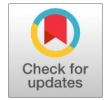


Digital Misogyny Unveiled: An Examination of Online Hate Speech Targeting Women in Bangladesh

Fatema Samina Yasmin



Abstract: Discriminatory and sexist language expresses bias towards men and projects that women are inferior around the world. It is also evident in the patriarchal society of Bangladesh. While they are often prevalent subtly in communication taking place in person, the anonymous nature of the internet has enabled people to be vile towards women in the virtual world. Online hate speech and misogynistic behavior have become pervasive issues in today's digital landscape. Most people take Islamic verses literally or believe the religious clerics without checking their words' authenticity. The socio-religious idea of women being subservient to men produces numerous hate speeches against women on social media platforms. The presence of numerous online religious lectures spewing offensive words against women made the situation worse in Bangladesh. They conform to the prevalent idea that men should control women's agency, and for that purpose, even violence is acceptable. This article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon, specifically focusing on the context of Bangladesh. Through case studies, it looks into how religious leaders fuel online hatred towards women. It further explores the various forms, impacts, and underlying factors of misogynistic online speech. By delving into the complexities of this issue, it also discusses the challenges faced by women in seeking redress and proposes recommendations to mitigate online violence against women in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Digital Misogyny, Online Hate Speech, Women, Violence Against Women

I. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh, like many other societies, has deeply ingrained patriarchal norms that perpetuate gender inequality. Religious leaders, who are predominantly male, often reinforce and perpetuate these norms, using speeches as a means to maintain control over women and restrict their rights and freedoms. They play a crucial role in interpreting religious texts and guiding their followers' understanding of Islam. However, some religious clerics even manipulate these interpretations to justify the subjugation of women and promote discriminatory statements against them. This distorted interpretation of religion further exacerbates gender inequality and promotes discrimination. In many communities, particularly in rural areas, access to education and awareness about women's rights and gender equality is limited.

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This lack of education allows hate speech to thrive, as individuals may not have the knowledge or tools to challenge discriminatory beliefs and practices perpetuated by religious lecturers. When the religious lecturers give men, in general, the authority to control the lives of the women, not only of their family but in general, it creates a perilous situation for the women. It poses threats to them in the public space [1].

In recent years, Bangladesh has witnessed a disturbing rise in religious hate speech targeting women. The presence of numerous online religious lectures spewing offensive words against women made the situation worse in Bangladesh. These ideas from these lectures are supported and shared by many on social media platforms. This phenomenon reflects a broader trend of growing intolerance and violence against women in the country. The consequences of such hate speech are dire, leading to discrimination, marginalization, and even physical harm. Understanding the root causes and implications of this issue is crucial for addressing the underlying problems and working towards a more inclusive and tolerant society. This article aims to comprehensively analyse the phenomenon, specifically focusing on the context of Bangladesh. The author also examines the historical context, the role of social media, and the implications for women's rights and empowerment. The study examines the role of religious leaders in perpetuating online misogyny. It delves deeper into the diverse manifestations, consequences, and root causes of sexist discourse on online platforms. Combining information from various sources, the author aims to provide a unique and insightful perspective on this pressing issue while also proposing potential measures to mitigate the widespread occurrence of online hate speech directed at women in Bangladesh.

II. METHODOLOGY

To gain a comprehensive understanding of misogynistic online speech targeting women in Bangladesh, the author analyzes multiple reference articles that provide valuable insights into this issue. The writer curated keywords and hashtags to identify posts related to online misogyny and hate speech across various platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Additionally, search data analysis was conducted to identify keywords and phrases associated with misogyny and hate speech directed towards women. By analyzing both social media discourse and search data, the writer is able to capture the trends, behaviours, and attitudes surrounding online hate speech targeting women in Bangladesh.



The writer has used the Dangerous Speech Project [2], which mentions that no one is born hating or fearing other people. That has to be taught, and those harmful lessons seem similar, though they are given in highly disparate cultures, languages, and places. Leaders have used particular kinds of rhetoric to turn groups of people violently against one another throughout human history by demonizing and denigrating others. Vocabulary varies, but the same themes recur: members of other groups are depicted as threats so severe that violence against them comes to seem acceptable or even necessary. Such language (or images or any other form of communication) has been termed as 'dangerous speech' [2]. This model provides specific indicators with justifications, which allows for identifying how even seemingly innocent remarks can harm a community or an individual. This model is generally used to identify hate speech targeting communities. However, the author has used the same to identify how harmful and dangerous statements are provided against women on social media.

This study has particularly taken religious lectures available on various social platforms in Bangladesh in order to observe how religious clerics, in other words, most popularly known as Mullahs, play a significant role in shaping public opinion and influencing popular Islam. Their sermons and teachings have a profound impact on the beliefs and attitudes of the masses, particularly in rural areas where access to education and alternative sources of information is limited. This study will explore how they have used their religious authority to promote misogynistic views and reinforce patriarchal norms. This paper provides several case studies to show how the religious lectures available on social media give extensive statements spreading hatred against women, some even encouraging their audience to instigate violence against them. The online world provides a platform for the rapid spread of dangerous speech against women. Identifying such speech is essential to effectively addressing the issue. Here are some key indicators that have been investigated to identify hate speech against women:

- Hate Speech and Threats
- Misinformation and Stereotyping
- Cyberbullying and Online Harassment
- Rape Culture and Victim-Blaming

III. RELIGIOUS CLERICS, POPULAR ISLAM AND WOMEN IN REAL AND VIRTUAL WORLD

Social media platforms have become a breeding ground for misogyny in Bangladesh. While some individuals use these platforms to spread hate speech and discriminatory ideas directly, others use them to share content created by religious leaders or like-minded individuals. Several factors contribute to the dangerous speech mode employed by clerics and popular Islam in Bangladesh. One significant factor is the historical and political context, where successive governments have allowed religion-based political parties to operate, leading to the proliferation of religious academic institutions (madrasah) with minimum state control over curricula and quality of education. This has resulted in a large number of graduates from these institutions, who often struggle to find formal employment and are consequently drawn towards becoming clerics or teachers at religious schools. Madrasah students, both in general and specifically

those who attend unrecognized madrasahs, have unfavorable views towards women and their capabilities [3].

Another contributing factor is the lack of media literacy and low-quality education in Bangladesh. The digital revolution has provided widespread access to information, but many citizens lack critical analysis and logical thinking skills. Mainstream media, facing self-censorship or government-imposed restrictions, has failed to meet the public's hunger for an unlimited flow of information and news. Social media platforms fill up the gap. It has turned into a breeding ground for fake news, conspiracy theories, and hate speech, as people consume information without the necessary tools to discern truth from falsehood. Moreover, when hate or discriminatory statements are provided using, in most cases, false religious references, most people tend to believe them without checking their authenticity [4].

Despite the persistent attempts by human rights activists and NGOs with specific programs to create awareness against sexist behaviours against women in Bangladesh, there seems to be no decline in the popularity of rustic misogynistic religious leaders, their writing and speeches at the popular level. The local religious clerics and the village elderlies supervise traditional rural courts, known as 'Salish' in rural Bangladesh. These courts have punished thousands of rural women for violating the Shariah code. Various reports indicate that about 3,000 women were victims of these rural courts annually during the mid-1990s. In 1993 alone, about 6,000 persecuted and humiliated rural women committed suicide in different parts of Bangladesh [1].

Religious clerics are frequently seen preaching in front of tens of thousands of Muslim followers. The audience of these gatherings, known as 'waz-mahfil,' was previously considered to be primarily uneducated or semi-literate. In recent years, it has become apparent that wealthy local businesses and politicians organize and sponsor these religious lectures, and local dignitaries like civil administration and law enforcement officials attend them. As a result, the assumption that the target audience is predominantly rural illiterates is no longer valid [5]. Individuals from all around the world watch these lectures when they are recorded and posted on various social media platforms. Many videos of public religious meetings show the present audience verbally agreeing with the speakers' views on women. On Facebook and YouTube, many of the lectures have received millions of views, and the virtual audience agreed with their views on women, as seen in the comment section. In short, the messages reach a vast number of people both on and off the internet. Their large following allows them to reach a broader audience, increasing the visibility and influence of their hateful messages. This amplification effect can further perpetuate the cycle of discrimination and oppression. The speakers create two groups – 'in-group' and 'out-group' to establish their views [2]. According to the Dangerous Speech Project [2] women are the 'out-group' who as per the religious lecturers do not conform to the prescribed norms and are subservient to men. An out-group has a defining characteristic that differs from and is meaningful to the scholars' audience.

The scholars, their targeted audience, and those who agree with the statements belong to the 'in-group.' They will commit or condone violence against the 'out-group.'

Such speeches have a significant impact on society while the country is undergoing a wave of Islamic fundamentalism. Most people hold religious leaders in high regard and rarely question their opinions. It gets dangerous when the speakers distort Islamic doctrines in order to accommodate their own agenda. The patriarchal ideals mixed with religious sentiments make the audience susceptible to their views when they preach against women's agency in the name of Islam. When speakers use expressions and keywords that may elicit an emotional response, the speech and its impact can be more consequential. It validates domestic violence when a religious cleric urges male family members to control their female family members and, if necessary, to use force. Even if the entire group is unresponsive to a dangerous speech, a few "lone wolves" may act alone to inflict violence [2]. Some may exploit the notion that women should stay at home and not be seen in public or that unveiled women attract men as a justification to perpetrate violence against them.

"If you wish to praise women, rather praise dogs, for a dog is better than a hundred virtuous women! How shrewd was the King of the World Kay-Qobad who said: Let the good women be cursed!" (Stated by Firdausi, a tenth-century Persian poet, as mentioned in [1])

When women are compared to animals or as sub-humans, it provides justification that they are below men and opens up opportunities for violence. Bangladesh has emerged as one of the leading nations in terms of intimate partner violence against women [6]. In Bangladesh, incidents of misogyny have become intense in recent years. In the year 2016, there were a total of 458 reported occurrences of domestic violence, resulting in 309 fatalities. Additionally, there were 724 reported cases of rape, which led to 45 deaths. Furthermore, there were 34 reported cases of acid assault, 156 incidences of sexual harassment, 239 instances of sexual harassment, and 12 cases involving Salish and Fatwa [7]. The number of gender-based violence cases increased in 2017. According to the UNDP report, since May 2020, there has been a noticeable upward trajectory in reported incidents of gender-based violence (GBV). This pattern consistently reaches its zenith during the months of September and October during the pandemic era. This trend is connected to stress due to economic hardship, potentially leading to heightened instances of violence [8]. Ain o Salish Kendra's survey [9] from March to May 2020 shows that a total of 11,323 participants faced some form of violence against women, of which 11,025 were victims of domestic violence. Women faced more violence in real life and online during the COVID era.

IV. THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS STATEMENTS IN SPREADING HATE SPEECH AGAINST WOMEN

A major factor in the propagation of hate speech is the influence of Mullas, religious scholars, and leaders who hold significant sway over their followers. Mullas play a crucial role in shaping religious narratives and interpreting scriptures, often using their platform to promote discriminatory beliefs and restrictions against women. Their sermons and teachings contribute to the perpetuation of

harmful stereotypes and the marginalization of women. "God sends these fruits to us in 'packets' to save them from flies and insects, that is why they taste so good. All good things in life are shrouded with covers and mystery. That is why women should be covered from head to toe" (Narrated by Delwar Hossain Saidi, a Jamaat-i-Islami leader and a renowned religious scholar, from Bangladesh as mentioned in [5])

Irrespective of country or society, women have been identified as the object of threat or lust. Religious leaders are apprehensive about women attaining education, independence, and opportunity within the socio-economic and political spheres. They issue statements not only to control women's agency but also to put the blame on women for natural disasters. An Indonesian Islamic judge in Aceh stated, "The tsunami occurred because of the sins of the people of Aceh. The Holy Quran says that if women are good, then a country is good" [10]. The same report mentioned that religious police became active after the tsunami and harassed women without headscarves. In fact, in one occurrence, the angry villagers tried to harass a bareheaded girl, flicking lighted cigarettes at her [10]. Similarly, Pakistani politician Maulana Fazlur Rehman [11] and an Iranian cleric [12] opined that women wearing jeans or revealing clothes and acting promiscuously could cause earthquakes and inflation. The statements of the religious clerics are picked by common men who use them as references. They often share their lectures on social media. The common men do not check holy books for the statements' authenticity. They have a firm belief in the men of God and further use harmful ideas against women in real life and on social media to create pressure on women to abide by the 'standards' set by the statements.

Religious hate speech not only affects women's psychological well-being but also hampers their social and economic empowerment. Women face discrimination, violence, and limited opportunities due to the prejudices propagated by hate speech. They are often denied equal access to education, employment, and decision-making processes, further perpetuating gender inequality in society.

V. THE REALITY OF GENDERED ONLINE HATE SPEECH

The Internet and social media platforms have given women unprecedented opportunities to express themselves, share their stories, and connect with others. However, these platforms have also become breeding grounds for gender-based online hate speech. According to Jane [13], an increasing number of women are subject to hate speech online every day, and they are being harassed online regularly. Interestingly, gendered cyberhate is no longer limited to women who are visible in public. Women, as a whole, are objectified either as a threat or out of lust. Therefore, many individuals, some of them very influential, express freely online on social platforms, such as by writing text-based abuse, posting oral or written comments, tweets, Facebook messages, or YouTube videos, that women need to be governed so that they do not have the power to harm society.



If required, the audience can apply force to dominate them. Since these expressions (e.g., speech, text, or images) may encourage the audience or followers to conduct violence against women, they can be identified as ‘hate speech’.

The Council of Europe defines sexist hate speech as a form of violence against women that perpetuates gender inequality. It encompasses any expression that expresses contempt towards a person based on their sex or gender, treating them as inferior or solely defined by their sexual dimension. Sexist hate speech is not limited to specific groups of women; it can target any woman or girl, regardless of age, occupation, or background [14].

Gendered online hate speech is not a myth or an isolated phenomenon. It is a harsh reality that women face daily. According to an Amnesty International online poll conducted in various countries, including the UK, USA, Spain, Denmark, and more, a significant number of women aged 18–55 reported experiencing online abuse or harassment on social media platforms. These experiences range from unauthorized dissemination of fake or sexualized pictures to threats, insults, and dehumanizing comments [15].

General search behavior indicated a high volume of searches related to misogyny and hate speech, primarily conducted by young males aged 8–24. Help-seeking behavior was observed, particularly among males aged 45–54, indicating a need for support in dealing with cyberbullying and misogynistic attitudes. Perpetrator behavior, characterized by males aged 18–24, exhibited a significant presence in online spaces, contributing to the spread of hate speech and harassment [16].

It is essential to understand that online hate speech against women is not limited to offensive or abusive speech. It goes beyond that, causing both individual and societal harm. The impact of online hate speech can be transferred from the digital realm to the offline world, leading to real-world consequences. Women may feel silenced, face barriers to participating in public and political life, and experience the normalization of violence against women.

The virtual world is a reflection of real life in Bangladesh. The analysis of social media discourse and search data revealed alarming trends in misogynistic online speech targeting women in Bangladesh. Social media platforms have become an integral part of daily lives, connecting people from all around the world. However, this digital landscape is not always a safe space, especially for women. Gendered online hate speech has emerged as a significant issue, perpetuating violence, discrimination, and inequality against women. More and more online harassment and violence have been conducted against women recently. The Action Aid’s survey [17] conducted in November 2021 on online harassment shows a rise from the previous prevalence rate of 50.19 percent. It reveals that 63.5 percent of women, namely 228 out of a total of 359, experienced online assault. Approximately 64 percent of women in Bangladesh experience online harassment and violence in various forms. Among the 228 participants who experienced online aggression, 67.81 percent encountered it between 1 and 5 times, 21.89 percent encountered it between 5 and 10 times, and 10.30 percent encountered it more than ten times in 2022. A majority of women experienced online assault primarily on Facebook (47 percent) and Messenger (35 percent).

Additional sites where women encountered online violence included Instagram (6.11 percent), IMO (3.06 percent), WhatsApp (1.7 percent), and YouTube (1.31 percent).

According to a report by UN Women [16], it is evident that religious beliefs and patriarchal societal standards have been employed as justifications for sexist narratives and as means to target women in online spaces. The primary misogynistic narratives identified encompass the following themes:

- Assertion of male superiority over women;
- Advocacy for limiting women's societal roles (e.g., discouraging their involvement in politics and confining them to domestic responsibilities such as child-rearing and household chores);
- Emphasis on the need to protect women; and
- Imposition of specific standards of modest clothing for women, with potential chastisement for non-compliance.

Based on the criteria set by the UN Women Report [16], several case studies are presented to show how religious lectures can become dangerous and the reasons for violence against women.

A. Case Study 1 (Women are Compared to Inanimate Objects or as Subhuman)

“Women are like tamarind, like tamarind, like tamarind. You get tempted to see a little boy having tamarind; you get tempted when you go to a market where tamarind is sold. Women are worse than that; when you look at a woman, your heart gets tempted... No matter how old you are, if you shake hands with a woman, then you will develop bad intentions. This is called zina (illicit activities) of the heart, from where the real zina (illicit sexual relationship) happens. If anyone says he doesn't get bad intentions after seeing a woman, then he is impotent. Your manhood is ruined” (narrated by, Shah Ahmad Shafi in a video posted on YouTube [18]).

In a religious assembly, Shah Ahmad Shafi, a renowned Islamic orator, compared women to tamarind. He mentioned that one’s mouth would always salivate when he saw tamarind, whether in the hands of a child or at the market. Women would always tempt men the same way, and men would be forced to commit ‘zina’ (unacceptable sexual acts).

Even a pious man would lose control if he saw uncovered women before him. In this message, he was degrading women by comparing them with objects or food items. It dehumanizes women, making them tempting sexual objects for men. It also permits men to rationalize their actions if they sexually assault women by putting blame on the victims. Safi’s statements became popular because they blamed women for men harassing women in public places. Even an independent Member of Parliament, Rezaul Karim Bablu, in a national parliamentary session, remarked that

“If the Allama Shafi ‘tetul totto’ (tamarind theory) were applied, if women covered themselves, then rapists would be discouraged from violating them. Religious sentiments would drive men. Honorable Speaker, if Allama Shafi's ‘tetul totto’ (tamarind theory) is applied, then rapists would be discouraged and religious sentiments would develop more in them” [19].



"What we see here, Honorable Speaker, is that the feminists are motivating women to be naked by talking about women's freedom (used as a metaphor for women's empowerment). That is why rapists are accepting their desire to rape and are encouraged to commit more rape" [19].

The statement becomes more dangerous as it was made during a parliamentary session where the legislators were amending the existing anti-rape legislation. It gives the wrong message that even the legislators believe that it is a woman's fault when she gets raped.

"Women are dangerous people; hey boys, do not chat with a woman. You will be destroyed. Your father will be destroyed. Your family will be destroyed. Your nation will be destroyed. You would not understand them. She is a woman. She came to destroy you.... Our prophet said, I never let go of anything that could be more dangerous than women for men. Women are dangerous objects for men. Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) said, hey women, I did not watch anyone more than you... You destroy the intelligence of intelligent men. Mohammad (PBUH) said, do not go to a woman's house who has no husband; otherwise, you will be in trouble.... Mohammad (PBUH) said, do not go near women. Otherwise, you will be in trouble. Mohammad (PBUH) said, Women! Women are the web of Satan (the devil). Indeed, the conspiracy of women is tricky and complicated" (stated by Sheikh Abdur Razzak bin Yousuf in a video posted on YouTube [20]).

Sheikh Abdur Razzak bin Yousuf, another religious lecturer, often condemns women in his videos available on YouTube. In one such video, he is seen to condemn women as being a dangerous race. He advised men not to get involved romantically with them. According to him, women tended to collude with the intelligence of men and destroy them along with their families and communities. He labeled women as the web of the devil. Widows were singled out as threatening to men, for they could entangle men into their lustrous nets. Yousuf has cited Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) and Allah, stating that they have identified women as the cause of trouble and warned men not to approach them. These statements are dangerous because the language dehumanizes women as sexual objects and is used skillfully to conceal the perpetrators' (men's) responsibility. It indicates that women provoke or coerce men into sexual relationships when their judgments are compromised. It places the entire blame for men's sexual misconduct on women. Such words are perilous since he is falsely referencing Allah and the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), creating the impression in the audience that even they held women accountable for men's wrongdoing or viewed them as immoral. These fabricated references can be used to legitimize sexual violence against women and victim shaming.

B. Case Study 2 (Fabricating Existing Laws to Degrade Women)

"A wife cannot divorce a husband. Do you know why? Because I have bought you, not free. I am not sold, but you are sold. If you ever hear that any woman has divorced her husband, stay away from her. She is cursed" (Hasanur Rahman Hossain mentioned in a video posted on Facebook [21]).

"Women's birth is a disgrace and a curse. Women do not have any souls. The birth of women is disgraceful. If a husband wants, he can sell his wife. Wives are assets of their husbands, just like objects. Women cannot leave their husbands even if their husbands torture them" (as mentioned by Abdur Razzak bin Yousuf in a video posted on YouTube [22]).

"Hey, Muslim women! Stay at home. Do not project yourselves like the women in the era of wilderness, barbarianism, uncivilization... If a woman wants to be respected in this life and the afterlife, she should not leave her house without any emergency. Allah says, Prophet (PBUH), tell your womenfolk and the wives of those men that they must not get out of the houses.... It is the attitude of the era of Jahiliyyah (the un-Islamic period) to roam on the streets, venture here and there, or show their beauty... When you (women) go out of the house, you speak and walk provocatively. When they are out of the house, the Saitan (the devil) tempts them, and women feel the need to change their way of talking and walking in provocative manners... Though they are dimwits, the women can take intelligent men down the path of destruction. Women are a dangerous race... Prophet (PBUH) says, I have not seen anything more dangerous for men than women... Women are dangerous objects for men. Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) says women could destroy or collude with a man's intellect. They are such a race that can impair the intelligence of men... Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) says men do not visit a widow's home. You will get into trouble...

Prophet (PBUH) says men should not go to women; otherwise, they will be in trouble... Allah mentions that the conspiracy of women was complex/complicated...

Hey girl! You who study in class ten are a devil. Your parents are educated, yet they are incapable of performing their duties. Giving birth to a child was not becoming a parent; it was a matter of power and principle to become a father or a mother... You (pointing to a girl) are a Muslim, the daughter of a Muslim. How do you dare to venture out without covering your head? If she were married off, she would have had two children at her age. How did you dare to sit before me without covering her head? What are you trying to show me? Do not let them (women) go anywhere outside the house... Why will your wife go to the bazaar? Are you dead? In your presence, why will she go to the bazaar? You are a coward. You allow your wife to venture outside the home. Society is getting destroyed because of cowards like you. Prophet (PBUH) warned the world about women... told them to be careful about women. They can derail men... Keep her at home. Why is she at the bazaar? At the office? Is she a Hindu? The Hindu and the Christian women marry with the condition that they will earn and feed their husbands. What kind of father are you? Why is your

daughter working on the garments? Your daughter is roaming freely without covering her head. Will I answer for her? You will. You are a coward. You are alive, yet your daughter works in garments. You should feed them by begging if needed. Your daughter will go to garments and will engage in illicit sexual relations...

Do not take the stick away...Have it in front of the door Let them know who the master of the house is but do not hit the wife's face. It will destroy her beauty" (as stated by Sheikh Abdur Razzak bin Yousuf in videos posted on YouTube [23], [24]).

At a religious assembly, Hasanur Rahman Hossain [21], an Islamic cleric, stated that Islam does not allow women to divorce their husbands. The wives, in his eyes, were not free. Their husbands "purchased" them by making the "denmohor," which is a gift of money or property given by the groom to the bride at the time of an Islamic marriage. He further opined that under Bangladeshi law, both men and women were allowed to divorce, but in Islam, it was not permissible for women. This cleric has compared women with purchasable goods and fabricated Islamic principles to justify his statements. Muslim women can divorce their husbands. In Bangladesh, divorce is still considered taboo, and a divorced woman can destroy a family's reputation. It can make a woman an outcast for the rest of her life. There are instances where family members have forced the wife to return to her husband's house despite knowing that the husband and his family members physically and verbally abuse her. They did not want their divorced daughter to tarnish the family's reputation. There are news reports where the murdered wife previously informed her family members of ongoing physical abuse and requested that they take her home, but the family members have coaxed her to adjust and stay in that marriage. When religious leaders talk against divorced women in a society that is already unwilling to accept them, the situation becomes more detrimental for the women. Family members can force women to remain in violent relationships using the logic given by religious preachers.

It has been observed that in certain statements, women are not degraded by comparing them to any inanimate objects. Instead, they are portrayed as less significant or low-status society members than men. As a result, their parents, family members, or men in general must supervise and control their lives, clothing, mobility, education, health, and even sexuality. Women are portrayed as subservient to men as per their social status. Some speakers feel that women cannot exist independently of their male family members and that men should be in control of their lives. At the same time, it is alarming that male family members are given authority by these religious lecturers over their female members, and in some instances, they have even encouraged them to resort to physical violence.

C. Case Study 3 (Threats to Women's Fundamental Rights)

"Why was 'caesar' (a cesarean section/c-section) mandatory? If a woman had a C-section operation, then she could not have more than two or three children. The doctors advise that if a woman has more c-section operations, the mother will die. The child will die. There are records that women had taken ten children having c-section operations... If Allah gives a woman a child, He knows that the woman has the capacity to carry that child. They (doctors) lie to us. They say (women) cannot have normal babies after 'caesar'. They (women) can have normal babies after 'caesar'. In fact, there is no need for 'caesar'. There was no 'caesar' fifty years ago. Why are there so many 'caesar' operations now? All lies.

It is all about business and money...They (doctors/health workers) lied to people, saying that 'caesar' and modern medical science can reduce maternal mortality and child mortality. If one believes this statement, he commits 'shirk' (which means and refers to accepting other gods and divinities alongside Allah and considers shirk as a sin that will not be forgiven if a person dies without repenting of it). Women died before during childbirth. Women now die during childbirth. If they live, that is wonderful. If they die, that is fine too, because a mother will get the benefit of becoming a 'shahid' (one who died fighting to protect Islam). And when she goes through the pain of childbirth, she gets the benefit of conducting a 'hajj' (the annual Islamic pilgrimage). If you do 'caesar' and cut the tummy to get the baby out, where will she get such benefit from?...They (doctors/health workers) tell pregnant women to follow instructions and be aware of their health conditions...

Our mothers and aunts never needed to see a doctor when they were pregnant. They worked hard husking paddies using 'dekhi' (traditional wooden mortar), boiled them, and even carried heavy 'motka' (storing vessels).

Women do not work like that in the present day. They live luxuriously with maids to do everything 'Caesar' is a deep conspiracy against Islam. This practice must not be followed (by Muslims). The younger a mother is, the healthier her children will be. I had done 'recharge' (research) and saw that those mothers who got married before 18 years and had more children compared to those mothers who married after 18 years and did not have more than three children were healthier than the other group" (stated by Mahmudul Hasan Gunobi in a video on YouTube [25]).

Applying a rights-based approach, the WHO considers that interference or denying a woman's access to reproductive treatment can be regarded as a life-threatening situation and a violation of her fundamental human rights. In a patriarchal society, women are valued for their reproductive roles. Men, family members, or the community exercise control over women's reproductive medical treatment. When a pregnant woman is denied medical treatment, it increases the risk of death for both the mother and the child. There is no doubt that cesarean sections can be elective, but in most cases, they are used to save the lives of mothers and children to avoid complications developed during pregnancies. When an Islamic lecturer like Mahmudul Nabi Gunobi [25] asserts that there is no need for cesarean sections, it puts many women's and children's lives in danger. It becomes even more dangerous when he mentions that it is the wish of Allah for a mother to live or die. Men or family members may not seek medical attention when a pregnant mother is in dire need of it. Every year, hundreds of mothers die during childbirth due to preventable causes. Their family members do not feel the need for regular check-ups or adequate nutrition during their pregnancies. Such statements can encourage men or family members to deny mothers medical treatment, which can be life-threatening, or force them to have more children against their wishes. It takes away women's control over their bodies or their desire to decide on the number of children, and most importantly, such practices would become life-threatening for young mothers.



He further mentioned that when younger women had more babies, the babies were healthier than those women who had children at older ages. He justified early marriages for minor girls. Gunobi [25] dehumanized women as if they were less than human beings (men) who could not decide about their reproductive roles, the number of children, or having access to medical treatment. He also ignores that early marriage victims are often forced to have children at an early age, even before they are physically and mentally capable of handling motherhood, which results in lifelong health complications.

D. Case Study 4 (Expressing Hatred Towards Female Students/ Working Women/Divorcees)

Rumana Manzur is a former teacher at the University of Dhaka and a Fulbright Scholar. She was pursuing a master's degree at the University of British Columbia when her husband violently attacked her. Syeed Hasan, her husband, allegedly gouged her eyes out with his fingers and chewed part of her nose off in front of their young daughter during a bitter argument over her education. She became blind. Later, despite struggling with challenges, she finished her studies at the University of British Columbia Law School and became a human rights lawyer. She was invited to speak at TEDx Talks because of her fighting spirit and inspiring journey. Faporbaz, a Facebook page, shared the footage. There were several responses in the comment section where many individuals supported and defended her husband's actions. Some even said she should not have pursued higher education against her husband's wishes and that what happened to her was justifiable. Her husband should have killed her because of a rumor about her purported affair with an Iranian man [26]. The manifestation of religious lectures can be seen in the comment sections of many posts. These comments imply that women are subservient in marriage. Wives cannot be equal to their husbands. Their husbands should have complete authority over their lives; if they do not comply, they should be physically abused, maimed, or killed. Defending domestic violence creates more opportunities for perpetrators to be violent in the private space of the home. In the same manner, it is observed on social media that actresses, influencers, female motivational speakers, or working women generally receive much hatred and judgement, even given the advice of covering themselves, staying at home, and devoting themselves to their husbands. Many religious speakers see women who attend universities or work as a threat to the purity of Muslim women. Sahriatpuri [27] compared universities to brothels. Such a statement is very dangerous as it implies that when women go to universities, they mix with men freely to have illegal physical relationships. As a result, higher education poses a threat to the chastity of Muslim women. Abdur Razzak Bin Yousuf, on the other hand, accused working women of having sexual encounters. He claimed that women's earnings were not desirable since they were derived through sexual interactions [24]. In a patriarchal country like Bangladesh, where women's virginity or physical purity is highly prized for preserving family honor, such statements may be extremely detrimental to women's development. These words imply that Muslim women become impure as a result of studying or working outside the home. They are more likely to engage in forbidden sexual activities, endangering the purity of Muslim women.

Family members may apply physical force to dissuade women from studying or working; thus, such statements can be perilous for women's empowerment.

VI. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGION IN VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

While it is hard to connect religious sermons to violence against women, it shapes beliefs, values, and practices, which in turn can either contribute to or counteract violence against women and girls. There is clear evidence from Arab and other Muslim countries that the societal and governmental apparatus enables the endorsement and perpetuation of male dominance over female relatives.

Domestic violence has not yet attained the status of grave concern. Domestic violence is sometimes perceived as a private issue, with some asserting that it might be an acceptable reaction to perceived misconduct by the wife. The usage of specific passages from the Quran is used to support the claim that males who engage in physical abuse of their spouses do so according to divine directives. The presence of religious justifications, coupled with the significance attributed to upholding family honor, contributes to a collective reluctance among abusers, victims, law enforcement officials, and healthcare experts to maintain a conspiracy of silence rather than revealing instances of these violations [28], [29]. Bangladesh is no exception. Women refrain from reporting violence online or in real life because society blames the victim. In most cases, women are represented as immoral, too independent, of a promiscuous nature, and wearing indecent or non-Islamic attire. So, they got what they deserved, and their being victims is somehow justified [30]. In 2022, a woman was attacked by a bouqa-clad woman for wearing non-Islamic Western clothes at Narsingdi railway station [31]. The perpetrator boldly defended her stand before the media when she was arrested, saying that such women should be physically beaten up for not wearing Islamic clothes. The alarming part is that the judges at the Supreme Court echoed the same sentiment. They stayed the High Court's order to bail the assaulter and stated that the dress of the young woman was not appropriate according to the country's culture [32]. Human rights activists and NGOs raised concern over the High Court's observation of the harassment of a girl at the railway station for her dress code. These stakeholders argue that such a remark has the potential to impede the unrestrained mobility and safety of women [33].

A. Religious Teachings and Gender Inequality

Religious teachings, particularly within Islam, can be interpreted in ways that reinforce gender inequality.

Religious beliefs and cultural practices establish patriarchal norms in society more firmly and make women subservient to men. When religious scholars express similar views through their sermons, most of the population does not hesitate to enforce these norms and values. When women are dehumanized, violence against them, including practices such as early and forced marriages, domestic violence, or dowry-related violence, seems justified as well.

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Moreover, even though Islam gives women the right to divorce or to inherit property, these scholars distort the original rules and give sermons in favor of patriarchy, giving authority to men rather than spreading actual Islamic teaching. When such rights are taken away, women face severe discrimination in society and within families. These teachings can create an environment where violence against women is normalized or even justified. This misuse of religion further exacerbates the challenges faced by victims in seeking justice and support.

B. The Impact of Religious Practices

According to religious scholars, for women, the best way to attain virtue is by serving their husbands, by always keeping them happy and content, and by having as many children as possible. According to Mufti Amir Hamza, women are at fault for their husband's extramarital affairs since they cannot attract and keep them at home. As a result, males begin to seek pleasure elsewhere. A man could abuse his wife if he found her physically unattractive [34]. Such words are sufficiently demeaning to degrade women socially and psychologically and justify intimate partner violence. Many religious speakers in public gatherings, including Mufti Amir Hamza, Abdur Razzak Bin Yousuf, and Sheikh Shaifuddin Belal, encouraged domestic violence and excused husbands for beating their wives [35], [36], [23]. According to them, it was the only way to keep the wives under control. They also encouraged the husbands to physically assault their wives and children if they refused to comply with their wishes or to prevent them from working and studying. The remarks imply many dangerous ideas, such as urging males to restrict their wives and children from working or studying, and they authorize men to beat their wives and children. Such remarks will encourage domestic violence, giving men the excuses, they need to continue to keep women under control. Bangladesh is among the top five countries for intimate partner violence, and according to a survey published by the World Health Organisation (WHO), a significant proportion, precisely fifty percent, of women within the age range of 15 to 49 in the country had encountered instances of physical or sexual violence perpetrated by their intimate partners throughout the course of their lives [6].

VII. THE CONSEQUENCES OF RELIGION ON VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The consequences of religion's influence on victims of violence in Bangladesh are far-reaching and multifaceted. It is not just men who are influenced by religious clerics or their sermons. Women are products of their society, and religious and patriarchal ideas equally influence them. Therefore, they also believe their responsibility is to conform to the prescribed norms and values and, primarily, to keep themselves safe. Those victims who are deeply religious may, as a result, face additional hurdles in seeking help and support due to conflicting religious teachings and societal expectations. The intersection of religion and violence can result in a complex web of emotional, psychological, and spiritual struggles for survivors.

A. Physical and Psychological Harm

Religious violence against women has severe physical and psychological consequences. Women who experience violence within religious contexts may suffer from physical

injuries, trauma, and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. The long-lasting effects of this violence can hinder women's ability to lead fulfilling lives and participate fully in society. Religious violence against women often leads to social stigma and isolation. Survivors may face judgment and ostracization from their religious communities and families, making it difficult for them to seek help and support. The fear of being labeled as "disobedient" or "immoral" can prevent women from speaking out and accessing resources.

Nurunnahar Chowdhury, a girl from Kulaura upazila, Bangladesh, went to the USA for higher education. Based on her few pictures on social media, the local mosque committee has ostracized her family, accusing her of wearing indecent short dresses and marrying a Hindu man [37]. United Nations officials and human rights advocates have expressed concern over the significant rise in the number of women engaging in suicide attempts in Afghanistan. A specific connection has been established between it and the Taliban's restrictions on all aspects of women's lives, encompassing a prohibition on education above the elementary level, severe prohibitions on employment opportunities, and a ban on accessing public spaces such as parks and bathhouses [38].

B. Impediments to Justice

Religious beliefs and practices can create barriers to justice for survivors of violence. In some cases, religious leaders may discourage or prevent women from reporting abuse to secular authorities, promoting a culture of impunity [39]. The influence of religious institutions and leaders can also hinder efforts to enact legal reforms that protect women's rights. In 2022, President Ebrahim Raisi of Iran implemented strict measures aimed at curtailing women's rights and advocated for stricter conformity to the nation's compulsory dress code, which imposes the wearing of the hijab by all women. Amid the strict enforcement of women's dress codes in Iran, Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, tragically passed away due to a 'violent arrest' by the 'morality police' for infringing the hijab. The family stated before the media that she was beaten and killed in custody. The officials responsible for her death were not punished. However, her death sparked protests in Iran and resulted in more deaths [40].

VIII. RELIGION, ONLINE HATE SPEECH AND VULNERABILITY OF WOMEN

When religious clerics deliver statements full of hatred and discriminatory innuendo, they claim that the members of the targeted group, here the women, are less human or less worthy than men or that they share a dangerous or undesirable trait to derail the men or destroy religious and social norms. When these statements are delivered and shared through social media, they reach millions of audiences rapidly and create an insecure environment for women. The social media platforms have failed to adequately address the issue of online hate speech, mainly when it is directed at women and marginalized groups. Instances like Twitter's swift reaction to tweets wishing harm to Donald Trump while disregarding the daily death and rape threats faced by women and people of color highlight the double standards prevalent on these platforms.



Women, trans individuals, and non-binary people have long been pointing out these discrepancies, urging for a more equitable and inclusive online environment [41].

Misogynistic hate speech in digital spaces has severe consequences for women's rights and their ability to participate equally in the online world. The prevalence of online violence and abuse directly affects women's physical, emotional, mental, economic, reputational, and aspirational lives. It perpetuates gender inequality and reinforces traditional gender norms that limit women's agency and freedom. The normalization of online sexism also exacerbates the crisis of masculinity, with some men idealizing abusive behavior and demanding gender conservatism from women.

It is essential to recognize that online misogyny is not separate from the everyday sexism and patriarchy present in offline spaces. The digital realm mirrors and amplifies existing gender inequalities, making it crucial to address the underlying structural issues that perpetuate misogynistic attitudes. Research indicates that women often adapt their behavior and self-govern their online presence to conform to societal expectations of performative modesty [42][49][50][51]. They are forced to navigate the hyper-visible boundaries of propriety, limiting their ability to express agency and desire freely.

A global mobile phone company has found in a new region-wide survey that 49 percent of school students, i.e., females in Bangladesh, have been victims of cyberbullying in one way or another, revealing that young people are increasingly becoming vulnerable to such harassment. Moreover, 55 percent of young women do not even confess to their parents for fear of defamation [43]. The Action Aid 2022 survey [17] showed that more than 60 percent of women and girls do not report online harassment to authorities. The complicated process of reporting and getting justice prevents them from seeking legal assistance. The study also found that most women perceive the current complaint methods as ineffective. Consequently, a significant proportion of 28.8 percent displayed no inclination to lodge any complaints. This survey further reported that women's self-confidence and independence are significantly diminished by the emotional anguish caused by online aggression and harassment.

The normalization of online sexism is closely tied to the proliferation of homosocial male networks and 'bro clubs' that perpetuate misogyny. They look down on female friends or companions. These male-only groups enforce sexist attitudes and normalize harassing women online as a pack. Taking advantage of the anonymity of the internet, they do not hesitate to express sexist comments or innuendos online to known or stranger women, which they may not be able to do in person [44], [45].

Men who are educated in Madrasha, Islamic academic institutions, are brought up without any communication with women. Their teachers, lacking both enlightenment and extensive knowledge of religious scriptures, enforce the idea of women being subservient to men over the academic years. These young men form similar 'bro-clubs' and act as a pack. They are very susceptible to external influences and adhere rigidly to their beliefs, perpetuating a harmful cycle of religious intolerance. These young men, while not accustomed to women's advancement in society having access to the internet and smart devices, express rigid ideas

towards women's advancement in society and bully or harass women online [46]. The very idea that they are superior to women just for being men, coupled with religious and patriarchal beliefs, gives them the authority to comment, bully, or harass women online.

IX. THE NEED FOR STRONG LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND INTERVENTIONS

It is essential to undertake effective interventions within legal frameworks to combat online misogyny and hate speech. The existing legal framework in Bangladesh must be strengthened to ensure that online violence and abuse against women are recognized as serious offenses. Laws should be enacted to hold perpetrators accountable and provide protection and support for victims. Additionally, comprehensive sex education programs and awareness campaigns can help to reform prevailing gender norms, fostering a culture of respect and equality. Empowering individuals with digital literacy skills is crucial to combating online misogyny effectively. Digital literacy programs should not only focus on technical skills but also on understanding the social dynamics of the online world. Media literacy programs can help individuals critically analyze and question online messages, enabling them to identify and challenge misogynistic content. Equipping individuals with the tools to navigate the digital landscape safely and responsibly can create a more inclusive online environment.

Hate speech is a grave concern that can cause profound psychological and emotional harm to the targeted individual. In Bangladesh, numerous legal acts are adopted to counter hate speech, both individually and as a group. Victims of cyberbullying have the option to lodge a criminal complaint with the police in accordance with the regulations outlined in the Digital Security Act of 2018. The act establishes legal penalties, including imprisonment and/or fines, for individuals convicted of cyberbullying. Individuals who have been subjected to cyberbullying have the option to initiate a civil suit seeking compensation from the individual responsible. The victim has the right to pursue reparation for the damages inflicted by the act of cyberbullying, encompassing psychological anguish and loss of reputation. Bangladesh Police operates an online Crime Help Desk where online bullying victims can report the occurrence and receive aid [47].

X. STRENGTHENING ONLINE REPORTING MECHANISMS

The development of robust reporting mechanisms is essential to encourage victims of online misogyny to come forward and seek justice. Online platforms should establish clear and user-friendly reporting processes, ensuring that reports of abuse are taken seriously and addressed promptly. Support services and resources should also be readily available to victims, providing them with the necessary assistance and guidance throughout the reporting and recovery process.



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Social media has emerged as the primary platform for the perpetration of psychological violence, encompassing sexist and misogynistic comments, degrading imagery, mobbing, intimidation, and threats. Facebook officially claims to take action against hate speech targeting women, but in practice, it frequently rejects reports on such incidents by asserting that they do not violate community standards. According to a news report published in Reuters [48], Facebook Inc. received a letter from prominent female members of the U.S. Congress, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and top female politicians from the European Union. The letter urged the company to take stronger measures to safeguard women in politics from the dangers of violence, sexism, and hate speech on its platform [48]. Creating digital spaces that celebrate and amplify women's voices is crucial for countering online misogyny. Digital feminist communities can provide a supportive environment for women to share their experiences, seek advice, and collectively challenge misogynistic narratives. These communities can also play a vital role in advocating for policy changes, raising awareness, and fostering solidarity among women facing online abuse.

XI. CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the long-term impact of religiously infuriated hate speech on women requires further study. Misogyny, deeply rooted in societal norms and power dynamics, presents significant challenges that must be addressed through a multi-faceted approach. The role of religious leaders in promoting hate speech and religious restrictions against women in Bangladesh cannot be ignored. It is essential to challenge and dismantle the patriarchal structures that perpetuate misogyny. By understanding the historical context, the role of social media, and its implications for women, it is essential to develop effective strategies to counter this form of violence and discrimination. The government, political parties, electoral institutions, and civil society must work collaboratively to enforce legislation, promote civic education, and provide support and avenues for redress. Only through collective efforts can Bangladesh move towards a more inclusive and tolerant society where women are protected from online violence and discrimination based on their religious beliefs and can contribute to creating a society where diversity is celebrated and every individual is treated with dignity and respect.

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