



Safe Havens - Freedom Talk #9 **Freedom Talk@Women Chapter International**

Freedom of press and artistic freedom is seriously under threat in Bangladesh due to government policies. **Safe Havens Freedom Talks** series will address this issue with an event presenting first-hand experiences of the censorship and many challenges for women in the country, which led to the creation of Women Chapter International (WCI).

The event is produced in collaboration with **Women Chapter International** and the conversation will be streamed on **Friday, 12 November 2021** at **2.30 pm CET** on

<https://www.facebook.com/events/437611357936143>

<https://howlround.com/series/safe-havens-freedom-talks>

In this Freedom Talk, **Shucheesmita Simonti**, **Shumu Haque** and **Supriti Dhar** from Women Chapter International will have a conversation on the story of the platform and the challenges faced during its journey since the beginning.

Early part of the 2010s was a tumultuous time in the recent history of Bangladesh. As the country kept leaning towards a culture of Islamic fundamentalism, the status of women became even more dire than it had been in the past three decades as the post 1975 dictators and even some of the democratically elected governments started to rely on the Muslim Fundamentalist Political Parties in a desperate bid to hold on to the power.

What this meant for the women of the country was that as the country's policy kept leaning more and more towards a more conservative Muslim patriarchal setup, from the education, to the job sector to the legal framework and even in the social infra-structure, everywhere women found their scope of personal liberty becoming narrower everyday.

It is at this time, at the end of 2012 and early 2013, the youth of the country took down to the streets demanding justice for the war crimes committed against its population during the liberation war of 1971 by the Pakistani Army's collaborators (most of whom are now connected to and heading the numerous pro-Islamic fundamentalist political parties such as Jamaat E Islami, or Hefazat E Islami Bangladesh), the whole country woke up with the hope of a new transformation not unlike the Arab Spring.



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This movement, widely known as the "Shahbagh" (Named after the popular locality in the Bangladeshi Capital of Dhaka, where this started, much like Tahrir square in Egypt) or, "Projonmo" (The word for "Generation" in Bangla) movement, also opened people's eyes towards other areas in the society desperately in the need of reform. Supriti Dhar was an active part of this movement.

As an activist and journalist, she was painfully aware of the lack of a safe place where the Bangladeshi women could openly discuss the issues that were a matter of life or death to them. Issues such basic such as equal rights to education, work, safety from domestic or gender-based violence, sexual violence, access to information on their reproductive rights, etc.

This encouraged Supriti to create the online portal Womenchapter.com, which became the very first feminist portal in Bangladesh as well as in Bangla language world wide. Gradually, Womenchapter created an English Section which opened its doors to writers and stories from across the globe.

About Freedom Talks

Safe Havens – Freedom Talks series is closely connected to the annual global Safe Havens conference. The Freedom Talks series is focused on issues regarding threats towards artistic freedom, free press and intangible heritage. Guests in the Freedom Talks series are highly knowledgeable and prolific actors in the global Arts Rights Justice sector – fighting for artistic freedom. The Freedom Talks aim to share space and broaden the narrative of who can take center stage, by lending the brand to different organizations within the sector. The talks are presented in – or translated to – English. The talks can be watched through the Freedom Talks Facebook account and through our partner [Howlround](#), where also previous events are archived.

About Women Chapter International

Women Chapter International (WCI) is a Non-governmental Organisation, registered in Sweden. It focuses its activities in the areas of equality and human rights with especial emphasis on gender-based violence, discrimination, human rights violation and sexual violence and the rehabilitation of survivors. Primarily its areas of work are Bangladesh and Sweden. Gradually it will expand its area. Since its inception in June, 2020, WCI has researched and presented a series of events on the trans-generational effects of war-time sexual violence and aims to take its mission one step further by implementing the knowledge gained from these endeavours to intensive work in the field of support and rehabilitation of sexual violence survivors.

The Speakers @Women Chapter International



Shucheesmita Simonti

Shucheesmita Simonti is a writer and activist. Her areas of interest include women's rights, migration, and refugee rights. She has been working as the Editor of Women Chapter's English website since 2016. She has completed an M.A. in Development Studies from the International Institute of Social Studies, the Netherlands, and an M.A. in International Relations from South Asian University, India. She also has done a 1-year diploma in Human Rights, International Humanitarian Law, and Refugee Law. Shucheesmita speaks Bengali,

English, and Hindi. She is a passionate paper artist and specializes in paper quilling. A bibliophile, Shucheesmita also loves to travel, write stories, and volunteer with NGOs or charities in her free time.



Shumu Haque

A self-proclaimed feminist, activist, poet, and a voracious reader, Shumu Haque started writing from her high-school days. Born in Sri Lanka and brought up in Bangladesh, she has spent more than half of her life in Canada and calls Toronto her home and works in the Canadian Not-for-Profit Industry. Shumu has studied Humanities and Communications at York University before completing her diploma in Print and Broadcast Journalism from Humber College in Toronto. She is fluent in Bangla, English, Hindi/Urdu, a little bit of

Gujarati, and has a special interest in issues pertaining to human rights and equality across the globe. Her experience of growing up as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and fighting to cope with it on her own without any support from those around her made her aware of the necessity to create a support system for other survivors like herself in the South Asian Communities across the globe. It also made her understand the complexities of the trauma that comes as a result from such abuse and the obstacles that they can create for the survivors unless they receive the necessary support to help them heal and rebuild themselves as strong, independent individuals. It is from this necessity that Shumu got involved in her activism and it is also this desire to see justice done to the survivors of unjust violence that she has been focusing most of her writings around such issues. Shumu has been writing on the portal Women Chapter since 2014 and has been one of the Founding Directors of Women Chapter International. In WCI, she is in charge of Communications.



Supriti Dhar

Supriti Dhar is an ambitious and passionate journalist with great communication skills, who has been striving to make a difference. She has worked for more than 20 years with various media houses including BBC Radio Services. A dedicated human rights activist, Supriti's areas of interest are, ensuring the rights of women, refugees, religious minorities, and indigenous communities. She has founded the online portal Women Chapter in 2013 with the goal of giving the women of Bangladesh an

online platform to express their views on topics related to equality and feminism which were until then considered taboo in contemporary Bangladeshi society and over the years the portal has developed an English section that now includes writings



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from women from all over the world. Supriti has also played a significant role in combating the draconian Bangladeshi law called the Digital Security Act which resists the Freedom of Expression of freethinkers, dissidents, artists, and others and as a result of which has had to choose a life in exile. She has recently published a memoir of her days in the former Soviet Union. Fluent in native Bangla, English, Russian and Now learning Swedish language, Supriti includes traveling, meeting people, and knowing other cultures among her most favorite hobbies. Supriti is currently working with SAC (Swedish Art Council) as a freelance *Consulting Expert*.

*The event is organized by the independent international NGO Safe Havens Freedom Talks (SH|FT), through collaborations within the global Arts Rights Justice sector, and with Safemuse graciously supporting as its mentoring organization in the start-up period. SH|FT is supported by The Swedish Arts Council under the Programme for Artistic Freedom funded by Sida, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, and The Freedom Talks are sponsored by the Swedish Institute.

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