

Theory and Praxis Report

The Island Women: A Feminist Environmentalist Vision for Saint Martin's Island

March 2026

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Contents

Introduction	1
Echoes of the Sea: Abduction, Grief, and State Silence	2
The Gendered Human Cost of Geopolitical Insecurity	6
Discussion	7
Solidarity with the 11-Point Demand of the Teknaf-Saint Martin's Fisherman Families	8
Conclusion	9
Annex	10
List of Speakers:	10

Introduction

“The Island Women: A Feminist Environmental Vision” seminar was an initiative conducted on 29th January 2026, with the intention to rethink feminism and environmentalism through the unfamiliar perspectives of the island community's praxis knowledge. The Centre for Critical Discourse invited the women from Saint Martin's Island to the seminar to share their experiences at the University of Dhaka—the academic sphere that often circulates mainstream narratives and discourses. The seminar also invited expert speakers from multi-diverse streams, such as gender, environment, NGOs, and class politics, to listen, understand, and reshape the state-hegemony of feminism and environmentalism. The expertise in gender, environmentalism, and geopolitics followed the agenda, explaining the lived experiences and testimonies of the "price" of the coral island community. While the seminar prioritized validating and providing the women's ground narratives and acceptance in mainstream and dominant discussions, it guided the participants and audience to learn of the abduction of fishermen as a silenced trauma shared by generations of these women.

The invited women from the island attended the seminar with courage and inspiration in taking care of each other. Madina Khatun, 60 years old, stated in the seminar that she lost her husband 20 years ago. Her husband was abducted by the Arakan Army at sea. To date, she could never know what happened to her husband or if he was alive or dead. However, she raised two of her beloved sons on her own. Both her children were only around 5 years old when their father was abducted while fishing at sea. Madina Khatun entered crying and attended the seminar to ask only one question: “I have lost my sons too, in August 2025. Would my daughters-in-law, with my currently 5-year-old grandsons, remain in the same state of helplessness till their last breath too? Can't we get over this generational curse of being families of fishermen?”

Rabeya Begum, the youngest daughter-in-law of Madina Khatun, did the walk to the dais with the old mother-in-law, who could barely walk. Following her, the missing elder brother's pregnant wife, Humaira Begum, entered holding two of their young sons, who don't understand why their fathers are not coming back home from fishing. Humaira Begum, the elder daughter-in-law, was also in her last

month of her second pregnancy. She traveled from the island to Dhaka to attend this seminar to look for one platform to demand her husband back for her unborn child.

Not knowing any prior information regarding their husbands' traces, and with no actions towards the abducted fishing communities over the border areas, an urgency was created at the seminar. All the journalists attending the seminar were drawn towards putting the concern forward to be raised immediately. We were pressured enough to uphold the narratives through our seminar because the proletariat class people, such as the women from the island's fishermen communities, have no access to the concern of the dominant media or ministries for their families, even after suffering in silence over generations.

These women voiced their demands and expected the government of Bangladesh to act on them. If the fishing industry matters, so do those communities who keep the industry alive. We worked for it and could create an impact on their safe return to their families.

Echoes of the Sea: Abduction, Grief, and State Silence

January 29, 2026; Professor Muzaffar Ahmed Chowdhury Auditorium

The Seminar was a theory and praxis-based structure. It wanted to draw the attention of scholars regarding the academic knowledge gaps on the praxis. Saint Martin's Island is a coral island in need of preservation for the ecology. Many are oblivious to the fact that the inhabitants of this coral island pay a 'critical cost' for their residency, often enduring conditions of structural poverty and food insecurity.

Our ongoing research project in the island worked as the primary source of evidence on how the fishermen community are likely to be unpaid or exploited with the fishing syndicate system, thus transforming as an easy target for structural land dispossession. Most of the island dwellers sold their lands for some cash in hand, and welcomed profit-oriented tourism in the ecological critical area without knowing the impacts. They got no better opportunity for tourism due to the tourism market competition with luxurious resorts of bigger corporate industries, owning their lands and circulating profits at the cost of the stressed subalterns. However,

the government of Bangladesh in the Interim regime did check on the environmental degradation but didn't assess the power structure's responsibility towards it. While tourism was unexpectedly shut down via top-down policymaking, local families and the women were the primary victims of the decision as always. As we wanted to learn about the women's sufferings in the island while the income is swollen and only fishing remains as the income source.



Photo: To bridge the linguistic gap between the islanders and the academic audience, local representative Mohammed Zubayer provided real-time translation of the local dialect for Humaira Begum, whose husband remains missing.

Looking into Saint Martin's Island residing women's class struggle and cultural oppression, we called for a feminist and environmentalist vision towards the affected community. Women, who lost their husbands due to the Arakan Army's abduction and remained with no fixed income from tourism or fishing. The Government of Bangladesh overlooked this structural exclusion and promised no future prevention of their own lives. The feminist and environmentalist vision was called within the semi-formal panel dialogue with empathetic live-discussion, actively co-anchored by one of the Island participants, Mohammad Zubayer.

He assisted the non-island audience to understand the Chittagong-closed island-pronounced linguistic dialect in which our female island participants narrated their purpose to attend the seminar. Humaira Begum, Rabeya Begum, and Madina Khatun were acknowledged in frustration, pain, and determination to ask back their family members. The women continued to grieve over the state sponsored

selectiveness of geopolitical concerns in their own narrative storytelling. They exclaimed in sorrow and disbelief that the government would not take any action to bring back the abducted fishermen without the audiences' solidarity in the demands. They also raised concerns on the role of the media and civil society regarding their livelihoods and security. Each of the Island participants mentioned that their community has no other occupation but fishing in the sea over the generations. So, the economic structure chained them with a fate of uncertainty of meeting their male members due to their ancestral profession.

They also mentioned many of them even want not to continue fishing but no other occupations are available and they emphasized on safe fishing, with the rights of fair share of income and dignity. They also suggested that alternative occupation could make their livelihood easier too.



Photo: Overcome by illness and grief, Madina Khatun declined a seat on the stage, as Mohammad Zubayer began sharing her harrowing story with the audience

While Mohammad Zubayer co-anchored the narrations, he also got his talking points in which he clearly explained the other vulnerable conditioning and hardships of women in the island. His words mentioned the lack of hospital, sea ambulance, and transport, even for the high-risk pregnant women. He mentioned the crises of medical care and described how the sudden ban of tourism without any financial support, caused girls to stop their studies to be married early and further absence of hospitals and income source in the island lead them to teenage and unsafe pregnancy and even systemic deaths due to it. The island womenfolk and he reached out for solidarity toward their betterment, and the Seminar was

overwhelmed with the local narrations of pain and its searching for relief. As a result, it also could bring sharp voices from the civil spheres of, NGO, universities, and political leadership at the premises.

Dr. Sazzad Siddiqui, Chairman, Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Dhaka, delivered his concerns for conversational initiatives regarding the abduction zones highlighting the importance of prevention and care-based peacemaking efforts, towards a positive peace strategic international collaboration in geopolitics.

Samira Ahmed Raha, Researcher, Bengal Foundation, emphasized on the gendered costs of maritime security as the conflicts produce invisible but drastic consequences for the women, especially the elderly caregivers, pregnant women, and mothers of young children. She mentioned that the feminist vision must intersect with the conflicts, border militarization, climate precarity, and livelihood loss of the women in Island. She critically argued for a grounded and context sensitive approach to uphold women's narratives in discussion of security, environment, development, and island governance.

Mir Mohammad Ali, Assistant Professor, Department of Aquaculture, Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University, claimed that the governance or policymaking can't overlook the island community while it recommends to safeguard the environment. He explained that any environmental measures must include and empower the local women and community and expand their livelihood opportunities. He mentioned that the possibility of coral island economy could grow and benefit the locality if there were alternative fishing infrastructure and industries, such as dried fish, where the monetary benefit could be transferred directly to the people preventing the syndicate systems.

Radia Binte Ashrafi, Program Associate, Badaban-Sangho, shared her experiences of the NGO-driven fishing womenfolk solidarity groups in Southern Bangladesh. She explained that climate and disaster affect marginal women more than ever discussed or understood with a holistic approach for transformation.

Meghmallar Basu, President, Bangladesh Student Union, University of Dhaka, shared the grief of political phenomenon and criticized how the dominant discourse ignored the proletariat class struggle in politics. He focused on the challenges and the journey of the women with yearning who never got a chance to raise their concerns before arrival to Dhaka or attending the seminar.

The Gendered Human Cost of Geopolitical Insecurity

The experiences shared during the seminar are rooted in a broader transformation of the political and security landscape along the Bangladesh–Myanmar border. In particular, developments in Myanmar’s Rakhine State have significantly altered how border and maritime spaces are governed. In recent years, the Arakan Army (AA) has expanded its influence across large parts of Rakhine State. While Myanmar’s central government retains international legitimacy, its operational governance has eroded in specific territories, notably the Rakhine State, which is adjacent to the Bangladesh border.

As a result, governance in these areas has become more complex, involving a mix of state and non-state actors. For communities living near the border, this creates uncertainty regarding authority, protection, and accountability. This shift in control is particularly visible in adjacent maritime areas of the Bay of Bengal. Waters that were previously understood as state-regulated are now, in practice, less clearly governed. In such contexts, the areas are often described as “grey zones” where rules are not always consistently enforced. Multiple actors may claim influence. Civilian activities, such as fishing, become more vulnerable to disruption. Reports of detention, confiscation of equipment, and demands for payment reflect the challenges of operating in these uncertain environments.



Photo: The Arakan Army abducted two brothers, both fishermen from Saint Martin’s, approximately five months ago. Their mother, Madina Begum, broke down in tears for them. January 29, Thursday, at the Professor Muzaffar Ahmed Chowdhury Auditorium of Dhaka University.

The Bangladesh–Myanmar coastal interface is not only locally significant but also strategically important at the regional level. It is connected to the key maritime routes in the Bay of Bengal, with broader economic and infrastructure interests. Due to the presence of large Rohingya refugee populations in Cox’s Bazar, the region is already under pressure. The local security dynamics in the regional area can complicate the situation in the near future. For Bangladesh, responding to incidents in this context involves several policy constraints:

- **Diplomatic engagement** is primarily conducted with the government of Myanmar, which may not have full operational control in the affected areas.
- **Direct engagement** with non-state actors, such as the Arakan Army, is sensitive and often informal.
- **Strong responses** carry the risk of escalating tensions in an already fragile border region.

These factors contribute to a situation where responses may appear limited or understated, particularly in remote maritime zones. While these dynamics are often discussed in terms of security and strategy, their impacts are most directly felt at the community level. Fishermen operating near Saint Martin’s Island face increased uncertainty and risk, while their families experience the social and economic consequences. Women, in particular, are affected in multiple ways:

- As primary caregivers in the absence of family members.
- As individuals managing financial and emotional stress.
- As voices that are often underrepresented in formal policy discussions.

Discussion

The current crisis on Saint Martin’s Island is rooted in a systemic "green" dispossession, where top-down environmental policies have inadvertently prioritized ecological preservation over human security. While the government implemented tourism bans to check environmental degradation, these measures failed to address the underlying power structures, such as corporate resort expansion and exploitative fishing syndicates that had already dispossessed local landholders. Consequently, the island’s women have become the primary victims

of these policies, as the loss of tourism income has forced their families into total reliance on increasingly hazardous maritime activities for survival.

The security landscape has further deteriorated due to the emergence of maritime "grey zones" near the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, where the expansion of the Arakan Army has weakened state authority. In these areas, rules are inconsistently enforced, leaving fishermen structurally exposed to abduction, equipment confiscation, and ransom demands. This is not merely a matter of individual risk but a result of an economic structure that chains the proletariat class to ancestral professions, compelling them to enter high-risk zones because no alternative livelihoods or protective mechanisms are available to them.

Ultimately, the seminar highlighted that the abduction of fishermen is a "silenced trauma" that manifests as a profound household and community crisis carried by women. These women must navigate the gendered impacts of economic hardship and emotional grief while remaining underrepresented in formal policy discussions regarding maritime security and island governance. By presenting these testimonies at the University of Dhaka, the participants provided a vital counter-narrative to state-centered security discourses, demanding a transition from abstract geopolitical strategy to a care-based, human-centered approach to peace and environmental sustainability.

Solidarity with the 11-Point Demand of the Teknaf-Saint Martin's Fisherman Families

The 11-point demand put forth by the fisherman families of Teknaf and Saint Martin's represents a vital call for justice against the systematic "silenced trauma" and structural exclusion they have endured for generations. By demanding the immediate release of abducted fishermen, specialized medical care for survivors of torture, and the return of seized trawlers, the community is directly challenging the state-sponsored selectiveness that has historically overlooked their security in favor of abstract geopolitical interests. This solidarity movement highlights that the protection of Bangladeshi sovereignty must be synonymous with the protection of its most vulnerable citizens, ensuring that those who sustain the nation's fishing industry are no longer treated as "stressed subalterns" who bear the critical cost of

living on a coral island through famine-like poverty. Furthermore, these demands advocate for a transformative shift in island governance that prioritizes human-centered support over top-down environmental and economic policies. By calling for an end to illegal land dispossession by profit-driven corporate entities and the establishment of essential infrastructure such as sea ambulances and alternative economic opportunities— the families are reclaiming their right to a dignified livelihood. Standing in solidarity with these 11 points means recognizing that environmental preservation and maritime security are inseparable from social justice; only by empowering local communities and ensuring their access to education, healthcare, and fair wages can the ecological and human balance of Saint Martin's be truly restored.

Conclusion

The collective discourse highlights a profound disconnect between state-level maritime strategy and the grassroots reality of the Saint Martin's Island community. Through the lens of the "The Island Women: A Feminist Environmental Vision" seminar, it is evident that the islanders, particularly women— bear a cost for their residency in a coral ecology, often manifesting as famine-like structural poverty and systemic neglect. The dialogue established that the ongoing abductions of fishermen by the Arakan Army are not isolated maritime incidents but are symptoms of a "grey zone" in governance where the expansion of non-state actors has eroded state protection for the proletariat class. A critical environmental analysis reveals that "top-down" policies, such as sudden tourism bans and the allowance of corporate land dispossession, have stripped local families of their agency and alternative livelihoods. This has "chained" the community to high-risk fishing activities, leading to a cycle of generational trauma where women are left as the primary caregivers to navigate the emotional and economic fallout of missing family members. The seminar served as a vital academic-praxis bridge, moving these narratives from the periphery into the mainstream discourse at the University of Dhaka to challenge state hegemony.

Annex

List of Speakers:

Madina Khatun
Mother of two abducted fishermen, Jahangir and Alamgir

Humaira Begum
Wife of abducted fisherman, Jahangir

Rabeya Begum
Wife of abducted fisherman, Alamgir

Mohammad Zubayer
Local representative of the Island

Dr. Sazzad Siddiqui
Professor and Chairman
Department of Peace and Conflict Studies

Samira Ahmed Raha
Research Coordinator
Bengal Foundation

Mir Mohammad Ali
Assistant Professor & Former Chairman,
Department of Aquaculture,
Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University, Dhaka

Radia Binte Ashraf
Programme Development Officer
Badabon-Sangho

Meghmallar Basu
President
Bangladesh Student Union
University of Dhaka

