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Activist Public Relations in Developing Contexts

**Activist Public Relations in Developing Contexts Where Rules and Norms Collide: Insights
from Two Activist Organizations against Gender-based Violence in Bangladesh**

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Abstract

Purpose

This study broadens our understanding of activist public relations in developing contexts. The power of formal laws and policies in developing contexts diminishes by traditional norms and authorities, and therefore, a great deal of activist public relations efforts is devoted to controlling destructive norms and informal authorities. Activist public relations literature often assumes powerful formal institutions that are capable to control behaviors. We challenge this assumption by exploring activist public relations against gender-based violence (GV) in Bangladesh.

Design/methodology/approach

This study took an interpretative and social constructionist approach to examine public relations practices of two GV activist organizations in Bangladesh. The data were collected through observation, interviews, and document analysis of four campaigns. The data were coded in NVivo.

Findings

The data show that the activist organizations used public relations campaigns for informal institutional work. The campaigns included educating various publics, and storytelling to build supporting identities, norms, and networks to address GV in Bangladesh.

Originality

The findings suggest that activist public relations in developing contexts carry out institutional work and create informal institutions to compensate for the formal institutional voids. In addition, this paper highlights the role of public relations in institutional work, to create and maintain contributory institutions or disrupt disturbing institutions.

Keywords: Institutional voids, activist organization, informal institutional work, gender-based violence, public relations

**Activist Public Relations in Developing Contexts Where Rules and Norms Collide: Insights
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Following the call for the activist viewpoint in public relations scholarship (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000), there has been an increasing number of studies on activist public relations (cf. Taylor et al., 2001; Uysal & Yang, 2013, Xiong et al., 2019). However, a few studies have empirically examined activist public relations in non-western contexts (cf. Allagui, 2017; Benecke & Oksiutycz, 2015; Han & Zhang, 2009; Kaur, 2015; Yang & Taylor, 2010). Non-western developing cultures are characterized by formal institutional voids (Bothello et al., 2019). Formal institutional voids are features of environments in which formal laws and regulations are overruled by social or traditional norms and authorities (informal institutions) (Mair & Marti, 2009), such as *chiefs*¹ in Africa (Ray & Reddy, 2003), autonomous indigenous communities in Bolivia (Tockman, Cameron, & Plata, 2015), *samaj*² and *Salish*³ in Bangladesh (Islam, 2002), and *adat*⁴ in Indonesia (Hauser-Schäublin, 2013). Therefore, the state laws and regulations in developing contexts are not as powerful as their western counterparts, and do not effectively address societal issues, especially if those laws and regulations contradict traditional institutions.

This study broadens our understanding of activist public relations in developing contexts. Activist public relations in developing contexts needs to go beyond those in western contexts to address societal issues. The power of formal laws and policies in developing contexts diminishes by traditional and informal institutions (Migdel, 1988); therefore, a great deal of activist public relations efforts focus on closing the gap between supportive formal laws and policies and non-adhering obstructive informal norms and authorities.

Gender-based violence (GV) in Bangladesh is characterized by formal institutional voids (Acid Survivors Foundation, 2014; Anwary, 2007; Chowdhury, 2007; Huq, 2003; Mair & Marti,

¹ Traditional leaders of indigenous people in Africa (Ray and Reddy, 2003)

² The indigenous institutions that use traditional and religious rules to govern villages in Bangladesh (Islam, 2002).

³ The judicial system by which *samaj* resolves local conflicts and punishes offenders (Islam, 2002).

⁴ Traditional norms and values in Bali (Hauser-Schäublin, 2013)

2009). GV is conceived as “physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (Article 1, United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993, see United Nations, December 1993). This broader concept entails sexual abuses or assaults, acid-violence, rape, family violence, female genital mutilation, human trafficking, and dowry (Baker, 2007; Chowdhury, 2007; Cole & Phillips, 2008). Different forms of GV such as rape, acid-violence, dowry, family violence, and human trafficking are prevalent in Bangladesh (Anwary, 2007; Islam et al., 2021; Khan, 2015; Young & Hassan, 2016). A survey conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics in 2015 reported that of the 19,987 married women interviewed, 49.6% had experienced physical violence and 27.3% had faced sexual violence in their lifetime (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

Despite the severity of the issue, local GV disputes (regarding various incidents such as acid-violence, domestic violence, and sexual assault) are mainly intervened by informal authorities namely, *Salish* (local village councils who are predominately male), independent from the state-led justice system. *Salish* or local village councils comprise village elders who pass judgments, following *Fatwa*⁵ (religious edicts) which is normally patriarchal (Acid Survivors Foundation, 2014; Khondker, 2015). Many judgments in *Salish* are conceived as male-biased, originating from the power exercise of rural leaders (Khan, 2014).

There are state laws to support women against GV, such as the Prevention of Women and Children Repression Act 2000 which covers several components such as sexual assault and acid-violence (Khan & Karim, 2017). However, women mostly do not report abuse (Human Rights Watch, 2020). In addition, law enforcement is ineffective in many cases when GV victims’ complainants are overlooked or underrated by the police (Khan, 2014), because of the dominance of patriarchal norms over formal rules, even in the state organizations (Chowdhury, 2009).

⁵ Fatwas are understood as “a legal opinion of a lawful person or authority” (Ahmad, 2009, p. 135). Villagers in a country like Bangladesh respect the decisions of the elders and local leaders, which in turn validate the decisions that come through fatwas given by these local leaders.

GV activist organizations in Bangladesh focus on raising awareness, empowering survivors, and creating networks of support for survivors and women at risk. For example, Acid Survivors Foundation (an NGO to prevent acid attacks and support survivors) raises awareness about acid-violence in schools, provide the survivors with legal and psychological support and education, and empowers the survivors to act as spokespersons of the organization (<https://acidsurvivors.org/>); or Ain o Salish Kendra (a human and women's rights organization) organizes rallies to raise awareness on GV and develops networks of civil rights organizations to prevent GV in various districts of Bangladesh (<http://www.askbd.org/ask/>).

This study uses institutional theory, particularly the concepts of institutional voids (Bothello et al., 2019) and institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) to explore public relations practices of the two activist organizations above (Acid Survivors Foundation and Ain o Salish Kendra) in Bangladesh. We examine how activist public relations in institutional voids (in which informal authorities and cultural norms, rather than formal laws and policies, rule communities) engages in institutional work to develops institutions to fill the gap between formal institutional support (laws, policies, and state organizations) and established informal authorities (cultural values, and local or religious mechanisms).

In the following sections, *first*, the literature on institutional theory and institutional work is reviewed. *Second*, the method is explained, and the sampled campaigns and participants are described. *Third*, the results on how the activist organizations practice public relations and engaged in institutional work are reported. *Fourth*, the findings are discussed to inform activist public relations in non-western developing contexts. *Fifth*, the paper concludes with a summary of the key findings, limitations, and directions forward. We begin with a literature review on institutional theory and institutional work.

Institutions and Activist Public Relations

Institutional theory is one of the key theories in organizational research. Although there is a strong link between institutional theory and public relations, the theory is neglected in public relations research (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013). In this section, we provide an overview of institutional theory and explain how institutional theory informs activist public relations.

Institutional theory conceptualizes environments as formal and informal institutions (North, 1990). Institutions are socially constructed governing principles that determine the appropriate attitudes and practices and therefore, shape individual and organizational interactions and behaviors (p. 4). Formal institutions are written rules, policies, and laws, or organizations (created by the state or legitimized the law), and informal institutions are cultural norms and conventions such as traditions, taboos, and customs (p. 46). For example, formal institutions are national laws by which courts judge GV incidents or how the police are required by the rules to file GV cases; informal institutions are how normally society treats women, or how people evaluate GV incidents. Individuals and organizations that do not conform to institutions jeopardize their legitimacy (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013). For example, organizations that violate laws and regulations may be sanctioned by the legal system; or organizations that do not follow normative or cultural practices may lose their organizational partners or employees. Likewise, activist public relations needs to be mindful of formal and informal institutions around issues of interest. Activist public relations must tap into shared meanings to gain support from the environment (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2017).

Formal and informal institutions coexist, but the relationship between the two sets of institutions varies in different environments. In many non-western contexts, informal institutions dominate formal institutions for controlling individual and organizational behaviors. The dominance of informal institutions is called formal institutional voids (Bothello et al., 2019; Casson et al., 2010; Mair & Marti, 2009). In other words, in formal institutional voids, the inadequacy of formal institutions (rules and regulations) is compensated by informal institutions (norms, culture, traditions) (Bothello et al., 2019; Mair & Marti, 2009) to order behaviors. For example, formal institutional voids are manifested in the high power of traditional and religious rules instead of the court to judge GV incidents or following societal norms instead of regulations by service providers such as the police or hospitals.

Formal institutional voids have implications for activist public relations. Where culture and traditions rule an issue, many activist public relations practices need to address informal institutions. In Bangladesh, where informal institution such as *Salish* uses *Fatwa* to judge GV cases illegally, and the government has been impotent to stop *Salish* (for example, victims do not report the incidents due

to fear of the social stigma or law enforcers follow patriarchal norms instead of the regulations) activist public relations cannot solely rely on the laws, policies, and the government. Therefore, many activist public relations practices deal with informal institutions without the intervention of the government. The concept of informal institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) explains activist public relations practices to change informal institutions. The next section explains the informal institutional work framework.

Informal Institutional Work

Institutional work details how organizations or individuals disrupt, create, or maintain institutions through rhetorical and relational communicative processes (Fredriksson et al., 2013; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Activist organizations leverage public relations to disrupt, create, or maintain institutions. Activist public relations challenges the status quo by disrupting destructive institutions, such as detrimental corporate practices (cf. Thompson, 2018) or racism (cf. Hon, 2016). Activist public relations also engages in creating new institutions, for example, establishing a new cognitive framework to remove the social stigma related to an issue (cf. McKeever, 2021) or building a strong informal network with the media to influence the public agenda (Uysal & Yang, 2013). Further, activist public relations maintains institutions that support their efforts, such as advocating an established movement that aligns with an issue (cf. Hon, 2016) or leveraging existing negative attitudes towards a corporation (Veil, et al., 2015). Therefore, activist organizations are characterized as institutional workers (Hou, 2020).

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) introduce forms of informal institutional work. *Constructing supporting identities* refers to building identities to support an issue. Identity building is a key concept in activist public relations. For example, the literature shows how activist groups develop positive collective identities for vulnerable groups by creating social media campaigns (Cizek, 2017), or how constructing active social identity (rather than a passive victim identity) is necessary for collective action (Mairescu, 2017), or how forming a new identity for a disease by media advocacy reduces stigmatization to cure the disease (McKeever, 2021).

Creating new norms is about developing supportive norms and behaviors. Building culture is central to public relations. Activist public relations builds new norms and cultures by initializing

engagement and dialogue around societal issues and encouraging conversation among opposing views (Benecke & Oksiutycz, 2015; Kent & Taylor, 2011).

Constructing networks deals with creating networks of individuals or organizations to support an issue. The literature has conceptualized various networking approaches. For example, activist organizations may build up online networks using shared hashtags (hashtag activism) (Xiong et al., 2019), or create media platforms to connect publics with shared concerns (Benecke & Oksiutycz, 2015). Activist organizations may also leverage the power of online forums (which include networks of like-minded people) to raise awareness about related issues (Hearit, 1999), or build different networks (in terms of diversity and the strength of relationships) depending on how their issues are perceived by publics (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2017). In addition, activist organizations may build large social networks (including journalists) on social media to develop the power to get their issues onto the public agenda (Uysal & Yang, 2013).

Mimicking refers to linking new norms and beliefs to existing beliefs. Activist organizations tap into the established shared meanings in society to support their cause. For example, activists might highlight the national culture to fight practices of multi-national corporations (Han & Zhang, 2009), or relate the national victory in the war to the employers' support of infected employees (Anderson, 2019), or connect an incident to an established social movement (Hon, 2016).

Educating touches on improving knowledge and skills. For example, in conservative environments activist public relations may focus on educating publics rather than organizing against the state (Yang & Taylor, 2010); or activist organizations may use education to de-stigmatize a disease (giving information about how to prevent the disease rather than talking about lifestyles that are likely to transmit the disease) (McKeever, 2021). *Theorizing* is about creating new concepts and rationalizing. Activist public relations may use research, facts, and reports to justify their issues and their proposal to resolve the issues (Woods, 2019).

Valorizing and demonizing provide examples of what is accepted and what is not accepted and evaluate people or organizations based on the level of their submissions to the accepted norms. For example, activist organizations may delegitimize their targets by referring to the targets' unethical behaviors (e.g., green washing, unethical partnerships, inhumane behaviors, etc.) (Woods, 2019).

Mythologizing refers to narrating history and telling positive stories for supporting norms and negative stories for destructive norms. For example, food activist organizations may tap into the history and traditions of food production to fight against genetically engineered food (Woods, 2019). Stories are strong persuasive tools for activist organizations (Kent, 2015).

Routinizing is about introducing new processes and routines (beyond stories) to establish new norms and beliefs. For example, educating is a form of routinizing; or RSPCA (an animal rights activist organization) creates “RSPCA approved certificates” to build relationship with those chicken producers that meet the organization’s animal welfare standards.

Informal institutional work including the rhetorical and relational strategies above provides activist groups with approaches to cope with the formal institutional void. Activist organizations take the informal institutional work approaches to build communities (as alternatives to the state organizations) to support their cause. Hallahan (2004) argues that public relations is about building communities. Activist organizations in formal institutional voids build communities by engaging existing communities (e.g., by building supporting identities or linking new norms to communities’ established values), nurturing the communities they are part of (e.g., by educating or routinizing new norms), and organizing new communities (e.g., by building supporting networks) around societal issues.

In brief, activist organizations in developing contexts face formal institutional voids around their issues and therefore engage in informal institutional work to build supporting communities to fill the voids. Thus, in this study, we aim to answer two research questions:

RQ1. What characterizes activist public relations in formal institutional voids? and,

RQ2. How does activist public relations engage in informal institutional work?

The data collection, data analysis, and sampling methods are described in the next section.

Method

To answer the research questions posed above, an interpretative and social constructionist approach was taken. In the interpretative approach, researchers use inductive methods in natural settings (Daymon & Holloway, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Hennink et al., 2011) to interpret the

social world and uncover contextual meanings in under-theorized areas (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, pp.102-104).

Case studies were developed to understand public relations activities of the activist organizations in their campaign sites, textual materials, and websites to address GV. The social constructionist epistemology allowed us to understand how the activist organizations constructed social realities and created discourses through the production and dissemination of texts and public relations activities in their campaigns.

Ethics approval for this study was sought and gained from the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee. Document analysis, observation, and semi-structured interviews were used to capture public relations practices of the organizations. The first author conducted the observations of public relations campaigns and played a sense-making role in interpreting data coming from different sources. Discourse analysis method was used to analyze the data to explore concepts and messages constructed through the use of language in communication (Daymon & Holloway, 2011).

To select participants, a purposive sampling technique was followed. The authors used their judgments to screen potential participants and sample the participants that were compatible with the research objectives and methodology (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). A two-fold approach was adopted to form the sample: first, the activist organizations were selected, and second, the individuals were sampled. The individuals were either members of the activist organizations or audience members who took part in the sampled campaigns.

Two activist organizations were chosen. Both activist organizations had exclusive roles in organizing public relations campaigns against GV in different parts of Bangladesh. Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF) operates exclusively on the issue of acid-violence and Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) deals with manifold issues of GV such as dowry, child marriage, domestic violence, human trafficking, and sexual violence. The two activist organizations are described below.

Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF)

ASF was established in 1999 in Bangladesh, organizing campaigns to raise awareness about acid-violence and to provide medical and psychological supports to victims. Acid-violence is a form

of gender-based violence, as women and children are victimized in majority in this violence. It “involves intentional acts of violence in which perpetrators throw, spray, or pour acid onto victims’ faces and bodies” (Avon Global Center for Women and Justice, 2011, p.1). It is said in the documentation of Acid Survivors Foundation that from 1999 to 2016, 3347 acid-violence incidents took place in Bangladesh, resulting in 3712 victims (Acid Survivors Foundation, 2016, p.2). ASF organizes meetings with policymakers and administrative officials to develop preventive strategies to stop acid-violence and to empower victims in their respective communities. ASF provides legal assistance, training, and financial support for the rehabilitation and reintegration of survivors. Data was collected through reading ASF’s annual reports and website, observing a practical campaign, interviewing the campaign’s participants, and reading campaign materials.

Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK)

Unlike ASF, the scope of ASK’s activities is larger. Since 1986, ASK has been working on GV including several GV-related human rights issues such as child rights, minority rights, and labor rights. It has developed 17 different organizational units. Of them, four units are directly related to activism against GV. The Gender and Social Justice Unit (GSJ) is widely operating to raise awareness against GV. Data was collected through reading the unit’s annual reports and reviewing its website, observing a campaign, interviewing the campaign’s participants, and reading campaign materials.

Campaign Sites and Audiences

In total, four campaigns were chosen for this study. Two campaigns from ASF: the advocacy campaigns for acid traders and the reintegration of victims into their communities, and two campaigns from ASK: the advocacy campaigns for partnering with local NGOs and for organizing formal support for victims. The data for ASF’s advocacy campaigns for acid traders was observed while the data for the campaign on the reintegration of victims into communities was collected through interviews with members of the activist organizations and inlaying documents. The observation of ASF campaign took two hours with 25 audience members. It is important to note that the audience members of the observed campaign of ASF followed the discussions made by NGO activists, slide presentation, and guests. The data of the ASK’s campaigns were collected through interviewing activists who ran these campaigns and analyzing documents. For sampling individuals, we relied on

the campaign officers’ recommendations. Ten participants were recruited from the campaigns’ audiences and the activist organizations. Table I describes the individual participants. All participant data has been de-identified with English labels. The results are explained in the next section.

Table I. Individual participants

Participant (P)	Organization	Gender	Age	Professional Role
P1– Activist A	ASF	Male	35	Project Manager (NGO Professional)
P2 – Activist B	ASF	Male	37	Victim-cum-activist and NGO professional responsible for PR
P3 – Activist C	ASF	Female	34	Project Manager (NGO Professional)
P4 – Activist D	ASK	Female	49	Senior Deputy Director, Gender Justice Unit (NGO Professional & lawyer)
P5 – Activist E	ASK	Female	41	Senior Deputy Director, Mediation Unit (NGO Professional)
P6 – Activist F	ASK	Male	38	Media and international advocacy Unit (NGO Professional)
P7 – Activist G	ASK	Male	43	Senior Coordinator, Human Rights Awareness Unit (HRA), ASK
P8– Audience I	ASF Advocacy Campaign	Male	27	Battery businessman using acid in business
P9 – Audience J	ASF Advocacy Campaign	Male	38	NGO professional in a local NGO
P10 – Audience P	ASK Advocacy Campaign	Female	39	Advocate and activist in Netrokona district

Coding

To break down and conceptualize the data, an open coding technique was used in NVivo data coding software, to capture the public relations practices of the organizations. Interview transcripts and observation data were coded in NVivo while manual coding technique was used to code data from different documents. To achieve reliability on the content and number of codes, the inter-coder reliability method was used (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Three of the authors checked the codes of a sample of interviews to ensure there was consistency in coding. In the majority of instances, the authors agreed on the assigned codes. Where differences arose, the raw data were analyzed to enable the authors to reach consensus. After coding the public relations practices of the organizations, the codes were compared with the informal institutional work variables below.

Institutional Work Variables

The forms of institutional work were operationalized in the GV context based on the literature by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006). After the data was inductively thematically analyzed, two of the authors undertook a deductive coding process that examined how these themes aligned with institutional work variables as follows: (i) *Constructing supporting identities* is any activity that changes the role (identity) of actors (individual and organizations), (ii) *Creating new norms* is any activity that changes how actors behave normally, (iii) *Constructing networks* is any activity that changes the relationships between actors, (iv) *Mimicking* is any activity that relates new practices to actors' existing practices and beliefs, (v) *Educating* is any activity to build actors' knowledge and skills. *Theorizing* is any activity that elaborates cause and effect, (vi) *Valorizing and demonizing* is any rhetorical activity that exemplifies good and bad, (vii) *Mythologizing* is any storytelling activity, and (viii) *Routinizing* is any activity to routinize new processes. The next section reports the results of this process.

Results

To answer the two research questions (RQ1. What characterizes activist public relations in formal institutional voids? and RQ2. How does activist public relations engage in informal institutional work?), we detail the public relations activities of the activist organizations and how those activities are related to informal institutional work variables. We categorize the public relations practices based on how they engaged in informal institutional work. We begin by reporting the practices to construct supporting identities and norms.

Constructing Supporting Identities and Norms, and Routinizing Norms

ASF and ASK practiced public relations to change the influential actors' identities and norms in the context of GV. The identity and norm-building public relations activities are reported here.

In *the advocacy campaign for acid traders*, ASF aimed to stop the illegal sale of acid by acid-traders to make acid inaccessible for potential perpetrators. The campaign materials included a banner, a legal guidebook, "Voice Magazine" and a small multimedia documentary. The campaign made the participating acid traders feel responsible for acid-violence incidents.

The acid traders learned about details of legal issues associated with selling and using acid in their daily businesses. Audience Member I stated that he could realize various aspects of the issue

including the importance of having a license and how to get and renew the license, which allows the acid sellers to buy and sell acid for industrial purposes. The campaign educated the audience on maintaining a register book to monitor the sales and purchase of acid to authorized or licensed customers. A police officer, who was an invited guest in that event, also talked about the issue. Audience Member J and I developed an awareness of this aspect followed by their participation in the campaign. Audience Member J stated:

“What I have got from this meeting is that acid sellers should know all information about buyers and for this purpose, they should maintain a register. Acid should not be sold to unauthorized persons – the sellers should be careful in selling and should have license.”

The audience members realized that a stock register would help them track buyers if any acid-violence occurred in a place nearby. The acid traders discussed their firmness and carefulness in acid selling activities so that acid does not go to the hands of violent people and acid attacks are prevented in their community.

In *the advocacy campaign for reintegrating victims into the community*, ASF provided educational programs to empower survivors to reintegrate into their respective communities and to actively seek support from the government (Acid Survivors Foundation, 2013). ASF trained survivors to act as spokespersons of the organization. ASF organized communicative spaces in which the acid survivors spoke before local government officials, media, civil society, and communities to voice their problems and needs. Activist A stated, “When a survivor says something, it is more effective and more acceptable than what I say before the representatives of civil societies and general people - the reason is that their voice makes it clearer.”

In *the advocacy campaign to partner with local NGOs*, ASK empowered members of local NGOs to protect human rights in their respective communities. ASK advised members of local NGOs about their legal rights and how they could protest *Fatwa*, which was used illegally in village-level judgments. Activist D of ASK stated that *Fatwa* was legally barred in Bangladesh by a verdict of the High Court. Nevertheless, people including local leaders used *Fatwa* in the villages of Bangladesh to punish women and men while executing judgment on various issues. Since many people were not well-informed of their legal rights and law, *Fatwa* immorally victimized women, as Activist D

commented. ASK aimed to brief the members of local NGOs about the illegitimacy and illegality of *Fatwa* which was used in *Salish* to punish “sinners.” Consequently, the ASK’s village-level activists took part in *Salish* to observe the hearing and judgments and provide advice.

ASK’s advocacy and training activities transform the members of local NGOs into activists in those rural places so that the activists act in the absence of ASK and formal authorities. A booklet titled “My Work, My Voice” (Khan et al., 2012) documented these practical instances on how members of Manobadhikar Songrokkhan Porishad (MSP) took initiatives for mediation and prevention of various GV cases in different villages of Bangladesh. In the booklet, a village-level activist discussed how she stopped a child marriage between a 15-year-old girl and a 17-year-old boy in 2012 in her village, Fulkocha. Upon receiving the news about the child marriage, the activist rushed to the event and informed the girl and boy’s parents about the legal and health consequences of child marriage. The activist also warned the parents that she would inform legal authorities if the marriage was held. The parents, then, decided to stop the marriage and wait till the boy and girl matured.

In *the advocacy campaign to organize formal support for victims*, ASK organized campaigns to persuade formal stakeholders such as lawyers, the police, and journalists to support GV victims. ASK informed stakeholders about the issue to prevent the re-victimization of GV victims (Ain o Salish Kendra, 2011; Alam, 2014). For example, by organizing advocacy meetings and workshops, ASK advised a group of lawyers, named Manobadhikar Ainjibi Porishads (MAP), about human rights issues and corrected responses to legal needs of people or victims in poverty residing in rural areas. These communicative activities informed the lawyers about the availability of legal aid funds from the government for victims of GV with information on how to access the fund. MAP is now operating in ten areas of Bangladesh to provide free legal services to victims of GV. The next section presents the network-building practices.

Constructing Networks

ASF and ASK’s public relations campaigns built supporting networks of actors. The public relations activities that formed social and organizational networks are reported here.

In the advocacy campaign for reintegrating victims into the community, ASF organized district-level conferences in Dinajpur district with the Deputy Commissioner, representatives from the Police Department, and the Social Welfare Department, as well as journalists and local union council members, to connect acid victims with local administrations.

In the advocacy campaign to partner with local NGOs, ASK utilized workshops, advocacy campaigns, and small group meetings to invite the members of Manobadhikar Songrokkhan Porishad (MSP), a human rights protection association, and Manobadhikar Nari Samaj (MNS), a women's human rights protection organization to protest together against human rights violations and GV incidents. ASK mobilized villagers, who are also members of the local NGOs, to operate in coordination with ASK as village-level activists to resist any GV incidents including child marriages in their respective communities. The next section presents the educating public relations practices.

Educating, Theorizing, and Valorizing and Demonizing

ASF and ASK applied informative and instructive public relations in their campaigns. The related public relations activities are reported below.

In the advocacy campaign for acid traders, ASF's activists provided information about the regulations regarding the purchase and distribution of acid. The activists referred to the Acid-Offences Prevention Act 2002 and the Acid Control Act 2002 (to see the Act, Acid Survivors Foundation, 2014).

In the advocacy campaign for reintegrating victims into the community, ASF trained participating survivors in groups on how to secure their rights, how to gain self-reliance by engaging in professional careers, and how to get in contact with the right officials. They also taught the participants how to talk as spokespersons of ASF. ASF organizes training activities strategically to give voice to acid survivors.

In the advocacy campaign to partner with local NGOs, ASK advised members of local NGOs about their legal rights to empower them to protect human rights in their respective communities.

In the advocacy campaign to organize formal support for victims, ASK conducted meetings with other stakeholders such as senior police officers, physicians, administrative officers, legal professionals, and members of civil society to inform them about limitations of their services to

victims of GV and motivate them to work cooperatively to provide proper supports when a GV victim lodged a case in a police station. It is often heard that victims that report their cases to the police are not provided with adequate support by the officials. The next section presents the mythologizing public relations practices.

Mythologizing

ASF and ASK used mythologizing public relations to educate the influential publics. The storytelling public relations activities are reported below.

In *the advocacy campaign for acid traders*, ASF showed a documentary about the causes of acid-violence, its mental and physical impact on the victims, preventative measures, and the laws to control the sale of acid in markets. Audience Member I expressed that he was also sensing the same pain as an acid victim felt. He said:

“When acid victims survive, they survive like a dead human – this is what I feel. People in society may feel worried or the children may worry after seeing their faces. Even, victims may feel worried after seeing their acid-affected faces, which in turn may serve as a barrier to find a job and to get married to someone.”

In *the advocacy campaign to organize formal support for victims*, ASK organized seminars to uncover examples of investigation reports in which discriminatory language is used about victims of GV (Ain o Salish Kendra, 2013). The information was shared and discussed to raise awareness about the necessity of proper investigation and reporting of GV incidents. ASK told stories about how police officers often tried to support perpetrators by removing perpetrators’ names from investigation reports; or how medical centers provided slow and negligible responses to issue medical reports regarding GV incidents to the police. The next section clarifies how the results contribute to our understanding of activist public relations in developing contexts.

Discussion

Results to the research questions address a knowledge gap in how activist public relations operates in non-western developing contexts or in other words in formal institutional voids. The first research question (RQ1. What characterizes activist public relations in formal institutional voids?), focuses on the influence of institutional voids on activist public relations. We argue that activist

organizations in institutional voids engage in informal institutional work. Institutional voids imply that social norms and behaviors are guided by traditions rather than the law and public policies. Therefore, dealing with laws and policies or the government does not solve the issue, because they do not have the power to change norms and behaviors adequately. To change attitudes, norms, and behaviors of key publics in developing contexts, activist public relations takes a bottom-up approach to build communities of support and informal institutions such as supportive networks, identities, and knowledge and skills among key publics, to compensate for the formal institutional voids. For example, ASK developed informal control (rather than formal policing) in the villages by educating and building network with local individual activists to control *Salish* (local village councils). Activist public relations in institutional voids moves beyond changing formal policies and laws, to build informal institutions and communities. The preoccupation of activist public relations in informal institutional work may also limit its capacity to advocate for improved laws and policies.

The second research question (RQ2. How does activist public relations engage in informal institutional work?) addresses how informal institutional work provides a framework for activist public relations in institutional voids. The results evidence how the campaigns take part in various forms of informal institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). For example, in the campaign for acid traders, ASF *developed new norms* among the acid traders so that they followed regulations and record their sales and customers. ASF used emotional stories to *mythologize* the negative effects of the irregular selling of acid on victims. Similarly, in the reintegration campaign, ASF voiced the victims' needs to the officials to *change norms* in the service provider organizations in response to acid victims. ASF also brought the service providers together and *constructed networks* of support for victims. ASF *educated victims to change their identities* to be self-reliant and actively seek their rights from service provider organizations. In addition, in the campaign to partner with NGOs, ASK *created networks* of local activists in various villages; *educated* them and *changed their identity* to act in the absence of formal authorities in rural areas and do *informal policing* over illegal traditions (*Salish* and *Fatwa*).

This paper develops our understanding of how activist public relations influences, and is influenced by institutions (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013). Activist public relations scholarship has

clarified the role of public relations in controlling the state or influencing laws and public policies (Sommerfeldt, 2013). However, in contexts where formal institutions are weak and state organizations are not capable enough, advocacy to change public policies is not the end of the story. Activist organizations need to informally institutionalize supporting attitudes, norms, and behaviors. For example, when victims do not report incidents to the police, activist public relations may build informal networks of local individual activists to conduct informal control and report offenses to the police; or when service provider organizations stick to unfair traditions such as patriarchal behaviors rather than the law, activist public relations creates informal networks of legal firms to connect and register victims to the legal system.

We discussed the impact of formal institutional voids on activist public relations and how activist organizations leverage public relations to engage in informal institutional work to fill the voids. The findings evidence how the institutional work strategies are communicative (and fit into rhetorical and relational public relations practices) and provide a holistic approach for activist public relations. Previous studies have studied or referred to individual forms of institutional work, such as building identities (cf. Cizek, 2017, McKeever, 2021) and networks (cf. Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2017; Uysal & Yang, 2013), mimicking (Han & Zhang, 2009; Hon, 2016), educating (cf. Yang & Taylor, 2010; McKeever, 2021), and mythologizing (Kent, 2015). However, the literature has failed to incorporate institutional contexts to explain those strategies.

In a broader view, this study sheds light on the understudied relationship between public relations and institutional environment (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013; Fredriksson et al., 2013). The literature highlights the importance of environment using the key concept of shared zones of meanings (Heath & Palenchar, 2000; Henderson, 2005; Jiang & Ni, 2009) which highlights cognitive institutions around issues (how issues are symbolically perceived by highly involved publics (Scott, 2010)). However, the impact of regulative and normative institutions and the interaction among institutions are not sufficiently taken into consideration by the activist public relations studies.

This study informs activist public relations in developing countries and explains how activist communication may focus more on building informal institutions and forming bottom-up communities of support rather than changing and relying on top-down formal policies, laws, and

regulations to indirectly influence their target communities. However, the insights are not limited to developing countries but also apply to those sub-contexts of western countries, which do not follow the mainstream institutions. For example, indigenous or ethnic communities within western contexts may not be fully supported by formal institutions, and therefore, follow their own traditions (rather than connecting to supporting formal institutions). State organizations and regulations or corporations are not only sources of power in societies that need to be targeted by activist public relations (cf. Sommerfeldt, 2013), but established informal institutions such as traditional norms and values exert power over communities and may discriminate against some community members (e.g., based on gender). Informal institutional work provides activist organizations with a framework to adopt community-based and bottom-up solutions in those communities.

Conclusion

This qualitative study sets out to broaden our understanding of the relationship between public relations and institutions. Previously, the literature has conceptually and empirically linked public relations to institutional work. For example, Fredriksson (2014) has conceptualized crisis communication as institutional work; or Hou and Zhu (2012) have used the institutional work framework to explain how public relations practitioners in China construct the field of public relations in response to the peculiar Chinese normative institutions. This study furthers the relationship between public relations and institutional work and frames activist public relations as institutional work (Hou, 2020).

Specifically, the findings explain how activist public relations operates in institutional voids which characterize non-western developing contexts, and also entail how institutional work explains activist public relations in institutional voids, using gender-based violence in Bangladesh as an example. Gender-based violence activism in Bangladesh is a good example due to its cultural sensitivities and the tendency for violence against women to be minimized in patriarchal institutions thus leaving a void in the government's response (Ali et al., 2016). We explain how activist public relations in Bangladesh (characterized by formal institutional voids) goes beyond formal policies and laws and creates informal institutions such as supporting identities, networks, norms, and informal policing mechanisms to assist formal institutions. This is fundamentally different from activist public

relations in Western contexts where laws are more reliably enforced by governments and in most cases, there will be democratic consequences for those who fail to uphold the law.

This study has several limitations that are opportunities for future research. This study focuses on formal institutional voids. Future research should consider the influence of other institutional arrangements on activist public relations. Research on activist public relations in environments other than developed or western contexts with the focus on the link between public relations and the environment (cf. Allagui, 2017; Han & Zhang, 2009; Holtzhausen, 2005; Yang & Taylor, 2010) is underdeveloped, but shows the significance of environment to shape activist public relations. For example, Allagui (2017) shows how in monarchical environments activism can be manifested in corporations' promotional practices; or Yang and Taylor (2010) explain how non-profit organizations in conservative contexts may not explicitly refer to their organizing practices but seek relationship with the government. Activist public relations research needs to explore how various institutional environments require different strategies.

In addition, this study was conducted on activist organizations in Bangladesh. Future activist public relations research should explore formal institutional voids and activist public relations within ethnic and indigenous communities in western contexts. Indigenous and ethnic communities may not trust formal institutions and prefer their traditions over formal rules. Formal institutional voids have been mainly studied to explain developing contexts. Future studies are needed to shed light on the relevance of formal institutional voids in developed countries.

Furthermore, the data for this study was collected through observing the activist organizations' campaigns and the campaigns' materials and participants. Future research should focus on the vulnerable groups or victims' perspectives (e.g., by interviewing victims or ethnographic studies of vulnerable communities) to measure the efficiency of the activist organizations' approaches.

Finally, this study shows that activist public relations in formal institutional voids and developing contexts engages in informal institutional work and adopt bottom-up approaches to build communities of support to solve issues. Future studies should examine if being occupied and

concerned with informal community building limits the activist public relations' capacity to advocate for improved laws and policies.

Institutional theory provides a framework to explain key contextual distinctions. Activist public relations needs to move beyond mainstream contexts and broaden the view to understand contexts that are urgently in need of change.

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