

## Online Misogyny in Bangladesh

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### Abstract

This study, focusing on “Do not stand too close to my body,” a Bangladeshi online feminist campaign, sought to understand how men react to women in cyberspace and use Islam to sustain misogyny. Two research inquiries guided the research: Men’s reaction to women and women-related issues, and men’s attempts to use Islam to justify and sustain misogyny online. To answer the research questions, 1,474 Facebook comments were analyzed following a qualitative content analysis method. The findings show that men react to women aggressively in social media and such reactions have two main propensities. One is that men shame and denigrate women, the other that men try to justify their aggression and blame the victimized women for their victimhood. In addition, men use Islam to justify and sustain misogyny: They rebuke women for not being decent enough according to the *patriarchic* version of Islam, and they defend their patriarchal aggression against women and justify it as an expected outcome of disobeying the Islamic code of conduct. These closely related propensities also suggest a conflictual interrelationship between men and women in social media, where men endeavor to dominate the communication. Identifying a few limitations related to the methodology and findings, this article also suggests some practical applications of the results.

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### Key words

online misogyny, social media, cyberbullying, women, patriarchy, Islam

## Introduction

This study, focusing on Bangladesh, investigated different aspects of online misogyny and its relationship to Islam. Like elsewhere in the world, Bangladesh as a Muslim-dominated country has a long history of misogyny (Hashmi, 2000).

Growing social awareness in recent years seems to have failed to bring an end to misogynistic expressions in society. As a result, violence against women (VAW) has surged. From 2001 to 2018, for example, 13,638 women were raped in Bangladesh; of them, 1,467 were killed (Odhikar, 2018). Moreover, victims of other forms of violence are numerous. In January-April 2019, 354 women were raped, including 55 rape attempts; 18 of them died and 6 more victims committed suicide (Ain o Salish Kendra, 2019). A total of 1,139 cases of sexual harassment were reported from January to March 2019 and many incidents remained unreported as well (Bosu, 2019). Victims often do not report cases of violence anticipating that the law will not support them, fearing being harassed again, and worrying it may tarnish their social image (Al-Zaman, 2017; CCABD, 2018). It is also true that the faulty implementation of legislation in Bangladesh makes it difficult for victims to obtain proper justice, creating obstacles at every step (Haque, 2019; Tahmina & Asaduzzaman, 2018). Thus, Bangladesh becomes a heaven for misogynists.

The Internet has made a considerable contribution to the ongoing trend of misogyny. Around 73% of female netizens face manifold cybercrimes; of them, only 23% lodge complaints, 73.71% of the victims are aged 18–30, and 30% are unfamiliar with help-seeking processes (Akter, 2018; CCABD, 2018; Kabir, 2018). Moreover, increasing social media use coupled with inadequate cyberlaw turns online space into a wonderland for misogynists. Interestingly, in Bangladesh, it seems that men using Islam as an instrument of patriarchy frequently misuse and misinterpret it to sustain and bolster their social authority (Islam & Islam, 2018). This tendency suggests that if patriarchic Islam meets social media, it could produce negative outcomes. However, the previous literature has failed to connect the issues of online misogyny and patriarchic Islam. Therefore, considering online misogyny and Islam as two important topics of contemporary sociopolitical and socioreligious discourses in Bangladesh, we attempted to explore the nexus between these two variables: How male netizens react to women in cyberspace, and how they use Islam to justify and facilitate misogyny. To answer the research inquiries, we studied a prominent case.

In 2019, an online feminist campaign in Bangladesh, popularly known as “Gaheshe daraben na” (Do not stand too close to my body), received much attention: Some appreciated it while others denounced it. The campaign dealt with a sensitive but pressing issue in Bangladesh, i.e., the harassment of women on public transport. A study shows that 94% of women have experienced sexual harassment on public transport (BRAC, 2018). From January 2017 to February 2018, at least

21 women were raped while using public transport: Many of the victims were mutilated and killed afterward (UNB, 2018). The situation deteriorated between 2018 to 2020 as more women became the victims of such crimes. Also, on many occasions, the women jumped through bus windows to escape rape and died (Daily Jugantor, 2018; Daily Prothom Alo, 2019; Manabzamin, 2019). Commuters often blame women who face harassment and protest in public transports (a Bangladeshi Facebook group named “We want security in public transport” has many similar confessions.).

As a result of the increase in incidences of groping, rape, and murder, 13% of women avoid public vehicles (WBBT, n.d.). Against this backdrop, the campaign offered a platform for women to raise their voices against VAW on public transport. Such online feminist activism is unusual in Bangladesh because of the country’s rigid sociocultural environment. While differing in some respects, this campaign also has some similarities with other movements around the world. For example, VAW is commonplace on public transport in India, and the gang rape and killing of Jyoti Singh (popularly known as *Nirbhaya* [fearless]) was a landmark incident: Online protest is common after every such incident. However, Indian cases are somewhat different from Bangladeshi cases in at least three aspects. One, India is a Hindu-dominated country, whereas Bangladesh is Muslim-dominated. Islamic scripture seems to have more instructions and restrictions regarding women’s issues than does Hindu scripture. Moreover, thanks to the recent new Islamic revivalism in Bangladesh (Islam & Islam, 2018), both male and female Muslims are seemingly more concerned about the Islamic lifestyle. Two, unlike in Bangladesh, a wide range of people in India—from celebrities to the public—participate in online protests against VAW. Three, the Indian judicial system seems more efficient in VAW-related cases than that of Bangladesh. Following a mass protest, for example, the killers of Jyoti were brought to justice immediately, resulting in a huge reform of Indian legislation and the judiciary. After that, VAW-related cases were allocated to fast-track courts.

Unlike the South Asian region, Western online feminist activism is mainly Twitter-based *#hashtivism* (hashtag activism), such as *#BlackGirlMagic*, *#YesAllWomen*, and *#MeToo* (Hitchings-Hales & Calderwood, 2017; Storer & Rodriguez, 2020). These movements are the outcomes of multifaceted social discrimination and injustice along gender lines. Even in many Middle Eastern Muslim countries, such as Egypt and Iran, the *#MosqueMeToo*/Mosque Movement is a cornerstone of Islamic feminist activism (Khan, 2018; Lewis, 2005). However, the features of these activities are qualitatively different from the case of Bangladesh.

While Western feminist activism is very concerned about more subtle forms of social discrimination, such as Black Feminism (#BlackGirlMagic), Bangladeshi women struggle to get their most basic social rights and security, such as not being harassed, raped, or killed when they are outside of the home. Moreover, unlike Western and many Muslim countries, Bangladeshi women seem less outspoken, persistent, or active participants in on- and offline forms of feminist activism. For example, the Western #MeToo movement succeeded in India but failed in Bangladesh (Zyma, 2018). Considering these aspects, the selected case is significant in the context of Bangladesh.

In the areas being discussed, previous studies have been limited to providing better insights. Therefore, this study sought to answer two research questions following a quantitative content analysis of social media users' comments. The results suggest that men react to women-related issues negatively, and often try to use Islam to justify their misogynistic attitudes in various ways. The following section discusses the concept of online misogyny and how men react to women in the online space. It also provides a conceptual framework for the study.

### Defining Online Misogyny

Misogyny is defined as an *unreasonable* fear, disgust, and hatred toward the female sex, which usually takes many explicit forms (Gilmore, 2010). However, Manne (2018) argues that misogyny is not only about hatred toward women. Rather, it is about punishing and controlling women who challenge men's authority. Misogynistic expressions are linked to diverse forms of negative expressions. Popular culture often embraces these expressions and thereby also helps misogyny to flourish in society. For example, eve-teasing, a misogynistic expression, has been represented in Bangladesh's popular culture as a medium of communication between men and women (Nahar, van Reeuwijk, & Reis, 2013). It is to be noted that eve-teasing is as damaging as a physical attack that arouses anger, lowers self-esteem, and induces embarrassment and fear (Cameron, 1998). Misogyny has recently shifted from offline to online. In this study, we defined online misogyny as simply the misogynistic expressions found on various online platforms, mainly in social media. Online misogyny, like offline misogyny, causes depression and other negative psychological effects (Airin, Begum, Ali, & Ahamd, 2014). Although online is supposed to be a gender-, race-, and class-free zone, it has now become a negative space for women due to online misogyny (Jane, 2017).

The prevalence of online misogyny along with VAW has increased remarkably

since 2011 (Jane, 2014a, 2016). Scholars are using terms like “online abuse,” “gendered cyberhate,” and “cyberbullying” to describe this multifaceted online misogyny (Ging & Siapera, 2018): Jane (2014a, 2014b, 2016) termed it “e-bile.” Although online misogyny is a growing concern for feminist scholars, studies are still scarce and nor has the terrain of online been properly sketched (Jane, 2014b). Only a few studies have attempted to explore the online text-based misogynistic expressions of social media users. For example, Jane (2014b) emphasized flaming in cyberspace targeting women to identify a conceptual framework for analyzing online misogyny. A similar study discussed a few cases of online vitriol aimed at different groups of women (Jane, 2014a). However, these studies were not based on primary data and empirical methods, nor did they properly and formally acknowledge aggressive behavior as an influencing factor for online misogyny. Aggressiveness is quite a common expression in online misogyny that is a form of destructive behavior. Hostility and verbal aggressiveness are two specific types of aggression (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Hostility includes “irritability, negativity, resentment, and suspicion” and verbal aggressiveness includes character attacks, competence attacks, ridicule, teasing, profanity, attacks on physical appearance, threats, maledictions, background attacks, and non-verbal behavior (i.e., raising the middle finger, sticking out the tongue, rolling the eyes) (Infante & Rancer, 1996; Infante & Wigley, 1986; Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 46).

Social media users frequently display various forms of destructive behavior on different issues (Bekiari & Pachi, 2017) for four primary reasons: psychopathology, disdain for others, social learning of aggression, and deficiency in argumentative skills (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, pp. 46-47). It is important to mention that constructive reactions are more related to strong reasoning skills and destructive reactions to weak reasoning skills, although they often overlap. Overall, destructive behavior can be both a reason for and an expression of online misogyny.

*RQ1:* How do men react to women and women-related issues in social media?

The precise reasons for online misogyny is a much-debated issue. Previously, in traditional societies, men and women had little scopes to grow up and socialize together due to social values and rigidity (Azad, 2004). In cyberspace, however, such artificial social separation is to some extent relaxed. Therefore, men might feel excited after encountering women in cyberspace and want to control them even there as well, which could be a reason for online misogyny (Moussa & Mohamed, 2013). In another study, Bakó (2015) argues that patriarchy has shifted from real

space to cyberspace. This paradigm shift could be another reason for online misogyny. Koulouris (2018) argues that online misogyny linked to political and other ideological agendas can be more impactful than aimless or sporadic misogynistic expressions. Men's unparalleled social authority, political agendas, and systematic ideological hegemony, according to Mannan and Mary (2006), keep women from enjoying more social power, positions, and benefits in Bangladesh.

Other factors that may assist online misogyny are the patriarchal view of law and its implementation (Halder & Jaishankar, 2011). Both are prevalent in Bangladesh, which could be an outcome of a fragile judiciary system and surging socio-religious rigidity (Tahmina & Asaduzzaman, 2018; Islam & Islam, 2018). However, any specific correlation between these factors is yet to be explored. On the other hand, according to Jane (2016), the majority of women who face online (and offline) harassment rarely come forward as *digilantes*, i.e., digital vigilantes, to expose the felons publicly when proper justice remains undelivered by the legal authorities. Even the #MeToo movement in Bangladesh failed thanks to extreme online vitriol from both males and females (Zyma, 2018). Can religion influence the extent of misogyny? If so, then it demands a closer look. For the research purposes, the following section explores the relationship between Islam and misogyny in the context of Bangladesh.

### Islam and Misogyny in Bangladesh

The presence of misogyny in the Muslim world is evident (Barlas, 2019; Saadawi, 2015; Wadud, 1999, 2013). In Bangladesh, incidents of misogyny have become intense in recent years. The year 2016 alone experienced 458 incidents of domestic violence (309 deaths), 724 rapes (45 deaths), 34 cases of acid violence (one death), 156 incidents of sexual harassment (6 deaths), 239 of dowry-related violence (130 deaths), and 12 *Salish*<sup>1</sup> and *Fatwa*<sup>2</sup> cases (Ain o Salish Kendra, 2016). The number of gender-based violence (GBV) cases increased in 2017: 487 domestic violence (390 deaths), 818 rapes (58 deaths), 32 cases of acid violence (1 death),

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<sup>1</sup> *Salish* is a traditional judicial system at the grassroots level of Bangladesh that resolves local cases. The *Salish* judges are mainly *Matbar*, chairmen, *Imams*, or members of local elites.

<sup>2</sup> *Fatwa* is an Arabic word meaning the solution to a problem. Deriving from sharia, the sacred Islamic law, it lets the Muftis decide the appropriate remedy for a crisis. However, in Bangladesh, fatwas are widely misused by the local Huzur or Islamic clans to serve their broad interests.

170 incidents of sexual harassment (12 deaths), 303 of dowry-related violence (155 deaths), and 10 *Salish* and *Fatwa* (one death) cases (Ain o Salish Kendra, 2017). Many such crimes remain unreported every year. This abnormal number of VAW cases describes the intensity of misogyny in Bangladesh. Riaz (2014) describes it as the “culture of fear” that governs the psyche of women and their understanding of the world. Banu (1992) identifies significant tripartite relationships between Islam, women, and education. Women from rural areas, having lower educational backgrounds, are more biased toward Islam and prominent Islamic figures, whereas educated urban women prefer the more liberal and modern approach to Islam. Further, women, in general, are more conscious than men about women’s rights (Banu, 1992). However, in rural areas, uneducated women are more apathetic about their basic rights (Mannan, 2011).

The beginnings of misogyny as an institution in Bangladesh are difficult to trace back due to its long history. Hashmi (2000) explicates how misogynistic behavior as a cultural practice existed in Bangladesh long before Islam came. Therefore, Islam-influenced misogyny is just an extension of a previous and deep-rooted socio-cultural hatred against women. Khatun (1997), Azad (2004), Mannan (2011), Mannan & Mary (2006), and Millett (2016) observe that men tend to deploy several ideological instruments, including *matritto* (motherhood), *bhadrata* (decency), and *ijjat* (prestige) to subjugate and exploit women. Even in popular Bangla and Islamic literature, women are repeatedly depicted as *femmes fatales*, enigmatic, helpless, delicate, and incapable (Azad, 2004; Mannan, 2011). Illiterate and semi-illiterate *mullahs* have been inciting misogyny in Bangladesh for ages through their public orations (Hashmi, 2000). This group, according to Hashmi, is a religious-cultural product of the lower social class and they lead a major portion of the believers. The literature suggests an apparent relationship between Islam and misogyny but does not explain whether its outcome is positive or negative. Moreover, the complex nexus between Islam and online misogyny is yet to be researched. It is important to note that our study mainly focused on popular Islam, which can be a patriarchal version of Islam, to some extent deviating from core Islamic teachings.

*RQ2*: How do men use Islam to justify and sustain misogyny?

## Methods

Jinat Jahan Nisha, a Bangladeshi social worker and entrepreneur, designed a T-shirt for women with a quote/slogan printed on it: “Ga gheshe daraben na”

meaning “Do not stand too close to my body” (“Story of ‘Ga Gheshe Daraben Na,’” 2019). It was a single-sentence message addressing men who harass women in public spaces. Her main aim was to protest sexual harassment and raise awareness among the masses. Several national dailies also covered and supported the event. She posted photos of two female models wearing these T-shirts on her Facebook page in April 2019. Later, it went viral on social media, stirring a mass outcry among Bangladeshi men. Instead of supporting this awareness initiative, online misogyny eventually gauged its voice (Momin, 2019). We used this incident as a case study to answer the two research questions.

The relevant data for analysis were collected from social media. Facebook was chosen as the data source for two reasons. First, of the eleven most common social networking sites (SNSs) in Bangladesh, Facebook has the highest number of users and this is ever-increasing: from 92.01% of users in 2018 to 94.02% in 2019 (“Social Media,” 2019). Second, Facebook is important thanks to its contribution to sociopolitical activism in Bangladesh. A few of the most significant political incidents in recent years, (e.g., Ramu violence, the Nasirnagar attack, the Shahbag movement, and the Road Safety movement) were based on Facebook (for more, see Al-Zaman, 2019; Rahman, 2018).

The selected case for this study was reported on April 4, 2019 by the online versions of the three most popular national media outlets in Bangladesh: Daily Prothom Alo, Daily Kaler Kantho, and BBC News Bangla. They shared their online reports, which were almost identical and praised the campaign, on their Facebook pages, which produced widespread reactions. By April 7, 2019 the three public Facebook posts had received 2,930 comments. Of these posts, BBC News Bangla received the highest number of comments (1,868). Moreover, the total number of followers of BBC News Bangla’s Facebook page is the highest among the three. Therefore, the comments were specifically collected from its Facebook post.

The data were collected in two ways to ensure accuracy and validity. First, manually by copying and pasting all the comments into a Microsoft Office Word file. Second, automatically by accessing the Facebook API through the built-in application Netvizz (Rieder, 2013), which gathered and compiled all the comments on the posts to a CSV file. A total of 1,868 comments were collected from the post. Of those, 394 comments were filtered out for one of three reasons. One, the comments ( $n = 290$  comments) included only links, other unnecessary and obscure texts, emojis, and/or stickers which are irrelevant to the research questions and/or the method. Two, parts of texts from some comments ( $n = 90$  comments) were



missing when the data was collected. Third, as the research questions only focus on Muslim male users' reactions, comments from female users ( $n = 3$  comments) and non-Muslim users ( $n = 6$  comments) were excluded.

However, on Facebook, identity fluidity can make sex- and religion-based categorization difficult. In such cases, we followed two strategies to maximize the information accuracy. One, we studied each of the respondent's profiles to establish their sex and religion. More information was obtained from their public profile information. Two, where this information was unavailable, we had to determine it from the ID names. Note that the names of males and females and of Muslims and the followers of other religions have identifiable differences. When both strategies failed, we excluded the comments/commenters ( $n = 5$ ). This resulted in a final sample size of  $N = 1474$  comments.

The research method used is qualitative content analysis, a "technique for gathering and analyzing the content of text" (Neuman, 2014, p. 371). Here, the term "text" refers to anything "written, visual, or spoken that serves as a medium for communication" (p. 371). While quantitative content analysis is mainly based on numbers, frequencies, and statistics, qualitative content analysis is mainly based on interpretations and descriptions (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). The collected data were coded systematically by a single coder, i.e., the researcher. Both manifest coding and latent coding were applied. Manifest coding is the search for selected words and phrases in the dataset while latent coding allows coders to identify the hidden meaning (Neuman, 2014). In manifest coding, at first, we studied and searched the corpus for terms associated with RQ1 and RQ2. We found 25 dominant terms for RQ1 and 16 terms for RQ2. We then studied the comments containing any of the listed terms for their semantic associations. We performed this analysis for more in-depth insights from the data because a term can express contradictory meanings, making the interpretation equivocal.

Following these two steps, we finally agreed on the codes: Whether a comment carries a positive or negative connotation toward women (RQ1), and whether men utilize Islam or not to blame or justify misogyny (RQ2). In this case, some comments were more expressive and important than others. Due to the unavailability of trained coders during the data analysis period, we could not perform the coding conventionally and more acceptably. In such cases, a single coder should code the data in two different occasions (Time 1 and Time 2) to determine the reliability of the codes (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999), which procedure was followed in this study as well. The time gap between the two codings was two months.

Cohen's Kappa value of intra-coder reliability was 0.87 in this study, which is acceptable. A few representative quotes are presented along with the discussion to make it more lucid and substantial. However, most of the comments were in Bangla except for a few in English. For that reason, translations and transliterations (wherever required) were made. Lastly, to preserve the users' privacy, their names were anonymized.

## Findings and Discussion

### Men's Reactions to Women-related Issues

Two main categories of reactions identified were (a) shaming and denigration, and (b) justification and accusation. There were 505 instances indicating how men react to women-related issues. Of these, 368 (72.87%) were related to sex and the female body, expressed mainly by the following words/phrases: *nosta* (jezebel), *dudh* (boobs), *oshlil* (nasty), *magi* (slut), *dborshon* (rape), *khanki* (prostitute), and *pacha* (hip). Another 137 (27.13%) instances expressed the male users' resentments, using keywords and phrases like *kharaṭ* (evil), *nongra* (lewd), and *abal* (idiot).

**Shaming and denigration.** According to men, as many comments suggest, women must adhere to certain social and behavioral codes, such as staying inside the house and always being veiled. Women who do not adhere to these instructions are likely to be the victims of body shaming and vigilantism in social media. Beyond purely verbal abuse, violation of such codes was also considered an offense that must be punished physically. "A" said: 'Why are you talking like this (the slogan) by showing your boobs?' "B" said:

They (the women) at first cause men's erections by showing their boobs and hips, and then say *do not stand too close to my body!* I want to suggest to these stupid women that you should not wear such clothes making your body shape visible.

In the first comment, the user referred to a sensitive female body part for shaming, as is also the case in the second comment. The second user further deduced that women should not let men see the body shape that might stimulate them. Therefore, it must be women's responsibility, according to some male users, to prevent men being stimulated. Many male users mocked the slogan of the campaign as well, such as "Do not look at my breasts, you cannot touch those," "Stop staring at my hips as they belong to my husband," "Do not rub your penis on my ass," and "Do not grab my boobs." By such mockery, they shamed women's bodies and demeaned their moral characters. The following offensive sarcasm was

shared by 26 men including “C”, “D”, “E”, “F”, “G”, “H”, “I”, “J”, “K”, and several others:

A man and his sister-in-law were walking through the woods. She suddenly says, “Hey brother-in-law, I fear you will do something nasty to me now.” “How could I do so while I have a stick and a hen in one hand, a goat in the other, and a cage above my head?”, the man wonders. “If you insert the stick into the soil and tie the goat to it, and encage the hen with your cage, then you would do to me whatever you want. Alas! I am afraid,” she replies. [*Siti*]

By saying this, they attempt to promote the idea that it *is* women who tempt men to violate them, and men are nothing but the prey of such women. Therefore, women should be ashamed of themselves.

Denigration encompasses several traits, and underestimation is one of them. Men’s comments tended to treat women as inferior to men. According to some, women’s strength and vigor are no match for men. Thus, they refuse to learn anything from women. As women cannot be more qualified than men, so men may have the right to underestimate them by any means. “L” Islam said: “Alas! We need to learn manners from such harlots (women) nowadays.” Many users underestimated and abused women by using derogatory terms related to women’s moral character. The following comments are from “M” and “N”: “Those who say such words (the slogan) are jezebels”; “Nowadays, girls are becoming nothing but prostitutes.” The use of specific obnoxious words like *khanki* (prostitute), *nosta* (jezebel), and *potita* (slut) in discourse declares that women are debauched. They also reject women’s realistic demands by questioning their moral character and making them inferior to men. Of even more concern is that some users encourage others to punish outspoken women brutally. Shahin Hassan stated furiously: “If my mother and sister had dressed like this, I would butcher them for sure.” The user showed highly aggressive behavior, declaring he would even kill his female family members if they wore T-shirts. The tone of this comment might echo the idea of honor killing in many Muslim countries.

**Justification and accusation.** Many users tried to justify men’s aggression toward women through improper reasoning. They also accused female victims of their delicacy and misfortune. Many of them further discussed what would be the perfect punishment for women’s insubordination. As the first step, male users legitimized their aggression against women: “They [the women] live in Bangladesh, they

live like Americans, but when they are raped, they want justice like Saudi Arabia.” It is noteworthy that men regarded America (as representative of the West) as uncivilized and Saudi Arabia (the epitome of the Muslim world) as a country of justice. A few more comments contain the same statements in one way or another. It is therefore easy to comprehend the conformity of men’s attitudes and world-views regarding this matter.

In addition, the surge in incidents of rape were justified and/or supported by several males almost identically. For example, two men commented: “If nudity is a protest, then rape is a physical exercise,” and “They [the women] are the ones who rape men.” In the first statement, the user presented an irrational analogy. Nudity and rape should not be equated in this context, and this simply represents support for VAW. In the second comment, the user accuses female victims of raping men. This effort to justify VAW and declare women responsible for their victimhood is fundamentally flawed. Interestingly, it is apparent that many male users consider women wearing T-shirts as *nudity*.

Male users not only accused women of responsibility for the GBV they suffer, they also accused other males who support women. In most cases, the male supporters were addressed as *abal* (idiot) and *hijra* (eunuch). According to the accuser males, the supporters of women were idiots because they “do not understand anything but women.” They were further addressed as “eunuch” because they were “affected by impotency after supporting the women.” The conversation below is an example:

“O”: Most people in Bangladesh treat women as non-human. Even they would not acknowledge the necessity of women’s security.

“P”: [To “T”] Hey idiot, you people spoil women in the guise of a saint [*sic*].

“Q”: [To “T”] Ah! A womanizer is here to establish women’s rights.

When “O” tried to express his opinion in favor of women, both “P” and “Q” rebuked and ridiculed him. This could be a reason that prevents many male users from supporting women openly on social media.

### Islamic Ideology to Sustain Misogyny

What we found in the dataset after analyzing the codes was the deliberate instrumentalization of Islam to sustain online misogyny. In relation to the second research question, a total of 534 instances where vitriol against women was ex-

pressed referring to Islam were found. Of these, 391 dealt with the idea of decency. This category included several specific ideas, such as the *Sabib* (true) way of wearing clothes, and the idea of morality associated with clothing. In this part, the most used terms are *genji* (T-shirt), *buk* (breast), *burkha* (burqa), *shalin* (decent), and *Purdab* (veil), directly linked to the clothing and character of women. Another 143 instances either denied VAW or blamed the victims. More descriptively, male users tended to justify man's aggression and denied women's allegations against men, and also suggested how women should lead their lives in more "Islamic" ways. They further condemned feminists and Hindus along with seculars and atheists for spoiling the essence of Islam. The most used terms were Muslim, *dharmā* (religion), and *Islami* (Islamic). Based on the instances, two broad areas of Islamic ideology were identified that help male users validate misogyny. One is the ideation of decency, and the other is the tendency of defending aggression through *pseudo*-Islamic reasoning. Both concepts correlate with each other and often overlap.

**Ideation of decency.** In Islam, *Purdab* (veiling) is a fundamental concept for both men and women. The *burkha* is an article of clothing widely used by Muslim women, which is thought to be the epitome of *Purdab*. However, popular Islamic interpretations attribute the idea of *Purdab* only to women, exempting men from it. Many male netizens repeatedly talked about how women should wear dresses, how they should remain veiled in public spaces. Surprisingly, we found only three instances in the entire dataset where the male users elucidated that *Purdab* has equal value for both men and women. For example, one user commented: "Men are advised in the Quran to control their gaze before women's veiling."

Many comments from male users hinted that the T-shirt is a symbol of indecency for women in Bangladesh society. Therefore, if a woman wearing a T-shirt appears in a public space, it would naturally create controversy. "R" rebuked and threatened: "No women from decent families wear a T-shirt without an *urna* (a piece of cloth)." This comment suggests that women should obey men's words, that is, they should not go to public places wearing T-shirts. Some users thought that women should not wear T-shirts as it is not a *sufficiently feminine* form of dress. Otherwise, men would be confused and end up harassing women.

The following three comments are from "S," "T," and "U," respectively: "They will be molested if they continue wearing men's attire. Wear something feminine, so that we can distinguish between you and us"; "No gentlemen would touch the body of such shameless women who wear men's attire"; "You let yourself be molested by wearing such T-shirts." Notice how well the male users achieve the *gender-*

ization of T-shirts. Such incoherent and sexist accounts bear the sign of moral policing, a form of vigilantism. Further, the women who wear T-shirts were considered shameless. Wearing T-shirts was also seen as a feminist/Western conspiracy to degrade Muslim women. Often, users also promulgated that Islam prohibits T-shirts for women, although no source for such information was mentioned. Two similar comments are: “It is [promoting T-shirts] nothing but a trick to degrade Muslim women”; “T-shirts are forbidden for women in Islam.” These remarks suggest that disobeying the man-made standard of decency is un-Islamic and unholy. Male users also offered solutions for how women can be safe from both men’s greed and being un-Islamic/unholy: “Wear a *burkha*, not T-shirts like the foreigners.”

**Defending aggression.** In many instances, male users tried to justify their aggression on women by victim-blaming that we have seen in earlier sections. However, in this case, they referred to Islam to validate their standpoints: Either the female victims did not maintain *Purdah* properly or they somehow aroused the perpetrators to involve in action. According to many extreme views, *Purdah* is not only wearing a *burkha*, it must be *dhiledhala* (loose). Unless the *burkha* worn is loose, women’s body shapes would be visible to men and it would provoke them. Several male users suggested a similar idea in different ways: “Cover your face and wear loose dresses”; “Start wearing a loose *burkha*, then you will not need to act like a victim”; “Wear a loose *burkha*”; “Only harlots think like that [the slogan]. Wear a loose *burkha* with a *hijab*.” Such vile expressions referring to Islam not only misrepresent the religion but also indicate deep-rooted misogyny.

Two specific attitudes were discerned among male users. First, some said that sexual VAW is closely linked to the dress women wear. The more women wear Islamic dress, the safer they will be. The following are two men’s statements:

These dresses would surely invite rape. Muslim girls must have *urna* covering their bodies.

Islam is a religion of peace. If these women would maintain *Purdah* rather than wearing T-shirts, groping and raping would not take place.

As Islam is a religion of peace, according to them, it already includes how a woman can protect herself from men’s lust. Wearing Islamic dresses and maintaining *Purdah*, some male users surmised, would protect women from sexual harassment even while commuting. Two such comments are: “Commute in public transportation wearing a *burkha*, you will be respected instead of molested”; “Wear a

*sunnati* (prescribed in Islam) *burkha*, no one will touch and molest you.”

Second, male users often tried to decriminalize the act of sexual VAW by blaming the victims. They stated that the female victims usually do not properly observe the Islamic dress code. This exposes them to sexual violence and men are not responsible for that. Further, they argued that men may rape women if their dress is not *sufficiently* Islamic. They also implied that it is men’s responsibility to compel women to obey Islamic rules. In this case, disobedient women must be punished. Two excerpts from the comments are:

Who wears these clothes (T-shirt and jeans) should be burnt. Wear a standard *burkha*, no one would molest you.

Protesting while naked! Such women must be raped by dogs and, thereafter, be banished from this Muslim country.

It seems male users try to defend their violent behavior by using Islam as a shield. It is also noticeable that they accuse women of becoming victims of men’s greed. It should be the women’s responsibility, according to many male users, to try not to be dishonored by men.

Some male users also blamed Hindus, seculars, atheists, and feminists for spoiling the essence of Islam. They suspect that Hindus with other infidels are actively trying to infect Islam. The following excerpt is a conversation between two male users, the first one is “V” and the second one is “W”:

V: Saudi women are the most backward. No one should, from now onward, stay behind the door, and the language of protest should be like this.

W: Damn! You are an infidel. Must be a Hindu.

Western feminism’s eternal struggle against Islam can be understood from the statements of some male users. They perceive women’s emancipation as equal to men’s defeat. This also represents a defeat of Islam, according to them, as men represent and uphold Islam. Male users described the campaign as a *naribadi shor-ojontro* (feminist conspiracy), *ojouktik* (irrational), and *nostami* (perversion). In similar cases, feminism is the usual scapegoat. Some male users stated that “feminism is a corrupt ideology and only depressed and unhappy women circulate this,” “feminists are enthusiastic to spoil the familial bonds in Bangladesh,” and “all feminists should go to hell.” These statements are expressions of anger against

feminism as well as the campaign.

## Conclusion

The primary aims of this paper were to find out how male netizens react to women and how they use Islam to sustain misogyny. Two research questions were formulated after reviewing the relevant studies: Both were answered by analyzing the relevant social media data. For RQ1, male netizens show two types of reactions: shaming and denigration, and justification and accusation. Male netizens are found to be more interested in shaming and denigrating women in social media. They also tend to justify men's criminal behavior against women and accuse women of being responsible for their own misfortunes. For RQ2, male netizens use Islam in two specific ways to sustain misogyny: ideation of decency and defending aggression. Many male users talk about how women should preserve decency in an Islamic way and infer that this would prevent VAW. They deny the allegation that men are violent and promote the idea that women are delicate. They also try to postulate that women are being corrupted by feminism, atheism, secularism, and Hinduism, and these factors as a cumulative force are allegedly distracting women from Islam, which is the prime reason for VAW, according to them.

### How Men React to Women

From the analysis, two propensities are explored. First, most of the male netizens show a hatred for women in cyberspace that is evident in a variety of expressions. They humiliate and disparage women verbally and shame the female body as it allegedly attracts and arouses men. They also decide to punish the women whose visible body shapes arouse them. In many comments, women are also mocked for disobeying men's cultural instructions, such as wearing a *burkha* or maintaining *Purdah*. Besides, underestimation is abundantly used to demean women's capability and contribution to society. Most of these expressions are accompanied by slurs that primarily indicate men's communicative power over women in cyberspace. These expressions of online misogyny are similar to offline misogyny, what Azad (2004) and Mannan (2011) described in their works. It is important to mention that men's cultural instruction is based on a somewhat narrower view of society and Islam. Bangladesh society was generally more open in the period from the 1970s to the 1990s before the new Islamic revivalism in the 2000s (Islam &



Islam, 2018). During that time, women's clothing was more liberal than the present time, with almost no moral policing (Al-Zaman, 2018). This suggests that the cultural promotion of women's religious clothing is a relatively novel phenomenon in Bangladesh that might be an aftermath of the popular Islamic revivalism and/or a new form of male dominance over women's lifestyles. Second, male users tend to establish that men are innocent and women are corrupt. They justify this standpoint in two specific ways: by denying the allegations and by accusing others. Victim-blaming is one of their common traits. Men accuse women of disturbing them with their beauty and visibility. Rape is admissible, according to some, if the women wear *vulgar* dress. Interestingly, male users think that wearing T-shirts is vulgar. It could be an instance of poor reasoning that is mainly intended to hide/justify men's violent traits and to sustain their authority over the female body (Infante & Rancer, 1996; Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

### How Islam is Used to Sustaining Misogyny

Two main themes emerge from the analysis that shows how men attempt to validate misogyny by referring to Islam. First, they propose a concept of decency based on popular Islamic interpretations. Second, they try to validate men's aggression toward women referring to Islamic sermons. In both cases, it seems, they try to present their reasons by misinterpreting the main tenets of Islam. Put another way, rather than addressing core Islamic values and principles, they try to advocate their version of Islam. In the first instance, many male users try to outline the limits of decency. This conceptualization of decency is a combination of Islamic values and the social norms of Bangladesh society: the kernel of it is *Purdab*. To oppose the "Ga gheshe daraben na" campaign, they formulate a conceptual framework mainly based on Islamic *Purdab*. For example, men and women must have two separate dress codes, and women should not wear male dress, such as T-shirts. Thus, they seek to stigmatize the whole campaign that promotes women's T-shirts with a benign quote. They also repeat Islamic instructions on clothing in support of their stance. According to them, T-shirts are forbidden in Islam, although not a single user presents evidence on behalf of such a claim. However, Islamic scripture, such as the Quran, only suggests both men and women dress moderately and does not impose any strict regulations (Barlas, 2019). Unintentionally, or intentionally, ignoring core Islamic preaching, they state that wearing T-shirts is *un-Islamic* and a violation of *Purdab*, while wearing *burkha* is the Islamic and *Sabih* way of *Purdab*. Therefore, women wearing T-shirts are unholy

and women wearing a *burkha* are holy. It is addressed as *the* main theme of decency. Thus, to become decent, a woman must wear a *burkha* when she appears in a public space. In this case, men's reconceptualized/reproduced concept of *Purdah* sounds more puritanical and seems to contradict the concept of Islamic *Purdah*.

Secondly, male users link *Purdah* to the victimhood of women. They repeatedly reason that a woman becomes a victim of sexual violence as a result of not maintaining proper *Purdah*. While some users propose a moderate version of *Purdah*, i.e., wearing a *burkha*, the extremists suggest women must wear a *loose burkha*. Otherwise, her body shape would be visible and she could be harassed. Some users further suggest that men can harass women who do not obey Islamic codes of conduct, and it is not men's fault at all. Women must remain at home when it is dark and not go outside without wearing an *urna* that conceals the shape of their breasts. Male users also tend to use vile language to compel women to obey these rules. However, these popular interpretations of Islam frequently contradict the basic idea of *Purdah* and Islamic codes of conduct (Barlas, 2019) and are the widespread patriarchal interpretations of Islam that are more related to misogyny (Mernissi, 1992). Further, Barlas (2019) and Wadud (1999) state that nowhere is it mentioned in the Quran that women must wear a *burkha*. Rather, both men and women should have modest clothing (*Purdah*), which has no clearly defined dress code.

Overall, the dataset is full of verbal aggression, including character attacks, appearance attacks, mockery, teasing, scolding, and insults (Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992; Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). It is a sign of destructive human behavior usually motivated by one of four underlying causes: frustration, social learning, psychopathology, and argumentative skill deficiency (Infante, Trebing, Shepherd, & Seeds, 1984). These reactions suggest that most male netizens, at least in the present sample, are misogynists. Also, Islam is employed by some males to bolster their social supremacy in cyberspace, just as in real space (Manne, 2018). While Islam itself decrees moderate rights for women (Barlas, 2019; Lamrabet, 2016; Wadud, 1999, 2013), men on Bangladesh SNSs appear to be the moral police and self-proclaimed custodians of Islam. Moreover, the contestation between Islam and feminism is evident (Kausar, 2001). Finally, the findings are closely linked to each other, and even one factor could be the outcome or initiator of the other.

## Strengths and Limitations

The prime strength of this research is its methodological novelty and analytical style. In Bangladesh, analyzing social media text using a qualitative content analysis method is not common. Following such a methodology, to the best of our knowledge, the present research is the first interdisciplinary research in Bangladesh that has attempted to bridge three fields of study: communication, gender, and religion. Therefore, in this under-researched area, this study would help academicians and policymakers to understand the features of online misogyny and how Islam contributes to it. Furthermore, this study may also help to better understand the inter-relationship between women and the growing Islamic piety in contemporary Bangladesh.

This study also has some limitations. First, a single case may not represent all other cases. Moreover, Bangladesh is a relatively small South Asian country. Therefore, generalizing these results could be problematic. Second, only those who participated and commented on the discourse were counted, a group that represents only a small portion of total Facebook users in Bangladesh and the results may therefore not be representative; having said that, the sample size seems large enough to generalize the findings but only for similar incidents. Third, the comments of male users were determined based on their male names and profile information. However, such information can be false since social media allows users to create fake identities.

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