

## POLICY BRIEF #27

# A CRISIS OF RAPE IN BANGLADESH: OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAITH ENGAGEMENT

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Widespread sexual violence is a persistent problem in Bangladesh, aggravated during the COVID-19 pandemic. This brief focuses on the ongoing rape crisis, examining pathways to policy reform. Its underlying premise is that faith actors can potentially be a galvanizing, positive force that influences public policy and stimulates social change.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Sexual violence is detrimental to individual and collective human flourishing and an impediment to any country's prosperity and development.
- Bangladesh's laws on rape echo and reinforce the gendered power relations in society. Legal reforms are needed, since many laws are steeped in colonial history.
- Dialogue with religious communities can be advanced by identifying and promulgating religious norms that support gender equality and counter sexual violence.
- Education, a key social institution for collaborative engagement with religious bodies, can produce fundamental normative and structural changes.



This brief draws on BRAC University's Centre for Peace and Justice (CPJ) and World Faiths Development Dialogue's (WFDD) ongoing research on the rise of gender-based violence in Bangladesh, linked to the COVID-19 emergencies.

## INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM

Bangladesh's achievements and progress towards gender equality and family planning uptake are widely noted and lauded. However, widespread sexual violence has been aggravated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Human rights advocates place blame primarily on deeply entrenched gender norms and the very few prosecutions and convictions of perpetrators. Faith leaders play large roles in perpetuating gender norms that can lead to increased violence against women and patterns of domination. However, religious support for family planning, for example, has contributed to uptake and program success, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, demonstrating that some religious norms contribute both to equality and a capacity for engagement and change in approaches to topics related to gender relations.

Religious engagement in combating sexual violence offers a significant potential to shape engrained traditions and teachings in positive directions. Purposeful support might encourage policymakers to improve anti-rape measures, thus helping to elevate the status of women in both public and domestic spheres.

Despite progress and programs supporting gender parity policies in Bangladesh over several decades, the most recent World Economic Forum Global Gender Report (2020) still shows Bangladesh as ranking only fiftieth among 153 countries.<sup>1</sup> Women's advocacy groups have played central roles in moving the needle policy wise, with persistent protesting and nudging. However, a rape crisis has dominated the news since the COVID-19 lockdowns began in early 2020. Women in many parts of Bangladesh have been subjected to an egregious string of rapes, day after day, including gang rapes.<sup>2</sup> Starting in

September 2020, hundreds of women have flooded the streets of Dhaka to protest the pattern and inadequate response. The protests were initially sparked in late September by a horrific gang rape of a woman while her husband was tied up.<sup>3</sup> More protests erupted as videos of rapes filmed on cellphones circulated on the internet for weeks before they were taken down.

More broadly, various statistical indicators tell us that sexual violence has increased during the pandemic, with NGO hotlines reporting a rise in calls from victims because so many are trapped with their abusers as a result of lockdown measures.<sup>4</sup> Patterns of sexual violence perpetuated against women and girls signal that gender discrimination and misogyny are still widespread, although they were quite rarely part of public discourse before the current crisis.

Bangladesh's national policies highlight a strong official commitment to gender equality and to addressing gender-based violence (GBV). Bangladesh marks the anniversary in 2021 of two landmark pieces of legislation on gender-based violence, and it is entering the final phase of a nation-wide plan to "build a society without violence against women and children by 2025." Data from the government's One Stop Crisis Centre, however, indicates that from 2001 to 2020, only 3.56% of cases filed under the 2000 Prevention of Oppression Against Women and Children Act have resulted in court judgments.<sup>5</sup> Recent statistics underscore that the sexual violence problem in Bangladesh cannot be defeated by policy alone, especially when the said policy is barely implemented. The challenge is thus to address deeper social issues like misogynistic attitudes and weak legal systems where perpetrators escape with impunity.

The aim of this brief is to inform government entities, faith-based organizations, and secular organizations about the context and nature of the ongoing sexual violence crisis in Bangladesh. It highlights ways in which faith actors can be powerful allies of women and girls by speaking out against such violence and working to bolster meaningful and impactful policy change. Achieving a clear understanding of common ground is both the end and the means. It can help advance sustainable reform around ending systemic sexual violence based on an appreciation that such violence is detrimental to individual and collective human flourishing and represents a significant impediment to Bangladesh's prosperity and development. The brief focuses on rape perpetrated against women and girls but acknowledges that people of all genders suffer from sexual violence.

## **BANGLADESH: SEXUAL VIOLENCE PROFILE**

Sexual violence affects women and girls disproportionately and is widely understood to be a serious violation of human rights that threatens the fabric of a society. It hampers economic and social development by creating barriers for those who seek education and work opportunities, due to associated psychological burdens. Survivors face various forms of social stigma surrounding rape that can hinder the healing process.

Rape, specifically, often leaves women and their families with concerns regarding the loss of her and the family's honor, a concept associating worth with women's bodies that is linked to many intersecting issues in South Asia and beyond. These consequences of sexual violence further entrench women's subordinate status in society and the

unequal power relations between men and women. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2020 noted a prevalence of gender violence affecting 53.3% of Bangladesh's female population over a lifetime.<sup>6</sup> According to a 2005 WHO multi-country study, 30% of women in Bangladesh reported their first sexual experience as forced.<sup>7</sup>

A 2013 multi-country UN study on male violence surveyed perpetrators of rape and found that in Bangladesh, 95% of urban perpetrators and 88% of rural perpetrators reported facing no legal consequences for raping a woman or girl.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the Government of Bangladesh's One Stop Crisis Centre showed that between 2001 and 2013, about 78% of women chose not to challenge their rapist in court, even when they had sought medical care.<sup>9</sup> This data indicates that large numbers of rape survivors do not seek legal recourse because of threats, stigma, shame, and secondary victimization by the criminal justice system, as well as a culture of impunity for the perpetrators.

The COVID-19 pandemic has witnessed a rise in domestic violence and sexual assault in many if not all societies. BRAC University's Human Rights and Legal Services program documented a nearly 70% increase in reported incidents of all forms of violence against women and girls in spring 2020, compared to the same period last year. The table below breaks down the numbers of reported and documented rapes compiled by Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), a leading human rights organization. Economic fallout and lockdown restrictions often mean a decrease in funding for legal aid, shelter, and medical care for assault victims, with higher risks when a woman or girl is locked in with their abuser. These constraints multiply the social, psychological, medical, and economic consequences suffered by victims of sexual violence during the pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

A sharp rise in reported rapes is one of the grave effects of the pandemic. The protests that swayed Dhaka and other districts in fall 2020 showed that women were willing to take to the streets to demand social and legal change, even if it meant putting themselves in harm's way due to the pandemic. As of 2020, human rights groups estimate that about four women a day are raped in Bangladesh on average, with many rapes going unreported.<sup>11</sup> In an article in the *Guardian*, Shireen Huq, founder of the women's activist organization Naripokkho, proclaimed: "Gender-based violence is a national emergency in Bangladesh. It should be declared as such."<sup>12</sup>

A comparison between past rape statistics and the numbers during the pandemic underscores the gravity of the present situation. Below are the rape statistics reported by the human rights group Odhikar Organization for the period from January 2001 to December 2019:

#### **Odhikar Organization Rape Statistics for January 2001 to December 2019**

<b>Total Women Raped</b>	<b>Gang Rapes</b>	<b>Killed After Rape</b>	<b>Suicide After Rape</b>
6,900	1,490	483	35

Source: Odhikar Organization, 2020<sup>13</sup>

These numbers, tallied over an approximately two-decade period, can be contrasted with rape statistics collected for the year 2020, over the course of the pandemic. As the following table shows, Ain O Salish Kendra reports over a fourfold rise in the annual average of rape incidents:

#### **Ain O Salish Kendra Rape Statistics for January to December 2020**

<b>Form of Rape</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Death After Rape</b>	<b>Suicide After Rape</b>	<b>Cases Filed</b>
<b>Gang</b>	317	28	12	923
<b>Individual</b>	1,302	20	2	213
<b>Total</b>	1,627	48	14	1,136

Source: ASK, 2020<sup>14</sup>

### **POLICY AND LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: IDENTIFIED NEEDS FOR REFORM**

The contemporary rape crisis in Bangladesh takes place against the backdrop both of a specific history where rape was a significant issue, and legacies of entrenched patriarchal gender norms, reflected in both social attitudes and law.

Bangladesh has significant legal instruments in place aimed at protecting against domestic violence and rape, although aspects of the framework are outdated and inadequate. The pandemic and rise in rape cases with few convictions has shed new light on these legal inadequacies and has provoked activist outrage. Bangladesh's policy and legal environment surrounding sexual violence needs to be understood in its context as a post-conflict and post-colonial state.

Bangladesh is a former British colony. Independence from Britain in 1947 and the India-Pakistan Partition resulted in the division of Pakistan into its West and East regions, located on either side of India. East Pakistan went on to become Bangladesh in 1971 through a violent struggle for liberation. This history of liberation carries a legacy of systematic wartime

rape. The Pakistani army deployed the rape of women as a war strategy, with approximately 200,000 to 400,000 cases of rape and sexual enslavement in military camps.<sup>15</sup>

Such weaponization of rape has been a common feature of wars, across cultures and throughout history.<sup>16</sup> Women, as the perceived embodiments of the nation and vessels of its culture, are usually the targets of rape during wartime. Deploying rape as a strategy of war is intended to bring shame to the enemy and crush their spirit. Genocide, ethnic cleansing, and genetic imperialism are carried out through rape and impregnation, with severe social and psychological consequences that damage the social fabric.<sup>17</sup> The notion that women symbolize the nation's honor leads to their ostracism by their own families and communities when this honor is "violated" by the enemy. Experience in contexts like Bangladesh, Bosnia, and Rwanda bears witness to these tragic patterns.<sup>18</sup>

In postwar Bangladesh, the newly formed state conferred the title of "*birangona*" or "war heroine" on women who were raped in wartime. Several socioeconomic programs were also instituted to promote their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. However, the government narrative and media representations during this time portrayed them as passive victims. Government efforts, in the form of awarding titles and introducing rehabilitative schemes, aimed to reinstate the honor of these supposedly dishonored women. This served to reinforce patriarchal gender norms.

Despite the state's ostensibly interventionist approach, the undercurrents of Bangladeshi society's dominant religious and cultural attitudes were still evident in state initiatives. Both state and society were guided by a conservative, Muslim-majority ethos which

equated a woman's worth with her chastity and virtue.<sup>19</sup> Hence, the *birangona* label served mostly to single out such women for social stigmatization and ostracism. In many cases, they were turned away from their own families and were rejected by wider society. Similarly, state efforts to "emancipate" these women expected their docile participation in these programs and a quiet acceptance of their limited prospects. Despite the apparent efforts to honor the affected women, there was no state honor associated with the nominal honorific, and they were never openly honored.<sup>20</sup>

The *birangona* label reduced women's identities to solely that of wartime rape victims. Their complex life trajectories are lost to history, with public memories curated only from the horrific literary and visual representations and testimonies that paralyzed them in a perceived state of victimhood and ruination.<sup>21</sup> For affected women, their experience of rape was both definitive and destructive for their identities as individual members of their families, communities, and nation. Some shifts in the public memory of the *birangona* have emerged since 2001, with left-liberal efforts to rethink the 1971 history. Many women have now publicly acknowledged their experiences of sexual violence during the war, and there was even a testimony on sexual violence at the International Crimes Tribunal in 2009.<sup>22</sup> However, the gender norms and values entrenched at the birth of the Bangladeshi state continue to shape political attitudes towards rape and normative underpinnings of laws and policies.

The issues highlighted are by no means unique to Bangladesh or to Muslim-majority nations. Notwithstanding rhetorical commitments to redressing cultural traditions that lead to unequal treatment, many societies still in effect turn blind eyes to attitudes that amount to controls of women's

bodies. Modernized societies, Muslim and non-Muslim, still have many gaps in efforts to carve out paths that allow women to flourish in society and to turn their backs on obligations to adhere to traditional gender roles that limit their economic and bodily autonomy.

The impact of Bangladesh's colonial past features more directly in the articulations of laws and structural components of the legal system. Many substantive and procedural laws such as the 1898 Code of Criminal Procedure, the 1872 Evidence Act, and the 1860 Penal Code predate Bangladesh's Constitution and have remained largely unchanged since the colonial era. It should be noted that similar laws have long been repealed in the United Kingdom but remain in effect in many former colonies. These laws need to be reviewed in light of the current constitution to reflect an equal and non-discriminatory framework. Another logistical issue with the Penal Code is that the definition of rape dates from the colonial era and does not define penetration or elaborate on consent. This law requires proof of physical resistance, which is often impossible to prove. Marital rape is not recognized.

Many activists identify the 1872 Evidence Act, which relates to character evidence in rape cases, as harmful and discriminatory. This provision states that when a man is prosecuted for rape, the victim can be shown to be of "immoral character." This character evidence degrades the survivor and revictimizes them in court. It also drives the notion that a woman should possess good character to secure justice and deters the survivor from reporting the rape.

In October 2020, the Bangladeshi government approved new measures to amend the 2000 Women and Children Repression (Prevention) Act to include the death penalty as the maximum punishment

for rape instead of life imprisonment. This came in response to mass protests against country-wide gang rapes. However, many activists, feminist scholars, and legal professionals disapprove of these measures because they afford no real solution to the problem of rape and are unacceptable from a human rights perspective. There is no evidence that the measures will deter sexual violence, and many worry that the move could deter reporting<sup>23</sup> and even increase rape-murder cases.<sup>24</sup> Reformed rape laws should aim to align with standards in international human rights law to ensure protection and legal access to all survivors and the right to a fair trial.

Sultan Mohammed Zakaria, a South Asia researcher at Amnesty International, echoes this sentiment, saying, "Executions perpetuate violence, they don't prevent it. Instead of seeking vengeance, the authorities must focus on ensuring justice for the victims of sexual violence including through delivering the long-term changes that would stop this epidemic of violence and prevent it from occurring."<sup>25</sup>

Several important alliances have emerged over the past year, advocating for preventative reforms to stimulate long-term social change. Prominent among these is Feminists Across Generations, which has put forth a 10-point list of demands for the eradication of GBV.<sup>26</sup> In addition to law reform, the alliance has called for targeted action in public and virtual spaces where violence is perpetrated; reform of other social institutions that tend to uphold rape culture, including family and education; and the abolition of several misogynistic social norms related to sexual violence, including victim-blaming and the embodiment of individual and familial honor in women's bodies. These developments point to an increased public awareness of sexual violence as originating in social culture, manifested not only in law, but across all social institutions.

## RETHINKING POLICY ADVOCACY ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE

This charged legal and policy environment offers significant potential for change. The unprecedented social movement has brought a discernible shift in focus towards countering the root causes of GBV, reanimating some key debates on gender norms in popular discourses around the current GBV crisis.<sup>27</sup> There is now a growing momentum to challenge decades of gendered oppression sanctioned by law and other social institutions. Until recently, the entire gamut of proposed reforms has revolved around the legal system, focusing on definitional elements and evidentiary standards that betray Bangladeshi law's own misogynistic character. However, there is a gradual recognition that though legal reform is essential, it is no panacea for the present crisis.

Law is a social institution, and it will thus usually reproduce the social conditions it is constructed from and embedded within. This is evident in the laws on rape which substantially replicate the gendered power relations in society, steeped in Bangladesh's colonial history. Nevertheless, law is an important source of social norms, and reforms to law can produce significant social change. Where law declares certain conduct to be illegal, this is a statement on what conduct society will not condone, and thus, it influences social conduct at least to some extent.<sup>28</sup> However, it is important to understand the limits to law's normative influence, and hence the effective cap on social changes possible through legal reform alone.

The legal system's response to sexual violence has been primarily reactive—law responds to violence *ex post facto*, and it targets individual perpetrators to provide support and redress for individual victims. Therefore, law's preventive role and general deterrent effect are very limited, as evidenced by the high levels of sexual

violence even in jurisdictions that have robust laws to counter such violence.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the structural causes of sexual violence—that is, the underlying sociocultural perceptions, attitudes, and inequalities regarding gender—remain largely untouched in how legal justice is delivered in practice.

Sexual violence is rooted in power imbalance between genders, arising from the disadvantages that are attached to particular gender roles and behaviors.<sup>30</sup> This shapes social perceptions of sexual violence, its perpetrators, and its victims, as is evident in societies where women are identified as having subordinate status and less agential personhood compared to men.<sup>31</sup> The scale and severity of sexual violence in Bangladesh signifies a culture of acceptance where such violence has been normalized and even legitimized. The prevalence of sexual violence thus indicates that social norms create and maintain the space for committing these crimes. Hence, sexual violence cannot be comprehensively addressed through legal and policy reform alone.

The aim should be transformative cultural and structural change that overturns the established social norms on gender. As WHO has observed, social norms rooted in culture are highly influential in altering individual behavior, including violent behavior.<sup>32</sup> Such norms also have a pivotal role in defining social views on sexual acts and sexual violence.<sup>33</sup> Thus, action to prevent sexual violence needs to probe deep into the norms and structures that normalize such violence and impose gendered pressures on individuals. This can then lead to effective preventive measures for sexual violence through efforts that can overturn gender norms and dismantle their associated structures, perceptions, and behavioral patterns.

## FAITH RESPONSES TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence against women across societies is generally a symptom of a broader devaluation of women that reflects the entrenched and complex sociocultural underpinnings of the society. Eliminating sexual violence, therefore, requires an integrated approach across all social institutions.<sup>34</sup> While policy advocates are beginning to contend with these deeper structural and normative causes of sexual violence, there are significant blind spots and preconceptions around faith organizations and the work of faith actors. Among social institutions that have moral authority on questions of gender, religious bodies stand starkly as ones that receive disproportionately lower attention from policy advocates. This has particular relevance in Bangladesh given their capacious moral influence in Bangladeshi society. In Bangladesh, almost the entire population professes some religious affiliation, and many see religion as their primary guide for social conduct.<sup>35</sup>

An agenda for transformative change, however, needs to be sensitive to the cultural context where change is sought and should draw support from cultural elements as part of efforts to eliminate sexual violence and transform gender norms. Elimination of sexual violence requires societal commitment to gender equality. Interventions aiming to prevent sexual violence, therefore, need to engage with normative beliefs about gender, rectify misunderstandings, and work to change harmful attitudes.

From a religious perspective, opposition to progressive ideas about gender quite often stem from flawed and narrow interpretation or misinterpretation about religious precepts on these issues. Faith leaders can act as barriers to progressive development and gender equality due to factors such as lack of education,

misinformation, and patriarchal mindset. People are products of their culture, and it is essential to contextualize where faith leaders stand on specific issues due to their long-held cultural belief systems and practices that could perpetuate practices and ideologies that harm women.

Some gender-regressive beliefs and traditions are misattributed to religion. The marry-your-rapist phenomenon in Bangladesh may be a case in point.<sup>36</sup> Such traditions have long existed in many Middle Eastern and North African countries and were believed to be Islamic practices, although they have since been traced to their colonial roots in the French penal code.<sup>37</sup> The topic has not yet been studied in Bangladesh, but it suggests the need for critical rethinking of gender inequalities presumed to be inherent in religion.

Women's rights advocates have cogent reasons for reservations about working with faith actors, arising from the decades of resistance they have experienced from religious quarters in advocating for some core tenets of gender equality like women's right to equal inheritance.<sup>38</sup> Women's rights advocates often argue that religion is a tool that justifies patriarchal control over women's autonomy. While tensions can arise between secular development and faith actors on issues of gender equality, uncomfortable dialogues surrounding these issues are an integral part of uncovering where there may be shared goals between both parties. Collaboration and understanding between secular and faith entities could allow for better responses and interventions towards sexual violence in their communities moving forward and offer material help to survivors.

Faith communities are important partners in multi-sectoral responses to sexual violence, with large influence in their communities. Faith actors can offer



alternative values, models, and visions of progress that can inspire new approaches and outcomes in development.<sup>39</sup> Their embedded positions within their communities as trusted leaders support degrees of power with non-state and state actors due to the sheer size of their constituencies.<sup>40</sup> It is thus important to explore how they have been and can continue to be practically engaged in an impactful way.

## SUCCESSSES AND CHALLENGES: INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Successful engagement with faith actors on gender-related issues has a significant history, both within and beyond Bangladesh, notably enhancing the efficacy and impact of public health interventions. In Bangladesh, for instance, USAID's Expanded Service Delivery project effectively engaged and mobilized Muslim imams and religious leaders, who went on to become champions for reproductive health and family planning at the local and national levels.

Public health has been a particularly productive arena for such engagement, with plentiful evidence, especially from Africa. Faith leaders have in some settings been key actors in interventions to improve family planning and reproductive health and to combat HIV/AIDS and female genital cutting.<sup>41</sup> Leadership training for Muslim leaders has broadened their knowledge base on Islamic precepts regarding these public health issues and helped to fill commitment gaps in their role as progressive thought leaders for their communities.

Examples of success lie outside public health as well. Organizations committed to ending child marriage, including the United Nations Population Fund, International Center for Research on Women, and Girls Not Brides, have engaged faith leaders as

part of broad initiatives to instill behavioral change, through community, faith, and traditional leadership. In Nigeria, evidence from projects supported by the Ford Foundation and Grand Challenges Canada demonstrates successful initiatives where religious leaders came together to find scriptural support for action against child marriage.<sup>42</sup>

The Burundi Red Cross offers an example of successfully engaging religious leaders to counter GBV. Religious leaders were part of a project's community awareness and sensitization component, working with local authorities and volunteers to raise awareness using different methods to address different age groups in the community.<sup>43</sup>

In Pakistan, Norwegian Church Aid has worked with local partners to sensitize and build the capacities of faith leaders on issues of GBV, enabling them to speak out against gender discrimination and violence, even having them raise awareness during sermons and community meetings.<sup>44</sup> This has led to progressive changes like marriage officiants taking women's formal consent before marriage.

In Myanmar, Norwegian Church Aid has worked with the Gender Studies Centre at the Myanmar Institute of Theology to explore gender in Christianity, with a focus on female religious leadership in Baptist Christian institutions.<sup>45</sup> A key project aim was to encourage faith-based educational institutions to develop women leaders in faith who can go on to become agents of change in society. Promotion of gender equality and prevention of GBV were also goals underpinning this project. The project arranged gatherings of ordained women; established peer support networks; and developed a platform for sharing knowledge, experiences, and mutual empowerment. It also advanced policy advocacy for female representation, engaging women faith leaders

with male staff, graduates, and theologians, as well as male champions of women's rights.

Evidence of positive outcomes from engagement with faith actors is encouraging development institutions to outreach to faith leaders in order to reproduce better development outcomes and to ensure local ownership of the development process.<sup>46</sup>

Even where collaborations between faith actors and development practitioners are initiated, obstacles may emerge. For instance, in the Nigerian example cited above, Muslim leaders declined to prescribe a marriageable age for their communities because they could find no scriptural support for such a position and concluded that such a statement would be incompatible with the values of their communities. Nevertheless, efforts to engage can yield positive results. While the leaders found no direct grounds to oppose child marriage, they did find scriptural support for points relating to girls' education, maternal mortality and morbidity, and the state's role in protecting children, which made it possible for them to encourage their communities to delay marriages on the grounds of education and health.

There are similar challenges in advancing faith-inclusive social responses to the current sexual violence crisis in Bangladesh. CPJ/WFDD research on GBV during the pandemic found that prominent secular NGOs that work towards gender equality have experienced resistance from faith actors and are hesitant to reach out and engage. Previous research found that faith-inspired actors also harbor reservations towards such collaborations because they are not convinced that their perspectives and approaches are valued. Keeping in mind both the challenges and opportunities of faith engagement in gender-related development issues will be key to chart a productive path forward.

## WAYS FORWARD AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In charting ways forward to address the present rape crisis, both reactive and preventative measures are needed. Legal reforms called on by policy advocates are crucial to purge law of its sociocultural biases against victims of sexual violence and colonial legacies of gender inequality. However, to eradicate the root causes of sexual violence, a long-term strategy of coordinated action across all social institutions is needed. Religious institutions are principal social institutions to be integrated into the strategy. The recommendations that follow aim to facilitate a strategic process:

1. *Identify a group of faith leaders who have expressed concern about violent patterns and a willingness to engage in efforts to counter sexual violence and expand engagement through their networks:* In all faith-based efforts, the crucial first step is finding those who are self-motivated and willing to participate in dialogue that can lead to engagement. A USAID flagship Extending Service Delivery project in Yemen, for example, began by recruiting progressive Muslim scholars who had the potential to go on to become champions of gender equality.<sup>47</sup> This was followed by trust-building that fostered partnerships and gained the support of stakeholders. A similar staggered approach should be the first step towards engagement with faith leaders to counter sexual violence in Bangladesh.
2. *Work towards greater gender sensitivity and equity in faith leadership, offering gender-sensitivity training to faith leaders:* Gender-sensitive training is important for all faith leaders; even those who are engaged in awareness-raising

and prevention programs have unconscious biases and embedded ideologies that can be addressed through training to encourage more positive norms.<sup>48</sup>

3. *Support safe spaces for religious scholarship on religious approaches to GBV:* Progressive religious thinkers need the safety and intellectual freedom to reexamine their scriptures and religious teachings, explore and share alternative or unconventional readings of religious texts, and engage in genuine scholarly ventures to understand the nuances of religious texts. Such spaces are few in Bangladesh, but through the collective efforts of governments, national-level faith leaders, and university-based academic centers for religious study, such an intellectual environment can be built where progressive religious thought can thrive.
4. *Religious norms that support gender equality and counter sexual violence should be identified and communicated to religious communities:* Theological beliefs and ethics offer important resources for reforming social conduct and transforming the cultures that condone sexual violence. For instance, feminist ethicists within the Catholic tradition have emphasized that questions on sexual conduct should be placed within the broad framework for human relations based on equality, compassion, and solidarity that is established in the New Testament.<sup>49</sup> Similar normative resources should be identified across all major Bangladeshi religions so they can then be propagated among religious adherents, to stimulate changes in attitudes and conduct regarding gender and sexual violence.

5. *Education is a key social institution for collaborative engagement with religion in producing normative and structural changes:* Policy advocates have argued for comprehensive sex education and consent training to tackle the present crisis, but a broader agenda for educational reform is needed. Both government and faith-based education in Bangladesh would benefit from a critical engagement with normative beliefs about gender. Appropriate changes to teaching materials and methods can be introduced at all levels of education and need to be consistent and cross-referential across subjects, especially religious studies and social science.
6. *Religious avenues for aiding victims' recovery need to be systematized:* Research demonstrates the severe psychological consequences of victimization, prominent among which is the decline in generalized trust.<sup>50</sup> A recent stream of research demonstrates that religious participation can help victims of sexual violence cope with the negative psychological effects of victimization, in particular by helping them regain trust in society.<sup>51</sup> Religious institutions can offer victims of sexual violence who belong to their faith communities the supportive environment, activities, and shield from social stigma necessary for them to heal from their traumatic experience.

The various suggested measures should be integrated into a comprehensive and long-term strategy to establish and sustain healthy norms in society, across religion to other social institutions. Community engagement is a key part of this process of eradicating the root causes of sexual violence and can be conducted on an ongoing basis and at all levels of society—from the individual, familial, communal, and to the societal.

## NEXT STEPS

Collaborating with faith leaders and communities on sexual violence issues can and will be complex, though it is key in order to mobilize large factions of society to respond to and prevent rape and violence. It also could have a lasting positive impact by influencing cultural norms and belief systems that underlie patriarchal motivations for sexual violence. Education is a key tool to preventing rape and tackling it from the source. Advocates argue for comprehensive age-appropriate sexual health education that covers consent within all school levels. Linking sexual health education to themes like equality and human rights within a faith framework could also have the power to be more effective.

Effective and swift legal response can validate survivors and send a message of no-tolerance to perpetrators while simultaneously building towards a human-rights-based approach to addressing sexual violence crimes. Reformed legal responses paired with long-term strategies and coordinated efforts across all social institutions have the power to effect real social change in Bangladesh and beyond.

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