

**Tracing the Footprints of Digital Aggression: An Ethnographic Journey into  
Cyber Harassment Against Female Activists in Bangladesh**

By

**Ummul Khayer Fatema**

**Student ID: 20117007**

Submitted to the Department of Economics and Social Sciences in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Social Sciences in Anthropology

Department of Economics and Social Sciences  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences,

BRAC University

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## Declaration

I hereby declare that:

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing my degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where it is appropriately cited with complete and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted or submitted for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all primary sources of help.

Student's Full Name & Signature:

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Ummul Khayer Fatema

20117007

## Approval

The thesis titled “Tracing the Footprints of Digital Aggression: An Ethnographic Journey into Cyber-harassment Against Female Activist in Bangladesh” submitted by Ummul Khayer Fatema of Summer 2023, has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelors of Social Sciences in Anthropology on 31/10/2023

### Examining Committee:

Supervisor: (Member)

---

Dr. Seuty Sabur

Associate Professor, Department of ESS, BRAC University

Program Coordinator: (Member)

---

Dr. Shahidur Rahman

Professor, Department of ESS, BRAC University

Departmental Head: (Chair)

---

Dr. Wasiquir Rahman Khan

Professor and Chairperson, Department of ESS, BRAC University

## **Abstract**

In the last few years, the utilization of social media by public figures, social advocates, and content creators has increased significantly, particularly in addressing social justice, including gender equality, human rights, and other crucial societal matters. With a large proportion of activism taking place on digital platforms, websites like Facebook have become instrumental in widespread mobilization and demonstrations. While online activism is making progress in addressing gender justice and is in the process of developing, violence against women continues to escalate in the digital realm. This thesis will investigate how cyber harassment attempts to suppress female activism in Bangladesh. To understand this, I will try to see the connection between heteropatriarchal norms and harassment. What kind of harassment do women activists face in their everyday lives? How do they navigate through this? And how does it impact their activism? It also sheds light on the experiences of female activists to highlight how heteropatriarchal norms contribute to the suppression of their activism through cyber harassment and how it can have a profound impact on a female activist's life, both personal and professional. The frequency of cyber harassment and the effects it has on Bangladeshi female activists pose a serious obstacle to gender equality. This crucial matter calls for more investigation. This thesis will contribute to the advocacy for changes in policies and laws to better protect female activists from cyber harassment and alleviate the suppression of their rights to protest, as well as develop better online safety measures, create support networks for victims, and work with law enforcement to prosecute perpetrators.

**Keywords:** Female Activists, Cyber-harassment, Gender inequality, Patriarchy.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this research to one of my biggest supporters, my father (the only person who always believed me).

## **Acknowledgement:**

I would start by thanking the person with whom I first interacted in the Anthropology Department, Professor Seuty Sabur, who is also my supervisor (luckily). Thanks would not be enough to express how indebted I am to her. From learning the definition of anthropology to getting insightful feedback to develop this thesis, all credit goes to her. Thanks for always spreading positive energy, which I needed the most during my undergrad, and guiding me to become an aspiring anthropologist.

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## Chapter 01

### Introduction

In 2015, a disturbing headline in an Australian newspaper shook the public's conscience and sparked widespread outrage. The headline read, "*All feminists should be gang-raped to set them right*" (McNally, 2015). The audacity of such a statement, openly threatening violence against women who advocate for gender equality, shocked everyone. This incident serves as a stark reminder of the dark underbelly of the digital age, where online spaces can be breeding grounds for misogyny, hate speech, and threats against women activists. This was the case in Australia, labelled a "first-world" country, believing in equality and so on. However, in developing countries like Bangladesh, where gender inequality has persisted for generations, it is almost impossible for women to come out publicly (both online and offline) to advocate for their rights without facing harassment from the people here, who have cultivated strong heteropatriarchal norms and find it problematic to see equality among men and women. Patriarchy is essentialized in a capitalist society where individuals learn gender roles from their early childhood and evolve as being gendered throughout their lives, as well as perceive it as "normal" (Sabur, 2021). These deeply rooted patriarchal norms and cultural practices are the primary contributors to the continued subjugation of women, which the perpetrators learn from their families, peer groups, and communities and take as a normal act. On the other hand, we keep ourselves too busy to police our girls in the name of security and protection (Sabur, 2021). While bringing up girls in this particular manner, we often cannot see how we normalize the difficulties in the lives of women. Along with the offline challenges, women face an additional layer of discrimination and harassment online. Social media is not being utilized as a means of communication now but as a platform where we socialize (Miller et al., 2016, as cited in Chowdhury, 2018). To be more specific, it is ultimately a

space that is linked with social reality (Chowdhury, 2018). Since it is embedded with social realities, both society and social media are connected in a way that shapes each other. For example, the emergence of online activism and social media platforms in recent days has provided women with powerful tools to raise their concerns, advocate for their rights, and challenge deeply entrenched gender inequalities. However, this increased visibility and engagement in public discourse have also exposed women activists to various forms of online harassment and cyberbullying and have impacted the participation of female activism over the last few years.

Misinterpretation of religious norms is often used as a means to enforce and justify oppressive practices against women in Bangladesh. For instance, some women are coerced into refraining from uploading their pictures online, and if they do, they become targets of derogatory comments and unwarranted moral policing. Predators, hiding behind the guise of religious righteousness, shame and harass women by commenting, "Hijab koi" (Where is your veil?) as well as proclaiming that heaven is forbidden for those women who do not cover their bodies, especially their heads. These derogatory remarks not only perpetuate the objectification of women but also control their autonomy and expression in the online space.

The Majority of the female celebrities in our country face insurmountable harassment online. The utilization of various social media platforms by social activists, media figures, and content creators has played a significant role in discussions surrounding gender, human rights, and other crucial topics related to social justice. Among these platforms, Facebook has been particularly influential in facilitating widespread activism and protests. There has been significant use of Facebook for online activism (Mahpara et al., 2022). It is an unfortunate reality that almost every woman in Bangladesh who opens a social media account inevitably faces some form of harassment. As noted by Kabir (2018), women who are vocal on social media often become targets of harassment, facing

a disproportionate amount of abuse compared to less vocal female social media users. Before the advent of social media, the means of communication for individuals were centered on personal interactions, which shifted afterwards. Undoubtedly, the utilization of social media differs from one region to another (Chowdhury, 2018). Vocalizing publicly and challenging heteropatriarchal norms and customs through their activism in Bangladesh is onerous. While taking on the challenge of doing it, they experience an intensification of hatred and hostility through social media. This points to a disturbing pattern where cyberbullying is employed as a tool to suppress women's activism and silence their voices. The impact of cyberbullying against women activists in the digital realm has raised significant concerns within academia, civil society, and human rights organizations. It poses a severe threat not only to the safety and well-being of women activists but also to the larger goal of achieving gender equality and dismantling patriarchal structures.

In Bangladesh, 64 out of 100 women face cyber violence, which came out in a recent study of action aid. Interestingly, the number rose from 50 to 64 from 2021 to 2022 (The Daily Star, 2022). However, it is a common act to target the victims of gender-based violence and accuse them of not maintaining themselves in an “appropriate way” in order to protect the perpetrators. In 2020, a group of men recorded a video of them raping a woman in Begumganj, Noakhali, and shared the video footage on social media, which shocked the whole country and incited outrage<sup>1</sup>. After that incident, the female protestors came out to the streets to demand justice. However, the women who marched to the streets faced a new form of violence: cyber harassment. As a result, online platforms (especially Facebook) became battlegrounds for gender-based violence (GBV) as these women activists were targeted with harassment, murders, and rape threats (Action Aid, 2022). Some people justified the incident just to prove the female activists wrong online. While the

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.thedailystar.net/noakhali-gang-rape-2-main-accused-held-1972785>

activists were advocating for a safe place for women, some people were continuously saying women should keep themselves covered/ keep male partners with them while going out instead of focusing on what the accused have done to a woman who was a housewife, and the incident happened inside her house.

### **1.1 Significance of this Research**

According to the report of Action Aid (2022), Facebook (47%) and Messenger (35%) were the platforms where the majority of the women experienced online assault. Other social media sites where women experienced online abuse included YouTube (1.31%), IMO (3.06%), WhatsApp (1.75%), and Instagram (6.11%). There is a significant portion of female internet users in Bangladesh who have deactivated/deleted their social media accounts after facing several forms of cyber-attacks in their comment sections and inboxes. What is particularly noteworthy is that when female users vocalize about these harassments, they face other complications that eventually lead them to another form of violence. Instead of offering encouragement, several people criticized the female users for being overly emotional and advised them to make their accounts private as a solution. Ironically, this normalization of harassment did not help the situation; on the contrary, it worsened it. The female activists who fight against it and advocate for change face difficulties more often and some of them also stop doing activism after facing significant challenges, including family isolation, community hatred, and limited freedom of expression. Therefore, further research is needed to determine viable options for dealing with cyberattacks targeting female activists. By providing female activists with possible ways to deal with these trying circumstances, such a study hopes to boost their confidence so they will continue contributing to online activism. Since this thesis aims to identify the core factors behind this cybercrime in Bangladesh by conducting qualitative research, it will shed light on the unique challenges faced by female activists, both

Bengali and indigenous activists. Along with that, it will also contribute to understanding the relationship between intersectionality and cyber harassment. Furthermore, the findings of this research may significantly contribute to the field of policy and advocacy as they also examine the existing legal frameworks to combat cyber harassment against female activists and promote online safety.

Therefore, by investigating the experiences of women activists who face online harassment, I aim to uncover the contributing factors to the development of this newly formed gender-based violence, as well as highlight how patriarchal norms contribute to the suppression of women's activism through cyber harassment. Listed below are the specific questions that I will explore:

1. What are the sociocultural factors that led to the prevalence of cyber harassment against female activists in Bangladesh?
2. How does cyber harassment impact the participation of female activists in activism? What are the long-term repercussions of cyberbullying on the mental health and career trajectories of female activists, and how do they navigate through this?
3. What kinds of safety measures do female activists take to continue their activism?
4. What role does state legislation play in mitigating or amplifying the issue of cyber harassment against female activists?

## **Chapter 02**

### **Literature Review**

As we have learned from the previous chapter, the rise of digital media in the late 20th century marked a transformative moment for activism, particularly within the context of gender equality. The emergence of the internet and digital platforms during the third wave of feminism (1990s–

early 2000s) allowed female activists to migrate their advocacy efforts to online spaces through blogs, forums, and social media platforms. These digital tools have played a pivotal role in making feminist voices heard more loudly, facilitating networking among activists, and empowering marginalised communities. However, this digital era has also given birth to a troubling phenomenon: a surge in gender-based violence on online platforms. This disturbing trend poses a serious threat to the safety, reputation, and participation of women in public discourse. Researchers worldwide have undertaken in-depth studies to comprehend this evolving form of violence against female activists across diverse cultural landscapes, which will be discussed in this chapter.

I have drawn upon the insights of Veena Das to shed light on the intricate interplay of subjectivity, gender dynamics, and violence to achieve a more nuanced understanding of my interlocutors' experiences. In her work, 'Violence, Gender, and Subjectivity,' Das delves into the profound influence that various forms of violence—both physical and symbolic—can exert on an individual's lived experience, identity, and subjectivity. By analyzing the complex connections between violence, gender, and personal subjectivity, Das illuminates how violence shapes not only one's identity but also their self-perception. In a parallel manner, Das's articulation of the transformative impact of violence on an individual's sense of self makes it more evident that online harassment, threats, and abuse can significantly affect how female activists perceive themselves and their roles. Such digital harassment has the potential to inculcate doubt in the activists' minds, which would consequently obstruct their journey of advocacy.

Furthermore, this thesis draws inspiration from two notable works: Mahpara et al. (2022) and Faludi (1991), both offering valuable insights into various forms of gender-based violence and their representations. Moreover, both works attempt to navigate the underlying factors contributing to these types of violence in the digital realm. Although Faludi (1991) primarily focuses on the

American context, her observations reveal patterns that resonate globally. In contrast, Mahpara et al.'s (2022) research is rooted in the Bangladeshi context, providing a unique perspective on the issue.

My research focuses on the multitude of harassment experiences that female activists often encounter, as well as the strategies they employ to cope with these challenges. By narrowing the scope to Bangladeshi women activists, I aim to uncover the spectrum of harassment they face, ranging from gendered prejudices to cyber threats. Furthermore, I intend to look deeper into the strategies to combat those challenges. Given the unique socio-cultural dynamics in Bangladesh, it is anticipated that the findings of this study may diverge from those conducted in other cultural contexts. Therefore, my analysis section exclusively draws references from Bangladeshi pieces of literature.

The study conducted by Mahpara et al. (2022) holds particular relevance to my research due to its specific focus on the socio-cultural milieu of Bangladesh. In their work, Mahpara et al. (2022) examine the experiences of prominent female figures in Bangladesh who utilize social media platforms to advance social justice, equality, and other relevant societal issues. This study sheds light on the unique challenges and forms of harassment faced within the Bangladeshi socio-cultural context, specifically focusing on this particular group.

The insights offered by Mahpara et al. (2022) serve as valuable points of comparison and contrast in my research. I seek to identify the types of harassment experienced by Bangladeshi female activists and their effective strategies for overcoming these hurdles. According to Mahpara et al. (2022), the surge in internet activity in Bangladesh between 2012-2016 coincided with bloggers and activists addressing topics such as secularism, women's and human rights, feminism, and religious extremist views. This online gender-based violence, as Mahpara et al. (2022) suggest,

can be viewed as a reactionary response to the women's rights movement. It often employs fear-inducing tactics to hinder the courage, confidence, and advocacy efforts of women.

Another significant work, Faludi's (1991) analysis, delves into the portrayal of feminism as an enemy of women themselves. This portrayal within a given societal context essentially attributes feminism to a pivotal element in the backlash against it. This perspective played a crucial role in the anti-feminist movement, which sought to impede progress towards gender equality. Faludi illustrates how feminism was consistently framed as a threat to deeply ingrained cultural norms, morals, and social cohesion. This deliberate framing was employed as a strategy to undermine the legitimate pursuit of gender equality. This resulted in some women turning against the very cause meant to empower them. The constructed notion that feminism disrupts societal norms often arises in discourses surrounding gender equality and women's rights. Such representation perpetuates the existing status quo of female oppression. Feminism is sometimes depicted as a destabilizing force due to concerns about disrupting established power dynamics and social order. Faludi (1991) also highlights how historical retaliations were employed to coerce women back into traditional, 'acceptable' roles whenever they dared to express their opinions.

Citing Mahpara et al. (2022), these tactics have successfully limited the influence of numerous proponents of gender equality to some extent. Individuals must understand that these backlashes have an impact on people beyond solely women.

In this context, Citron (2014) examined the rise of cyber harassment in the digital realm, specifically focusing on the individuals who are often targeted. Citron's (2014) persuasive argument highlights that the majority of cyberbullying victims are chosen based on factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or other protected characteristics. Notably, in this research, I



incorporated two participants who are allies of the LGBTQI community. These individuals, due to their outspoken opinions on the topic, have also experienced online harassment.

Furthermore, considering the dire situation of the LGBTQ population, (Chaney, Sabur, and Sahoo, 2020) looked at the thoughts of civil society organizations, focusing on how these organizations viewed continued human rights violations in light of the precarious circumstances of the LGBTQ people in Bangladesh. This paper aided in understanding the persistent violence, prejudice, and intimidation directed towards the group above. The persecution the LGBTQ people and their allies experience from the majority in Bangladesh is a confluence of extremism, according to this paper's analysis. Moreover, activists and supporters of LGBTQ rights in Bangladesh also face challenges; thus, the issues are not limited to LGBTQ individuals. Cyberbullying and other types of harassment are frequent problems for female activists who support the rights of LGBTQ people, which are also faced by male activists as well. Therefore, (Chaney, Sabur, and Sahoo, 2020) provide a unique insight into the debate of religious extremism among different sexually oriented people. The way the majority of extremists impose their thoughts on others, which ends up with colossal abuse, was something that all my respondents agreed with.

In a comprehensive report by BLAST & BRAC JPGSPH (2017), cybercrime encompasses many abuses, including spamming, hacking, hate speech, identity theft, tracking of users' movements, and public humiliation. Further investigation of this cybercrime context by Citron (2014) reveals that a significant number of these transgressions include sexualized characteristics. Using sexually explicit images, revenge porn, and picture morphing as examples of sexually explicit content that is frequently found online as a form of abuse, Citron (2014) draws attention to this issue. A significant contrast appears when looking at harassment in the digital space as a whole. Furthermore, there are two distinct kinds of harassment, one of which is classified as "more severe"

and includes physical threats, stalking, and sexual harassment, and the other as "less severe" and includes things like calling someone names to shame them (Vogels, 2021, as cited in Mahpara et al., 2022).

To analyze the state's role and legislation, I referred to the report by BLAST & BRAC JPGSPH (2017) to gain insights into the deficiencies within the current legal system and institutional processes aimed at addressing cyber violence against women. The report's findings highlight several significant issues, including an inadequate legal framework, inconsistent enforcement, and a lack of awareness among the public and law enforcement regarding the various forms of cyber harassment—a key consideration for my last research question.

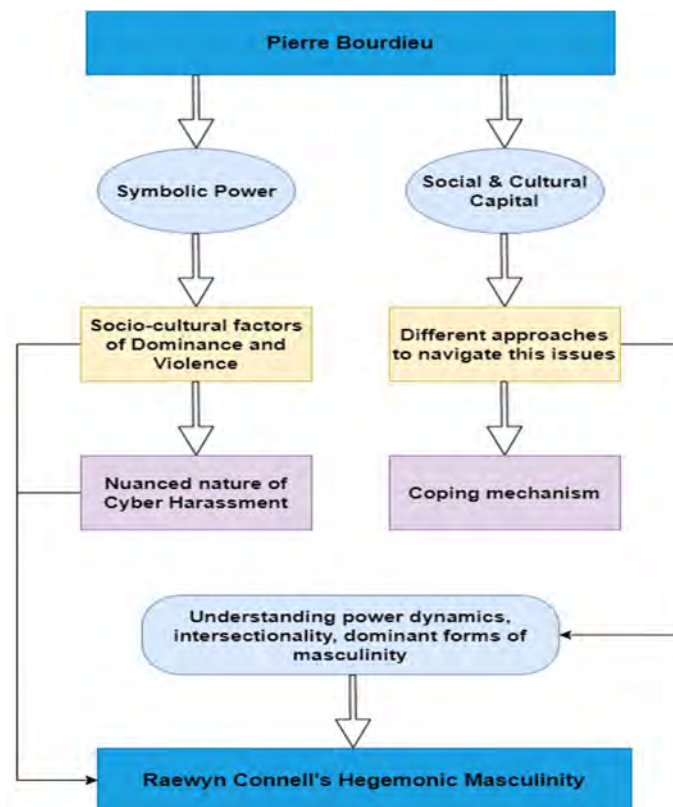
Moreover, the report draws valuable lessons from other nations by providing insights into the implementation of their legal systems and the protection of victims of cyberbullying. For instance, the report reveals that only 18% of women in the European Union have experienced some form of severe cyber harassment. However, it is worth noting the alarming prevalence of cyber harassment against women in Bangladesh, which stands at a staggering 73%. This statistic underscores the urgent necessity for more robust policies to address this pervasive issue in the country (BLAST & BRAC JPGSPH, 2017).

### **Research Gap**

In summary, this literature review has shed light on the complex landscape of cyber harassment, focusing on its impact on women and gender equality activists. Drawing from the insights of authors such as Citron, Das, Faludi, and Mahpara et al., this section navigates various facets of online violence, its societal implications, and its broader effects on individuals. The secondary research has highlighted the significance of comprehensive legal reforms and increased societal

awareness. Notably, the prevalence of cyber harassment in Bangladesh, as revealed by BLAST & BRAC JPGSPH (2017), stands a stark reminder of the importance of addressing this widespread concern. This review serves as a foundation for a more detailed examination of the experiences of particularly Bangladeshi female activists and their allies in the online space, as well as the strategies they employ to navigate these challenges.

## 2.1 Theoretical Framework



*Figure: 02 Structurization of Bourdieu's and Connell's Theory*

This chapter presents the pertinent theories that link the problem of harassment that impacts gender equality activists to the research questions. It discusses several strategies for addressing this problem, examined via the lenses of Bourdieu and Connell.

For this study, I used Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power to understand the nuanced nature of online harassment better. Pierre Bourdieu's work of Symbolic Power, for instance, perfectly aligns with the said phenomena and provides me with a more profound knowledge of power and dominance to analyze how the perpetrators of cyber harassment deteriorate the credibility of female activists on digital platforms by controlling the discourse and narratives of public opinion. It also sheds light on how they (perpetrators) impose their opinions forcefully, showing a solid symbolic dominance on online platforms. Along with that, this thesis also aims to show how Bourdieu's two larger narratives of social and cultural capital influence how activists navigate online spaces, take part in activism, and deal with online harassment, which differ from one another.

To further my understanding of the sociocultural variables influencing gender-based violence on online platforms, I have drawn on Raewyn Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity. This approach clarifies how such violence reflects and concurs with the dominant masculinity in a given society. Different behaviours, beliefs, and cultural expectations define this hegemonic masculinity. Raewyn Connell's influential work on gender and sexuality (2020) has provided me with an understanding of how heteropatriarchal norms in the Bangladeshi context can play a detrimental factor in gender-based violence both online and offline. Moreover, Connell used the term-hegemonic masculinity to refer to the type of masculinity that predominates and perpetuates within a society. Power, authority, and control are frequently associated with this type of masculinity. In the context of Bangladesh, we see how a particular form of masculinity is constructed as dominant, thereby shaping social norms, power structures, and gender roles. In this study, I intend to use this understanding and shed light on the real-life experiences of the respondent's by examining how

they have confronted society's expectations of gender roles whenever they attempt to deviate from or break them.

## Chapter 03

### Methodology

After connecting the appropriate theories to the research questions, I have designed a suitable method to conduct the fieldwork, which will be presented in this chapter. In order to examine and comprehend the lived experiences and views of female activists encompassing online gender-based harassment, this study adopts a qualitative research methodology. The purpose is to give an in-depth understanding of online harassment faced by female activists, taking into account the sociocultural factors that triggered it, the consequences of it, the coping strategies of the activists, and the effectiveness of current legislation and enforcement on emerging new forms of gender-based violence on online platforms. This ethnographic research intends to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

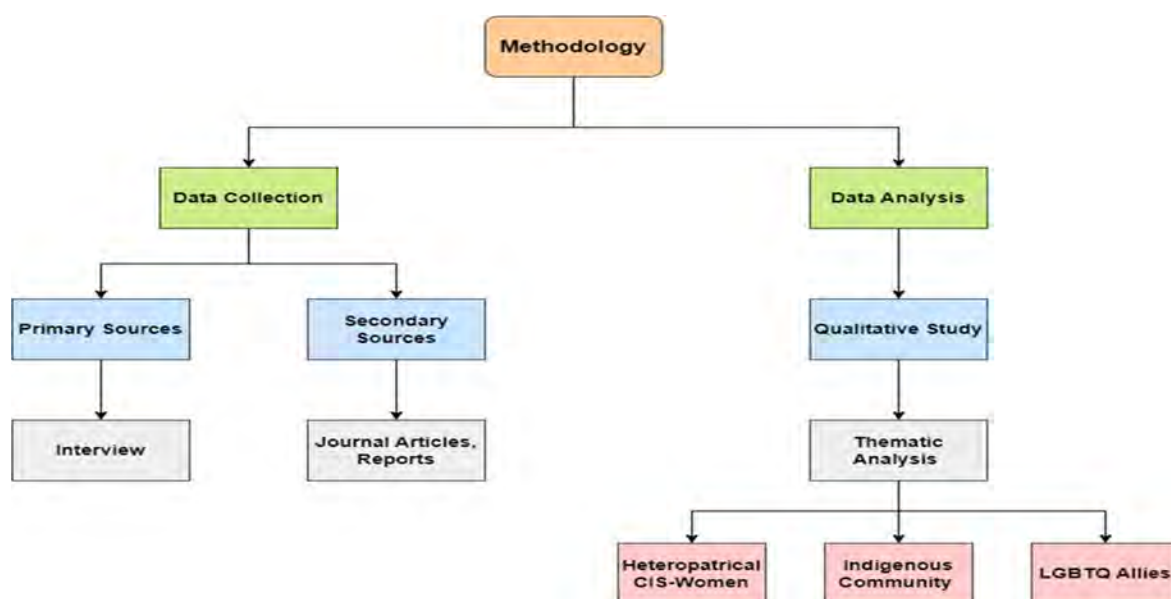


Figure 01: Structure of Methodology

For conducting this research, I used two methodological tools:

### **3.1 Data Collection**

(i) Participant Interviews (Primary Resource): For this research, I deliberately chose the purposive sampling method, where I took semi-structured interviews with eight Dhaka-based participants based on their varying backgrounds and activists' causes. I chose my research location, Dhaka, as all of my respondents currently live here, providing me with additional convenience to take their follow-up interview.

(ii) Literature Review (Secondary Resource): Besides gathering primary data, secondary sources were also heavily used to support the findings. A thorough literature review was conducted using journal articles, books, newspapers, NGOs reports, and the Internet, which were relevant to the cyber harassment discussion. Primary data has been combined with secondary data to identify the main issues of the research topic.

### **3.2 Data Analysis**

I interviewed a total of eight people for this study in order to gain information on current issues associated with my four research questions. A variety of perspectives were intended to be captured via the participant selections. Six of the eight participants were female activists, while the other two were men. Two of the male participants also identified as LGBTQ allies, showing their dedication to supporting LGBTQ rights and problems related to advocating for LGBTQ rights. Among them, I spoke with a participant who worked as an assistant judge for the Bangladesh Judicial Service to get a better understanding of the situation in law enforcement mitigating cyber harassment. Before selecting these interviewees, I made efforts to establish a connection with the

activists by discussing different social issues, including politics, education, and human rights, to develop a sense of trust and openness in the interview process.

The interviews were recorded during the interview, which ranged in length from 40-60 minutes. Each respondent gave their consent willingly, and they were all allowed to opt-out at any time. In addition, there were follow-up interviews, which were carried out either in person or over the phone. They allowed me to take notes and share the appropriate quotes (some anonymously) in my research before I started the interviews. They even gave me consent to share the evidence (screenshots of the comments/messages they received on social media) in my thesis. I did a content analysis of those comments in my findings and decoded them in my analysis part to get an overall idea of the abusive behaviours. However, the identities of the commenters/harassers will be hidden. After conducting the interview, I transcribed those to which all the interlocutors responded in Bangla. I translated and summarized the Bangla transcriptions into English. Due to the semi-structured and open-ended nature of the questioning, each interlocutor shared a unique story that helped me better understand them.

A thematic analysis was conducted for the cumulated findings. The themes in focus were demography, identity, long-term impacts, safety, and law enforcement. I found the interviews insightful, as the stories and personal narratives shared by my interviewees intertwined with the themes of my research.

The Data gathering procedures of my interlocutors were mentioned in this chapter. In order to comprehend the growing nature of the violence directed at female activists, its various manifestations, links to offline and online violence, and details pertaining to these issues, I engaged in a thorough investigation of this phenomenon by gathering information from two sources—

interviews and secondary sources. In light of this, my interview focuses on how cyber harassment affects female activists who are engaged in activism, how they deal with this kind of gender-based violence, and what the long-term effects are.



## **Chapter 04**

### **Diverse Responses Under Common Challenges**

In this chapter, I arranged and described the findings thematically and divided the experiences of cyber harassment into three categories: first comes from heteropatriarchal ciswomen who have been actively participating in online activism along with social movements; the second is activists belonging to the indigenous community; and the third comes from LGBTQ allies. During the interview, I found some important facts about this issue, which encouraged me to make this category to investigate the correlation between these three groups, which offers multifaceted responses to a common challenge- breaking the dominant patriarchal norms.

#### **4.1 Participants' Demographic Background**

Bangladesh is a patriarchal society. Within the context of the aforementioned phenomenon, the majority of the population tends to believe that men are inherently superior to women and have the authority to subordinate them by enforcing gender roles and norms. Therefore, if they see any men or women deviating from the boundaries of anticipated gendered standards, they react negatively and begin imposing their own judgments, which are typically justified by more extremist interpretations of religion. Because of this, they exercise their coercive power online, particularly on Facebook, by abusing others through hate speech as well as making mockery of those who hold opposing ideas.

The objective of this chapter is to explore the backgrounds (especially economic, cultural, and social capital) of the interlocutors in order to understand how their habitus were shaped and led to activism. It will take into account several variables, including their activism types, gender, ethnic identity, educational background, and social standing. I conducted interviews with activists, where

six of the eight participants were female activists, while the other two were men who also experienced cyber harassment for showing their dedication to supporting LGBTQ rights and problems related to this. I interviewed two indigenous female activists to understand their experiences and opinions on this crucial issue. Furthermore, to back up the findings from the research, I also interviewed two participants (one male and one female) who are not engaged in activism now but were previously engaged to get a balance on different responses to this issue.

The home town of my six interlocutors is Dhaka, and the other two are from Chittagong. One of the interlocutors is from Laxmipur, but all of the interlocutors now live and work in Dhaka.

In terms of educational backgrounds, five of the interlocutors attended public universities, where they mentioned receiving significant exposure to grassroots activism. However, the response from the interlocutor, who attended a private university, differed in this regard. As a result, this educational institution worked as an indicator of socio-backgrounds to understand their different experiences based on their educational institutions. The social network differs in this matter. Those who are from public institutions were more exposed than those from private institutions, as the students are more engaged in open activism and politics in public institutions than in private ones. The socioeconomic status of the interviewees, from middle class to affluent middle class, which they disclosed based on their and their parent's income and resources, helped me to understand the extent of harassment that differs from one respondent to another, as well as how activists handle the situation and the types of safety measures they take to come out of this issue, which is highly connected to their socio-economic status.

**Table 1: Demography of Participants**

No	Names	Gender	Ethnic Identity	Education	Types of Activism/ posts in social media	Socio-economic class
1	Prova	Female	Bengali	JNU <sup>2</sup>	Women's Rights, Politics	Middle class
2	Dalia	Female	Chakma	CU <sup>3</sup>	Politics, Indigenous Identity, Women's Rights Activism	Middle class
3	Samira	Female	Bengali	SUST <sup>4</sup>	Social Injustice, Politics	Affluent Middle Class
4	Hridoy (pseudonym, not involved in activism)	Male	Bengali	BRACU	LGBTQ, Intersectional Feminism	Affluent middle class
5	Anika (pseudonym, not involved in activism)	Female	Garo	IUB <sup>5</sup>	Single motherhood, marital rape, divorce	Middle class

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<sup>2</sup> Jahangirnagar University

<sup>3</sup> Chittagong University

<sup>4</sup> Shahjalal University of Science and Technology

<sup>5</sup> Independent University Bangladesh

6	Shafiu	Male	Bengali	DU <sup>6</sup>	Cyber security laws	Affluent middle class
7	Priya	Female	Bengali	JNU	Politics, Social Injustice	Affluent Middle Class
8	Tori (pseudonym)	Female	Bengali	BRACU	Women Rights	Middle Class

#### 4.2 Harassment Faced by Heteropatriarchal Cis Women in Activism

In this study, my primary objective was to look at the underlying factors that contribute to the cyber harassment of female activists online. To learn more about the most recent forms of cyber harassment, our study included in-depth interviews with female activists, including both indigenous and Bengali women. In these interviews, all the activists agreed on how, as activists, they evolved over the years. Interviews with the activists exposed the numerous types of abuse and harassment they experienced when they started activism. It quickly became clear that the types and severity of responses they encountered varied considerably. The heteropatriarchal cis-women's response largely shows how the majority subject them to moral policing, derogatory comments, and extremist religious reasoning.

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<sup>6</sup> Dhaka University

#### 4.2.1 Aggressive Comment, Hate Speech

All the interlocutors endured insurmountable hatred online for their activism. I noticed a pattern emerging in their descriptions regarding enduring aggressive comments against postings on feminism. These comments target women and dehumanise activists who are vocal about issues in society. My interlocutors think that these remarks frequently aim to characterize these female activists as unconventional to the heteropatriarchal order. These harassers consider these women in contrast with the accepted norm of being quiet, soft, and, most of all, submissive to men.

Online harassment came in many different forms, with distressingly frequent instances of derogatory remarks, rape threats, and even threats to kill. The difficulties experienced by female activists who dare to question conventional norms and promote gender equality and social change are further highlighted by this hostile setting.

My interlocutor, Samira, said

*“I posted about marital rape on Facebook, and the comments left me astonished. The post was previously open for comments, but I had to turn them off because of the sexist comments that accused me of being an improper Bengali woman who did not understand the meaning of marriage and blamed women like me for the high rate of divorce in our nation nowadays. In addition, I constantly hear people referring to me as a "prostitute" because only they discuss sex in a public-like way.”*

#### 4.2.2 Religious Reasoning and Moral Policing

"Female activists frequently receive criticism and disparaging remarks about their appearances, which include things like clothing choices, lifestyle choices, and personal decisions. This scrutiny

includes behaviours like not covering one's head or wearing a veil. Those who wear big tip/bindi<sup>7</sup>, are often called disgraceful names such as “Tipwali”, and “Neribadi” for insulting the female activists who identify themselves as feminists. Furthermore, these behaviours, according to some commenters, go against Islamic cultural standards. One of my interviewees, Prova, said she received derogatory comments many times for wearing a big Tip. She showed me a comment where a person was commenting on a public post about the appearance of females. The comment was,

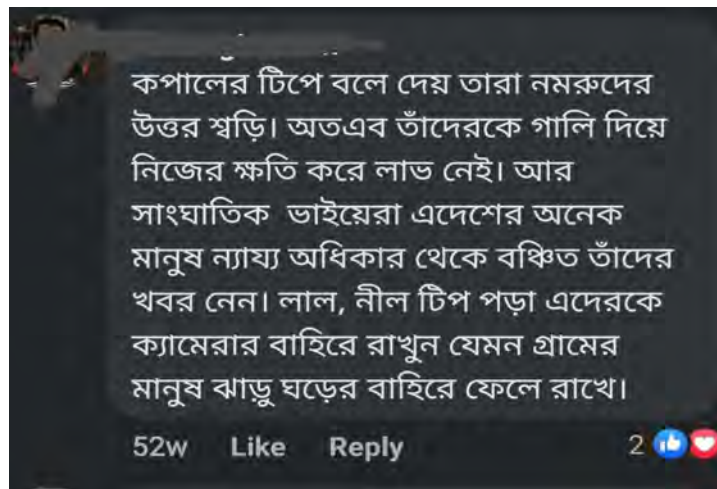


Figure 04: The text of this screenshots (collected from respondent) states;

“কপালের টিপ বলে দেয় তারা নমরুদের উত্তর স্বড়ি (উত্তরসূরী)। অতএব তাদেরকে গালি দিয়ে নিজের ক্ষতি করে লাভ নেই। আর সাংঘাতিক (সাংবাদিক) ভাইয়েরা এদেশের অনেক মানুষ ন্যায্য অধিকার থেকে বঞ্চিত তাঁদের খবর নেন। লাল, নীল টিপ পড়া এদেরকে ক্যামেরার বাহিরে রাখুন যেমন গ্রামের মানুষ ঝাড়ু ঘরের বাহিরে ফেলে রাখে।”

<sup>7</sup> Tip is a dot worn by women (occasionally men) on the forehead.

“The tip of the forehead indicates that they are the successors of Namrood<sup>8</sup>. So, there is no use in harming yourself by abusing them. And journalists, brothers, many people of this country are deprived of their rights. Keep the red, blue tipped ones outside the camera like the villagers keep the brooms outside the house.”

Surprisingly, a sizable part of the comments made about female feminists seem to be less about the subjects of their postings and more about how they appeared on the online platforms. These remarks typically have an abusive and frequently humiliating tone. Among the recurrent comments, female activists encountered claims that if they followed Islamic shariah law, they would not be subject to the onslaught of hate speech. This illustrates the pressure to adhere to specific interpretations of religious and cultural standards, which adds another level of complexity to the online harassment these activists have to deal with. My interlocutor shared with me a screenshot of her comment box where a person blamed her for posting about Munia Murder Case<sup>9</sup>.

The comment says,



Figure 05: The text of this screenshot( collected from respondent) states;

“ নিজের ইচ্ছায় ধর্ষিত হবেন পুরো ছেলে জাতিকে কলঙ্কিত দিবেন আপনারা নারীরা পারেন বটে”

<sup>8</sup>In Islam, Namrood was the King of Babylon and was active during the times when Prophet Ibrahim was vigorously opposing idolatry, who proclaimed himself to be the Almighty and wanted to prove that there was no God except him. He is considered the enemy of the Muslims.

<sup>9</sup> <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/national/io-of-munia-murder-case-summoned-sunday-to-explain-inaction-1633794794>

*"You are getting raped out of your own will and then blaming the whole group of men! Females are too much!"*

My interlocutor, Prava stated that when she began writing about the murders of atheist bloggers in Bangladesh, she received numerous online threats and was repeatedly asked to remove her postings because the harassers believed the atheists should be killed. She gave examples of posts about the murder of Xulhaz Mannan<sup>10</sup>, Abhijit Roy<sup>11</sup> received multiple comments that justified the killings of the bloggers and writers who claimed to be LGBTQ activists and non-religious. Additionally, she was told that feminists should be killed for violating Islamic Sharia and supporting atheists. She said,

*"When I started researching blogger killings and fighting for atheist rights in 2014, I ran into a big problem. Radical Islamist opinions were promoted on a fake account named "Nayan Chatterjee." Due to the sexist and racist material posted on the page, an argument broke out. I voiced my opposition to such posts. After that, in the comments part of that page, I started to get serious threats, including rape and death threats. Over time, the harassment campaign increased, and I ultimately felt required to go to a police station and ask for help from the local authorities for my protection. However, I did not receive any help."*

There is a commonality among the derogatory comments directed against female activists that often rest on pseudo religious justifications. When these activists write about their daily lives or share images, much of the criticism they get is about moral policing. Their comments seem to imply that the validity of their opinions is somehow tied to their appearance or bodily presentation. For instance, another interlocutor, Anika, shared,

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<sup>10</sup> <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/cases-filed-over-murder-of-bangladesh-lgbt-rights-activist-xulhaz-mannan-and-his-friend>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/he-was-killed-gag-free-speech-2045977>



*“I often get messages saying I should cover my body and wear modest clothes before saying anything about women's rights because people will not consider me as a women's rights advocate if I go online “half-naked”. Interestingly, these comments and, texts I have received from whom I know, including my school teacher,”*

Two of my interlocutors, Priyanka and Tori, showed some screenshots of their comment sections and inboxes, where they get comments mostly related to their religious beliefs. While Tori shared that some of the commentators in her account even agreed on the fact that she seems intellectual, her focus should be shifted from women's rights to religion. The comment says,

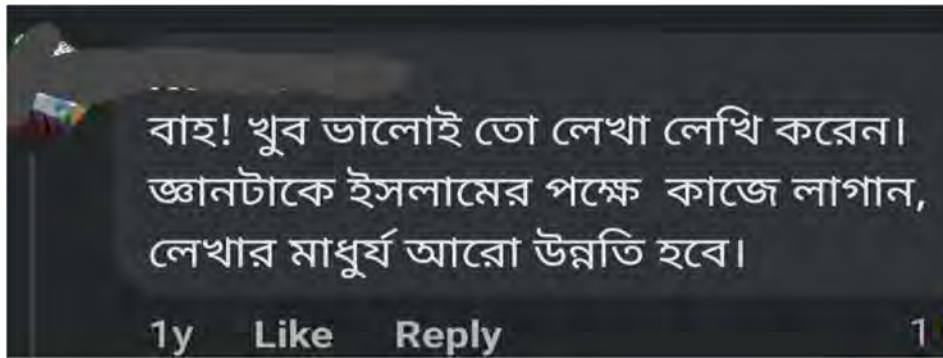


Figure 06: The text of this screenshot (collected from respondent) states;

*“বাহ! খুব ভালোই তো লেখালেখি করেন। জ্ঞানটাকে ইসলামের পক্ষের কাজে লাগান, লেখার মাধুর্য আরো উন্নতি হবে।”*

*(“Wow! You write well. But if you use the knowledge for the sake of Islam, the sweetness of the writing will enhance)”*

This comment was written by one of her juniors (male) in school, whom she barely knew. This case is pervasive among the experiences of other activists. My respondent shared that she made her profile private to avoid these encounters. Furthermore, she emphasized that since she writes about the issues that trigger people who hold extremist ideologies, she does not keep them

unknown persons. However, after maintaining such protocols, she did not expect something like this from one of his school juniors, who himself is a student at a reputed public university.

### **4.3 Harassment Against Indigenous Female Activists**

My indigenous interlocutor expressed openly how she encountered many types of harassment, some of which were distinct from what other female activists from the mainstream community experienced. One of my indigenous interviewees, Dalia Chakma, who has been an activist since 2019, described her experience of receiving racist and ethnic slurs, threats, intimidation, and online assault when she began writing about politics, indigenous identity, and women's rights activism. However, she was not harassed individually but, in a group, setting through an act of alienation, which I considered to be one of the most distinctive forms of harassment I have ever come across. Another noteworthy experience she described was how her own indigenous community assaulted her for her activism. The experience is much more complicated when considering the experience of a female activist who belongs to a minority group. Any female activist is susceptible to verbal abuse, threats, doxxing, and hate speech in the digital sphere. In these situations, an extra layer of harassment develops that is motivated by prejudice based on her ethnicity. Her struggles and experiences with abuse are made more difficult by the junction of her racial and gender identities.

#### **4.3.1 Intra-community Harassment**

There is evidence that activists faced difficulties inside their own group when they began writing about the negative aspects of the indigenous community; therefore, it is not always true that the harassment always comes from the heteropatriarchal mainstream community. My interlocutor, Dalia, who used to write on Bengali masculinity, indigenous rights, and other political issues that exploited those rights, had a similar experience in that she first received positive feedback from

her community. However, the dynamic changed when she started working on indigenous masculinity. It was intolerable in her own community, which she felt was the beginning of this issue. She shared,

*“When I wrote about tribal issues with the state on social media, I got much praise. The dynamics, however, experienced a significant change when I expanded my advocacy to include issues involving tribal women in my region. Issues and challenges began to surface when my attention shifted from Bengali masculinity to Indigenous masculinities as well.”*

My interlocutor, Anika, belongs to the matrilineal Garo/Mandi community. She had a different set of problems. She recollected,

*“My very close friends have always bullied me because of my ethnicity. When I used to write, some people would comment on my writings, saying that I didn't have enough understanding of feminism since I was not a Bengali and couldn't understand the context of Bengali girls caring for children. They presumed and stated to me that because I come from a matrilineal community and my mother is constantly working in agriculture, how could I ever understand the love of mothers? They are unaware that the Garo culture is a matrilineal society, which should not be confused with a matriarchal culture. Even some of my Bengali acquaintances said I needed first to be one in order to comprehend their culture.”*

#### **4.3.2 Sense of Alienation**

This was a different form of harassment that female activists from the indigenous community encountered that included a deliberate attempt by a particular group to isolate and shun her beyond the usual types of online harassment or threats. Their social isolation from their community, the destruction of their support system, and feeling unwelcome were all effects of this group's harassing tactics. One of my interlocutors, for instance, described how she felt excluded when her

coworkers suddenly distanced themselves from her. Another respondent from the indigenous community described how, when she used to visit her hometown, Chittagong, her own neighborhood teased her for writing about the discrimination of indigenous women and how they endure disproportionately high levels of abuse from their own community. Even her parents had an issue with her and condemned her for writing on this matter, as neighbors complained about her to her parents. Her own family members have several times asked her to leave activism and return home because of her writing; they were facing public shaming. This particular kind of harassment stands out due to how subtle it is and how long-lasting the emotional and psychological impacts can be. Additionally, it emphasizes the intricacy of the difficulties faced by indigenous women activists, who frequently deal with prejudice and animosity from both individuals of the mainstream community as well as members of their own ethnic groups.

My interlocutor, Dalia, shared that she began noticing a growing sense of alienation within certain organizations that claim equal rights with which she had been associated. This alienation was coming from the people who claimed themselves as activists, believing in equality, but their ideologies and perspectives were different. Those individuals who once admired her work began to distance themselves from her. She gradually sensed that her presence was no longer as welcome as it once was. Even those organizations where my interlocutor used to work were receiving threats if they wanted to collaborate with her. For example, Dalia mentioned that

*“I have been subjected to a lot of bullying from my tribal locals and also from the mainstream community. But I was most surprised when some so-called intellectual “activists” started bullying me and spreading hate speeches about me. This experience stressed me the most in the case of continuing activism. I started realizing that my networks are closing.”*

#### 4.4 Heteronormative Aggressions on LGBTQ Allies

For this research, I also interviewed male activists who identify as LGBTQ allies. Although their interactions with online harassment are distinct from those of female activists, it is essential to discuss their encounters in this study. By doing this, one aspect would be clear that it is not only women who have been harassed online but also men who support people of other sexual orientations, undermining heteronormative standards in society.

One of my interlocutors, Hridoy, who is a feminist, shared how he has been facing bullying and harassment since his college days for not being enough “masculine” to his classmates. Most of the time, he heard people calling him “Hijra”<sup>12</sup> for supporting Queer rights. When he started writing about intersectional feminism on his Facebook account, he soon started receiving verbal abuse, threats, bullying, and hate speech, which created significant pressure on him. Interestingly, the harassers happened to be the children of BCS (Bangladesh Civil Service) cadres of his father’s colleagues.

As he said,

*“I removed my eight-year-old Facebook account due to harassment. I could not take the pressure. To have a clean account, I deleted it. I even removed the nickname after creating a new account so that friends from my previous account cannot trace me.”*

Different forms of backlash were coming from both online and offline when my interlocutor wrote about queer rights. Another respondent, who is an intersectional feminist activist, added that some of her old school friends started ignoring her when she publicly declared in Facebook that she was

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<sup>12</sup> “Hijra” is a term sometimes pejoratively used to insult “weak or feminine men” in Bangladesh.

an LGBTQ ally. After that, her friends called her an atheist and against Islam because, as a Muslim (by birth), she is not allowed to advocate for queer rights.

#### **4.5 Impacts on Mental Health and Career Trajectory**

In terms of affecting mental health, all of my interlocutors shared how pathetic they feel at times when this harassment reaches out to their families. Most of them started noticing that the harasser did not limit their disturbance to online only; rather, they extended it offline as well.

On this, one of my interlocutors said,

*“When our neighbors started showing them negative posts and comments made against me, my family first learned about the matter from them. The online abuse I was experiencing as a result of my advocacy was made public by this expose. But when a local political party put a lot of pressure on my family as a result of my vocal advocacy of the rights of tribal people, the situation worsened. My family started to worry for their safety and well-being due to the growing political pressure. Although I had resisted social pressure, it was getting harder for me to ignore political pressure. As a result, I was forced to limit my activities in Chittagong and stop going there.*

In terms of impacting career opportunities, two of my interlocutors shared that they were being cut off from a cultural organization due to demanding to organize a protest for marital rape. According to them, that so-called cultural organization could not do it because there are people from different mindsets who would not like events like this. The situation got worse, and my interlocutors were the ones who had to leave that organization. Similarly, another interlocutor mentioned,

*“Initially, I actively participated in a variety of activism-related activities and projects. But over time, a string of bad experiences forced me to progressively stop participating in these activities.*

*One of the primary factors influencing this decision was the pressure of my family when they learned about the harassment I faced on social media.”*

The inferences drawn from the contextual data show that each respondent faced serious difficulties when taking part in internet activism. They were forced to question traditional religious and cultural standards as a result of the pushback against their support for women's rights, single parenthood, marital rape, and LGBT rights, which were frequently misinterpreted by backlash actors. The response by the actors deliberately targeted these activists, who varied in gender, race, and sexual orientation. Although some respondents made valiant attempts to mitigate the effects of the harassment, others found it more difficult to do so. They had strained ties with their families in addition to career-related effects from online abuse.

## Chapter 5

### **Decoding the Underlying Factors and Impacts of Cyber-Harassment**

Considering the diverse responses collected from the previous chapter, I explored the data describing the difficulties activists had while expressing their opinions on social media sites and how these situations had a negative impact on both their personal and professional lives. My goal was to paint a whole picture of their situation, including the challenges they encountered and the coping strategies they employed to continue their activism. In this chapter, I will delve into the core-rooted socio-cultural factors of online violence by analyzing the data that I collected from my interlocutors. Furthermore, I will compare the existing literature review with the circumstantial evidence that I got from the interview to identify activists navigating through these challenges, as well as the consequences that harm the long-term projects of the activists. Then, I will juxtapose my theories of symbolic power by Bourdieu to analyze the significant results of harassment and its relation to control of the discourse on online platforms, as well as the theory of Connell's hegemonic masculinity to portray the reason for the misogynistic backlash.

#### **5.1 What triggers the backlash?**

Female or male activists usually face backlash when they provide insights or perspectives that deviate from the dominant narrative. This statement draws attention to the tension that exists in the field of social justice activism, where people may encounter opposition and backlash when questioning accepted beliefs and putting forth unconventional viewpoints. The heteropatriarchal cis women activists frequently encountered this pattern of backlash.



Das (2008 ), for instance, illustrates the way experiences with violence shape a person's identity. Victims of online harassment may feel helpless, afraid, or less valuable as a result of assaults' dominant social discourse. Furthermore, we also get a precise observation from her work that power dynamics and dominant cultural norms can shape heteronormative behavior, which is the most influential factor in online harassment against LGBTQ allies. Subtle kinds of coercive power are vividly shown in the digital sphere, notably on platforms like Facebook. Hate speech, derisive mocking of people, especially those who support gender equality, to undermine their claims, the act of shaming and labeling them by interfering in their private lives and decisions, issuing rape threats, and propagating fabricated sexual images are all visible and frequent daily occurrences on Facebook (Kabir, 2018). These actions indicate common forms of violence that result from the dominant narrative, in which repressive actors view women as "weak" and "inferior." They feel empowered to attack with impunity because they believe they have the authority to pass judgments and provide their opinions on any subject they wish. Given this, there is a concerning and hazardous part to online activity that has serious repercussions that my heteropatriarchal cis women activities experienced more frequently.

One of my interviewees described a particularly upsetting incident in which her images were maliciously abused on multiple social media sites along with labels like "Prostitute" and "Bitch." Some of these posts were purposefully sent to her family in an effort to intimidate her into abstaining from advocating about subjects like marital rape and single motherhood that go against the prevailing cultural narrative. Additionally, these comments and messages contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes, notably the idea that Muslim customs are not followed by women who do not cover their heads. She was also misidentified several times as 'Hindu'. This instance

highlights the breadth of how internet harassment may use various strategies to intimidate and silence activists who question established standards.

## **5.2 Misinterpretation and Delegitimizing the Feminist Contents**

In our country, there is an enduring narrative that uses and misinterprets feminist content as harmful to society. When considering the online harassment of female activists, this discussion becomes quite pertinent. When these activists openly identify as feminists and advocates of feminism, they frequently encounter backlash from individuals who see feminism as a threat to conventional norms and values. Being a feminist is typically depicted as undesirable in this debate. Female feminist activists are described as "bad" women who are careless, chaotic, and unfit to be "wives". These disparaging labels are used as online harassment tactics to intimidate and humiliate anyone who disagrees with the existing quo.

One of my respondents, Samira, a Marxist-feminist activist, mentioned,

*“One day my father called me when I was engaged in a campus protest and told me to return home because one of my relatives saw me on TV. He said this type of activity would make it difficult for them to find me a decent partner. I said I was here because a girl like me, Tonu, was brutally raped and murdered. Can you imagine what would happen if it was me instead of her? He claimed that since I cannot change the system, I should back off from this type of activity, which would make me a characterless person who is brainwashed by Western countries. He argued why I write on Facebook that I am a feminist since he knew this was slang to defame women.”*

Additionally, there is a Facebook community called "Feminism is Cancer" with over 19,000 members who identify as a forum for the defence of men's rights (Mahpara et al., 2022). I was

analysing the content and discovered that not only the posts were filled with hatred but that the participants firmly believed that Western feminism rendered good women "delusional." Additionally, they believed that even though feminisms advocate for women's right but it does not assist women in need, rather upholds Western values and insult religion. According to one of the comments, feminists' greatest disappointment is that they lack a "penis". These actions are only done to delegitimize the contents, which were supposed to promote topics like domestic violence, mental health, and consent in sexual relationships, etc. The purposeful motive for not raising awareness among the young audience is because the perpetrators always want to maintain hegemonic masculinity in society. Even female political leaders faced harassment several times. These gender dynamics contribute to the overall patriarchal political climate, which can influence the tone of political discourse in the general public. People who believe that males should have positions of political power and authority and who feel threatened by assertive or politically engaged women are inspired to harass or attack those women online to call into question their credentials or authority (US AID, 2018).

In this context, one of my interlocutors, Prova, responded that

*“My father never counts me as someone with whom he can discuss politics. When I started activism, he resisted me. However, over time, I finally made him believe that I was capable of discussing any topic. Yesterday, he came to me and asked me about the possible outcome of the Dhaka election.”*

These shifts show that women have long been subjugated to a particular patriarchal worldview that oversimplifies their roles and positions. This way of thinking has historically portrayed women as being intellectually incapable of engaging with and knowing about the outside world. It reflects

engrained gender norms and assumptions that have supported the notion that women are not "smart" enough to understand the intricacies of life on the outside.

### **5.3 Collective Harassment: Bengali Masculinity & Indigenous Masculinity**

In our society, marginalized individuals, societal norms and conflicts that exist offline frequently also appear online. The situations surrounding the violence that women and girls experience may be just as different online as they are offline in Bangladesh, where these groups are disproportionately targeted by GBV (US AID, 2018). Online harassers in Bangladesh may also choose to target groups that have traditionally been marginalized or neglected. This comprises those who identify as or are seen to be, members of the LGBTQI+ group, as well as members of racial and religious minorities. The targeting of these vulnerable groups further complicates the issue of online harassment. . It illustrates how discrimination against individuals based on their race, religion, or sexual orientation overlaps with online harassment, which is not only a problem for women. These groups frequently deal with specialized and magnified types of online abuse, which can have detrimental effects on their safety and well-being.

In order to shed light on a fascinating dynamic, I gathered data from intersecting for the themes (ii) indigenous and (iii)LGBTQ Allies of my research. As it questioned and deconstructed a hegemonic ideology, there was a notable acceptance of indigenous activists who critiqued Bengali masculinity inside the indigenous community. This notion, however, changed when one of my interviewees opted to write about gender-based violence happening inside indigenous communities. At this point, the community started alienating my respondent to speak about the oppression and inequality that happens among their indigenous community. This was collective harassment she encountered, which was a distinct form of cyber harassment that came out of this research- and impacted her personal and professional lives as an activist. The perpetrators wanted

to hide the negative aspects of their community, which came out afterwards. For instance, even within ethnic minority communities, such as those from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), researchers discovered that women from these communities did not feel comfortable asking their traditional leaders, who are typically men, for assistance because they believed the leaders would believe or protect men who had committed crimes (US AID, 2018). The outcomes of this research show how hegemonic masculinity, online harassment, and intersectional feminism interact in intricate ways. Furthermore, patriarchal gender dynamics influence the mainstream people on how they should discuss politics. As a result, they often prioritized that men should hold authority and political power, and they considered strong or politically engaged women activists as a threat to their credentials (US AID, 2018). While advocating for many types of injustice and discrimination, intersectional feminism proponents frequently become the subject of online abuse. The enforcement of hegemonic masculinity, which aims to uphold established gender norms and power systems, is directly related to this harassment. The appeal for gender equality, inclusion, and the overthrow of repressive structures by intersectional feminism poses a danger to hegemonic masculinity as the prevailing cultural ideal. As a way to establish their power in the digital space, those who practice this hegemonic masculinity harass feminists who oppose their authority. Faludi (1991) points out how feminism was misused to represent it as something against the rooted socio-cultural norms and made it an enemy of the women for whom they are constantly facing harassment.

It is crucial to remember, though, that not all harassers embrace hegemonic masculinity. Harassment may occur from inside groups that are marginalized, as the indigenous interlocutor's experience indicates. When this occurs, the internal dynamics and power conflicts within these

communities may play an essential role in the online harassment of activists who promote gender equality and justice.

#### **5.4 Long-Term Repercussions & Coping Mechanisms**

I have gathered and compared data from three major themes throughout this investigation, where one aspect was common that every victim of my research was in some way impacted by their experience of cyber harassment. The findings indicate that all of the respondents suffered, and this harassment impacted them either psychologically, socially, economically, or functionally. These topics include the difficulties activists confront when they are the targets of online gender-based violence, the long-term effects of such harassment on their mental health and career paths, as well as the coping mechanisms they use to get through these difficult circumstances. It is critical to understand how the tactics they use and how they view harassment are closely related to the idea of social and cultural capital developed by Pierre Bourdieu.

I want to compare and contrast the experiences that are described in my three findings themes by using Bourdieu's framework of social and cultural capital in this section of the study. By doing this, we gain more comprehensive knowledge about how social and cultural capital shapes an activist's reaction to online gender-based abuse. Furthermore, the effects it has on their well-being and career trajectories and the variety of coping mechanisms they use

##### **5.4.1 Impacts on the Mental Health of Female Activists**

One of the significant impacts of cyberharassment on women is psychological trauma (Dhaka Tribune, 2022). A report by Action Aid (2022) reveals that psychological damage, including issues like anxiety and depression, is one of the significant effects of online abuse on women, impacting 65.07% of victims. Decreased confidence in utilizing social media or participating actively in

online platforms, which affects 42.79% of those affected, is the second most common consequence. Third is loss of self-esteem, which is experienced by 24.89% of those targeted, impacting 25.33% of victims. All the interviewees responded to their mental health concerns, which were affected by this online abuse.

Dalia said,

*“When I was getting threats of gang-raped murder online, I was only thinking about what those people who didn't know me personally thought of me. It was an open space. This thought affected me so much for a very long time. But the worst thing that mentally hit me was the threat of banning other platforms that I worked for. I used to be very upset to see all those platforms being harassed for just working with me. I had a very difficult time when I was new to activism.*”

Sharing a similar sentiment, Samira said,

*“Many times, I thought of leaving activism because I could not take the pressure of this harassment. I was not able to go for counselling because I could not afford it. I did not get support from my family either. As a result, I started fearing to post anything on social media. I deactivated it several times.”*

My interlocutors opened up about how difficult it was for them to battle to increase their self-esteem after encountering backlash several times on the online platform. All of them face several mental health issues, including anxiety, stress, isolation, trauma, PTSD<sup>13</sup>, self-doubt, etc.

Drawing it from Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power, which reinforces the idea of symbolic violence that justifies and perpetuates social inequalities. The mental health issues that female activists confront might be understood as a consequence of symbolic violence perpetrated against

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<sup>13</sup> PTSD is the abbreviation of post-traumatic stress disorder

them by the oppressive structures they are battling. It is possible to see their ongoing suffering, assault, and anxiety as a result of the symbolic violence perpetrated by those who oppose their action. Furthermore, the mental health of the activists suffers greatly from continual exposure to symbolic violence, the stress of advocacy work, and the internalization of social norms. As a result of their attempts to overthrow established dominant symbolic systems, they often suffer from depression, anxiety, and trauma caused by the harassment of the perpetrators.

#### **5.4.2 Unveiling Resilience and Coping Strategies**

I have received diverse and exciting responses from female activists to my research question on coping mechanisms, which are not one-size-fits-all; rather, these techniques include a variety of adaptable countermeasures aimed at reducing the emotional, psychological, and economic costs of online harassment. Some activists choose to practice digital self-preservation, which may involve restricting their online visibility, setting strict privacy parameters, or choosing pseudonyms to conceal their identity.

Needless to say, different coping strategies come from their diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The safety measures are inextricably tied to the resources /economic capital the participants have as it differs from one participant to another. Those who have more control over the resources exhibit a heightened capacity to work on their mental health needs.

These strategies are relevant to the concept of Bourdieu's social and cultural capital. For instance, cultural capital consists of knowledge and skills that an individual possesses (Bourdieu, 1985). The ability to deal with the digital realm, including cyber harassment, using social media, or utilizing its privacy settings, also requires a form of skill or expertise that can be taken as a form of cultural capital. As most of my interlocutors' coping mechanisms frequently rely on the social networks and relationships of activists, people with high social capital have access to helpful



groups and supporters who may act as backups for them. Additionally, they could be connected to advocacy or legal tools that might be used to effectively combat harassment.

As mentioned by Dalia,

*"Local politicians reached out to my family members and created pressure so that I stopped doing activism. Gradually, their pressure and torture accelerated, which made me stop visiting my hometown. It's been a while since I went to Chittagong."*

On the other hand, Hridoy said,

*"I was aware that the bullies were the children of my father's colleagues; I could take action against them if I wanted to, and they would have to reconcile with me. But I didn't want to come to an agreement with them. I did not want them to apologize and be friends again. It was my decision to maintain a clean friend list on Facebook."*

We can distinguish between two different responses, which emphasizes the crucial role played by a strong social network in determining how activists deal with online harassment in their lives.

Furthermore, cultural capital is also rooted in the choice of coping strategy of an activist, as it encompasses an individual's knowledge, skills, and cultural resources. Three of my female activists agreed on one point that: all of them evolved over the years and underwent a massive shift. My interlocutor Prova reflected,

*"I was engaged in politics for a long time. I have noticed people started being afraid of me when they realized I also have some political power now. It might also be because of age (smile). But it's true; I know much better now how to deal with this as my knowledge and expertise have transformed over the last few years."*

In the setting of Bangladesh, it might be difficult to call for help from one's own family while dealing with difficulties associated with activism, especially if it goes against their family's beliefs.

As a result, many female activists find comfort in confiding in their peers and senior colleagues, who provide a non-judgmental and understanding atmosphere.

## **5.5 Legal Framework and its efficiency on this issue**

On social media, 58% of women have experienced harassment in some way and among five (The Business Standard, 2023). I interviewed a senior assistant judge from the Bangladesh Judicial Service to better understand the role of the government and legal framework in reducing cyber harassment of women for my fourth research question. I aimed to get the most recent, unedited data possible for my investigation. Due to lacking primary data, I complemented this interview with thorough literature research. Notably, the Senior Assistant Judge also participates in social media by posting articles on cyber security, displaying a keen interest in the topic. With the help of this combined information, I was able to evaluate the efficiency of the present legal systems and law enforcement initiatives for combating cyber harassment of women online.

### **5.5.1 Legislative Gaps**

In the Bangladeshi context, the victim is usually blamed and demonized, particularly when it comes to women, since it is not yet a victim-friendly society. The law's implementation is still debatable. This is due to the fact that more than 55% of cybercrime victims in the country are not getting the legal assistance to which they are entitled (The Business Standard, 2022). In addition, according to BLAST & BRAC JPGSPH (2017), 75.77% of women said they intended to file complaints anonymously, and 64.71% of women did not find any solution or did not take action in response to their concerns. These figures demonstrate the difficulties faced by women when filing complaints.

My interlocutor, Prava, said,

*“Many wings have been opened, like Police Cyber Support for Women, to mitigate this online violence. But when one of my colleagues went there to seek support, she got no response.”*

In Bangladesh, victims of cyberbullying have access to the ICT Act<sup>14</sup>, PC Act<sup>15</sup>, and DS<sup>16</sup> Act (Daily Star, 2021). However, the proper implementation of these laws is still doubtful, as there are some limitations in our laws and institutes that have a profound impact on addressing the cyber violence issue (BLAST & BRAC JPGSPH, 2017).

My interlocutor, Shafiul, mentioned,

*“When victims file complaints and face the bureaucratic challenges associated with courts and police stations, their interest in continuing the case frequently dwindles.”*

All of my respondents indicated a reluctance to obtain legal assistance due to their understanding of the costly and sometimes confusing processes required. It became clear that, in the framework of the current heteropatriarchal structure, the field is more suited to the acts of harassing actors than it is to the protection of victims. This comment highlights the significant obstacles and difficulties experienced by anyone thinking about taking legal action in response to cyberbullying.

### **5.5.2 Role of Law Agency Firms and NGOs**

The protection of victims has been improved through a variety of means, not only through traditional law enforcement. In fact, several of my respondents decided against going to the police and instead chose to ask for help from feminist organizations and non-governmental organizations

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<sup>14</sup> Information and Communication Technology Act

<sup>15</sup> Pornography Control Act

<sup>16</sup> Digital Security Act

(NGOs). Notably, law enforcement organizations have recently started taking a number of actions to counteract such cyber harassment.

In addition, legal aid organizations like ASK<sup>17</sup>, BLAST<sup>12</sup>, and BNWLA<sup>18</sup>, as well as women rights organizations like Bangladesh Mahila Parishad<sup>19</sup>, Naripokkho<sup>20</sup>, and others, are essential in helping victims of cyberbullying navigate the complex legal issues involved. The need for a coordinated response to safeguard and empower victims is emphasized by these cooperative activities, which represent an integrated approach to combating cyber harassment.

In this context, Samira said,

*“Most of the time, I go to my university female seniors who are associated with women's rights organizations, as I have noticed that only they have helped me with such problems in many ways.”*

On the contrary, a significant number of female internet users are not aware of the legislation. The report of The Business Standard (2023) shows that 43.22% of the victims are only conscious of the laws related to cybercrime, while the remaining 56.78% are unaware of that. As my interlocutor, Shafiul, said,

*“There are some women who filed complaints against the harasser, but after a while, they undo it since they are mostly unaware of the long procedures. Although I have also seen cases where some women continue the whole legislation procedure until the perpetrators are punished, those women seemed to have a good social network, which provided them with an idea about the existing laws.”*

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<sup>17</sup> Ain o Shalish Kendra (ASK)

<sup>18</sup> Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA)

<sup>19</sup> The Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) is a non-governmental, mass women's organization dedicated to advancing the human rights, gender equality, and the empowerment of women.

<sup>20</sup> Naripokkho is a women's activist organization

The mechanism of social and cultural capital is essential in this aspect, which is equally important when asking for legal assistance. If a person is unaware of existing laws and safety nets related to cyber harassment, it accelerates the challenges for her. It is pretty visible how complex the Bangladeshi legal system is, which includes ineffective case management, case backlogs, lengthy procedures, as well as the tendency of retaliation and re-victimization of the victims by the accused.

## **Chapter 06**

### **Conclusion**

Both men and women experience various types of harassment and violence, gender-based violence (GBV) is a particular concern in the digital sphere for women and those who identify with a variety of gender identities and sexual orientations. In Bangladesh, 73% of female internet users have reported cybercrimes (BLAST & BRAC JPGSPH, 2017). This research has looked into the multidimensional environment of cyber harassment encountered by female activists within the setting of Bangladesh setting. I have discovered the complex mechanisms of this prevalent problem using qualitative methods and in-depth interviews, illuminating the many difficulties and coping mechanisms these activists face.

#### **6.1 Key Findings and Analysis**

This study's key outcome highlights the detrimental effect that cyberbullying has on the lives of female activists. Online abuse penetrates both the personal and professional lives of individuals, going well beyond the boundaries of the online world. The perpetrators target these female activists to suppress their advocacy and sustain their dominance on both offline and online platforms. The online violence is mainly targeted at marginalized groups, including cis-heteropatriarchal female

activists, female indigenous activists, and LGBTQ allies. The behavior of the perpetrators is examined through the lens of Raewyn Connell's framework of hegemonic masculinity. However, perpetrators impose this notion to dominate these groups and create pervasive cyber harassment. By analyzing the nature of this online violence, it is often rooted in hetero-patriarchal norms, where backlash actors use power and dominance online to silence female activists who challenge gender norms, resulting in imposing symbolic violence against them. When speaking out against gender-based violence and indigenous masculinities, indigenous female activists have particular difficulties in their own communities, where they encounter hostility and isolation. Additionally, by using Pierre Bourdieu's theory, this research has shown the significance of symbolic power in maintaining online harassment. For example, the way perpetrators forcefully impose their ideology on female activists through derogatory language, trying to do moral policing with the justification of religion, is directly relevant as it asserts symbolic oppression. The coping mechanisms used by female activists demonstrate their social and cultural capital. By utilizing the concept of Bourdieu, I was able to understand how these strategies are intricately linked to their social and cultural capital and cover a range of responses meant to lessen the emotional, psychological, and professional costs of online harassment. Along with that, the role of legislation was also discussed, and the effectiveness of NGOs, private law enforcement agencies, and women's rights organizations to mitigate this issue was highlighted.

## **6.2 Limitations**

- Due to time restrictions, the number of participants in this study is small, which may not accurately reflect the whole experience of Bangladeshi female activists.

- I could only analyze the qualitative data of the participants' insights on cyber harassment and gender-based violence but could not bring statistical data that may also create a gap in this crucial topic.
- I have only focused on one particular social media platform- Facebook (47% harassment rate), which may limit my observations on this issue.
- I also faced a dilemma after getting the data on which aspects to include and exclude, as diverse experiences opened before me, so I had to be very selective while sharing the encounters of female activists.
- Additionally, I was unable to identify the demography of the backlash actors, as most of the posts of my interviewees where they faced harassment were either removed or old, which made it impossible to trace the perpetrators.

### **6.3 Future Directions**

Based on the findings of this paper, there are some areas to explore in future research, as mentioned below;

- Analyzing the effectiveness of legal framework and combining it with global phenomena in addressing this issue in the context of Bangladesh
- Enhancing accessible legal protection, for example, introducing government-based help desks for legal assistance
- Exploring the role of community support network development to reduce cyber harassment against female activists and create victim-friendly safety network
- Investigating the effectiveness of counternarratives to reshape public discourse in online platforms

- Analyzing the political campaign to identify the aggression and harassment against female politicians in the country
- Conducting similar detailed case studies to examine the variations of discrimination and harassment based on intersectionality

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## **Appendix**

### **Thesis Demo Questionnaire**

#### **Demography/ Background Information**

1. Age, Educational Background, Field of expertise, Marital status, Occupation, Religion

**How does cyber harassment impact the participation of female activists in women's rights activism?**

2. What kind of activism are you involved in?
3. How long have you been involved in activism?
4. What kind of social issues do you deal with or write about on social media?
5. Have you ever been bullied/harassed for your activism? Was it online or offline?
6. What caused such a trigger for bullying or harassment?
7. Did it impact your participation in social media or activism in general?

**What are the long-term repercussions of cyberbullying on the mental health and career trajectories of female activists, and how do they navigate through this?**

8. Do your family members know/support your engagement with online activism? If yes, then, what was their response to the harassment that you have encountered?
9. When you are in trouble (Harassed or bullied) who else do you seek help from?
10. Have you ever reached out to any particular women's rights organization or legal institution?
11. Did it impact your mental health and well-being? If so, how?
12. Did you seek any professional help?
13. Did it affect your long-term projects?

**What kinds of safety measures do female activists take to continue their activism?**

1. What coping mechanisms have you used or have seen other activists use for well-being and mental health?
2. Have you noticed any particular patterns or trends in how female activists overcome cyberbullying and continue their activism despite the challenges?