Introduction

This book aims to make visible the complicated transactions and uneasy alliances between women activists in Bangladesh and local and international development and human rights organizations. All of these groups participate, sometimes together and sometimes on their own, in the process of improving services for victims of gender violence and transforming structures of gender discrimination that enable and sanction women's oppression. I intend to detail the complex processes of transnational movement building while highlighting diverse forms of local activisms. At the same time I will make visible the intramovement dynamics that lead to conflicts of unequal power relations among differentially located women, what Gayatri Spivak (1999) has called the "intra-cultural differences" in transnational women's networks.

In this chapter, I will introduce some key debates surrounding transnationalism and women's organizing and illustrate the ways in which they help us understand the context, in the global South in general and in Bangladesh in particular, within which development and nongovernmental organization (NGO) initiatives around women's empowerment have been conceptualized. Locating women's transnational organizing in Bangladesh within these debates underscores the value of paying attention to multiple layers of power operating in transnational movements for gender justice.

At the heart of this book lies an investigation of women's organizing against gender violence in Bangladesh. By showcasing the exemplary work of one particular women's group, I discuss both the possibilities of transnational networking and its less discussed effects and consequences within local level organizing. I use Elizabeth Friedman's (1999) concept of "transnationalism reversed," to which I owe the title of this book, to focus the discussion of the consequences of transnationalism to a "local" women's campaign. Friedman argues, and I agree, that while the successes of feminist transnational organizing has received a great deal of attention from scholars of social movements,

not enough has been said about some of its lesser known, and perhaps unintended consequences and challenges to "local" women's movements. By emphasizing intramovement, intraorganizational, intracampaign dynamics, I wish to expand the ongoing feminist analysis of the indeterminate ways that communities of women mobilize against gender inequality. Specifically, I am interested in how and whether transnational praxis of gender violence advocacy articulates with local feminist responses.

Critical Feminist Perspectives on NGOs, Development, and Nation-Building in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has been featured prominently in scholarly discussions of the growth and role of NGOs in the 1980s and 1990s. Not only is it home to some of the world's largest NGOs, but these organizations have played a vibrant role in social and political mobilization in the country. In addition to providing services like credit, health care, and education, the NGO community has also played a significant role in democratic nation-building, alongside the government. These multifaceted roles have been likened to those of a social movement, and NGOs, like social movements, have historically drawn participants from all walks of life and spanning all social classes, including the urban elite, leftist intelligentsia, rural elite, and the poor.

The rise of NGOs and their impact in the global South have not gone without criticism, however. Broadly, these critiques and debates can be categorized in three camps. The first recognizes the critical role of NGOs, especially in the context of weak states failing to protect and provide for their citizens. The second sees NGOs as agents of neoliberal development implementing new forms of imperialism that help maintain a chain of dependency linking transnational corporations, states, donors, and, at the lowest end, the "target population" of development initiatives. In this vein, scholars Lamia Karim (2004) and Dina Siddiqi (2006) both see NGOs as facilitating the global capitalist reach into the private lives of citizens, particularly the poor, who are brought into the chain as clients, rendering them vulnerable to forces of modernization, patriarchies, and cultural and economic globalization. A third and more nuanced critique, within which I wish to situate my own work, emphasizes the complex and often contradictory roles that NGOs play, and the multifaceted relations they foster with states, donors, and clients. I believe this third approach is more useful and even honest in illuminating the very difficult terrain of doing feminist work in a postcolonial context, given the multiple challenges of globalization, neoliberalism, and patriarchy.

It is true that NGOs have been and still are central to nation-building in Bangladesh, both as service providers and as vehicles for progressive organizing, often challenging government and corporate top-down approaches to development. It is also true that they are tied to colonialist discourses of development and donor-driven neocolonial "empowerment" projects for the poor in the third world. Such discourses perpetuate dependency on "aid," prioritize external agendas over locally based ones, and weaken and co-opt locally directed vision and capacity. Some scholars have characterized the post-1980s NGO boom as the "rise of a new managerialism" through which neoliberal governments, in collaboration with international development aid and policy strategists, have claimed to enhance efficiency by cutting public sector services, parceling them off to private sector companies, and deploying corporate management techniques (Townsend and Townsend, 2004). This type of development assistance, incorporated into NGO agendas, focuses more on making societies governable rather than meeting the needs of local populations. These strategies, suggest Townsend and Townsend, have made NGOs suspect as "guns for hire" in furthering corporate goals, enculturating a climate of gate keeping through monitoring and evaluation schemes that make NGO staffs more accountable to the donors than to their clients. However, a concurrently flourishing rhetoric of "partnership and participation" gives the illusion of equity in the industry and muddies the underlying hierarchical management structure. In this system, bigger NGOs often became the parent organization funding and managing smaller ones.

Rather than encouraging accountability toward clients, rigorous monitoring mechanisms tend to protect donors from public scrutiny. Staffs are trained to prioritize meeting the goals of the NGO, and to acquire technical skills like fluency in English language and drafting reports according to certain formats, rather than to adapt the organization's style to locally based needs. Academic research is commissioned through development organizations and presented in these preformatted styles that are absorbed by the NGOs to legitimize their own existence instead of producing knowledge accessible and useful for broader publics. These reports are rarely disseminated in the form of academic books and journal articles but are often shelved in the libraries of donor agencies to be presented and discussed in international conferences as country case studies. What is more, high-level NGO staffs are often criticized for drawing corporate salaries, driving expensive cars, working in air-conditioned offices, and taking frequent foreign trips, all of which add to the distance from the clients whose needs they are apparently serving.

It would be a mistake, however, either to characterize NGOs as a monolithic structure or to delink a critique of them from postcolonial

development processes. Obioma Nnamaeka (2004) has discussed how colonialism has shaped particular forms of "underdevelopment" and imprinted certain legacies and distinctive frameworks in which social movements and civil society organizations are likely to grow in postcolonial contexts. Racist, classist, and patriarchal theories of development and empowerment tend to recast issues of freedom, rights, and justice in the global South into normative economistic and technical language, and NGOs can be seen as sharing in such colonial legacies. Although NGOs in Bangladesh operate within an asymmetrical terrain of power, where any space to organize autonomously is seriously compromised by their dependency on multiple global forces, individuals who work in them come with heterogeneous backgrounds and motivations. Even as these individuals work for organizations that arguably perpetuate neocolonial attitudes and policies, some are able to push for creative transformations, however limited, within them. Further, the vibrant NGO sector in Bangladesh draws individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, identities, and skills. For instance, the NGO sector, aside from providing much-needed services for the poor, has also created a class of middle-ranking jobs. Women in particular, influenced as they may be by the modernist ideals of empowering and uplifting the poor, have found in NGOs desirable alternative avenues for employment.

Women's organizations, which have simultaneously benefited from and transformed the proliferating NGO sector in Bangladesh, have faced critiques similar to the ones stated above in relation to NGOs in general. While not all women's organizations are NGOs, and women mobilize against gender oppression and injustice in infinite number of ways and venues, in this book, I am interested in emphasizing the globalization and "NGOization" of social movements and the particular consequences to women's transnational organizing in Bangladesh. Even those organizations, which are not NGOs, and have worked to protect and further women's rights both before and after the "NGO boom in feminism," function within a landscape in which their activities are inextricably entangled within the NGO culture of women's development.[1] Rather than assuming that women's organizing is simply affected and impacted by NGOization, however, I seek to highlight how women actively shape the dynamic terrain of transnationalism.

While I will further elaborate on this point in chapter 5, here, however, I want to draw attention to how the national women's movement in Bangladesh, while implicated within the NGOization of social movements, and thus the national and global neoliberalisms that characterize this process, nevertheless still performs crucial movement activity within that context.

Sohela Nazneen and Maheen Sultan (2009) have argued that women's organizations are unevenly impacted by the NGOization process in Bangladesh, in that some national-level organizations—including Naripokkho—are more successful in maintaining autonomy and a feminist agenda, unlike smaller ones that are more susceptible to be eclipsed by neoliberalism. While this is an important distinction, it is nevertheless true that women's transnational organizing is inextricably woven into the processes of NGOization. At the same time, here, I want to draw attention to the unequal relations between the urban, elite women who run the NGOs, and the clients, women from rural and poor backgrounds, which have been the topic of much scholarly discussion.[2] Likewise, when national urban elite groups participate in transnational feminist networks, power relations between them and their Northern counterparts are vastly unequal. Although women's NGOs are doing significant work, it is nonetheless important to recognize that Northern and middle-class feminist ideology and practices can limit democratic feminist organizing on multiple scales.

Feminists in Bangladesh largely work within the constraints of what Lamia Karim (2004) has called the "NGO paradigm," with its links to the government, donors, and INGOs. These linkages shape the kinds of conversations that can emerge in public and inhibit rigorous critiques of western and elite development ideology and practices. Further, they hinder grassroots feminist organizing and limit the scale of independent social development work done outside of NGOs. The NGO linkages to international institutions do open up possibilities for new kinds of alliances, but they simultaneously curtail the flourishing of perhaps more organic and radical ones. Scholarly critiques of local NGOs, therefore, must be cognizant of this structural dependence and the fact that powerful international NGOs most often are not affected by criticism; whereas, smaller local organizations can be hurt by them. Accountability in this chain of dependent organizations tends to run vertically upward, but not the other way around.

This kind of dependence represented by the relationship between local and international organizations hinders solidarity among differentially positioned women in the dependency chain. Yet just as women's NGOs themselves are part of a transnational dependency chain, they do offer a venue for feminist organizing that is also transnational. It is worth investigating whether the dynamics within and between NGOs will consolidate and/or weaken the power of the global, national, and local elite. As will become clear in upcoming chapters, resistance to such global power structures can take manifold and unexpected shape and form, spanning demands on the

state, community-based and/or NGO organizing, social movements, cross-border alliances, and everyday survival strategies. An important question this book will engage with is How will feminists be able to manipulate the potentially resistant space of the NGO, given that their political strategies within NGOs are limited by NGO dependency on the very "global feminist" structures local feminists are trying to resist?

Transnational Feminist Frameworks

My work builds on a substantial legacy of feminist scholarship on cross-cultural dynamics of women's movements. The 1990s in particular marked the ascendance of transnational feminist activism by riding on the momentum of two decades of United Nations conferences for women. Feminists specifically targeted international policy arenas and intergovernmental organizations to mobilize concerns about gender in national and local contexts. Networking and advocacy on a global scale enabled locally based activists to mobilize strong transnational collaborations in order to pressure the recalcitrant state policy apparatus to engender important policy changes both nationally and globally. Sonia Alvarez (2000) defines this kind of transnationalization of women's organizing as "local movement actors' deployment of discursive frames and organizational and political practices that are inspired, (re)affirmed, or reinforced, though not necessarily caused, by their engagement with other actors beyond national borders. This happens through a wide range of transnational contacts, discussion, transactions, and networks, both virtual and 'real'" (p. 32). Thus, local and transnational forces shaping women's movement dynamics are seen by Alvarez as mutually constitutive and inextricably intertwined analytically. For example, the U.N. summits and NGO participation engendered conversations about gender violence and women's human rights constructed through transnational negotiations.

However, Jacqui Alexander (2005) cautions against a relativist reading of the transnational, which can obscure the power of Northern constituencies over their Southern counterparts, and points to how national and transnational processes might be mutually constitutive but are nevertheless imbricated in asymmetrical power relations (p. 183). It is this understanding of transnationalization, coupled with Chandra Mohanty's (2003), in which she emphasizes the interconnectedness of women's struggles, histories, and experiences across communities in cross-border organizing, that I find most useful for my work.

It is important to note here that analytically this transnational feminist analysis is in contradistinction to *global feminism*, which emphasizes a unidirectional North-to-South flow of ideas, resources, and mobilization. A *transnational feminist* praxis, as I use the term, refers to women's organizing that recognizes, in theory and in practice, the multilayered power relations shaping women's struggles in North-South as well as South-South contexts. Again, this is decidedly different from usages of the term *global feminism*, which tends to flatten the diversity of women's agency and positionality in presenting a universalized western model of women's liberation based on individuality and modernity (Grewal and Kaplan 1994). Rather, Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty (1997), urge an analysis that intertwines "the global and the local" and choose the term *transnational* as a corrective to the notion of "global sisterhood," which they find as resurrecting the "center/periphery" or "first-world/Third-World model" of feminist organizing (p. xviii). The term *transnational*, although mindful of continued significance of national boundaries, is also different from the term *international*, which tends to prioritize discrete national borders.

In their recent anthology, *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*, Amanda Swarr and Richa Nagar (2010) consult what are now considered two canonical transnational feminist texts of the 1990s, *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, and *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* by Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, as they strive for their own conceptualization of the term. At the risk of capturing briefly an extensive discussion on the points of convergence and divergence between these texts, and to avoid rehashing the same debates eloquently unfolded by Swarr and Nagar, suffice it to say here that key to the first text (assert Swarr and Nagar) is an attempt to decenter feminism from its essentializing Northern tendency toward more heterogenous formations. Central to the second is an approach to feminism that is more relational, comparative, and historical. While acknowledging the importance of both, Swarr and Nagar appear to be drawn to Alexander and Mohanty's allegiance to cross-border feminist praxis, collaboration, and activism, which "move[s] through and beyond the global/local dichotomy" (p. 10). Further, it is these authors' resolute reminder of accountability to feminist communities in struggle that most animates my own vision of transnational feminist praxis. Like Swarr and Nagar, I too intend to blur the distinctions between theory/method, individually/collaboratively produced knowledge, and academia/activism with a commitment to "combine struggles for sociopolitical justice with feminist research

methodologies, thereby extending the meanings and scope of transnational feminist theory and practice" (p. 13).

The discussion of "local" women's organizing in my work emphasizes the variety of ways in which communities of women mobilize against diverse forms of oppression against a background of the intramovement, intraorganizational, and intracampaign dynamics across borders. Using a transnational feminist analysis thus enables me to mount a critique that is contingent and multifaceted and that strives toward shifting the discourse of global feminism away from its universalistic tendency.

While the transnationalization of women's organizing has certainly produced desirable results of many kinds, particularly in policy advocacy, scholars have also pointed to less celebratory ramifications, which as mentioned earlier, Elizabeth Friedman (1999) calls "transnationalism reversed"—a concept to which this book owes its title. This lesser discussed "flip side" of the globalization of women's movements has engendered disparate and differentiated consequences for movement dynamics and practices. Even as they enable crucial cross-border collaborations, intramovement tensions also generate contradictory consequences within such collaborations. For instance, new kinds of divisions and hierarchical relationships have emerged within feminist organizations at the same time that these have tended to experience growth. Hence, it is necessary to expand our theoretical understanding of transnational organizing and illuminate the inter- as well as intramovement tensions, in an attempt to imagine more equitable and just feminist alliances across borders of nation, class, and race.

In this book I map the trajectory of the Bangladeshi women's campaign against acid violence in the mid-1990s and beyond. The transnational organizing of Naripokkho, a Dhaka-based women's advocacy organization, led to the successful creation of a donor-funded umbrella organization for providing comprehensive care to survivors of acid attacks. However, the creation of this organization led to several effects unintended by the campaign: Naripokkho's own diminished engagement with the campaign, the co-optation of the women activists' survivor-centered strategies by the newly created institution, the gradual consolidation of a neoliberal agenda by the newly established Acid Survivors Foundation programs, the estrangement of key activists from the campaign, and the (re)affirmation of a progress narrative within which the stories of survivors were told by various actors. This book highlights the complexities, contradictions, and paradoxes of diverse women's organizing that are often left out of homogenizing representations of women's movements and transnational alliances.

A Note on Theory and Method

In the tradition of Nagar and Swarr's articulation of transnational feminist praxis, this volume is invested in a politics that combines struggles for social justice with feminist epistemology in the interest of expanding conversations about cross-border solidarity and collaboration. These writers state unequivocally that all academic production is necessarily collaborative, even if the author's voice is privileged, and often celebrated, as the sole narrator. Even though academic knowledge is essentially created and informed by multiple engagements with communities—students, colleagues, peers, research collaborators, activist circles—the institution of academia recognizes the "solo feminist," thereby furthering the academic/activist, theory/method, individual/collaborative divides (Pratt et al., 2010, p. 84).

Using transnational feminism as the grounding for its intellectual and political endeavor, this book adheres to a lens and set of practices that pay attention to various overlapping systems of power such as capitalist development, globalization, imperialism, and patriarchy. It also looks at the ways in which these systems rearrange colonial and neocolonial power relations in different locations, and how these processes engender and are influenced by complex and contradictory modes of subjectivities and agency. A transnational analysis emphasizes reflexive action and critique while consciously illuminating their temporal and spatial constitutions (Swarr and Nagar, 2010, pp. 3–5). Further, moving away from easy imaginings of collaboration and solidarity characterizing much of 1990s "global feminism," this volume emphasizes the contradictory and shifting ways in which collaborations take shape, often emerging only out of conflict and negotiations. As this research shows, transnational feminism cannot be assumed a priori but is always contingent, shaped by its specific historical and institutional realities.

In this study, I rely heavily on the ethnographic method of participant observation, used here in conjunction with a second valuable method, narrative interpretation. To that end, in addition to participant observation, I have employed other written sources such as archives; news reports; pamphlets; statistical data collected by the state, national NGOs, and international agencies; audiovisual materials; e-mail correspondences; life narratives; and secondary literature generated by scholars. Like Anthropologist Akhil Gupta (1998), I firmly believe that "the claims made in an ethnography and the presentation of the ethnographer's knowledge—are shaped not only by the kind of data collected but also the manner in which those data were obtained" (p. 29). Like him, I am concerned with "how the [researcher] is positioned

within the text, questions of polyvocality, the representation of respondents' voices, problems of translation, the 'staging' of dialogic encounters, concerns about authorship, the use of photographs and audiovisual techniques, and the [researcher's] responsibility" to both their respondents and to the research community as a whole (p. 29). While I cannot elaborate on each issue here, in the following chapters I will address some of my key methodological choices. I hope that in keeping with the tradition of a feminist ethnography in terms of the representation of research findings within the text and the choices I make in the analysis, I can encourage active and ongoing reinterpretation from the readers, including those who are the subjects of the research. Moreover, I would like to employ Gupta's idea of resisting "analytic closure," and thereby to make the text "vulnerable" to reinterpretation, reanalysis, and rethinking, attributes he lists as the essential qualities of a sound ethnography (p. 30).

Gender violence in general, and acid attacks against women in particular, has a longer genealogy in Bangladesh and in the surrounding region than I am able to impart here. It is my purpose to trace the work of women activists in Bangladesh specifically in the mid-1990s and later. I focus on these years in part because of the strategic negotiations of that time period that were carried out by feminists in Bangladesh with key institutions transnationally, in order to create a public discourse on acid violence, and thus to develop a socially recognized campaign by and for Bangladeshi women. At the same time, my choice is shaped by my own involvement with the campaign in three roles over the years: that of a journalist, a U.N. consultant, and an independent researcher, respectively. My analysis is based on interactive reflections on the multiphased and multisited trajectory of the campaign, with the aim to broaden the discussion of gender violence to a global human rights arena. The roles I occupied allowed me an "insider's" perspective of the day-to-day workings of a women's advocacy group, as well as other key actors such as international NGOs and state institutions. It is important to note, however, that gathering information through these intimate relationships was a potentially risky endeavor because traditional ethnographic research calls for the researcher to maintain some level of an "outsider" status to preserve analytic integrity. The paradox whereby a feminist researcher simultaneously is an insider/outsider in the process of gathering information and crafting a research project, arguably in collaboration with the research subjects is, I believe, a valuable contribution to the feminist ethnographic approach. On the one hand, it might be considered risky to rely on the subjective reflections of interlocutors with whom I have a long-term association as an ally. However, one may also argue that all knowledge is subjective and collaborative

despite academic and institutional structures that claim otherwise. On the other hand, giving primacy to the multiple and disparate voices, strategies, experiences, and narratives of the antiviolence campaign woven together to be read as one of the many contesting stories posed in this study complicates our understanding of diverse women's activism. Akhil Gupta posits that juxtaposing multiple discourses, and not attempting to provide a unified and coherent narrative out of disagreements and contestations are actually commensurable with the argument made in a text that strives to enhance understanding of a postcolonial moment.

Jayati Lal's (1996) discussion of the "insider/outsider" dynamic and dilemma in feminist ethnographic research is enormously helpful. Instead of taking either position as a given, she argues that these identities are actively constructed and given meaning in the practice of research. For instance, I may be an insider to Bangladesh but my "return home" after years of graduate school training in North America also makes me an outsider who has to negotiate a renewed sense of belonging in a location that is now unfamiliar. Lal, who is an Indian national, writes about her own experience of doing fieldwork in Delhi as a PhD student from a North American university: "More important than a sameness that might be assumed in my possible identity as an insider are the power differentials and class inequities that divide those insiders and the divisions between the researched and researcher that are created by the very act of observation" (p. 193).

In the long course of my research, each instance of my engagement with activists and staff at Naripokkho, survivors of acid violence, and the various actors in the campaign like state representatives, U.N. officials, journalists, international human rights advocates, and so on was constituted through a different set of power relations and presumptions on all sides, based on gender, nationality, class, age, and educational and professional status. For instance, at the event honoring ABC producers at the Yale Club, I was at once an insider to Bina's circle of friends from Bangladesh, and therefore a witness to the trajectory of her arrival in the United States, and at the same time an outsider to her newer circle of American patrons, to whom I was a "native informant" from which to seek affirmation for their progress narrative. I am also reminded here of the numerous occasions in the mid- to late 1990s when Bina and other survivors of acid violence working and volunteering for the Naripokkho campaign led me to the homes of young women survivors, many of whom lived outside of Dhaka city in rural Bangladesh, and to the Burns Unit at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH), for research purposes. In these very different settings, my upper-middle-class,

urban background, less than perfect Bangla, and status as U.N. consultant or PhD candidate in elite western institutions, undoubtedly demarcated the boundaries of the participation and collaboration.

One particular encounter with the director of a major NGO providing affordable health care to the poor, drove home this point. Early in my involvement with Naripokkho, when I was working as a journalist for a national English-language daily newspaper, I was invited to the home of this man, who was collaborating closely with Naripokkho organizers, to discuss putting together a project proposal for donor agencies to fund a burn unit at the NGO he directed. Because of time constraints, as I had to leave Bangladesh to start my PhD program in the United States, I was unable to collaborate on this project. A year later, when I again visited the same director, this time in his office, to solicit some information in my role as a development consultant for UNICEF, he refused to have a conversation with me and asked that I leave his office on the grounds that his relationship to the donor agency I was representing was conflicted. He spoke to me, with palpable contempt, of my own allegiance to this donor agency and the material benefits of my position there—in stark contrast to my previous position in a local newspaper. Where I was once considered an "insider" to the campaign, because I had been recruited to write for it, here I was considered someone who had "defected" for material gain. What complicates this picture even more is that it was on the recommendation of Naripokkho activists that UNICEF had hired me as the consultant on the acid violence project—because the feminist group preferred an "insider" from the campaign for this work. Such encounters seem to suggest that the insider/outsider dichotomy in research is less about fixed identities and more about critical and reflective positionings.

With regard to another complicated insider/outsider moment, I am reminded of the number of times I sat patiently at government representatives' offices—always in air-conditioned waiting rooms as opposed to the stuffy corridors with other visitors, no doubt because of my class status. At the same time, my age and gender did not provide me with the stamp of importance required to be seen immediately by these government officers. Additionally, I was always expected to answer questions like "What is your father's name," and "What does your father do?" by way of social screening before any information would be imparted to me.

Another revealing research moment was the day I arrived at the Naripokkho office to meet Bina on our way to DMCH in a rickshaw as opposed to a car, my usual mode of transportation. (The driver was sick and

had taken the day off.) As Bina climbed onto the rickshaw with me, she said with genuine concern, "Elora *khalamoni*, you should be careful doing this work. I am sure people are watching you" ("*shabdhan e cholo, shob lok jon dekche*"). This remark clearly alluded to my class status and the fact that norms of middle-class femininity required that I not be "seen" so publicly—in a rickshaw without the protection of the car—associated with a campaign perceived to be risky for young women. The grand gestures of hospitality that followed every visit I made with survivors and their families made me internally cringe with embarrassment—whether offering me the best chair in the room, ordering tea and snacks from the hospital cafeteria, or laying out a multicourse meal on the dining table and sending to the corner store for Coca-Cola and Fanta (to appease my ostensibly "foreign" taste). I was reminded time and again of the inevitably unequal and even exploitative relationship between researcher and the subjects of research.

There is a fine line in ethnographic research, particularly by researchers from the North in research settings in the South, between academic feminist knowledge production and academic feminist colonization. I take my cue from Jayati Lal, who refers to Michelle Fine's urging feminist researchers to persistently " 'examine the hyphen at which Self-Other join in the politics of everyday life,' and to work against inscribing the Other" (quoted in Lal, 1996, p. 200). Moreover, the mediated relations circumscribing research processes, and the productive engagements resultant in the hyphens are fraught with questions of accountability and responsibility.

Swarr and Nagar (2010) rearticulate questions regarding accountability posed by Peake and de Souza, asking, "What do women in the South—placed in different points in organizational hierarchies—stand to gain and lose from transnational feminist exchanges? And how much of themselves are northern-based feminist academics willing to put on the line, given that they work in institutions that reward obedience and status quo, and that widely discourage the convergence of action and research?" (p. 212). In order to better articulate my own relationship to these questions, it is important to note my engagement with the anti–acid violence campaign in its various stages and consequently the shifting communities to whom I am accountable.

When I first began writing about this topic in the mid-1990s, it was in my role as a journalist-cum-ally of the Naripokkho campaign. The audience was the general public as well as the specific communities that the activists wanted to mobilize. The purpose was to raise awareness, and the process was transparent in the sense that each piece was reviewed by Naripokkho activists before publication. These pieces were circulated by the organization

in various registers in which they organized nationally and globally. Second, as a research consultant for UNICEF, the next phase of writing and research involved producing and packaging knowledge in a format comprehensible to funders, which often involved the translation of activists' and survivors' experiences and ground realities into the global logic of development and humanitarian interventions seeking tangible results. In my current role, as a feminist researcher located in the northern academy, I am cognizant of institutional expectations around producing knowledge that will benefit my ascendance in the academy (tangibles like book, recognition, tenure, and promotion), as well as of my desire to produce knowledge that is meaning-ful for the various communities—collaborators in struggle who informed the research (outcomes here are less quantifiable).

All of these relations—both within and outside of the academy—are of course fraught. For instance, in my first year on the tenure track I was told by a senior colleague in the department that engaging in collaborative research and coauthored manuscripts would be risky for my tenure because the academy preferred single-authored projects. On the other hand, in sharing drafts of the manuscript with Naripokkho activists prior to publication, I have been cautioned about revealing too much or too little, waiting for the right moment to minimize risk and to maximize impact, misrepresenting internal organizational dynamics, and taking my analysis too far, thus bordering on a betrayal of the very community that this work is meant to advocate for. My shifting insider/outsider positions have been called into question repeatedly as I have navigated the tricky waters of transnational praxis. As Geraldine Pratt et al. (2010) show, it might become necessary at certain points of col-laborations not to collapse the roles of the academic and the activist and to maintain a strategic distance (pp. 65–71). I say this not to take analytic license to position myself as the "solo feminist" author, but to simply point out that there are instances in collaborative research when our (feminist academics) analysis might be at odds with that of our (activist) collaborators. It is only through rigorous and persistent reflexive engagements in those paradoxical moments—and emphasizing the juxtaposition of narratives that Gupta argues is key to texts striving to represent the postcolonial condition—that we can tease out the contradictions inherent in transnational praxis.

As the following chapters will show, multiple community collaborators compel multiple and tiered allegiances and accountability. For example, as the campaign evolved and expanded, its many constituencies did not always exist in harmonious relationships with one another, and their agendas were not compatible. As a researcher, it becomes necessary to carefully track my

shifting locations and relationships as they unfolded with respect to each constituency over time. In this regard, I realize that critiquing large and powerful international donor organizations and western-based media networks is less risky and sometimes more necessary than critiquing smaller NGOs and community-based organizations, and individual movement actors. After all, the communities we engage in research with are not homogenous, and they do not necessarily have singular interests. I have found that narrative analysis is valuable in addressing this question of critiquing actors in movements with which one is allied, because it enables emphasizing the multiple agendas and questions of the diverse constituencies of this project, as well as illuminating the competing ways subjects actively shape their "presentations to suit their own agendas of how they wish to be represented" (Lal, 1996, p. 204). Rather than canceling out, prioritizing, or even suppressing competing agendas, narrative analysis enables the weaving of a more nuanced and even politicized telling.

Narrative analysis allows us to question the perceived ineluctable distinction between factual reporting and storytelling by suggesting that facts, like fiction, emerge when researchers and writers interpret and give meaning to them in particular ways. Facts do not exist prior to this meaning-making process involving both the witness and the interpreter of the act. Rather, as Leslie Rebecca Bloom (1995) points out, meaning is constructed in the style of storytelling. This approach is informed by the idea, espoused by Jonathan Potter, Margaret Wetherell, Ros Gill, and Derek Edwards in their article "Discourse: Noun, Verb or Social Practice?" that meanings are created through discourse and not simply reflected by them (Potter et al., 1990). However, people are influenced by dominant narrative themes that allow them to arrange meanings in contextual and perhaps familiar ways. These observations lead researchers to the valuable knowledge that stories are socially constructed and can appear to change along with voices of narrators. Discursive and narrative analyses give me the opportunity to self-consciously construct meanings through my use of narrative lenses, choices of actors, and the selection of when a story begins. In this book, by examining competing narratives of the anti–acid violence campaign (including my own), I make meaning of how these stories are created and re-created over time and with what consequences.

Moreover, feminist narrative analysis makes available to women structures for writing about their multifaceted experiences against the grain of dominant masculinist narratives. Careful reading of women's voices help us examine their roles, choices, and sufferings in a way such that they are able

to assume power rather than be further marginalized. Teresa de Lauretis (1987), using Carolyn Heilbrun's argument, suggests that when women are deprived of narrative frames that allow for complex self-representations, they are deprived of power. By presenting contesting narratives to weave a more complex view of transnational organizing, I want to make visible the agency of diverse women activists in the struggle for representation and subjectivity.

Feminist narrative analysis, by refusing analytic closure, encourages interpreters to constantly reexamine their own conclusions and recognize the instability of authorship. Kathleen Barry (1990) refers to this intersubjectivity in research as an opportunity for researchers to "become interactively involved with the subject through interpretation of meanings" (pp. 77–78). Feminist ethnography in turn takes as its central investigative unit the interactive relationship between the feminist researcher and her respondent as active agents in the process of meaning making, blurring the distinction between theory and method. For this reason, a combination of narrative interpretation and feminist ethnography is fitting as the chosen approach to interweaving theory and method in the act of self-reflexive storytelling. Taking my cue from feminist ethnographer Ruth Behar (1993), I add a cautionary note here as the author of this study: my voice as an interpreter/reader is ultimately privileged, and producing texts out of life stories runs the risk of "colonization of the act of storytelling" by turning each story into a "disposable commodity of information" (pp. 12–13). Here, Shari Stone-Mediatore's (2003) assertion is valuable: narrative analysis opens up the possibility of considering the text not as "objective truth" but rather as "ways of seeing" (p. 38).

Feminist postcolonial theory as a genre is helpful as it explains the myriad influences shaping the subject of one's research and the implications of the investigator's location in the pursuit of and production of knowledge. It has explicated and complicated the symbiotic relationship between the (researcher) self and the (researched) other. The perceived contradictory locations of the "home" and the "field," as well as the legacy of colonialism that implicitly shapes this relationship is marked by the researcher being situated in "the West" and the researched "elsewhere," complicating further the politics of representation in this study (Visweswaran, 1994). My position as an insider/outsider encompasses my roles as journalist, development consultant, activist, and independent researcher spanning Bangladesh and the United States. I hope this work will have meaning for all of the communities from which my understanding has benefited. I also want to point out that in studying transnational feminist organizing, I have followed some participants and interlocutors in multiple sites in Bangladesh and the United States. Hence,

the location of the subjects of research has also been mobile, adding more layers to the spatial and temporal contingencies in a transnational analysis.

One area of postcolonial feminist scholarship and ethnography in particular that is tremendously important for this work has been the explicit theorizing of feminists' relationships to "women," or ways in which women of the global North are discursively constructed as feminists (read: liberated, free, independent) in relation to women from the South (read: oppressed, bound by culture, dependent) (John, 1996). While considerable scholarship exists about the power dynamics between white colonizers and native women, less attention has been directed to the colonial framework shaping women's relationships to one another within national and local spaces, particularly as they manifest through the script of global feminism. Hence, this study extends that conversation to also include the power differentials in such relationships within feminist and women's networks in disparate spatialities.

There is of course a long colonial history, discussed both within and outside feminist scholarship, of representations of third world women's victimization by *their* own patriarchal cultural and religious institutions—and the consequent justified rescue missions and military interventions enacted by forces of the global North (Mohanty, 1991; Mani, 1990; Narayan, 1997; Lazreg, 1994; Trinh, 1989). Feminists have argued that these depictions have acquired a renewed vigor in the post–September 11, 2001 climate of reductionist understandings of women's oppression in the Muslim world (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Razack, 2008). Clearly, these depictions do not tell the whole story, particularly of the forces and policies that originate in the North and maintain the subordinate status of women in these so-called zones of oppression. Moreover, the racialized gender dimension of the rescue narrative—famously described by Gayatri Spivak (1994) as "White men are saving brown women from brown men"—is supported by abundant visual and textual representations in the mainstream media sensationalizing the plight of third world women. This logic becomes ingrained in the psyches of consumers of mainstream media to such a degree that representations like these need no contextualization or explanatory narrative (p. 92). Shahnaz Khan (2008), speaking of Afghan women, likens such images, particularly of the "veiled Muslim woman," to creatures confined in a "public zoo, providing voyeuristic spectacle and affirming splendors and freedoms of a singular Western culture and the misery and oppressive nature of the equally singular Third World/Muslim culture" (pp. 161–62).

Concomitant to the production of the oppressed third world/Muslim woman is the ubiquitous image of the racialized premodern, aggressive, yet

feminized, third world/Muslim man. Sherene Razack (2008) argues that the deployment of allegorical figures of the "dangerous Muslim man," "imperiled Muslim woman," and "civilized European" are the cornerstone of neo-imperial construction of the third world/Muslim Other, in contrast to the "civilized" white nations. Not just a story, these representations serve to provide and legitimize the governing logic and relation of empire (p. 5). The machinery of colonial discourse can achieve these racialized and gendered effects simply through the use of such images and terms like *traditional*, *Muslim*, and *cultural practice*. One of the questions I am interested in exploring in this book is how such transnational productions of gender, and gender violence in particular, do or do not correspond with "local" feminist conceptualizations. In this particular historical moment, feminists must pay attention to the global representations of the Muslim world—of which Bangladesh is a part—and the dominant stories they tend to support or subvert.

The national women's movement in Bangladesh, for historical reasons I elaborate on in chapter 5 of this book, maintains a resolutely secularist position. That is, religion by most advocates of social justice is viewed as a private matter. At the same time, the activists I worked with did not see any contradiction between their faith in Islam and their political struggles for women's emancipation. In my research I rarely encountered activists who would use religion as an explanatory framework for acid violence. If and when the question of religion and violence was broached, activists stated or implied that an authentic understanding of Islam would clarify that gender violence was strictly condemned. However, activists did attribute increased violence against women in part to the "gradual infiltration of fundamentalist and/or reactionary Islam," which they saw as an external threat to the nation. Using religion as an instrument for mobilizing the antiviolence campaign, however, was not commonplace.

In contrast, in the west gender violence in Bangladesh—the third-largest Muslim majority nation—is invariably packaged through an Islamic/culturalist framework (as we will see in the discussion of "Faces of Hope" in chapter 3). The latter, I argue, serves the larger imperial project of empire from which certain variants of feminism make the rescue of Muslim women their own sustaining mission. That is, this same colonial and neo-imperial logic is inherent in global feminism as well as in humanitarian interventions. In attempting to complicate our understanding of feminist struggles, subjectivities, and agency in multiple sites, this work is located in the conjuncture of all of these above-mentioned genres: feminist ethnography, critical ethnography, narrative analysis, feminist postcolonial studies, critical development, and transnational feminist studies.

Chapter Overviews

This book comprises a cluster of five essays tied together by the common thread of women's transnational organizing around gender violence. Together, these pieces aim to contribute to new theoretical understandings of the historically asymmetrical planes constituting uneven relations of power within women's movements. Chapter 1, "Feminist Negotiations: Contesting Narratives of the Campaign Against Acid Violence in Bangladesh," traces and analyzes the complex trajectory of the anti–acid violence campaign in Bangladesh. I demystify the claim that men's acid throwing against women and girls is an "aberrant cultural practice," showing that this phenomenon needs to be understood within broader systems of gender inequality and intersecting forces of globalization and socioeconomic shifts in the region.

The chapter traces the development of the antiviolence campaign by feminists, beginning with the efforts of the women's advocacy group called Naripokkho to turn incidents of acid throwing against women and girls in Bangladesh into a concerted public campaign, by mobilizing key players at the national and international levels and making strategic alliances with them. I show that the expansion of the campaign over time as a result of the diversification of actors involved at both the national and international levels has not only generated institutional support to survivors of acid attacks but has also had some unintended consequences. The new services, albeit having greater reach, espouse an individualistic neoliberal strategy without adequate attention to systemic change. This is a story of the challenges of women's organizing and its negotiations with transnational politics and subsequent successes and failures.

Chapter 2, "Local Realities of Acid Violence in Bangladesh," showcases the story of Nurun Nahar, a survivor of acid violence in Bangladesh, and to lesser degree Bina Akhter, in order to demonstrate that despite protective measures, state, medical, and legal institutions continually fail to respond adequately to violence against women and deny women rights to state protection, which are supposedly guaranteed by law. The failure of state institutions to ensure appropriate care has been somewhat mitigated, I argue, by NGOs, particularly women's groups, which are nevertheless heavily constrained due to the volume of demand, scarcity of resources, and a funding culture inhibiting horizontal collaborations among women's groups. This chapter emphasizes the local contexts within which women activists operate, including patriarchal and intransigent social and cultural systems. Additionally, it reflects on how women's NGOs have created alternative strategies and visions for victimized

women's recovery and empowerment in the absence of a strong state and within dominant cultural, economic, and political structures.

Chapter 3, "From Dhaka to Cincinnati: Charting Transnational Narratives of Trauma, Victimization, and Survival," spells out the implications for women's movements of the growing trend toward transnational forms of organizing. By juxtaposing multiple narratives of the anti–acid violence campaign by international actors, survivors, and local women activists, I aim to weave together a more complex understanding of transnational feminist praxis and women's subjectivities. The chapter highlights the story of Bina Akhter, who has been called alternatively the "star of the acid campaign" and "self-serving" by Naripokkho activists, and an "angel of mercy" in the U.S.-based ABC television network's "Faces of Hope" report. Through the use of Bina's story, I urge a move beyond dualistic framings of women's experiences of violence that position them as "good victims" or "bad victims." I challenge the terms "victims" or "survivors," arguing for a more liberatory epistemology that allows for dynamism, fluidity, and most importantly narrative agency. I also discuss the fallout that occurred in the anti–acid violence movement when some of the survivors chose to remain in the United States, violating the terms of the contract that allowed them to enter the country for reconstructive surgery. I argue that this controversy must be understood not only as an instance of intramovement differences among individuals, but also as a demonstration of the global structural inequality that shapes the trajectories of such movements.

Chapter 4, "Feminism and Its Other: Representing the 'New Woman' of Bangladesh," explores the use of entertainment-education media by women activists as a mobilizing tool. Analyzing the 2006 telefilm, *Ayna (The Mirror)*, which takes up the topic of acid violence, I look at the contemporary production and representation of the "New Woman" in Bangladesh in the context of globalization and development and in contrast to an earlier context of anticolonialist and nationalist struggles. Deploying film as a vehicle for education-entertainment, the director of *Ayna* provokes an important conversation about human rights advocacy, transnational feminist alliances, women's subjectivities, victimization, and agency. At the same time, a textual reading of the film, in conjunction with ethnographic study of women's activism in Bangladesh, allows for a juxtaposition of the neoliberal underpinning of the film's representations of development and women's empowerment with the lived experiences of women participating in and/or benefiting from such "humanitarian interventions."

Finally, chapter 5, "Transnational Challenges: Engaging Religion, Development, and Women's Organizing in Bangladesh," broadens the discussion of transnational feminist praxis beyond the Naripokkho campaign and locates women's activism in Bangladesh within the intersecting forces of rising religious extremism, state politics, and global capitalist development. This chapter explores the question of whether and how the transnational production of violence against women in a "Muslim nation" articulates with "local" feminist responses. In particular, I point out, the national women's movement in Bangladesh, historically aligned and intertwined with the secular nationalist struggle for liberation, followed by the state- and donor-driven neoliberal development agenda, has positioned itself in opposition to Islamist politics. This nationalist-secularist stance, in opposition to an Islamist one, however, has not adequately addressed the intersections of gender and religion in the nationalist and civil society politics in a transnational age. Invoking the secular-nationalist struggle and its cross-class alliances as the impetus for democratic nation building in the current political climate, where Islamist politics are perceived as a unilateral threat, I argue, can be limiting in vision and reach.

The landscape of Bangladeshi politics has shifted such that divisions among the nationalists, feminists, secularists, and Islamists are no longer clear-cut, if they ever were. For example, violence against women is frequently attributed by local and global media and secular and feminist NGOs to a "backlash against modernity" by Islamist groups. Deeper analysis reveals the political, social, and economic forces leading to gendered violence and encourages a more nuanced analysis of the proliferation and diversification of Islamist politics in the region and the exigencies shaping feminist politics.

This introspective and self-reflexive examination of the power relations among and within women's groups encourages feminists to strive for a broader praxis that challenges colonialist narratives of women's empowerment in the global South. By shedding light on the complexity of local women's organizing and their negotiations with transnational politics, I show the multiple layers and linkages involved in feminist struggles. In so doing, I want to challenge the assumptions made in universalizing discourses of women's oppression and activism, and highlight the unexpected and even unlikely alliances and trajectories that transnational feminist projects may engender.