

The Gender Wall: Digital Violence and Women in Politics in Bangladesh

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Purpose:

Despite techno-optimist rhetoric, digital technology has not simply expanded women's political participation; it has proven to be a double-edged development, enabling new forms of violence against women in politics. This report seeks to demonstrate how technologically-facilitated gender based violence (TFGBV) has harmed women's political participation and representation in Bangladesh, specifically in the February 12, 2026 national elections. While these attacks have taken a variety of forms, the three most commonly-reported ones are: appearance-based attacks, promotion of harmful gender stereotypes, and humiliation through deepfakes and digitalized sexual violence. As of 2025, Bangladesh has taken a notable step by introducing several policies to address online harms, most importantly a Cyber Security Ordinance that outlines procedures for responding to diverse forms of TFGBV, such as sexual harassment. However, these policies fall short of truly addressing such violence primarily due to legal loopholes, weak enforcement mechanisms, and the anonymous nature of digital violence, which complicates prevention, investigation, and accountability. Therefore, it is imperative that the legal and institutional frameworks in Bangladesh take preventive and interventive action in order to provide meaningful forms of recourse and justice for survivors of TFGBV.

Significance:

In the 2024 July Uprising in Bangladesh, women, particularly university students and garment workers, played a pivotal role in the People's Movement that successfully protested the dictatorial government and ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.¹ Since then, however, women's contributions to pro-democracy movements and the current Bangladeshi government have not been reflected in the demographic makeup of the nation's political system. This report adds a critical lens to the broader issue of gender parity in politics by evaluating TFGBV as a primary deterrent to women's political participation and representation in Bangladesh.

The February 12 National Election and TFGBV: What Happened?

On February 8, 2026, just days before the national election, only 78 of the 1,981 parliamentary candidates were women, accounting for less than 4 percent of all candidates. The election ultimately resulted in the election of just seven women to parliament, marking a significant setback for women's political representation, particularly given the central role women played in the July Uprising.² While this disparity

¹ Taylor, Jerome. "Women Are Playing Key Roles in Protests across South Asia. The Backlash They Face Is Often Heavily Gendered." CNN, 30 Nov. 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/11/30/asia/women-south-asia-protests-intl-hnk>.

² Ghosh, Rituja. "Bangladesh's 2026 Election: Where Are the Women?" *The Diplomat*, 27 Feb. 2026, thediplomat.com/2026/02/bangladeshs-2026-election-where-are-the-women/.

can be attributed to various reasons, including major political parties such as the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), National Citizen Party (NCP), and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) failing to support women candidates, the pervasiveness of technology-facilitated gender based violence (TFGBV) also greatly chilled women's political participation. Indeed, the United Nations (UN) reported on February 11 that women political leaders in Bangladesh were "reporting increased incidents of cyberbullying, deepfakes, coordinated harassment, and image-based abuse, including AI-altered and sexualized content," posing a deep concern for how social media and the digital revolution might worsen continue women's political representation in Bangladesh.³

Key Forms and Examples of TFGBV in Bangladesh:

Appearance-Based Attacks:

One form of TFGBV that has been documented in many cases in Bangladesh is online harassment over apparel. Women candidate **Dilshana Parul** of the NCP said that in the past election, she faced relentless trolling over her choice to wear a headscarf. She also said that this cyber abuse was not just from rival parties, but "even those who call themselves progressive," highlighting the gendered component of this violence, with gender concerns superseding political ideology for many.⁴ Another woman named **Farzana Sithi**, an activist involved in numerous anti-discrimination movements, was targeted last year in one of content creator Khaled Mahumud Hridoy's Facebook Live sessions, where he threatened and encouraged raping and assaulting her, citing her clothing and lifestyle as justifications.⁵

Gender Stereotypes:

Another common form of TFGBV is attacks on character, which politicians like Parul say do not occur on the same level for men. NCP candidate **Nabila Tasnid** corroborates this claim by saying that her campaign was targeted by opposition coalition-backed groups who spread online propaganda and misinformation, questioning her character and women's ability to lead.⁶ This stands in stark contrast to the harassment that men in politics experience primarily on the basis of their political stances and business arrangements.

Additionally, one way that TFGBV thrives is because of the gendered nature of family caretaking. On election day, a reporter from the *Financial Express* stated, "When cyber-abuse goes viral, it does not target the woman alone, it engulfs her entire family. Many female candidates are mothers, and family support is essential for a political career. For those with children, enduring sustained and public attacks becomes an

³ United Nations. "United Nations Calls for Safe, Inclusive and Meaningful Participation of Women in Elections." *United Nations Bangladesh*, 2026, bangladesh.un.org/en/309812-united-nations-calls-safe-inclusive-and-meaningful-participation-women-elections.

⁴ IANS. "Cyber Abuse, Threats Shadow Women Candidates in Bangladesh Elections." IANS News, *IANS*, 8 Feb. 2026, ianslive.in/cyber-abuse-threats-shadow-women-candidates-in-bangladesh-elections--20260208131004.

⁵ Voices for Interactive Choice and Empowerment. "Digitally Exposed: Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in Bangladesh – Trends, Cases, and Recommendations." *Voicebd.org*, 4 Aug. 2025, voicebd.org/2025/08/04/digitally-exposed-technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-in-bangladesh-trends-cases-and-recommendations/.

⁶ IANS. "Cyber Abuse, Threats Shadow Women Candidates in Bangladesh Elections."

overwhelming burden.”⁷ This demonstrates why TFGBV is particularly effective in intimidating women candidates specifically.

Deepfakes and Digital Sexual Violence:

Other documented forms of TFGBV targeting women political leaders in Bangladesh include video deepfakes that falsely attribute statements or actions to them as part of deliberate smear campaigns aimed at undermining their public standing. Furthermore, there is an increasing prevalence of sexually explicit deepfakes and digitally manipulated images that depict these leaders in pornographic contexts, a form of violence that rarely impacts men or has the same implications for their reputation.⁸

The Current State of Policy:

Below are some existing policies in Bangladesh that had specific goals to address TFGBV:

Cyber Security Ordinance (CSA) (2025): Punishes sexual harassment and revenge porn with up to 5 years and a fine of up to 2,000,000 Bangladesh Taka (20 Lakh), or about \$16.4k USD.

Pornography Control Act (PCA) (2012): Punishes the distribution and, sometimes even consumption, of pornography with a maximum of 8 years along with a fine of up to TK 200,000

Despite the fact that Bangladesh has taken numerous legal and legislative actions to address the prevalence of TFGBV, their efforts have fallen short to truly protect women, especially in the realm of political participation. While this failure can be attributed to many reasons, here are three that appear salient:

Legal Loopholes:

In the 2025 CSA, offenses such as revenge porn include a requirement that they were committed with the “intent to harm.” This requirement places the evidentiary burden on the victim to prove the harasser’s state of mind, often leading to case dismissals.⁹

Furthermore, the ordinance only punishes “content intended for sexual harassment, revenge porn, child sexual abuse material, or content intended for sextortion,” creating a loophole where individuals can claim that the acts they committed were not with such intents.¹⁰

⁷ Doulot Akter Mala. “From Uprising to Exclusion.” *The Financial Express*, 2026, <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/views/from-uprising-to-exclusion>.

⁸ Voices for Interactive Choice and Empowerment. “Digitally Exposed: Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in Bangladesh – Trends, Cases, and Recommendations.”

⁹ Roy, P. Chandra. “(PDF) The Cyber Security Ordinance 2025: An Unofficial English Translation 1.” *ResearchGate*, 2025,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/398270759_The_Cyber_Security_Ordinance_2025_An_Unofficial_English_Translation_1.

¹⁰ Roy, P. Chandra. “(PDF) The Cyber Security Ordinance 2025: An Unofficial English Translation 1.”

Additionally, the 2012 PCA further defines pornography as any material that is likely to increase sexual sensation or desires, again increasing the burden of proof on the victim, considering that sexually explicit deepfakes or doctored images of women politicians may not be spread for the purpose of increasing these sensations or desires.¹¹

Lack of Procedure:

Bangladesh's Police Headquarters has established the Police Cyber Support Centre for Women (PCSW), providing a hotline for women to report cases of TFGBV. Between 2020 and 2024, more than 42 thousand complaints of cyber harassment were filed.¹² However, there lacks clarity on what the PCSW does with these complaints, including what the referral process looks like to police investigators, the determination of whether or not an investigation is warranted, and the process and timeline of investigation.

Anonymized Nature of Violence

Lastly, because much of this violence takes place on social media or the digital sphere, it is mostly committed anonymously. The lack of resources dedicated to tracking these perpetrators, as well as failure of cooperation with these social media companies, makes any sort of legal recourse difficult to achieve. Furthermore, major tech companies like Meta who own platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have stayed silent on the issue of TFGBV while implementing policies that permit violent content to go relatively unchecked. For instance, Meta recently updated their community standards to make it more difficult to remove content sexualizing a public figure, writing, “we will remove this content *when we have confirmation from the target* or an authorized representative of the target that the content is unwanted.”¹³ This policy demonstrates a significant weakness in their standards where women and other gender and sexual minorities (GSM) have the burden of reporting cases of TFGBV themselves. Additionally, when content sexualizing a public figure is not removed immediately, it tends to circulate fast before the figure or an authorized user can bring forth a claim to the platform, allowing too much time for harm to occur.

Immediate Steps Toward Reform:

Strengthening/Reforming Language in Existing Legislation;

Amend the 2025 CSA to remove the “intent to harm” requirement and punish acts solely based on the acts themselves, rather than what they might have been intended to do. This removes room for the amount of ambiguity in current cases that places an undue burden of proof on the victims and survivors of TFGBV.

Establish a Cyber Observatory on TFGBV:

¹¹ Rahman, Jahidur. “Bangladesh Pornography Control Act 2012 | PDF in English.” *Scribd*, 2018, <https://www.scribd.com/document/550543739/porn-in-english-act2018>.

¹² Akhter, Naznin. “Women ‘Easy Targets’ in Cyberspace Too.” *Prothomalo*, 29 Jan. 2025, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/n09z2iw96x>.

¹³ Meta. “Community Standards.” *Meta*, 2026, <https://transparency.meta.com/policies/community-standards/>.

Bangladesh should establish an independent body to monitor digital attacks on women, with a subgroup dedicated to address attacks on women in public life or high-profile women who are most at risk. This body must collaborate with (or pressure) social media companies to take down malicious posts expediently and attempt to track down perpetrators. Furthermore, they must collaborate with the police and judiciary in order to develop a procedure for investigating and filing these cases, ensuring that women can seek legal redress in a timely manner.

Mandatory Interventionist Trainings:

Implement trauma-informed digital forensic training for police units to ensure that investigations are not hindered by bias and that women who experience TFGBV are not further victimized or shamed by officers. This can be achieved through partnerships with NGOs such as the Zero Abuse Project, which provide training and webinars on a variety of topics including sextortion and recognizing and responding to TFGBV.¹⁴ Furthermore, women candidates and politicians should receive dedicated training on TFGBV and procedures for redress so that they can advocate for themselves.

Transnational Exchange of Knowledge and Support

As technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) continues to transcend national borders, stronger transnational collaboration is essential to exchange knowledge, share effective strategies, and develop coordinated responses. This is particularly important across Muslim-majority societies, where advocates face many shared challenges while working within diverse legal, political, and cultural environments. Feminist networks that convene activists, scholars, practitioners, and survivors across these contexts, such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), are uniquely positioned to facilitate this exchange and strengthen collective advocacy. Highlighting successful policies across the globe are also an important way to model effective response as well as and survivor-centered interventions.¹⁵ In the absence of meaningful action by major technology companies to prevent and address online gender-based violence as well as binding international mechanisms, sustainable reform must be driven by locally grounded expertise, regional solidarity, and survivor-centered approaches that prioritize accountability, safety, and justice.

¹⁴ Zero Abuse Project. “Trainings Archive.” *Zero Abuse Project*, 2026, https://zeroabuseproject.org/trainings/?_training_categories=technology-facilitated-crimes.

¹⁵ For Politics Foundation’s Safety in Office Repository that lists country-by-country collection of legal instruments designed to prevent, investigate, and punish threats or violence against public officeholders, particularly women, visit: <https://www.betterpolitics.foundation/safety-in-office-repository>

About the Author:

Bio: Armaan Sharma is a WLUMML research fellow, and an undergraduate student at Stanford University who's passionate about leveraging law and policy to advance justice for marginalized communities. He is particularly committed to uplifting gender and sexual minorities (GSM) and preventing intergenerational cycles of violence through intersectional, community-driven advocacy. His work has spanned grassroots organizing, policy-work and lobbying, and community-engaged research, with a focus on teen dating violence (TDV) prevention. Prior to WLUMML, he has partnered with numerous community-based organizations (CBOs) such as Futures Without Violence and Safe Alternatives to Violent Environments to develop youth programming, lead public education campaigns, and inform equitable policy solutions rooted in lived experience. He is driven by a vision of justice that blends legal reform with cultural transformation.