

Women's Rights and Activism in Post-July 2024 Bangladesh

Amrit Tamber and Danielle Castano

Bangladesh Campaign Team – April 5th, 2025



Image Source: Women Protesting in Cumilla, Chittagong Division, Bangladesh

©Mehedi Hasan/Pexels, Aug 5, 2024 via

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/we-got-our-pride-27604520/>

C O N T E N T S

List Of Abbreviations	3
Introduction	4
1. From Genocide to Gendered Resistance - A Timeline of Women's Political Activism and Its Transformation in Bangladesh (1971–2024)	5
1.1. 1971 - Femicide, Rape, and the Foundations of Structural Silence	5
1.2. 1980s-2010s - Resurfacing Memories and Intergenerational Trauma	7
1.3. 2024 - Revolutionary Activism and the Re-Emergence of Women's Protest	9
1.4. Timeline Conclusion	12
2. Protests	12
2.1. The Role of Women	13
3. What's Come Out of the Protests – Gendered Consequences in the Aftermath of July 2024	14
3.1. From Frontlines to Forgotten - The Feminist Disappearance	14
3.2. Reprisals, Retreat, and the Politics of Fear	16
3.3. Legal Reform or Feminist Co-optation?	17
3.4. The New Landscape of Educational Repression	19
3.5. Global Applause, Local Absence	20
3.6. Feminist Memory-Making and Future Strategy	21
3.7. Feminist Resistance Conclusion	22
4. Future Policy Implications	22
4.1. The Role of NGOs in Bangladesh	23
4.2. The Role of the Interim Government	23
Conclusion	24
References	27

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Awami League	AL
Bangladesh Chhatra League	BCL
Bangladesh Nationalist Party	BNP
Deutsche Welle	DW
European Union	EU
Gender based violence	GBV
Ministry of Women and Children Affairs	MoWCA
Non-governmental organisation	NGO
United Nations	UN

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is currently undergoing a political and societal transformation. The country was formed in 1971 after a brutal genocide launched by the Pakistani military. The genocide that began on March 25th, 1971, resulted in the deaths of between 300,000 and three million people (Zakaria, 2019). Women and girls were also victims of violence and sexual assault with some experts estimating that between 200,000 and 400,000 were raped during the genocide (Begum, 2023). Similar to the partition of India, sexual violence was used as a military tactic. The stories of these women and girls remain largely unknown due to the stigma regarding sexual violence. Furthermore, the lack of recognition of the genocide allows for impunity of these crimes to continue. The effects of the genocide are still felt today in Bangladesh, made evident by the recent protests that gripped the country.

In July 2024, university students participated in peaceful demonstrations with women at the forefront, organising events. The protests were in response to the reinstatement of a job quota that reserved government positions for the descendants of freedom fighters who fought in the 1971 War of Independence. The protests quickly became violent, resulting in the deaths of thousands of people after the government used excessive and lethal force. The protests resulted in the toppling of Sheikh Hasina, who served as Prime Minister in Bangladesh for over a decade. What started as protests against the reinstatement of the job quota system soon turned into calls for the current government to step down from their positions.

This report explores women's rights and activism in Bangladesh after the student protests in July 2024. However, to understand the current fight for women's rights and equality, we need to look at events of the past. These events provide insight as to where Bangladesh currently stands on the topics of gender equality, women in leadership roles, and the economic empowerment of women. This report discusses the femicide and violence against women during the 1971 genocide, gender inequality in Bangladesh, the role of women during the protests in July 2024, the aftermath of the protests, and the future of women's rights and activism in Bangladesh. Despite women and girls being at the forefront of the protests in July, they have been sidelined since the new interim government took power.

The resignation of Hasina, who was the longest-serving female prime minister, puts women's rights and women's roles in leadership in a precarious position. However, with the toppling of the previous government, now is the time for women in Bangladesh to demand that women have a seat at the table, ensuring that they have the same rights as men and that there is accountability for crimes of sexual violence. A new government offers an opportunity to improve Bangladesh's women's rights record and address its high rates of gender based violence (GBV), which affects almost three-quarters of women in the country.

1. From Genocide to Gendered Resistance - A Timeline of Women's Political Activism and Its Transformation in Bangladesh (1971–2024)

1.1. 1971 - Femicide, Rape, and the Foundations of Structural Silence

1.1.1. Targeted Gender Violence and the Architecture of Genocide

The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 is one of the most brutal conflicts to ever take place in South Asia, particularly for women, who were disproportionately targeted in ways that redefined how gender impacts war and the gendered landscapes of war. Pakistani armed forces alongside the local auxiliary militias known as *Razakars* carried out consistent campaigns of systematic rape, sexual enslavement, and mass killings which primarily targeted Bengali Muslim women. These acts were not incidental atrocities; rather, they were part of a calculated genocidal strategy meant to destabilise the present social order, which sought to undermine Bengali nationalism whilst simultaneously ethnically and culturally cleansing the region (Kamal et al., 2024; D'Costa, 2012). The targeting of women reflected the understanding that the female body was not only a site of violence but a symbolic space where power, honour, lineage, and national identity converged. The mass rapes were, therefore, both psychological warfare and demographic warfare which was meant to break familial bonds and permanently scar the population.

Approximately 200,000 to 400,000 women were repeatedly raped in camps that were deliberately established for sexual violence. Many of these women were abducted during military raids and imprisoned in military cantonments turned rape camps where they faced ongoing abuse by soldiers (Begum, 2024). These camps represented zones of enforced invisibility and dehumanisation where women's bodies were treated as military property to be used and tossed aside. In many cases, pregnant women were deliberately held until they gave birth before they were released with the intention of altering the ethnic heritage of the Bengali population through forced impregnation that would have Pakistani genes (Clifford, 2008; Rashid, 2018). Meger (2016) argues that the weaponisation of sexual violence in conflict zones functions to disrupt national identity, and in 1971, the destruction of women's bodies paralleled the attempted dismemberment of the Bengali nation.

Moreover, the attacks on women were not random or isolated; rather, they were facilitated through state infrastructure and military intelligence. Strategic targets included women from intellectual and well-to-do families, student activists, and women in rural areas suspected of sheltering or supporting the *Mukti Bahini* (liberation fighters). These women were often removed from their communities with impunity: in many cases, their experiences were compounded by public spectacle (Saikia, 2011). This weaponisation of gender violence had long-term effects on how communities responded to sexual assault survivors. The post-war shame and ostracisation

that survivors faced did not arise spontaneously but were seeded during the war as a part of the campaign of fear and domination.

Crucially, the rape of Bengali women carried a racialised dimension. The war's underlying ethnic, linguistic, and cultural tensions meant that the targeting of women intersected with broader racialised discourse which deemed Bengalis as subhuman or inferior. Thus, the physical and psychological trauma inflicted on these women cannot be understood or seen merely as war collateral. As a central feature of a military campaign that imposed permanent ethnic hierarchies, it disrupted reproductive continuities that enforced political submission through bodily conquests. The systematic nature of the violence, which was documented extensively in survivor accounts, human rights reports, and war tribunal testimonies, exemplifies that the state-sponsored atrocities against women in 1971 were neither marginal nor auxiliary but were in fact a constitutive element of the war's genocidal violence (Abid et al., 2024; D'Costa & Hossain, 2010).

1.1.2. The Birangona Narrative and Structural Erasure

The immediate aftermath of independence resulted in the Bangladeshi government attempting to address the suffering of rape survivors by proclaiming them *Birangona* or “war heroines”. This term represents a radical reconfiguration of post-conflict gender norms, but in practice, it served more to contain than to empower. The language of heroism did not translate into policy or tangible reparations which then abstracted the experience of wartime rape into a national ethos which demanded silence, purity, and sacrifice. Instead of positioning *Birangona* as active subjects that could be utilised to reconstruct the nation, they were converted into passive icons of trauma, which symbolised collective suffering without receiving justice (Mookherjee, 2015).

Structural erasure is codified through public neglect and social stigmatisation. Survivors were not consulted in policy decisions that concerned their welfare and were often excluded from mainstream discussions about the aftermath of the 1971 war. Many were abandoned by their families and communities, causing a significant number to be institutionalised or left to fend for themselves in poverty-stricken conditions (Debnath, 2017). Rehabilitation centres were ill-equipped and poorly funded, with no long-term strategies to ensure social reintegration. Survivors who bore children were then pressured to give them up, and marriages were denied because of the perceived stigma that is connected to survivors of gender based violence. In this way, gendered violence in 1971 was not just a wartime atrocity; rather, it became an enduring architecture of exclusion which continuously shaped the status of women.

While the *Birangona* were elevated in speeches and commemorative rhetoric, they were rarely permitted to speak for themselves. The state's efforts to manage their identities through scripted narratives effectively silenced their trauma. Their stories were mediated by male bureaucrats, politicians, and historians, many of whom avoided addressing the full scope of their suffering (Mookherjee, 2021). This symbolic elevation without material or legal acknowledgement compounded the sense of betrayal many survivors experienced. State-building after 1971

required heroes, but not complicated, wounded women, especially not those whose suffering challenged patriarchal notions of purity and national honour.

The lack of prosecution for wartime rape further compounded this erasure. Despite the passage of the Collaborators Act in 1972, few cases involving sexual violence were ever brought to trial. The International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) initiated in the 2000s brought renewed attention to war crimes, but the number of indictments for rape and gender-based violence remained disproportionately low relative to the scale of atrocities committed (D’Costa & Hossain, 2010). The ICT’s limited engagement with sexual violence highlighted the structural unwillingness of the state to centre women’s experiences within legal and historical reckoning. Ultimately, 1971 not only witnessed the physical targeting of women, but it also institutionalised their erasure in the new nation’s consciousness.

Rashid (2018) notes that the very act of framing gendered suffering within national honour narratives obscured the diversity of survivors’ experiences. Women from different regions, religions, and classes were affected differently—some faced continued abuse within refugee camps, others were trafficked across borders, while many were simply never heard from again. Yet the *Birangona* label reduced these variations into a monolithic story of heroic endurance, leaving no room for rage, dissent, or critique. In doing so, the state transformed trauma into silence, turning female suffering into a foundational yet unacknowledged cornerstone of Bangladeshi independence.

1.2. 1980s-2010s - Resurfacing Memories and Intergenerational Trauma

1.2.1 Feminist Recovery and the Politicisation of Silence

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as Bangladesh transitioned through cycles of military rule and fragile democracy, the memory of *Birangona* remained politically inconvenient and socially stigmatised. Feminist scholars, activists, and artists—often working in isolation or in small collectives—undertook the arduous work of recovering these suppressed histories. They understood that the state’s refusal to acknowledge the trauma of 1971 constituted a second form of violence: erasure. Initiatives such as oral history projects, theatrical performances, graphic novels, and ethnographies created spaces for *Birangona* testimonies to be heard, seen, and archived (Mookherjee, 2021). These efforts not only restored voice to survivors but also politicised silence itself, making the act of remembering an insurgent gesture against the state’s patriarchal and nationalist narrative.

A turning point in this feminist memory work came with cultural productions like Rubaiyat Hossain’s film *Meherjaan*, which challenged the sanitised and masculinised version of war that had dominated for decades. The film presented rape survivors as complex, conflicted individuals—not as national symbols, but as women struggling with grief, desire, agency, and belonging (Chowdhury, 2016). While the film faced backlash and was pulled from theatres, it

catalysed crucial conversations about justice, representation, and the ethics of commemoration. Other efforts, including underground plays, academic symposia, and women's oral history circles, further expanded this discursive field. Feminist archives began to trace how women's bodies had become repositories of both trauma and nationalism—objects of memory and tools of political utility.

The inclusion of *Birangona* narratives in feminist pedagogy became a crucial development in this era. Educators and activists introduced these stories in university curricula, literary festivals, and grassroots workshops. Although these engagements remained concentrated in urban academic spaces, they planted the seeds for a broader conversation about how collective memory could function as a tool of resistance (Nahar, 2022). These feminist interventions framed wartime rape not as a shameful aberration but as a foundational injustice whose consequences shaped every domain of women's lives in post-independence Bangladesh. Importantly, they also made connections between the past and present, encouraging students and activists to see continuities in how the state treated women's bodies, whether in 1971 or contemporary settings of police brutality, labour exploitation, and gender-based violence.

This period also witnessed the formation of transnational feminist solidarity, as diaspora communities and international scholars began incorporating *Birangona* narratives into comparative genocide studies and human rights discourses. Conferences, edited volumes, and international forums amplified these voices globally, underscoring that the silencing of survivors was not only a national issue but a global one (Ali, 2023). By the end of the 2010s, a critical mass of memory work had accumulated, creating an intellectual and emotional infrastructure for future generations to challenge the state's exclusionary history and call for restorative justice.

1.2.2. The Transmission of Trauma Across Generations

While feminist initiatives sought to recover and honour *Birangona* narratives, intergenerational trauma became increasingly visible in everyday family life. Second- and third-generation descendants often grew up in environments where their mothers' or grandmothers' experiences were cloaked in silence. This silence, though intended to protect, generated emotional distance and identity confusion (Ali, 2023). Children sensed the existence of unspoken grief and guilt but lacked the vocabulary to process it. This often resulted in inherited anxieties, fractured relationships, and an ambivalent relationship with national pride.

Research in trauma psychology and memory studies confirms that trauma can be biologically and behaviorally transmitted across generations. The descendants of *Birangona* women not only inherited the emotional consequences of their mothers' experiences but also encountered the sociopolitical structures that continued to devalue women's voices. The lack of public acknowledgement reinforced the sense of marginality felt within families. At the same time, some descendants transformed this legacy into activism, becoming outspoken advocates for mental health, reproductive justice, and feminist historiography (Samanta & Gilliaert, 2024).

In artistic practices, this intergenerational trauma took on metaphorical expression. Young poets, filmmakers, and performance artists used fragmented narratives, silence, and abstraction to signal inherited pain. Through experimental forms, they demonstrated how the absence of language could itself be a narrative of violence. At literary festivals and spoken word performances, descendants of survivors began naming their grief, not only to honour their ancestors but to disrupt the cultural amnesia that had taken hold of the nation.

By the 2010s, feminist youth in Bangladesh increasingly referenced 1971 in their demands for systemic reform. This generation, more digitally connected and politically engaged, began linking past state violence to present-day struggles for gender parity, education, and bodily autonomy. The trauma of their ancestors became a framework for understanding contemporary injustices—an emotional and political lens that shaped their engagement with the state. Intergenerational trauma thus became a powerful force in Bangladesh’s evolving feminist politics, proving that the past was never really past—it lived on in the bodies and voices of those who remembered.

Through this intergenerational lens, memory became not just a personal inheritance but a political responsibility. Young activists learned to name their trauma, critique the conditions that produced it, and mobilise around demands that extended beyond individual healing toward structural transformation. Feminist collectives increasingly framed justice as both backward- and forward-looking: honouring survivors while securing rights for future generations. In doing so, they positioned memory as a living archive—one that insisted on the simultaneity of past and present in the fight for gender justice in Bangladesh.

1.3. 2024 - Revolutionary Activism and the Re-Emergence of Women’s Protest

1.3.1 The July Uprising and Feminist Centrality

The eruption of civil unrest in July 2024 marked one of the most significant political ruptures in Bangladesh since independence. What began as a response to the reinstatement of public sector quotas quickly spiralled into a mass mobilisation against authoritarianism, inequality, and the militarisation of public life. Central to this movement were women—students, journalists, garment workers, homemakers, academics, and artists, who defied curfews, censorship, and surveillance to claim political space that had long been denied to them (Politics4Her, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2025). Their presence was not marginal—it was foundational. Women organised committees, drafted manifestos, ran medical aid stations, conducted digital forensics of police abuse, and crafted the aesthetic and emotional core of the revolution.

This participation was not spontaneous. It was the culmination of decades of feminist political work initiated in the post-1971 silence, sustained through underground organising during military rule, and amplified through academic, artistic, and civil society networks in the 2000s and 2010s. Feminist protestors explicitly invoked the legacy of the *Birangona*, carrying placards that featured images and testimonies of wartime survivors. Through these acts, they drew a direct line from the foundational violence of 1971 to contemporary forms of state brutality and gendered exclusion (Sabur, 2024). This strategic invocation of history subverted official narratives of national unity, reminding the public that liberation remained incomplete while women's pain remained unacknowledged.

Chants echoed across Dhaka and Chattogram, demanding that any claim to democratic renewal be rooted in gender justice. Feminist organisers used social media to amplify these messages, creating hashtags that went viral across the region and gained international attention. Their mobilisation was intersectional—addressing not only gender but also class, caste, labour rights, education reform, and climate justice. In this context, feminism became a unifying framework through which diverse forms of injustice were analysed, challenged, and resisted.

The feminist leadership of the 2024 uprising signalled a paradigmatic shift in political resistance in Bangladesh. No longer relegated to peripheral support roles, women set the agenda. They redefined the terms of protest by grounding political critique in emotional labour, collective care, and bodily autonomy. In doing so, they reimagined revolutionary politics itself, not as a contest of masculine strength, but as a struggle for sustainable, inclusive futures.

1.3.2. Archiving the Present as Feminist Strategy

As the state began to crack down on protests through arbitrary detentions, disappearances, smear campaigns, and media blackouts, women activists turned to archiving as a form of resistance. Drawing lessons from the historical erasure of *Birangona*, feminist collectives such as Nari Mukti Mancha and the July Women's Archive began documenting the uprising in real-time. These archives included video footage, written testimonies, oral histories, protest artwork, poetry, and photographs; each a fragment of truth positioned against state-produced disinformation (Siddiqui, 2024).

Archiving was more than historical documentation; it was an assertion of epistemic sovereignty. Women declared themselves the authors of their own history, refusing to allow another revolution to be written without them. This practice of feminist historiography challenged dominant modes of historical production that had traditionally centred male political actors while reducing women to passive witnesses or symbols of sacrifice. Instead, these archives offered textured, embodied accounts of struggle; accounts that validated emotion, subjectivity, and relationality as core components of political life.

Feminist archiving also had a pedagogical dimension. Activists organised teach-ins, community screenings, and mobile exhibitions that brought the history of 1971 into conversation with the events of 2024. These educational interventions deconstructed myths of national purity and exposed the continuity of patriarchal violence across decades. By doing so, they bridged

generational divides and ensured that younger women understood their activism as part of a longer arc of resistance—a lineage of defiant daughters rising to complete the unfinished work of their mothers.

In the face of increasing repression, archiving also became a survival strategy. Encrypted cloud repositories and decentralised backups allowed protestors to protect their materials from state seizure. Diaspora communities offered technical and logistical support, mirroring the transnational solidarity networks that had emerged around the *Birangona* decades earlier. These digital and analogue practices of care constituted a politics of resilience, where memory work was inseparable from the work of protection, refuge, and continuation.

Feminist archiving was not just about preserving the past; it was about imagining the future. These archives laid the foundation for demands around truth commissions, reparations, inclusive curricula, and legislative reform. They positioned memory as both a legal and moral claim, asserting that democracy could not be rebuilt without accounting for the gendered violence upon which it had historically been founded and repeatedly sustained.

1.3.3. From Protest to Advocacy: The Rearticulation of Feminist Demands

Following the peak of street protests, women-led coalitions began transitioning into policy-oriented advocacy. They submitted open letters to government bodies, launched petitions, proposed constitutional amendments, and established watchdog organisations to monitor gendered violence within state institutions (Foreign Policy, 2025). The shift from resistance to reform was strategic, not a retreat, but a recalibration of feminist praxis. These efforts aimed to institutionalise the radical energies of July into long-term political transformation.

Among the key demands was the establishment of an independent Truth and Gender Commission to investigate crimes committed in 1971 and 2024. Activists insisted that the same culture of impunity that protected wartime rapists now shielded police officers, military personnel, and bureaucrats accused of violence against protestors. Their proposals also called for gender-sensitive budgeting, comprehensive sexual education, recognition of unpaid care work, and quotas for women in all levels of governance, including within transitional justice mechanisms.

This advocacy was informed by intersectional analysis. Women from marginalised communities—ethnic minorities, Dalit women, *hijra* activists, and domestic workers—joined the movement and shaped its priorities. Their participation expanded the conversation beyond

middle-class, urban feminism to address the structural roots of gender oppression across class, geography, and ability. In town halls and social media campaigns, these women challenged the idea that feminism was elitist or disconnected from grassroots realities. They made clear that liberation must be inclusive or it was not liberation at all.

The global response to the 2024 uprising further amplified its feminist core. International human rights organisations, scholars, and journalists highlighted the role of Bangladeshi women as exemplars of frontline activism. Solidarity letters poured in from feminist networks in Sudan, Palestine, and Latin America, reminding Bangladeshi activists that their struggle was part of a wider transnational movement against patriarchal and authoritarian governance (Politics4Her, 2024). In this networked resistance, the *Birangona* were remembered not only as victims of history but as the mothers of modern revolutionaries.

1.4. Timeline Conclusion

The protests of 2024 are not an endpoint, but an inflexion in the timeline of Bangladeshi women's resistance. They represent the convergence of memory and momentum, trauma and tenacity. From the searing wounds of 1971 to the electrifying hope of 2024, women have continuously redefined the parameters of political engagement. They have exposed the inadequacies of nationalist histories, challenged authoritarian structures, and imagined more just futures.

As the report moves into an examination of the current landscape of gender inequality in Bangladesh, it does so with the understanding that today's feminist struggles are deeply rooted in historical continuities. With that in mind, the next section will examine the structural barriers that persist in law, society, and governance, while highlighting how the legacy of past resistance informs new strategies for change. What follows is not only an analysis of inequality, but a testament to the revolutionary possibilities of collective feminist action.

2. Protests

On July 15th, 2024, university students peacefully protested at the University of Dhaka after the reinstatement of a job quota that reserved 30 percent of government positions for the descendants of freedom fighters who fought in the 1971 War of Independence. The quota system, which was created in 1972, has proved to be a barrier to civil service positions for the country's large youth population, who face high rates of unemployment (Sajjad, 2024). The job quota system was revoked by the government in 2018 after a series of student protests. However, the quota was reinstated in June 2024 after petitions were filed from the relatives of the freedom fighters.

Shortly after the protest began, the university students were attacked by individuals armed with sticks, rods, and clubs, which many suspect were members of the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) (Corea & Erum, 2024). The BCL is the student wing of the political party Awami League (AL), currently in power in Bangladesh. A speech made by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina only escalated the protests when she called students “*razakars*”, which is a term used to identify pro-Pakistan collaborators during Bangladesh’s War of Independence (Sajjad, 2024). Tensions further escalated after a student from Rangpur’s Begum Rokeya University was killed by police on July 16th, 2024. The video of Abu Sayed’s death circulated the internet and sparked outrage, leading to more people joining the movement.

On July 21st, in an attempt to stop the protests, Bangladesh’s Supreme Court ruled that only five percent of government jobs would be allocated to the descendants of freedom fighters (Dutta & Dawar, 2024). The student protesters did not accept this ruling, and the following day, Students Against Discrimination (the organisation behind the protests) called for a 48-hour suspension of protests to allow the government to meet a new set of demands (Dutta and Dawar, 2024). Some of the demands included: a public apology from Prime Minister Hasina, the resignation of the home minister and the road, transport and bridge minister, the arrests of the police who attacked and instigated students, and the banishment of the BCL from student politics (Alam, 2024). The list of demands was largely ignored, and by July 30th, the protests had resumed.

The protests, which started as discontentment with the job quotas, transformed into a call for the current government administration to step down. As a response to the protests, the government shut down the internet, implemented a curfew, and used excessive force. Soon after the protests began, the government gave the police orders to shoot on sight anyone violating the curfew order. Protesters, journalists, and bystanders were killed in attempts to stop the protests. The protests spanned from July 15th, 2024, to August 5th, 2024, and resulted in Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigning from her position and fleeing to India. Bangladesh is currently run by an interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, who plans on holding elections later this year or at the beginning of next year.

Bangladesh is a parliamentary democracy with two predominant political parties, the AL and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The AL, which has held power since 2008, has become increasingly authoritarian. The AL has sought to crush its opposition, the BNP, by jailing its leaders and cracking down on supporters of the BNP. This strategy has been used by the AL for several elections. Furthermore, the caretaker government responsible for ensuring that fair and free elections were held in Bangladesh was abolished in 2011. The actions of the AL have fostered distrust in its citizens, which explains why the protests in July 2024 quickly turned anti-government.

2.1. The Role of Women

The protests in 2024 saw the highest participation of women in Bangladesh's history, with women arming themselves with sticks and stones to encounter police and the AL (Rashid & Sattar, 2025). The participation and organising of female students in the protests signal a shift in the role of women in Bangladesh's political movements. This shift can be attributed to increased educational opportunities, economic empowerment, and targeted initiatives promoting gender equality (Islam & Kabir, 2024). Alongside the increase in participation, women were also at the forefront of organising marches and sit-ins.

The student-led Anti-Discrimination Movement, which formed as a response to the reform of the present quota system in government jobs, was one of the protest organisers (Frontline Defenders, 2024). The women involved in the protests were not just female university students; they were also female high school students, parents, and older women.

Nusrat Tabassum and Nahida Bushra were prominent figures in organising the student protests last year. Tabassum is a student of Political Science at Dhaka University and one of the co-coordinators of the Students Against Discrimination Movement. On July 27th, 2024, she was taken into the custody of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police's Detective Branch office. Tabassum and several other human rights defenders were released after reportedly being coerced to issue a statement of withdrawal of the protest movement after being detained for one week (Frontline Defenders, 2024). She promptly re-joined the protest after her release. Police claimed that the activists' leaders were detained for their own safety.

Alongside organising marches, women also speak out via social media and news outlets. Activist Prapti Taposhi, who was interviewed by Deutsche Welle (DW), spoke out on the arbitrary detentions of the coordinators of the Anti-Discrimination Movement. She also stated that students in Bangladesh are living in a war zone, as more and more students have been detained by police (Jones, 2024). Additionally, women played critical roles in the Bangla Blockade, when students shut down major roads and railways throughout the country (Rashid & Sattar, 2025). Women participating in the protests were subjected to sexual violence and GBV with threats of rape and in some documented cases, sexual assault perpetrated by AL supporters (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025). This violence was used as a tool to deter women from participating and undermine female leadership within the movement.

Despite increasing violence and assault, threats of expulsion from university, and police detainment, these students continued to participate in and organise protests. Furthermore, women in Bangladesh assisted in guiding traffic and conducting night patrols when the country was in disarray after the resignation of Prime Minister Hasina (Rashid & Sattar, 2025). Despite playing

a large role in the protests, women have been largely ignored in the decision-making process of the new interim government.

3. What's Come Out of the Protests – Gendered Consequences in the Aftermath of July 2024

3.1. From Frontlines to Forgotten - The Feminist Disappearance

3.1.1. Women Led the Revolution

The July 2024 uprising marked an inflexion point in Bangladeshi political consciousness. Triggered by widespread frustration with elite capture, authoritarianism, and economic disparity, the movement became a crucible for feminist organising. Women led student unions, wrote manifestos, created protest art, and held the front lines of mass demonstrations (Politics4Her, 2024). Their bodies became sites of resistance and targets of violence. In public squares, on university campuses, and across digital platforms, women articulated an expansive vision of liberation, one rooted not only in democratic ideals but in an unapologetically feminist reimagining of the Bangladeshi state.

Women's participation was not confined to support roles; it was intellectual, strategic, and symbolic. They curated protest aesthetics, developed slogans, translated policy demands, and created feminist media. This was not an auxiliary engagement—it was foundational. As noted by Politics4Her (2024), the July uprising marked the first time since the Liberation War that women have occupied such visible and decisive leadership roles in a mass national movement. But as with previous episodes in Bangladesh history, revolutionary prominence was followed by swift marginalisation.

Despite the risks, women consistently bore the heaviest costs of the movement. From enduring physical assaults during protests to receiving threats against their families, their leadership came at a high personal price. Yet this sacrifice did not translate into sustained recognition. The social memory of the uprising began to be rewritten almost immediately, one press release at a time, slowly eliminating the names and images of women who had sparked, sustained, and shaped the momentum of the revolution. Their erasure functioned to sanitise the uprising's radicality and restore traditional gender norms.

3.1.2. Displaced Voices: The Return of Political Erasure

In the immediate aftermath of the protests, women who had once led the charge were pushed to the periphery. Their names were removed from press briefings. Media retrospectives recast the protest in masculinised terms, focusing on male student leaders and ignoring the critical labour of their female counterparts. As Sabur (2024) argues, this deliberate sidelining represents not

simply an oversight but a structural disavowal of women’s agency. It is the recalibration of revolutionary memory to fit the existing patriarchal architecture.

Public commemoration efforts reflected this erasure. Official memorial posters, policy dialogues, and academic symposiums often omitted the names or testimonies of the women who had risked imprisonment and violence to shape the protests. The Anti-Discrimination Students’ Movement, which had been lauded during the uprising for its commitment to gender justice, reverted to a male-dominated leadership by the end of 2024 (The Daily Star, 2024). The erasure was not accidental—it was the result of a systematic reinstatement of normative gender hierarchies in political institutions. As with the *Birangona* of 1971, women were celebrated for their sacrifice but denied the power to shape the narrative that followed.

This silence had implications beyond memory—it directly affected institutional outcomes. The absence of women in post-protest negotiation rooms meant that policy demands shifted away from gendered concerns. Conversations about state violence against women protestors, access to justice for survivors of assault, or protections for women in political organising were quickly shelved. Feminist agendas, once at the heart of the protest’s moral authority, were deemed too divisive or inconvenient for a state anxious to restore “order”.

3.2. Reprisals, Retreat, and the Politics of Fear

3.2.1. Surveillance and Self-Erasure

Following the protest, the OHCHR documented targeted threats against women activists, including surveillance, doxing, and family intimidation (OHCHR, 2025). These threats were alarmingly effective. Women who had led protests began withdrawing from public view, often deleting social media accounts, suspending public appearances, and avoiding meetings. Some left Dhaka entirely. Others, particularly those from conservative regions, adopted religious coverings or changed their public personas as a form of tactical invisibility, not out of conviction, but survival (OHCHR, 2025).

This retreat was not a failure of courage—it was a calculated response to a political environment that offered no protection. Ahmed (2011) describes this as the “double bind of feminist grief”: women are punished both for raising their voices and for the resonance of what they say. They are simultaneously too visible and utterly invisible, rendered hyper-legible as threats and yet denied personhood as political actors. In this way, the state weaponised fear to neutralise feminist dissent without overt censorship.

The surveillance extended to homes, universities, and even healthcare settings. Some activists reported being followed, harassed, or repeatedly questioned about their political affiliations. Others described pressure on their families—calls to parents warning them to silence their

daughters or risk police intervention. These forms of coercion fall under what feminist theorists like Kelly (1988) describe as “continuums of violence”, where psychological intimidation and structural exclusion function alongside physical violence to regulate female autonomy.

3.2.2. Religious Nationalism and the Silencing of Feminism

Compounding this repression was the deployment of Islamist narratives that framed feminist protestors as threats to religious morality. Sermons in local mosques decried protest slogans as vulgar, and media aligned with conservative clerics published editorials blaming “westernised women” for the breakdown of social order. Rather than drawing on the legacy of *Birangona* to celebrate defiance, the history of 1971 was invoked to discipline women’s bodies—to contrast virtuous past heroines with the supposedly immoral daughters of the present (France24, 2025).

This invocation of religious nationalism as a tool of gender control is not new. It reflects what Butler (2004) and Mahmood (2005) theorise as “disciplinary femininity”—the use of both secular and religious narratives to prescribe idealised behaviours and suppress those who transgress them. In the context of post-protest Bangladesh, it became a mechanism for reasserting male dominance in national discourse. Women’s resistance was reinterpreted as rebellion, their demands as disruption, and their leadership as insubordination.

The consequences of this ideological backlash were swift. Women protestors reported being denied mosque access, suspended from religious schools, or publicly shamed in their neighbourhoods. Digital campaigns portrayed them as agents of foreign interference. These tactics were particularly effective in rural and peri-urban areas, where familial honour and religious piety intersect with higher stakes. As a result, many women turned inward, retreating from activism, shielding their daughters from political spaces, and resigning themselves to silence. Yet within that silence lies a smouldering memory of injustice, waiting for its next moment to ignite.

3.3. Legal Reform or Feminist Co-optation?

3.3.1. The Law After the Outcry

Another incident in 2024 which fuelled cries for legislative action was the rape and death of an eight-year-old girl in late 2024. This prompted a wave of national grief and became a flashpoint which united civil society, feminist groups, and the broader public around calls for stronger protections against gender-based violence. Within weeks, the government passed a new law promising harsher sentencing for rapists, expanded definitions of consent, and the creation of gender desks in police stations (France24, 2025). While hailed as a symbolic victory by some, feminist legal scholars expressed scepticism about its long-term impact.

The problem, as highlighted by Merry (2006), lies in the disjuncture between legal symbolism and structural transformation. In rural and peri-urban regions, where patriarchy is often enforced through both custom and institutional complicity, rape survivors still face immense barriers to justice. Police officers frequently demand bribes to file reports, medical infrastructure is lacking for forensic examinations, and courts delay proceedings for years (Politics4Her, 2024). These conditions remain largely unaddressed by the new law, which offers procedural enhancements without dismantling the social and bureaucratic systems that prevent access to justice in the first place.

Yet, amidst these structural failings, the feminist movement has not retreated—it has reimagined itself. Feminist legal advocates, despite being sidelined from the formal drafting process, have developed parallel frameworks and policy proposals to hold the state accountable. These blueprints call for trauma-informed policing, community justice hubs, and survivor-centred oversight mechanisms. Women-led organisations in Dhaka and Rajshahi have started grassroots legal literacy campaigns to empower survivors to navigate the system. These responses illustrate the irrepressible agency of Bangladeshi feminists, who continue to transform grief into resistance and policy into praxis.

3.3.2. *Instrumentalising Tragedy*

Beyond questions of implementation, the very process through which the law was passed raises critical concerns about the politics of representation and voice. The girl's death was repeatedly invoked by politicians, yet survivors of gender-based violence were not meaningfully consulted in drafting the bill. There were no public hearings, no survivor-led commissions, and little transparency about stakeholder involvement. This sidelining of feminist voices parallels earlier patterns in post-1971 Bangladesh, where *Birangona* were publicly celebrated but excluded from legal redress and political decision-making (D'Costa, 2012).

The instrumentalisation of tragedy in this context reinforces what Ahmed (2011) describes as the “affective economy” of state power—grief is mobilised not to empower survivors but to restore political legitimacy. The state uses feminist grief as a spectacle to gain credibility, while simultaneously suppressing the structural critiques that feminism demands. Rather than creating platforms for survivors to shape justice, the government utilised their suffering as moral capital. As a result, the legal reforms read less as reparative justice and more as a strategic reset—a way to signal responsiveness without accountability.

And yet, women are fighting back. Feminist collectives have begun conducting independent audits of the law's rollout, documenting discrepancies between promised reforms and on-the-ground realities. Survivor-led movements such as *Nari Shokti Mukti Mancha* have launched public campaigns to challenge state narratives and reinsert feminist perspectives into the national conversation. These groups insist that justice is not just about harsher laws, but

about societal transformation—ending victim-blaming, building feminist care infrastructures, and embedding accountability in every level of governance.

Feminist organisations have also critiqued the state’s selective engagement with gender-based violence. Laws passed in moments of public outrage tend to focus narrowly on punitive measures, overlooking the continuum of structural violence that underpins sexual assault. There is no policy for education reform, media accountability, or religious discourse that normalises victim-blaming. There is no funding for survivor support services or comprehensive sexual education. By focusing on punishment rather than prevention, the law mirrors a carceral logic that can retraumatise rather than heal.

Finally, the law’s rollout has failed to inspire confidence among activists. Even as the government points to it as a key outcome of the July 2024 protests, many women’s groups have expressed frustration at the lack of follow-through. There are few signs of sustainable investment in training law enforcement, resourcing shelters, or expanding rural access to justice. But rather than resigning to disappointment, feminists have reframed the law as a site of continued struggle. For them, the law is not the end of the revolution—it is another battleground, another opportunity to demand more from the state, to amplify survivor voices, and to insist that no reform is meaningful without the leadership of those most affected.

3.4. The New Landscape of Educational Repression

3.4.1. Falling Attendance, Rising Fear

The Malala Fund (2025) reports that school attendance for girls dropped significantly in the six months following the July protests. Particularly in urban slums and conservative districts, parents feared their daughters would be targeted for political involvement. Some schools received informal pressure from the government and media to suspend or expel girls who had participated in protests. In communities where social cohesion depends on gender conformity, this translates into mass withdrawals of girls from secondary schools, undermining years of progress toward gender parity in education (Malala Fund, 2025).

The impact of this retreat from education is devastating. For many girls, schools were not just sites of instruction but critical spaces for building political consciousness, community, and personal autonomy. Losing access to education meant losing access to networks of support, exposure to feminist thinking, and the possibility of upward mobility (Sabur, 2024). In this way, the crackdown on student protestors extended beyond the streets—it penetrated into the classroom, home, and future aspirations of thousands of girls across Bangladesh.

This regression mirrors a historical logic of containment, echoing the institutionalisation of *Birangona* after 1971. Then, too, women were sequestered from public life in the name of

protection (D’Costa, 2012). Today, the narrative is repurposed: protecting girls now means limiting their visibility, silencing their political voices, and re-domesticating their ambitions. The state’s refusal to guarantee safety for politically engaged girls has normalised the idea that female education is contingent, not a right, but a privilege revocable in moments of national crisis (France24, 2025).

3.4.2. Constructing Political Silence in Girls

Spivak’s (1988) question—“Can the subaltern speak?”—resonates sharply in the context of post-July Bangladesh. The girls of 2024 were not merely protesting; they were imagining radically new futures, grounded in justice, equality, and resistance to patriarchal authority. They were chanting feminist slogans, debating legislation, and reclaiming public space (Politics4Her, 2024). But in the aftermath, this political speech was reframed as disruption. Girls were silenced not just by external forces but by internalised fear, familial pressure, and the institutional withdrawal of opportunity.

The state, media, and even some educational institutions have contributed to this silencing by characterising girls’ involvement in protests as immature or dangerous. School administrators have quietly discouraged feminist organising, with some enforcing unofficial bans on student associations (The Daily Star, 2024). Textbooks remain devoid of gender-sensitive narratives, and girls returning to school after the protests report being interrogated about their loyalty to the nation. This environment fosters a pedagogy of fear, teaching girls that safety lies in silence (OHCHR, 2025).

Yet even within these constraints, resistance simmers. Underground feminist reading circles have emerged in several cities. Girls exchange zines, share digital content, and meet in private homes to discuss what is missing from their curriculum. Teachers sympathetic to the movement quietly support them, slipping in literature, historical examples, and critical theory during lessons. These small acts constitute a form of “quiet radicalism”—a refusal to forget, to surrender, or to give up on education as a site of liberation (Ahmed, 2011).

These emergent networks reveal that while the state may seek to mute feminist expression, it cannot erase it. Girls who once marched in the streets are now achieving their struggle through memory work, oral histories, and peer mentorship. They carry the legacy of the July uprising not as a cautionary tale, but as a blueprint for future organising. Their silence is strategic, temporary, and brimming with the possibility of resurgence. In this sense, the educational repression of 2024 has not extinguished feminist futures—it has scattered them into subterranean spaces, where they continue to grow.

3.5. Global Applause, Local Absence

3.5.1. *International Recognition as a Double-Edged Sword*

In 2025, several women from the July uprising were recognised by the U.S. Department of State as recipients of the International Women of Courage Award (U.S. Department of State, 2025). Yet many accepted under anonymity. Others were represented by surrogates. Their courage was celebrated abroad, while their safety remained imperilled at home. These awards, while symbolically important, highlight the paradox of global feminist solidarity: recognition without protection.

This paradox—visibility without security—is emblematic of the shortcomings in mainstream global feminism. As Mohanty (2003) critiques, Global South women are often celebrated only when they conform to the archetype of the silent, suffering subject. When they speak, resist, and organise, they are no longer deemed legible or heroic. In Bangladesh, this played out in full: international accolades brought no reprieve from local surveillance, exile, and ostracisation. These awards offered recognition but no reparation – applause without infrastructure.

In interviews conducted with youth feminist activists in Dhaka and Chittagong, several noted how their recognition by international institutions increased their vulnerability at home. Their families were harassed, their community roles were questioned, and their leadership was publicly challenged. As one activist noted, “The award didn’t protect me—it put a target on my back”. This reality underscores the need to critically assess how transnational visibility is wielded and who bears its risks.

3.5.2. *Symbolic Recognition Without Structural Reform*

Global recognition offers moral legitimacy but cannot substitute for political power. As Ahmed (2011) notes, celebration is not emancipation. Recognition without transformation does little to dismantle the systems that imperil feminists in the first place. It may amplify their courage, but it does not institutionalise their protection. Awards, press releases, and symbolic gestures must be matched with real commitments—legal, financial, and diplomatic—to ensure that celebrated voices are not punished for their audacity.

Feminist solidarity must therefore be redefined. It must move beyond performative allyship to encompass action. Transnational feminist networks should invest in relocation support, security training, emergency funding, and political advocacy for at-risk women activists. Human rights organisations and foreign governments must pressure states like Bangladesh to uphold protections for human rights defenders, not merely decorate them after the fact. The courage recognised globally must be met with structures that allow it to survive locally.

Ultimately, international recognition is not meaningless, but it is not enough. The women of the 2024 uprising deserve not only applause but autonomy. Their sacrifices must be honoured not only through awards but through protections. Their legacy must be safeguarded not through mythmaking but through systemic change.

3.6. Feminist Memory-Making and Future Strategy

3.6.1 Feminist Memory-Making and Future Strategy

Building Testimonial Infrastructures

Even in the face of repression and historical erasure, feminist groups across Bangladesh have not been silenced. They have drawn upon a rich lineage of memory work, especially from the *Birangona* oral history projects, to construct resilient testimonial infrastructures. These include encrypted digital archives, travelling exhibitions, decentralised zine collectives, and podcast series that circulate the stories of women who led and sustained the July uprising (Siddiqui, 2024; Hirsch & Smith, 2002).

These acts of archiving are not merely preservational—they are pedagogical. Workshops held in safe houses across Dhaka, Sylhet, and Barisal train young women in documentation, trauma processing, and political education. Women are taught to speak, write, and archive their realities in their own words and forms. This is not just activism—it is epistemic justice. As these women reclaim narrative authority, they build tools not only for resistance but for healing.

These initiatives mark a shift from reactive protest to proactive movement-building. They reveal an intentional strategy among Bangladeshi feminists to reorient the future, not by waiting for permission from the state or society, but by creating autonomous knowledge systems. Memory becomes a practice of survival and defiance. Documentation becomes a feminist act of truth-telling that no state can fully erase.

From Mourning to Mobilisation

These feminist epistemologies challenge dominant historiographies that frame 2024 as a failed or fleeting moment. Instead, they assert that the revolution continues—in whispers, in workshops, in coded messages and midnight meetings. As the women of 1971 turned their trauma into political testimony, so too are the daughters of 2024 converting grief into groundwork. They reject narratives of passivity, offering instead a vision of feminist insurgency that outlives media cycles.

Mobilisation now occurs through mentorship networks, feminist reading rooms, and encrypted messaging groups that coordinate protests, publish demands, and support each other's safety. Girls once expelled for protest involvement now run underground schools and legal aid desks. These are spaces of refusal—where mourning is not paralysed but politicised; where silence does not imply surrender, but strategy.

This transition from visible mass protest to decentralised mobilisation is not a sign of defeat. It is a recalibration. Feminists in Bangladesh understand that transformation requires both confrontation and endurance. They are preparing for the long arc of justice, where today's losses are documented not as defeats, but as blueprints for resurgence.

3.7. Feminist Resistance Conclusion

The sidelining of women after July 2024 mirrors the fate of their foremothers in 1971. Despite leading transformative movements, their names are dropped from reports, their bodies re-disciplined, and their visions ignored. But history shows that this erasure is never final. Women in Bangladesh have long fought to convert invisibility into resistance.

As the next section will explore in more detail, the institutional barriers to gender equality remain formidable. Yet the legacy of the 2024 uprising—like that of 1971—is not lost. It is being archived, whispered, and written anew by women who know that revolutions do not end with silence. They begin again with each act of feminist remembrance.

4. Future Policy Implications

This section discusses the role that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the interim government of Bangladesh have played in improving gender equality and women's rights in the country. Approximately 73 percent of women experience violence at the hands of intimate partners (Islam, 2025). Since the protests subsided, the interim government and NGOs have launched several initiatives and projects to help combat gender inequality and promote women's rights.

4.1. The Role of NGOs in Bangladesh

NGOs have played a vital role in supporting women's rights in Bangladesh. Several policy initiatives and projects were created after the protests to support gender equality in the country. Save the Children in Bangladesh launched a four-year initiative funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands called the “Strengthening Women's Organization Capacity for Championing Women's Rights” project. It aims to strengthen organisational capacities of

women-led organisations so that they have a stronger voice and influence on women's economic rights and gender equality (Save the Children, 2024).

Additionally, the European Union (EU) and United Nations (UN) signed a partnership agreement to prevent sexual and gender-based violence in public spaces, workplaces and tertiary educational institutions in Bangladesh. The €4.8 million grant will focus on strengthening the leadership of civil society and women's rights organisations and transforming harmful gender norms to address discriminatory practices (United Nations Bangladesh, 2025).

On November 24th 2024, a national dialogue was held in Dhaka to seek recommendations on how to strengthen laws to prevent gender based violence (GBV). The event was organised by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) in collaboration with the Local Consultative Group on Women's Advancement and Gender Equality and the United Nations in Bangladesh (Islam, 2025). The dialogue brought together government representatives, women's rights advocates, civil society organisations, development partners, and private sector stakeholders. The dialogue made recommendations such as ensuring women had financing in agriculture, addressing cybercrimes and marital rape, and launching awareness campaigns about government legal aid funds (Islam, 2025). These are a few examples of how NGOs are helping to support women's rights in the country.

4.2. The Role of the Interim Government

Shortly after the protests subsided and the interim government took over, many criticised the interim government for a lack of representation. As a result, the interim government added a Women's Affairs Reform Commission to its roster of reform committees with Shireen Huq, co-founder of Naripokkho, a prominent women's rights organisation in Bangladesh, in charge (Rashid & Sattar, 2025). Since the commission was created, a decision-making forum was held outlining recommendations on women and girl-friendly solutions in policymaking.

Dr. Zareen Delawar, Governor of Zonta District 25, advocated for stricter laws regarding crimes of rape and violence against women and for rape cases to be handled by female lawyers and judges (Zonta International, 2025). Furthermore, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2025) note that some of the perpetrators of violence during the protests feel further emboldened as sexual violence and harassment have not been fully criminalised under national law. In order to make changes, the interim government must work to promote gender equality and women's rights.

CONCLUSION

The arc of women's political resistance in Bangladesh—from the genocidal trauma of 1971 to the revolutionary organising of 2024—is not a straightforward narrative of progress. Rather, it is a cyclical, contested, and deeply embodied struggle against the structural forces of patriarchy, nationalism, and authoritarianism. What unfolds across this timeline is a series of ruptures and recoveries, where the state repeatedly attempts to erase or contain women's activism, only to be challenged by feminist counter-histories, memory work, and collective mobilisation.

The gendered violence of 1971 was not incidental to war but fundamental to its genocidal logic. The systematic rape, enslavement, and mutilation of Bengali women was an explicit strategy of domination, aimed at destabilising Bengali identity and breaking communal resilience (D'Costa, 2012; Rashid, 2018). These acts of violence were facilitated through military intelligence networks, targeted abductions, and the construction of rape camps—marking women's bodies as sites of political conquest. And yet, the post-war state's designation of survivors as *Birangona* did not result in restorative justice or empowerment. Rather, it abstracted and mythologised their suffering, rendering them passive icons of nationalist trauma while excluding them from real material or legal recovery (Mookherjee, 2015; Debnath, 2017).

The state's failure to prosecute wartime rape or provide sustained support for survivors initiated a legacy of erasure that feminist scholars and artists began to challenge in the decades that followed. From the 1980s onward, women began recovering the buried narratives of 1971, reframing silence not as absence but as a political terrain to be navigated and subverted (Mookherjee, 2021; Nahar, 2022). These acts of feminist recovery were not only historiographic interventions—they were insurgent acts of memory-making. Films, oral history circles, poetry, and ethnographies destabilised official narratives and re-centred gendered experience as core to the national story.

By the early 2000s, a new generation of feminists—many of them descendants of *Birangona*—transformed inherited trauma into political consciousness. Intergenerational memory became a mode of resistance, linking the wartime violence of 1971 to ongoing structural oppression in labour, policing, education, and the home (Ali, 2023; Samanta & Gilliaert, 2024). Young women framed their activism as part of a longer lineage, situating their grief within feminist genealogies of defiance. They did not treat the past as a closed chapter but as a haunting presence that demanded redress in the present.

This arc of historical reckoning converged in the July 2024 uprising, where women were not only visible participants but central architects of the protest. They led marches, wrote manifestos, administered aid, produced media, and built coalitions that stretched across class, age, and geography (Politics4Her, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2025). Their leadership was not

accidental—it was the outcome of decades of feminist groundwork. These women explicitly invoked the memory of the *Birangona*, insisting that no revolution could claim legitimacy while continuing to marginalise or silence women’s pain.

And yet, as in 1971, visibility was met with repression. In the aftermath of the protests, women leaders were disappeared from official accounts, marginalised from decision-making, and targeted for surveillance, harassment, and doxxing (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025). Public memory began to be masculinised once again, reducing women’s revolutionary labour to a footnote in a broader nationalist recovery. Media retrospectives focused on male student leaders; institutional spaces returned to patriarchal norms. Even as international organisations awarded women for their courage, many were forced into hiding or exile (France24, 2025; U.S. Department of State, 2025).

This pattern of feminist disappearance—revolutionary prominence followed by institutional exclusion—mirrors the fate of the *Birangona* fifty years earlier. Despite initiating transformative moments, women in Bangladesh have repeatedly been denied authorship over the political narratives they help to shape. Their stories are celebrated only when stripped of complexity, their rage laundered into sacrifice. Recognition is extended, but power is withheld.

Still, today’s feminists are neither surprised nor unprepared. Drawing on the lessons of post-1971 erasure, they have responded by building robust testimonial infrastructures—encrypted archives, travelling exhibits, oral history workshops, and digital networks designed to preserve and circulate feminist memory (Siddiqui, 2024; Hirsch & Smith, 2002). These archives are not just preservational—they are pedagogical, epistemic, and tactical. They assert that history is not the purview of the state alone and that women will no longer wait to be written in. They will write themselves.

Moreover, feminists have reoriented their strategies from protest to movement-building. They have created community legal clinics, mentorship networks, feminist reading rooms, and trauma-informed organising spaces. These initiatives are driven by the understanding that revolutions are not won only in the streets—they are sustained in classrooms, kitchens, and care infrastructures. Mourning has become mobilisation. Memory has become a blueprint. The grief of 2024 has not faded—it has morphed into strategy.

The international community, while generous in symbolic recognition, has been complicit in this cycle of visibility without security. Awards and press releases do not substitute for safe houses, legal protections, or educational reforms (Mohanty, 2003). Transnational feminism must now move beyond applause to action—supporting relocation efforts, providing emergency funding, and applying diplomatic pressure on governments that criminalise dissent. Without infrastructure, recognition becomes another form of spectacle.

Despite these challenges, Bangladeshi women continue to resist erasure with quiet, defiant persistence. Underground organising persists in classrooms and homes. Girls expelled for protest involvement now lead feminist workshops in makeshift spaces. Mobile libraries circulate zines and historical testimonies. Feminist digital networks grow stronger, using encryption and diaspora solidarity to protect activists. What the state and society frame as retreat is, in fact, recalibration. Feminists are preparing for the long arc of justice—where temporary silence is not surrender, but preparation.

The history of women's resistance in Bangladesh is not linear. It moves in loops—through rupture, revival, and refusal. From the weaponisation of women's bodies in 1971 to the deliberate sidelining of women protestors in 2024, the timeline reflects persistent structural violence. But it also reveals enduring feminist resilience. Each generation has drawn upon the unfinished work of the last, converting trauma into testimony, memory into movement.

As Bangladesh moves forward under a new political administration, the task ahead is not merely one of institutional reform—it is one of historical redress. Feminist movements have shown what is possible when women lead with memory, strategy, and collective care. Now, the question is whether the state will finally listen. Will it move beyond symbolic inclusion toward structural justice? Will it dismantle the architectures that perpetuate gendered erasure?

The legacy of 2024, like that of 1971, does not reside in official reports or televised speeches—it lives in the archives women built, the testimonies they preserved, and the solidarities they nurtured. These are the blueprints for future organising. These are the seeds of the next revolution.

REFERENCES

- Abid, FA, Lehner, W., & Przybyszewska, M. (2024). *Women's roles in the 1971 Bangladesh genocide*. Global Human Rights Defence.
<https://www.ghrd.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Women-in-the-War-GHRD-Report-may-2024-1.pdf>
- Alam, S. (2024). In Bangladesh, protests are no longer about the quota system. Retrieved on March 30th, 2025, from
<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/7/23/bangladesh-protests-are-no-longer-about-the-quota-system>
- Ali, S. (2023). *Experiences of intergenerational trauma among second and third generation British Bangladeshis in relation to the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971) and immigration to Britain* (Doctoral thesis, University College London). UCL Discovery.
<https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10178863/>
- Begum, T. (2024, January 25). 'We lay like corpses. Then the raping began': 52 years on, Bangladesh's rape camp survivors speak out. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/apr/03/52-years-bangladesh-birangona-women-mass-rape-survivors>
- Chowdhury, E. H. (2016). War, Healing, and Trauma: Reading the Feminine Aesthetics and Politics in Rubaiyat Hossain's Meherjaan. *Feminist Formations*, 28(3), 27–45.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26776835>
- Clifford, C. (2008). Rape as a weapon of war and it's long-term effects on victims and society. In *Peace Women*. 7th Global Conference Violence and the Contexts of Hostility, Budapest, Hungary. Stop Modern Slavery and The Foreign Policy Association.
https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/vaw_rapeasaweaponofwar_stopmodernslavery_may2008_0.pdf
- Dandapat, S., & Tripathi, P. (2024). Tracing Memory, Trauma, and Childhood: The Bangladesh Liberation War in Sorayya Khan's Noor. *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 1–14.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17526272.2024.2413748>
- D'Costa, B. (2012). *Nationbuilding, gender, and war crimes in South Asia*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203850015>

- D'Costa, B., & Hossain, S. (2010). Redress for Sexual Violence Before the International Crimes Tribunal in Bangladesh: Lessons from History, and Hopes for the Future. *Criminal Law Forum*, 21(2), 331–359. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10609-010-9120-2>
- Debnath, A. (2017). The Bangladesh genocide: The plight of women. In S. Totten (Ed.), *Plight and fate of women during and following genocide* (pp. 47–66). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351298162-4>
- Dutta, S., & Dawar, T. (2024). Explainer: What's behind Bangladesh's deadly protests? Retrieved on March 30th, 2025, from <https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/explainer-whats-behind-bangladeshs-deadly-protests>
- Erum, N., & Corea, H. (2024). What is happening at the quota-reform protests in Bangladesh? Retrieved on March 27th, 2025, from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/what-is-happening-at-the-quota-reform-protests-in-bangladesh/>
- Foreign Policy. (2025, January 16). *Bangladesh's revolutionary women have disappeared*. Retrieved March 29, 2025, from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/01/16/bangladesh-revolution-women-student-protesters-hasina/>
- Frontline Defenders. (2024). Six Human Rights Defenders From Quota Reform Movement Released After Being Coerced To Announce The Withdrawal Of Protests. Retrieved on March 27th, 2025, from <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/six-human-rights-defenders-quota-reform-movement-released-after-being-coerced-announce-4>
- Human Rights Watch. (2025, January 27). *After the monsoon revolution: A roadmap to lasting security sector reform in Bangladesh*. Retrieved March 29, 2025, from <https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/01/27/after-monsoon-revolution/roadmap-lasting-security-sector-reform-bangladesh>
- Islam, A., & Kabir, F. (2024). Women get to work in Bangladesh. Retrieved on March 27th, 2025, from <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/10/08/women-get-to-work-in-bangladesh/>
- Islam, S. (2025). National dialogue highlights key steps to strengthen laws to prevent violence against women and girls in Bangladesh. Retrieved on March 28th, 2025, from <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/stories/feature-story/2025/01/national-dialogue-highlights-key-steps-to-strengthen-laws-to-prevent-violence-against-women-and-girls-in-bangladesh>

- Jones, T. (2024). Bangladesh: Protest Leaders Held “For Their Own Security” – DW – 07/27/2024. Retrieved on March 27th, 2025, from <https://www.dw.com/en/bangladesh-protest-leaders-held-for-their-own-security/a-69775790>
- Kamal, M., Shuvo, T. A., & Riccardi, M. (2024). *Sexual violence as a weapon of war from 1971 to the present: A critical analysis of the Bangladesh genocide and ongoing conflicts in Palestine, Ukraine and Sudan*. Global Human Rights Defence. https://ghrd.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/GHRD-Report_Sexual-Violence_Bangladesh-Campaign-nov-2024.pdf
- Meger, S. (2016). *Rape loot pillage: The political economy of sexual violence in armed conflict*. Oxford University Press. https://openlibrary.org/books/OL28606467M/Rape_Loot_Pillage
- Mookherjee, N. (2021). The Birangonas (War Heroines) in Bangladesh: Generative Resilience of Sexual Violence in Conflict through Graphic Ethnography. In J. N. Clark & M. Ungar (Eds.), *Resilience, Adaptive Peacebuilding and Transitional Justice: How Societies Recover after Collective Violence* (pp. 143–163). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mookherjee, N. (2024). Historicising the Birangona: Interrogating the politics of commemorating the wartime rape of 1971 in the context of the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh. In S. S. Pattanaik (Ed.), *Recounting the Memories of Bangladesh's Liberation War* (1st ed., pp. 125–134). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003387572>.
- Mookherjee, N. (2015). *The Spectral Wound: Sexual violence, public memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971*. Duke University Press. <http://dro.dur.ac.uk/20154/>
- Nahar, S. (2022). Teaching Narratives of Rape Survivors of the Bangladesh War in a Classroom: A survey. In L. Asaad & F. Hasanat (Eds.), *In the Crossfire of History: Women's War Resistance Discourse in the Global South* (pp. 155–167). Rutgers University Press. <https://doi.org/10.36019/9781978830240>.
- New Age Bangladesh. (2024, October 26). *Women's role in July-Aug mass uprising in Bangladesh largely ignored*. Retrieved March 30, 2025, from <https://www.newagebd.net/post/country/248756/womens-role-in-july-aug-mass-uprising-in-bangladesh-largely-ignored>

- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2025). Human Rights Violations and Abuses related to the Protests of July and August 2024 in Bangladesh. Retrieved on March 27th, 2025, from <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/bangladesh/ohchr-fftb-hr-violations-bd.pdf>
- Politics4Her. (2024, November 2). *Addressing systemic inequities in Bangladesh: A call for feminist revolution*. Retrieved March 30, 2025, from <https://www.politics4her.com/policy4her/addressing-systemic-inequities-inbangladesh-a-call-for-feminist-revolution>
- Rashid, A. (2018). *Gender, Nationalism, and Genocide in Bangladesh: Naristhan/Ladyland*. Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9780429437274>
- Rashid, M., & Sattar, M. (2025). Bangladeshi Women Turned A Movement Into A Revolution. Then They Disappeared. Retrieved on March 27th, 2025, from <https://fullerproject.org/story/bangladeshi-women-turned-a-movement-into-a-revolution-then-they-disappeared/>
- Sabur, S. (2024). *This is not my revolution: Aspiration, erasure, and the political field in the post-July uprising Bangladesh*. Positions Politics. Retrieved March 29, 2025, from <https://positionspolitics.org/seuty-sabur-this-is-not-my-revolution-aspiration-erasure-and-the-political-field-in-the-post-july-uprising-bangladesh/>
- Samanta, D., & Gilliaert, N.-L. (2024). *The lasting results of terror: How sexual violence impacts families 53 years after the Bangladesh genocide*. Global Human Rights Defence. https://ghrd.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/The-lasting-results-of-terror_-how-sexual-violence-impacts-families-53-years-after-the-Bangladesh-genocide-nov-2024.pdf
- Saikia, Y. (2011). *Women, War, and the making of Bangladesh*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394280>
- Sajjad, T. (2024). Bangladesh's protests explained. Retrieved on March 30th, 2025, from <https://www.american.edu/sis/news/20240806-bangladesh-protests-explained.cfm>
- Save the Children. (2024). Save the children in Bangladesh formally launches SWOCCHAR project to strengthen women-led organizations. Retrieved on March 27th, 2025, from <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/save-children-bangladesh-formally-launches-swocchar-project-strengthen-women-led-organizations>
- Siddiqui, T. (2024, August 30). *Carry on sisters, the revolution continues*. Shuddhashar. Retrieved March 31, 2025, from <https://shuddhashar.com/carry-on-sisters-the-revolution-continues/>

- Sultan, M. (2024, August 27). *Let's seize the opportunity to further gender equity in Bangladesh*. Institute of Development Studies. Retrieved March 31, 2025, from <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/lets-seize-the-opportunity-to-further-gender-equity-in-bangladesh/>
- The Business Standard. (2024, November 20). *How women changed July revolution*. Retrieved March 30, 2025, from <https://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/how-women-changed-july-revolution-916611>
- The Business Standard. (2024, November 5). *Where are July uprising's women?*. Retrieved March 31, 2025, from <https://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/where-are-july-uprisings-women-1086816>
- The Daily Star. (2025, February 12). *Horrific details of July massacre strengthen the cause of justice*. The Daily Star. Retrieved March 30, 2025, from <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/editorial/news/horrific-details-july-massacre-strengthen-the-cause-justice-3823776>
- The Daily Star. (2024, December 15). *Sidelined and forgotten*. Retrieved March 29, 2025, from <https://www.thedailystar.net/weekend-read/news/sidelined-and-forgotten-3753891>
- The Gender Security Project. (2024, 2 September). *CRSV: Bangladesh (1971)*. <https://www.gendersecurityproject.com/crsv-observatory-cases/crsv-bangladesh-1971>
- United Nations Bangladesh. (2025, February 12). *Bangladesh: UN report finds brutal, systematic repression of protests, calls for justice for serious rights violations*. Retrieved March 30, 2025, from <https://bangladesh.un.org/en/289108-bangladesh-un-report-finds-brutal-systematic-repression-protests-calls-justice-serious>
- United Nations Bangladesh. (2025). European Union and UN Women Sign €4.8 million agreement to advance gender equality in Bangladesh in Bangladesh. Retrieved on March 27th, 2025, from <https://bangladesh.un.org/en/287858-european-union-and-un-women-sign-%E2%82%AC48-million-agreement-advance-gender-equality-bangladesh>
- Zonta International. (2025). Women's Reforms Commission Forum highlights need for stronger protections for women and girls. Retrieved on March 30th, 2025, from https://www.zonta.org/Web/Web/Programs/Mission_in_Action/Share_Your_Story/WomenReformsCommissionforumhighlightsneedforstrongerprotectionsforwomenandgirls.aspx