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Tracking Gender-Based Violence and Backlash Against Women's Rights in the Digital Space: Cases From Bangladesh

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GENDER AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION SERIES

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1. Background and Rationale

With the increased use of the internet and the expansion of social media platforms usage worldwide, the digital space has emerged as a "new space," playing a central role in mediating all aspects of social, economic, and political life. *Digital space* is defined in this paper as any online platform where people can interact with each other, share their experiences, views, and opinions, can learn about national and international events, and avail the space for arranging and countering social movements. The digital space provides a unique opportunity for all to talk about anything and everything, spread information without fact-checking or validation, and connect to people who are not accessible in real life. In the context of Bangladesh, Facebook can be considered the face of the digital space. Because of its accessibility and user-friendly technology, it has become a popular medium for entertainment, education, business, and communication. Facebook is being used as a platform for spreading positive awareness of gender equality and women's rights; however, those who oppose these beliefs also use the same platform as a medium for spreading their ideologies.

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, when work, education, and daily communication were limited within online platforms, the importance and effectiveness of the digital space became more visible. The latest statistics by the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC, 2021) showed that by the end of October 2021, 129.18 million people (almost 80% of the total population of Bangladesh) were using mobile internet. This included an additional 28 million internet users who started using the technology since the first COVID-19 lockdown in April 2020. The Bangladesh National ICT Household Survey 2018-2019 found that 43.1% of the population aged over 15 years had used the internet, and 80.7% of the survey respondents between 15 and 24 years were internet users (Aspire to Innovate [a2i] & ActionAid International [AAI], 2019). According to this survey, 91.8% of the respondents used the internet for social networking, with Facebook being the most popular platform. The popularity of Facebook among Bangladeshi social media users was also reflected by the data of NapoleonCat (2021), a Polish social media engagement platform, which stated that until November 2021, there were 52.7 million Facebook users from Bangladesh. This accounted for 30.5% of the total population; 67.9% of which were men and 44.25% were within the 15–24 years age group.

As the digital space, especially Facebook, became more accessible and increasingly popular among internet users, it also turned into a medium for harassment and violence—instances that can be termed cybercrime. Cybercrime includes a wide spectrum of abuses: hate speech, public shaming, spamming, hacking and identity theft, cyberstalking (repeatedly sending offensive or threatening emails, text messages, or instant messages), surveillance tracking, malicious distribution of illegal material such as recordings of rape and revenge porn (distributing intimate videos or photographs without consent), morphing (the manipulation of a person's image often onto a different body), online threats to inflict physical harm, sexual

assault, or to kill, and efforts to instigate suicide (convincing or compelling a person to end her life) (UN Women, 2017, as cited in Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust [BLAST] & BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health [JPGSPH], 2017). Although both men and women face some forms of harassment and violence, women and people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations are specifically targeted by gender-based violence (GBV) within the digital space. This is highly prevalent in Bangladesh where 73% of women internet users have reported cybercrimes (BLAST & BRAC JPGSPH, 2017). Police headquarters data show that it has received 17,280 allegations of cyber harassment from women in a year since the establishment of the Police Cyber Support for Women (PCSW), a specialized wing to assist in taking necessary legal action about cybercrimes committed against women, in November 2020.

Additional Deputy Police Commissioner (ADC) of the Cyber Crime Investigation Division, CTTC, Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP), Nazmul Islam said that he receives 15–20 complaints of sexual harassment each day, most of which take place in cyberspace (UNB News, 2021). As for the types of violence and harassment women face, 15% (1,884) of the women complainants said that they have faced threats of spreading intimate photographs publicly on social media platforms. Of all the complaints, 43% of harassment was communicated by using fake social media accounts.

Another study found that more than 60% of women on Facebook faced some form of harassment; of them, about 10% filed complaints that their images were stolen, merged with pornographic images, and made available on the internet (Ara, 2020). Along with hate comments, shaming, and labelling, misogynistic justification and accusation were seen as the two main dominant forms of online abuse. A glance at 1,476 comments showed that 72.87% were related to sex and the female body, expressed mainly by the following words/phrases: *noshta* (wasted), *dudh* (breasts), *oshlil* (nasty), *magi* (slut), *dhorshon* (rape), and *khanki* (prostitute), and the rest 27.13% showed a general resentment of male users towards women using keywords and phrases like *kharap* (bad/evil), *nongra* (dirty), and *abal* (idiot) (AL-Zaman, 2021). This is also a part of the larger global trend of cyber violence as abusive and insulting language on social media platforms is the most common form of harassment (Plan International, 2020). This trend of harassment specifically includes women feminist activists and advocates of gender justice as many gender rights movements and awareness activities are increasingly taking place in the digital space.

This online backlash in Bangladesh already led to real implications. During 2012–2016, Bangladesh observed a surge in online activism when bloggers and activists started to write about secularism, women's and human rights, feminism, and against religious extremist ideologies. These bloggers and activists were met with backlash and resistance which escaped the virtual world and translated into their real lives. The hatred and vitriol led to attacks and killings of many online activists. This consequently led to a few quieter years online with secular

and gender equality activists being threatened or forced into silence or to leave the country entirely (Roy, 2015).

Online activism re-emerged slowly since the COVID-19 restrictions on physical space acting as a catalyst. Social activists, media personalities, and social media content creators used different social media platforms to talk about human rights, gender justice, and other issues critical to social justice. Facebook became an integral part of mass mobilization and protest as a great deal of activism shifted online. Despite the activism increasing in favour of gender justice, the increased use of the internet still led to rising rates of violence against women (VAW) in the digital space. This online violence can thus be considered within the larger backlash against women's rights activism as it was systematically using fear tactics to create a loss of confidence, courage, and interest to speak out or advocate for gender justice.

In this context, as part of the research titled Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice, the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) took the case of understanding online GBV as a form of backlash against the women's rights movement in Bangladesh. Under the larger research, a pilot study titled Tracking Gender-Based Violence and Backlash Against Gender Equality in Social Media in Bangladesh was conducted in September–November 2021. The study aimed to examine the backlash faced by women public figures (who are active in social media and discussed/campaigned on issues related to GBV, among others) in the digital space in response to incidents of GBV, bodily autonomy, and consent. It also looked at two national events that stirred discussions around VAW and sexual harassment. By doing so, the study aimed to identify forces opposing gender justice issues and unpacked the types of backlash manifested by them in social media. It further looked at the strategies used by these public figures to counter the backlash.

This examined the following:

- What are the forms of online GBV?
- How are they expressed?
- What triggers backlash?
- Who expresses the backlash?
- What are the strategies used by these public figures to counter backlash?

The findings of the research provided insights for the long-term research and capacity building under the Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice. Here we will be looking at how effectively the Digital Security Act (DSA) 2018 and other relevant emerging laws and policies have been used to counter these sorts of violence, along with analyzing the state's role in countering backlash against women's rights in the digital space.

The paper used the conceptual framework of backlash developed by Susan Faludi and Jane Mansbridge and drew examples of backlash against feminist activism in digital spaces around the world by reviewing existing literature. After setting the theoretical background, the paper broadly discusses the methodology and the challenges of the research since it was comparatively a new form of data collection and analysis. Before going to the overall findings, the paper presented the case studies, in other words, the Facebook accounts that were followed for this study. Here we will discuss why these specific people faced backlash in the form of violence, the types of backlash, who inflicted the backlash, and the strategies these women took to mitigate the risks. We will also detail the two national events that we followed to further highlight the span and the gruesomeness of the violence that has been happening in the digital space. The paper concludes with a discussion of the emerging issues that are being contested and appropriated by the actors of backlash.

2. Literature Review

The harassment and violence in the digital space against women's rights and gender equality activists is a form of backlash against the advancement of gender equality and the progressive voice. Faludi (1991) defined *backlash* as the episodes of resurgence that arise in reaction to women's "progress." Progress is interpreted by men as a threat to their (men's) economic and social well-being. Moreover, backlash does not always exist against a real gain, but also against gains that are not fully achieved or have the potential to be achieved. Backlashes have always been triggered by the perception—accurate or not—that women were making great strides, and that women might win or they are about to win something. The digital space activism by the actors that we selected for this study reflected that women were becoming vocal about their rights, against gender-based violence, and they were questioning the existing patriarchal power structure and posed the threat that these structures could be broken and reshaped. It posed a threat to the dominant force of losing the existing power to the oppressed.

A significant characteristic or form of backlash was identifying feminism as women's enemy (Faludi, 1991) and how it (feminism) was destroying the culture, norms, and social harmony of society. This theory diverted the attention of how backlash was playing a central role in delegitimizing the claims of gender equality and also engaged women to attack their cause.

According to Faludi (1991), this made the few women—who were publicly vocal about their claims—struggle to prove their assertions and forced them to take a more subtle position to survive. Another strategy of backlash was that it subtly tried to send back women to their "acceptable" roles and kept pushing women until they started blaming themselves and began enforcing the backlash on themselves. Drawing from Faludi (1991), we would argue that the backlash actors tried to make women take the blame and also targeted creating mass support for

their (backlash actors') claims, which, if not successful in pushing women back to their "acceptable" position, managed to silence many other voices in support of gender equality.

While theorizing backlash, Mansbridge discussed its different forms of manifestation. Backlash may involve subtle forms of coercive power (such as ridicule, condemnation, ostracism, or censure) or hostile forms (such as assassination, rape, beating, lynching, or other forms of violence) directed against the agents or leaders of change. In these cases, the backlash came in the form of using coercive power to regain control of lost power (Mansbridge & Shames, 2008). A backlash against social movements could take many forms, including overt force (violence or threats), intentional strategies of "divide and conquer" (trying to split up the coalition behind the movement), and "soft repression" (ridicule, stigma, and silencing) (Ferree, 2004, as cited in Mansbridge, 2008). The different forms flow from the nature of relations between the dominant and subordinate groups and they undoubtedly have independent effects on how the backlash affects the course of the movement that challenges the status quo.

The subtle forms of coercive power were highly visible in the digital space, especially on Facebook. Hate speech, mocking people (specifically those who were vocal for gender equality) to delegitimize their claims, shaming and labelling them by referring to their personal lives and choices, rape threats, and circulating fake sexually fabricated photographs were all prominent and daily occurrences on Facebook. These were also defined as online harassment and cybercrime.

Cybercrime includes a wide spectrum of abuse such as hate speech, public shaming, spamming, hacking and identity theft, cyberstalking, surveillance tracking, malicious distribution of illegal material such as recordings of rape and "revenge porn" (distributing intimate videos or photographs without consent), "morphing," making threats or sending obscene emails or text messages, including threats to inflict physical harm, sexual assault, kill, or efforts to instigate suicide (BLAST & BRAC JPGSPH, 2017).

The *State of Online Harassment* report by Pew Research Center measured online harassment using six distinct behaviours: (a) offensive name-calling; (b) purposeful embarrassment; (c) stalking; (d) physical threats; (e) harassment over a sustained period; (f) sexual harassment (Vogels, 2021). This report also distinguished between "more severe" and "less severe" forms of online harassment. Name-calling or efforts to embarrass were categorized as "less severe," while stalking, physical threats, sustained harassment, or sexual harassment were categorized as "more severe."

Although different forms of online harassment have been examined since the early days of the internet, online GBV is still not socially, legally, or academically well understood (Citron, 2014; Reed, 2009; Salter & Bryden, 2009, as cited in Simons, 2015). Moreover, women and people from minority communities, such as people of colour or members of the lesbian, gay,

bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) community, were major targets of online harassment (Citron, 2014). Although both men and women faced harassment and attack in the digital space (sometimes for no reason whatsoever) women have been disproportionately targeted for severe harassment on the internet. This included sexual harassment such as comments detailing rape fantasies, comments defaming and degrading the women in an attempt to ruin their reputation, sexually explicit photographs, hate speech, and circulating private photos without the individual's consent (Citron, 2014).

The effects of online harassment on women can be devastating to their personal lives and professional careers (Simons, 2015). Women were almost twice as likely as men to list “fear of personal injury” as their primary fear related to online harassment. Research on cyber violence in Bangladesh found that women—particularly young women—faced severe online abuse that is sexualized and violent (Akter, 2018). Types of violence mostly included pornographic videos, videos of rape, and digitally manipulated images with pornographic materials, which ultimately affect the victim, and the families also become a victim of public resentment and humiliation. Social media platforms have generated unique forms of abuse and become a critical medium for online gender-based harassment (Citron, 2014; Vogels, 2021). Social media has been the most common platform for all types of online harassment, with young women experiencing the most severe forms of harassment at disproportionately higher levels than other groups (Vogels, 2021).

Research on online harassment and violence also highlights the reasons that encourage this type of violence. According to Akter (2018), certain preexisting social and physiological stereotypes and inadequate legal protections led to increased gender-based cyber violence. Kabir (2018) argued that online sexual harassment targeted women who were active in public spaces or held particular ideologies in terms of politics, religion, and gender. Zafar (2018) also claimed in her research that preexisting socio-psychological factors and inadequate legal protections resulted in cyber violence against women and girls as they were more vulnerable and did not opt for legal protections because of the taboo around sex, consent, and any type of relationship between unmarried young men and women. Kabir (2018) also stated that society’s reaction towards online harassment is similar to sexual harassment and included victim blaming and shaming due to which victims were unwilling to take legal actions. Drawing attention to the DSA 2018, the author suggested that this law could be an effective tool to reduce the uprising of online sexual harassment against women if the cyber-criminal law was used as much as it is used for political campaigns and interests. Bangladesh passed the ICT Act in 2006, amended in 2013, to combat cybercrime and online harassment, but the law does not address online GBV, which made it insufficient to undertake legal measures against this particular problem (Akter, 2018).

The digital space has created opportunities for social and political movements, and many feminist movements in Bangladesh and around the world are taking place online. It has been claimed that the feminist movements are more present and active in social media compared to

the offline world (Larrondo Ureta et al., 2021). It has given visibility to the movement and to the contested issues that the movement longed for. However, they often meet with online violence.

3. Methodology

To understand the types of backlash that were taking place online, the issues that triggered it, and the strategies that were being used as a countermeasure, our study tracked Facebook profiles of Bangladeshi female media personalities and public figures, national events that stirred discussions around gender-based violence in social media platforms, and an anti-feminist Facebook group, which focused on combatting feminism and women's rights online. As female public figures, we tracked the Facebook interactions of media personality Rafiath Rashid Mithila, social media content creator Farhana Muna, and female journalist Farzana Mithila. We selected these profiles purposefully as all of these women had actively spoken about women's rights issues and VAW in the online sphere, often resulting in backlash from multiple sources in the form of cyber harassment and bullying.

Under the category of national events, we tracked the online discussions on the death of Mosarrat Jahan Munia, a college student, who had a relationship with prominent and powerful Bangladeshi businessman Sayem Sobhan Anvir, and the arrest and jail detention of Shamsunnahar Smrity, popularly known as Pori Moni, a Bangladeshi film actress, who was arrested and sent to jail after she filed a sexual harassment case against an influential businessman and politician. Both these events shaped public discourse around GBV and victim blaming in Bangladeshi society, which was widely circulated in media tabloids, minor YouTube channels, and Facebook. Lastly, to understand the backlash actors' strategies and operations, we tracked an anti-feminist Facebook group named Feminism is Cancer (FIC), which actively posts memes and other content, degrading feminists and women's rights issues. Each of these highlighted the importance of social media as a new tool to initiate discourse around women's rights and the need for new strategies in an emerging space.

We choose Facebook because it is the most-used social media platform in Bangladesh with 52.9 million users. The second highest-used platform, Instagram, lags far behind, with only 4.5 million users (NapoleonCat, 2020). To track the Facebook profiles, groups, and events, we used the CrowdTangle software. CrowdTangle is a tool that helps Facebook to track, analyze, and report on information that is set to "public." This includes activity timelines, number of interactions, types, and topics of posted content. CrowdTangle data provided the statistics of interactions, a time graph of the trends of these interactions, trends in follower count, types of posts, and types of interactions. For CrowdTangle, we selected the time of August 2019–August 2021. For the two events, we followed the tags #PoriMoni and #Munia on Facebook. CrowdTangle gave us some quantitative data which were then manually followed up by analyzing posts, comments, and reactions to reach the findings.

3.1. Limitations and Challenges

The limitation of using CrowdTangle was that it could only track public, verified profiles with 10,000+ followers. Our research, therefore, could only track public profiles with a high number of followers, and we had to drop a few other female journalists who did not have verified pages or profiles. CrowdTangle provided an entry point with statistics on the number of interactions that took place on the selected profiles. However, events did not work for CrowdTangle. The use of hashtags was also not prominent among Bangladeshi Facebook users; therefore, the researchers had to carry out a manual search. The researchers had to search with a specific topic, content, theme (e.g., "Muna Marriage," "Muna Divorce"), name, slang, insults, or body parts (e.g., "Mithila nude," "Mithila photo leaked," her partner's name). The manual search also included going to profiles and going through the timelines of the selected profiles. For this, the research team spent hours being active online, scouring emotionally exhausting content which caused fatigue and psychological trauma, as the researchers had to emotionally engage with the posts to analyze them. Furthermore, posts and news about Pori Moni were removed from Facebook pages and the links collected through CrowdTangle did not work anymore. Therefore, much of the data went missing.

Social media offered a large amount of data that included relationships and interactions between followers and friends, relations between users and content, likes, mentions, shares, comments, and different types of "reactions" (a clickable emoji to show how the post made you feel). Therefore, extracting relevant data from social media became challenging. There was a notable dilemma within the research team about which content to keep and which to exclude. It was also hard to identify the demography of the backlash actors as the majority of the profiles were either locked or the comments were made from fake profiles.

The researchers also faced challenges while analyzing the data as it is a relevantly new area of study. Researchers were not used to engaging with social media content to explore online violence. Bringing together the individual findings, which were written in different languages and were differently analyzed, was one of the main struggles. Also integrating case-wise findings into the overall findings and separating types of backlashes from strategies of backlashes was quite challenging as they were often similar. Another challenge faced by the researchers was that we were quite used to having informal conversations among ourselves about social media backlash and translating that into formal academic language was a challenge, given the explicit nature of the content.

The researchers also faced an ethical dilemma on whether to bring in the backlash actor's Facebook profile names to add visuals. While searching for good practices in social media research, we found examples of doing market research and preventing VAW but no good

practices in researching online VAW. The team then decided to make the profiles of the backlash actors anonymous while adding the visuals as we did not take the commentator's consent.

4. Case Studies

4.1. Farhana Muna (Munatic)

4.1.1. Background

Farhana Muna, popularly known as “Munatic,” is a social media content creator, influencer, and comedian. She gained popularity over the last few years, mostly through her videos on Facebook and YouTube accounts. Her official Facebook page named Munatic was created in October 2015 and has a total of 303K followers. Muna is well known for her witty, sarcastic videos and skits, which gained massive popularity among the Bangladeshi audience. She has often engaged with gender justice issues and actively campaigned on social media for the prevention of domestic violence. She has many videos on sexual harassment, sexual harassment in cyberspace, and consent. Her content also focused on other sociocultural issues such as single motherhood, divorce, mental health, and toxic masculinity.

Muna is based in Australia where she works as a Senior Advisor of Diversity and Inclusion in Homes Victoria. She is a single mother and a survivor of domestic violence.

4.1.2. Issues Muna Posted About

4.1.2.1. COVID-19 and Domestic Violence

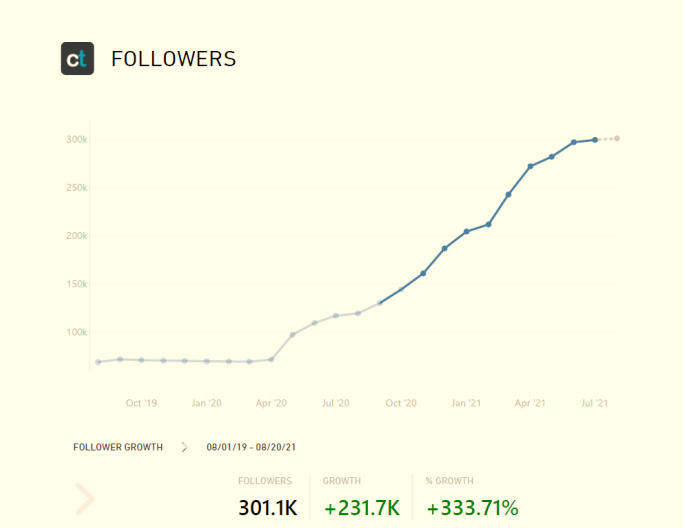

Figure 1: Increasing Followers of Farahana Muna, Data From CrowdTangle

Our CrowdTangle statistics analysis reported that from April 2020 to June 2020, there was a spike in the number of interactions in Muna’s Facebook videos. The spike then came down by July 2020. This period was during the first phase of the countrywide lockdown. With the UN Secretary General’s announcement of domestic violence as a shadow pandemic during COVID-19, gender justice activists around the world campaigned for the prevention of domestic violence during COVID-19. It was feared that domestic violence might be on the rise during the pandemic and that by being confined in homes with their perpetrators, survivors’ access to justice was likely to be majorly hampered. Many celebrities and social media influencers were seen joining awareness campaigns against domestic violence. Muna was

one of them and produced many awareness contents on the probable increase of domestic violence during the pandemic.

Initially, she started posting photographs with captions about obstacles women face when leaving abusive relationships, and why women should not pull down other women who chose to stay in abusive toxic relationships. These also focused on the barriers women face when reporting incidences of violence and how social norms constrained them to ignore the violence. She also posted about survivors reaching out to her for help and advice during the pandemic. Being a public figure and content maker on gender justice issues, many of her followers felt that she could be a useful source of help. As a part of her campaign, she exhorted public figures and other content makers and bloggers to be respectful towards domestic violence survivors, and avoid victim blaming. One of her posts read,

> "If you're an influencer reading this - public platforms come with responsibility and consequences. When it comes to topics such as mental health, domestic abuse and health/safety, it is CRITICAL that we think our content through and how they can affect impressionable minds. Influencing people about what face wash to use is not the same as influencing them about the above. Please be a conscious content creator and respect your audience."

She also became a part of *"Project #aarna"* (Bangla for "no more"), a social media campaign, that created, published, and circulated a series of videos, webinars, and live talk shows on domestic violence during COVID-19. Muna was seen hosting several live talk shows on Facebook with gender justice advocates, development experts, and specialists as a part of the project. She also posted videos on VAW with the caption *#Aarna* as a part of the campaign.

These gained significant audience responses (mostly positive) and were widely shared across Facebook.

4.1.2.2. Online Sexual Harassment

The CrowdTangle statistics suggested that there was another spike in Muna's video interactions from August 2020 to September 2020. The highest number of interactions were generated by her posts on online sexual harassment. Some of these posts were skits in the form of small videos talking about the types of harassment she faced online. In one of these videos, she compiled all the major hate comments regarding her physical appearance, character, and clothing. She replied to those through a skit and called out the names of the offenders. The video received a major response from her followers and was the most appreciated. She also shared screenshots of the hate messages and comments she received and replied to those through the captions of her posts.

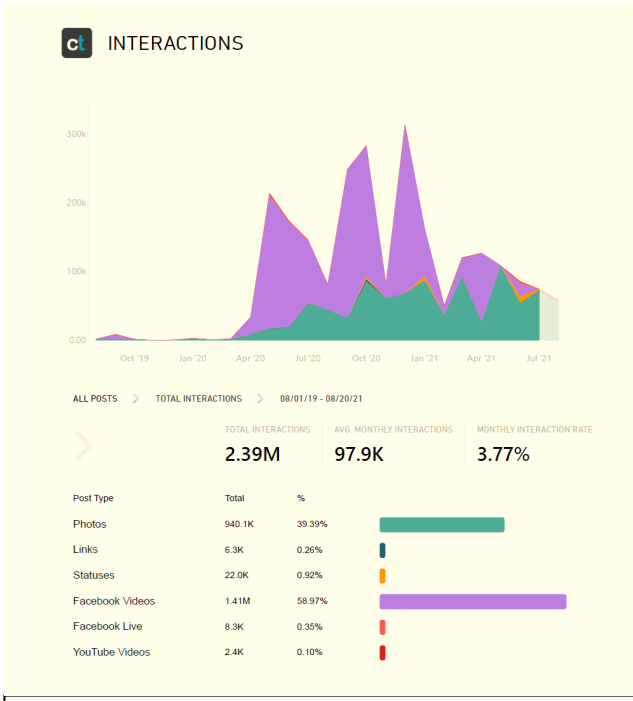

Figure 2: Interactions on Farahana Muna's Content, Data From CrowdTangle

4.1.3. Backlash

Most of the comments were made by men and boys, but some were made by women as well. However, a large number of these people were fake account holders, who have locked their accounts, and therefore determining their gender or other background information became difficult. Some information could be derived from accounts that were not fake or locked. Among these accounts, the male commenters were aged between their early twenties to late forties. Many of them were located abroad, either as migrant workers or as students.

4.2. Rafiath Rashid Mithila

4.2.1. Background

Rafiath Rashid Mithila is an actor, development professional, and media personality. She has been active in the entertainment business for over 15 years. She is also an advocate for social issues and human rights such as good parenting, child rights, and women's rights. She has 3.8M followers on her Facebook page where she mostly posts about her upcoming work both in media

and related to child development. She also has a personal Facebook account which is private and not a part of our research analysis. Mithila was married to Tahsan Rahman Khan, a popular singer, actor, and media personality in the country. They were one of the most popular and beloved celebrity couples in the country. However, things changed after the couple divorced in 2017, and Mithila remarried Srijit Mukherjee, a Hindu Indian filmmaker. As a result, her personal life was also a target of hateful comments.

From the CrowdTangle data, we found that Mithila's Facebook account was most active (meaning more posts uploaded and interactions) during July–October 2020 and April–July 2021 and was moderately active (fewer posts and interactions) in between those periods. The highest interaction rate in her posts was during August 2020. Notably, her followers increased sharply from July 2020 onwards.

She faced backlash in 2019 after marrying Srijit Mukherjee and in 2020 when she posted video content and talks on VAW, sexual harassment, safety in cyberspace, and online harassment.

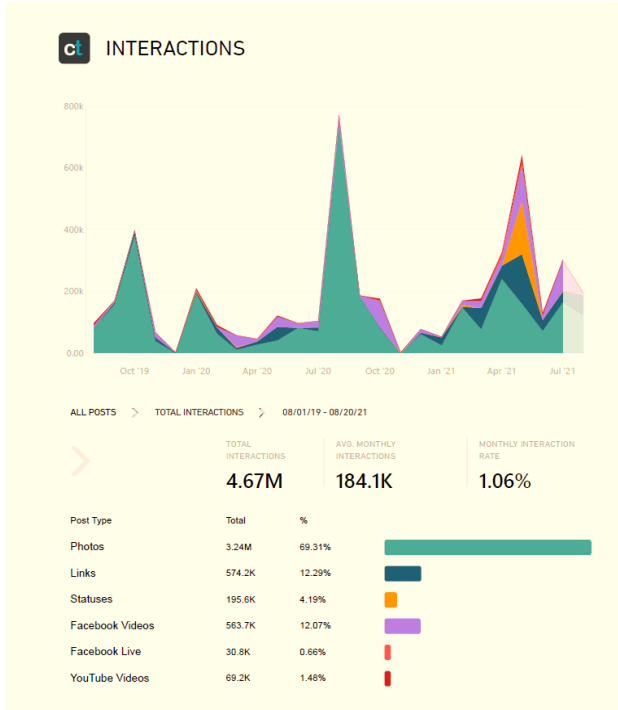

Figure 3: Interactions on Mithila's Page, Data From CrowdTangle

However, in 2021, the number of comments and backlash reduced to a significant rate. Since the upsurge of hate comments and personal attacks on Facebook, Mithila came forward to the media to talk about her experience regarding the harassment she had faced. In multiple interviews on different platforms such as news channels, online live discussions, and webinars on online violence, she said that she hired a social media manager to manage her social media accounts who filtered the majority of the comments and content. This strategy seemed effective since we observed a decrease in hate comments. Moreover, Mithila also threatened on her Facebook page to take legal action against those who were dangerously violent and harassing her.

4.2.2. Issues Mithila Posted About

Mithila mainly posted promotional videos, photos, and news about her upcoming media works. She also used her social media handle to promote her work regarding child development and mental health which is her expertise as a development professional. She also posted

messages on occasions like Eid-ul-Fitr, Durga Puja, and other national events. In 2020, she posted awareness-raising videos made by UN Women Bangladesh on the occasion of 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence. In the same year, she also participated in public webinars and interviews, talking about violence against women, sexual harassment, and safety in online spaces. Talking about these issues worked as a major trigger factor of backlash towards her.

4.2.3. Who Were the Backlash Actors

Most of the comments were made by men and boys, but some were made by women as well. Most of the backlashes she faced were because of her divorce from Tahsan, who has a huge female fan base. Therefore, women made comments on Mithila's character and life choices.

"শাকচুন্নিটা, একসময় তুমুল প্রিয় ছিল তাহসান এর সাথে নাম জুড়ে সবার জনপ্রিয়তা পেয়েছিলো। আর এখন বাপ বয়সী স্বামী পেয়েছ। অতি লোভে তাতি নষ্ট, কি কি যে করবে আর…"

("This witch was once popular and she gained fame by adding her name to Tahsan. Now she is married to someone who is her father's age. You will lose everything if you are too greedy; what will she do next…")

This comment was written by a female Facebook ID, expressing her disgust and hate for the actress because she divorced Tahsan and married someone older than Tahsan.

The ratio cannot be determined, but the manual search revealed mostly real people with their profile pictures, including young men from their 20s to 40s. Since Mithila is currently married to a Hindu man from Kolkata, a large portion of positive, defensive, and supportive comments were coming from Kolkata's Bengali-speaking Hindu people who (by their comments) stated that they must defend and praise their sister-in-law. Their comments also got negative or obscene replies and "Ha Ha" reactions.

However, there were fan followers who often supported her and condemned the hate comments through supportive comments and Facebook posts:

"পাব্লিক কমেন্ট অপশন অফ করলে ক্ষতি হয় কোনো?? অসুস্থ লোকদের বিস্তার রোধ করতে এটুক করলেই তো হয়"

("Is there any harm if the public comment option is turned off?? This can prevent the spread of these sick people").

4.3. Mithila Farzana

4.3.1. Background

Mithila Farzana is a prominent female television journalist in Bangladesh. She started her career as a news presenter at Ekushey Television in 1999. After the shutdown of Ekushey Television, she started working at ATN Bangla and lastly worked at Ekattor Media Ltd. She also hosted the BBC Bangla Sanglap, where she was the first female host. She has a verified Facebook profile which has 11,500 followers. There is another page named Mithila Farzana with 18,000 followers. This page was created by a follower in June 2020.

4.3.2. Issues Mithila Farzana Posted About

Since she made her profile public less than a year ago, there were fewer posts in her profile compared to other cases. In her verified profile, there was a mix of posts related to her personal and her professional life. She mostly posted about her garden and her pet dog. She also posted about winning the WIL (Women in Leadership) inspiring female in journalism award and taking action against those who spread fake news about her on online platforms. The posts on her fan page were similar to the ones shared on her verified page, except for her personal posts (e.g., garden, pet dog). Her fan page also contains episodes of an online talk show she hosted called *Ei Alo, Ei Ontoral* (Light and Shadows) from June 2021 to September 2021. Some of the episodes on the show talked about issues such as consent, women's freedom of choice, and mobility.

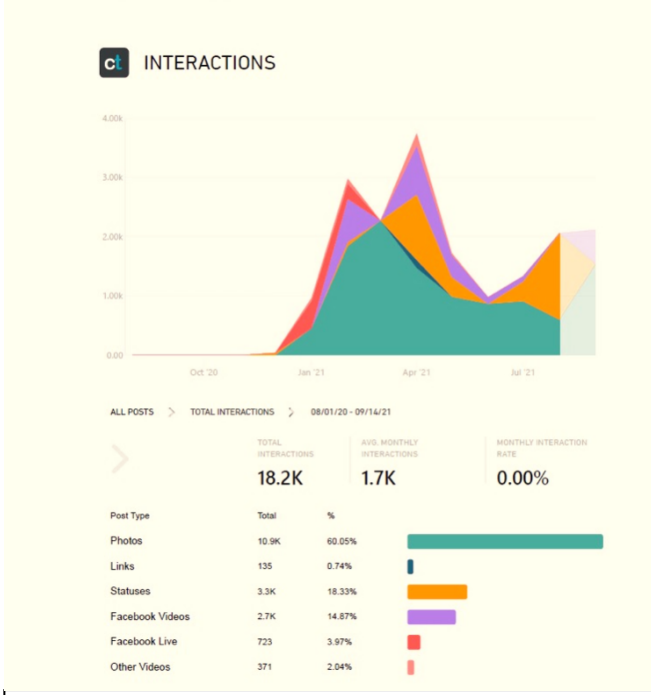

Figure 4: Interactions on Mithila Farzana's Page, Data From CrowdTangle

4.3.3. Who Backlashed Mithila

The majority of the backlashes Mithila Farzana faced were from men and young boys. Women commented on her posts but they did not engage in hateful comments. Men and boys commented on her post from different parts of Bangladesh and some comments were from outside Bangladesh (e.g., Saudi Arabia).

4.4. Event: Mosarrat Jahan Munia's Death

4.4.1. Background

Mosarrat Jahan Munia, a 21-year-old college student, was found dead in an apartment in an affluent neighbourhood in Dhaka on 26 April 2021. After Munia's death, multiple reports and sources alleged that she was involved in a romantic relationship with Sayem Sobhan Anvir, an influential businessman in Bangladesh. The 40-year-old Anvir is known to have one of the highest net worths in Bangladesh. Being married with two children, Anvir's extramarital relationship with Munia, followed by her death, stirred multiple controversies in Bangladeshi media. Initially, it was suspected that Munia committed suicide. However, Munia's post-mortem report confirmed that she was 2–3 weeks pregnant and there were multiple injuries on her body. As the story unfolded further, all the evidence suggested that Anvir was behind Munia's death (The Business Standard, 2021; The Daily Star, 2021). Later on 6 September 2021, Munia's elder sister filed a case with Dhaka Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunal-8 with allegations of rape and murder, accusing Anvir and other members of his family of abetting suicide (Dhaka Tribune, 2021). The plaintiff alleged that Anvir and his family threatened Munia with murder if she did not leave Dhaka. Hours after the news broke, a travel ban was imposed on Anvir by a Dhaka court (The Business Standard, 2021). However, it was rumoured that he fled the country secretly. He is yet to be arrested or questioned by the police in this regard (Dhaka Tribune, 2021).

Munia's death became a widely discussed topic all over the nation. Most of these discussions took place on social media (mostly Facebook), through different online media portals, Facebook groups, and users' status updates and post sharing. People's views and opinions were divided into two groups: one group took Munia's side and demanded justice for her death, while the other group labelled Munia as a "gold digger" and "home-wrecker" and felt that she deserved to die. Munia's case is still in the courts and her death remains a mystery.

4.4.2. Contested Issues

We tracked the hashtag "#Munia" in CrowdTangle to understand the trend in the number of interactions around Munia's case. The CrowdTangle statistics reported that the hashtag "#Munia" seemed to have increased in activity from 18 April–9 May and then from 16 May–6 June.

4.4.2.1. Greedy, Gold Digger, and Viral Contents

The most commonly discussed issue about Munia's death was her relationship with Anvir. People became curious to know how a college girl belonging to a small-town family was introduced to a top-tier businessman like Anvir. Fingers were immediately pointed at Munia for

being greedy for Anvir's wealth and hence getting involved in an "illicit love affair." More hatred was directed towards Munia for being a "gold digger" than to Anvir, despite all the proof and allegations against him for causing Munia's death.

Minor channels on YouTube seemed to take full advantage of the situation and posted many videos with their interpretations of Munia's death. These channels aimed to increase their subscribers and video views because in general they never reported on social justice issues. Most of these videos tried to uncover the mystery behind the death. Each channel had its version of the story. Some videos claimed that Munia was raped by Anvir and many comments on these would claim that she was not raped but was rather a prostitute for being sexually involved in a relationship with a married man.

"Nizar iccai kapor khulla sataka dorson bola na. Toahola dorson kora mayaderka opoman kora hoba.biar aga kapor khula asob mayaderka calara rokkita banai bow na. Free pawwa jinish kayo taka dia kina na. Lovar karona arak batir husband ar rokkita na hoa middle-class calar bow hoila ajka ato kharap din dalhta hoito na"

("If someone removes their clothes on own decision then it is not rape. Comparing this act with rape would mean dishonouring the real rape victims. Girls who remove clothes [have sex] before marriage are considered as mistresses by boys, and boys do not marry them. No one buys free things. If you had not become a mistress of a married man out of greed and had you married a middle-class man instead then you would not have to see such bad days")

Some videos had "catchy" captions to attract more views, and had content like Munia dancing or having dinner with friends. Captions on these videos would read, "মুনিয়ার নাচের ভিডিও | Munia dance video | Anvir and Munia scandal," "Munia dance video viral," "Munia dance," "Munia nach," "Munia Anvir," "Anvir and Munia news," "Bashundhara MD scandal news," "Bashundhara group MD Anvir," "Basundhara MD Anvir." Some videos were leaking random phone conversations and were claiming those were of Munia with captions like

Figure 5: Thumbnail Photo of a YouTube Video That Says "Last Video of Munia, You Will Really Miss It if You Do Not Watch"

"আনভীরের দুই গার্লফ্রেন্ড মুনিয়া ও সাইফা মীমের তর্কবিতর্ক, অডিও ফাঁস Anvir|Muniya|Saifa Mim|Audio|" (Anvir's girlfriends Munia and Saifa Mim's argument, leaked audio).

Multiple videos circulated on Facebook with content blaming Munia for her greed: "*Lobh dekhailei ki narir lobh a porte hobe? Lobh toh onekei dekhay"* (People will always try to entice you, should women accept it?). Munia's death became a "hot topic" and minor media outlets used her death to gain viewers. These videos were widely circulated on Facebook, particularly through minor Facebook entertainment pages that wanted to increase their number of followers as well. These groups also circulated Munia's pictures, as well as her pictures with Anvir. The captions of these posts would blame Anvir and Munia both—Anvir for being a rich spoilt characterless man and Munia for being a pretty woman hungry for money:

"মুনিয়া তোমার ছিল রূপ আর আনবিরের ছিল ব্যাংক ভর্তি টাকা (লোভে পাপ, পাপে মৃত্যু)আর সেই টাকার কাছে তোমার রুপ, যৌবন, জীবন এভাবে বিসর্জন দিলা"

("Munia, you had beauty and Anvir had money. Greed begets sin, sin begets death. You sacrificed your beauty, youth and life for money").

Comments on these posts were filled with hate for Munia. Dragging her relationship with Anvir in every post, commenters pointed out that she loved Anvir's money more than she loved him or herself:

"Akhane nijer theke besi se taka re valobasce tai amon poronoti hoice"

("She loved money more than herself and that led to this consequence").

They labelled her as a sinner for being greedy for money. People started justifying her death claiming that a greedy sinner like her deserved a tragic death:

"লোভে পাপ আর পাপে হয়েছে মৃত্যু এটাই ছিল ঠিক তার পাপের ফল"

("Greed begets sin, sin begets death. This was the result of her greed").

4.4.2.2. Blaming Family Members and Her Upbringing

The comments not only pointed fingers at Munia but also lambasted her family and blamed Munia's upbringing for the cause of her death. Questions were raised on why Munia was allowed to live alone in Dhaka in an affluent area:

"মেয়েটা রে খুব বেশি নিরাপরাধ বলা যাবে না...এই দোষ এড়িয়ে যেতে পারবে না তার বর্তমান অবিভাবক...দ্বাদশ শ্রেণীতে পড়া একটা মেয়ের লাইফ স্টাইলের উপর নজর দেওয়া উচিত ছিলো..লোভ মানুষ কে এভাবেই ধ্বংস করে এটাই তার জ্বলন্ত প্রমান...। একটা হিন্দি ছবির কথা মনে পড়ে গেল।"

("We cannot say that the girl was innocent…Her current guardians cannot avoid the responsibility…They should have followed up with the lifestyle of a 12th-grade girl…This is how greed destroys a life…This reminds me of a Hindi movie").

Many comments held Munia's sister responsible for her death and labelled her (the sister) as a money-hungry woman as well:

"সবার আগে মুনিয়ার বড় বোনের বিচার হওয়া উচিৎ কারন সব কিছু জানার পরও একটা বিবাহিত পুরুষের পিছনে তার বোনকে লেলিয়ে দেওয়ার জন্য....!"

("First they should bring Munia's elder sister under judgment because she unleashed her younger sister after a married man…!").

4.4.3. Who Were the Backlash Actors

Both men and women posted hate comments about Munia's death incident. These were similar in nature, as most focused on her greed and justified her tragic death. Women haters particularly reacted to her relationship with Anvir and blamed her for not setting a good example as someone's lover. Some blamed her for dating an older man:

"বাপের বয়সি একটা লোকের প্রেমে এই মেয়ে কিভাবে হাবুডুবু খায়? এর পরিণতি আর কত ভালো হত! আমি মেয়ে হয়েই ঘৃণা হয় ওই মেয়ের কথা ভাবলে যে অন্য নারীর সংসার ভাংতে পারে।"

("How can this girl fall in love with a man of her father's age? How much better could the consequences be? Even though I am a girl, I hate this girl when I think that she broke up another girl's marriage.")

4.4.5. Strategies to Counter Backlash

4.4.5.1. Coming Together to Show Solidarity

Amidst all the negative comments on Munia's character and lifestyle, there was a group of people who came together to show their support for her. These included young feminist activists, renowned leftist activists, human rights activists, and academicians. This group actively posted opinions on the state's bias towards protecting an influential businessman, who was also reportedly a supporter of the ruling party and had made massive contributions to the government's fund during the pandemic. There were also general people like young university students who commented on the viral videos supporting Munia and blaming the media for not exposing Anvir.

"এইসব আউলফাউল নিউজ তোদের পাছার চিপায় রাখ!! শিল্পপতির বাল নিয়েও নিউজ করতে পারস না তোরা, খালি "মুনিয়া শাড়ি পরছিলো, লেহেঙ্গা পড়ছিলো, ডায়রি লিখছিলো এসব নিউজ করে মার্ডারের মতন একটা ঘটনা কে আত্মহত্যা বলে চালিয়ে দেওয়ার চেষ্টা করতেছিস। দালাল তোরা।"

(Shove these news in your asshole!! You cannot do news on the industrialist, rather trying to establish the murder as a suicide by publishing news like 'Munia wore saree and lehenga, wrote diaries.' You are pimps.")

A Facebook group was also formed under the name "Justice for Munia" which had 399 followers.

4.4.5.2. Strategic Posts

Posting about the state's failed transparency in ensuring punishment for a top businessman can be challenged under the clauses of the DSA 2018. This particularly applied to young feminist organizations that lay at the bottom tier of the power pyramid. These issues required strategic posting from people who were either very powerful with transnational alliances—which could pressurize the government—or people who were already in the bad books or marked as rebels by the government. This strategic posting was used during the court's judgment on the allegations against Anvir. The day before the judgment a video was posted by a renowned leftist activist who routinely spoke openly about social issues and national crises. The caption read:

"The police clear principal accused, Bashundhara Group's MD Sayem Sobhan Anvir, from a case filed over abetting the death by suicide of college student Munia. Anvir was not even questioned by the police, let alone arrested! #JusticeForMunia."

That video was widely shared by young feminist activists all over Facebook with the caption:

"২৯ জুলাই, আমরা চোখ রাখবো আদালতের ওপর। #JusticeForMunia"

("On 29 July, we will have our eyes on the court. #JusticeForMunia")

This was a strategy by young feminist activists to protect themselves and their organizations from being "marked" by state surveillance. The viral video received backlash as well, with comments such as: "What about justice for those guardians who let her live this type of lifestyle …", which was replied with "Justice is what we want, for her family and the nation."

5. Event: Pori Moni Narcotics Case Detention

Pori Moni is a Bangladeshi film star and a popular figure on social media. Her Facebook page has 9.5 million followers. On 8 June 2020, Pori Moni posted on Facebook claiming that the police were not taking her sexual harassment case against Nasir Uddin Mahmood, a powerful businessman and politician, and she sought the prime minister's intervention regarding this matter. The post became viral and every media outlet reported the incident. Later, Pori Moni went live on Facebook and described the incident of sexual harassment. As the situation became more public, the police took her case and arrested Mahmood along with another businessman, but Mahmood was later released on bail.

A week later, Pori Moni was charged with vandalism at Gulshan's All Community Club in a drunken state. On 4 August 2021, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a special force of police, raided her house and arrested her on allegations of possessing drugs and alcohol. She was taken on a four-day remand and was later detained in jail for 27 days. After several denied bail applications, she was finally granted bail and released from jail on 31 August 2021. After her release when she was going home, she wrote "Don't love me bitch" on her palm and showed it to the waiting media and public in front of the jail gate. She did not elaborate on it or discuss who it was intended for.

5.1. Contested Issues

5.1.1. Blame Game

As soon as the allegations were posted online, social media users split into two groups. One side was supportive of Pori Moni and demanded that she should get justice; this included general people, feminist activists, human rights activists, and journalists. The other side, from whom Pori Moni faced backlash, was mocking and condemning her. They made fun of the

situation and said that this was an act of seeking attention or it might be a personal agenda against people who did not satisfy her in some way.

When she was arrested, two distinct theories surfaced. The first theory was from those who had supported her earlier and claimed that she was the victim of a revenge act by Nasir Uddin Mahmood, the businessman against whom she filed the sexual harassment case. The other one was from the opposing group, claiming that she made up the story of sexual harassment to evade legal actions against her in connection to the incident of vandalism under the influence of alcohol. This was clear that the opposing comments believed that certain types of women, those who seem to be free to do anything, do not follow societal norms, seem to associate with many men, do not follow *purdah* (social norms of seclusion and purity), and stay out late at night partying and drinking with men are a bad influence and need to be brought under legal purview.

After this accusation, Pori Moni went live on Facebook and claimed that she felt threatened and that if she died, it will be a murder and not a suicide:

"If I die, do understand that I have been murdered, I am not the suicidal type - Pori Moni, 14 June 2021."

5.1.2. Character Questioning

Meanwhile, some private photos and videos of Pori Moni with a young and resourceful police officer, who was also in charge of investigating Pori Moni's case, became viral on social media. It was alleged that they were in a relationship despite the police officer being married. The police officer was removed from the case but people again blamed Pori Moni for the matter. Posts and videos were created by various public Facebook pages and online news portals claiming that Pori Moni had several admirers from whom she took expensive gifts. Her admirers included chief executive officers (CEOs), prominent businessmen, and male actors. Moreover, news was circulated claiming that Pori Moni and Sayem Sobhan Anvir, the alleged murderer of college student Mosarrat Jahan Munia, spent time together in Dubai after Anvir fled the country to avoid arrest in the murder case filed against him.

Facebook comments around this issue viewed Pori Moni as a *temptress*, a woman who tempts someone to do something, typically a sexually attractive woman who sets out to allure or seduce someone. She was often labelled as a "prostitute" and condemned for seeking justice for sexual harassment, and some people also alleged that "some business transaction went wrong," implying that she was not paid enough for providing sexual services. There was a lot of focus on her behaviour, with comments questioning why she would be at clubs, especially late at night, even after knowing the consequences women face at these clubs. Many people also said she did not deserve justice as she spent time with Anvir when he fled to Dubai after killing Munia.

There were several discussions and thousands of comments, the majority of which were hate comments against Pori Moni. The events and the hate comments were so prominent that *The Business Standard* (2021), a major daily newspaper in Bangladesh, researched social media comments and found that among all the comments on Pori Moni, 80% were against her, while only 16% spoke in her favour. The rest 4% was irrelevant.

5.1.3. Countering Backlash and Support From Women's Rights Groups

After her arrest for possession of illegal substances, hate commenters got one more chance of defaming and shaming her. She was called *Raater Rani* (Queen of Night) because she went partying and drinking with men at night which decent girls would not do and what happened to her was the consequence. Even some news channels were publishing reports with "Raater Rani" in the headline. Later an online feminist group, the *Meye Network*, in their monthly meeting, decided to protest this labelling. They were angry and disappointed with this "moral policing" and "media trial" and believed that using such language was a weapon of patriarchy to limit women within the four walls of the house, to prevent them from going out at night alone, to keep them terrified of and dependent on men. Therefore, to reclaim the night, they started an online campaign #raater_rani where women could use the "raater rani" photo frame on their profile pictures on Facebook, but the profile picture should be clicked outside at night. The campaign gained popularity within a short time and both men and women participated in the campaign, along with many prominent activists.

Figure 6: Raater Raani Facebook Photo Frame

This campaign also faced a backlash. Therefore, the Pori Moni issue, on one hand, fueled a new online feminist campaign by young feminist activists, and on the other, created strong support for Pori Moni's efforts to seek justice. Some

Figure 7: Pori Moni After Getting Bail

leftist student political groups also protested demanding justice for Pori Moni.

After her release, the phrase “Don’t love me bitch,” drawn on her palm with henna, gained instant popularity among the public, especially women and activists, who supported her during her arrest and detention. Pori Moni’s photo, with the phrase on her hand and a wide smile on her face outside the jail gate, became the symbol of a strong, unapologetic woman and several activists drew the phrase on their palms and posted it on Facebook. However, there was a discussion on whether feminists should support the cause of Pori Moni, whether her seeking justice was a feminist issue or not. Many disregarded it, attacking feminist organizations by saying, “If you are [a] true feminist then go help a real girl in distress (sometimes followed by a violence or sexual assault issue), do not waste time behind this (Pori Moni) issue.”

6. Facebook Group: Feminism Is Cancer

Feminism Is Cancer (FIC) is a Bangladesh-based Facebook group with over 19,000 members who call themselves a men's rights protection forum. This group was created on 14 May 2017. According to the CrowdTangle report, the FIC group did not seem to exist before August 2020. However, the report showed an increase in post volume over time.

The FIC group often gets reported by different feminist pages. According to the description provided in their description section, it has been deleted multiple times before and again reopened under a slightly different name. For the study, this created difficulty to assess long-term trends. Rather, we only have information from the latest iteration of the group.

Interactions started increasing in April 2021, peaking in June and July of the same year. There was previously a smaller surge in interaction in November 2020–January 2021 which was not explored as part of this research (the highest number of interactions took place in December 2020). CrowdTangle showed no interaction graphs and no graph on follower growth. The post count of FIC had a peak in December 2020 and the posts started increasing from February 2021 which peaked in June 2021.

6.1. Issues Discussed

The majority of the posts in this group were targeted against feminists and feminist groups.

According to a discussion on why the group members hate feminists, comments claimed that feminism is a western concept that turned innocent women “delusional.” The claims also said that feminists do not help women in need but rather are perpetuating a western culture and insulting religion in the name of women’s rights. One of the comments said that the biggest regret feminists have is that they do not have a penis.

"ওরা [feminists] কাজের কাজ করেনা। শুধু ওয়েস্টার্নদের সংস্কৃতি অনুসরণ করে আধুনিকতার নামে নেংটা হইয়া রাস্তায় ঘুরার সাধীনতা চায়"

("They [feminists] do not do any useful work. They are just following the culture of Westerners in the name of modernity and want the freedom to walk naked on the streets" Source: FIC Facebook)

The group also had specific names for the feminists, such as নেড়ীবাদী/*Neribadi* (a degrading term to address feminists), নেড়ী/*neri* (street dogs) which is phonetically similar to নারী/*nari* (women), and টিপোয়ালী/*Tipowali* (referring to feminist wear a big red tip/bindi on the forehead). The trending hashtags within this group included #StopFeminism, #শাশুড়িshockzz (mother-in-law shocks), #বৌমা_shocks (daughter-in-law shocks), #boycott_transgender, #FakeFeminism. In most of the posts, the members interacted with "haha" reactions and a few comments supporting the post.

Other than these, the members of FIC frequently discussed issues of divorce and blamed feminists for introducing this concept to Bangladeshi society. The members labelled divorce as a "dower business" (*denmohor* business) as in Islamic culture, the dower is money given to the wife at the time of divorce. According to one of the FIC members, "dower business" is worse than prostitution.

6.2. Targets

This group actively targeted feminist activists' profiles, posts, and groups. Additionally, they targeted anything that may seem to them as contradicting the gender roles and gender binary.

One strategy was mass-reporting accounts they disliked to disable them. *Mass reporting* is where a group of people reports a specific post so that the Facebook authority takes it down. FIC also has a separate group called "Feminism is cancer cyber team (report feminists)" which focuses specifically on mass reporting. At the time of the research, their latest post targeted "Justice For Women, Bangladesh-JFWB," a women's movement group with over 45,000 members. FIC also targets the LGBTQI community. They specifically targeted any conversations around BTS (a Korean band), whose male fans are believed to be gay according to FIC members. They have recently started reporting the "Rangpur Gay Community" Facebook group with more than 10,000 members. Their commonly used term to report a group is "চলেন সবাই গ্রুপ টা উরায়ে দিয়া আসি (Let's all blow up the group)."

6.3. Actors

The group consists of men of varying backgrounds and educational qualifications. Members and the moderators are university students from well-reputed public and private universities, such as Dhaka International University, Jahangirnagar University, Independent University Bangladesh, and Shahjalal University of Science and Technology. One of the group members is also a youth leader in the Active Citizen program by the British Council. These profiles were identified through a manual search of the comment sections in the different posts of the group.

6.4. Counter Strategies

FIC has been reported by feminist activists and groups. The CrowdTangle trends for activity showed a sudden crash in activity, which could be attributed to the silencing by the Facebook authority through disallowing posts for a certain period.

7. Findings Overview

In this section, we will unpack when the backlash emerged and why the backlash happened. Drawing examples from the case studies, we categorized the types of backlash that happened in digital spaces, the triggering factors of backlash (or what issues were contested), and who were the backlash actors. We also tried to frame the strategies that were used by the backlash actors and counter backlash strategies by the personalities and activists to minimize the hate and backlash.

7.1. When Did the Backlash Emerge

The CrowdTangle data provided an overview of the spike in interactions and the timelines of interactions of the Facebook profiles tracked. These depended on when the Facebook accounts/profiles were created, the types of content that were posted, the number of followers of the tracked accounts, and the account holders' time spent on the internet.

Rafiath Rashid Mithila's account interactions and followers logically increased when her account was most active from July 2020 onwards. During her divorce, although her account was not too active, the issue received massive media and public attention. Several public groups were formed to discuss the celebrity couple's divorce. These discussions were mainly criticisms against Mithila, which ultimately led to bullying, name-calling, and harassing her. After the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, she started posting content on VAW, sexual harassment, and cyber security. These posts received major backlashes and were reflected in the CrowdTangle data through high rates of interactions in her Facebook profile.

Farhana Muna's Facebook page initially focused on entertainment and comedy, and she had a wide fan base as an influencer. During the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, she started actively campaigning against VAW and women's rights issues through her content. These posts started receiving backlashes in the forms of offensive comments, name-calling, and bullying; her interactions also peaked around April 2020–October 2020, according to CrowdTangle data.

Farzana Mithila received the most interactions and backlashes when she chose to take legal action against people who spread misinformation against her.

The group "Feminism Is Cancer" was created in 2017; however, the group became active from 2020 onwards. There was a peak in the number of interactions from November 2020–January 2021. The interactions started increasing again in April 2021, and CrowdTangle reported the highest peak from June–July 2021. The timelines suggested overall interactions and backlash both increased substantially during the COVID-19 period.

7.2. Types of Backlash

The backlash faced, either as popular public figures or when advocating for women's rights through their pages, can be classified into different types. There were many common overlapping themes.

7.2.1. Name-Calling and Labelling

The most common form of backlashes was name-calling and labelling**.** Often these comments would have no relevance to the issue they are posting about. These would also be personal attacks concerning women's personal life choices (such as clothing, marital/relationship partners, etc.). Among all the labels, the label "prostitute" is the most widely used.

Rafiath Rashid Mithila's post promoting her upcoming drama on television with her photo can be used as an example. Comments were labelled on her as "বারোভাতারি"(*barobhatari*), a term used for a woman with twelve husbands, indicating that the woman is not virtuous and sleeps with multiple men. Comments also referred to her second marriage and her leaked intimate photos with her ex-boyfriend and labelled her as "বেশ্যা"(prostitute) or porn star. At times, these were coupled with fabricated photos of sexual connotations along with vulgar descriptions of how they would have sex with her or rape her.

A post from Farhana Muna on sexual harassment, a largely different topic than the above, led to comments targetting her character and tagging her as a "cheap prostitute."

"তোমরা নিজেরাই তো বল দুদু দেখাবো টাকা বিকাশ করো" (You yourself asked for money in exchange of showing your breasts)—read a comment on Muna's post on sexual harassment.

In April 2021, fake news was posted about Mithila Farzana on an online platform called *baalerkontho* (the name mimics a prominent newspaper in Bangladesh; in Bangla, *baal* means pubic hair), stating she was found in a compromising position at a local hotel. When she took action against people who spread this misinformation and posted about it on facebook, a fake profile commented, "60 takar ma...i tui" (You're a prostitute worth 60 taka). They accused her of spreading fake news and threatened to use the DSA 2018 against her.

"গুজব ছড়ানোর আগে ভাববেন। দেশে এর বিরুদ্ধে আইন আছে এবং তার প্রয়োগও আছে"(Think before you spread rumors. The country has laws against it and its implementation), said a comment on Farzana's post.

This is ironic, as, legally, Farzana Mithila should have been able to use the DSA 2018 to counter the fake news, but instead was being threatened by it.

The two national cases of Munia's death and Pori Moni's narcotics test detection also garnered various degrading labels. In Munia's case, she was labelled as a "gold digger" for being romantically involved with a rich married man. Despite all the proof against Anvir, Facebook was flooded with content pointing fingers at Munia's character and her upbringing. In Pori Moni's case, she was labelled as a "prostitute" and also as "raater raani" (night queen, also a euphemism for a sex worker), for having a lifestyle that included partying and drinking with men at night. Backlash actors claimed that the case filed against her was justified as she was not a decent girl and she deserved whatever happened to her.

7.2.2. Sexually Explicit Comments

Rafiath Rashid Mithila and Farhana Muna faced various sexually explicit comments, often directed to specific body parts such as breasts and vaginas:

"তোমার উলঙ্গ শরীরটা দেখতে চাওয়া আমার নিষ্পাপ মন (My innocent mind wants to see your naked body" (Facebook Page, Rafiath Rashid Mithila, 29 December 2020).

"আহারে তাহসান ভাই বিস্কুটগুলা খেয়ে প্যাকেটটা দরিয়ে দিল ভারত কে সাব্বাস বাঙালী (Aha! Tahsan Bhai ate all the biscuits and gave the empty packet to India! Bravo Bangali)" (Facebook Page, Rafiath Rashid Mithila, 24 August 2020).

The hate comments towards Rafiath Rashid Mithila were more severe, and in extreme cases, included rape threats and fabricated sexual photographs as a meme or just to post in the comment section to vilify her.

"টাকি মাছের গর্ত দেখাইবা আর টাকি মাছ ডুকলেই দোষ. গর্তের মুখ বন্ধ রাখুন, টাকি মাছ আসবে না"

("You will show your hole to the fish and it is their fault if they enter? Close your hole, and they will not enter" Facebook Page, Rafiath Rashid Mithila, 24 August 2020).

These were directed to the clothes she was wearing:

"তোর ভিতরে ব্লাউজ ব্রা নেই কেন?লড়ে চড়ে তো। তোদের fb তে আসার দরকার কি?আস্তে হলে শালীন পোশাক পরে আয়। বিড়ালের সামনে মাছ রেখে যদি বলিস খাবিনা, বিড়াল কি তা শুনবে?"

("Why are you not wearing a bra inside? I can see your breasts move. Why do people like you come to Facebook? If you are to come, come wearing decent clothes. If you keep fish in front of cats and tell the cats not to eat the fish, will they listen?")

Interestingly, Farzana Mithila did not receive sexually explicit hate comments like Farhana Muna and Rafiath Rashid Mithila. This may be because of the preconceived notions regarding prominent figures like celebrities and social media influencers remaining greater targets of hate online. On the other hand, when it comes to female journalists, this hate is comparatively lower. This is because a journalist, despite being a media person, is not a part of the entertainment industry. Their profession is taken more seriously by the masses, and there is a widely held understanding that journalists have legitimate networks with better access to law enforcement authorities.

7.2.3. Religious and Moral Policing

Religious reasoning was often used to justify the negative comments. Female public figures were criticized for their clothing preferences, lifestyles, personal choices, and opinions as the commenters believed that it went against the Bengali religious, cultural, and moral ideologies.

Farhana Muna would be often blamed for coming in front of the camera and speaking in public without purdah. Many comments also claimed she was trying to make a mark in the entertainment industry by showcasing a western lifestyle without respecting her cultural roots.

"ইসলামী আইন অনুসারে মেয়েরা যদি পর্দাপ্রথা মেনে চলে তাহলে তারা কোনো খারাপ মন্তব্যের সম্মুখীন হতো না। বরং আরও সম্মান পেত। পশ্চিমা সংস্কৃতি ফলো করতে গিয়ে প্রায় নেকেট হয়ে ঘুরে বেড়াবেন। আবার সম্মান চান। যত্তসব !!! (No woman would have faced hurtful comments if they maintained purdah as per the Islamic shariah law. Rather, they would have

been respected for maintaining purdah. You would follow the western culture and roam around naked and on top of it, you also expect respect? Absurd!!!),” said a comment on Frarhana Muna’s post.

Rafiath Rashid Mithila’s decision to divorce her husband and marry an Indian Hindu man while being a Bangladeshi Muslim came under major scrutiny and backlash. Discussions were held regarding what is permissible in Islam, and she was criticized and humiliated for choosing to marry someone outside of her religion. The comments also claimed that she should be punished for this grievous sin. When Mithila posted photos celebrating Durga Puja and videos wishing “Happy Diwali” during the festivities, it resulted in immense backlash with comments doubting her religious beliefs, often including quotes from the Hadith. Some comments even suggested that she should change her religion.

“You bitch, you are a shame for the Muslims, you cannot be a Muslim, you change your Muslim name to take a Hindu name and do whatever you want, no one will stop you.” (Facebook Page, Rafiath Rashid Mithila, 15 October and 4 November 2021).

These comments would also reinforce stereotypes about Indians all being Hindu and being a direct contrast to all Bengalis who are presumed Muslims. Consequently, Muslim women participating in Hindu festivals were looked upon as going astray from the Muslim Bengali identity and instead incorporating the Indian culture. In the same posts, Indian Facebook users commented positively, wishing her on the occasion of the festival or welcoming her into their celebrations.

“You are a rubbish uncultured woman, it is hard to identify whether you are a Hindu or a Muslim; aren’t you ashamed of celebrating Diwali despite being a Bengali,” read a comment made on Mithila’s Facebook post in November 2020.

Mosarrat Jahan Munia was similarly demonized for falling in love with a rich, married man. Even when the outcomes were starkly different—Mithila being in a legitimate, happy marriage and Munia being in a secret affair with an immensely powerful man and finally murdered—both were labelled as immoral and of questionable character. Similarly, Farhana Muna’s divorce was also a matter of moral contention.

When Muna talked about LGBTQI rights, even well-wishers resorted to religious or moral reasons against advocating for or even discussing these people. Putting “being a good person” on the flip side of “advocating for LGBTQI rights” further demoralized the community along with discouraging others from openly talking about this.

Mithila Farzana received religious policing when she discussed issues such as consent, women’s freedom of movement, and mobility.

"টকশোতে বসে বসে যা করো, ঐগুলা বড্ড বেশি বাড়াবাড়ি হয়,আল্লাহ ছাড় দেন,ছেড়ে দেন না বিষয়টা মাথায় থাকলেই সবার জন্য কল্যাণ (Whatever you are doing in these talk shows, these are all too much. Allah may forgive, but does not forget, it is better if everyone remembers that), read another comment made on a video of her talk show.

Women's mobility as a sign of immoral character was similarly reflected in Pori Moni's case. Her lifestyle, which included parties and association with men, was said to be at odds with the culture and religion she came from.

7.2.4. Delegitimizing

Lastly, delegitimizing the content of the post was a common theme and was done in different ways.

Some topics were said to be outside the scope of "real/ideal feminism," thus labelled the original post maker as lacking credibility to speak on this matter. The comments had a sense of entitlement, made with the expectation that the women should be looking for male validation and thus must want his advice on how to best speak on the matter.

All the female public figures tracked for the sake of our research posted on issues such as early childhood development, sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence, mental health, consent in a sexual relationship, marital rape, single parenthood, etc. to raise awareness among their vast, and often young, audience. Yet, they were mostly mocked and trivialized with demeaning comments and "haha reactions" on Facebook.

Muna often talked about serious social issues in her entertainment content, making short skits about domestic violence or the objectification of women. However, as she is known as an influencer, and maybe a drug user or someone with a mental disorder, the content she created was undermined. People often brought up her divorce and called her "depressed" and "deprived" of the basic happiness life has to offer.

"*Ai moyila assolay pagol sa sob kisu besi boja. Ai moyilar kota barta mona hoy sa akjon drug adit ami tar family kaca onrot korce take akta rehav cantar a patno hok*??"

("This woman is crazy and over-understands everything. The way she speaks proves that she is a drug addict. Would like to request her family to get her admitted to a rehab centre.")

The claim that these women were not in the proper frame of mind to be spreading knowledge on women's rights and related issues was also seen in Mithila's case. The public claimed that since she broke the heart of a "nation's heartthrob" (meaning her ex-husband), and despite having a daughter with her former husband, she married a man from a different religion,

Mithila does not have the right to talk about women's rights. Additionally, Mithila Farzana's credibility as a journalist was questioned due to the political affiliations of her employers, or simply by name-calling and dismissing the message entirely.

"যদিও ভালো পোস্ট কিন্তু মিথিলার পেইজ থেকে আসায় হাহাহা রিয়েক্ট দিতে হলো (Even though it is a good post but since it came from Mithila, I had to put a 'ha ha' react)" (Facebook Page, Rafiath Rashid Mithila, 29 June 2020, post on cyber security).

"প্রতিবন্ধীদের নাট্যকলা অনুষ্টানে প্রতিবন্ধীদেরই Guest হিসেবে আনা হয়? জানতাম না! (Are people with disabilities invited as guests in plays performed by the disabled? I did not know!)" (Facebook page, Mithila Farzana, post on telivision show regarding people with disabilities).

When Farzana Mithila took legal action against those bullying her online, her post on this matter received 1.3k haha reactions out of 2.3K likes. The post was flooded with comments like "হা হা জয়যুক্ত হয়েছে," meaning that the "haha reactions have won."

Munia and Pori Moni's cases were intertwined as Pori Moni was labelled a "fake feminist" and was suspected of being in Dubai with Anvir (the alleged suspect in the Munia murder case). Those seeking justice for Munia also backlashed Pori Moni, questioning why someone, who did not stand up for other women, should receive justice for sexual harassment.

The backlashes were not only limited to mocking Mithila, Muna, and Mithila Farzana but their followers were bullied as well. Often fans and followers try to defend these women in the comments section against the backlash. However, the defensive comments, in turn, received "haha" reactions. If the fan was a woman, she was often harassed with further sexually explicit comments, or fingers were pointed at her character or religion. On the other hand, the derogatory comments or comments that vilify the author of the post received "love" and "like" reactions. Eventually, these posts often lost the key serious messages they sought to deliver.

7.2. Issues That Were Backlashed

7.2.1. Choice of Clothing

Women's choice of clothing was one of the most contested topics on social media, especially when they are deemed to be non-compliant with traditional attire. Often this led to discourses around purdah and religious values.

A major form of backlash Muna faced was abuse and slurs on her body parts targeting her choices of clothing, especially when she was wearing anything western. Mithila also received

similar comments when she posted her photographs wearing t-shirts, gowns, off-shoulder dresses, etc., which do not conform to the Muslim-Bangladeshi social norms or the purdah system. Sometimes this included sexually explicit comments targeting her personal life.

"এই রকম খারাপ জামা কাপড় পরলে সবাই খারাপ নজরে তাকাবে,আর আপনার জামা কাপড় দেখলে মনে হয় আপনার চরিএ ভালো না,আপনার ব্যবহার ও অনেক অশ্লীল, ব্যবহার ঠিক করেন ,ব্যবহারে বংশের পরিচয়"

("If you wear such indecent clothes, people will look at you in the wrong way. Your clothes reflect that you have a bad character. Your attitude is also very vulgar. Fix your attitude; it represents your family") (Facebook Page, Rafiath Rashid Mithila, 29 December 2020).

"এতদিনে বুঝতে পারলাম, তাহসানের বউ থাকতে এসব আকর্ষণীয় ছবি দেখা যায় নি, হিন্দু বেডার বউ হওয়ার পর সাগর খুলে দেখাচ্ছে। এই জন্যেইতো বলি তাহসান কেন ভালোনা"

("Finally I understand that you could not post these attractive photos while you were Tahsan's wife. Now, since you are a wife of a Hindu man, you are opening yourself like a sea. Now we know why you said Tahsan was not good!") (Facebook Page, Rafiath Rashid Mithila, 29 December 2020).

7.2.2. Content Around Violence Against Women

Giving statistical facts or raising awareness against VAW (particularly online harassment) received a lot of interaction. This was likely because women using social media, who could relate to these contents, shared these within their networks, thus revealing it to a bigger audience and increasing the likelihood of all kinds of people seeing it. Women also commented on these, sharing their own experiences of online violence and tagging people within their networks.

Simultaneously, these topics seemed to specifically act as a trigger for additional "haha" or "angry" reactions from backlash actors. The CrowdTangle statistics reported that when Farhana Muna, Rafiath Rashid Mithila, and Farzana Mithila posted about GBV, they received the highest number of reactions. Backlash actors labelled them as "attention seekers" for trying to uncover the offenders' names in public. These posts were looked upon as publicity stunts to get more views in her videos. Some even labelled Muna as a harasser as she publicly revealed the names of the offenders without their "permission."

"Please try some new topics to grab attention... Tired of seeing this...can't digest [it] anymore…Proving him wrong or showing how modern you are...will it change the society['s]

mindset??? What you are doing is also a digital social rape of this '*bekkol*' (stupid) guy in a very smart and intentional way..." (Facebook Page: Munatic)

Through her skits, Muna also attacked those who backlashed and posted offensive comments about her body parts which resulted in significant backlash. People blamed her for not covering up and harassed her further with offensive remarks like "cheap products always have a demand." Some labelled her as a too-modern woman with no respect for her religion and culture. Some labelled her as a woman with no self-respect as she spoke about these openly in public with no shame.

Muna's posts about consent or other contested issues usually followed violent occurrences. When two consecutive rape cases took place in Dhaka (one in October 2020 and another in January 2021), Muna posted some content on gender-based social issues, which received mostly positive feedback but still faced some backlash. Most comments directly attacked her character. The fact that Muna does not post about matters like consent regularly could be one of her strategies to avoid the backlash this might generate.

When Farzana Mithila brought Pori Moni on Ekattor Television talk show, after the boat club incident, she faced backlash which claimed Ekattor Television was biased when it comes to women's rights.

"নারীদেরকে কি ঘর থেকে বের করে আনার চেষ্টা চালাচ্ছেন আপনারা অশ্লীলভাবে চলাচল করার জন্য… এসব ফাজলামি বাদ দেন"

("Are you trying to get women out of their homes so that they can roam around in an obscene way… Stop this nonsense.") (Facebook Page: Farzana Mithila)

When Rafiath Rashid Mithila posted about cyber harassment to raise awareness, several comments questioned her credibility to post on VAW issues. She was called promiscuous under the guise of women's rights and freedoms and thus unfit to speak about VAW.

"তোর মত মেয়েদের মুখে women rights মানায় না মিথিলা। মেয়েদের স্বাধীনতার কথা বলে রাস্তার কুকুরের মত যেখানে সেখানে যার তার সাথে শারীরিক সর্ম্পকে লিপ্ত হওয়ার নাম নারী স্বাধীনতা নয়। কাউকে ভাল লাগল বিয়ে করলাম, দুই দিন না যেতেই নিজের স্বার্থের জন্য ছেড়ে দিয়ে অন্যের খাট গরম করার নাম নারী অধিকার নয়। নিজের ধর্ম বিষর্জন দিয়ে দুনিয়াবি স্বার্থ চরিতার্থ করার নাম Women empowerment নয়। এগুলো ফাইজলামি, এগুলা বেহায়াপনা। এগুলা নারীদের চিরিত্রহীন ও উলঙ্গ করে তাদের মান মর্যাদা নষ্ট করার অধিকার।"

(Girls like you should not speak about women's rights, Mithila. Advocating for women's freedom and then sleeping around with whoever like a street dog is not women's rights. Liking

someone and marrying him, and then soon leaving him if he fails to serve one's interest and then sleeping with another man is not called women's rights. These are jokes and shamelessness. These are tactics to establish women as characterless and tarnish their honour.")

When Farzana Mithila took legal action against cyber harassment, it was taken as a joke. Even when she posted pictures of the signed bond and cases, it was believed by some to be a lie to seek attention.

"ওরে পাগলি মান সন্মান যা চলে যাওয়ার তা তো চলেই গেছে...এখন এসব মুচলেকা দিয়ে কি হবে"

("You crazy woman! Whatever respect was supposed to go, is gone. What will change with these bonds now?") (Facebook Page: Farzana Mithila)

7.2.3. Personal Life Choices

Each of these women's personal choices, especially Farhana Muna and Rafiath Rashid Mithila who are divorced and/or single mothers, who are deviating from the more common behaviour of remaining silent and ashamed, were highly public and thus under a lot of debate and discussion.

Among all the female public figures we tracked, Rafiath Rashid Mithila received the most backlash about her personal life, irrespective of whatever issues she posted on her social media handles. If she posted issues of early childhood development and parenting, the hate comments claimed that her daughter will not respect her as she (Mithila) is a divorced woman. These comments also aimed to define "ideal motherhood" and reinforced the concept of a "good mother" who should sacrifice everything and prioritize the happiness of her partner and children. A lot of these comments reinforced the existing social norms which dictated that women had the sole responsibility of sustaining marriages despite harmful circumstances. Mithila was, therefore, looked upon as a "bad mother since she prioritized her well-being and happiness by remarrying.

"তিনি আয়রার কেমন মা, ছোটবেলাতেই আয়রা কে দেখতে হলো তার বাবা-মায়ের বিচ্ছেদ! সংসার ভাঙ্গায় যার প্রধান ভূমিকা পালন করেছেন আমাদের মিথিলা আপা! এরপরও আয়রা কে নিয়ে এত লাফালাফি বেমানান দেখায় আপনাকে… মৃত্যুর পরে আল্লাহর সামনে দাঁড়িয়ে কি জবাব দিবেন?"

("What kind of a mother is she to Ayra? Ayra had to see her parents separating at an early age—all blame goes to her. She played the main role in breaking up her family. Your over-enthusiasm about your own daughter does not suit you…What answer will you give to Allah after your death?")

Many called Mithila a disgrace to motherhood—*"আপনি মা জাতির কলঙ্ক"* (You are a shame to motherhood)—and used her divorce, second marriage, and allegations of sexual promiscuity to invalidate whatever she said about women's struggles. Comments assumed that women who chose to live their lives making their own choices, and not conforming to social norms around marriage and relationships, are bad examples to society.

Muna, also a divorced single mother, received comments calling her mentally distressed and not satisfied with anything in life. Her posts on the struggles of single motherhood received significant backlashes.

"অন্তত আপনার মত এমন বারোভাতারির কাছ থেকে বুদ্ধি নেয়া লাগবে না, যে কিনা নিজের সংসার আর এমন একজন সন্তান রেখে বেশ কজনের সাথে নোংরামি করে সর্বশেষ অন্য ধর্মাবলম্বীকে বিয়ে করে দেশ পলায়ন করহেন...লজ্জা থাকা উচিত! তা তো নাই আবার জ্ঞান দিতে আসছেন, নিজে যে বাংলাদেশের একজন কলঙ্কিনী সেটা মাথায় রাইখেন"(We do not need to learn these from someone like you who has multiple husbands, slept around with multiple men, finally married someone out of her religion and left the country despite being a mother. You should be ashamed! You have no shame and on top of it, you are trying to spread awareness on these issues! Remember that you are a disgrace to the nation!)," read a Facebook comment made on Mithila's post.

"ঘরের কাজ দেখে ওর মাথা খারাপ হয়ে গেছে। পৃথিবীর সবকাজ ফেলে রাখা যায়।কিন্তু ঘরের কাজ ফেলে রাখলে নিজেরই বিপদ।যেমন এই মহিলা বিপদে পরে পাগল হয়ে গেছে। (This woman has lost her sanity due to household chores. You can neglect all forms of work, but neglecting household chores would leave you crazy. This woman, for example, has become crazy.)," read another comment on Farhana Muna's Facebook post.

It is interesting to note that another famous male singer, Arnob, who is a cousin of Rafiath Rashid Mithila, also married an Indian Hindu woman a few months after Mithila and Srijit's marriage. Unlike Mithila and the other women mentioned in this study, Arnob did not face any hate comments or backlash regarding his marriage. Instead, he was congratulated on his marriage. Again, this might be an issue of gender and patriarchy where Mithila was accepted in Kolkata because Srijit married her and as it is said in Bangla "*বিয়ে করে নিয়ে এসেছে (*He brought her as a bride to Kolkata)." Srijit is not accepted among the Bangladeshi Facebook users because Mithila was a Muslim girl who married a foreign Hindu man—"*বিয়ে হয়েছে (*a Bangladeshi girl got married)."

It is an issue of not accepting interfaith marriages and transnational marriage, but also of the gendered ideology that the woman marries into the man's family (and in Mithila's case, also into the religious/cultural community). Mithila's marriage to a person of a different nationality

challenged the nationalist ideology which was also fundamentalist. Fundamentalism manipulated and used the language of tradition, religion, and culture, to fulfil a political project. These projects, in turn, constructed homogenous and exclusionary identities for a political purpose (Mehra, 2008). Women are central to all fundamentalist projects, where the term "ideal woman" is used to control them. The construction of an ideal creates an altered image of that which is not ideal. This creation of an ideal sanctions discrimination, stigmatization, and violence against women. This also happened to be the case here—the backlash actors or the opposition used this identity of "ideal Muslim and Bangladeshi women" to stigmatize and vilify Mithila.

7.2.4. LGBTQI-Related Posts

Of the female public figures we tracked, only Muna posted about LGBTQI issues. In May 2021, Muna posted a picture with a caption supporting the LGBTQI community. The post received massive backlash and people attacked her for her religious beliefs.

"Soon she'll be advocating for paedophiles, that's where her masters are going towards," said a comment on her post.

Many attacked her claiming that this was one of her publicity stunts that went wrong. One comment read, "An out-of-touch single mother desperately trying to stay relevant by spewing nonsense and associating with the conformity of feral cultural Marxists. Well, let's see how that works out for you..."

Many of her followers wanted to unfollow her seeing her support the LGBTQI community. A follower commented, "I used to admire you apu…but this is not right. I wish you knew apu. Especially in times like this when every haram is being normalized."

However, this did not stop her from showing her support for the LGBTQI community. Later in August 2021, she uploaded another post on creating inclusive spaces and restricted the comments section as a part of her strategy to counter backlash (the post was made public, but no one could comment on it).

The lack of posts on this issue can be attributed to the history of online LGBTQI activism in Bangladesh where it threatened both one's physical safety and social image in the community. Even the fan base resorted to the backlash, as seen in Muna's case. In 2014, far-right forces demanded capital punishment of atheist bloggers and threatened gay rights activists which later resulted in their murders. This caused a major stall in public conversations around LGBTQI rights. Muna does not live in Bangladesh, which allowed her a certain level of protection as opposed to the other women in our sample.

7.3. Backlash Actors

7.3.1. Backlash Actors on Female Public Figures' Profiles

CrowdTangle could not specify how many of the backlash actors' accounts were fake, locked, or open; it could only tell the number of followers on the profiles we tracked. Manual research found that tracing the demographics of backlash actors was only an estimate as most of their Facebook accounts were either locked or were fake. Profiles were considered fake when the holders did not resemble a real name, their accounts were locked, and there was barely any information available about the profile holders. For the locked accounts, gender and other background information such as education, profession, or living area could not be determined. The findings are therefore from the accounts we could access.

Most of the commenters were men and boys, but there was also a significant number of women posting hate comments. The male commenters were aged between their early twenties to late forties, and mostly located abroad, or outside Dhaka. Some of the comments were made by people with religious extremist views. In one of her posts, when she was exposing the backlash actors, Muna's caption read:

"অনেকের প্রোফাইল এ আবার দেখি কাবা শরীফ, হাদিথ, কোরান শরীফের ছবি দেয়া. অনেকের প্রোফাইল মা/ছোট বোন/স্ত্রী/প্রেমিকাকে জড়িয়ে ধরা ফটো দেয়া. যেইসব বয়সের ছেলেদেরকে ছোট ভাই বলে ডাকার কথা, সেই সকল ভাইদেরও রেপ কমেন্ট ডিলিট করতে হয়েছে. বাপ চাচা বয়সের তো কথা বাদ দিলাম"

("I see many of these profiles have pictures of the Kaaba, Hadith and Quran quotes. Many have pictures with their mothers, sisters and lovers. I even had to delete rape threats from boys who are of my younger brother's age. And let's not talk about the ones aged like my father and uncles").

In the case of Mithila, the difference in the number of male and female backlash actors was not very high as her ex-husband's female fans also left hate comments. There was a clear dichotomy whereby the backlash actors were mostly from the Bangladeshi Muslim community, while users from the Kolkata Hindu community either defended or praised her. As her current husband is a Kolkata native, she became a local sister-in-law, and thus, came under their protection in the patriarchal family structure practiced in the sub-continent. Their comments also got negative replies and "Ha Ha" reactions.

7.3.2. Backlash on Events

Our findings show that people who posted hate comments on the events of Munia's death and Pori Moni's arrest were confident to comment from their real accounts. Unlike the female public figures' profiles, the hate comments on both events came equally from men and women.

7.3.3. Backlash Strategies

While the digital space has contributed significantly to women's advancement, different strategies to restrict this newly formed space have also emerged.

7.3.3.1. Threats to Report Videos and Accounts

A common strategy was threats to report content posted by female public figures. All the female public figures we tracked received these threats, and Muna and Mithila had contents taken down because of mass reporting.

According to Facebook Community Standards, Facebook would warn an owner for a first violation if the content is massively reported. However, if the content from that account continued to be reported regularly, it would be taken down, and Facebook would restrict the account holder's ability to post or, in severe cases, disable their profile. This is a huge risk for public figures, as their livelihoods often depend on online social media activity. Also, a lot of effort and investment are involved in creating content, and having them deleted is a financial loss as well. Content on Facebook can be reported if they violate authenticity, safety, privacy, and dignity (Facebook Community Standard, 2021). While these standards were created by Facebook to reduce harassment and fraudulence in the digital space, they are now being used by backlash actors to harass women further.

7.3.3.2. Organized and Coordinated Backlash

Upon finding posts about women's rights, LGBTQI issues, or anything deemed contrary to gender norms (e.g., male fans of Kpop groups being deemed feminine), members of FIC call for coordinated hate comments or mass reporting. Specific people were also sometimes targeted, and Mithila was one of them.

"চলো উড়ায় দিয়ে আসি" (Let's go blow them away) was a regular post on the FIC group.

By using Facebook's gender-blind algorithm, which depends mostly on the number of reports, FIC attempted to delete such posts by mass reporting.

7.3.3.3. Unfollowing

Unfollowing the Facebook accounts of female public figures was another strategy that proved to be effective. In the digital age, it became crucial for them to be able to sustain their presence on social media, as a lot of promotions and advertisements now take place on online platforms. From Mithila's upcoming dramas to Mithila Farzana's journalistic reports, online publicity helped them access their target audience within and outside the country. Muna considers herself a content creator and Facebook has been her main platform to showcase her work and establish her footing in the industry. A low number of followers could deprive both Muna and Mithila of career opportunities.

7.3.3.4. Fake Accounts

It was seen that fake accounts were used primarily to post sexually explicit comments and rape threats. However, when it came to moral or religious policing, people used their real accounts. It is interesting to note which types of comments required hiding behind fake accounts to maintain anonymity, and thus which comments, they felt, would harm their real reputations as opposed to which were considered more "acceptable" or "justified" in society. Additionally, it could be a strategy to avoid going against Facebook's community standards, and therefore getting reported or deleted.

7.3.3.5. Implied Threats

Oftentimes, there were comments where backlash actors confessed about wanting to write bad things, but limited themselves, fearing they would be exposed in front of their relatives:

"কমেন্টে কিছু লিখলে যাতে ফ্রেন্ডলিস্টের অন্য কেউ সেটা দেখতে না পায়, সেটার একটা অপশন ফেসবুক কর্তৃপক্ষের রাখা উচিত। মান-সম্মানের ভয়ে মনের কথাগুলো বলতে পারিনা। বাল!"

("Facebook authorities should keep an option that would enable us to comment freely without fearing that no one from our friend list sees that comment. Just for the fear of losing our respect, we cannot speak our minds. Damn!").

Another group held back from making offensive remarks fearing they might become victims of the DSA 2018. Although this does not limit all the backlash actors from commenting, it seems to ensure fewer negative comments.

7.3.3.6. Use of Special Characters or Interchanged Letters

Another commonly used strategy by backlash actors was to use special characters or interchanged letters while writing explicit comments such as F*** (Fuck) and $#*! (Shit). This is mainly done to escape Facebook's algorithm and to avoid violating Facebook Community Standards.

7.3.3.7. Fabricated Photos

When delegitimizing posts through questioning moral character, backlash actors used photoshopped images or comedic memes to further their point. Mithila's posts received comments which included her face being photoshopped into pornographic images. Derogatory comments about her alleged sexual promiscuity were supported by memes comparing her to fruits or food. These received many "haha" reactions from other users supporting the behaviour.

7.4. Strategies to Counter the Backlash

Several strategies are followed by female public figures to counter the backlash. While most of the strategies like filtering comments and restricting the comments section were common strategies, some of them had their forms of strategies to deal with the backlash.

7.4.1. Limiting or Filtering Comments

Limiting comments was a common strategy used by female public figures depending on the subject of the post. These were calculated steps, as female public figures assumed that certain topics were likely to receive more backlash—being more contentious and tabooed—such as issues like sexuality. Sometimes the post was made public, but no one could comment on it.

Filtering out offensive comments was another common strategy practiced by female public figures. Often their official and verified accounts have moderators, who remove offensive hate comments. However, for some accounts (like Mithila's), the hate comments were so large in numbers, that even filtering could not always get rid of all these comments.

7.4.2. Dark Humour

Muna used dark humour by making skits that discussed online harassment, VAW, sexual orientation, and consent. Though her contents were made to entertain people and make them laugh, these held strong hidden messages that worked as awareness-building against VAW. The sarcasm and dark comedy made the messages more acceptable to a general audience and were

more communicable. She also put sarcastic captions in these posts to make them sound fun. For example, one of her videos on online sexual harassment had the caption:

"করোনা ভাইরাস এর সাথে সাথে বাড়ছে আরেকধরণের সামাজিক ভাইরাস। এই ভাইরাস এ আক্রান্ত সমস্ত ভাই ও বোনেদের জন্য আসুন আমরা দুই হাত তুলে মোনাজাত করি"

("Another form of social virus is increasing alongside coronavirus. Let us all pray for the brothers and sisters affected by this virus").

7.4.3. Strategic Responses

Sometimes female public figures strategically responded to the hate they received. Sometimes they replied directly with witty comebacks, other times they threatened to take legal measures against the backlash actors. Muna replied directly to comments with witty remarks.

For example, she took a screenshot of a person's Facebook profile bio (the "about" section on Facebook) who posted a hate comment on her educational qualification and replied to his comment with the caption "I refuse to take feedback from someone who has this as their bio. Time to flush you away. 👋".

She also posted screenshots of offensive comments in her Facebook posts with captions raising awareness of cyber harassment and encouraging women to speak up against any form of violence.

"স্ক্রিনশট নেই, RAB / POLICE স্টেটমেন্ট এ উল্লেখ করি, আর দীর্ঘশ্বাস ফেলি. জীবনে অনেক অন্ধকার সময় পার করে এসেছি. Sexual abuse , violence, depression, anxiety, suicide, divorce - প্রচুর পাহাড় পেরিয়ে দিয়ে এইখানে দাঁড়ানো আমি. আমার মতন একজন মানুষের মনোবল কতটুকু হতে পারে একবার চিন্তা করে দেখেন…সাহস ছোয়াছুয়ে. তাই করে ফেললাম সাহস. আমার আয়ত্তে যা যা স্টেপ আছে নেয়ার আইনগত ভাবে, আমি নেয়ার পথেই এগুচ্ছি. আমাকে দেখে যদি আগামীতে পাঁচটি মেয়েও আওয়াজ ওঠায়, প্রতিবাদ করে, আমার জন্য এই কয়েকদিনের কষ্ট সার্থক"

("I take screenshots and mention RAB and police in my statements. I have passed many dark times with sexual abuse, violence, depression, anxiety, suicide, and divorce. Imagine how strong I am mentally. I am taking whatever legal steps that are necessary. Courage is contagious and if even five other girls take similar steps against cyber harassment by looking at me, then my hard work will pay off")

She also threatened the backlash actors through these posts—"stay posted, I will write about the official process of dealing with cybercrime once the whole procedure is complete."

Like Muna, Farzana Mithila also responded to some of the hate comments with wit. Similarly, Mithila also threatened to file police cases against people who keep posting extremely degrading photos. She has been vocal about the attack on her social media page on several media channels and said that she has a social media manager to manage her page and filter and limit comments. She never replied to the hate comments directly. However, she and her ex-husband Tahsan came on a radio show where they talked about the toxicity in social media and requested people to not behave negatively. This was a strategy to deal with the backlash as most of the hate Mithila receives is for her divorce.

7.5. Why the Backlash

There exists a socially constructed trope of the "ideal Muslim Bangladeshi woman" who dresses modestly, manages her household chores, takes responsibility for enduring her marriage, looks after her children, and silently accepts social norms. On the other hand, there are women like the ones in our sample. This is, of course, a false dichotomy but is often used to justify much of this backlash. This backlash aimed to subtly (or not so subtly) send women back to their "acceptable" roles, as per Faluldi (1991)'s definition.

Throughout the comments, it was seen that the "ideal Muslim Bangladeshi woman" came into play when they were domestic beings, looking after the household and childbearing and restricting themselves within the standards and boundaries of freedom the society has set for them. Any woman who chose to disrupt this status quo of the "ideal Muslim Bangladeshi society" was considered to be a threat. They were further demonized as bearers of "western propaganda." This identification of feminism as a western import and destroying the culture and norms of the society was also another use of identity politics.

The discourse around the disruption of the status quo enabled backlash actors to gain mass support for their claims, which pushed women back to their "acceptable" position, and if not that, it managed to silence many other voices in support of gender equality (Faludi, 1991). For instance, the fact that Mithila still chose to live her life on her terms, despite being a divorced single mother and later marrying a man from a different religion and nationality, made her subject to backlash. In Muna's case where she chose to wear western outfits and posted her content online acted as a trigger factor for backlash actors to attack her personality and life choices.

The backlash against freedom of personal life choices such as marriage, divorce, motherhood, and bodily autonomy of women was also specific because they challenged the status quo. Women were not expected to make decisions of their own and were also not expected to present these publicly—even in forms of awareness. All the female public figures we tracked

were open about their life choices on the public platform and owned these life decisions with pride which seemed, to the backlash actors, as a loss of control over women in general.

This became a contested issue and made them targets of hate, ridicule, condemnation, and violence in the form of backlash (Mansbridge, 2008). It further led to a gatekeeping of who is allowed to speak about what. This explained why Muna or Mithila received hate comments when they talked about early childhood development, mental health, or LGBTQI issues, or why people questioned the validity of Pori Moni's sexual harassment complaint and if she can seek justice, or why Munia was labelled as a "gold digger" after being murdered. According to Faludi (1991), this made women, who have been publicly vocal about their claims, struggle to prove their claims, and to survive they took a more subtle position—for example in our case, female public figures refraining or strategically posting on issues around sexuality and LGBTQI rights.

Protesting women's rights online has been easier and safer than protesting or preventing women from enjoying their rights on the streets. One can hide behind their fake Facebook account or lock their Facebook profiles to be anonymous and post thrashing comments against female public figures and gender justice activists. Moreover, these backlash actors have not faced any significant legal consequences to date. Furthermore, it is easier to organize and replicate hate at a massive level, thus causing a larger degree of damage.

8. Emerging Issues and Conclusion

The female public figures we tracked sought to break the stereotypes around gender-based violence, women's rights, and sexuality, but in return, they received reactions that reinforces the stereotypes. This reinforcement brought in narratives and debates on the definition of feminism and women's rights—particularly on liberal feminism versus radical feminism and created conditioning/validation of what counts as feminism and women's rights and what does not.

Women's rights issues such as women's education, employment, and domestic violence are seen as liberal feminism which is a more "acceptable" term for women's rights because of the activities of the development sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and awareness building. However, issues like consent, women making decisions on marriage and divorce, single parenthood, sexuality, and gender diversity are considered more radical issues and western concepts. These, therefore, remain highly contested and result in more backlash and hate.

The rapid increase in online participation during the COVID-19 pandemic has made online GBV a key area to look at. The digital space has therefore become a new avenue to intensify backlash and VAW. The effects of this form of backlashes are widespread and intense and inflict immense psychological trauma often demotivating women to continue their presence

in cyberspace. It also violates the freedom of speech of women who are vocal in the digital space. It intimidates women who want to enter the digital space, especially Facebook as a social media, and advocate for women's rights issues.

Fast changes in technology and digital/social media platforms make it harder to track trends of online violence over time. Our research was limited to one social media platform—Facebook. However, with changing times, there is a range of new mediums, which are yet hidden spaces, that generate backlash. These include social media platforms like Reddit, 4Chan, and Discord with a large number of users from the younger age group particularly adolescents. With this new generation of internet users, there has also been an emergence of new terminologies and "lingual" that are used as tools of gender-based violence.

These have not been researched yet and therefore are an emerging area of concern that lacks established methodologies/approaches to conduct in-depth studies. It also remains crucial to unpack who the backlash actors are (as tracking them remains difficult because of the scope of anonymity that social media offers such as fake IDs/locked profiles) through these in-depth studies. The research did not look in-depth at interactions on other social media platforms. However, as user of those platforms such as Instagram and TikTok and keeping a general observation of public profile, it was observed that people get to be more expressive and their true selves on those platforms. This gave a sense that there might be less possibility of facing hate and backlash. This could be possible because these platforms have fewer users in Bangladesh. However, this also requires further research to observe the changing trends.

In current times, the digital space is serving as a platform for the real formation of ideas and as a medium for the mobilization of gender justice activism. Therefore, the emerging form of online backlash is not only closing the digital space for women but also shrinking the civic space for promoting gender justice. This calls for acknowledging the severity of this violence and its impact on women's and girls' lives. Unpacking the strategies to counter this form of backlash also remains crucial. Therefore, online violence against women needs to be understood and addressed under a relevant legal framework. This brings in the role of the DSA 2018, which defines any false, defamatory, hurtful expression and pornography as criminal offences. However, this Act has rarely been used for violence and harassment in digital space. This is because it does not address gender-based violence effectively, and in many cases, victims are afraid to report incidents of sexual harassment fearing social stigma.

The DSA has been a controversial law for being frequently used by the state against activists and individuals for criticizing the existing political power structure or for just expressing different social and religious ideologies. However, our findings report that backlash actors often refrain from posting explicit hate comments for the fear of being detained under the DSA. Therefore, this remains a crucial area to explore how much the DSA has contributed in limiting what can be

said openly, how effective has it been in mitigating online gender-based violence and counter backlash, and how it could do more. Finally, the state needs to prevent and mitigate online risks and promote a safe digital space for women which will ensure freedom of speech while respecting the rights of various actors and users of the digital spaces.

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