Digital Femininity Unfiltered: Opportunities and Oppressions in Facebook

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Abstract

In the context of Bangladesh's Muslim-majority, heteropatriarchal society, women face layered and intersectional forms of oppression—both offline and online. This paper critically explores how digital platforms, particularly Facebook, function as contested terrains of feminist activism and patriarchal surveillance. Drawing on a 2022 incident in Narshingdi, where a young woman was physically assaulted for wearing a crop top and jeans, the study examines the legal, cultural, and digital responses that followed. The High Court's verdict, which justified the assault by framing the victim's attire as culturally inappropriate, ignited polarized reactions across social and physical spaces. By analyzing this event and the broader sociotechnical environment of Facebook, this paper argues that while digital platforms provide new avenues for feminist resistance and solidarity, they simultaneously reinforce existing power structures through moral policing, algorithmic bias, and hegemonic self-regulation. Theoretical frameworks by Langdon Winner and Gramsci underpin the critique of Facebook's political nature and its role in maintaining dominant ideologies. Through global parallels such as the Arab Spring, the #MeToo movement, and Iranian cyberfeminist initiatives, this paper situates Bangladeshi feminist activism within a transnational dialogue. Ultimately, the study highlights the double-edged role of social media: as both a tool for feminist empowerment and a mechanism of patriarchal control.

Keywords: *Digital Media; Cyberfeminism; Moral Policing*

Introduction

Living in a Muslim dominated heteropatriarchal society, women in Bangladesh experience oppression from various ends. Among many other forms of domination, moral policing on women because of their intersectional positionalities is very prevalent in Bangladesh.

With the emergence of various social media platforms and available internet technology in Bangladesh, women's visibility in the media has taken a new turn. While social media platforms enable

women to share their lived experiences in the form of creating content which sometimes resist oppression, they also exacerbate women's suffering by allowing moral policing and surveillance on them. In this paper I explore the nuanced factors that impact feminist activism in both cyberspace and socio space in Bangladesh. To examine the feminist visibility and their received treatment, I will analyze a cultural text in Bangladesh related to assaulting a woman triggered by moral policing and explore the underlying politics of the social media platform Facebook. Through analyzing various actions surrounding the instance of assault that involves feminist movements both online and offline, reaction of general public, judicial decisions of the court, and the underlying politics of Facebook, I argue that although social media offers an alternative way of feminist activism and resistance, it also reinforces oppression of women by allowing patriarchy to exercise power on them in the form further moral policing bolstered by the bias and the politics of Facebook.

Context

On May 19, 2022, A young University going girl was physically assaulted at the railway station in Narshingdi district, Bangladesh. The assaulted girl was wearing a crop top and jeans which are considered as an indecent dress in the context of Bangladesh. The woman who assaulted her was a middle-aged Muslim woman, a matchmaker by profession who lives in the rural area of Bangladesh. She called other like-minded people and started assaulting the girl and tried to pull off the clothes of the girl. The girl, unable to defend herself, had to take shelter in the station master's room. On that day, no complaints were filed against the issue although the incident was reported on mainstream newspapers. ("Woman Assaulted at Narsingdi Station over 'Indecent Clothes.'"). Later that day, a railway official had filed a case in support of the assaulted girl; however, following the complaint, the high court of Bangladesh questioned the choice of attire of the assaulted girl and reached to the verdict that the battered girl was at fault of not wearing 'decent' dress. The high court also maintained that the girl was wearing "an objectionable dress" which does not fit with the country's culture. The High Court emphasized on preserving the culture and tradition of Bangladesh and defended their statement by exemplifying dress as a part of the culture of Bangladesh. After this incident, instead of in detail inquiry and admonishment of the woman who assaulted the girl, the court ultimately went against the harassed girl and supported the dominant cultural practices of Bangladesh which is run by a heteropatriarchal Muslim oriented society.

The verdict of the High Court gave rise to controversies and political movements not only in physical space but also in social media in Bangladesh. Just after the statement of the High Court, students from different Universities arranged rallies and posted the photos of their rallies on Facebook by supporting and appreciating the arbitration of the High Court of Bangladesh, and they reinforced the fact that women in a Muslim country like Bangladesh should conform to the Islamic code of attire. If not, they deserve harassment and assault. As a counter politics, some other students of tertiary level of Bangladesh raised their voices immediately both in social media and physical spaces against the biased judgement of the High Court. This issue was taken up in the social media and went viral with lots of debates and contestations. Based on this incident, this paper aims to explore the nuanced factors that impact feminist activism in both socio-space and cyber space through the dominant discourse of heteropatriarchal Muslim dominated society of Bangladesh. In this regard, I examine this contemporary incident held in Bangladesh, the visibility and received treatment of the activists in social media, specifically on Facebook. In addition, this paper investigates the underlying politics of Facebook which creates a position for the male to criticize, control and limit feminist activities by posting hate comments, judging women's choice of dress code, and by instructing women to do the male community-constructed righteous works.

Politics of Social Media Platforms

Social networking platforms expand the territory of male surveillance over the activities of women. As technical things possess politics and exerts power (Winner, 2019, p.19), social media being a

technology, facilitates victimization of women by their male counterparts. By the term "politics" (p. 22), Winner pointed to the arrangements of power and authority in human associations and the activities take place within those arrangements. Moreover, by referring to "Inherently political technologies", he maintained that some technologies are by their very nature political in a specific way. Winner also examines and evaluates various kinds of technology that do not allow flexibility and make people choose a particular form of political life (p. 29).

Considering Winner's point of view, the platform of Facebook can also be seen as a political artifact. Nurik in his article, "Men Are Scum: Self-Regulation, Hate Speech, and Gender-Based Censorship on Facebook" demonstrated how the self-regulatory system of the Facebook platform functions in a distinctly gendered way by citing the case study of a group of women who have been censored and harassed on Facebook (p. 2879). In the article, Nurik referred to Gramsci's "theory of hegemony" which suggests that leaders enforce conformity to the existing social order by convincing individuals that their interests are prioritized while masking forces of domination and coercion (Nurik, 2019, p. 2884). Social media corporations try to selectively censor material that might offend dominant interests (along with advertisers) and endanger earnings because they are primarily accountable to shareholders (ibid). The impulse to remove such stuff helps to keep

ideologies in place since it makes the hegemonic viewpoint seem less troublesome to censors because it has been ingrained in societal processes. According to Nurik, the theory of hegemony can be applied to the self-regulation of social media because this system promotes dominant interests at the expense of marginal opinions (p. 4). Moreover, users who report one another for posting 'objectionable' contents support this hegemony (ibid). These users participate in the hegemonic system being unaware of how social media's egalitarian appeals to self-regulation and free speech conceals the subjective judgements made by censors who are undemocratically chosen (Nurik, 2019, p. 7).

Facebook's contradictory censorship practices can be exemplified by the removal of a post by a Norwegian journalist in September 2016. Facebook deleted the post since it contained the picture of a naked child. However, in reality, this picture was of a nine-year-old Vietnamese girl, Phan Thi Kim Phuc, running naked and screaming "Too hot, too hot," having just seriously burned by a napalm attack during the Vietnam war. This photo won the Pulitzer Prize in the year 1972 and had been published on the front page of New York Time. Moreover, this photo symbolizes the brutality of the war and had been printed several times as the iconic photo showing the brutality of the war. The removal of the photo on Facebook received harsh criticisms by publics. When the prime minister of Norway criticized and rebuked Facebook for its censorship strategy by posting the same photo to the platform, Facebook again removed the the Prime Minister's post (Tufekci, 2021, p. 147). Thus, Facebook's censorship policy appears as contradictory and sometimes it fails to understand the true motive of some posts and even it does, it decides to serve the purpose of the politically dominant party.

Despite the underlying politics of Facebook which is often oppressive to the women and non-binary minorities, it engenders a broader space for women and queers to speak up about their oppression, challenge hegemonic perspectives, and protest dominations they encounter because of their precariously intersectional positionality of race, gender, religion, and many more. Since online activism connects geographically distant people, participants communicate feminist ideologies to extensive networks of people, advancing the movement beyond close-knit communities (Crossley, 2015, p. 254). Moreover, Feminists who are active in cyberspace use Facebook as a tool to advertise their offline events and meetings. In the study by Crossley, it is found that feminist activists use their cyber networks of friends to make their events more vibrant by communicating with existing members and by recruiting new members. Besides, copying fliers and making posters are costlier than disseminating Facebook event pages to friendship networks (p. 261). Due to the affordances of the platform of Facebook, feminists

utilize Facebook as a means of building feminist network, creating solidarity, and engendering feminist resistance to various oppression directed towards them.

Among many other ignitions that spark from activism in Facebook, Arab Spring is exemplary. To elaborate, the "Day of Anger" (25 January 2011) marked the start of the Egyptian revolution. After seeing photos of Mohammed Bouaziz setting himself on fire in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid in December 2010, protestors in Egypt began organizing in small groups, going door to door handing out fliers urging people to attend the rallies, posting on Facebook pages, and using Twitter (Rabindranath and Kapil, 2014, p. 130). In addition, Wael Ghonim, an Egyptian working with Google established a Facebook 'group' open for all Facebook members and started a campaign against police brutality. Thus, leading to an online mobilization that ultimately led to the demonstrations in Cairo on 25 January 2011 and, eventually, Mubarak's ouster. The group's name in Arabic, Kulina Khalid Said ('We Are All Khaled Said' WAAKS) expressed the sentiment perfectly, and soon caught the sentiments of the online community (p. 129). This Facebook group was used to provide information to the protesters and create awareness of civil society on the demands and actions taken by the activists. Images of satellite maps marked with arrows indicating the locations protesters should go to evade pro-government forces were also uploaded. The activists received Google maps and gathering locations, which guided them, boosted their morale by highlighting successful activities from other locations, and strengthened the sense of community (p. 130). So, in the time of Arab Spring, the contribution of online activities enable the activists to participate in the movement in a more organized way, and Facebook is one of the vital platforms that plays a key role in organizing the movement. Not only this, the #MeToo campaign is another noteworthy online movement which was possible due to the broad space of online platform. The #MeToo campaign originated in the year 2006 by Tarana Burke to support victims of sexual harassment and end sexual violence. It gained worldwide attention in the year 2017 after well-known celebrities publicized their experiences of violence and sexual assault using the phrase "me too" as a hashtag #MeToo (Roth-Cohen, 2021, p. 4).

#MeToo enables women to shout out their silences by sharing their sexual harassment stories. The statements of the discourses were visible in the individual posts which were mostly unreported, and those personal stories were not merely about the traumatic experiences but also about the exposure of the male sexual offenders (p. 9). Roth-Cohen utters that cyberspace is the place which encourages group members to communicate with other group members whom they consider friends, fostering a sense of community and belonging (p. 12). Thus, during the #Metoo movement on social media, the visibility of women was groundbreaking which exploded into a global cause and sparked 85 million people in a single day to share a hashtag and experiences of their assaults. So, there is no doubt that this rapid spark is only possible in cyberspace, and Facebook is the platform where women feel safer than socio space to express their oppressions and challenges. Likewise, in the article "Cyberfeminism, Iranian Style", Batmanghelichi and Mouri portrays how Iranian rights-based platforms—Bidarzani, Women's Watch, Feminism Every day, My Stealthy Freedom, and ZananTV—and their use of social media vocalize and extend women's rights advocacy. In Iran, after the 2009 presidential election many human right defenders, including bloggers and journalists who participated in the anti-government protest had to leave their country and Iran's domestic security discouraged them to return to the country (p. 50). So, these activists raise their vocal in the cyber space and host webinars, issue public reports, and produce their own "E-board casting platforms" (ibid).

Social media platforms enable women a stage to share and tell stories about their embodied experiences which encourage solidarity and inspires unity. An instance of activism in Facebook by Iranian women can be seen in the Facebook page 'My stealthy freedom'. The page is geared towards promoting that the right for Iranian women to choose whether they want hijab and eventually it transformed into an online campaign where it provides Iranian woman with a space to post their photos removing their headscarves, which violate the Government's Islamic dress code and it also connotes the temporary freeing themselves from the oppression. Similarly, Abbasgholizadeh, the founder of Zanan Tv,

made "an alternative, activist-driven media outlet for women's movement and pro-democracy advocates inside and outside Iran." In addition, Telegram is a messaging application with a focus on speed and security which provide its users to send messages, photos, videos, and files of any type and create channels for broadcasting to unlimited audiences. In Iran, unlike Twitter and Facebook, Telegram is not filtered, for this reason it emerges as one of the leading social media services (p. 60). To clarify, Telegram channel "Women's Watch" is a platform which promotes feminism in cyberspace by allowing people to contribute women-related photos, videos, news, and articles. Unlike "Women's Watch", "Feminism Everyday"- another Telegram channel- produces its own content, and they also promote self-empowerment, women's sexual rights, and decision about their own body and health and aims to educate ordinary Iranian Women. Another platform, Bidarzani began its journey to fight against the government-sponsored Family Protection Bill which allows Iranian males more freedom to polygamy without the proof of financial means or the first wife's consent. This platform in addition to working in cyberspace published and distributed more than one thousand pamphlets in different cities across Iran to reach communities that do not have access to the Internet. Unlike "Feminism Everyday", it attempts to raise awareness via a leftist grassroots-based form of feminism (p. 72). These examples clarify that Facebook and other social platforms of cyberspaces expand the global breadth of feminist activities.

Feminist Activism in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, feminist activists are more visible on social media platforms, especially on Facebook. The reasons which make them utilize cyberspace are the heterogenous patriarchal societal structure and Muslim religion-dominated values. Religious identity and gender identity mingling together form intersectionality for the women in Bangladesh which creates an obstacle to engage with socio space which does not allow a gender-neutral space. Regarding intersectionality, by referring to black women, Crenshaw said that discrimination can move in one direction or another, just like how traffic does at a crossroads. Crenshaw uses the metaphor of cars moving in any number of directions, demonstrates that it can cause an accident if it occurs in an intersection (p. 149). Similarly, being both a Muslim and a woman in Bangladesh, women get trapped in the framework of intersectionality which opens in manifolds of oppression. In the incident that happened at Narshingdi, the High Court's decision went directly against the girl which can be related to which Crenshaw also examined in her paper "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" where she mentioned three cases namely, DeGraffenreid v General Motors, Moore v Hughes Helicopter, and Payne v Travenol. In all the cases the judicial treatment of intersectionality was the same, and in every case, Courts either fail to understand the problem or recognize the problem. Even Crenshaw suggests that black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and black men (p. 149).

As Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country, the culture and values are determined by the subjectivity of male Muslim practitioner, and they share the values of the Islamic dress code and expects women to maintain those dress code. Islam provides specific instructions in terms of the etiquettes of dresses for both males and females with particular guidance to the looseness, thickness, and overall appearance of the dress. Islam also provide guidance regarding the importance of wearing the dress that practitioners of Islam is supposed to wear (Huda 2024). Here it is important to note that Islam does not guide only women to wear any particular dress and it has instructions for men as well. In Bangladesh, the Islamic speakers distort the main theme of the guidance, and to attract people to the "Waaz Mahfil" (Islam Preaching Gathering), they spread unauthentic and provocative information focusing on women (Mahmud 2021), for example they talk about targeting only women that what should they wear and what would be the punishment if they do not maintain the dress code. In response, many people believe them and blindly follow their instructions which are available on YouTube and are equally shared on Facebook. Based on their speeches and references, dominant males and even Islam-oriented females count it as their duty to reform and correct those who do not follow the instructions provided by these preachers. So,

Muslim women who wear western dresses go filtered through this discourse of the dress code of Islam and experience broader discrimination than those who are not Muslim. And as socio space is dominated by this category of people, women feel safer sharing and protesting their oppression in cyberspace.

In the incident at Narshingdi different hegemonic oppression works from different domains of power. Patricia Hill Collins discussed four domains of power from which three can be assigned to explore the incident of Narshingdi which are, the interpersonal domain of power, the disciplinary domain of power, and the hegemonic domain of power. The interpersonal domain functions through routinized, day-to-day practices of how people treat one another (e.g., micro-level of social organization) (Collin, 2022, p. 287), and under this domain of power, the woman who assaulted the girl at the rail station can be counted. Again, Collins says that "the disciplinary domain of power has increased in importance with the growing significance of bureaucracy as a mode of modern social organization. Bureaucracy, in turn, has become important in controlling populations, especially across race, gender, and other markers of difference" (p. 281). The High Court of Bangladesh in this incident plays its role in going against the girl by saying that the dress worn by the girl was objectionable and not goes with the culture of Bangladesh. After the High Court's decision, in Bangladesh, two competing groups come up with different reactions – where one group appreciated the decision, and the other group protested it. Both groups' standpoints were more visible on social media compared to socio space.

| Jahangirnagar University | Jagannath University | Dhaka University |

Figure 1: Images of students from different Universities to praise the High Court

In supporting the decision, in figure 1, it is visible that students from different Universities arranged a rally where very few joined, but they took pictures of these events and posted on social media. On social media, under every picture, hundreds of comments were there which were all full of appreciation and statements against the freedom of wearing any dress. Thus, participation significantly multiplied when the activities were posted on Facebook.

Figure 2: Example of comments found on Facebook

Here in this comment, it is said that if exposing body is a symbol of modernity, animals are the most modern creatures. Later, all the photos were either taken down by Facebook or the admin of the Facebook pages as these are no longer available on Facebook, but the incident in the meantime became viral. Later, reacting to this event, some of the University students again protested in their respective universities by supporting the freedom of wearing dress and their participation was also low in the physical gathering which is showed in the figure 3.

Figure 3: Image of students supporting the freedom of dress code

The protesters in supporting the freedom of dress code too took pictures and posted those on Facebook, but the reactions were entirely against them. The threat was full of hate comments where activists were bullied, mocked, and harassed under memes. Figure 4 is an example of how activists who supported the freedom of dress code are bullied and mocked.

Figure 4: Image of bullying one of the activists.

So, with the expansion of visibility on social media, the harassment and oppression towards women equally increases in the male dominated society. Jessica Megarry in her article "Under the watchful eyes of men: theorising the implications of male surveillance practices for feminist activism on social media" says that given the continuing social and economic power of men, and their historical use of new technologies to coerce, frighten, violate, and ultimately control women as a social group, it follows that feminist activists who directly challenge male social power is also vulnerable to these tactics in social media spaces. Moreover, the visibility of feminist activism on social media then offers men new opportunities to watch, intervene in, and derail women's attempts at digitally mediated consciousness-raising (p. 8). By sketching the example of feminist writer Anita Sarkeesian and the *Free the Nipple* campaign, Jessica Megarry clarifies how social media technologies increase the visibility of feminists which makes individual men surveil the activists. Sarkeesian argues that female characters in video games function as a "decorative virtual sex class" who serve the desire of straight males in her YouTube channel, and for her these types of arguments, she was sent rape and death threats (p. 9). Thus, Jessica in her paper portrays how women's political consciousness is under surveillance, and by providing an example of the campaign *Free the Nipple* (social media enabled feminist campaign), Jessica examines how women are engineered to behave in a "male-friendly manner" on the social platform through male surveillance. *Free The Nipple* is a "real life" equality movement that's sparked a national dialogue. Famous graffiti artists, groups of dedicated women, and influencers such as Miley Cyrus, Liv Tyler, and Lena Dunham have shown public support which garnered international press and created a viral #FreeTheNipple campaign. The issues they're addressing are equal rights for men and women, a more balanced system of censorship, and legal rights for all women to breastfeed in public ("Free The Nipple"). *Free the Nipple*'s promotional imagery, together with its participatory call, aligns with dominant, objectifying visual codes and contributes to the "significant pressure" placed on women to "actively invite a sexualized gaze" in self-representational environments. The Free the Nipple campaign suggests that women are profiled and engineered to behave in a male-friendly manner on social media platforms, even when they are attempting to challenge male power (p. 10). Again, Nakamura in her paper "Blaming, Shaming, and the Feminization of Social Media" maintains that internet provides everyone the power to surveil thus everyone becomes more visible and trackable then ever. Moreover, Female users and other users from marginalized and stigmatized groups are differentially targeted as objects of surveillance and victimization in social media. Nakamura provides an example of a woman named Blanchard who lost her disability insurance being accused of looking too happy in her Facebook pictures. While Blanchard's beach photos were the result of one of the most common and everyday uses of social networks—sharing pictures with friends—they exposed her to comparison with the normative "depressed body," a comparison to which she was found lacking (3). In a related context, this paper also finds that while digital platforms empower professionals to earn through online engagement, they simultaneously exploit the unpaid digital labor of everyday users (Rahman et al. 2025).

However, this study has certain limitations. A broader study could incorporate multiple feminist spaces across Facebook and other platforms to develop a comparative understanding of cyberfeminist resistance. Moreover, while the study critically observes how digital platforms can enable resistance, it also acknowledges their role in reinforcing structural inequalities. It does not, for instance, fully address how marginalized identities—such as queer, trans, disabled, or working-class individuals—navigate and resist digital surveillance and moral policing. These dimensions are crucial, as intersections of gender, sexuality, class, and disability are often erased or sidelined in mainstream digital feminist discourse.

Future investigations will seek to engage with these complexities by building on feminist scholarship on digital communication and identity in South Asia, including work on queerness (Dasgupta, 2017), gender (Joynal & Rahman, 2020) and (Rayhan et al., 2020), sexuality and marginalization (Rashid, 2023), and language (Rahman et al. 2019). In this vein, the study also considers Facebook as a political artifact—a platform whose self-regulation and content moderation often serve hegemonic interests, as noted by Winner (1980) and Nurik (2020). While social media facilitates visibility and voice for feminist

activism, it also reinforces patriarchal structures by enabling moral policing, digital harassment, and censorship, particularly through biased algorithms and community reporting mechanisms.

To conclude, Women in Bangladesh are subjected to many forms of oppression. These oppressions are engendered form the ideology of heteropatriarchal society and religious domination. Women's visibility in the media has changed because of the rise of numerous social media platforms and the availability of internet technology in Bangladesh. While social media platforms give women the opportunity to get justice by sharing embodied experiences, it also makes women's suffering worse by enabling moral policing and surveillance of them.

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