woman in a certain professional role? I was happy when I landed a job as an engineer in a small company headed by a woman. I thought my days of gender discrimination was over. I was wrong.

I was thrilled for a few months until I realized that patriarchy is gender-neutral. My boss would often exert power declaring that she was a man and that she preferred to hire men since women had 'limitations' like menstruation. I was baffled and angry. I had questions that had never come to my mind before, and no one was answering them.

It was in June 2011. It had been two and a half years since I started blogging. I was already accustomed to the digital culture in my country. Having observed the sexual innuendos and sexist languages in digital spaces, I was seeking a safe space where I could speak to other women about gender-based abuse and discrimination. I could not find such a space around me. Hence I decided to create the space myself.

I opened a Facebook group named 'Meye.' Meye means girl or woman in Bengali. I did not have any visions yet. All I wanted was to talk and ask questions. I invited all the women I knew from all walks of life to join the group. They were all educated women with somewhat privileged backgrounds like me.

A few months after the group was initiated, I joined a bigger company only to discover that I had jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. Everything from the job responsibilities to the office space was gendered. Women would be reminded of their gender identity at every step. Many women would even use that to their advantage, by accepting less significant responsibilities and gender segregation, which seemed to be an established norm everywhere I went to work. Meye became more relevant with every passing day.



We, the women of Meye discovered that we were a bunch of misfits in a patriarchal society who had the same adventures and questions, seeking refuge in the group from the hostility of the real world. Through our stories, Meye evolved organically into a collaborative platform of women battling discriminations in Bangladesh. Now a grassroots activist platform, Meye has created a community of over six thousand women in the last eight years, growing and sustaining an ecosystem of empathy, awareness, and creativity through activism and entrepreneurship across physical and digital spaces.

When I started Meye, I never imagined that it could come this far. Meye has been a tremendous journey from 'I' to 'us.' Whatever 'we' did in the last eight years, was out of instinct and desperate need. We never followed anyone's footsteps because we did not know where we were headed. We only had ourselves, our stories, pain, anger, failures, and dreams. We listened to our hearts and created a new path for ourselves, uniting all our small efforts to resonate together for a more significant impact. Eight years later, I left home with a unified dream of finding a future for that utopia of grassroots social activism.

Having an academic background in a highly technical field and the experience of activism with a feminist focus, I was looking for an interdisciplinary course that would allow me to weave through the intersections and design a brighter lens for the future. That is why I came to OCAD University to pursue my Master of Design in Strategic Foresight and Innovation. I wanted to understand the design and the future of an organization that originates from digital space, evolves organically, and makes a difference in the gender landscape through mass participation.

This paper follows academic writing rules. However, I am both the researcher and the participant in the study. Since the inspiration for the paper came from my personal journey, I have taken the liberty of writing in the first person throughout the story.

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# PURPOSE AND SCOPE

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## CHAPTER ONE

# PURPOSE AND SCOPE

## RESEARCH QUESTION

How can women-centric digital spaces impact the future of gender equity in a patriarchal society?

**T**he purpose of this research is to explore the potentials of digital spaces in co-creating gender-inclusive sustainable futures in a patriarchal society. The focus is on women-centric initiatives that enable women to create inclusive opportunities for themselves through bottom-up approaches in digital spaces in Bangladesh. The research involves urban adults who have professional or lived experiences on gender and space in the country.

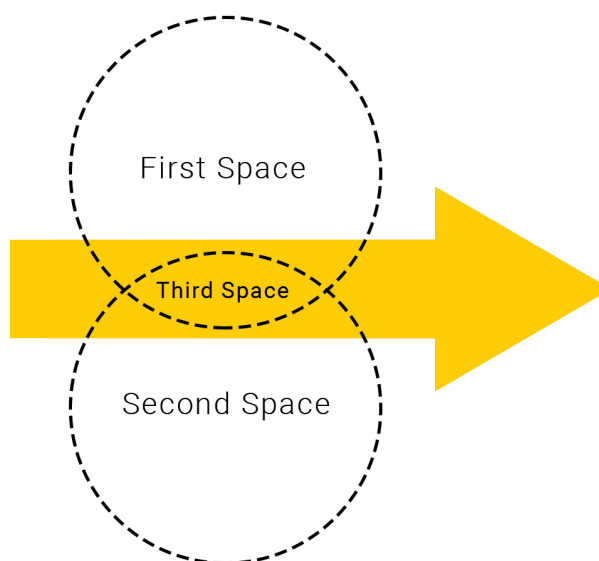
With an impressive track record for growth and development, Bangladesh aspires to join the middle-income country group by 2021. It has been holding its topmost position in South Asia to ensure gender equality based on economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment of women in Bangladesh (The World Economic Forum, 2019). Yet there is a prevalent gender disparity and gender-based violence on the rise (“Bangladesh witnesses 592 rapes in six months”, 2018). Women are the marginalized part of society despite progressive laws and social movements throughout the history of the country (Nazneen, 2017). With deep-seated patriarchy prevalent in the country, it is compelling to see where women belong in the landscape of change-making in the system.

In the era of digital transformation, a silent change is sweeping across the country as social media has become a regular aspect in the lives of women, especially those who live in urban and semi-urban areas and have access to the Internet and smartphones. In a culture where women are encouraged to remain silent, it is a significant trend that some women are finding their voices through social media (“Social media: A game-changer for Bangladeshi women,” 2018). Thus, digital interactions open a new avenue for women in Bangladesh to unite, empower themselves, and emerge as leaders on their own.

This study looks at digital spaces as a form of third space that allows women to bypass physical boundaries and social barriers. The third space, a postcolonial sociolinguistic theory, narrates human identity and community as a hybrid space. It was first realized by Homi K. Bhabha and later conceptualized within the social sciences by Edward W. Soja, who looked at the third space from a critical urban theory perspective.

Figure 1.1. Third Space emerging at the intersection of first and second space

Image Credit:  
Mpolanica, 2014



According to Soja, the first space is physical space, the second space is a mental or conceived space, and the third space is a social product that is created at the intersection of those two spaces (Figure 1.1), with an intent to reclaim that space for change by a society under oppression or marginalization (Saju, 2014).

Women-centric digital initiatives, which originate from the friction of advancing social infrastructure and persistent patriarchal culture, can generate an alternative space for change. Such spaces can be easy to initiate but difficult to sustain rapid growth due to the spontaneous nature of digital interactions and the economic system around them. Meye is the case study for this research as an example of a space like that. Meye started as a women-centric digital initiative and evolved into a grassroots activist platform of Bengali-speaking women who acknowledge and stand against gender discrimination around them. The platform expanded organically into different directions to address various social, political, and economic challenges intersecting with gender discrimination, leading to a complex system of activism and sustainability.

The research analyzes the evolution of Meye and the surrounding ecosystem to find the relevance of such a platform in the grand narrative of gender equity in a specific society where spaces are gendered. The study aims to understand how women in Bangladesh are trying to acknowledge and overcome the challenges and striving for long-term changes in a patriarchal system through digital third spaces.

## RESEARCH QUESTION BREAKDOWN

How can women-centric digital spaces impact the future of gender equity in a patriarchal society?

### Women-centric Digital Spaces

Bangladesh has the fourth-largest population of Facebook users in Asia; 96.1 % of internet users in the country are on Facebook (Figure 1.2). That is why Facebook was used as the primary form of digital space for this study. It focuses on women who have access to information and digital technology, own necessary devices, and possess the minimum digital literacy to navigate on social media.

Figure 1.2. Social Media Statistics in Bangladesh – October 2019

Image Source:  
<https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/bangladesh>

Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Pinterest	Instagram	LinkedIn
96.1%	1.7%	1.43%	0.61%	0.08%	0.03%

Social Media Stats in Bangladesh - October 2019

”

**A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.**

————— Virginia Woolf (1929, p. 4)

The room refers to the literal and figurative space of a woman where she is free to imagine. The research perceives the women-centric digital spaces as a metaphorical expression of the room. A women-centric digital third space enables women to meet through their minds and share resources to build a community village.



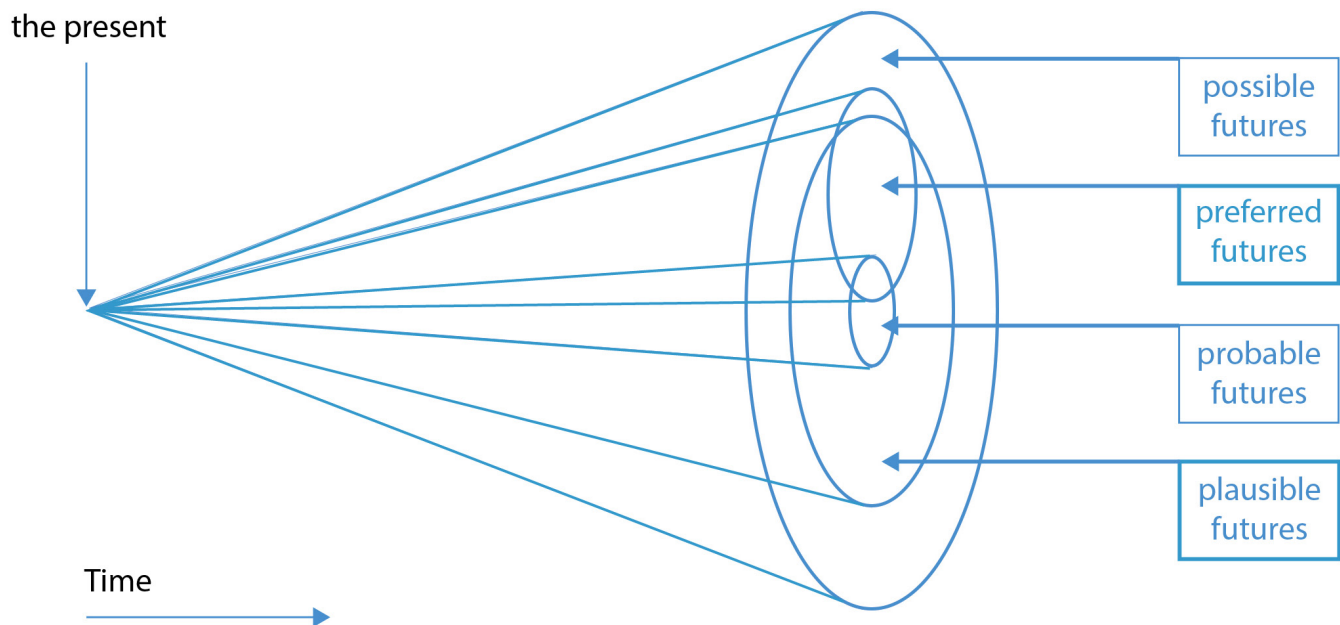


Figure 1.3. The Cone of Possibilities

Image Credit: Voros, 2019

### **Future Impact**

There are four types of alternative futures, presented in the futures cones (Figure 1.3). All are subjective to present realities and judgments. In brief, these categories are:

- 1. Possible** – the futures that might happen, based on some future knowledge that we might possess someday.
- 2. Preferable** – things that are expected or desired to happen in the future.
- 3. Probable** – things that are likely to happen, usually based on current trends
- 4. Plausible** – things that could happen based on the current understanding of how the world works (physical laws, social processes, etc.) (Solomon, 2019)

Figure 1.4. Feminist Visions of Science and Utopia in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's 'Sultana's Dream.'

Image Source:  
<https://www.ladyscience.com/features/feminist-visions-science-fiction-utopia-rokeya-hossain>



This study intends to understand the effect that women-centric digital spaces might have on the future through women's worldviews and lived experiences. Men are the leading writers of the history and stories of humankind. As a result, social worldviews are dominated by male narratives since the beginning of the time. "Sultana's Dream" by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is an example of an act of female literary subversion which aims to craft an alternative reality fairer to women (1905). It is the first science fiction written by a Bengali Muslim woman from a conservative background in colonial India. Rokeya writes about a fictitious world named Ladyland, where spaces are switched for the genders, men stay indoors, and women take the lead through their intelligence and scientific innovations. "Sultana's Dream" is known as a literary tool of fantasy to subvert dominant discourses and reach women's real "home," a utopia in which women control their own lives.

Despite the differences in time and expressions, the text poses a metaphorical resemblance to the digital third spaces that the research studies. While science fiction can be a metaphorical representation of a preferred or possible future, this research attempts to explore the plausible futures of gender equity from the perspective of women in urban Bangladesh.

### **Gender Equity and Patriarchal Society**

This study focuses on gender equity rather than only gender equality, a parameter often used for women empowerment. Gender equality requires equal access to resources, rewards, and opportunities, while gender equity is the process of being fair to all genders (UNFPA, 2019). Women experience discrimination historically and socially, compared to men. However, men and non-binary genders also suffer due to patriarchy. Hence, equity is a necessary parameter for a feminist worldview of a gender-fair future.

This chapter is followed by Context Setting, which consists of a literature review, insights from the academic experts I interviewed on the subject matter and the theoretical framework of Third Space in respect of women-centric activism and gender-focused narratives in digital spaces of Bangladesh. The context setting is followed by Methodology and Research Design, Case study, Data Analysis, and Conclusion. These sections are arranged in a sequence that explains the historical background, present realities, and a foresight analysis that ties all the findings into plausible futures of women-centric digital spaces in Bangladesh. All supporting documents and a bibliography can be found at the end of the document.

# 2

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## CONTEXT SETTING

Figure 2.1. Bangladesh and Dhaka on the world map

Retrieved from <https://www.worldfishcenter.org/content/enhanced-coastal-fisheries-bangladesh-ecofish-bd>



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## CHAPTER TWO

# CONTEXT SETTING

**B**angladesh is a South Asian country on the Bay of Bengal (Figure 2.1). A small country to the east of India, it is marked by lush greenery, hundreds of rivers, the longest uninterrupted sea beach and the biggest mangrove forest in the world. Bengali is the official language of Bangladesh. Bengali is also the ethnicity of the majority of the population in the country. The Bengali language movement from 1948 to 1956 demanding Bengali to be an official language of then Pakistan fostered Bengali nationalism in East Bengal, leading to the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 (Islam, 1978). The nine-months long liberation war of the country is a witness of genocide and mass rape by the Pakistani army and their collaborators (Hossain, 2012). A war-torn country with geographical vulnerability to flooding and cyclones, Bangladesh has battled with poverty and political turmoil throughout its history. The state spent 15 years under military rule until democracy was restored in 1990. Since then, Bangladesh has elected two female Prime Ministers, as power alternated between two political parties led by Sheikh Hasiba and Khaleda Zia (“Bangladesh Country Profile,” 2019).

Bangladesh is one of the world’s most densely populated countries, with 27,200 people per square kilometer. Dhaka, the capital city, is the most densely populated city in the world, with a population of 41,000 per square kilometer (Demographia World Urban Areas, 2019). The ratio of males and females is almost the same, though spaces are highly gendered.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

Bangladeshi society is categorized as ‘classic patriarchy,’ characterized by the institutionalization of extremely restrictive codes of behavior for women, rigid gender segregation, specific forms of family and kinship, the ideology of female dependency, and male guardianship and a dominant ideology linking family honor to female virtue (Jahan, 1995). Men have control over women’s labor, sexuality, and mobility outside the household (Kabeer, 1994). While the form of patriarchy varies with geographical location (urban/ rural), class, ethnicity, religion, etc., it remains predominantly patrilineal (descent through the male line) and patrilocal (relocation to husband’s house after marriage in Bangladeshi society (Jahan, 1995). A Muslim majority country, Islam is only partially implicated in their extreme forms of female subordination. Women are believed to belong to domestic spheres, and the public spaces are a male domain (Kabeer, 1994).

Bengali women have enjoyed active participation during the anti-colonial struggles, the language movement of 1952, the liberation war of 1971, and efforts to restore and deepen democracy in the 1980s and 1990s, but their role in these struggles has rarely received much recognition (Jahan 1982; Nazneen and Sultan 2010). Historically, national liberation struggles were often positive for women. However, like other countries in South Asia, nationalism “took on a chauvinist hue, tinged with misogyny” in Bangladesh (Zaman, 1997). Bengali nationalism treats a country as a mother, calling it the motherland, placing motherhood as the epitome of a woman’s role in society. A woman’s notion of respect is often linked to their domestic roles as mothers and sisters, while almost all Bengali abuse words have sexual innuendos towards the same roles of women.

The Pakistani army and their local collaborators raped millions of Bengali women as a war strategy during the liberation war in 1971. The Bengali textbook euphemism for a sex crime is the sacrifice of the 'honor of mothers and sisters' of the nation. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of the nation, labeled the rape survivors as "war heroines" to help them reintegrate into their communities. But the Bangladeshi society completely ostracized those women (Hossain, 2012).

The liberation war of Bangladesh resulted in the destruction of about one-fifth of the country's economy, leaving it as one of the least developed countries (LDC) in the world. An inflow of foreign capital through globalization and a free-market economy adjusted the lack of significant investment in the country. The economy of Bangladesh had accelerated by the outstanding turn-around from 1990 when democracy has been restored in the country. Over the years, Bangladesh has shifted from the agricultural economy to the industrial and service economy through foreign direct investment (FDI) in Ready Made Garments (RMG), Textile, Leather, Pharmaceuticals, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Marine, Tourism, and Agro-based Industries, etc. In the last decade, the country has achieved GDP growth rates near 6% because of the development of the RMG industries and microfinance (Reza, Fan, Reza & Wang, 2018), two sectors that are making steady progress through a gradual increase in female participation in the workforce (Zafarullah & Nawaz, 2019).

Bangladesh is now emerging from a low-income to lower-middle-income country status and aiming to become a middle-income country by 2021 ("Bangladesh Development Update: Building on Resilience," 2018). Despite a steady economic rise over the years,



the female labor force participation is less than 40%, and the share of females in high-status occupations is 10.4% (Faruk, 2019). According to the 'Global Gender Gap Report 2020' published by World Economic Forum (WEF), Bangladesh has been ranked the top gender-neutral country in South Asia (Figure 2.3) by closing down the 72.6% of its overall gender gap and obtained 50th position out of 153 countries globally ("Bangladesh Top Gender-Neutral Country in South Asia: Report," 2019). The parameters of gender index include economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment of women. The report praises Bangladesh as the only country where women have had a longer tenure than men as the head of the state over the past five decades, mentioning this as a contributing fact to the strong performance of the Political Empowerment subindex.

Figure 2.2. Bangladesh has been ranked as the top gender-neutral country in South Asia

Image Credit:  
Daily Star, 2019



In Bangladesh, the highest executive power lies with Sheikh Hasina, the Prime Minister, who is also the President of the largest political party, the Awami League, and a woman. Khaleda Zia, the former prime minister and the President of the opposition party, is also a woman. Having women at the leading position of both major political parties are often exemplified as the empowerment of women, though both women came to power through their relation to powerful male political figures, and there are only 8% of women in the cabinet and only 20% in the parliament in Bangladesh.

The Constitution of Bangladesh states that women and men are equal in all spheres of public life. However, it also recognizes religion-based personal laws, which are unequal to women. The laws of inheritance, marriage, divorce, and custody of children cater to patriarchal norms. Female heirs inherit nothing or half as much as male heirs, depending on their religion (Khan, 2016). A Muslim woman inherits one-eighth of their father's property, while a son receives half of the property. A Hindu woman cannot inherit property from their father and husband. She can take possession of her husband's property after his death, but cannot sell or transfer the property to anyone ("How the Bangladeshi Succession Law Jeopardizes Family Planning," 2018).

In a culture where women are believed to be domestic beings, home is culturally prescribed to be the safest place for a woman. Yet, most gender-based violence in Bangladesh occurs at home. More than half of Bangladeshi women are victims of domestic violence, which is primarily violence towards women in a marital relationship. Rape and sexual harassment in public spaces are on the rise, often not reported because of the culture of gender-shaming and social stigma around a woman's 'honor' (izzat) and 'shame' (lajja) (Pandey, 2017).

Most (80%) of the cases brought before the court by women are related to violence. While 1.1% of women seek help from the police, only 2.1% of women inform local leaders of their experience. There is only a 3.1% chance that the court will rule in favor of the victim, while there is a 32% chance that the court will dismiss a case and release a perpetrator. The only law that can provide direct protection against violence against women is for dowry demands after marriage, which can be misused (“Research shows 66% Bangladeshi women are victims of domestic violence”, 2018).

The gender-based discrimination, violence, and injustice against women of Bangladesh have been addressed by women’s groups and movements throughout the history of East Bengal, which can be traced back to anti-colonial struggles before the region became Bangladesh through the liberation war in 1971. Between the 1970s and 1990s, different women’s groups were formed with different political worldviews. For example, organizations like Bangladesh Mohila Parishad (Women’s Council of Bangladesh) and Karmojibi Nari (Working Women) had links with the left political parties who held Marxist political views, while Naripokkho (Pro-women) was perceived as a radical group by other women’s rights groups as it stressed women’s autonomy and were willing to publicly raise concerns related to women’s sexuality and bodily integrity. The ideological distinction between these groups blurred over the years as they built alliances and coalitions around specific issues like violence against women, religious personal laws, reproductive rights, and challenging Islamization. There is a sharp decrease of voluntarism among many of the younger members of women’s rights and feminist organizations partly due to monetizing the labor used for an organization building and mobilizing (Nazneen, 2017).

On the contrary, a new kind of volunteerism has been emerging through digital technology in Bangladesh throughout the last decade. Individuals and groups have been coming forward through blogging, online activism, and digital networking in Bangladesh. While the volunteer activities include all genders and a wide range of causes, a significant change has become visible by women gathering in social media with a gender-focused voice as a spontaneous response to patriarchal discriminations and injustice in their lives. These emerging voices in digital spaces need to be explored to find plausible futures of gender equity beyond the institutionalization of feminist movements in Bangladesh.

## **INSIGHTS FROM ACADEMIC EXPERTS**

The experts agreed that spaces are socially structured and maintained to be sex-segregated based on age, class, ability, and many other identities in Bangladesh. Boys and girls get segregated at a young age, for increasingly more extended hours, leading to men and women marking separate areas of femininity and masculinity in personal (living room, kitchen, etc.) and public spheres (mosques, weddings, etc.)

Sexuality is a binary concept, and only heterosexual relationships are socially and legally acceptable in Bangladesh. Homosexuality is a punishable offense under Bangladeshi Penal Code 1860, Section 377 (Abdullah, 2018). The Madonna-whore\* dichotomy is very much present in space segregation for Bengali women. Her physical boundaries define a woman's identity and dignity in Bengali culture.

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\* The madonna-whore dichotomy denotes polarized perceptions of women as either good and chaste or as bad and promiscuous (Kahalon, 2019).

The social boundaries for Bengali women have evolved through western colonialism, religious dominance, and the rise of Bengali nationalism throughout history. Western colonialism introduced the idea of ladies (bhadramahila) who stayed indoors and the working-class women who enjoyed lesser social status (Sinha, 2001). The Bengali words for ‘good women,’ the brides and wives, are derived from words referring to domestic spaces, while the words for ‘bad/derailed women’ (sex workers, free women, etc.) are related to public spaces (Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.3. Two Bengali words for women according to their space

Image Credit:  
Trishia Nashtaran, 2019

ঘরনী

(ghoroni)

She who stays at home

**wife**

বারাঙ্গনা

(barangana)

Free/loose/public woman

**prostitute**

The experts have argued that the notion of ‘empowerment’ is rooted in the assumption that women are powerless, and men are powerful. It positions women as the victims and men as the problems in patriarchy, implying that someone from outside needs to be the savior of women. Women’s agency and their resistance are not acknowledged in this approach (Cornwall, Armas & Botha, 2012).

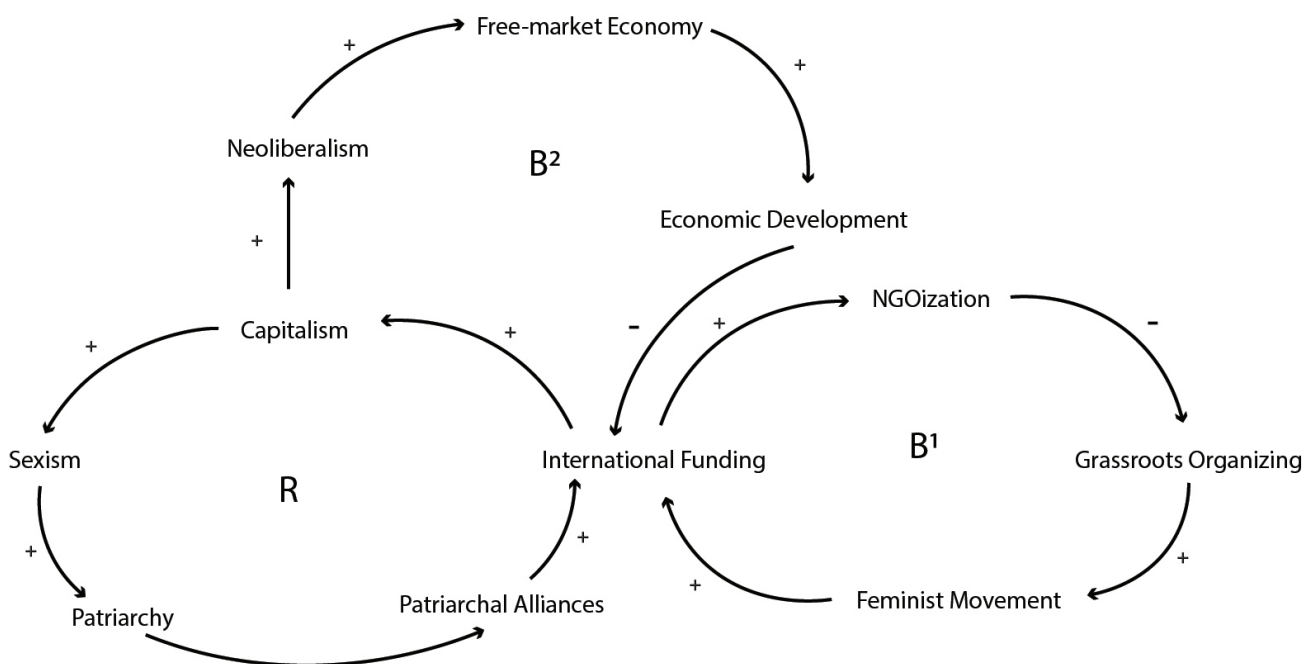
**“ I am personally not a fan of the word ‘empowerment.’ Empowerment assumes that you take a specific action, and that action bestows power on a passive recipient. You cannot give power to someone. The power that is ascribed is not necessarily power itself.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Nafisa Tanjeem, Assistant Professor of Global Studies and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Lesley University

The experts agreed on the fact that there is no visible feminist movement in Bangladesh at the moment. Feminist NGOs emerged in Bangladesh in the 1980s, which is the same period when donor-driven development funds flooded the overall NGO sector. There is a direct link between the implementation of SAPs (Structural Adjustment Policies) and the popularization of neoliberal socio-economic policies in Bangladesh. NGO-ization of women's movement (including women's empowerment) has happened as part of a global trend in gender and development, in connection with transnational feminist movement networks. Even now, mainstream gender and development narratives are mostly shaped by Western development priorities (Hossain, Al-amin, and Alam, 2012). The mainstream feminist NGOs have played an important role in raising awareness about reproductive rights and addressing the gender wage gap or child marriage. Still, most of their analyses exclusive focused on sexism but did not take into consideration how sexism interacts with capitalism and neoliberalism in various ways.

Figure 2.4. Causal Loop of feminist movements and patriarchal alliances in Bangladesh

Image Credit:  
Trishia Nashtaran, 2019



The international affiliation, along with the domestic pressure, led to the depoliticization of the NGO sector, shifting it away from a social mobilization to a service delivery paradigm (Rahman, 2006). Therefore, NGOs can be active in advocacy, but their capacity to engage in structural reforms is limited. In a way, NGOs professionalized feminist community organizing and social movements as a strategic compromise to gain grounding and mileage. Ironically, they created alliances across many patriarchal systems that provided finance and the power to influence policies. Hence, gender empowerment, equality, and justice have always been done by staying within a patriarchal framework. The radical edge of the historical tradition of community mobilization slowly disappeared in this process of losing political agency of grassroots feminist organizing, leaving barely any visible feminist movement in Bangladesh now.

The literature review reflects on the persistent efforts from both government and non-government organizations to improve the condition of women, along with economic growth in Bangladesh. However, the efforts are often made on superficial factors like health, education, and political representation rather than challenging the patriarchal beliefs in society. The core of the meaning of empowerment lies in the ability of an individual to control her destiny. The expert insights imply that the empowerment of women within a patriarchal structure hinders the ability of women to claim their agency as equal humans. Better healthcare can improve the standard of life for women, while education and employment can facilitate changing the status of women in Bangladesh. However, none of these parameters ensure equity alone. Women achieving political power via patriarchal dynasties is a common practice in the country, which might not translate to the empowerment of women who are not part of a dynasty.

The constant rise in gender-based violence in contrast to economic progress and strategic empowerment of Bangladesh implies a systemic gap in achieving gender equity in the country. The grassroots organizing of women address the gap, yet lose their voice and power in the process of institutionalizing the movements, and creating alliances with patriarchal bodies in the system. Often borrowed from elsewhere, they tend to follow the same pattern of development that the western world did generations ago. These development models repeat a 'used future,' doing the same thing over and over, without hitting the root cause. (Inayatullah, 2004).

## **WOMEN-CENTRIC ACTIVISM, GENDER FOCUSED NARRATIVES, AND DIGITAL THIRD SPACES**

According to unitary theory, the first space is physical space, which is tangible. The second space is a conceived space, which is abstract. The third space is a lived space, which is a social product created by a marginalized society that wants to reclaim the space of inequality and introduce changes through it. Edward W. Soja argued that spaces might include different aspects of many categories and develop into a hybrid of them. Thus, Soja accommodates social intersections in space theory, creating scope to explain some of the complexity and non-linearity of wicked problems like poverty, gender injustice, racism, class conflict, etc. (Saju, 2014, P. 116).



Any human being works with first and second space. For example, the geographical location and dimensions of Dhaka city are the first space according to the space theory. And in the second space, if asked to describe Dhaka, one might see it as a densely populated city. The third space, on the other hand, is concerned with the lived experiences of marginalized communities living in the city, women in this research, who experience gender discrimination and sexual harassment in public and private domains. Their lived experience of discrimination and injustice often remains concealed, depending on the intersections of identity women have in society. The third space concerns that intersectionality and lived experiences that add definition to a physical space. The notion of “Third” refers to the iteration of constructing and reconstructing identities, to the fluidity of spaces, where identities flow into the future of any spatial existence.

Soja defined the Third Space as “an-Other” way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life. He reified this metaphorical space as a physical space in which the socialization of human interaction occurred (Roy, 2017. P., 29). Bangladesh is an excellent example of how interpretations and practices of private or public vary with the changing of identity and plurality of time, location, and gender. With deep-rooted cultural pressure of silence and shame on women and the colonization of institutionalized social movements, women’s personal stories remain untold beyond the invisible walls of intersectional identities and hierarchies. Patriarchy constructs gender-biased worldviews by posing men’s narratives as ideals, while women’s lives, experiences, roles, and responsibilities are very different from men. When women try to occupy the traditionally male-dominated spaces, they often find themselves negotiating with unreasonable expectations and responsibilities standardized by patriarchal narratives.

Gender is a fundamental category that affects the distribution of power in society. The lack of voice in the third space of gender leaves a void in social narratives. Lived experiences of women may address this lacuna. The growth of digital technology has created pathways for women to fill that gap through the virtual realm of the internet in Bangladesh. Even before the hashtag movement began globally, women in Bangladesh had arranged campaigns on Facebook, which led to physical protests against sexual assault on women. While women's participation in the digital economy is credited to the expansion of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and growing internet penetration in the country, their involvement in changing the worldview of gender equity remains out of focus ("Women of Bangladesh in the Digital Era," 2019). There are individual voices, campaigns, and groups of Bangladeshi women in social media, especially on Facebook, that started to question and challenge the patriarchal norms from a grassroots level.

Women's use of online social networking has aided social changes in the citizen revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt by mobilizing, producing knowledge, developing, and sharing resources online, both locally and globally (Carty, 2014). The role of social media in Bangladesh is still unfolding as well as the distinctive nature of the governance structures that will emerge from the online interactions. The research focus on this MRP studied how social media might continue to enhance the building of civil society through women-centric narratives emerging from the third spaces in the digital age of Bangladesh.

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**CASE STUDY:  
MEYE**

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## CHAPTER THREE

# CASE STUDY: MEYE

**T**his chapter explores the complex journey of Meye that contextualizes the actions and the challenges of a feminist third space emerging from social media in a patriarchal society. Meye identifies as a feminist grassroots organizing platform, aiming for equity of genders in Bangladesh. It started from a Facebook group on the 25th of June 2011. The initial purpose was to spark dialogues around gender discrimination faced by Bengali-speaking women in the workplace. The group later evolved organically into a women-led multi-faceted network beyond the digital space, battling intersectional discrimination based on sexuality, race, class, ethnicity, ability, etc. in the country. The following is a compilation\* of some lived experiences of a few women in Meye. The experiences are crucial to the identity of the platform since thousands of these individuals and their stories have defined the journey of Meye throughout the years. The experiences can be psychologically disturbing to some.

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\* All personal identifiers were removed. Details of similar experiences were shuffled in order to ensure confidentiality.

# LIVED EXPERIENCES

Trina (33) used to work at a telecommunication company. Majnu (35), a male co-worker, would persistently harass her by making suggestive comments and blocking her way on the street. She filed an official complaint to the human resource, who decided not to act against Majnu. They concluded that it was not harassment since he neither touched her physically nor used any vulgar words. Disappointed and demotivated, Trina left the job a few years later.

Renu (24) was mugged on her way to the university. Her tuition fees were gone. Coming from a middle-class family of four siblings, she could not arrange the money on her own. So, she turned to some volunteers of Meye. They reached out to the members of Shondhi, their welfare project, looking for a sponsor. Neela (59), a member of the platform, carried the rest of Renu's educational expenses, despite not knowing her later in person. Later Renu started her own business in Rangtaa, the entrepreneurship wing of Meye. Renu works as a volunteer for Meye now.

Reba (36) is an IT professional. She was harassed by a police officer in broad daylight on the street of Dhaka. He threatened to beat Reba up as she was dropping off her kids to school on her motorbike. The officer was offended to see a woman riding a motorbike. Furious and anxious for her safety, Reba wrote about it on Facebook. Meye reached out to her and guided through the legal procedures to file and fight a case against the man. Reba had to fight to stand her ground. But it was worth it. The officer was suspended.

Diya (30) used to be a development practitioner in a reputable NGO in Dhaka before she got married. Her husband is from an affluent and influential family in the city. His family made Diya quit her job and join the family business. Even though her husband started beating her up a few weeks after the marriage, Diya did not speak out until she started fearing for her life. Firstly, she did not have the money to hire a lawyer since her salary would be controlled by her husband. Secondly, she feared the stigma of a divorced woman. She was with her firstborn when she finally left her in-law's house and filed for a divorce. She has been struggling for the custody of her son ever since, even though, according to the law, a male child should be with his mother until he is seven years old. She keeps receiving life threats from her former husband, demanding for the custody of their child. The police would neither take her case nor give her protection against those threats. Diya feels unsafe to speak up in social media, as her former husband previously had hacked all her accounts and removed her from MeWe. He believed MeWe was a bad influence on his wife.

Eera (41) has always wanted to be a dancer. But her family did not allow her to go to dance classes. She was made to become a doctor against her will, as it was considered the best profession for a woman in her society. After marriage, she decided to give up her medical profession and take dance classes arranged by MeWe. Both her parents and in-laws were against it. She still struggles every day for the choices she made, but she is happy she made them. Her husband supports her choice, which helps her to stand the ground against social odds.

Mita (28) works as a graphics designer in a reputable agency in Dhaka. She used to live with three other women in an apartment in a prominent residential area in Dhaka. She liked her roommates, whom she found through Meye. They were all professional women living alone in the city. They were glad that they found the place, as landlords usually do not rent places to unmarried individuals. Their relief came to an end when they were asked to leave after a month, upon complaints from the building society. The security guard had complained that Mita and her roommates would often come home late, with different men dropping them off in their cars or motorbikes. Sometimes these men were their coworkers, and sometimes they were drivers from ride-sharing apps. The apartment community tagged Mita and her roommates as derailed women as they were unmarried women coming home late with men. They were forced back on the street looking for a new place, with an obligation to explain the reason for leaving the last house.

Tara (30) was raped by a family member when she was eight years old. She was too young to understand the gravity of the incident. She tried to tell her family, but no one would believe her. Tara married her boyfriend against her family's will five years ago. She frequently experienced marital rape but never talked about it with her friends or family as she knew no one would believe her. She wrote about it through the anonymous service in Sisterhood, the online support group of Meye. That is when she realized that it was rape all the time. She left her husband and started to work again through the network.

Mala (34) has been in a wheelchair since she was ten years old. She is an activist advocating for the rights of individuals with a disability. Unlike physical spaces, she does not need to restrict her movements in digital spaces. She communicates her thoughts through her writing and participating in events at wheelchair-accessible spaces. While she is extremely busy with her own organizations, she has been a dedicated member of Meye from the very beginning, supporting their causes for an inclusive society.

Nishi (26) was molested by a reputable man in the city. She was at a professional meeting with him when he forced himself on her. Humiliated and traumatized, she wrote about it on Sisterhood, the online support group of Meye. They provided legal aid to file a case on sexual harassment against the perpetrator. But later, Nishi decided not to file the case, as the man was too powerful, and she feared for her safety as a woman from an indigenous community in the country.

Nipa (24) is an engineering student in Khulna, Bangladesh. She was traveling back from Dhaka, where she had come to meet a friend. The bus broke down in the middle of the road. She started panicking as it was getting dark. The university hostel has a strict time limit for women to enter. If Nipa had to get in after 10 pm, they would call her parents for explanations. Her parents did not know that she was traveling to another city. Nipa asked for help from Meye. A member in the nearby city offered her shelter for the night.

Shumona (34) is a professional model. Some intimate photographs of her and her ex-boyfriend got 'leaked' on Facebook. While many raised voices against the violation of



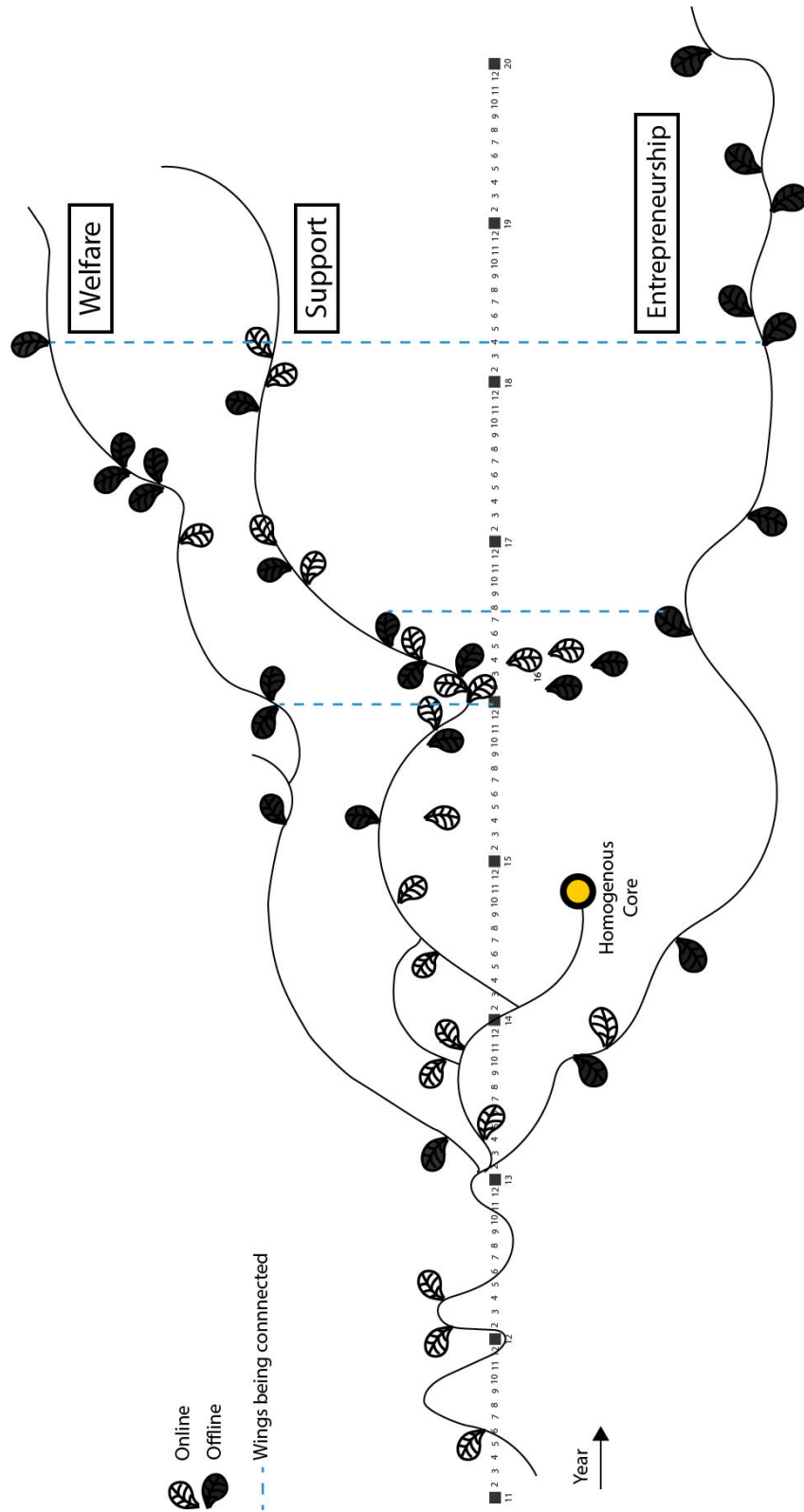
privacy, Shumona got a massive amount of backlash on social media for being 'sexually promiscuous.' Shumona decided to fight back. She filed a case of defamation under the ICT Act of Bangladesh.

Shefali (52) was ten years old when she was sold into sex work. She left the profession over three decades ago and started an organization for the children of sex-workers in Bangladesh, with a vision to break the vicious circle of poverty, abuse, and social ostracization. She has raised hundreds of children<sup>4</sup> of Bangladeshi female sex workers in the last ten years. Shondhi, the welfare wing of Meye, has been arranging sponsorship for the children Shefali is raising. Shefali makes sure that the children receive love, respect, and a sense of belonging through these sponsorships, as she believes children need affection and validation more than money. Shefali attends Rangtaa, the annual event of Meye, with her kids as an entrepreneur and a member of the community.

These are a few among the innumerable stories that women brought to the support groups of the platform over the years. Bengali women have had a history of private inner circles of shokhi's (female friends), which reflects in the art of Nakshi Katha (Hand embroidered quilts). The process is like a collective expression of their lived experiences through sitting together and depicting what matters. Women-centric online support groups act as a virtual form of Nakshi Katha in a patriarchal society, in which women gather with their individual stories and find a unified voice through the resonance of their lived realities of struggle, survival, and dreams. The testimonials of the members who participated in this study can be found in the appendices.

Figure 3.1. The Timeline of Meye

Image Credit: Trishia Nashtaran, 2019



# THE JOURNEY

Meye runs a collaborative platform of over six thousand women, a welfare project of hundreds of vulnerable adults and children, and a business network with hundreds of local entrepreneurs. Started with no funding or prior experience to run projects for change-making, Meye thrived through a pool of human resources gathered from the interactions and participation of the women in the network, which eventually shaped its course of action along with a business model of its own. Meye gathers and organizes people and ideas through online networking and runs offline projects to implement those by bringing people together in real life. Started from a strict gender focus, Meye gradually moved on to include other genders to create an inclusive reality.

An activist network that operates through collaborative storytelling of women from different walks of life and different parts of the world, the journey of Meye has been highly intuitive, spontaneous, and non-linear. The initiatives of Meye sprouted from different contexts and took many directions over the years. Keeping a resemblance to the organic nature of growth, the journey of Meye is presented as a tree growing across a horizontal timeline (Figure 3.1). The branches with leaves represent major wings of the network that initiated under different circumstances. The leaves represent various projects under those wings. While many of the projects sustained, some also ceased to continue, which are depicted as falling leaves. The leaves with solid colors represent projects that took place in physical spaces, and the rest represent online initiatives. The dotted lines indicate a link-up between different wings of Meye. These linkups are important as they act as diverging points where separate wings of the platform met to exchange resources, leading to an inclusive and sustainable model of Meye.

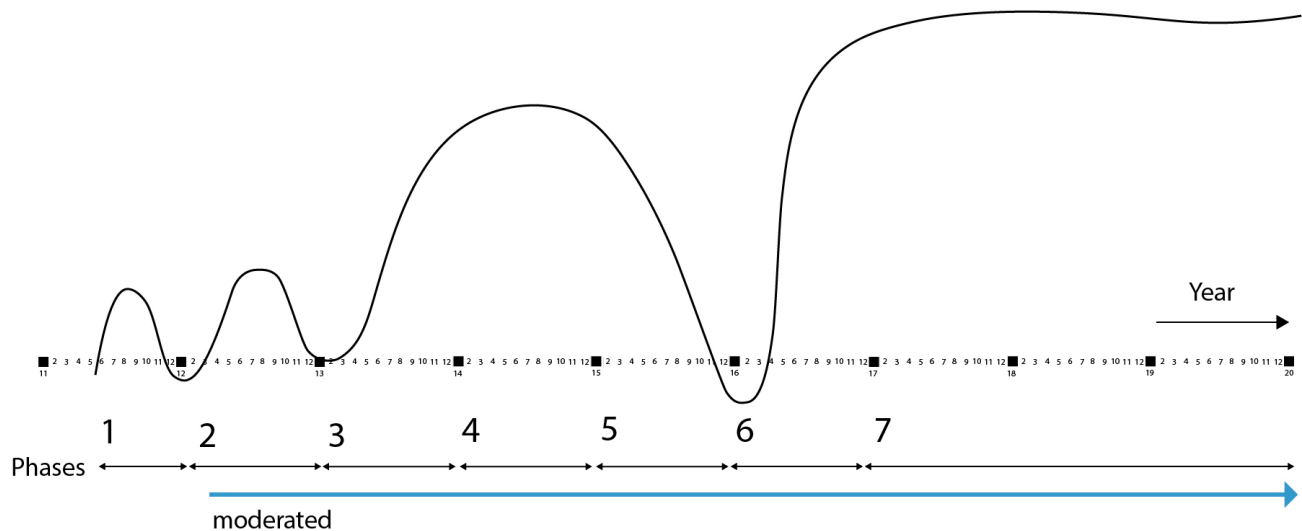


Figure 3.2. The Phases of Organizational Growth in Meye

Image Credit: Trishia Nashtaran, 2019

During the first year, Meye was completely digital and unmoderated. As the platform kept growing, it adopted an evolving mechanism of moderation and leadership, according to the challenges it faced over the years. The challenges shaped the path of Meye through six distinct phases, which have been depicted as waves (Figure 3.2). The horizontal axis stands for the timeline, and the vertical axis depicts the ups and downs and the volume of activities in the platform.

## PHASE 1: QUESTIONS AND STORIES (2011)

Meye started with some questions I had accumulated through my experiences in the workplace.

Why do some people think women cannot do certain things?

Why do some people think being a man is the standard of being a human?

Who some women support those discriminating ideas?

Why do some people not acknowledge gender-based harassment?

It was halfway in 2011. I decided to talk to other women and find the answers. I created a Facebook group and named it Meye (women or girl in Bengali). I added all women I knew to that group and started telling stories of my life. Stories are contagious. One story leads to another, attracting more people to join the circle and share their own experiences on the subject matter and beyond. Thousands of women gathered in Meye over a year to share or listen to each others' lived experiences and insights. While the stories were the source of energy that laid the foundation of the platform, the information coming through the stories were scattered. I did not get the answers to my questions right away. However, I started realizing that there were many women who had the same questions as mine, looking for a place to ask them.

## **PHASE 2: THE SECRET SOCIETY OF THE MISFIT WOMEN (2012)**

Gathering thousands of members is easy in a Facebook group. The difficult part is to sustain a respectful space for safe interactions, especially in new media like Facebook, where conventional boundaries can blur easily. The group was unmoderated for some months until backlash started to pour in, in the forms of religious preaching, intolerance towards different opinions, and violation of privacy inside and outside the group. Meye went through an iterative process of developing a code of conduct in response to the risks and challenges that surfaced through those unpleasant experiences. The process of moderating interactions brought down the number of members to hundreds. The privacy setting of the group was made secret.\*

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\* Now named 'hidden', only the members can see such groups, the interactions, and the list of members in them.

Religious preaching and violation of privacy were strictly prohibited. Members were requested to add only individuals who made an informed decision to be a part of such a space. Thus, Meye started to turn into a ‘secret society of misfit women’ who were questioning the system with the same rigor. All stories and opinions shared inside the group would be treated as highly confidential information, not to be shared with anyone else outside the group. Though the group had become much smaller than its initial phase, the interactions became comparatively responsible and homogenous.

As members started to feel that some stories needed to be shared beyond the small group, Meye opened a public page\* and a blog<sup>7</sup> of the same name as a channel of communication with the outer world. Facebook pages were new and less user-friendly than today. Some stories shared inside the secret group would be published on the blog\*\* upon consent from the writers of the story. I was the only admin\*\*\* of the group till then. My work seemed simple, since decisions were made by the members unanimously, and my role was to execute them.

## **PHASE 3: DIVERGENCE (2013)**

The year 2013 was a remarkable year for activism in Bangladesh. Two major national incidents left a long-term mark on the social, political, and economic ecosystem of the country. Additionally, two other incidents influenced Meye to take initiatives that would impact its future endeavors. The incidents are described here, along with Meye’s participation and reaction to them (Figure 3.3).

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\* Facebook pages are public. Anyone can see and follow them.

\*\* Former blogspot.com, now blogger.com.

\*\*\* Admin was the only administrative position Facebook had in those days. An admin could add and remove members, posts, and comments.

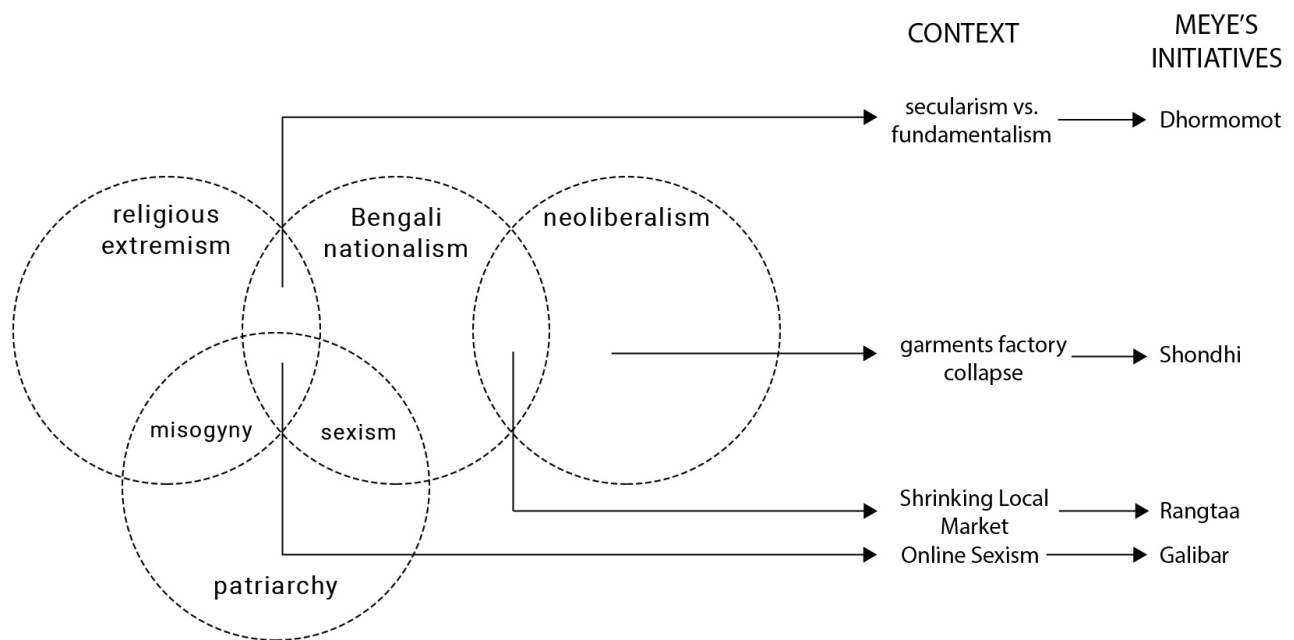


Figure 3.3. Context of some initiatives of Meye in 2013

Image Credit: Trishia Nashtaran, 2019

# CONTEXT

On February 5, 2013, in a spontaneous move, thousands of young people gathered at Shahbag intersection, Dhaka, as a protest against war criminals, convicted by the International Crimes Tribunal of Bangladesh. Demands were made for justice for war crimes committed by rajakars, allies of the state of Pakistan and its army, against Bengalis during the Bangladesh War of Liberation in 1971\* (Murshid, 2013). Tens of thousands of people joined the demonstration, which gave rise to protests across the country. Bloggers and online activists played an integral part in those protests, which led to the killing of bloggers and online activists by Islamist fundamentalist groups that had made it known that bloggers and secular activists who spoke out against religion or in favor of atheism would be under threat. (Tharoor, 2019).

\* In 1971, Jamaat death squads murdered thousands of civilians during Bangladesh's War of Independence from Pakistan. During the run-up to Bangladesh's election in 2014, Islami Chhatra Shibir, Jamaat's student wing, was ranked the third most violent non-state armed group in the world because it frequently targeted religious minorities to intimidate and disenfranchise them (Smith, 2019).

On 24 April 2013, the Rana Plaza building in Savar, Dhaka, collapsed. The building housed five garment factories. The collapse killed at least 1,132 people and injured more than 2,500 (“The Rana Plaza Accident and Its Aftermath,” 2017).

In mid-2013, members of Meye, who are entrepreneurs, shared their experience of rejection at commercially arranged fairs in Dhaka. The entrepreneurs agreed on the fact that Bangladeshi products were unpopular at those fairs. Customers would look for the Pakistani lawn (fine plain weave cotton) (Jamal, 2017) and refuse to buy anything made in Bangladesh.

A member of Meye committed suicide in October 2013. She was suffering from depression. She was an active volunteer of Meye, but she never talked about her distress in the community. Her silent demise indicated the need for space where one could safely express their deepest stories without making themselves more vulnerable in a digital space.

## INITIATIVES

In response to the mass uprising at Shahbag intersection, Members of Meye arranged groups online and participated in the Shahbag protest. Privacy and security were at stake when the members and supporters of the religious fundamentalist groups were discovered in Meye. A temporary panel of ten members was formed to perform an extensive screening in Meye, to allow only women with a secular mindset in the group. Denial of the genocide in 1971 and supporting war crimes was declared forbidden in Meye after this.



One of the side effects of “the online war” for the trial of convicted war criminals was the toxic masculine expression of online activists (Khandoker, 2013). Bengali nationalism puts mothers and sisters at a position of respect, although almost all name-calling includes sexual innuendos of raping the same women as a form of insulting the opposition. While Meye is a pro-liberation war platform, we wanted to critically address the misogyny through interactive discussions among secular online activists of all genders. A new group was initiated from Meye on the 17th of April 2013. It was named Galibar. The word ‘gali’ means abuse/curse, and ‘bar’ stands for occasion/time in Bengali. Galibar created an occasion or space to discuss Bengali abuse words, their origin, and social construct. It was another form of collaborative storytelling through a controversial topic like curse words, which is trivial to men, but a taboo for women. The strategy was to invite women first so that the culture of the space evolves around their comfort.

The Rana Plaza collapse took place a week later. Members of Meye decided to do something for the victims of the disaster. Facebook was flooded with updates with the requirement of logistical support. Like many other citizens, members of Meye started sending food and medicine to the spot of the incident. Some members would work as volunteers where the victims were admitted. We collected data during our visits to the hospitals, which was later circulated to other organizations that offered aid and rehabilitation. Friends and acquaintances of those volunteers would request to send money to the victims on our behalf. A spreadsheet was created to keep the accounts open to the public to ensure transparency. The worksheet is still active and public.

Meye needed a gender-neutral name for the project to join the alliance of all the initiatives arising from the Rana Plaza Disaster. That is when Shondhi was formed as a welfare wing of Meye and participated in a press conference with the alliance. Shondhi is a Bengali word which means union. It lost communication with the alliance after the press conference and sustained the voluntary activities by itself in various natural, human-made, and political disasters by sending aid through local representatives.

Ten volunteers who physically participated in the formation of Shondhi took forward the leadership. They sustained the same open-ended leadership pattern that welcomes volunteers who emerge out of free will and empathy. After six years since its formation, Shondhi has 159 volunteer donors with 17 operating ones. Shondhi tended to seven humanitarian causes and conducted three workshops over the course of six years. Shondhi does not publicize its work; neither does it ask for any donation. The principal is to involve only those individuals who step up in crisis with a free will. Every penny of donations goes into charity.

In response to the declining demand for Bangladeshi products in local fairs, the first entrepreneurship fair of Meye took place in the first week of October 2019. It was named Rangtaa, a Bengali word for decorative tin foil papers used at rural festivities. The first fair was an experimental event to showcase local products produced by the members of Meye. It came as a reaction to the shrinking local market in the free-market economy in Bangladesh (Figure 3.3). One of the core principals was to boycott Pakistani products, an agenda that took off from Shahbag uprise (“Bangladesh: Gonojagoron Moncho, including origin, purpose, structure, membership, areas of operation and activities,” 2014). No celebrities were invited to the opening ceremony. Instead, the members

inaugurated the event together as an expression of celebrating themselves. The fair succeeded beyond expectations. Rangtaa is now an online marketplace catering to Bangladeshi entrepreneurs working with local artisans, art, and craft. Rangtaa has eventually extended its ban on foreign products from countries other than Pakistan as well. The fair arranged by Rangtaa is now a regular annual event that acts as a physical meetup of the network and the source of revenue for Meye.

Two weeks after the first Rangtaa fair, a member committed suicide. It shattered the community of Meye, as they were under the impression that Meye was finally a safe space to talk about all crises. A new account was created for anonymous interactions. At first, I was the only point of communication for such posts. After several iterations of trial and error, a mechanism was developed through which members could write and interact anonymously, without revealing their identity to anyone at all. A dedicated team of volunteers would look after the screening and anonymity of the posts through a dedicated email address now.

I created the first administrative panel of ten members by the end of 2013. The role of the panel was to make decisions based on the interactions in Meye, to sustain a community-driven by trust, honesty, ethics, empathy, freedom of expression, equality, and appreciation of others. The principal of the panel was to serve those whom they are leading, without exerting power. It was a form of servant leadership that practices stewardship and collaborative empowerment, reflecting an altruistic ethic of care when servant leaders serve (Ruwhiu and Graham, 2016).

## **PHASE 4: A SHIFT TOWARDS DIVERSITY (2014)**

With updated features on Facebook, groups became more interactive and user-friendly in 2014. Women only groups were pouring into Facebook from different corners, most of which were initiated with the same spirit of women's solidarity, but the principals differed. Women would gather to talk about fashion and lifestyle topics, rather than issues related to patriarchy or discrimination in most women-only groups on Facebook. Meye was still a group, an extremely homogenous one comprising of highly educated, independent women. I proposed to invite women from different schools of thought to the inner circle of Meye, as an attempt to strike conversations with women who did not think about patriarchy or gender discrimination. I experienced extreme resistance and criticism from the members who were worried about the integrity of the homogenous group. I opened a new group to reach a broader crowd of women, named it Sisterhood, and asked the existing members to add all women they knew to the group. It was like repeating the same process when I started Meye in 2011. Sisterhood took off very fast. The anonymous service was transferred to Sisterhood after it became the leading support group of the platform. Meye became a network. The small homogenous group was renamed 'The Meye.' It comprises around 150 women, and Sisterhood consists of more than 6,000 women.

# **PHASE 5: BECOMING VISIBLE (2015)**

## **CONTEXT**

At least 20 women were sexually assaulted by a group of men, in the presence of police officers, on the evening of April 14, 2015, during the Bangla New year celebrations near Dhaka University campus. The incident sparked a wave of protests across the country. Police at first denied having any evidence of sexual assault and termed the incident a mere scuffle. Later, the suspects were identified from the footage of CCTV cameras installed around the scene (“No Justice Yet for 2015 Boishakh Sexual Assault”, 2018).

## **INITIATIVE**

While people from all quarters were condemning and demanding justice, some propaganda was spread on Facebook, suggesting women to boycott those public places, and stay indoors. As a protest to the hostility towards women in public places, Meye arranged an event on the tenth day of the crime at the same spot. It was called Arek Boishakh (Another New Year). Women, men, and children dressed in celebratory attires came together to sing and celebrate the new year as an expression of reclaiming their space.

The event drew a great deal of media attention, leading to NGOs expressing their interest in Meye. When a prominent NGO proposed an alliance to stop sexual assault on the campus, they invited Meye. They would offer remuneration to Meye for their participation as volunteers, while Meye wanted equal partnership in opinion, planning, and implementation of the projects initiated by the alliance. Though both genres of activists fought for the same causes, there was a persistent conflict of interest due to different operational mechanisms and channels of communication. Sometimes veteran activists from mainstream NGOs who have experience in physical spaces would disregard digital spaces like Sisterhood as activist platforms altogether. On the other hand, the spontaneous and participatory nature of digital interactions in Meye could not fit into the NGOized hierarchy and fund-centric agendas of the mainstream development organizations. Hence, Meye stepped away from any NGO alliance.

## **PHASE 6: RESILIENCE (2016)**

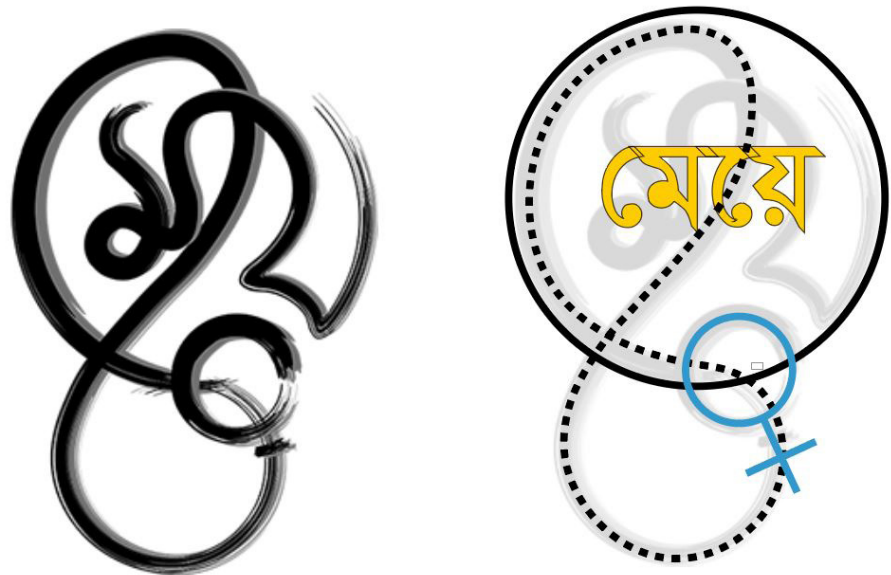
A new project started to form inside Sisterhood right after the sexual assault on the 14th of April 2019. The project was initiated by two new members, who proposed to develop an area-based physical network with women from Meye. By the end of 2015, I discovered\* that the project had registered as an independent organization. They were partnering with NGOs and applying for international funding. Unaware of the changing scenarios, many of the members had already invested their trust and time in the new project. Meye decided to part ways with the new project on the ground of the lack of transparency.

\* The NGO that they were partnering with sent me the proposal and the budget as the founder of Meye. They thought they were partnering with Meye's project.

Meye lost a good number of volunteers through the split, which led to an extensive reformation of the platform throughout 2016. Many new wings and projects were generated throughout the year, some of which changed the course of action of Meye, while the rest ceased to continue. During that time, I designed a logo for Meye to declare the identity of the platform (Figure 3.4). The design symbolizes a circle of women with innumerable possibilities.

Figure 3.4. Logo of Meye

Image Credit: Trishia Nashtaran, 2019



Two remarkable events arranged by Meye in the following year were Rongbaji (April 2016) and Ekantor (May 2016). Rongbaji was a street campaign in which women painted on rickshaws with slogans against gender-based violence (“Colorful Rickshaw Paintings Protest Violence Against Women in Bangladesh,” 2016). It was a protest right after a year of the sexual assault during the new year celebration and a month after Tonu; a theater activist was killed after being raped inside the cantonment area in Comilla, Bangladesh (“3 Years into Tonu Murder: No Progress Yet in Investigation”, 2019).

Figure 3.5. A member of Meye writing on a rickshaw. The members of Sisterhood proposed the slogan. It translates, “Shame the rapist, not the victim.” Rickshaw-painting is a male-dominated profession. The member wrote her name as an artist, leaving a mark that a woman wrote the slogan.



Image Credit: Trishia Nashtaran, 2019

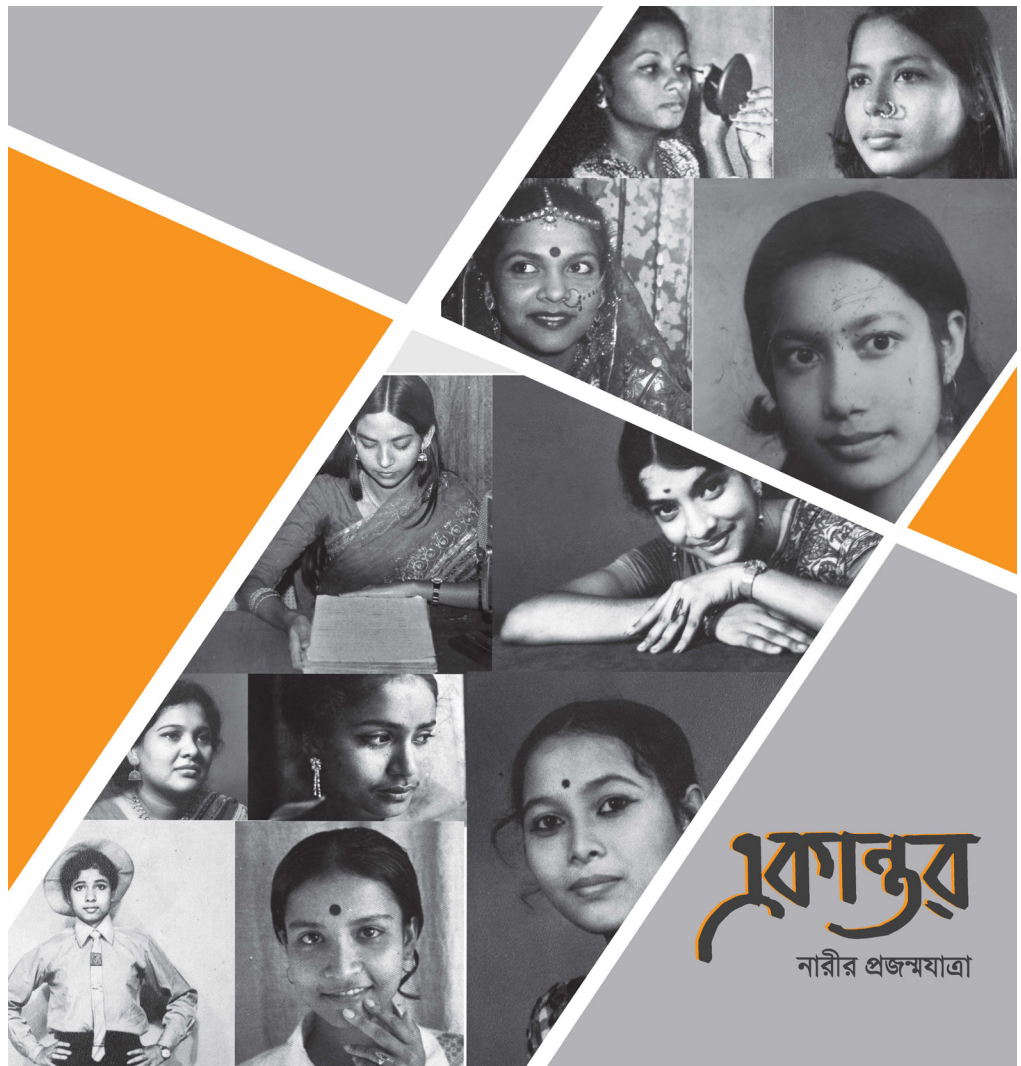


Figure 3.6. Cover of the brochure of Ekantor

Image Credit: Ananya Rubayat was the photographer and the curator of the exhibition. The brochure was illustrated by Navida Ameen Nizhu.



Ekantor (Bengali for alternate angle) was an intergenerational event to bring mothers and daughters to share space and talk. The event consisted of a weeklong exhibition and two workshops. The central concept of Ekantor was to celebrate the lineage of women in a patriarchal society and acknowledge their ideological differences through images, music, poetry, and dialogues.

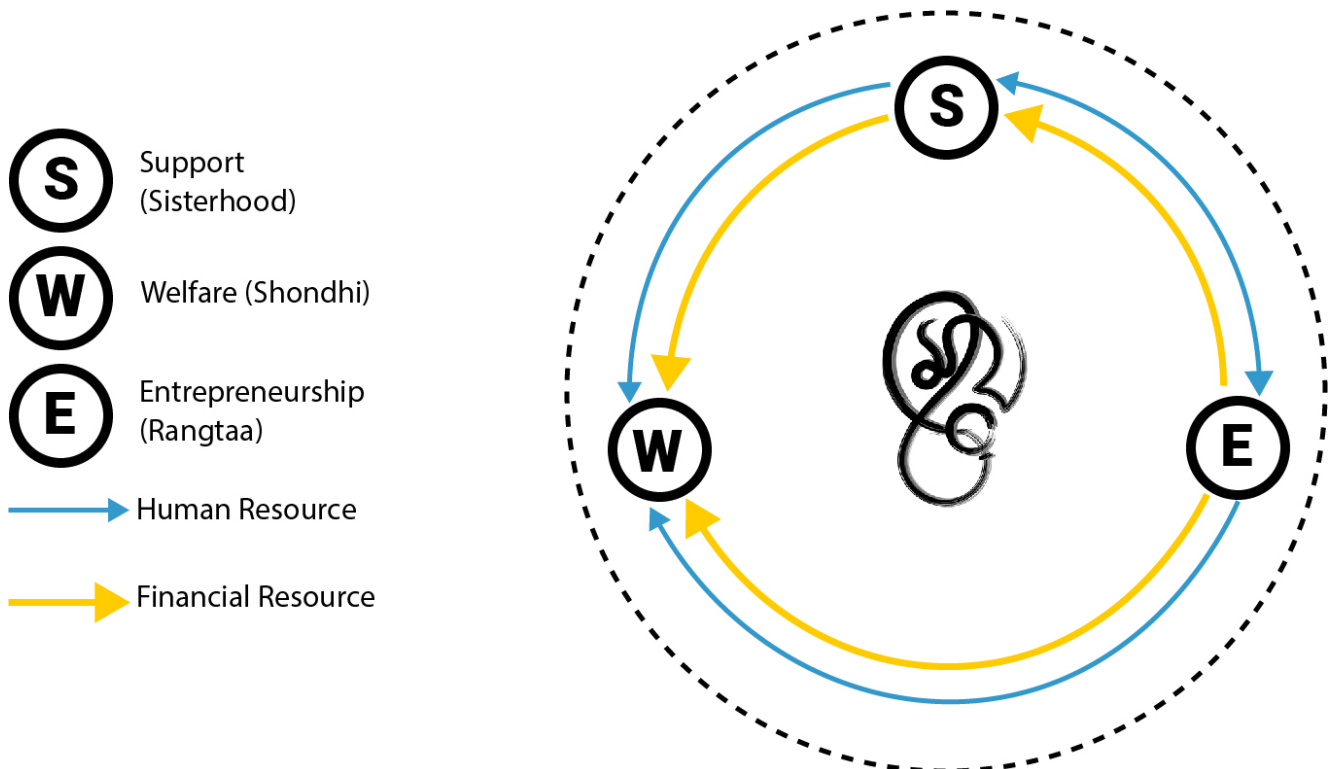
The exhibition portrayed images of daughters replicating their mothers, and the workshops included professionals and women from Meye who discussed domestic violence and divorce, two topics considered taboo in Bangladesh. Being an expensive event, Meye went out of its ways to look for sponsorship, but to no avail. The entrepreneurs of Rangtaa and members of The Meye stepped up to sponsor the event. It was a turning point, since Rangtaa turned into the source of funding since then, inspiring the current revenue model of the platform. The model is simple and straightforward. Sisterhood sustains a human-centric community through building empathy, while Rangtaa acts as an extension to that community that earns for its financial viability. Shondhi is the welfare project in which people from both Sisterhood and Rangtaa come together to stand by humanity. Members of Sisterhood generate ideas through interactions on social and political issues. The individual who proposes an idea takes the lead in executing it. Other members participate by volunteering their time, skills, and money. Members take turns in administration and coordination of the activities. Rangtaa functions as a marketplace in which members engage in direct interaction as buyers and sellers. The annual fair arranged by Rangtaa acts as a physical meeting point for the members. It also generates revenue for events and campaigns of the platform. The volunteers, organizers, or leaders do not receive any remunerations. All money made through the fair and individual donations goes into charity and activism.

## PHASE 7: THE EQUILIBRIUM (2017 - )

Meye has been operating in three wings since 2017: Sisterhood, Shondhi, and Rangtaa. Each wing has various projects, run by individual operating teams. Sisterhood is the only women-specific project and the most popular one. Shondhi is the least visible, yet the most impactful, and Rangtaa is the smallest, yet the most visible project of Meye. The platform has reached a state of equilibrium in which projects are structured, actions are organized, and the platform is economically sustainable through its business model. However, the emphasis on the sustainability of the entrepreneurship platform has taken its toll on other human-centric and gender-focused projects of Meye.

Figure 3.7. The flow of resources in Meye

Image Credit:  
Trishia Nashtaran, 2019



The platform faces the question:

## How can you sustain change if you are too busy to innovate?

Eight years after its origination, Meye stands at a crossroad, at which it can turn into a registered not-for-profit organization like NGOs, or a business body that balances purpose and profit like B-corps\*, or it can take a step back to remain a grassroots organizing platform with a feminist voice and vision. This study places Meye in the context of feminist change-making in Bangladesh to explore possibilities of a platform like this as a digital third space in the long run. I interviewed the founders of four other platforms with a gender-focus in Bangladesh, which has the potential to act as a third space. The comparative insights and visions of these platforms can be found in the Data Analysis

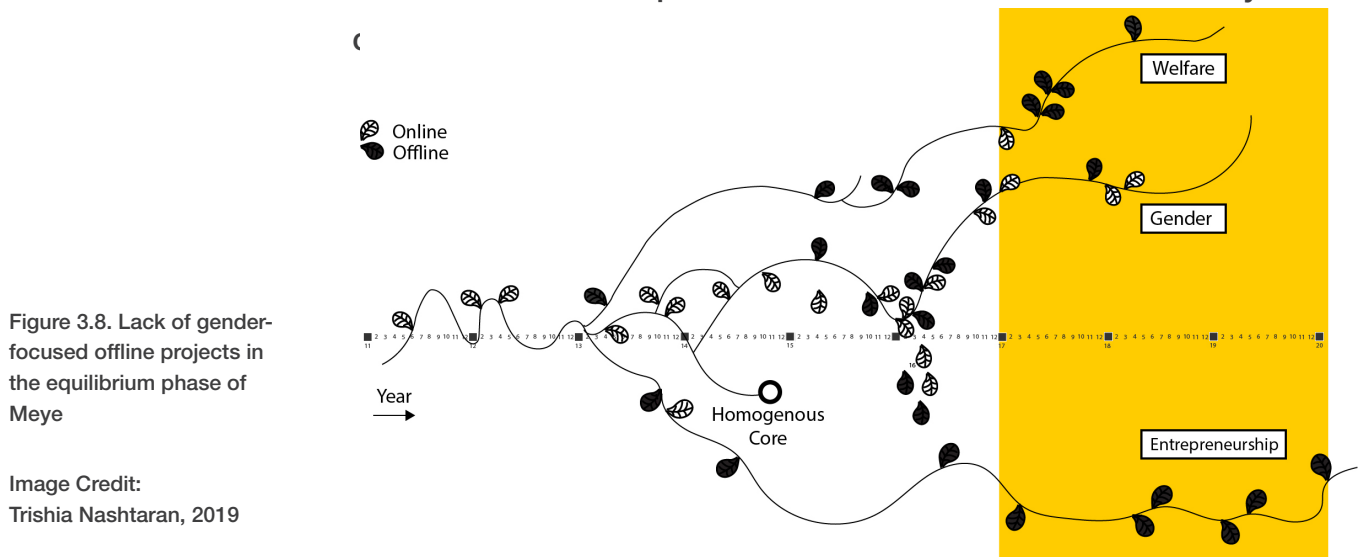


Figure 3.8. Lack of gender-focused offline projects in the equilibrium phase of Meye

Image Credit:  
Trishia Nashtaran, 2019

\* Certified B Corporations are a new kind of business that balances purpose and profit. They are legally required to consider the impact of their decisions on their workers, customers, suppliers, community, and the environment. This is a community of leaders, driving a global movement of people using business as a force for good. (Source: <https://bcorporation.net/>)

# 4

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## **METHODOLOGY & RESEARCH DESIGN**

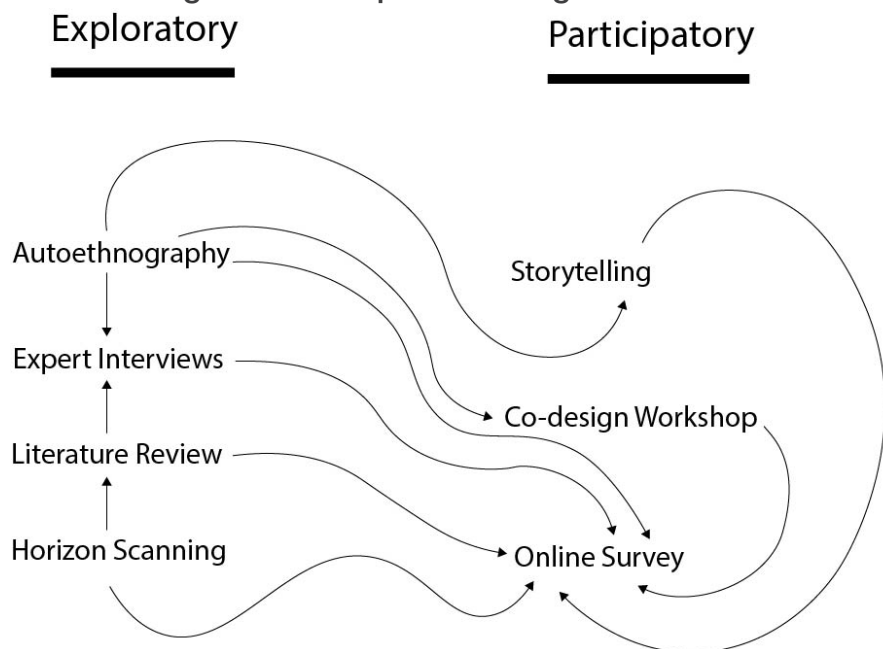
# CHAPTER FOUR

## METHODOLOGY & RESEARCH DESIGN

The overarching research method for this project is exploratory and participatory (Figure 4.1). The goal is to embrace the ambiguity of human-centric design and build agency through creativity, empathy, and participation of multiple actors in the system. A combination of qualitative and experimental methods is used to accommodate different insights from urban adults with diverse academic, professional, or lived experiences of gender and space in Bangladesh.

Figure 4.1. Schematic representation of the research method

Image Credit:  
Trishia Nashtaran, 2019



The research design was iterative and non-linear. All methods and questions were crafted and distributed around two Foresight frameworks that are used to structure future thinking for long term change. The purpose of the research design was to break the hierarchy of power and knowledge and bring women’s voices from different walks of life to create a holistic view of the future. The mode of communication was a mix of interpersonal and digital, as per the convenience of the participants. The two foresight techniques I used to find and analyze data were The Three Horizons and The Causal Layered Analysis.

Three Horizons tool was used for a horizontal analysis of the existing challenges and the preferred futures stated by the participants of storytelling, online survey, and the co-design workshop. The vertical analysis was done to dig deeper into the system in order to find what changes are required for a long-term impact (Figure 4.2). The CLA included insights from all participants, including the experts who have been interviewed for this study. The description of the foresight tools, along with a flowchart of the analytic steps, has been discussed in the Data Analysis Section.

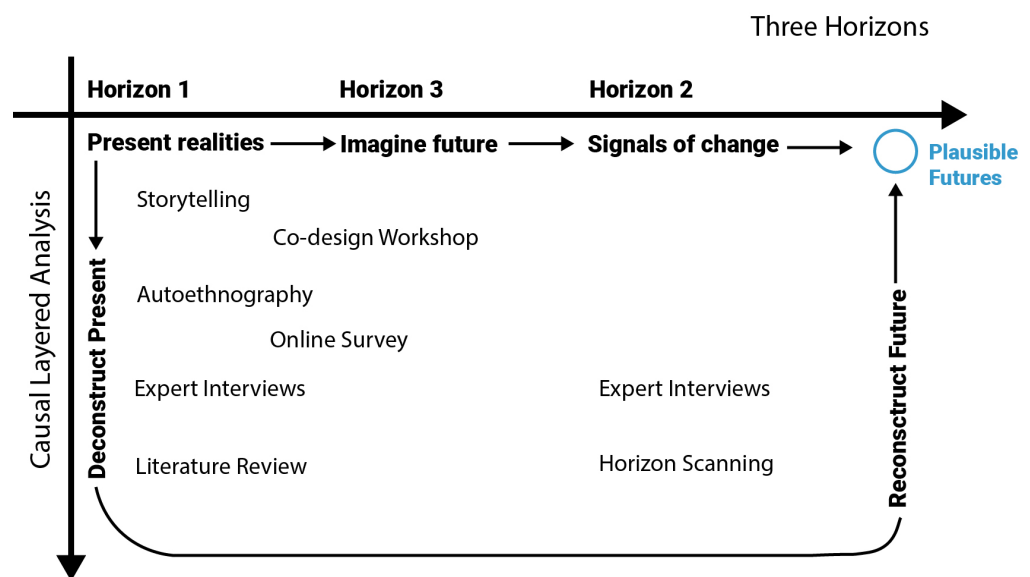


Figure 4.2. Schematic representation of the research design

Image Credit: Trishia Nashtaran, 2019

# **AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

Autoethnography is an intriguing qualitative method that offers a way of giving voice to personal experience to extend the autobiographical stories to broader cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings (Walls, 2008). I was the researcher and a participant in this study. Since the motivation behind this research was my lived experience and journey with Meye, the women-centric grassroots organizing platform I founded, my reflections and insights were an integral part of the qualitative analysis.

# **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A literature review was conducted to provide the necessary context for this project. Bangladesh has a classic patriarchal society that sustains physical and mental boundaries based on gender and other intersections of identity (age, class, geographical location, ethnicity, etc.) Men usually occupy higher decision-making positions. Yet a visible representation of women in leadership and development is increasing with time. Bangladesh has seen women who came to power through patriarchal lineage. They did not act as leaders of women or feminists. Feminism, women's empowerment, and NGO interventions are different but overlapping issues that have shaped the women's movement in Bangladesh. While the struggle for democracy in the post-liberation war country evoked grassroots organizing, the movements seem to have lost their agency to the donor countries and the state itself. They are no

visible political movements challenging power relations to empower the marginalized in Bangladesh now. On the contrary, a discrete change is emerging through women from Bangladesh who have been organizing their voices through digital technology in recent years. These women are creating an alternative space for themselves through social media, where they can navigate beyond the institutionalized barriers in the Bangladeshi sociopolitical system. This research explored the potentials of these alternative spaces in shaping the future of gender equity in Bangladesh. The analysis of the literature can be seen in the second chapter.

## **HORIZON SCANNING**

Horizon scanning is an organized process of gathering, analyzing, and disseminating information to support decision making in a foresight study (Charest, 2012). The technique was used to identify trends and gather signals of change from a wide range of secondary sources. Some sources of signals were public posts on social media, published journals/diaries/blogs, articles, and other methods used in this study.

## **STORYTELLING**

Storytelling is a powerful way of building empathy through lived experiences. In a patriarchal society where storytellers are usually men, it is necessary to enquire into the lived experiences of women to study spaces through the lens of gender. Since Meye evolved in a 'bottom-up' approach through the lived experiences of urban women in Bangladesh, in this research process, I chose to start with the women in digital spaces through unstructured dialogues, with the hope of finding directions for other methods. Digital space provides the opportunity to reach thousands of people at the same time, but it lacks the human



expressions that in-person communication provides. The objective of the one-to-one conversation was to mitigate the gap in online interactions.

The framework of the storytelling method for this study was inspired by 'The Human Library.' In this framework, humans are considered as books with stories based on their lives. The books can be browsed, borrowed, and read in rotating private sessions ("Human Library Toolkit," n.d.). The participants of this method were adult individuals who identified women from Bangladesh. I sent an open invitation to the members of the Facebook support group of Meye, explaining the purpose and process of the method and asked them to reach out if they were interested in being a part of this study. Later, I engaged in one-to-one dialogues with some of the participants who voluntarily expressed their interest in sharing their stories with me. Seventy-four women expressed their interest in participating in this method. I chose to talk to ten of them, given the limited timeframe of the study. The dialogue took approximately one hour per person to complete and a little more for some, as per their willingness to talk.

The participants were asked a set of guiding questions on their life, gender, and desired futures. I had informed the participants that they could choose not to answer the questions and tell the story they liked. The only mandatory question was about the title and scope of the 'book' about their life. Some participants took more time to come up with the title of the book on their lived experience. That led to further discussions, which inspired me to include the same question in the online survey.

While it was a strenuous process to carry out in a short period, it gave valuable insights into some aspects of women's lives that do not readily come through digital interactions. Though the participants came with different storylines, specific patterns became clear that inspired the design of the online survey later. The most important takeaway from this method was the emphasis on two core human factors necessary for a human-centric design: joy and agency. Joy brings people together, and agency creates a sense of belonging. This understanding inspired the treatment of the co-design workshop and online surveys. Both methods were designed and executed according to inputs from the participants. The goal was to make their participation comfortable and joyful.

The main challenge of executing this method was the unavailability of space for a confidential conversation. The available spaces were either commercial or residential. That reinforced two significant facts about spaces in Bangladesh found through the literature review. Firstly, though women are believed to belong to domestic spaces, yet a woman's home in Bangladesh is usually not her private space. Her domestic roles supersede a woman's privacy. Secondly, public places are generally under the scrutiny of the public eye. Women need to buy privacy by choosing expensive commercial spaces.

## **EXPERT INTERVIEWS**

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with subject-matter experts who have either published articles or have professional/practical expertise in the research area. The participants were all women of Bangladeshi descent who worked in different parts of the world. These individuals were selected through the literature review and my social and professional network in Bangladesh.

The participants were invited via email, and interviews were conducted both in-person and remotely, as convenient to the participants. The interviews took an approximately one-half hour. Finding the meeting schedule around different time zones and individual commitments was a challenge, while digital technology made it possible to communicate with individuals residing around the globe.

The experts were selected from two kinds of work backgrounds with a diverse set of experiences.

1. Individuals who have academic experience in feminism, gender studies, anthropology, media, journalism, and policy contributed to the understanding of the landscape of gender discrimination, women empowerment, feminist movements, and policymaking in Bangladesh before digital technology became an integral part of urban Bangladeshis. A part of the insights gathered from the academic experts has been summarized in the previous chapter, in relevance to the literature review. Another part of the insights has been used later for data analysis. These insights helped to get a sense of the past in order to move intentionally towards the future.
2. Individuals who have professional or practical experience in operating women-centric projects that are visible in digital spaces. These women contributed their unique insights on the origination and development of women-centric organizations of the present time, which has been used to understand any evident trends or signals leading to new directions during data analysis.

# EXPERTS INTERVIEWED

- 1. Dr. Shuchi Karim** is a multi-Disciplinary academic researcher, teacher, development practitioner, and activist. She has taught in Bangladesh and the Netherlands. She is currently teaching at the Department of Women's Studies and Feminist Research, Western University, Canada. Her academic specialization and work areas include gender, sexuality, sexual and reproductive health and rights, education and development, and action research management.
- 2. Dr. Gitiara Nasreen** is a Professor and former Chairperson at the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- 3. Dr. Nafisa Tanjeem** is an Assistant Professor of Global Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Lesley University. Nafisa's research and teaching interests include transnational feminist theories, transnational social justice movements, globalization, and feminist politics, and South Asia Studies. Before joining Lesley, Nafisa taught at Rutgers University, the University of Toronto, and the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh. She has been actively involved in community organizing and social justice activism.
- 4. Nasrin Khandoker** is a Faculty Member at the Department of Anthropology, Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh. She teaches Postcolonial Theory, Embodiment, and Social Inequality. She is a Ph.D. Candidate in Maynooth University, Department of Anthropology in Ireland.

- 5. Dr. Sohela Nazneen** is a faculty member of the Department of International Relations, Dhaka University, Bangladesh. She is currently based at the Governance cluster at the Institute of the Development Studies University of Sussex, UK. Her research largely focuses on women's empowerment, gender and governance, rural livelihoods, and feminist movements in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.
- 6. Habiba Nowrose** is a photographer based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. She received formal education in both Photography and Gender Studies. She uses Gender Studies as a frame of re-searching her subject of Photography. She is particularly interested in subjects that explore human relationships and gender fluidity.
- 7. Achia Khaleda Nila** is the founder of Women in Digital, a Bangladeshi social enterprise that started in 2013 with a mission to contribute to the digitization of the country through increasing and sustaining women's participation in coding, a field otherwise heavily male-dominated around the globe. With an all-female team of 25 engineers, they have their digital agency who are dedicated to creating a women-friendly ecosystem by training and bringing more women from different parts of the country into the digital economy. WIDBD generates its revenue through developing online software, mobile app, and games for the international market, all coded by women.
- 8. Tassaffy Hossain** is the Founder of Bonhishikha-unlearn gender, a not-for-profit, voluntary Bangladeshi organization that creates a platform where the youth can have dialogues about gender and sexuality. Based on Eve Ensler's The Vagina onologues, Bonhishikha produced its first show "It's a SHE Thing" in the year 2015 that featured stories around abuse and everyday violence

that urban women in Dhaka face and how they overcome these challenges. In 2016, a second production of “It’s a SHE Thing” was organized, followed by the first production titled “Men don’t TALK” was put to the stage, which demonstrated issues around masculinity, and how it is to grow up to be a “man” in urban Dhaka. Starting from stories on domestic violence to sex workers, social adherence, and LGBT rights, the productions feature multiple narratives in its storytelling styled stage performances. In 2017, for the first time, “It’s a SHE Thing” was held in Bangla, titled “Nari Nokkhotro,” aiming to bring in a wider spectrum of audiences.

- 9. Dr. Sakia Haque and Dr. Manoshi Saha** are two medical professionals, respectively, the President and the General Secretary of Travelettes of Bangladesh, a platform that aims to promote traveling among women in Bangladesh. The platform started as a Facebook group in 2016, and now it is registered with the government as a trust. It runs two main projects. The traveling program of the same name gathers women through online and offline communications and takes them on tours around Bangladesh. ‘Bangladesh Through Women’s Eyes’ is their offline project that involves motorbike tours around the country, campaigns and self-defense workshops for school-going girls, and a national photography exhibition of the same title.
- 10. Dr. Sadia Afroz** is a research scientist at the International Computer Science Institute (ICSI). Her work focuses on anti-censorship, anonymity, and adversarial learning. She is the co-founder of Inspiring Female BUETians, a project initiated in 2014 to improve the representation of female engineers from Bangladesh University of Engineering Technology (BUET), her alma mater, and the top-ranking engineering institution in Bangladesh (“Uni-Rank,” 2019).

# CO-DESIGN WORKSHOP

The workshop was held in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Forty-two adult individuals, ranging in age and gender identity, participated along with two children. The participants were volunteers, contributors, and entrepreneurs of Meye, the grassroots activist platform in Bangladesh. I informed the members of various projects of Meye through Facebook using the approved script along with a form. The workshop was designed to be playful and co-creative. The participants engaged in interactive sessions to address present challenges and to anticipate an expected future together. There was a resting corner in the venue to facilitate the need for mental and physical breaks. There was a team of volunteers to assist the participants. Light meals and refreshments were provided throughout the day. The workshop has been divided into four segments, with four breaks according to participants' needs.



Figure 4.3. A sketch of the co-design workshop drawn by one of the participants

Figure 4.4. Rapid post-up during the co-design workshop

Image Credit:  
Royena Rasnat, 2019



The overarching question of the workshop was:

## **How can we co-create a sustainable gender-inclusive future for ourselves?**

The workshop included two foresight tools (Causal Layered Analysis and three horizons), two business design tools (empathy map and value proposition canvas), and three energizer/games in between. The foresight tools are described in the analysis in the following chapter. A detailed description of the workshop can be found in the appendices.

A follow-up survey asking for feedbacks and afterthoughts from the participants were circulated digitally following the workshop. The participants spontaneously expressed how they enjoyed the workshop. The same responses reflected in the anonymous feedback forms. Thirty-seven out of forty-two participants took part in the follow-up survey. All of them said that they had enjoyed the



entire experience. A detailed description of the feedback can be found in the appendices. Though the participants unanimously stated the workshop was highly productive and enjoyable that they would like to go for long hours, even for several days, but it was an extremely strenuous process for me. The number of participants was too high (42) for gathering and processing so much information in eight hours. A smaller crowd with half of the population would have been ideal. However, the environment of the workshop was so energetic and inspiring that the stress seemed to be worth it.

## **ONLINE SURVEY**

The online survey was designed to engage individuals who identified as women and had access to women-centric digital spaces in Bangladesh. The purpose was to involve women from digital spaces in thinking about the future through the lens of gender. The questions were designed to get a general idea of the identity of these women, their worldviews on gender, space, and patriarchy, and how they perceived the future for women in Bangladesh.

The questions were refined after carrying out all other methods through iterative exercises with different volunteer teams. I published a series of virtual posts in three distinct women-centric Facebook groups, inviting women to participate in the survey. The final survey was de-signed to take about fifteen minutes. However, due to the spontaneous nature of online interactions, I had mentioned that the participants could take longer. Since the digital literacy of the participants could vary, and some individuals might prefer to participate in different ways, I tried to accommodate qualitative conversation as per the choice of the participants.

The participants were the members of Sisterhood, the online support group of Meye. Two hundred eight women participated in total, exceeding the intended number of one hundred fifty at the maximum in three days. The survey was completely anonymous. However, some participants voluntarily informed after submitting the questionnaire and gave feedback spontaneously. Some said that they enjoyed the survey. Some said they were glad that they could contribute to the study.

There was a question:

**If you had the superpower to make anything happen, what would you change for women?**

Some participants reached out to me after submitting the survey to add more ideas to the question. Inspired by the storytelling method, the survey included a question about the books the participants might write on their lived experience. The bookshelf represents a 'human li-brary' (Figure 4.5).



Figure 4.5. The Bookshelf of 'human books' in this study

Image Credit:  
Veronika Mendeleieva, 2019

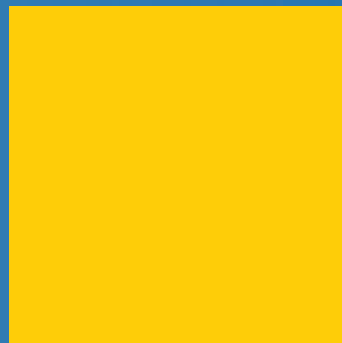
The online survey gathered the insights of the participants from Sisterhood, the online support group of Meye, on existing challenges and preferred future through the lens of gender. The co-design workshop collected data from the entrepreneurs of Rangtaa and volunteers of Shondhi who collaboratively brainstormed about the existing challenges in their business and volunteer activities, and potential changes to overcome those challenges. The insights and analyses can be found in the following chapter.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Every effort was made to maintain the confidentiality of participants throughout all methods. The semi-structured interview includes the names of interviewees at their consent. No names were collected for any other methods. Participation and identifying data was scrubbed from the summary. The workshop summary does not attribute any data to participants, and the names of participants will not be published. No personal identifiers were collected while gathering data and insights from public posts on social media. Any instances of individual names or organizations being mentioned were scrubbed and replaced with pseudonyms. The consent forms for each method include detailed descriptions of the measures taken to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. Considering the interview format was unstructured and semi-structured, the questions slightly varied from person to person. The questions asked in different methods can be found in the appendices.

5

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**DATA ANALYSIS**

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## CHAPTER FIVE

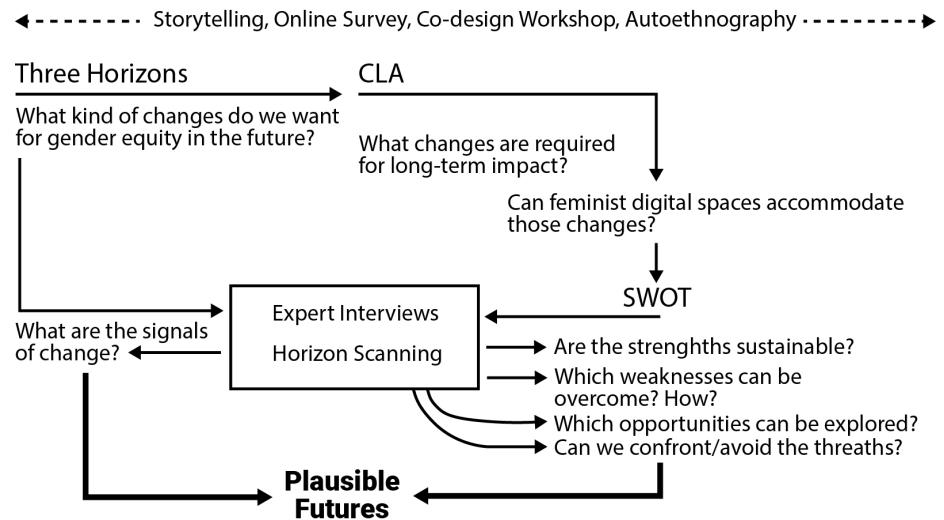
# DATA ANALYSIS

**T**wo foresight tools, Three Horizons and Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) were used as the primary framework for data collection and analysis. All methods used in this research were designed to gather data on the existing realities/challenges, expected futures, and present signals that indicate changes towards those futures. The online survey provided personal insights of the members of Sisterhood, the women-only support group of Meye. The participants shared their demographic information, lived experiences, and individual opinions on gender, space, and the future they expect to see in Bangladesh. The co-design workshop gave collaborative in-sights on the present realities and preferred futures regarding the sustainability of the community through interactive brainstorming of the active players in Meye. The participants of the workshop comprised of volunteers, entrepreneurs, and contributors to the platform who physically participated in the operational activities of Meye in the past.

A SWOT analysis was done based on the insights from the participants of the online survey and the co-design workshop, and Autoethnography. The SWOT analysis was further analyzed with the expert interviews, and horizon scanning to look for signals towards plausible futures in which women-centric digital third spaces can participate. The following sections in this chapter outline the key findings from these various methodologies (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1. The Steps of Data Analysis

Image Credit:  
Trishia Nashtaran, 2019



## THREE HORIZONS

The 'Three Horizons' is a foresight framework that can help to structure future thinking for long term change. It works both in workshop settings and for more in-depth analysis ("Three Horizons," n.d.). The first horizon - H1 - is the dominant system at present. It represents the existing realities and challenges. The third horizon - H3 is the new future, the radical innovation that introduces an entirely new way of doing things. The second horizon - H2 starts in the pocket of the first horizon as a point of disruption that indicates change. The model offers a simple way into a conversation about imagining the future (Figure 5.2).

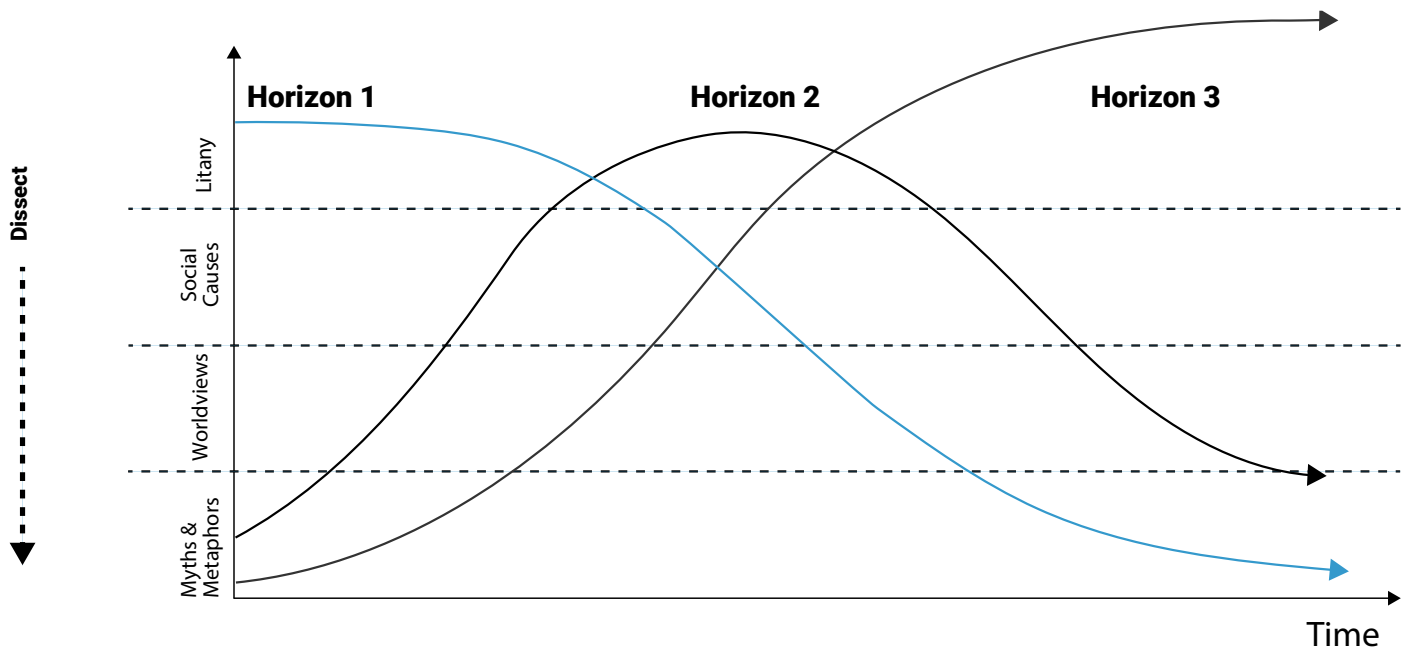


Figure 5.2. Three Horizons

Image Credit:  
<https://www.h3uni.org/>

## CAUSAL LAYERED ANALYSIS

Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), a technique used for strategic planning and future studies for shaping the future more effectively. Pioneered by Sohail Inayatullah, CLA is practiced for organizational, social, and civilizational change. It seeks to transform the present and the future through deconstructing and reconstructing reality at four levels (Inayatullah, 2004). The levels start with the litany, the unquestioned views of everyday reality, moves down to seek the social causes of those realities, including economic, cultural, political, and historical factors, followed by the worldviews of multiple stakeholders and the most deep-rooted myths and metaphors of the human subconscious mind. By moving up and down the layers, this technique brings different stakeholders to identify problems, understand their rationales, and explore alternative perspectives, transformative policy, and strategic solutions in a holistic way.



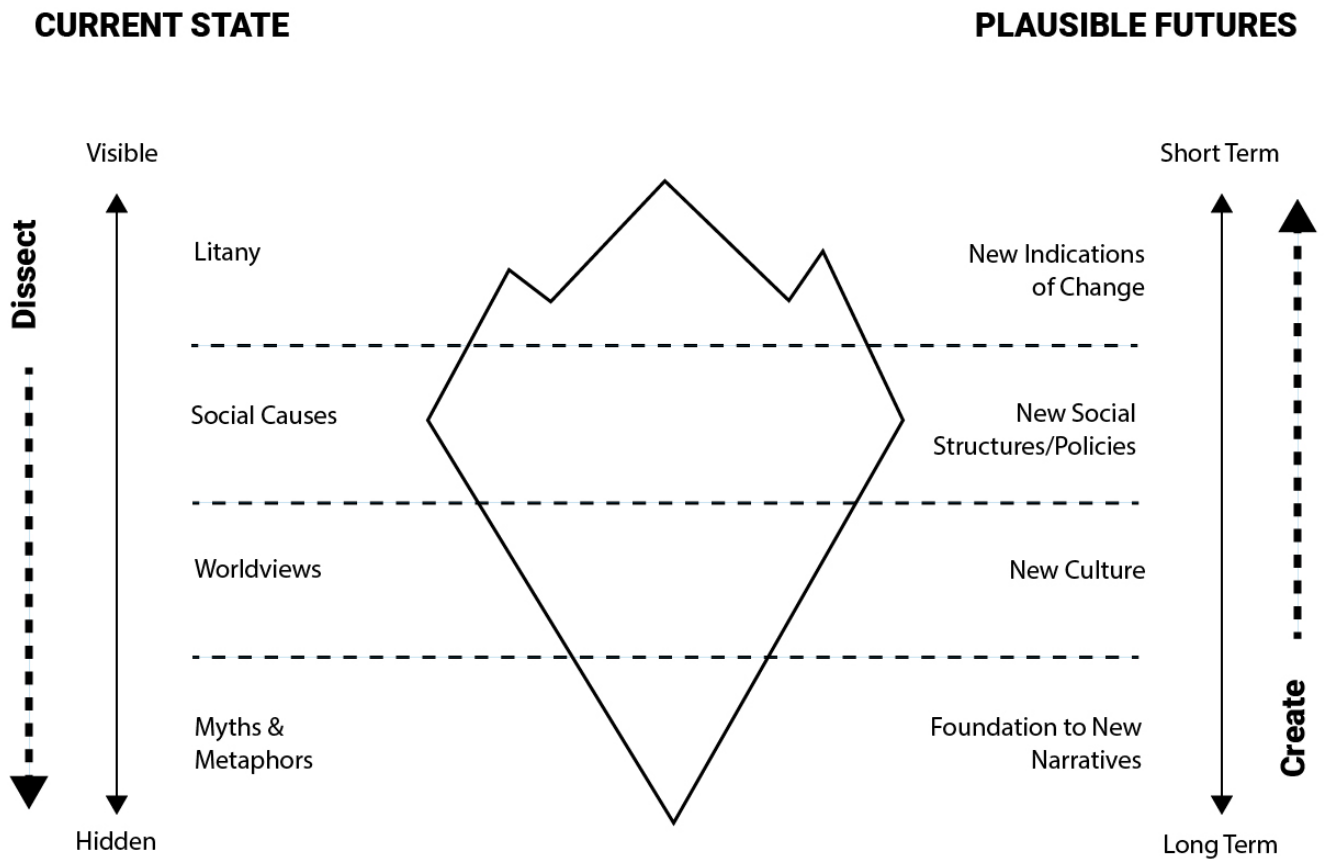


Figure 5.3. Causal Layered Analysis

Image Credit:  
Trishia Nashtaran, 2019

The CLA technique is often represented by an iceberg model, with four connected layers of an existing reality or challenge. The tip of the iceberg is litany, the visible facts, and challenges, followed by the deeper layers of social causes and worldviews that cause the litany. The deep-est layer is myths and metaphors, the sociocultural and subconscious perceptions that shape beliefs, faiths, and biases of an individual or community (Figure 5.3). A long-term change required the dissection of the causal layers to reach the most deep-seated myths and metaphors, which need to be flipped to create plausible futures.

The analysis is presented in three parts. In the first part, a horizontal analysis was done with the Three Horizons tool, and a vertical analysis was done with CLA. The participants in the online survey, co-design workshop, and the expert interviews were asked about the existing challenges and future anticipations regarding gender and space from their personal, social, and professional experiences, respectively. The horizontal analysis scanned through the present realities and future possibilities, while CLA was used to get to the deeper layers of the challenges which need to be shifted for a long-term change in the system. I explored the Expert Interviews and Horizon Scanning for the signals of changes that might facilitate or impede desired changes.

In the second part, a SWOT analysis was done based on the analysis in the first part, the insights from the participants, and expert opinions. The SWOT analysis sheds light on the changes that feminist digital spaces have the capacity to accommodate.

The third part further explores the SWOT analysis and the signals of change to investigate the strength of the digital spaces that can be sustained, the weaknesses that can be overcome, the opportunities that can be explored, and the threats that can be confronted or avoided in the long run. Suggestions were made based on the plausible futures found through the final analyses.

# HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL ANALYSIS

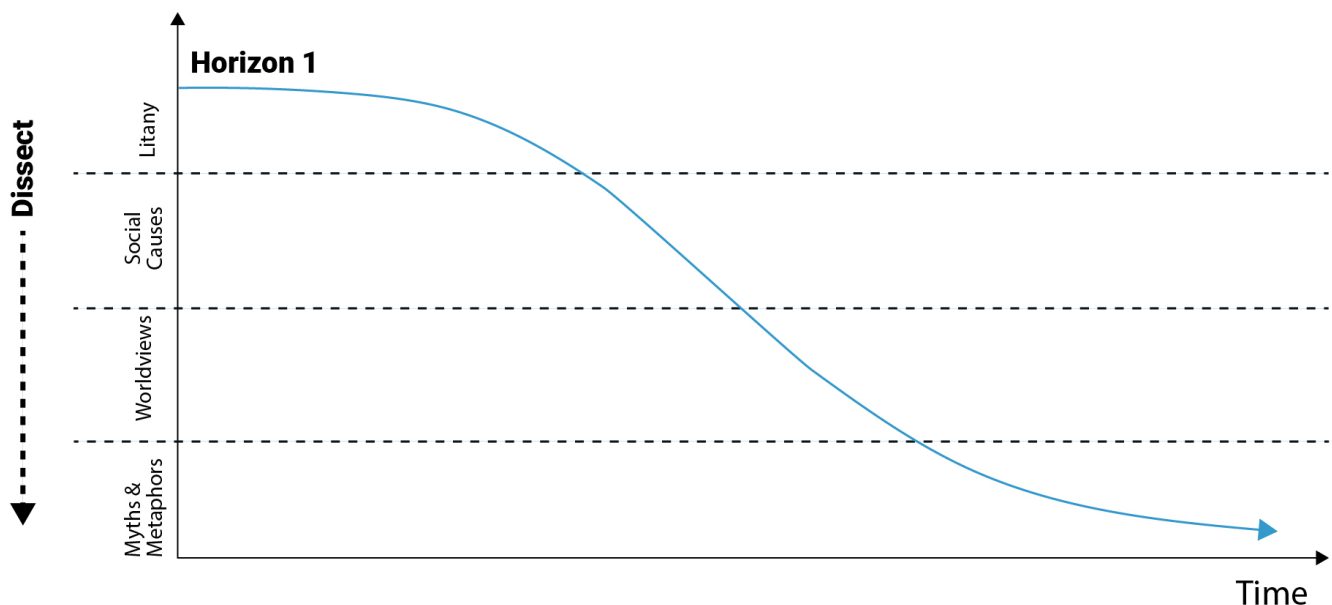
Five major themes were found in data collected through surveys, storytelling, and the work-shop. The horizontal analysis was performed in five categories of challenges respective to those themes.

1. Dominance of Patriarchy
2. Class and Privilege
3. Digital Behavior
4. Dominance of Religion
5. Dominance of Capitalism
6. Leadership and Activism

Figure 5.4. Causal Layered Analysis in the first horizon

Image Credit:  
Trishia Nashtaran, 2019

Firstly, the existing realities and challenges were gathered across Horizon 1, and then thematically dissected down to the myths and metaphors by CLA (Figure 5.4).



## **CHALLENGE 1: DOMINANCE OF PATRIARCHY**

The participants of the storytelling and online survey are mostly Bengali speaking middle-class and upper-middle-class urban adult women between their mid-twenties and mid-forties. When asked about the spaces where they experienced the most or the least free, safe, or discriminated, most (61%) of the participants said that public places were least safe, and the most discriminating for them. About one fourth (26%) of the participants felt the safest and most free at their homes.

The participants of the co-design workshop were mostly (93%) women from the same platform. The workshop was conducted to find future possibilities of the platform with the volunteers, entrepreneurs, and contributors of Meye, but patriarchy came out as one of the significant challenges in the workshop. Three of the participants in the workshop were men, who added insights on gender discrimination from the perspectives of genders other than women. The challenges found through both individual and collaborative participation in these methods are further categorized into four themes, which are analyzed with CLA (Figure 5.5).

## **THEME ONE: IDENTIFYING FEMINISM**

The participants were asked about their views on feminism and gender equality. While the percentage was quite high (82%) in favor of acknowledging patriarchy and understanding feminism, there was still a small portion of the population who thought otherwise. There was an option to explain other opinions. According to the

Figure 5.5. Dissecting Dominance of Patriarchy with CLA

Image Credit: Trishia Nashtaran, 2019

<p><b>Litany</b></p>	<p>Feminists experience backlashes. Girls and boys are treated differently. Girls get less food, freedom and respect as individuals. Women face opposition from their families to earn. Women settle for less.</p>	<p>Men refuse to accept the leadership of women. Women cannot choose their careers. Women face the glass ceiling effect at work. Women earn less than men. Exhaustion and Mental Break-down of women entrepreneurs</p>	<p>Men are judged and discriminated as online entrepreneurs. Women struggle to get a place of their own without marital ties. Women are forced to get married and bear children.- Women have to migrate to their in-laws' house after marriage. Women face sexual violence in domestic and public places. Men suffer from mental health issues.</p>
<p><b>Social Causes</b></p>	<p>Feminists want equality/equity of genders. Boys are more valued than girls. Women are expected to fulfill their domestic roles.</p>	<p>Men feel uncomfortable to be instructed by women. Women's work and promotion are considered less/not necessary. Entrepreneurs usually have another fulltime job apart from business and family responsibilities.</p>	<p>Men are responsible for the economic needs of the family. Online entrepreneurship is 'feminine.' A woman's independence is often connected to her sexual behavior. Men are shamed for expressing their emotional vulnerability.</p>
<p><b>Worldviews</b></p>	<p>Men and women can never be equal. Boys are future men. Men are more important than women. Women should not have authority over money. Their expenses should be met by their father, husband or sons. It is a sin to live on a woman's income. A woman's domestic skills are for her family/husband. They should not sell it.</p>	<p>Men should always have power. Women should be submissive. Women work for fun. It is a hobby. Women should prioritize their domestic roles.</p>	<p>Online entrepreneurship is considered 'easy' and 'domestic', since it can be done from the comfort of one's home. A woman's reproductive organs are destined to exclusively serve her husband's sexual pleasure and his patriarchal lineage. Women should be accompanied by a male relative outside home. Emotion is a sign of weakness.</p>
<p><b>Myths &amp; Metaphors</b></p>	<p>Men are leaders and bread-earners. Men are the light-bearer of the family. Women are mothers and caregivers. An unmarried woman is a public property. Men do not cry.</p>		

survey responses, women would hesitate to declare themselves as feminists, since it is misunderstood and prone to backlashes in society. One member mentioned that her husband made her leave Sisterhood, the support group of Meye, as he believed it was a bad influence on his wife.

**“ People think feminists hate men. I call myself a humanist. Because I believe in equality of all humans.**

\_\_\_\_\_ Anonymous survey participant

## **THEME TWO: GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND VIOLENCE IN PRIVATE SPACES**

Most of the participants (92%) in the survey live with their parents, spouses, or in-laws. More than half (52%) of them are married, while 32% have children. The participants were asked about the age when they became aware of their gender identity and when they first experienced some form of gender discrimination. The answer came in a wide range. Only about 5% of the participants said they never experienced any discrimination as women or girls. They became aware of their gender through menstruation or sexual attractions as adolescents. A little less than half (44%) of the participants said they became aware of their gender identity through discrimination or gender-based violence. A few participants (9%) said they only remembered the earliest memory of discrimination, while 10% said that they experienced discrimination/violence before knowing that they were girls or women.

These experiences took place in their childhood, in adolescence or adult life, both in their homes and outside. The participants were given the option to recall the memory of gender-based discrimination or violence in their life. About one fourth (27%) of the participants chose to explain their answers. The recurring reasons in those explanations were the birth of a brother, an experience of sexual assault, and physical restrictions imposed on girls. The participants stated that they discovered their gender identity when family members or neighbors expressed their displeasure with the lack of sons in the family or their appreciation when a boy was born. They mentioned restrictions on playing with boys or playing certain games that involved physical vicinity with boys (football, cricket, etc.) The participants said that they were segregated from boys at home, school, and playground as a child, and girls were made to wear an extra layer of clothing (orna/dupatta) to cover their chest when they reached puberty. Boys and men would receive more food, attention, and freedom, compared to girls. In adulthood, discriminations occurred after the participants stepped into married or professional life when they experienced less respect and opportunities than their husbands and male co-workers. According to the statement of the participants, women are taught that they belong to domestic spheres, and the public spaces are a male domain. Boys are valued more than girls since boys grow up to be men who take the patriarchal lineage forward.

More than half (54%) of these individuals grew up in Dhaka, while the others grew up in different parts of the country except for a few who grew up outside Bangladesh (3%). They evidently relocated to other cities inside and outside Bangladesh, as only 6% of these women lived in places outside the capital city in Bangladesh, while almost 34% lived in other countries. The largest population of the

participants were still from Dhaka (60%). Only 8% live alone in hos-tels (Aisha and Khondokar, 2018) in Bangladesh or with their love interest inside or outside the country. According to the survey responses, women who relocated to Dhaka as unmarried individuals, experienced difficulties in finding a place to live, as landlords would prefer to rent houses to families rather than unmarried working women. The landlords would ask for a male guardian of these women, which can be their fathers or husbands. An independent woman with no male guardian is considered a derailed woman with low Morales, as per the participants' experiences.

The survey participants were asked in an open-ended question, to imagine what they would do if they could be a man for a month. The aim was to find patterns in discrimination based on gender. While 24% of women said they would not do anything differently, 21% said they would inspire other men to end patriarchy because men listen to other men. On the other hand, 17% of the participants mentioned traveling as the answer to the same question. They said if they were men, they would wear whatever they want, go on solo trips, play outdoor games in the evening, travel in the city at night, and swim in the rivers of Bangladesh. This implies the persistent gender segregation of spaces according to location and time in a woman's life in the country.

## **THEME THREE: GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN WORKPLACES**

The participants of the survey were highly educated (64% Masters, 9% Ph.D., 25% Bachelors), and mostly employed (63.5%). Many were students, homemakers, entrepreneurs, and many were all of



those at the same time. The participants of the workshop were all professionals in different fields. Either they had full-time jobs apart from their business, or they left the job before becoming a full-time entrepreneur. They reported experiencing glass-ceiling\* effect in their careers, where they would make less progress compared to a male co-worker. All entrepreneurs agreed on extreme exhaustion that hindered their personal and professional development. They mentioned a lack of support from family and workplaces as the reason for their burn out. Women are expected to prioritize their domestic roles as wives and mothers, often discourages to make a living, as earning for the family is historically known as men's responsibility, and a woman's expenses should be met by their father, husband or sons. A woman's domestic skills (cooking, sewing, crafting, etc.) are expected to be used for her family/ husband, and not for sale. Families expect women to have 'clean' jobs like teachers, doctors, etc. which allow women to work in a specific physical space. As mentioned by the participants, there is a social notion that it is a 'sin' to live on a woman's income. Hence a woman's income is not valued as a necessity, and instead, women's work is often labeled as hobbies. That leads to women entrepreneurs selling products at a low margin, which creates an imbalance in the market, as reported by the entrepreneurs of Rangtaa. The women entrepreneurs of Rangtaa unanimously agreed that they faced obstacles in getting work done by men they employ, who usually do not feel comfortable taking orders from women.

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\* the phenomenon whereby there exists a wider gender wage gap at the top of the wage distribution and un-derrepresentation of females in well-paying occupations (Faruk, 2019).

## **THEME FOUR: GENDER DISCRIMINATION WITH MEN**

Men struggle with their mental health as a result of extreme exhaustion and social pressure to earn a living for the family. According to the male participants at the workshop, men do not talk about their crisis or express their emotions. Men are socially trained to be discrete with their feelings, and often shamed for being sensitive. Since most of the entrepreneurs are women, and the work is usually done from the comfort of one's home, online entrepreneurship is considered 'easy' and 'domestic.' Therefore, men who choose to give up their full-time jobs to become full-time entrepreneurs receive backlashes from their family and society for not being 'manly' enough.

A causal layered analysis of the four themes brings down the challenges caused by the dominance of patriarchy to the core belief of Bangladeshi society experienced by the participants, which perceives men as leaders and bread-earners, and women as caregivers and domestic beings. Therefore, despite having the privilege of education and employment, women and men experience discrimination in different ways based on their gender.

## **CHALLENGE 2: CLASS AND PRIVILEGE**

The participants came from the middle class and upper-middle-class urban households. The participants reported their experience of gender-based violence through the survey and story-telling. They stated that they never talked about those experiences anywhere

else before because they did not know any other place to share their experiences. Women who experienced sexual violence in childhood either kept quiet or were suggested to not talk about it because it was considered a matter of shame. In cases of gender-based violence like sexual harassment, domestic violence, rape, etc., more women are likely to file an official complaint (32.5%), and more will take part in protests (54%). But many will keep quiet nonetheless (14%).

**“ It brings back the memory of previous trauma. This is why I mostly do not read or write anything about these issues on social media. If something happens in front of me, I am vocal in most of the cases.**

\_\_\_\_\_ Anonymous survey participant

Most of the respondents said that they would seek the help of their domestic partners (64%), friends (44%), parents (35%), the police (31%), or telephone helpline (29%). Though many NGOs have been doing remarkable work to reduce gender-based violence, only 8.5% of the participants said they might reach out to NGOs. Not because they do not trust the NGOs, but mostly because they do not know about the service those NGOs provide and the way to access them. Even though most of the feminist NGOs or feminists within big national or international NGOs are located in the major cities, led by elite-urban-middle/upper-middle women, their primary beneficiaries are underprivileged communities from rural areas of the country (Hossain, 2006).

On the other hand, women experience another layer of discrimination when they have physical or mental disabilities. Participants informed that their families would keep them indoors because any disability is considered a matter of shame in society. Even if they step out of their houses, they struggle to navigate in physical spaces since most of the spaces are inaccessible for individuals with disabilities. When the individual with a disability is a woman, that adds to the existing stigma because they are considered to be unfit to perform the gendered roles assigned by society. According to the statements of participants with disabilities, the internet acts as a window for them to look beyond their physical boundaries (Figure 5.6).

## **CHALLENGE 3: DIGITAL BEHAVIOR**

A few women (5%) said they did not feel comfortable to talk in the presence of men, which keeps them in women-centric digital spaces, while 59% said they were there because they believed women should be united. A little less than half (44%) of the participants said they enjoyed the inclusive and tolerant culture of Sisterhood and wished to have gender-inclusive spaces everywhere with the same culture. They expressed their liking for the opportunities to communicate with people from any corner of the world through digital interactions. When asked about the things they dislike in digital spaces, the participants mentioned cyberbullying and lack of human interactions.

Figure 5.6. Dissecting some of the major themes with CLA  
 Image Credit: Trishia Nashtaran, 2019

	<b>CLASS AND PRIVILEGE</b>	<b>DIGITAL BEHAVIOR</b>	<b>DOMINANCE OF RELIGION</b>	<b>DOMINANCE OF CAPITALISM</b>	<b>LEADERSHIP AND ACTIVISM</b>
<b>Litany</b>	Discriminations and violence with middle-class women go unnoticed, unreported and unattended.  Lack of respectful representation of individuals with disabilities.	Cyberbullying Piracy of idea  Activists suffer from mental and physical burn out.	Women do not get an equal share of the inheritance. Women need to fight for the custody of their male child after divorce. Organized molestation of women during a secular national celebration. Killing of activists for atheism, homosexuality, etc. Feminist/secular writers in exile. Communal violence against religious minority groups.	Volunteer projects struggle to sustain and grow. Small scale businesses struggle to sustain and grow. Losing community-centric grassroots projects to fund-centric organizations. Increasing environmental pollution	Lack of new leadership in established organizations/institutions.  Lack of alignment in activist platforms.
<b>Social Causes</b>	Women are taught to keep quiet and hide their experience of sexual violence.  Lack of empathy. Physical spaces are barely accessible to individuals with disabilities.	Unmonitored digital spaces Lack of digital literacy Lack of empathy Alter egos of individuals Volunteers become overwhelmed with responsibilities. Online work is not taken seriously. Online resources are not given due credit.	Domestic and social culture is dominated by religious laws. Religion sentiment is used as a political tool. Criticizing or rejecting the authority of Islam has become a social crime.	Lacking money to compete	Bureaucracy and Hierarchy Centralization of power and knowledge Intergenerational gaps in organizations Different revenue models, political ideologies, experiences and expertise
<b>Worldviews</b>	A woman's morality lies in her chastity. Middle-class women are privileged. They do not need support.  Individuals with disabilities cannot have a fulfilling life. They should remain indoors.	No one can see you on the internet. Digital interaction is not real. Online is a timepass. Digital activism is shallow. Online entrepreneurship is not a real profession. Women should do 'clean' jobs.	Islam is the only true religion. Women must comply with religious guidelines.	Capitalism	Projects should be designed around the source of funding.
<b>Myths &amp; Metaphors</b>	Seeking help is a matter of shame and pity.	Digital space is an invisible cloak. The internet is a magic bullet. Everything happens automatically here.	Bangladesh belongs to Muslim heterosexual men.	Money = Success	Change is risky.

On the other hand, the activists and entrepreneurs reported that they suffer from extreme exhaustion because of their online activities. Volunteers become overwhelmed with work along with personal and professional workloads in a limited time. There is a perception that every-thing is one click away in digital spaces. Hence, online work is not taken seriously. People collect resources through their activism but do not acknowledge it. Ideas get easily copied, leading to the loss of businesses of online entrepreneurs (Figure 5.6).

## **CHALLENGE 4: DOMINANCE OF RELIGION**

There was an open-ended question in the survey asking the participants what they would change if they had a superpower. One of the recurring responses were about inheritance law and child custody in Bangladesh (Figure 5.5). These are controlled by religious personal laws. Women receive a lesser share of the inheritance, compared to their male counterparts, depending on their religion. Women need to fight for the custody of their child after divorce, especially that of a male child. The dominance of Islam is visible beyond the scope of gender in forms of communal violence against religious minority groups (Minar and Naher, 2018), and organized killing of secular writers, publishers, and activists for their secular ideologies, and sexual choices (Tharoor, 2019).

## CHALLENGE 5: DOMINANCE OF CAPITALISM

A significant concern raised in the co-design workshop was the financial sustainability of Meye. The entrepreneurs were facing a financial crisis to expand their business. Rangtaa had been trying to arrange more fairs to accommodate the entrepreneurs' need for growth, which resulted in a lack of gender-focused workshops and campaigns in the last two years. New entrepreneurship platforms are emerging with foreign investments, offering loans to small-scale entrepreneurs (Gilchrist, 2018). While moving to these new platforms would be beneficial to the entrepreneurs of Rangtaa, it would put the sustainability of Meye at stake. Besides, Rangtaa had been creating a niche market for local products in Bangladesh. The new platforms do not share the same philosophy as Rangtaa. Hence losing entrepreneurs to new capitalist platforms would cause a twofold loss for Meye (Figure 5.6).

**“ I am re-evaluating my contribution to Meye community and how I could be-come a more active part of it.**

\_\_\_\_\_ Anonymous workshop participant

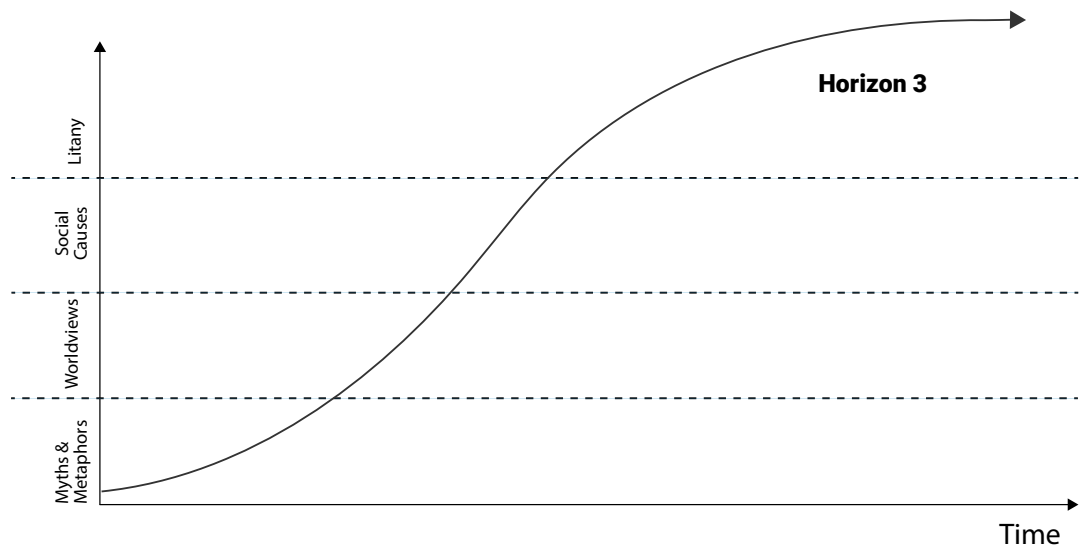
## CHALLENGE 6: LEADERSHIP AND ACTIVISM

According to the survey results, the women who participated in the online survey did not gather in digital spaces with an agenda to eliminate patriarchy or to claim equality, nor did they think Facebook could be an appropriate place to do so. They came to digital spaces mostly for entertainment (83%), networking (61%), and income-generating purpose (41%). Though 84% believe in the cause of women's solidarity for change-making, less than half (33%) of them identify as activists and only 11% to 13% of the participants were actively involved in the operational activities of the platform. The rest involved in discussions, gathered data for their professional and academic work, or observed the interactions as bystanders. The volunteers who participated in the workshop expressed their concern about the strenuous process of running the platform and organizing events, and only a handful number of volunteers do the work (Figure 5.6). An entrepreneur proposed to take a professional approach by employing the volunteers and registering Meye as an NGO. The volunteers expressed their reluctance to adopt an NGO model since monetizing grassroots activism might lead to a loss of agency in the long run, which happened to conventional NGOs in Bangladesh (Nazneen, 2017). Another entrepreneur expressed an idea to scale down their own business to sustain a better brand value in the long run.



Figure 5.7. The Third Horizon to find new/ preferred future

Image Credit:  
Trishia Nashtaran, 2019



A causal layered analysis of the six challenges resulted in twelve myths and metaphors that need to be changed in Bangladesh, according to the participants in this research. The participants were also asked about the future they would prefer to see for gender and space in Bang-ladesh. Those responses were arranged in the Third Horizon of The Three Horizon tool while flipping all myths and metaphors upwards in a direction towards a new future in the CLA (Figure 5.7).

This study intended to gather insights on preferred futures of the participants, which can be synthesized into plausible futures in which digital third spaces can participate. The participants of the survey proposed a range of possible futures in response to the question of their preferred future if they had superpowers. A possible future is a future that might happen, based on some future knowledge that we might possess someday (Solomon, 2019). The possible changes the participants of the online survey proposed were changes in human biology. They expressed their desire in a changed reproductive system and biological design of human beings altogether.

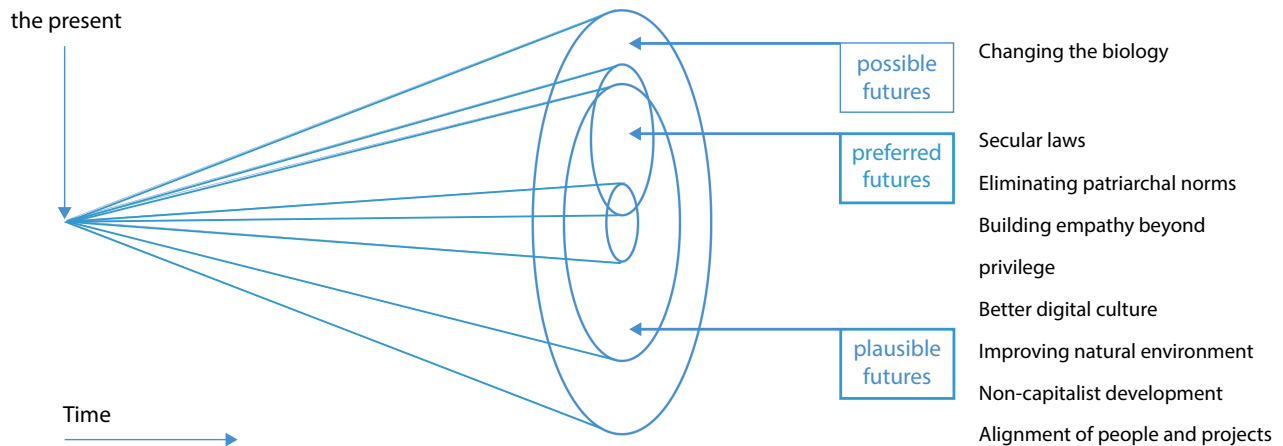


Figure 5.8. This study gathered insights on possible and preferred future while focusing on the plausible futures in which digital third spaces can participate

Image Credit: Voros, 2019

According to their responses, menstruation should be painless, and pregnancy should be shorter, and sexuality should be a choice. According to them, a woman’s biological clock is her biggest enemy. Women need to have control over the clock. They proposed to enable men to give birth so that reproduction can be a natural choice for both genders. To prevent sexual assault and rapes, the participants proposed to redesign human genitals, so that a penis cannot rape, or a vagina can defend itself. If they had a superpower, the participants would make women physically stronger and innovate a technology to ensure consensual sex.

The possible future is not in the scope of this study, yet worth mentioning since it sheds light on the discrimination and social pressure women experience in Bangladesh. The preferred future consists of things that are expected or desired to happen in the future (Figure 5.8).

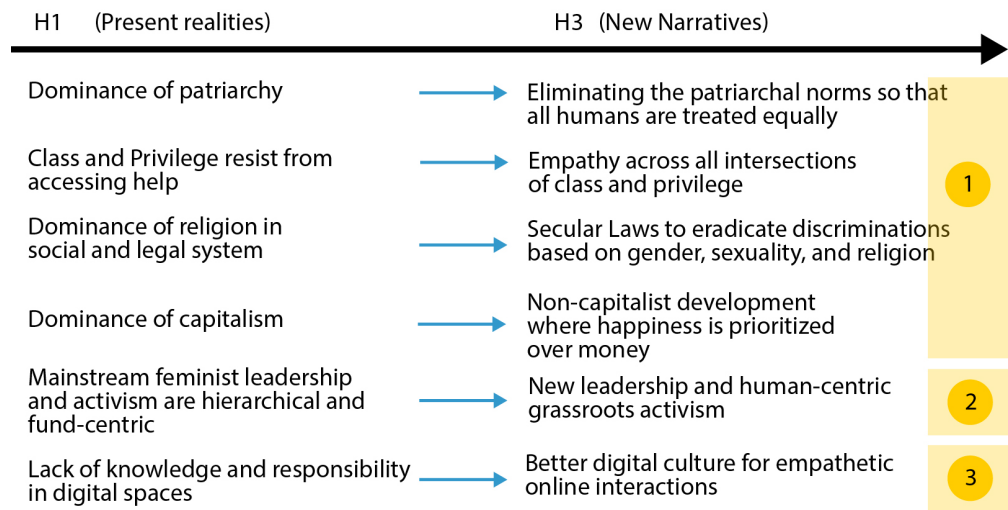
After flipping all the myths and metaphors with CLA (Figure 5.9), six categories of preferred futures were found (Figure 5.9).

Figure 5.9. Creating plausible futures by changing the myths and metaphors with CLA  
Image Credit: Trishia Nashtaran, 2019

	<b>ELIMINATING PATRIARCHAL NORMS</b>	<b>EMPATHY BEYOND PRIVILEGE</b>	<b>BETTER DIGITAL CULTURE</b>	<b>SECULAR LAW</b>	<b>NON-CAPITALIST DEVELOPMENT</b>	<b>NEW LEADERSHIP AND GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM</b>
<b>New Indication of Change</b>	Organized and meaningful feminist voices Unlearning gender Reclaiming sexual agency	Accessible and inclusive physical spaces. Equal access to opportunities irrespective of class, ability, and gender. Better representation of the marginalised population in media.	Balancing and aligning online and offline activities.  Moderation and literacy.  Building empathy.	Universal law to ensure equal rights in marriage, child custody, and inheritance.  New law to accommodate adoption of children.	Empathy-centric initiatives.	Decentralization of power and knowledge.  Non-hierarchical participation in change-making.  Alignment of ideologies and actions.
<b>New Social Structure/ Policies</b>	All genders are equal. Both men and women can be leaders, bread-earners, caregivers, and nurturers. Marriage is a choice. Virginity is a myth.	Privilege is subjective. Disability is subjective.	The internet can be used both in constructive and destructive ways. Digital activities take time, effort and brainpower. All human values are equally applicable to digital behavior.			
<b>New Culture</b>				Bangladesh is a secular country.	ideologies should be prioritized over money.	Projects should be designed around human needs.
<b>Foundation to new narratives</b>	All humans are equal.	Everyone needs to be heard.	The internet is a tool. Digital life is a reflection of the real one.	Bangladesh belongs to people of all genders, religio, beliefs, sexualities, etc.	Happiness = Success	Change is inevitable.

Figure 5.10. Flipping present myths and metaphors to build new narratives for future

Image Credit:  
Trishia Nashtaran, 2019

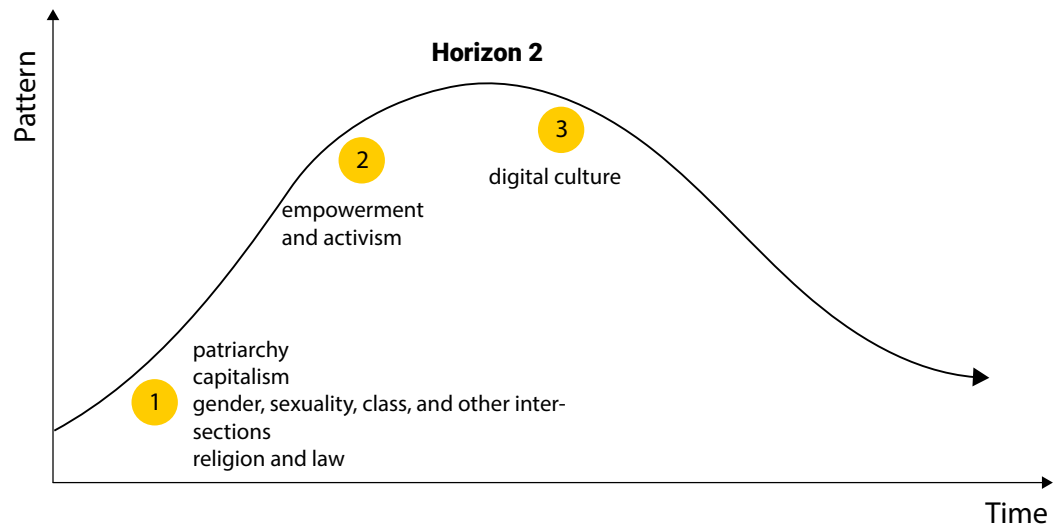


1. Eliminating the patriarchal norms so that all humans are treated equally
2. Empathy across all intersections of class and privilege
3. Better digital culture for empathetic online interactions
4. Secular Laws to eradicate discriminations based on gender, sexuality, and religion
5. Non-capitalist development where happiness is prioritized over money
6. New leadership and human-centric grassroots activism

The categories were further arranged in three groups according to the expert interviews and information found through horizon scanning (Figure 5.8). According to the three horizons tool, the Second Horizon is a point of disruption that leads to a new tomorrow. A part of finding plausible futures is to reach things that could happen based on the current understanding of how the world works. For this part, I collected signals of change (or lack of) from the three groups of insights found from the expert interviews, and the horizon scanning (Figure 5.11).

Figure 5.11. The Second Horizon to explore signals of change

Image Credit:  
Trishia Nashtaran, 2019



The academic experts gave their insights on the systemic barriers of women’s empowerment in Bangladesh, while the professional experts shared their experience and observations of build-ing their own gender-focused projects in recent times. Both kinds of expert insights have been analyzed and complemented by data extracted through horizon scanning, with the aim of find-ing the plausibility of changes desired by the participants from Meye.

## 1. PATRIARCHY, CAPITALISM, SOCIAL INTERSECTIONS, RELIGION AND LAW

The experts’ opinions were aligned with the insights gathered from the participants in other methods in this study that the challenges lie in the core belief system of the society, which needs to be shifted for a lasting change. However, the signals towards establishing a holistic secular legal system are mixed and inconsistent.

Bangladesh has introduced several gender-fair laws in recent times. While some crimes against women saw trial in 2019, many cases of violence against secular activists and women are still unsolved. The hardline religious groups have always protested the proposal of a secular inheritance law (Bangladesh: Change of Inheritance Laws Prompts Protests”, 2011). The Digital Security Act is often used to arrest citizens who criticize the government (“Bangladesh: New Arrests Over Social Media Posts,” 2019). While some experts argued that digital platforms are the most powerful medium for political changes, some recommended paying attention to the mechanism of political parties in Bangladesh. The negotiations for gender-specific laws need to acknowledge the fact that political parties are gendered/androcentric around the world. A political representative’s goal is usually to be re-elected. Even if a representative is feminist, they must consider if they raise an issue, how would that go down with the political party’s popularity. Hence a secular law might not be directly influenced by voices rising from digital spaces, which represent a small portion of the entire population of the country. The experts identified social norms, cultural values, traditions, capitalism, racism, sexism, absence of democracy, free-market economy, strategic partnerships with superpowers like India and China and some countries in the Middle East, NGOization of social movements, etc. as some of the systemic barriers to achieving gender equity in Bangladesh. Some experts argue that gender-based violence (GBV) has more social barriers than legal ones, since patriarchal ideas get support from religious ideologies, making it difficult to shift the social mindset towards gender equity. Religion is more of a culture than spiritual practice in Bangladeshi society, which determines both social and legal frameworks.

**“ Repeated legal actions and social mobilization helped to stop acid violence or stoning women for Zena (adultery) related accusations. That was possible, in my opinion, because these were forms of violence that happened in public spaces, so making society responsible was easier. Not so much in case of domestic violence.**

Shuchi Karim, Assistant Professor, the Department of Women's Studies and Feminist Research, Western University, Canada.

In the absence of any uniform code of family laws, some critical phases of a woman's life (marriage, divorce, maintenance, custody of children, guardianship, inheritance, etc.) are dealt with under various Personal/customary Laws that relegate women to a discriminated status. Crimes like domestic violence or marital rape are difficult to stop since people struggle to comprehend those as problems as per their religious conditioning.

The experts have also emphasized that all women are not equal, and gender is not synonymous with women in patriarchy. The narrative of women's empowerment needs to address intersectional experiences, power, and privileges. The concept of private vs. public spaces, with religious sanctions to discipline and control women, overlap and blur across social intersections of class, age, religion, etc. in Bangladesh. When an urban middle-class woman in Dhaka goes out to work, usually a female domestic worker would take care of the household. Thus, a working-class woman, often underpaid and overworked, is enabling a middle/upper-class woman to claim the public space by providing the much-needed care work. The hierarchy of classes within the same gender could be overcome if men started to claim private spaces by playing their part as caregivers in domestic spaces.

The state is also a critical stakeholder in the system. In many welfare societies, the state provides the much-needed care work to families, which is something the feminist platforms could think of demanding in the long run. Digital spaces might not be able to influence the social and legal norms directly, but these spaces can create dialogues around intersecting identities such as gender, class, ethnicity, ability, age, etc.

## 2. EMPOWERMENT AND ACTIVISM

I scanned through online news portals and social media for the last three years of updates on success stories of women in Bangladesh. Bangladeshi women are setting examples by reaching new heights of success in their personal and professional lives, both on a national and international level. Women have been climbing mountains and reaching new heights in sports, science, law enforcement and defense, fields conventionally known as men's domain. In November 2019, Bangladesh's government launched a National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security.

On the other hand, sexism seems normalized in the country. In August 2019, a prominent intellectual figure and organizer of an educational movement were criticized for sexism, racism, misogyny, and patriarchy in his article, which was published in a leading newspaper in Bangladesh. The article gives a vivid description of the body of a Bengali woman, which is "flawed" in comparison to women from the other parts of the world. The writer emphasized that Bengali women "must" wear a sari to conceal the imperfections ("What's in a Sari?", 2019). Though the article was criticized by



individuals and groups from different parts of civil society, there were also voices supporting the article. In a country where rape and murder of women have become a regular phenomenon, such sexual objectification in mainstream media and public support towards the tone of the article indicates the deep-rooted patriarchy in society.

The academic experts unanimously agreed that there is no vibrant women's movement in Bangladesh now. There is a generational gap that has disabled new leadership and progressive March for feminism. Female voices are important for gender equity, but feminist voices are more important, which can involve men's voices. Bangladeshi society is dominated by NGOized feminism, and there is a significant dearth of an intersectional understanding of women's experience and a significant absence of anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist feminist analysis, according to insights from the academic experts.

On the contrary, the interview with professional experts brought a trend of new leadership to light. Young leaders are emerging with new forms of organizations through different social causes since the rise of social media in Bangladesh. These leaders either have their own source of income or individual revenue model, that leverage their change-making without depending on external funding. I interviewed six such women who have initiated changes from a personal challenge and enabled many other women to do the same. Their work is distributed across physical and digital spaces in diverse fields of gender, sexuality, tourism, and technology. This is a remarkable trend in a time when the country's local non-government organizations are facing difficulties in securing sufficient funds and volunteers.

In contrast with the capitalist business and development models, Indie brands like Rangtaa are emerging in recent years. Started in 2013, Rangtaa created a self-sustaining marketplace driven by a human-centric community. Every year Rangtaa arranges an inclusive event for its beneficiaries where a safe and welcoming space is created for children and individuals in wheelchairs. Despite being a business platform, Rangtaa refrains from the competition, and prioritizes friendship, equality, transparency, and cooperation.

All indie brands do not follow the same ethics and philosophy. They are still a part of a trend in which local art and craft are finding their market through digital spaces. On the other hand, giant capitals like Walmart and Amazon have declared to start operating in Bangladesh in 2020, which many local entrepreneurs consider as a threat to their business.

### 3. DIGITAL CULTURE

The experts mentioned cyberactivism is the strength of new-age feminism, which can facilitate organized feminist action or a different version of women's movement through digital spaces if the individual voices and interests can be tied into collective action. While technological advancement has the potentials to eliminate gender barriers, some experts chose not to be very optimistic, as who controls the technological advancement and who has the power to decide to determine the impact and determined by the social power relations. There is a narrative on the democratization of digital platforms and digital technology that creates equal power and creates a level playing field for everyone, while digital technology can also create a different kind of elitism depending on the access to digital resources and the literacy to use them.

**“ I would say that digital technology is the most important medium of political motivation right now. With the changes in people’s lives, political movements have to be able to adopt the changes.**

\_\_\_\_\_ Nasrin Khandoker, Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology,  
Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh

While some experts expressed high hopes on digital movement, all agreed that long-lasting changes demand people meeting in real life. Physical presence puts a face and existence on an experienced narrative, which helps individuals to find purpose and a reason for collective action. Digital activism can impact physical activism and vice versa and complement each other to make the actions stronger and sustainable. Another aspect is the insidious use of it, which raises issues around safety, harassment, digital literacy, etc. Digital technology allows women to bypass the physical space, collectively organize and exchange information, which can be powerful and creative. Digital space is a form of public space, and there is a backlash against women coming there as well. If women or any marginalized community are not aware of the potential dangers of digital technology, it can make them more vulnerable.

The number of internet users is increasing rapidly in Bangladesh. Several women-centric apps and campaigns have been launched in recent years. On the other hand, anti-feminist Facebook groups are on the rise. There are some public groups on Facebook that advocate the banishment of feminism from Bangladesh. Religious lectures (waz) are widely shared, and women are called names in those groups.

# SWOT ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL THIRD SPACES

The SWOT Analysis explores the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of a digital third space like Meye that seeks change through a feminist lens in Bangladesh. The analysis is based on the insights from the participants in different methods and findings from the previous analysis, and horizon scanning.

## STRENGTH

### 1. AN ALTERNATIVE SPACE FOR SOLIDARITY

The majority (59%) of the women who participated in the online survey stated that they were in Meye because they felt women should be united to eliminate patriarchy, while 37% said that they did not know of any other places where they could talk freely. The discrimination and violence which women reported through the survey are not unique to Bangladeshi women. The uniqueness lied in the solidarity of women who have similar lived experiences. Digital spaces like Sisterhood offered an alternative space for these women to be heard through a unanimous voice.

### 2. ACCESSIBILITY

Though digital spaces were voted to be the second-highest in respect of discrimination (28%) in the survey, it was also the second most convenient space to practice agency (22%) of the participants. Digital technology and social media are inexpensive and more accessible compared to other available channels of

communication in Bangladesh. They can give access to both information and resources, two absolute necessities for any marginalized individual. A digital space like Sisterhood has the potential to reach individuals of different intersectional identities other than gender.

### **3. EMPOWER FROM WITHIN**

Digital platforms enable women to share their resources (skills, ideas, networks, physical spaces, etc.) at their disposal without any financial transactions or external interventions. The empowerment comes from the individuals sharing their existing powers to create collaborative energy. In a capitalist world that runs by profit-oriented rules, a profitless platform owned by everyday women facilitates spontaneous participation in change-making. unite feminist voices and act as a pressure group to negotiate with the state in realizing desired changes. De-spite the state's regulation and surveillance, digital spaces can create room for political aware-ness among women, a domain historically dominated by men in Bangladesh.

### **4. ANONYMITY**

Digital anonymity is often associated with cybercrimes. The same attribute of digital technolo-gy can help women to be heard and create solidarity in an authentic manner. I explored other Bangladeshi women-only groups that have services for the anonymous post. While their mech-anism varies, the purpose remains the same. They allow women to speak about things they do not feel safe to talk openly. The anonymity creates a temporary safe space for these women to have a voice.

### **5. NON-HIERARCHICAL LEADERSHIP**

Although not all digital platforms are free from hierarchies, they have the advantage of breaking the social power dynamics through

shared leadership among the members. For example, the bottom-up approach of Meye empowers every woman to facilitate change with their ideas and skills, finding solutions tailored to their needs. To break the traditional hierarchy of a colonized system, Meye sustains a space of equal footing for everyone to be a leader. Such platforms can create equal power and a level playing field for women to some extent.

## **6. CONNECTING THROUGH EMPATHY**

Digital platforms aid community building by finding like-minded peers from different corners of society. Thus, empathy-driven individuals can connect through humanitarian causes in digital spaces. For example, leadership emerges through spontaneous responses to the causes in Meye. The platform neither employed anyone nor sought financial assistance. Only those who organically respond to a crisis work for the cause. I found a similar culture in other digital spaces I explored for this research. Not all digital spaces are the same; neither they are all operating with the same agenda. A trend of empathy-centric communities in digital space can be noted as an indication that such spaces can be created with a specific kind of governance.

## **7. POLITICAL AWARENESS**

Depoliticization of the former grassroots movements has shifted them away from a social mobilization (Rahman, 2006). Problems like religious laws and patriarchal worldviews might take decades or centuries to fade out. A politically aware feminist third space can unite feminist voices and act as a pressure group to negotiate with the state in realizing desired changes. Despite the state's regulation and surveillance, digital spaces can create room for political awareness among women, a domain historically dominated by men in Bangladesh.

# WEAKNESS

## **1. A DIVIDE OF CLASS**

Not many women have access to digital technologies and technical know-how. Thus digital spaces can create divides between who can have a voice in this digital space, based on access to digital resources and digital literacy. An individual needs a smartphone, a stable internet connection, the knowledge to read/write in Bengali or English to access digital space. That leaves out the majority of women who face the same sorts of discrimination but cannot join the discussions.

## **2. BURN OUT**

Online administration is mentally exhausting, and offline works are physically taxing. Hence, volunteers struggle to manage stress and burnouts. One of the participants in the co-design workshop suggested paying the volunteers for their time and effort. It has been tried in the past and found to attract a different crowd of volunteers who might not be mentally aligned with the philosophies of the platform.

## **3. INSTABILITY**

While spontaneity is an attribute of online interaction that allows people to respond to issues immediately, it can also hinder the stability of a digital platform. A digital space can easily grow too big for its operational capacity and lose focus through multi-directional activities. to sustain innovation. In contrast with traditional not-for-profit organizations, the sustainability of a digital third space is challenged by the unpredictable nature of online interactions rather than financial stability.

## **4. APATHY**

Online interactions have their limitations of lacking privacy and in-person empathy building. The participants of the survey expressed their concern about unkind and intolerant online behavior from individuals who are kind and empathetic in real life. Digital technology might be changing how humans connect. While a digital third space can initiate a change, we might need to rethink its viability as the only way of doing that.

## **5. LACK OF CONTROL OVER INFORMATION**

Participants of the surveys and the workshop independently mentioned their exhaustion from overflowing information in digital spaces. While controlled spaces like Sisterhood create some boundaries through strict moderation, it cannot control the load of data the members bring into the group. The exhaustion leads to a short attention span, which results in a short-lived enthusiasm in a cause, but lacks long-term commitment.

# **OPPORTUNITIES**

## **1. INCREASING INCLUSIVE DIALOGUES**

When I was looking for signals and trends on an inclusive initiative across different intersections of identities (classes, abilities, etc.), I did not find any. There are different initiatives specific to an identity or cause, but not inclusive to all intersections. Digital spaces that have existing structures to serve a specific identity has the opportunity to expand to other intersections, or bring different initiatives together for an inclusive dialogue.



## **2. COLLABORATIONS**

I interviewed the founders of four different platforms who work for gender-focused causes through digital technology. They all have a distinct focus and mechanism. These platforms have the potential to collaborate by sharing ideas and resources. It can facilitate focused activism instead of every platform trying to do everything by itself. For example, Meye had initiated a project to arrange tours for women, upon repetitive requests from the members of Sisterhood, the support group. The project did not take off due to a lack of time and human resources. On the other hand, I interviewed Travelettes of Bangladesh, a women-only traveling project that has enabled thousands of Bangladeshi women to travel around and beyond the countries by arranging group tours for them. A collaboration between Meye and Travelettes of Bangladesh can facilitate women of both platforms to share the existing channel of changes.

## **3. CREATING KNOWLEDGE**

The online survey had a question asking what brings the participants online. The second highest population (62%) said they come online for academic purposes (The highest population was 83%, who come for entertainment). They are students, teachers, and researchers. A patriarchal society in which women lack safe space for their voices and actions, digital spaces can create a parallel reality for them. Further research on these spaces can lead to rich ethnographic insights on society.

## **4. ALIGNMENT IN NARRATIVES**

Less than one-tenth of the participants in the survey showed interest in contacting NGOs in case of gender-based violence. The primary reason was that they did not know what NGOs offered and how to access them.

Traditional development practitioners are in digital spaces to some extent, but there is a generational gap that has disabled new leadership and progressive march for feminism (Nazneen, 2017). It is necessary to initiate dialogues to find a point where these intergenerational worldviews can meet. If not, the older development works can be studied, and the results can be made available for the younger generation who use and convened through digital spaces. In this way, the new generation can create alignment in the narratives instead of starting everything from scratch.

# **THREATS**

## **1. VIOLATION OF PRIVACY**

The idea of space gets blurred online. Digital space is both public and private, which invades personal lives. For example, private intimate chats or photos sent as a consenting adult is a private action in a public platform. Harassment based on that private choice can lead to public humiliation. Social media also offered the state to employ new tools for surveillance. The government of Bangladesh now surveils social media activities and punishes people who criticize the government (“Bangladesh: New Arrests Over Social Media Posts,” 2019). The government has shut down sites on several occasions (“Facebook Shuts Down Fake Bangladesh News Sites Ahead of Vote,” 2018).

## **2. CAPITALISM, NEOLIBERALISM**

The activist platforms and organizations I explored for this research had a wide range of political inclinations and revenue models. Some would put effort to initiate change without addressing the patriarchal structures, some would choose to remain apolitical, and some would sustain their projects through capitalist models. When these projects interact in online platforms, they bring their different political and economic values to digital spaces, which can commodify a digital third space. Moreover, if unaware of the threats, digital spaces can lose ideas and volunteers to business platforms with big capitals, who are often inspired by the visible success of the third space, but do not share the ideologies of the platform.

## **3. FUNDAMENTALISM**

Bangladesh was born as a secular state. The principle of secularism was removed from the constitution, and Islam was declared the state religion during the military regime (“Keeping Islam as State Religion in Bangladesh Triggers Mixed Reactions,” 2016). Taslima Nasrin, a feminist writer from Bangladesh, has been living in exile for 25 years since death threats from fundamentalist groups followed by her writings on gender and religion (Zaman, 1997). Islamist extremist groups have killed at least eight Bloggers and activists between 2013 and 2016 (Tharoor, 2019). Both feminists and secularists are prone to receiving fatal backlash from religious fundamentalist groups and their followers.

The following segment proposes potential changes that can be initiated and organized through digital technology and digital spaces across different gender-focused platforms and organizations in Bangladesh.

# THIRD SPACES IN PLAUSIBLE FUTURES

This section addresses plausible futures in which digital third spaces can create impact. The points have been synthesized by focusing on the existing strengths, weaknesses that can be overcome, viable opportunities, and avoidable threats selected from the SWOT analysis.

## 1. OPINION LEADERSHIP

Stories are subtle yet powerful voices that acknowledge the reality. But they need to be transformed into a narrative to leverage a possible future. The voices need to be united into an audible yet meaningful noise to create and expand a crack on the wall of patriarchy. The scattered stories can be tied into a meaningful and strong voice through empathy, knowledge, and shared leadership. There is no vibrant women's movement in Bangladesh at this moment. Historically, movements are built around issues and ignited by a crisis, which requires mobilization, action-oriented agenda, and a growing discourse, alliances, etc. Women-centric third spaces have the potential to initiate a movement or an action. However, they can be initiated and mobilized without digital spaces, as well. Having an impactful digital voice can accelerate the change by reaching millions across the globe at the same time. A feminist digital space can unite like-minded voices to create collective energy to negotiate with the authority in a patriarchal system.

**“ You have to be a loud national voice if you’re ever to get anything done.**

————— Shireen Huq, founder, Naripokkho, a women’s activist organizations in Bangladesh active since 1983

## 2. INTERSECTIONAL INCLUSIVITY

This study is focused on women-centric experiences and findings, yet other genders and identities (class, ethnicity, ability, etc.) kept coming up through surveys and discussions. Now that women are increasingly entering the public space, men should claim the domestic spaces to redistribute gender roles and power balance of genders in private and public spaces. The majority (82.78%) of the participants in the survey expressed the necessity of men’s participation in eliminating patriarchy. Hence, men need to be brought to discussions to design future equity. A small portion of the participants identified as a member of the indigenous community (0.6%) and non-binary gender identity (0.66%). Though very small in percentage, the number indicates a lack of representation. Digital spaces can be a platform for better representation of the marginalized population in Bangladesh.

# 3. SUSTAINING THE UNSUSTAINABILITY

Third spaces are not meant to be permanent. They are intended to change into something else through conflict and interactions (Saju, 2014). Sustainability of a third space lies in its shapeshifting, fluid nature. Trying to hold it in a solid structure can take away the essence of the space and limit the potentials. Therefore, it is necessary to humanize rather than institutionalize a digital third space. While the unstructured interactions in digital spaces might seem unsettling, it can also be a strength of a third space. The lack of institutionalization can allow a third space to directly question the state or the civil society that conventional NGOs cannot do (“Scrap New Commission to Restrict NGOs,” 2012). A sustainable structure can also restrict the pathway to future changes. For example, the most impactful and persistent projects of Meye has been Shondhi, which is entirely voluntary and unpublicized. It is also the most challenging project to carry out since it is primarily dependent on individuals who would volunteer their time and effort without any financial expectations. Even when they were offered some remunerations on some occasions, they would either reject it or donate it for Shondhi. On the other hand, Rangtaa is often misunderstood as the biggest project of Meye, while it is the smallest yet the most visible one. Sustaining Rangtaa is comparatively more straightforward, as it serves all primary stakeholders directly. Entrepreneurs get financial benefits by selling and meeting their customers; all members get to meet each other and have a good time for two days. The participants have their stake in it to

keep Rangtaa go-ing. Still, it becomes incredibly strenuous for the organizers who work as volunteers. Once the entrepreneurs grow out of Rangtaa, the annual fair would become irrelevant and a system loss. Even though Rangtaa is the source of financial sustainability of Meye, extra efforts to keep Rangtaa rolling has been making the feminist activism of the platform inconsistent. Instead of repeating the same pattern of the fair, Rangtaa can be shifted to a different business model while sustaining the essence of the event, which is physical meetups and festivity

## 4. ALIGNMENTS AND ALLIANCES

Digital technologies are bringing in multiple stakeholders in the digital space. NGOs, corporations, government initiatives, new women-centric platforms all have access to digital spaces to a different extent. Intergenerational and ideological gaps between various stakeholders can hinder a seamless alignment. These stakeholders have created gender-specific services to stop gender-based violence and facilitate gender equality to some extent. Digital spaces can create a passive connection with their work by designing a map of the services. Women in digital spaces can use the map to avail certain services, and development practitioners from different parts can see the bigger picture in feminist activism through the map. The alignment of digital activisms can be comparatively harmonious.

# 5. THE CULTURE OF THIRD SPACE

All women-centric digital spaces are not necessarily feminist or gender-aware spaces, neither all digital spaces are third spaces. The digital spaces act as a projection of society. They can be a resourceful source of understanding and communication, but the changes need to happen in the real world. Physical presence and interactions are immensely important for building empathy and finding a purpose for collective actions. Besides, most women do not have access to digital spaces. Either digital initiatives need to go to them, or they need to be brought to digital spaces for a holistic impact. Bringing women to digital spaces without preparing them for the risks would make them more vulnerable and can create a new hierarchy. Increasing digital literacy and improving the digital environment can work hand in hand to facilitate a third space culture. However, a third space does not have to be on digital platforms. Hence, focusing on the culture of third space, which is intersectional and flexible, can be more valuable than enhancing the digital spaces that act as a third space. Almost every urban middle-class household in Bangladesh has women from a low-income group as their household help (Hussein, 2017). The process of building empathy beyond digital spaces can begin at homes, by addressing co-existing conflicts and marginalization of gender and classes.



## 6. NEW LEADERSHIP

Creating new leadership is a challenge both in conventional NGOs and new digital platforms, though the challenges differ contextually. Digital platforms usually start from a non-hierarchical leadership model, thus decolonizing the top-down organization structures. As the platforms grow, organic hierarchies arise that might not impose power, but create invisible clusters of leaders who act as the players and the members who function as the audience. While a new leadership can be developed from the existing population, a third space can use the opportunity to create new leadership for long-term change. They can sow the seeds of a possible future by working with children. For example, members of Sisterhood sponsor children of female sex workers in Bangladesh. These children can be raised as feminist leaders of tomorrow.

## 7. JOY

Joy is a universal and inclusive language. In the extremely stressful urban life of Dhaka, people desperately seek an outlet to breathe. The participants of the storytelling method mentioned that one of the essential things in life is joy. According to the participants of the online survey, they come to digital spaces mostly (83%) for entertainment. Hence digital third spaces can be centered around the happiness of the individuals across different ideologies and expectations. Research can be done on the ways different demographic groups, and inclusive spaces can be created through creativity and entertainment.

The concept of place and future is subjective to gender in Bangladesh. Discriminations and violence begin at home and extend beyond the boundaries of one's public life. The only place where women can be free is the mind, which can often be shaped to the benefit of patriarchy. With the persistent trend of cyber violence against women, it is easy to perceive that access to digital technology is not necessarily a pathway to gender equity at its core. Yet the digital platforms are one of the places where women can navigate beyond physical boundaries, mental biases, and social hierarchies of gender so far. Digital third spaces can act as a force that connects and aligns these minds for a specific cause.

# 6

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**CONCLUSION**

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## CHAPTER SIX

# CONCLUSION

**T**his research started exploring how digital spaces can leverage gender-specific participation to impact positive changes towards gender equity in a patriarchal society like that of Bangladesh. I started with the assumption that I needed to find a way for the sustainability of women-centric digital spaces to sustain collaborative storytelling with women. In the end, I realized it was the unstable nature of the digital space that facilitates spontaneous changes towards the future.

In a country trying to progress through economic development, women empowerment is a crucial part as women make almost half of the population. With patriarchy engraved in the cultural landscape, it is extremely challenging to initiate and sustain a gender-neutral space for women from all walks of life, where they can practice their agency, safety, and support without interruptions or stigmatization. Bangladesh has been empowering women through economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment over the years. However, without challenging the patriarchal structure at the root, these empowerments failed to translate into gender equity in society.

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**Without transformations in multiple layers of realities, they create a used future. The evidence says it's not working, but we keep on doing it.**

---

Sohail Inayatullah, the pioneer of CLA, at TEDxNoosa,”  
2013

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImWDmFPfifl>

The women-centric third spaces signal that used future by claiming their agency in taking things in their hand and initiating new realities in different ways. No matter how educated a woman becomes, or how much she earns, she will be perceived lesser than a man in a patriar-chal society, unless patriarchy is acknowledged and eradicated. Women who have access to the conventional form of empowerment are gathering in digital spaces and sharing the stories of discrimination, harassment, and violence that persist despite the empowerment.

The feminist third spaces in digital platforms hint the tip of the iceberg to a deep-rooted and persisted failure of women empowerment in Bangladesh. They indicate the necessity of a radical shift in worldview and metaphors of patriarchy for a long-term change. Without addressing the sexual politics, well-intended developments might change the forms of patriarchy but cannot challenge it from its core. A feminist third space in digital platforms can accelerate plausible changes through intersectional activism that expands to physical spaces. Physical organizations can arise from those third spaces on digital platforms, but a third space does not have to conform to a specific boundary. A third space needs to be open to organic changes. It needs to remain a fertile environment in which participants can combine diverse knowledge into new insights and plans for action. A feminist third space is a flexible, interactive, and intersectional point where marginalized voices unite and evolve with the goal of a collective change in a patriarchal society. Multiple stakeholders with different power dynamics can co-exist and collide in a feminist third space, leading to further changes. A feminist third space can emerge in a digital platform, but it must have a physical impact to achieve lasting plausible changes.

Bangladesh has seen vibrant feminist movements in the past, which is nonexistent now, as a result of the capitalization of the movement through NGOization in the country. Organizations cannot challenge patriarchy when they partner with patriarchal powers. On the other hand, Bangladeshi urban middle-class women are breaking their centuries old silence in a platform as vulnerable as the internet.

I wanted to understand if these women-centric digital platforms had the potential to bypass the systemic barriers and impact the future of gender equity. The Thirds Space Theory seemed to be the perfect framework for this alternative narrative because it talks about alternative metaphorical spaces where marginalized people unite to change their realities. My primary focus was Meye. I intended to set Meye as a backdrop to the story so that later in could be used for references. Therefore, I explained the journey of Meye before the analysis, which is elaborate and unstructured, yet relevant to the study. Most of the participants in the study were from Meye. I wanted to look beyond the hierarchies of the traditional organizations and gather voices of women from all walks of life. Therefore, I talked to a diverse range of women who are present or have access to women-centric digital spaces in Bangladesh. I spoke to the everyday women, the activists, and the experts, who gave me insights from different layers of lived and observed experiences. I realized through the study that a feminist digital third space like Meye can focus on initiating a radical shift in the myths and metaphors of patriarchy. It can create a channel for the participation of marginalized voices, existing players, and other digital platforms through dialogues and actions across digital and physical spaces. A loud and clear feminist voice is required to address the problem and unite similar voices to create an impact. Women-centric digital spaces have the potential to be that voice, despite the risks from the state and the fundamentalist groups.

# **CONTRIBUTIONS**

## **1. TWO FORESIGHT METHODS AND THREE-STEP ANALYSIS**

My analysis was done in three stages. The first stage involved two foresight tools merged. Three Horizons allowed the participants to be imaginative across a horizontal timeline, while CLA allowed me to reach the root causes of the challenges addressed by all participants. I did a SWOT analysis to find the qualities of a women-centric space that needs to remain the same, the areas which need to be improved, and the challenges that need to be addressed. Finally, I went through the literature review, expert interviews, and horizon scanning to rationalize the strengths and opportunities of these digital spaces as a feminist third space. The analysis method can be used for exploratory and participatory researches like this for a holistic view of a system, in which multiple stakeholders participate with different depths of experience and understanding of the system.

## **2. THE THIRD SPACE CULTURE**

A feminist third space is an ever-evolving utopia in which the least unheard can find their voice. It should not be constrained to a specific platform or organization, nor does it need a stable business model to survive. A stiff structure can limit the flexibility of a platform that aims to sustain the third space.



The culture of a feminist third space goes beyond the boundaries of space and identities. The culture arises at the connecting point in which marginalized voices gather with a common goal and engage with multiple stakeholders through equal access to power. If the culture can be sustained, space will self-organize with time. The maintenance of the culture can be tricky, given the regulation from the state and other allies. This kind of space needs to create scope for dialogues, knowledge, joy, creativity, and constant change across physical and digital mediums for a long-lasting impact.

Moreover, all women-centric digital spaces are not feminist third spaces, and a third space does not require a digital space to emerge. A Digital third space reflects the physical one. Digital technology is only a tool that can facilitate convenient access to an alternative space in a geographical location. The way third space feminism is emerging in Bangladesh, might not be the same for Bengali women living in other parts of the world. Identifying the third space and keeping the focus on feminism is necessary for creating pathways for women to participate in future gender-equity.

### **3. ALIGNMENT OF THIRD SPACES**

As I engaged in conversations with founders of other women-centric spaces, I realized that Meye was a part of a trend that needs attention. Women-centric digital spaces emerge from a personal challenge that evolves into a platform of women who experience the same challenges. In contrary to the conventional non-profit organizations in Bangladesh, digital spaces begin without funding. Firstly, because the internet is inexpensive. Secondly, the originators of the platforms are educated and employed women.

While the class privilege leverages their access to activism, it can later evolve into convectional organizations based on the vision of the leaders of the space. All alliances can be created among these digital spaces, which can connect through their visions and actions with the potential to co-evolve beyond the digital platforms for a lasting impact in society.

## **4. TIMELINE OF AN ORGANIC PLATFORM**

Spontaneity is a common quality of digital platforms. While it facilitates organic interactions, it can also lead to an extremely non-linear journey of the platform. It was a challenge to capture the ambiguous path of Meye in a timeline. The visualization style presented in this study can be used to study other platforms and organizations with a similar non-linear course of action.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The study was focused on urban adult women from the capital city of Bangladesh, where power and privileges are centralized. The bigger portion of the population was left behind in the research. The study also kept other genders out of focus. Besides, gender is not the only parameter of discrimination in patriarchy. Marginalized intersections are an integral part of a third space.

Hence, it is necessary to consider the intersections of identities and experiences in terms of race, class, nationality, religion, ethnicity, age, etc., with intersecting systems of oppression such as capitalism, heteropatriarchy, colonialism, and neocolonialism, and neoliberalism in patriarchy. Bangladeshi feminist movements are dominated by NGOization, which creates a hierarchy of power and alliances across patriarchal and capitalist institutions. Experts from the NGOs could add more insights to the institutionalization of feminism and women empowerment in Bangladesh. I could not interview any such experts due to the limited time and scope of the research.

## **NEXT STEPS**

The methodological framework and findings in this research show hope that a similar study can be conducted with other genders, identities, organizations, and cultures, to find plausibility in desire futures in a certain society. However, given the scope of this project, several potential steps were left unattended. In the future, this research will be further developed in the following ways:

1. An in-depth analysis and a comparative study of different women-centric platforms
2. A comparative study from men's perspective in Bangladeshi digital spaces
3. A systemic analysis of intergenerational feminist activism
4. Creating the Imaginary Map of feminist platforms and services
5. Creating a systemic map of Meye along with a detailed data story

## FURTHER RESEARCH

It is grounded in the post-modern thought of seeing a conclusion as never being final but instead as a starting point for further exploration. This research is a steppingstone of a larger project with a more long-term ambition to profound changes to impact a social system. The governance arising from digital spaces and their revenue models can shed light on new trends of leadership and organizational sustainability. Further research can be done on the mechanism, power dynamics, political ideologies, along with the interplay of the virtual ecosystem with established physical systems of emerging feminist digital spaces. Patriarchy can take different shapes in different cultures. The nature of discrimination and challenges might vary according to that cultural shift. Bangladeshi communities living outside Bangladesh can interest future research projects in this regard. Finally, several feminist science fiction can be inspired by the possible futures envisioned through storytelling and the online survey.

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# APPENDICES

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A: TESTIMONIALS FROM THE ONLINE SURVEY

“I was 5. I was forbidden to play football with boys of my age.

“I was 7. My mom asked me not to talk to my male cousins. She told me that girls should not speak or laugh loudly.

“I was 11 or 12. I was made to wear an extra layer of clothing, and I was restricted from playing a particular type of game because I was a girl.

“I was 14 or 15. My parents would not let me stay over at my friend's place. They would worry about my safety.

“I was 10-12 years old. I have been to some weddings in the family. I was amused by the shifting gestures according to genders in weddings. When you are on the groom's side, you become demanding and aggressive. You grow a sense of entitlement. But when you are on the bride's side, you act submissive.

“I wanted to learn music. My family did not allow me to go to music school because I was a girl.

“I was 12. It was winter. I went to an amusement park in Dhaka. A stranger touched my breasts in the dark. I cried a lot when I came home. My mom told me that I needed to be strong and careful because I was a girl. That is when I realized that I did not have the privilege to be outside at night without fear.

“I was 25. Just had started my first job. People made sure I knew I was a woman, and I deserved less.

“I became aware of my gender when I had my first period, or maybe when I kissed a boy for the first time. Yes, there were discriminations at home. I guess I was too strong to bother.

“I was probably 5. People would frequently ask me, “Don’t you have a brother?”

“I was 4 or 5. That is when I started to go to kindergarten. We were all kindergarteners and cried for our mothers, irrespective of gender. But boys would make fun of girls for crying. Girls and boys would play separately in the school field. We were implicitly told not to play “boy” games; neither would the boys let us participate in cricket or football with them.

“I was 5 when my brother was born. My relatives and neighbors were overjoyed at the arrival of a baby after me. That is when I realized that I was a girl and it was not as good as being a boy.

“I was probably 8. I knew I was a girl. But I was also aware that boys were valued in society, though I did not face any direct discrimination at home. So, I choose to be in denial. I would act and dress like a boy, thinking that it might turn me into a boy and allow me to do things I enjoyed.

“I was 9. I overheard that my father preferred a son.

“I was 5. I was molested by a guy who worked at our neighbor’s house.

“I was 27. I got married and went to live with my husband’s family. There I discovered that I was a lesser human being than my husband.

“I was 10. I went to Bangladesh on vacation with my parents. It was my first visit to Bangladesh. I saw that women and girls always ate after men and boys. Even my mom would do the same. A woman from the village was furious to know that I did not know how to cook. She was worried about my future husband’s wellbeing. I was only 10.

“I was 25. I went to study in Europe. I explored myself again and reconfirmed my gender identity.

# APPENDIX B: DESCRIPTION OF THE CO-DESIGN WORKSHOP

This workshop included methods I learned in Foresight Study, Business Design, Innovation Leadership, Human Factor, and System Analysis. These exercises are accessible physically (not physically strenuous) and are playful and co-creative in nature.

## SECTION 1: ICEBREAKING AND RAPID POST-UP

The first section of the workshop involved icebreaking and playful interactions, along with a high-level mapping of the existing challenges addressed by the participants. I started by introducing herself and giving an idea of what to expect throughout the workshop. She briefly explained the purpose of the research, the consent form, and the overarching question of the workshop. Some participants suggested starting with the national anthem. One participant took the lead in singing, and the rest followed.

### **Exercise 1: The Baggage**

The participants were asked to take a piece of paper and draw a suitcase on it. Then they were asked to write three words for the issues they had on top of their minds (Figure 7.1). The pages were collected, shuffled, and redistributed. The participants were asked to make sure that no one got their own drawing.

Then they were asked to read out loud the words written on those bags. The purpose of this exercise was to build empathy by acknowledging the emotional baggage everyone carried. The participants were not accustomed to each other's handwriting. There-fore, anonymity was maintained. The exercise also helped to set the mood of the space by ini-tiating the workshop from a personal contribution in the form of words and sketches.

## **Exercise 2: Singing**

The exercise of emotional baggage was followed by a chorus titled “Amra Shobai Raja” (We all rule as kings.) by Rabindranath Tagore, depicting democracy and shared leadership in the space.

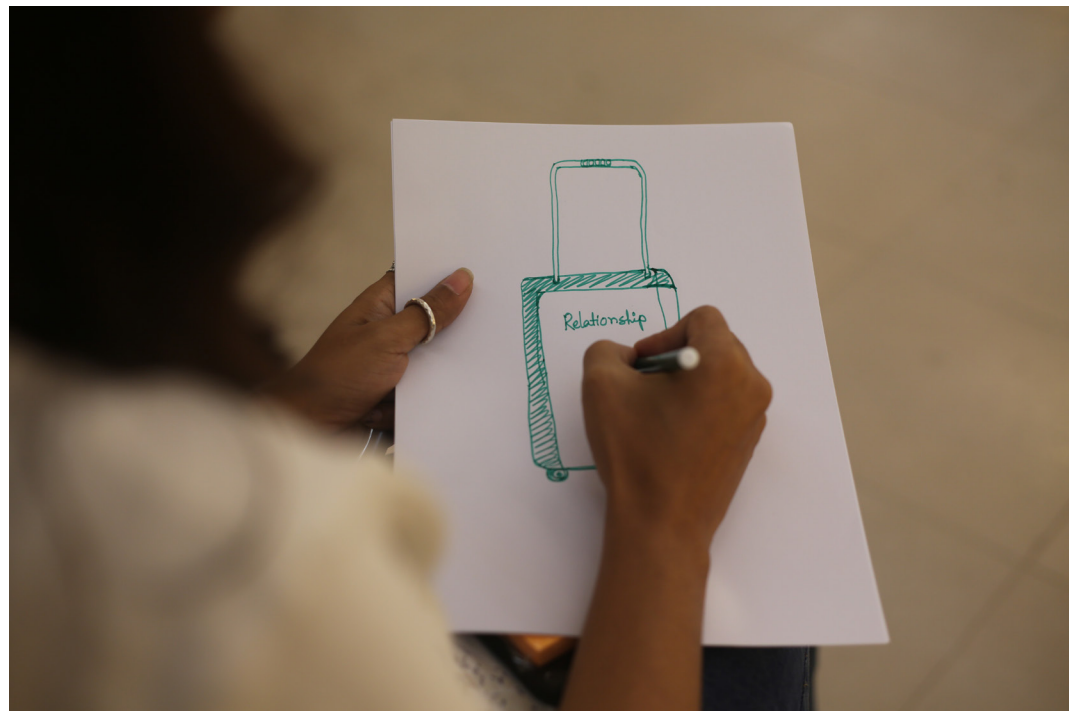


Figure i. Drawing the baggage

Image Credit:  
Royena Rasnat, 2019

## **Exercise 3:**

# **The Tree of Co-creation**

This exercise was a brainstorming session to encourage participants to think about a co-creative space in a holistic way. It prepared the participants for the Foresight tools to be used in later segments by drafting the foundations of co-creation, its basic values, the resources they offer to share in the space, their expectations, dreams, aspirations, and goals for attending the workshop. The tree acts as a metaphor for co-creation with its roots, trunk, and branches representing the foundation, channel, and future, respectively.

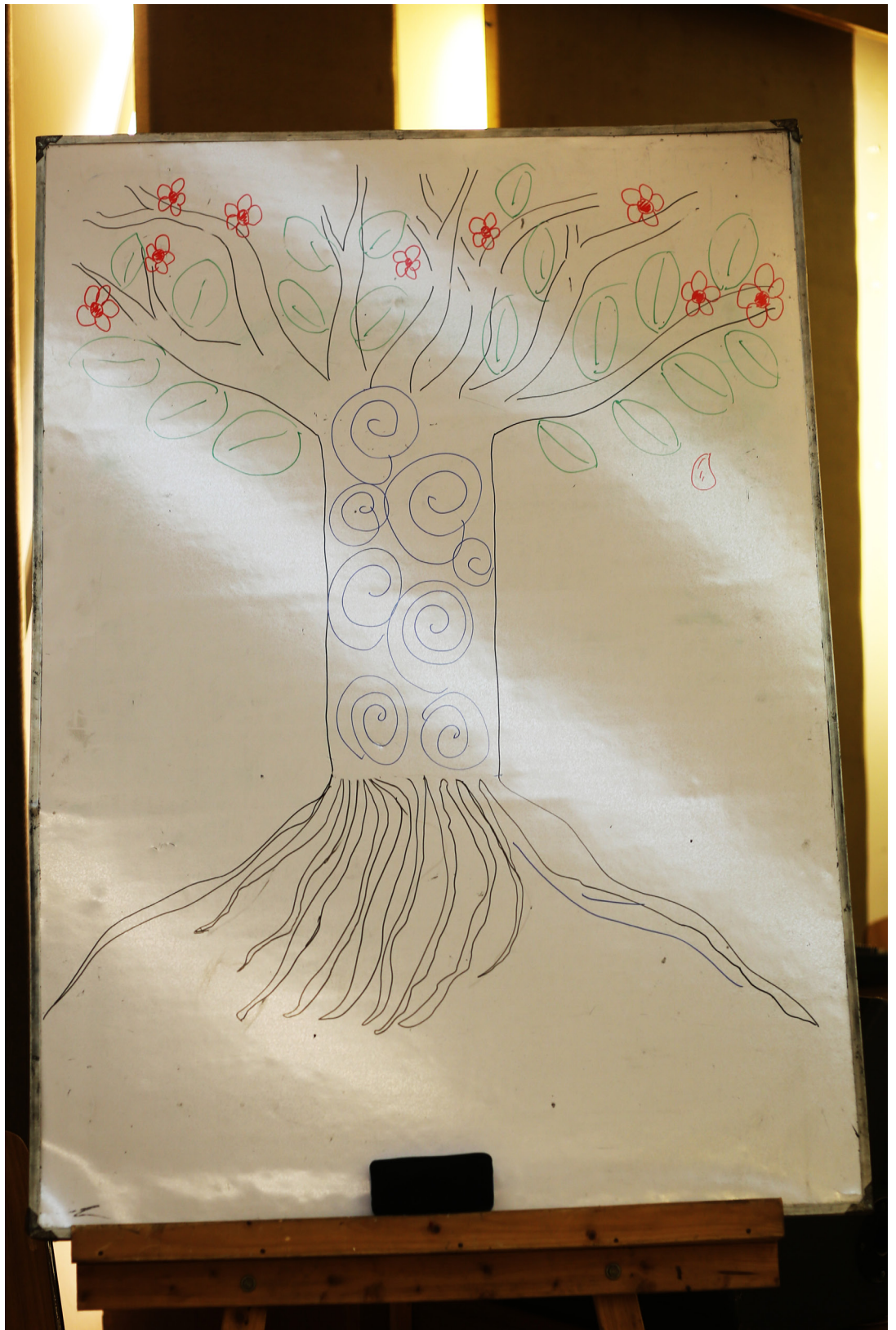
The participants were asked to define these three parts of a tree, and their roles, and to relate that to the collaborative space at the workshop (Figure 7.2). They were invited to write attributes of such a space on separate post-its and stick them to the 'Tree of Co-creation' drawn on a whiteboard accordingly.

The rationale for selecting this exercise was My prior experience of using it on different occasions. She had attended 'Active Citizens,' a social leadership training program designed to help social action projects to develop the soft skills required to understand better and address the needs of their communities. Later she used the same exercise as a research method in one of the academic courses. From direct experience, it provided an innovative and collaborative way to set the context for a workshop on the abstract topic of co-designing the future. The intent was that it would reconnect individuals to their purpose for being in the space and bring out common themes shared among the participants to set the context for the deeper brainstorming that followed.



Figure ii. The tree of co-creation

Image Credit:  
Royena Rasnat, 2019



# SECTION 2:

## THE EXISTING REALITIES AND CHALLENGES

### **Exercise 4: Down the Iceberg**

This section was inspired by Causal Layered Analysis (CLA). The participants were distributed in five circles with 8-9 individuals in each. I explained the purpose and the process of CLA along with an example and asked the groups to draw their group iceberg together. They were invited to write problems or challenges they would like to address on a personal, social, organization-al, or global level on separate post-its and stick them to the 'Litany' on the iceberg and present a summary from each group (Figure 7.3). Participants expressed their willingness to talk instead of writing on post-its after the discussions on Litany. The rest of the layers were exercised through inter-active verbal communication as I took notes on behalf of everyone.



Figure iii. The Iceberg of CLA

Image Credit:  
Royena Rasnat, 2019

# SECTION 3: THE PREFERRED FUTURE

## Exercise 5: Two Truths and One Lie

This exercise was placed after the first futures exercise as an energizer to relieve the stress of extensive brainstorming. The participants were asked to stand in a big circle while thinking of two correct information about themselves and one incorrect one. They were asked to take turns to share that information in the circle, and others were to guess which of the information was incorrect. It acted like a playful way to connect with each other. The rationale for selecting this exercise was My prior experience of using it while attending a workshop with 'Active Citi-zens.' The purpose of using the exercise for this workshop was to build empathy through facts and fun. The intent was to realize how easy it was to have wrong assumptions about others, especially in the age of digital communication, where people know each other through their virtual persona.

## Exercise 6: Up the Iceberg

I asked the participants if they would like to reconstruct the future by going upwards in CLA, or they would prefer some other techniques that might be less strenuous. The participants expressed their desire to continue CLA, followed by other methods.

Post-Ups as I took notes on the board. This process acted as a quick way to distinguish participants' role as the beneficiaries and representatives of the organization. The insights reflected on the two sets of expectations and responsibilities the participants had.



Figure iv. The Empathy Map

Image Credit:  
Royena Rasnat, 2019

The sat in the same circles as the first exercise. The brainstorming began with changing the myths and metaphors and ended in changing all four layers up to the desired future litany. The layers were discussed in the form of open dialogue as I summarised the ideas and took notes upon the agreement of the participants.

## **Exercise 7: The Empathy Map**

The participants were regrouped for the next exercise: Empathy Map (Figure 7.4). It is a com-mon design thinking tool. This tool is intended to help the group focus on the people involved in a project. The participants were asked to imagine themselves in Rangtaa, the annual fair ar-ranges by the organization. The groups were given a template of the map and were asked to think of each quadrant of the map and add words to “See,” “Think & Feel,” “Hear,” and “Say + Do.” As the participants preferred, the groups gave the words verbally rather than performing

## **Exercise 8: Three Horizons**

The exercise was designed to address the expected future participants envision after going through with CLA. The participants have explained the meaning and significance of the three horizons. The challenges and realities highlighted in CLA were considered as the first horizon. The participants were asked to recommend future goals they would like to participate in col-laboratively. It acted as a brainstorming session to create a list of expected futures. The rationale for selecting this exercise was to involve stakeholders from different facades of an or-organization and inspire them to put forward their visions. Participants were informed that all expectations could not be fulfilled at the same time. Yet their contribution would provide a footing to look forward to the future. It provided new insights and ideas from different per-spectives.

# SECTION 4: THE PROPOSED CHANGES

## **Exercise 9: Value Proposition**

The Value Proposition Canvas is a tool that helps to design a product or service according to the values and needs of the customer. It was used as an exercise for the workshop with an intention to ideate changes from a business perspective. Rangtaa is the primary source of economic sustainability of Meye, while entrepreneurs of Rangtaa were the main actors in that mechanism. The goal was to find out what their pains were and how the organization could introduce new products, services, and ideas to relieve those pains. The participants were given the templates of VPC, and I explained the points in the discussion.

The participants engaged in dialogues on the subject matter as I took notes of the points discussed. Though the core purpose was to serve the entrepreneurs, the discussion had extended to the sustainability of the organization.

## Exercise 10:

# Draw Your Partner

This exercise was placed in the end as an energizer and a souvenir to all. The participants were asked to choose the person standing next to them as a partner and maintain eye contact with each other for a minute while they drew each other (Figure 7.5). The portraits came out in all sizes and shapes with little resemblance to the subject, but everyone cracked up, and the workshop ended on a happy note. The rationale for selecting this exercise was my prior experience of using it on a workshop titled “Futures Literacy.” The exercise was used as an opening session and icebreaker there. I put it to the end of the workshop for this study instead. The intent was to create a joyful memory for the participants that they could bring home. The intention was to inspire the participants to look into each other’s eye, which has become a rare practice in digital culture, and to let go of inhibitions to perform in a certain way.

Figure v. Some of the portraits that the participants made of each other





# **APPENDIX C: FEEDBACK ON THE CO-DESIGN WORKSHOP**

The participants unanimously said that they had enjoyed the entire experience. The most repetitive comments were ‘fun,’ ‘innovative,’ ‘great.’ Some popular opinions were:

1. The entire workshop was very organized and informative.
2. I participated in many workshops in the past. It was the most productive workshop in a short amount of time.
3. The last exercise of drawing each other was memorable and fun.
4. Finding problems and solutions through the iceberg model was innovative.
5. The future exercise (three horizons) was inspiring.
6. The space was kept open and flexible so that the participants could choose to sit on the chair, the floor or to lie down. The freedom of movement was comforting.
7. Everyone's participation was made valuable.
8. Some participants had to take their children with them. The kids enjoyed the experience, implying that the space was child-friendly.
9. The breaks were useful for interpersonal interactions and ideations.

The participants were asked how the workshop could be better. The summary of the opinions are as follows:

1. The workshop could be longer. It could be a daylong or week-long workshop.
2. Some participants were more vocal than others. The quiet ones could be encouraged to speak more.

3. Some outdoor activities could be included, along with the overnight stay.
4. The inclusion of people from outside the organization could add different perspectives.
5. Inappropriate behavior and service from the authority of the venue were disturbing.
6. More games could be more fun.

“From the very beginning, we had a clear perception of ‘Meye’s morals. We knew what to do and what not to. But for the first time, after the workshop, we also have a goal (somewhat) to achieve.

“The workshop intrigued me to think in a structured way. The exercises helped to shape and reshape individual ideas.

“This was the best I could hope for. I wish it were for a longer period though. However, this was simply because the time we spent there flew away.

“It encouraged to focus on individual businesses while inspired to think of growing together as a community.

“The workshop shed light on the opportunities and limitations of digital space. That helped the participants to be more forgiving towards themselves and more respectful of their work.

“I was thinking of shutting down my business. The workshop inspired me to start afresh.

“The workshop inspired new ideas that were never thought of before. They inspired the participants to understand where they stood and where they wanted to be and how to attain that goal.

“Absolutely loved the workshop! I learned to find out drawbacks and conflict resolution.

“The workshop did not stop at identifying the challenges. It explored the possible solutions and ended with an unspoken promise from everyone to be a part of that change. That sense of solidarity and commitment gave hope.

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# QUESTIONS

# APPENDIX F: QUESTIONS

## EXPERT INTERVIEWS

*The wording of these questions changed slightly from person to person, but the essential concept remained unchanged. There are two sets of experts I interviewed.*

### **Set 1: Academics and Professionals**

1. How does patriarchy shape women's movement/NGO interventions?
2. Does women's empowerment facilitate gender equity? What about other genders?
3. Are economic advancement and women's empowerment correlated? How?
4. Does space and gender segregation exist in Bangladesh? Explain.
  - a. Why (and how) does physical and social space matter in gender identity? Is it important to study spaces through the lens of gender?
5. Are gender-focused narratives necessary for gender equity? Is it important to enquire into the lived experiences of women? Why/why not?
6. Do women participate in decision/policy making in Bangladesh?
  - a. Does gender play a role in this?
  - b. What is the gender ratio of participation?
  - c. Are there any other parameters other than gender?
7. How do gender dynamics play a role in violence against women in Bangladesh?
  - a. Is there any underlying misogyny/gender bias behind gender disparity and gender-based violence against women?
    - b. Do female/feminist voices facilitate empathy-building? How/Why?
8. What are the barriers to achieving gender equity in the legal system/social practices of Bangladesh?

9. Can digital technology facilitate the physical empowerment of women in attaining plausible changes?
  - a. Can technological advancement eliminate gender barriers?
10. What is the role of digital technologies in women's rights activism in Bangladesh? Explain.
11. Does digital activism have any impact on physical activism and vice versa? If yes or no, explain.
12. Are you interested in adopting digital technologies? Why/why not?

## **Set 2: Originators/Founders of Women-centric Digital Initiatives**

1. Purpose:
  - a. I would like to know more about your project and the rationale for it. What motivated you?
  - b. What are your projects, objectives, or goals?
  - c. Why now? Why this project?
2. Channel/Communication:
  - a. Why digital technology/spaces? Would you be able to do what you are doing without digital technology?
  - b. Who are your beneficiaries? How do you find them? How do they find you? What is your channel of communication?
  - c. How many members do you have? How do they participate in attaining your goals?
  - d. Do you have facilities for anonymous posts? How do you manage the service? What kind of information do women share through these posts?
  - e. Do you reach out to people beyond digital spaces? Why/how?
  - f. With whom do you collaborate (if you do)? Why? How?
  - g. Do you engage with the physical world of activism? Why? How?
  - h. Do you have a connection with NGOs and mainstream models of development?

### 3. Management:

- a. What is your Leadership model? Do you experience hierarchies in the digital space? How do you deal with those hierarchies?
- b. How many individuals actively work in your management/leadership teams? Do you plan on expanding?
- c. What qualifications and experiences come with your team?
- d. Is your team composed of volunteers or paid employees?
- e. How many teams do you have? Do the teams interact with each other? How?
- f. What activities/projects/initiatives have you implemented? What activities/projects/initiatives do you plan on implementing?

### 4. Philosophy:

- a. How do you perceive gender?
- b. How is gender equity factored into your program/projects? Why is it women-specific?
- c. Do you intend to involve other genders? Why? Why not?
- d. Do feminism, patriarchy, and gender discourses play a role in your actions?
- e. What are the core principles of your activities/projects/initiatives?

### 5. Value/Revenue:

- a. What value/revenue do you generate?
- b. How do you generate value/revenue?
- c. How do you measure success?

### 6. Sustainability:

- a. Is the project sustainable? How?
- b. Do you have any financial models/sources of funding?
- c. What are the risks behind your project?
- d. What are the assumptions behind your project?
- e. What are the gaps and challenges? How do you intend to overcome those challenges?

# ONLINE SURVEY

The survey included demographic data and subject-focused questions.

## Demographic Data

1. Age
2. Gender Identity
3. First Language
4. Highest Degree Attained
5. Profession
6. Income level
7. Relationship status
8. Where did you grow up?
9. Current Location (Village/City/State/Country)

## Radio Box:

1. Do you identify as a feminist? (Yes/No/Other)
2. What is your take on Feminism?
  - o Feminism is about equality.
  - o Feminism demands the superiority of women.
  - o Feminists hate men.
  - o We don't need feminism.
  - o Other:
3. What is your take on Patriarchy?
  - o Patriarchy is fine.
  - o Men should rule.
  - o We need a matriarchy.
  - o Women should rule.
  - o We need equality/equity of all genders.
  - o What is patriarchy?
  - o Other:

4. How would you like men to take part in the change?

- Men need to change themselves.
- Men should support women.
- Men should stand against patriarchy.
- Men cannot be a part of this process.
- Other:

5. How many daily hours do you spend online?

6. What do you seek online?

#### Close-ended short questions

7. How old were you when you realized your gender identity?

8. How old were you when you registered any sort of gender discrimination? You may explain it if you want. If you never came across any sort of gender discrimination, write N/A.

#### Array

1. How often do (or did) you face gender discrimination at home/work/public space/digital spaces in Bangladesh? (on a scale of 0 to 5, 0 = never, 5 = always)

2. How easily can you make decisions/choices of your life at home/work/public space/digital spaces? (on a scale of 0 to 5, 0 = not at all, 5 = extremely)

3. How likely it is for you to contact the following people/organizations in case of gender-based violence? (rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, etc.) (never, probably not, maybe, possibly, definitely)

4. What are your thoughts on the following statements? (Agree/Disagree)

5. How important is gender equity to you? (on a scale of 0 to 5, 0 = not at all, 5 = extremely)

6. How many daily hours do you spend online? (on a scale of 0 to 5, 0 = less than an hour, 5 = 5 or more hours)

7. How often do you participate in events you learned about through Facebook? (on a scale of 0 to 5, 0 = never, 5 = always)



## Multiple Choices

1. How do you react to gender Discrimination?
  - a. I file an official complaint.
  - b. I speak up in person.
  - c. I write about it on social media.
  - d. I keep quiet.
  - e. I take part in the protests.
  - f. Other:
2. How do you react to gender-based violence?
  - a. I file an official complaint.
  - b. I speak up in person.
  - c. I write about it on social media.
  - d. I keep quiet.
  - e. I take part in the protests.
  - f. Other:
3. What do you seek online? (entertainment, activism, mental support, employment, etc., based on further research)
4. Why are you in a women-only space like this?
  - a. I hate men. That's why I want to talk to women only.
  - b. I do not feel comfortable to talk in the presence of men. That's why I feel comfortable in this group.
  - c. I feel women should be united. That's why I'm here.
  - d. I don't know of any other places where I can talk freely.
  - e. I like this group. But I'd prefer gender-inclusive spaces that have all the qualities of this group.
  - f. I like to observe what urban women in Bangladesh think.
  - g. I gather ideas for my work/education from here.
  - h. Other:

5. How do you participate in Meye Network?
  - a. Mentally (by supporting the causes)
  - b. Intellectually (I share ideas and insights)
  - c. Physically (I work as a volunteer for Sisterhood/Shondhi/Rangtaa)
  - d. Financially (I am a contributor in Shondhi or a sponsor in an offline event/exhibition/workshop)
  - e. Socially (I go the events like Rangtaa)
  - f. Housekeeping (I volunteer my time in the moderation team)
  - g. I do not participate.
  - h. Other:
6. What is your take on Feminism?
  - a. Feminism is about equality
  - b. Superiority of women
  - c. Hating men
  - d. We don't need feminism
  - e. Other (The participants can add their own explanations if they have any.)
7. What is your take on patriarchy?
  - a. Patriarchy is fine. Men should rule.
  - b. We need a matriarchy. Women should rule.
  - c. We need equality of all genders.
  - d. What is patriarchy?
  - e. Other (The participants can add their own explanations if they have any.)
8. How would you like men to take part in the change?
  - a. Men need to change themselves.
  - b. Men should support women.
  - c. Men should stand against patriarchy.
  - d. Men cannot be a part of this process.
  - e. Other (The participants can add their own explanations if they have any.)

10. How would you like to participate in creating a desired future?
  - a. Intellectually
  - b. Physically
  - c. Financially
  - d. Other (The participants can add their own explanations if they have any.)
11. How do you enjoy participating in a change? (This question is inspired by Basadur profile.)
  - a. Getting things started
  - b. Getting things done
  - c. generating ideas
  - d. turning ideas into practices
  - e. Other (The participants can add their own explanations if they have any.)

Open-ended questions:

1. What is the primary source of your knowledge about gender and feminism?
2. What do you like about digital spaces?
3. What limitations/disadvantages do you experience in digital spaces?
4. What is the best way to reach out to women who are not in digital spaces?
5. What would you do if you could be a man for a month?
6. If you had the superpower to make anything happen, what would you change for women?
7. If you write a book on your life, what would it be called?
8. What would be the book about?
9. Would you like to add anything regarding the future of gender equity in Bangladesh and our/your role in it?

# STORYTELLING

Storytelling is a way of building empathy through lived experiences. I will engage with the participants in one-to-one dialogues inspired by the program called Human Library. <https://humanlibrary.org/about/>.

I treated the participants as books I am interested in reading. I asked them a set of key questions on life, gender, and desired futures of the participants, to guide the conversation. The participants were informed that they were free to choose not to answer the questions and tell the story they choose.

The key questions were:

1. If you write a book on your life, what would it be called?
2. Which chapter of the book would you like to discuss with me?
3. I would like to hear about your favorite childhood memory.
4. How old were you when you realized your gender identity?
5. How would a space of your imagination be?
6. If you had the superpower to make anything happen, what would you change?

*The wording of these questions changed slightly from person to person, but the essential concept will remain unchanged.*

# FOLLOW-UP SURVEY AFTER THE CO-DESIGN WORKSHOP

A follow-up survey asking for feedbacks and afterthoughts of the participants was circulated digitally after the workshop. The survey did not ask for the participants' personal information.

The overarching questions of the follow-up were:

- What did you like about the workshop?
- What could be better in the workshop?
- Did the workshop inspire you to think about the future? How?
- After participating in this workshop, do you have further thoughts on how we can co-create a sustainable gender-inclusive future for ourselves?