# MISOGYNY & VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN BANGLADESH: IMPLICATIONS FOR PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

This brief presents novel research findings on the relationship between support for misogyny, violence against women, and extremist violence in Bangladesh[1]. It analyses the underexplored relationship between attitudes and practices indicating misogyny (defined as both fear and hatred of women and/or the feminine), support for violence against women, and support for violent extremism.

## KEY FINDINGS

▶ Hostile sexist attitudes toward women and support for violence against women are the factors most strongly associated with support for violent extremism. Individuals who support violence against women are three times more likely to support violent extremism.

▶ Misogyny is integral to the ideology, political identity, and political economy of current violent extremist groups.

▶ Religiosity, age, gender, level of education, employment, or geographic area are not significantly associated with support for violent extremism.

Additional findings:

• The use of threats and violence to force women out of the public sphere is a significant part of the way women's behaviours and mobility are controlled, effectively precluding women from meaningfully participating in leadership and decision-making roles.

• Women's human rights are largely considered a threat in Bangladesh, and women human rights activist are perceived to be seeking to give women power over men.

• Baseline attitudes towards women can be sexist, especially amongst men, and traditional gender norms, including of the male breadwinner and female homemaker, are rigidly enforced.

• Veiling can be enforced through social pressure, threats of violence or outright violence. At the same time, it can make women targets of violence.

• For women, education does not have any significant relationship with the other variables included in the analysis—that is, greater education has little impact on their attitudes towards violent extremism.

• Some politicians as well as extremist groups have been able to effectively mobilise around anti-gender-equal interpretations of issues such as inheritance laws, polygamy, divorce, and alimony.

• Women's use of the Internet and social media is policed as it is often perceived as a route through which they might exercise greater freedom and, by extension, engage in licentious behavior. However, women are more likely than men to identify online extremist material.

## WHAT DID WE FIND?

### Sexism and support for violence against women is correlated with support for violent extremism

Correlations from a countrywide survey reveal the connection between gender regressive views, including support for violence against women and hostile mysogyny, and support for violent extremism in Bangladesh. There is a positive and significant correlation between supporting violent extremism and supporting violence against women, across both genders. That is, people who support violence against women are more likely to support violent extremism. The survey also showed that the relationship between gender regressive views, and support for violent extremism is stronger for women than men in Bangladesh. Anti-women's human rights sentiments are reasonably

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widespread in Bangladesh with almost half of men and a third of women agreeing that women seek special favours and preferential treatment under the guise of equality.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the survey shows that attitudes in support of violence against women and hostile misogyny explains more of the variation in support for violent extremism than other factors, such as age, education, socio-economic background or religiosity.

## Figure 1.

*Correlation between support for violent extremism and other variables in Bangladesh, disaggregated by sex*
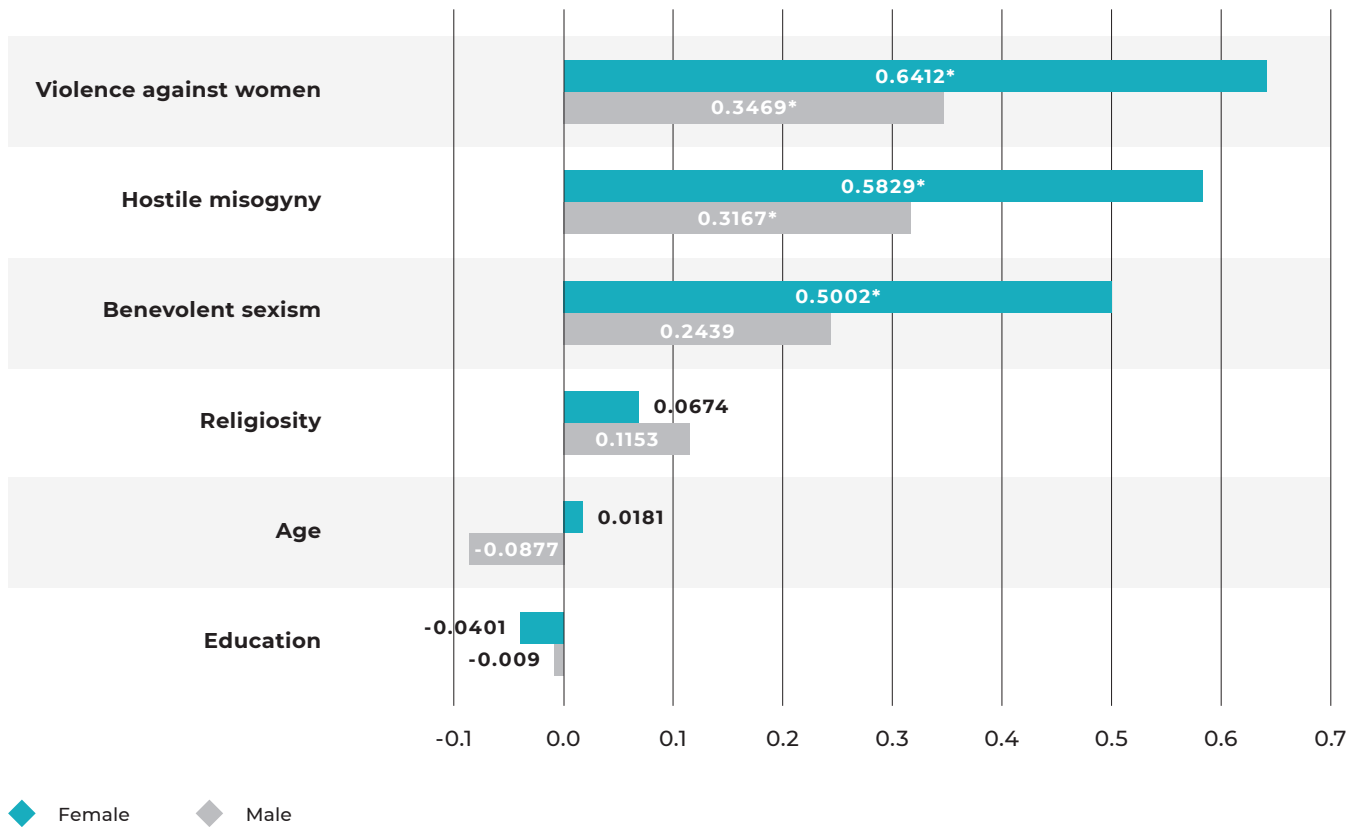


* Indicates statistical significance.

The Pearson correlation coefficient ('r') shows the strength and direction (positive or negative) of the association between the variables and support for violent extremism. A coefficient of 1 indicates a strong positive relationship. A coefficient of -1 indicates a strong negative relationship. A result of 0 indicates no relationship at all. The definition of terminology included is available in the full research paper.

Gender regressive views manifest themselves in various ways in society in Bangladesh, including through the exclusion of women from the public sphere, restrictions on women's access to the internet and the ability to move freely, and lack of support for women's human rights. Women's safety and security in public and private spaces is linked to political and religious notions of acceptable gender norms in Bangladesh, which is turn is exploited by violent extremist organisations.

## Exclusion of women from public space is violently policed

Women's access to the public sphere is widely contested in Bangladesh. In relation to women's participation in

public leadership and decision-making, participants surveyed exhibited hostility with nearly half (46 per cent) of Bangladeshi men, and 38 per cent of Bangladeshi women agreeing that political leadership should be in the hands of men. Women were considered not equipped with the skills or education to take part in public leadership and decision-making due to their confinement and association with the private sphere. Responses from young men were ambiguous and appeared to rely on whether the participant had personal experience of women in his life being involved in leadership and political activities. When women do seek to participate in the public sphere, they can be subject to psychological, physical, and economic violence, including by their family members.

Violence and insecurity were issues for young women, who voiced concerns over personal safety in a variety of contexts outside the home. In this regard, veiling or dressing modestly was considered important to both men and women as a way of ensuring safety while in public spaces. Some young men articulated that not abiding by rules related to dressing modestly was the reason some women faced insecurity or harassment, while others repeated the common myth that a lack of veiling may incite men to commit sexual violence. Threats of sexual and gender-based violence were considered measures through which to police women's attire in the public sphere. Conversely, veiling can make women targets of violence, with actors profiling and targeting women wearing veils in connection to counter terrorism strategies.

## Restrictions on women and girls extends to the digital space

The use of social media is also gender-specific in Bangladesh, with restrictions placed on women and girls in relation to accessing the internet, social media, and smart phones. Women and girls' access to the digital space is blamed for sexual and gender-based violence, rather than men's behaviour and gender norms. In this regard, many people were suspicious of the sexual freedom associated with social media. Some participants made remarks regarding the use of mobile phones and social media as a mechanisms to talk to members of the opposite sex, while others noted that social media was a way for individuals and groups to share religious ideology that promotes more conservative gender norms, including relating to Islamic dress codes. Young women also noted the use of social media to intimidate or harass women, including by using photographs to publicly shame women and girls.

Despite women's lower incidence of internet use, they identified online material as 'incitement to jihad' more frequently than men did. This indicates a possible intervention point in the online space in Bangladesh.

## Shrinking space for women's human rights fuelled by sexist attitudes and perceived threats to male hegemony

Underlying the exclusion of women from the public sphere are sexist attitude towards women and a backlash against advances in women's human rights.

Women's human rights are largely understood as a threat in Bangladesh, with women's rights activists and women-led civil society increasingly being targeted. A popular Islamist grouping, Hefazat-e-Islam was established in 2010 to oppose government plans to give women the same rights of inheritance as men.

While many people in Bangladesh (41 per cent) are worried about the effect of rising religious fundamentalism on women's human rights, many people also think that women's rights activists are seeking for women to have power over men. Women were more afraid of shrinking women's human rights than men were. Men, on the other hand, were more worried that women's rights activists were seeking for women to have power over men. In Bangladesh, the gender differences within the country were marked, with 46 per cent of men suspicious of activists, while 45 per cent of women disagreed or strongly disagreed that women's rights activists promoting women's supremacy.

## Education, division of labour, and gender norms

Education came up frequently as a site of contestation around gender norms, both in terms of its importance in gender equality efforts and its impact on changing harmful gender norms, including related to FGM, dowry, child marriage and honour killings, as well as. However, survey results from the Bangladesh sample, showed that there is no relationship between support for harmful gender norms and violence against women and girls, and a person's education.

Moreover, education level does not affect support for the gender division of labour. While education for girls/young women was seen as a positive by most participants, working outside the home is not. This is shaped by several forces, including the expectations of a woman's role after marriage, as well as the expectation that a husband should be able to provide all that his wife and family needs. A significant number of young men did not want their wives to work. They justified this by referring to wives' care obligations, to religious roles and expectations, and to women's safety from sexual and gender-based violence. Women's rights activists raised the paradox of women's empowerment and attempts to support women's access to employment in the face of religious fundamentalism and associated gender roles. There is discord between the reliance on women's labour as a contributor to Bangladesh's economic development and the pressure for women to subscribe to traditional gender norms that prevent them from joining the formal economy.

## Women's participation in extremist activities

The role of women in extremist organisations was discussed into two ways: as active participants and as supporters. The first role was identified by participants as a growing phenomenon in Bangladesh. Participants frequently acknowledged seeing news reports of women's

involvement in violent extremist organisations but struggled to explain the women's motivations. In this regard, survey results were split between those who think women are forced to join violent extremist organisations by male relatives (42 per cent), and those who think women join of their own volition (36 per cent). Participants discussed how women may not be active in their extremism, but rather support extremist organisations in different ways, including by encouraging men to attend meetings hosted by violent extremist organisation. Civil society highlighted the coercive manner in which some women find themselves working in support of violent extremist organisations as a result of gender norms that emphasise obedience in wives and daughters.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- ## Promote women's participation in the public sphere and support women's freedom of movement.

  In Bangladesh, the use of violence to force women out of the public sphere is a significant part of the way women's behaviour, choices, and mobility are controlled. Women's freedom of movement has become imperative as women increasingly adopt roles outside the home and greater participation in public life. Harmful social norms that result in restrictions on women's activities outside the home should be addressed and women's participation in public life and freedom of mobility protected through gender-inclusive policies and initiatives.

- ## Presence of gender regressive views utilised as an early warning sign of violent extremism.

  There is a positive and significant correlation between "Supporting Violent Extremism" and "Supporting Violence Against Women" across both genders. Risk assessment tools for violent extremism should routinely consider gender norms, including attitudes such as hostile misogyny and perceptions regarding violence against women. In addition, evidence on individuals perpetrating violence against women should inform efforts to counter and prevent violent extremism.

- ## Further research is needed to understand the link between women supporting gender regressive views and violent extremism.

  Analysis illustrates that the relationship between gender regressive views, including support for violence against women and hostile misogyny, and support for violent extremism is stronger for women than men in Bangladesh. Further research on this is required to understand the drivers of this association, including the emphasis placed on wifely obedience, coercive control and women's empowerment through radicalisation, and how it impacts women's ability to contribute to or prevent violent extremism.

- ## Promote and protect women's human rights, and the space for women human rights activists and civil society.

  Given the strong correlation between "Supporting Violent Extremism" and "Supporting Violence Against Women", promoting and protecting women's human rights, as well as supporting the work of women human rights activists and civil society becomes paramount. Women human rights activists and civil society can provide a crucial bridge between the community and efforts to prevent violent extremism, as well as ensure the security priorities of women and girls are understood.

- ## Women identifying and preventing online recruitment by violent extremist organisations.

  Social media was confirmed as an important mode of recruitment by violent extremist organisations in Bangladesh. Despite women's lower incidence of internet use, women identified online material as 'incitement to jihad' more frequently than men did, indicating a possible intervention point in the online space in Bangladesh.

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