



ADDRESSING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV) IN BANGLADESH: WHAT ROLES FOR FAITH-INSPIRED ACTORS?

A Review of Enduring Challenges, Ongoing Efforts, and Possibilities Emerging Following the COVID-19 Emergency

Aisha Binte Abdur Rob, Sarah Thompson

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 emergencies have shone new light on gender-based violence (GBV), a long-standing challenge for Bangladesh, making the problems more visible and exacerbating them, with worrying indicators of rising domestic abuse and more child marriages. Religious actor roles, always a significant factor especially in perpetuating these trends, are also seen in new light, both to address negative facets that condone GBV and to advance positive collaboration. This report presents findings from a review of these factors, drawing both on available literature and interviews with both religious and non-religious entities working to address GBV. It elaborates specific action proposals addressed to the different communities involved: faith and non-faith actors, governments, external partners, and media.

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INTRODUCING THE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic finds Bangladeshi society at an important inflection point that opens new ways for faith-inspired and gender-focused secular development actors to collaborate in meaningful social change that improves the welfare of Bangladeshi women, girls, and families. GBV plagues women in every region and faith, but pre-COVID-19, Bangladesh reported concerning high numbers of sexual violence, domestic abuse, and child marriage. A 2015 study by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics¹ indicates that almost two-thirds of married women had experienced physical or sexual violence from their husbands at least once. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports that Bangladesh ranks fourth in the world for child marriage rates.² Sadly, these social ills have been aggravated during the pandemic and lockdown, heightening pressures to identify societal approaches to address them.

Previous public health crises like Ebola have taught us that disease outbreaks can exacerbate entrenched gender inequities and amplify the risks that women and girls will be exposed to violence linked specifically to their gender. The COVID-19 pandemic notably included health-linked restrictions that increased psychological and physical risks for women and girls, already facing the negative challenges of entrenched gender inequality and discrimination. Economic downturns, closure of schools and houses of worship, and lockdown orders decrease women's mobility, exposing them to domestic violence (DV) or increased early and forced marriages. Lockdowns restrict formal and informal services to prevent, report, and support victims of GBV or move them to remote support, however ineffective when it comes to certain forms of GBV.

The turbulent waves of the GBV “shadow pandemic” cast new light on the roles of faith-inspired actors (FIAs). FIAs, understood here as organizations with explicit links to religious bodies and teachings, and faith leaders are pillars of social authority and support. In times of crises, their roles expand to fulfil myriad social functions, as first responders, social workers, guidance counsellors, adjudicators, mediators, and advocates of social change, among other roles. They are often the sole dependable link to some of the most vulnerable and remote groups in society and can build social trust and widen reach, often quite rapidly, that support equity and efficacy in social resilience and recovery efforts.³ Religious actors have seen greater expectations and practical challenges linked to GBV during this crisis period, with positive and negative roles: condoning GBV, during and beyond pandemic situations, or displaying fresh interest in addressing it. With significant potential to combat GBV, deep and sustained engagement is needed for meaningful gains. It is thus a concern that secular gender activists and organizations are seldom willing to partner with faith actors and that many FIAs are resistant to the agendas and advocacy of their secular counterparts. One observer during a May 2020 webinar lamented that while emergencies trigger collaboration and produce fruitful partnerships, they tend to be sporadic, short-lived, and lack the deeper engagement that can be sustained beyond an immediate crises.⁴

Divides between the secular and faith worlds cut across the globe, but distinctive historical factors for Bangladesh present difficulties in bridging them, especially in matters of GBV, and gender more broadly. The mutual suspicion has political and historical roots, with some influential FIAs and faith-inspired organizations (FIOs) seeing mainstream development as Western-led, and some secular groups seeing religion as inherently divisive or as institutions that justify regressive norms (especially within development circles in the 1990s)⁵. Some FIOs:

“...operate from an alternate Islamic development discourse, with priorities and goals that can be quite divergent from those familiar to the Western development community. These groups exhibit a great amount of diversity with various political and

ideological associations and histories. Security-driven agendas of Western governments post 9/11 further complicate attempts at engagement and have led to a preoccupation with radicalization and militancy that overshadows discussion of grassroots Islamic development efforts. This has contributed to a pervading atmosphere of suspicion and alienation. The increased scrutiny of Islamic charities forced many to operate in relative secrecy on the margins of mainstream development.”⁶

Few contemporary studies assess the relationships between the two camps in times of crisis and evaluate collaborative efforts. Taking stock during the COVID-19 emergencies thus has particular importance in the light of global shifts towards building networks between secular and religious bodies, including in Bangladesh. This offers fertile ground to weed out old misconceptions and cultivate shared values and common aspirations that encourage collaboration to counter GBV.

This report addresses lacuna in the current literature by assessing comparative perceptions and approaches of faith and secular actors vis-à-vis GBV and their experiences with each other, with a view to identifying emerging possibilities for sustained collaboration in countering GBV. Increased GBV during the COVID-19 emergencies has attracted considerable attention to how the pandemic has exacerbated the plight of women in Bangladesh and elsewhere. However, linkages between faith actors and anti-GBV measures are not well documented, and few guides exist on ways to counter GBV collaborating through a faith framework. The report highlights faith linkages in GBV responses, exploring how FIAs can be both part of the problem and the solution. Historically, FIAs have either explicitly or implicitly endorsed DV and child marriage, or they have resisted progressive policy change on gender parity. However, FIAs also have distinct strengths in speaking out against GBV globally, drawing on funding and mobilizing volunteers and fostering deeper normative changes in society.⁷ Painting an accurate picture of the Bangladeshi faith landscape, in all its complexities, and examining the strengths and weaknesses of countering GBV through a progressive, human-rights based faith framework, is important.

This report has five parts. Following this introduction, a review of the context and literature provides an overview of GBV in Bangladesh prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, noting gaps in knowledge, achievements, and challenges. The third section outlines the research rationale and design, followed by thematic findings and analysis, and finally paths forward and a concluding note.

CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Increased domestic violence in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 emergency period has been convincingly documented, despite mobility restrictions and the general under-reporting of GBV.⁸ Safety and security emerged as key concerns for women and girls, as lockdowns and constrained livelihoods placed increased pressures on households, triggering GBV in various forms.⁹ In tandem, the pandemic overwhelmed support, security, and social welfare systems, limiting the availability of these key protections for survivors of such violence.¹⁰ These systems are intrinsically constrained in meeting survivors’ needs, given that they operate largely in isolation from one another and do not adopt a survivor-centered approach to their support mechanisms. Protection and support mechanisms are activated only where survivors can reach them. This situation was worsened during the pandemic, as women and girls were confined within closed quarters with their abusers, and they often lacked the means to communicate with key service providers. UN Women, for instance, found that at least 30% women and girls do not know where they can find support when faced with abuse and violence.¹¹

Gaps in protection are well-understood, and significant efforts have been made to address them during the pandemic. Responses to GBV have been central to the COVID-19 responses of many organizations. Organizations dedicated to countering GBV devised innovative approaches to circumvent obstacles to support and protect GBV survivors. Their responses are assessed below, but the faith dimension of GBV is only sparingly noted as part of response plans and recommendations for future anti-GBV work. This links to gulfs between development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding on the one hand, and faith worlds on the other, which is particularly wide on issues affecting women's rights. Restrictive approaches towards addressing GBV are common around the world. In Bangladesh, this suspicion is deeply rooted in the historical struggle for women's empowerment in the face of staunchly conservative religious attitudes. A review of the literature underscores the importance of engaging with FIAs to ensure sustainable progress towards combatting GBV.¹²

Faith is intertwined with the specific forms of GBV that are the focus of this report – domestic violence and child marriage. A significant body of research explores relationships between religious attitudes and the perpetuation of domestic violence.¹³ Much of this literature is based on findings from Christian denominations; for example, the highest rates of spousal abuse in Christian communities have been found

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among men who had moderate church attendance;¹⁴ in many cases, perpetrators drew on scriptures to justify their use of violence and tended to subscribe to more patriarchal and non-egalitarian gender norms, including negative attitudes towards women.¹⁵ On the obverse side, survivors subscribe to religious views that might discourage them from reporting violence and seeking support.¹⁶ This raises important questions about the kind of scriptural

interpretations perpetrators, survivors, and communities as a whole internalize and invoke in familial settings. How faith doctrines and directives are interpreted, communicated, and understood in faith communities is thus central in efforts to curb domestic violence.¹⁷

Bangladesh shares a patriarchal social structural with many societies, with men dominating in socioeconomic and private spaces. Subordination of women, a common feature,¹⁸ disempowers them, often making them victims of violence.¹⁹ Religion is central to the social structure and patterns of power distribution, as there tends to be great social trust in religious institutions like mosques and madrasas. These institutions, and religious life as a whole, represent spiritual beliefs but are also foundational to the political, economic, and social lives of individuals.²⁰ Villages and localities across Bangladesh have mosques headed by imams, who are invariably men, as women are not eligible for this post. The imam generally leads daily prayers and performs religious rituals. They adhere to particular schools of Islamic thought, such as Deobandi, Wahabi, Barelvi, or Shia, which shape the way they interpret, practice, and preach Islam. While there are important distinctions between the different sects, there is a shared patriarchal undergirding.

In practical ways, religion features prominently in how domestic violence plays out in the lives of individual victims. Victims of DV in Bangladesh seldom have access to the services of professionals like psychologists or social workers. Moreover, even where such services are available, many victims, especially victims of domestic violence, will not use these services because such violence is deemed to be “private,” matters of the household, not to be disclosed to outsiders.²¹

It is often imams or religious leaders that people turn to for counselling and dispute resolution in issues of domestic violence, marriage, divorce, and inheritance.²² Research on the nature and quality of counselling and support services that FIAs can offer to victims is quite limited, especially in the context of lower-income countries. From what can be inferred from the experiences of wealthier countries, the

evidence suggests that most religious leaders lack the training needed to address domestic violence in their communities and thus often fail to intervene effectively.²³ Anecdotal knowledge suggests that religious leaders generally address domestic violence and other forms of GBV based on their traditional, patriarchal framework for understanding gender relations, so their interventions reflect these normative perspectives. Male dominance in marital relationships is assumed, as part of a broader male-centric religiosity.²⁴ While religious leaders do support victims in some cases,²⁵ compared to other potential support groups such as relatives, friends, lawyers, psychologists, and women's groups, considerable evidence suggests that faith groups have negative effects on victims' well-being and generally low levels of success in providing support to them.²⁶ FIAs are rarely proactive,²⁷ suggesting a latent potential of FIAs as a facilitative force in victims' recovery processes.²⁸

Faith can be a contributing factor in perpetuating abuse, when doctrines are drawn upon to rationalize and even justify violence. Religious leaders' roles in countering DV should be understood within the terms of religious teachings. Most Muslim scholars contend that the marital relationship should accord the husband a position of leadership while the wife should assume a subservient position.²⁹ Opinions are, however, divided on whether the husband has authority to physically hit the wife.³⁰ Conservative religious leaders tend to emphasize traditional gender roles, often persuading victims to conform to such role expectations, despite violence and suffering. Thus, intrinsic religious beliefs and attitudes can sometimes predispose victims to adopt unhealthy coping responses to violence.³¹

Child marriage engenders is a human rights violation, linked to early and systemic forms of GBV,³² with particularly strong correlations with GBV.³³ It has a severely deleterious impact on many aspects of women's well-being and agency, from their education, participation in the labor force, and decision-making, to physical, reproductive, and mental health.³⁴ Bangladesh numbers among the world's top 10 countries with high rates of child marriage; more than half the women in Bangladesh are married before they reach the age of 18 years old.³⁵ The causal factors behind child marriage are wide-ranging, from socioeconomic status to cultural and religious traditions, and it has historically been aggravated during periods of crisis, similar to the trends observed during the present pandemic.³⁶ Despite significant legal intervention in this area, little headway has been made to curb child marriage. Legislative reforms have not had much success, either because they cannot be enforced in the face of normative resistance from society or because the laws themselves allow for broad exceptions (across different countries and cultures, religious arguments quite often support exceptions to legal minimum ages for girls to married where there is parental consent).³⁷

FIAs are significant players to efforts to counter both child marriage and GBV.³⁸ Faith leaders can have critical roles in intervening and preventing gender-based abuse,³⁹ but the challenges to forging and sustaining effective partnerships with gender activists are formidable. Evidence suggests that faith leaders, despite being among the first responders on scenes of GBV, seldom adopt proactive stances.⁴⁰ Secular gender activists often argue that faith perpetuates the themes of domination and subordination in family settings, resulting in GBV. Feminists quite commonly view religion as the institutionalization of patriarchy's oppressive power.⁴¹ Similarly, FIAs may have misgivings that impede partnerships with their secular counterparts - faith leaders and communities sometimes view secular interventions in GBV contexts as alienating victims from their faith.⁴² Arguments around Western cultural imposition often surface in FIA challenges to anti-GBV work, challenging core feminist and secular values in these matters. FIAs in Bangladesh and elsewhere also find it difficult to engage with GBV issues partly because they are complicit in the deep-rooted cultures of abuse and oppression, which are common across religious traditions.

Intersections of faith and gender suggest broad trends in faith roles in facilitating and countering GBV, which seem comparable cross-culturally and across different religious traditions. Religious views and attitudes towards child marriage are very diverse. The example of Muslim leaders in Burkina Faso, for

instance, is instructive as it reveals widely varying interpretive attitudes towards Islamic law on gender roles, pregnancy outside marriage, and social mores.⁴³ This underscores the importance of adapting policies and programs to particular local contexts. Across diverse contexts, faith leaders' roles in providing moral and spiritual guidance can be critical in combatting child marriage.⁴⁴

In Bangladesh, the historical context explains in large measure the mutual mistrust between religious and non-religious perspectives. While Muslim traditions historically posed numerous barriers to women's advancement, Bangladesh's emergence as an independent nation-state is deeply intertwined with women's empowerment; women's education, attire, and cultural self-expression were symbolic of Bengali

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nationalism, powerfully juxtaposed against West Pakistani culture. In trenchant critiques of religious roles, Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain observed that inimical effects of purdah norms and the patriarchy embedded in Islamic practice reinforce women's subordination in society.⁴⁵ Yet during the independence struggles, high levels of violence against women (VAW) birthed the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association, a legal organization for women's rights. Later, with the suppression of civil and political rights and growing Islamization of the state under General Hussain Muhammad Ershad's authoritarianism, secular feminist organizations like Naripokkho were born, working to advance women's empowerment through feminist opposition to the state.⁴⁶

Religion has often constrained the space for advocating women's rights in Bangladesh's political landscape, whether through the express focus on Islam by military dictators or the implicit power accorded in alliances of centrist and Islamist parties. Through the 1990s, secular gender activists mobilized around the themes of VAW and the Islamization of the state. This placed them in the path of direct confrontation with Islamic religious leaders, whose fatwas were often inimical to women's rights. Feminist activism during this period led to enactment of significant laws to protect women and children, including the Nari o Shishu Nirjaton Doman Ain- of 1998 (amended 2000). Some movements centered around specific issues such as women's health and reproductive rights. Changes at the international level, such as the adoption of the Convention of Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), also inspired calls for reforms to religiously decreed family laws. Despite much effort to establish a Uniform Family Code, ultimately religious opposition and fears of Islamic backlash stalled such reforms.⁴⁷ In practice, the state retained its structural patriarchy and acted in many instances to reinforce male privilege.⁴⁸

In recent decades, a new space has emerged in the Bangladeshi polity where women and Islam come together more positively. Though not intrinsically political, an array of women's religious groups signals a hitherto unseen feminization of Islam in Bangladesh.⁴⁹ *Taleem* groups convene women informally to discuss the Quran, and they have become popular in both urban and rural regions and across different social and economic classes. The religious guidance offered at these discussions is broadly non-political and addresses matters that are of particular relevance to women. While views shared in these spaces are primarily modelled on traditional conceptions of gender roles in Islam, women's agency is also central to the discourse, woven in the language of rights and entitlements.⁵⁰ This shifting focus to the empowering elements of Islam has reclaimed some part of the public domain on women's issues that was previously exclusive to secular feminists. It opens new fronts on possibilities for forging alliances between such religious groups and secular actors on matters of common concern, such as VAW.⁵¹

Headway towards collaborative action has, however, been stymied largely by the tumultuous politics of Hefazat-e-Islam, a loosely organized Islamic group consisting of madrasa leaders and students who may or may not have been politically active in the past, convened in 2013 with the specific objective of opposing online activists. This group has a staunchly anti-women's rights agenda which it has driven forward to constrain opportunities for dialogue to counter gender inequality. This development hinders progress towards greater collaboration among women's religious groups and secular gender activists and perpetuates a long history of minimal progress towards women's rights being undone by religious backlash, evident through the 1980s and 1990s.⁵² Hefazat's retaliation and the earlier Islamist mobilizations in 2008 and 2010 opposing the National Women's Development Policy underscore the structurally embedded

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resistance to women's rights in Bangladeshi society and the slow pace of change in public sentiment on these issues. However, an increasingly fractured religiosity opens paths that link women's rights and religious discourse, and there is growing recognition that extreme Islamist political reactions can threaten progress towards dismantling gendered oppression.⁵³

This background points to a key obstacle to overcoming religious opposition in Bangladesh that must be addressed if progress is to be substantive and sustained. The structural patriarchy of religious institutions excludes women, denies them a voice, and sidelines their sufferings. Mosques and institutions of religious leadership broadly lack female representation in their organizational structures. They reject outright that GBV even occurs at significant levels in their communities. Given the enormous influence that religious leaders command and their ability to initiate crucial dialogue for change, their positions have serious consequences, exacerbating the inequality experienced by Muslim women and presenting obstacles to reporting abuse and requesting intervention.⁵⁴ Such leaders can discourage women from seeking external sources of support and intervention.

Bangladesh has taken important steps to address GBV, including legislation, public awareness, and counselling services, but measures are largely fragmented and uncoordinated. This is a common feature of societal responses to GBV, which rarely address the deeper root causes of violence that are intertwined with religion, culture, and socioeconomic conditions.⁵⁵ Roles of faith in GBV, always complex and multifaceted, have worked more as a problem than solution.

Religious dimensions are the focus of a long-running global movement towards increased faith engagement on GBV.⁵⁶ The World Council of Churches (WCC) followed the UN's Decade for Women (1975-1985) by establishing the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women from 1988 to 1998. Across 120 countries, the initiative has drawn together women's experiences and adopted a feminist approach in this work, bringing the realities of GBV to the fore. WCC used its findings to scrutinize practices of churches and partnered with secular institutions to address GBV as part of a humanitarian and development imperative; it incorporates its learning into interfaith work. "Thursdays in Black" is a contemporary effort centered on GBV, with its weekly symbolic wearing of black clothing as a gesture of solidarity. Many international FIOs in development and humanitarian spheres advance gender equality and female empowerment, often adopting the language and spirit of the UN goals. Commitments are shared by local faith leaders and many members of faith communities who have made important strides towards gender equality in social and economic spheres.⁵⁷ Some have taken up responsible roles in countering GBV and supporting victims, leading initiatives to offer training to potential perpetrators, assist victims, and raise social awareness on GBV, sometimes working closely with secular counterparts.⁵⁸ Other leaders and communities, however, retain deep-seated mistrust of gender equality and the transformation of religious, economic, and social systems that it entails.

Religious actors are thus increasingly part of development and transformation agendas,⁵⁹ through a transition from a narrow technical/secular lens on development towards more nuanced understandings that recognize religion as a potential resource and its actors as legitimate contributors, agents, and engineers of change who can offer alternative visions, values, and models for achieving progress.⁶⁰ Their vital roles in meeting different social objectives, from health care and education to climate change and conflict mitigation, are reflected in the substantial literature attesting to the significance of their work and their comparative strengths in delivering quality services.⁶¹ Growing religious engagement in GBV specifically can be seen in the work of several international development entities that work to combat child marriage, such as the UNFPA, ICRW, and Girls Not Brides (GNB).⁶² Interventions focus increasingly on drawing religious scholars into the dialogue, to drive community-level behavioral change.⁶³

In short, the reasons to pursue deeper, sustained partnerships between faith and secular actors in countering GBV are compelling. Not only do FIAs have key roles and enormous influence on questions of gender, but they also have capacities to mobilize funding, inspire volunteers, and convene followings around distinct moral standpoints—areas where secular institutions are bedeviled with challenges.⁶⁴ Forging and sustaining partnerships and fostering innovative approaches to collaboration requires a contemporary reevaluation of the interrelationships between the secular and faith worlds and their intersections along the gender axis. Unfortunately, the glaring dearth of research and operational evidence on general secular assumptions about religious attitudes towards gender and towards secular efforts to counter GBV is an important obstacle. Filling knowledge gaps can point to ways that secular and faith approaches to GBV can converge productively and sustainably.

METHODOLOGY

This report draws on research that examined perspectives of both religious and secular development actors on GBV and faith roles, conducted between August 2020 and January 2021 with interviews with representatives from FIOs and secular organizations working in Bangladesh to combat GBV. Groups were selected based on transparent work, public advocacy, and commitment to addressing GBV. Secular organizations predominated, despite efforts to ensure balance between faith and secular; many FIOs and faith leaders were hesitant to speak specifically about gender-related issues and GBV, as GBV can be a contentious topic for some groups and individuals. Further, the pandemic posed unique challenges, necessitating that all interviews be conducted virtually, via Zoom or telephone (in both English and Bangla). Interviewees were advised of the purpose of the research and that the information they shared would be included in the report; they were informed of the voluntary nature of the interview and that they could refuse to answer any question and terminate the interview at any point. Some interviewees opted to not disclose their names when talking about certain subjects, and they are referred to later in the text as representatives. A qualitative research design was chosen to identify in-depth opinions and views of the two groups. Question sets ranged from 35 to 45 questions each and were meant to elicit from the participants their general thoughts on GBV in Bangladesh, causes, what their organization does to combat it, gaps, and how they might partner with other organizations in the future.

The report focuses on two specific forms of GBV: domestic violence and child marriage; it does not address directly other forms of violence like sexual harassment and rape, also serious problems in Bangladesh. The focus on domestic violence and early marriage was chosen because the most readily emerging data is available, as they are tracked by various advocacy and nonprofit groups who understand the family as a foundational social institution.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

COVID-19 Impact on GBV and Gender Relations in Bangladesh

The COVID-19 emergency has highlighted many continuing structural and institutional issues surrounding work, family life, and education. It made many realize how unprepared society was to address these issues. Many secular and faith organizations spoke candidly about the data and anecdotal evidence showing that violence was rising against women, with many trapped at home with abusers or family members who took out their frustrations on them, emotionally and physically. Most interviewees concurred on the steep upsurge in GBV levels and had similar causal explanations for this phenomenon. A specialist at BRAC Human Rights and Legal Aid Services (HRLS), Shahariar Sadat, noted in late summer 2020 that human rights violations had increased by 128% in the two months following the start of the pandemic.⁶⁵ Nina Goswami of Ain o Shalish Kendra (ASK), a human rights organization, explained that households are under “pressure cooker” conditions, where confinement and growing tensions resulted in women being subjected to increasing domestic violence by not only their partners but also other members of the household.⁶⁶ The circumstances of women’s suffering and their sources of relief have also changed due to COVID-19 – not only has access to their parental homes been curtailed, but many were stripped of their mobiles and other communication devices, leaving them isolated, with few avenues for relief and protection. Some women have sought out emergency mental health care at hospitals in desperate bids to escape their houses or seeking protection from NGOs like ASK. Rina Roy of Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), a human rights non-profit that has carried out important work in documenting GBV rates during the pandemic, expressed similar views.⁶⁷

Girls and women in Bangladesh face myriad challenges. KumKum Mahbuba, a program manager from Simavi, a secular NGO that works to improve sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and WASH, highlighted many of them.⁶⁸ Many women and girls are stuck at home with anxious and out-of-work men who take their frustrations out on their wives. Pressures on health systems meant a lack of contraceptives with an uptick in unwanted pregnancies among women who were unable to leave their homes for health visits. Many clinics had no capacity to do more than treat COVID-19 victims. BLAST, a women’s rights organization, observed that many legal empowerment avenues for women and family courts were closed due to the pandemic, so domestic violence situations could not be addressed. Similarly, opportunities for intervention at the community level shrank, with the suspension of *shalish*, for instance (observed by Momtaz Ara of Mukti, a secular NGO).⁶⁹ Marufia Shifa, representing Nagorik Udyog, a human rights NGO, underscored the inadequate responses, as few have made GBV a priority in their work, focusing more on the emergency response to COVID-19.⁷⁰ Kamrun Nahar from Naripokkho, a women’s activist organization, agreed, pointing to poor coordination among actors and institutions working against GBV, from field workers to government ministries.⁷¹ Nahar made an important observation that *majbis* and local *matbors* (local leaders with traditional authority) took on more prominence during the COVID-19 crisis, overshadowing the roles of government and civil society.

Toufiq Hoque of Friendship, a needs-driven NGO, commented on the soaring levels of child marriage during the pandemic.⁷² Higher numbers of “boat marriages^a” were arranged, to the profit of middlemen and marriage registrars. Domestic violence is seen as less of a crisis than it really is during the pandemic, with statistics painting a rather distorted picture of levels of violence, as reporting declined, both due to reduced institutional access and added dangers of venturing out. Many public officials, like the police, who

a Friendship works in the Char islands and the riverbanks of northern Bangladesh, where weddings are sometimes conducted on boats, hence the colloquial term “boat marriages.”

are critical to effective responses to domestic violence, have been content to rely on these warped statistics, claiming that COVID-19 has been good for women as violence has declined by the numbers. Few have probed into the matter to see how and why this appears to be so.

Rokeya Kabir of Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS), a women's activist NGO, was one of the few with a positive outlook on COVID-19's effects on women's condition.⁷³ Noting rising levels of GBV and fewer accessible avenues for justice and protection, Kabir nevertheless asserted that the pandemic has laid the foundation for more progressive views on gender. Men often insist that women should stay within the confines of traditional gender roles ascribed to them, tending to perceive that women live lives of ease and comfort, doing "simple" housework within their own homes. Now, during the pandemic, as men are forced to acknowledge the toils of household work, whether by observing their wives or in some cases participating in the work themselves, Kabir argues that their biases can be challenged from firmer ground.

COVID-19's Impact on Organizational Work

Many organizations were unprepared at the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020 and thus were shaken. Their work was severely affected and disrupted, with a particularly destabilizing impact on anti-GBV agendas. Friendship, for instance, struggled to maintain its interventions on child marriage and domestic violence, as their usual mechanisms of action were no longer viable under pandemic conditions. Friendship's legal booths, installed to aid GBV victims, had to remain closed for months during the pandemic's peak periods. Ongoing efforts to improve organizational capacity stalled or were scaled back, as was the case for the Human Rights Center for Bangladesh (HRCB) which had to suspend in-person training programs. The Madaripur Legal Aid Association (MLAA), which offers mediation services to local communities, struggled to maintain this service. The Madaripur Mediation Model used by MLAA offers mediation for locals delivered by locals themselves. Local leaders work with disputing parties to resolve a dispute as they are more context-aware and can take into consideration community interests. MLAA's role is to organize the mediation so that the parties have fair opportunities to present their case, participate in a non-discriminatory forum, and receive judgments that are compliant with all applicable laws. This model involves a role for community members as spectators to the mediation process, usually numbering between 10 and 20 people. The pandemic prevented such in-person sessions, with serious negative consequences for the community's access to justice.

Organizations like Naripokkho and ASK grappled with budgetary constraints. ASK was placed in a precarious position as a few donors prematurely recalled funds when the organization had to revise planned activities given pandemic restrictions. For ASK, this made it more challenging to return to full-scale operations when community members came, seeking services which ASK was underfunded to provide. Telephone helplines, though useful, did not meet people's needs, as they often required services like case filing, court representation, shelter support, and so on.

Some organizations working with particularly underserved communities found that constrained government services forced them to revise their organizational priorities, tailoring their COVID-19-10 response to addressing gaps in government services. Friendship responded to the immediate needs of the people living on *chars* (river islands that are vulnerable to natural disasters) by deploying paralegals, paramedics, and volunteers to join government efforts and ensure the production and distribution of life-saving equipment to the *chars*, such as masks and personal protective equipment. When the government was faced with a shortage of protection equipment, Friendship came forth with its own production. For example, in Sylhet, they supplied prison inmates with high-quality layered masks and established hand-washing facilities. They supplied the police and courts in areas such as Kurigram and Gaibandha, among many others.

Many organizations were able to mobilize and adapt quickly to the challenge. BRAC HRLS moved swiftly to train staff on COVID-19 awareness and distancing via virtual training and meetings. They later trained community members via mobile phones. Mobile technology helped them reach and counsel their beneficiaries when in-person assistance could not happen. BRAC HRLS predicted that GBV rates would go up, so they worked to train for GBV awareness. Telecommunication and mediation became very successful tools for organizations like Caritas, which relied on it for support in counseling beneficiaries, and ASK, which scaled up their telephone helplines. HRCB maintained follow-up with its trained leaders through virtual platforms like Zoom. These community leaders took initiatives to continue community engagement throughout the pandemic. Some have, for instance, staged theatrical performances for their communities, protesting rape and other forms of GBV, while maintaining necessary COVID-19 precautions.

Some organizations took the opportunity to begin conversations on gender issues from new directions. For instance, under lockdown conditions, with women and men confined to the house, BNPS used telecommunication to spread awareness about COVID-19 and gender issues generally, but also to call on men to rethink the gendered work division in the household, encouraging them to participate in child rearing and housework, and to revise their views about women's contributions and hardships. These adaptive techniques faced their share of obstacles. The general lack of access to technology at the community level in remote locales and gendered digital divides made it difficult for organizations like Naripokkho to intervene in GBV cases, as many women and girls had neither mobile phones nor access to internet.

The COVID-19 impact on state functionaries and other service providers weakened responses to GBV. Police and other law enforcement entities were busy enforcing lockdown, which had repercussions for DV and child marriage, as they could not devote much time to cases. And then courts closed, a setback in terms of ensuring justice to the community. MJF's interventions in child marriage rely on cooperation from local administrations and the UN, thus were less efficacious when physical meetings were blocked. Coordination suffered. Governments and courts had to focus on providing relief to struggling people and could focus less on stopping child marriage and DV. Virtual courts focused on giving bail judgments, with ongoing and new cases swept aside. Low technological competence among court officials and legal professionals limited the efficacy of virtual courts. Hospitals operating at limited capacities and other care-providing institutions scaled back operations during the pandemic, limiting opportunities for support and coordinated action that these organizations generally rely on in mounting full-scale responses to GBV in communities where they work. Formal avenues supporting women were closed off during the crisis period, for example filing general diaries with the police.

Secular Knowledge and Perceptions of GBV

To better understand knowledge and perceptions about GBV and gender relations, we asked both faith and secular actors about their views. We wanted to understand their perspectives on root causes and potential remedies and how they envisaged roles for each other in shaping effective solutions.

Asked about the general state of gender and GBV in Bangladesh, Sadat from BRAC HRLS observed that there is a general acceptance of some lesser forms of GBV, like hitting your wife occasionally, which he has observed from his time in the field.⁷⁴ The psyches and structures surrounding domestic violence are hard to change. Even though NGO intervention has been successful, there is still a way to go in terms of changing GBV behaviors.

Shahana Siddiqui, a gender researcher from Bangladesh, has said that the tight-knit, honor-driven family structure in Bangladesh can have a large impact on domestic violence and child marriage, regardless of

social status.⁷⁵ Siddiqi insisted that many families will keep domestic violence issues under tight wraps so as to not embarrass the family, highlighting also that the massive social change that has happened within one generation in Bangladesh has left many men uncomfortable. “It’s sort of like patriarchy displaced; for example, we have all these women-focused microcredit and empowerment programs. They are great, but the thing is we made it into gender and a women’s issue; it wasn’t about men and women.” The development sector, she comments, can treat the poor as a homogenous group, but they are not. They contain many layers, like other social classes. Development jargon like “ultra-poor” does not tell us what’s happening socially, and class plays a massive role in the ways people negotiate their position and social capital, something development practitioners need to look into more. For example, development professionals know that child marriage impacts the overall GDP of a country due to women being absent from the workforce, but GDP is a very foreign concept to a poor family struggling to protect their daughter’s virginity and honor, who understand early marriage as a way out, to protect her in the short term. Siddiqi argues that while we want cohesion between development sectors and religious leaders, religious leaders function in different and often more traditional ways that have gained momentum from some shallow development sector interventions.

Organizations we interviewed had widely varying views on the causes of GBV. A representative from Naripokkho stressed that religion and culture play key roles.⁷⁶ Gender inequality is perpetuated through concepts like honor that is deemed to be embodied in a woman’s anatomy. She argued that such views grant perpetrators impunity while victims suffer revictimization. This is so pervasive in Bangladeshi society that even a four-year-old boy refuses to sit next to a girl in school. The culture is such that the commission of VAW is practically inconsequential. Inflicting violence and getting away with it are taken for granted. Earlier Naripokkho research to investigate the causes of GBV, speaking to convicts who had committed GBV-related offences to determine the causes of such crimes, found that as children, these individuals had never been told or made to understand that such violence is wrong. Even while serving their sentences, they remained steadfast in their conviction that there is nothing wrong in what they did and the only reason they had to suffer punishment was that some NGOs had come and intervened in Bangladesh. The Naripokkho representative asserted that a key aspect of religion’s role was that religion often views women as ultimately responsible for all ills.

A Mukti representative highlighted how different forms of GBV like child marriage often arise from very pragmatic considerations.⁷⁷ Common lines of reasoning among perpetrating parents include the idea that boys will feed them and take care of them in their old age, while there are no returns to investing in girls, as they will eventually have to be married off. Moreover, when girls mature, and especially if they are good-looking, they will be subjected to harassment, adding to the family’s distress. Some people have begun to understand the ill effects of child marriage, including early pregnancies and failed marriages with some social pressure against discouraging the practice. The Friendship interviewee also saw pragmatism as the primary cause of child marriage, observing that the COVID-19-induced spike in child marriage was due to families’ rising insecurities during this period of instability.⁷⁸ Lockdown aggravated preexisting conflicts, with tensions arising from diminishing resources and suffocating proximity.

The Mukti representative cited patriarchal values as the root of GBV. These values emanate from social traditions, conventions, religious norms, and disinformation around these social constructs – for instance, a women’s paradise lies at the feet of her husband. Unfounded claims about religious precepts are widely accepted across all social classes. Speaking specifically about the situation in Kushtia in western Bangladesh, she observed that society is quite tolerant of boys passing comments on girls in the streets, approaching them inappropriately, and even harassing them. Girls’ experiences are seldom taken into consideration. Women and girls have grown tolerant of men’s indecent behavior, such as urination on sidewalks, but they themselves are subjected to constant scrutiny and reproof on the ways they dress and conduct themselves. Policymakers at the highest levels of government often have fundamental biases and

assumptions around faith and religion. When Mukti attempted to establish a system for Hindu marriage registration, it met with opposition at the parliamentary and ministerial levels.

MJF and BNPS shared more multifaceted perspectives on the causes of GBV. Speaking on behalf of MJF, Rina Roy stated that perpetrators act out of rage, frustration, economic incentives, and many other factors.⁷⁹ She noted that religion could also be a causal factor, as an element of the broader patriarchal framework deeply embedded in society. For Kabir from BNPS, Bangladeshi society is pervaded by male hegemony across all social and economic institutions and every state functionary.⁸⁰ Women are viewed merely as service providers, helping hands at home and in the office, and sex service providers in every sector. This is why, for example, marital rape is not a concept in Bangladesh, Rokeya Kabir argued.⁸¹ Women are suppressed in the name of the nation's honor, and women themselves are often not vocal for their own right to justice. Kabir from BNPS recognizes the often latent but powerful ways that religion perpetuates GBV.⁸² Taking the example of child marriage, Kabir explained that unequal inheritance rights are one of its root causes. If inheritance rights were equal, families would not be so keen to send off their daughters at an early age, because the girl's departure would mean the family wealth is also passing with her.⁸³ This, along with other denigrating religious perceptions and rules about women, result in women being treated as chattel, which contributes to GBV like DV and child marriage

Secular Perceptions of Faith and FLAs' Attitudes Towards Gender and GBV

Secular organizations we spoke to commented that religion can be weaponized to keep women disempowered or oppressed. Akmal Shareef, country director for Bangladesh at Islamic Relief, a faith-inspired development agency, emphasized that global Islamophobia can drive skepticism among secular and development organizations.⁸⁴ Secular actors today recognize that their frameworks have limitations and that a faith framework is important because faith plays a huge role in a person's life and gives them inspiration and solace. Mahbuba from Simavi spoke positively about the potential for positive secular NGOs and faith actors to work together and find common ground where they can stand together to work for similar goals in the community.⁸⁵ However, most secular organizations view faith and its actors as more part of the problem than the solution in the GBV context. Some organizations, such as HRCB, understand that religion is not being intrinsically irreconcilable with ant-GBV work, but take the view that in Bangladesh religion has been politicized against women.⁸⁶ One interviewee argued that religion and culture embed derogatory views of women through such channels as education, entertainment, and religious forums, like the *Wabz mahfils* (Islamic religious sermons). With *Wabz* commercialized and part of efforts to vy for more attendees, religious leaders may stray from straightforward readings of Quran and hadith, with efforts to produce more sensational and captivating content.

At the other end of the spectrum are organizations that view religion as having had a perennially negative role in gender matters in Bangladesh. They suggest that current religious leaders are not open to talk about GBV because it will erode their power and destabilize basic structures between men and women. A representative from BNPS commented that so much fear and oppression is sown by religion that even secular actors in positions of power feel intimidated to bring positive reforms.⁸⁷ On the organization's experience with advocating for women's rights: "despite much policy advocacy around women's inheritance rights, we actually spoke to a minister who said the government has no choice in this case but to bow to *Hefazat's* might." A network of interlocking interests binds religious and political actors in a mutually beneficial status quo, where political parties prioritize their business interests; maintaining women's subordination ensures the supply of cheap labor. They are therefore not keen to pressurize religious actors. As a community, religious actors would never work to counter GBV as they are too comfortable with the status quo that secures their positions of power, where they also maintain many illegal links to draw wealth through bribes in the name of madrasas and mosques.

On wider social roles of religion, interviewees argued that religion toxifies the social environment by objectifying women, seen during *Wahz* and khutbahs which perpetuate gender inequality in how they portray women and entrench biases in the minds of devotees. Past fatwas have stoked religious resistance against alternative theater and TV shows that explored progressive ideas around gender, referring to the example of the regional Chayanot conferences that had to be stopped in 2001 due to resistance, causing suffering for folk artists. Responses to COVID-19 within communities have been marred by superstition, where religion has been a powerful force shaping perspectives like the beliefs that the pandemic has occurred due to Allah's wrath. Scientific knowledge has had little sway with these communities.

Naripokkho expressed similar views: religious norms and institutions perpetuate irrational beliefs, making it difficult to achieve social progress.⁸⁸ In the organization's work, they find religious actors propagating views of women that uphold not even basic tenets of human rights and objectify women's bodies in ways that deny women agency and dignity. MJF takes a staunchly negative view of religion's role in Bangladeshi society.⁸⁹ During COVID-19, MJF observed that religious leaders were using social media platforms like Facebook to propagate extremely derogatory views on women, reflecting general attitudes of religious

leaders and outlooks of religious institutions that systematically undermine women's empowerment and efforts to counter GBV.

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Sara Hossain, honorary executive director from BLAST, expressed strong views about secular women's rights organizations working with religious groups. Secular organizations have a completely different set of human rights-based traditions, she argued.⁹⁰ Faith leaders come from extremely reactionary spaces and, in her view, have no dearth of resources to do what they want. In general, they have not been allies to women, and she doesn't expect them to be. On working with faith-inspired

actors, she contends that "what we should be doing is actually organizing people to get these people [faith leaders] pushed back into the corner where they should be and not determining our decisions and policies and what we do." A secular space to work in for women's empowerment is needed, and she sees few benefits in engaging with faith leaders; it is "a big waste of time and resources."

Organizations like Nagorik Udyog have more middling views on the question. The organization's baseline study suggests that religion is not a very significant cause of GBV in the communities where they work. However, they found that religious views on women in leadership positions are mixed and more often negative, suggesting that they contribute to the perpetuation of unequal gender norms. They recognize the potential of religious leaders in combatting GBV, identifying their social authority and influence as significant strengths but also emphasize that the potential is largely theoretical – it could only be actualized if leaders were to come to accept more positive interpretations of their religious scriptures. Looking to the future, the anonymous interviewee suggested that this may take long-term engagement and sustained dialogue.⁹¹ Mukti's approach recognizes religion as having both positive and negative contributions to the struggle for gender equality. The intractability of religion on charged issues such as women's inheritance rights, and fierce opponents of women's rights like the infamous "Tamarind Hujur" (Hefazet-e-Islam's former leader Moulana Allana Ahmed Shafi) can perpetuate GBV in communities, but the organization recognizes that religion accords women respect and anchors some moral messages that should be ingrained in society. Momtaz Ara from Mukti underscores the importance of engaging with religion, regardless of the nature of its contribution, arguing that "religion must be given importance in all efforts to counter GBV, as it has always been extremely influential in Bangladeshi society."⁹²

MLAA takes a more action-oriented approach to what it understands as the evolving role of religion in society. Following workshops and engagement, they see a trend towards more progressive views among religious leaders. Regional variations and hardliners who refuse to engage are significant, but there is an appetite for change among even conservative clusters.

FLAs Against GBV

Caritas, a Catholic humanitarian organization, has been on the frontlines of women's issues since the late 1980s and has adapted and changed their policies and agendas over the years to bolster women's empowerment. Shareef from *Islamic Relief* explained that their gender justice declaration blends both religious and secular frameworks to promote a safe environment for women, build female leadership, and fight for women's economic and social rights.⁹³ Life skill development classes for mixed gender adolescents involve speaking on awareness and protection issues. *Islamic Relief* has devised ways to talk about gender equality and combat GBV, using a human rights framework from a faith perspective, often bringing in an Islamic scholar to better frame their arguments for increased gender equality. When speaking with community members or FIAs, Shareef said they prefer to start conversations around DV by saying, "There's a very common religious text we use that says, "Whosoever is not good with their family cannot be a good person."⁹⁴ There's an established prophetic saying. Everyone knows that. So, what does 'good with the family' mean? You're beating your wife, torturing her. Beating your daughter, torturing her. Is it good with family or bad with family? So people accept that. So that's how we start the discussion. If you are not good to the family, you are not good. So first start good with your family. Not treating your daughter properly, discriminating, not giving food, not sending education. Is it good or bad? We start from that, these kinds of discussions. So, there are many scriptures we use, which are very straight words. We use it, wherever possible."

To combat GBV and child marriage and offer short term solutions, Caritas has a hotline for abused victims and offers shelter for those seeking refuge from violence while collaborating with law enforcement and offering the victims some money or food.

Among the individual Islamic religious leaders we spoke to, some shared their experience in trying to prevent child marriage during the pandemic. Mr. Rezaul Karim, a teacher from a female madrasa in Azimpur, noted that during the lockdown period, he regularly called his students' homes to ensure that they were keeping up with their studies and were not at risk of child marriage.⁹⁵

The Islamic Foundation recognizes the large potential of FIA in raising awareness and combatting social ills, as well as their distinct strength in terms of their high social authority and access to large congregations of adherents.⁹⁶ They are keen to work with other social actors and organizations on GBV and empowering women but report that they have limited opportunities to do so.

Challenges and Backlash in Faith Against GBV

A significant number of secular organizations recognize the importance of engaging with FIA, and some have taken initiatives to partner with faith organizations and/or engage with faith leaders. In extreme forms, religious backlash has sometimes stalled, and even reversed progress towards countering GBV and empowering women. Less severe challenges underscore the difficulties of bridging historical divides and mutual mistrust between secular and faith groups, even when both actors genuinely appreciate the importance of engagement.

Sadat from BRAC HRLS described the forms that extreme backlash can take in such contexts.⁹⁷ When BRAC started out decades ago, they gave women bikes to go into communities to do work, and many faith leaders found that hard to accept. In the 1980s, some BRAC schools were burned as conservative faith groups lashed out. BRAC ran very successful primary schools, and some ultra-religious segments were unhappy with that and a fatwa was issued against them as a result. BRAC's work to fight against *hilla* marriages^b and to outlaw them was met with backlash. Similarly, religious stigmas have affected some aspects of Friendship's work. For example, there has been religious opposition to their theater activities. Nagorik Udyog has also faced fierce opposition from fundamentalists when arranging *baul* shows with drums and other musical instruments. These events are part of efforts to speak about important social issues, including GBV. Nagorik Udyog has found FIAs who are willing to speak and genuinely reconsider their positions. A former anonymous employee of GNB, a global network of organizations committed to ending child marriage, observed how, when working with youth groups in conservative communities like Satkhira, stakeholders did not want them talking about SRH, so GNB started with basic health and hygiene programs, then gradually included elements of SRH.⁹⁸

Other secular organizations, like Naripokkho, have not experienced direct backlash, but feel that their work has cast them in extremely negative light in religious quarters.⁹⁹ In the 1980s, Naripokkho was the first to protest having Islam as the state religion, and they have been part of various initiatives that have offended religious actors, such as United for Body Rights Alliance Bangladesh. Their work has included sexual liberty, VAW, and other highly charged gender issues, as well as advocacy and outreach in religious institutions like madrasas. Although they have not had to deal with backlash as such, religious actors view them unfavorably.

Other challenges confront attempts towards engagement. Faith and secular perspectives on the causes of GBV can diverge significantly, which can limit the scope for collaboration. For instance, in contrast to the secular views discussed above, a representative from the Islamic Foundation argued that domestic violence is most perpetrated by a woman's female in-laws, rather than the men in her life.¹⁰⁰ He emphasized the importance of improving intra-familial relationships between women and further asserted the focus on men in secular anti-GBV initiatives is largely misplaced. In his view, GBV can be reduced through a stricter regime of preventive laws. He pointed to the example of Saudi Arabia, where many women are punished under laws prohibiting extramarital affairs and argued that these laws contribute to lower levels of sexual violence in the country. In addition to such laws, he advocated national programs for moral development which would deter youth from engaging in premarital and extramarital affairs. He also pointed to the widespread availability of technology as an important and largely unaddressed cause of moral degradation, referring to pornography and social media as instances. Such views do echo some of the concerns that secular actors have shared regarding faith actors' approach to GBV, thus underscoring a fundamental challenge in attempting to bridge across the divide for substantive collaborations.

Another elementary challenge is the language and terminology in which discussions on gender and GBV are framed. Given the deeply sensitive nature of these matters, the way discourse is shaped is especially important. Well-intentioned approaches that are ostensibly impeccable may come across as too Western and imperialistic. Language that is alienating or laden with blame or undercurrents of self-importance are unlikely to make much headway in fostering genuine dialogue and paving the way for collaboration. Establishing the organization's own credibility as secular actors when speaking on religion is another obvious challenge. BNPS voiced an important note of caution: efforts to engage with religious actors on GBV issues may end up being inimical to the cause, drawing on the example of the Asia Foundation's imam training, where some imams ended up using the networks and resources gained through the

b An interim marriage

training to entrench unequal gender norms.¹⁰¹ HRCB voiced a similar note of caution, indicating that their representative had direct experience of such misappropriation of platform and resources by religious leaders.¹⁰² Working with the secular organization, the religious leaders had gained a new level of legitimacy in the community, but having gained access, they began to use the trainings and resources to counter the progressive messaging and thwart the organization's efforts.

Faith actors face challenges, limitations, and resistance when they are seen as talking in ways that are too “Western,” using language that does not resonate with many communities. Some FIAs, in contrast, are not seen as being secular enough to work with non-religious organizations. Many face this dichotomy when trying to work collaboratively across other sectors. Shareef of Islamic Relief mentioned that many religious leaders feel they are too rarely approached and are left out of discussions.¹⁰³ Some faith leaders feel they are being judged or questioned, or their power may be questioned or undermined when approached by FIOs or NGOs. Many faith leaders at the community level lack the scholarly training to interpret complex verses and may perpetuate oppressive misinterpretations primarily because they lack access to credible religious guidance.

A heartening sign was that some organizations report waning levels of backlash in their contemporary work. Caritas, for instance, experienced significant backlash to its work in the 1980s and 1990s but said they currently don't hear or see much backlash to current gender work.¹⁰⁴ In terms of the power dynamics that bedevil FIAs who work at the crossings between the secular and faith domains, many are highly receptive to recommendations and are willing to adapt.

FLA/Secular Collaboration

Despite obstacles to effective and sustained engagement, contemporary instances of collaboration between faith and secular organizations offer lessons on developing pathways to bridging gaps. This section draws on experiences of collaboration to identify effective models and features that appear to facilitate collaboration.

Friendship's approach is informative, given their considerable success in engaging with religious bodies in various aspects of their work, for example with the Islamic Foundation to raise awareness about child marriage, awareness-raising imam training, and arranging *shalish* (a gathering of male village elders to settle community disputes). Friendship's working model helps to address and overcome religious resistance and form sustainable partnerships with religious actors. First, wherever Friendship works, they remain there for a long time with activities for the whole community. Friendship's services are comprehensive, from medical care to infrastructure development, so religious leaders, as community participants, receive services, which allows a relationship of trust and mutual regard to develop between them and Friendship. Second, Friendship has support from local and central governments grounded in trust; their paralegals respond to government requests for support. Third, they have plans to include religious actors more in the future – for example, committees to counter child marriage.

Mukti forms committees with various social actors to discuss specific social issues, collaborating on policy-making and implementation.¹⁰⁵ They make sure to include religious leaders on these committees, in addition to members of the government, NGO workers, teachers, police, youth, and other relevant stakeholders. This ensures a balanced and coordinated approach to addressing social problems. Mukti also encourages Imams to deliver khutbahs (public Islamic preaching) that address the particular social issues experienced in their communities, such as child marriage, VAW, trafficking, drugs, etc., and promotes social engagement at mosques, mandirs, and other places of worship. Thus, Mukti's approach integrates religious response within a broader framework of social response to social ills and mobilizes the full array

of religious actors and the various religious spaces available as possible means to counter GBV and drive social change.

Sharing Naripokkho's experience in conducting research on education and sexual and reproductive health rights, Kamrun Nahar found the study's engagement with religious actors a productive exercise.¹⁰⁶ Effective and productive collaborations are possible and even highly advantageous when there is an alignment of end goals between the actors. Although Naripokkho is skeptical about the potential for a deeper ideological meeting of minds, they see benefits in such strategic engagement.

Simavi, in the hill areas, works with customary and religious leaders as they mediate DV issues. Many leaders see DV as a private family issue, so Simavi works to sensitize leaders to the issues, increasing awareness on topics like GBV, gender equality, girls' safety, and menstrual health. GNB partners with various national and international organizations to mobilize religious leaders so that they talk about the negative impact of early marriage on religious occasions and Friday prayers. For sensitive and contentious issues around child marriage and girls' health in remote areas like the hill areas, they move slowly; projects take place over a couple of years.

Sadat from BRAC HRLS highlighted the importance of tapping into the potential of more progressive imams and faith leaders to work as catalysts for social change in more hard-line parts of society.¹⁰⁷ That is something BRAC works on continually. BRAC HRLS estimated that 5% of referrals come from FI leaders when it comes to GBV or child marriage interventions, and they aim to work more closely with them to get more referrals.¹⁰⁸ BRAC HRLS has worked with community gatekeepers to hold workshops for religious leaders on divorce, GBV, and other gender issues. They speak about human rights and gender so they can see community problems through three lenses: human rights, gender, and equality. Some leaders, BRAC has found, are more receptive than they used to be, accepting more progressive ideas and speaking out against GBV.¹⁰⁹ This tends to be the younger generation of leaders, who do not necessarily have large followings yet, but are important to engage alongside their more established counterparts, because they have stronger follower bases among youth and will be the future generation of prominent leaders, capable of bringing progressive shifts in their communities.

GNB highlighted that government and NGOs have worked actively to reduce child marriage.¹¹⁰ They focus on engaging with and understanding community gatekeepers like imams, union parishads, political leaders, and others before starting any type of programming; they begin with awareness-raising sessions to gain trust and make sure program goals are understood. GNB has been doing training about SRH and negative impacts of child marriage in madrasas. Many teachers and principals are enthusiastic to learn, including in madrasas. They provide menstrual hygiene products for madrasas.

Kabir of BNPS observed that the COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the importance of local actors in responding to local problems.¹¹¹ With few options for intervention, relying on local actors, including religious leaders, became necessary. The efficacy with which these actors shouldered this responsibility has been remarkable and demonstrates the importance of devising locally-led solutions for local problems, going forward from this crisis.

Nagorik Udyog has conducted campaigns in madrasas to counter child marriage. Training sessions with religious leaders encourage them to become more accepting of women's empowerment. They have observed recent positive shifts. In 2004, some Muslim religious leaders joined NGOs in protesting VAW. As a collective, their experience suggests, religious groups will take longer to change, with perhaps a decade or so of initiatives to engage and train them. Nagorik Udyog's approach is to conduct dialogues on contested matters and invite actors to rethink their gender regressive interpretations of religious codes. Here, credibility and authenticity are critical. Nagorik Udyog uses sources like the Quran and hadith and is trusted by communities due to their links to the central government, compared to local administrations

that are viewed as corrupt. Their use of direct references from the Quran and hadith enhances their influence with community members. On child marriage, their interventions often involve sharing Quranic perspectives on consent; community members who are religious are generally quite responsive. Fundamental change in communities is only possible when beliefs and attitudes change at a deep level of individual and collective psyches. Because Nagorik Udyog works towards social transformation, working with FIAs is important to them.

Islamic Relief has partnered with UN Women, using social media campaigns to combat DV, as part of the Asia Pacific Faith Coalition on Sustainable Development, a group of five leading international faith organizations working on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on gender. Every actor has a unique role to play, but a focus on working with youth and secondary students and helping them understand boys' roles in perpetuating violence is especially important for long-term normative change that can deter potential perpetrators, who are commonly male. Islamic Relief gave examples of effective faith and anti-trafficking and child marriage work in India, underscoring the importance of bringing together scientific and religious points of view, such as evidence that girls are not physically or mentally developed enough to be married or bear children before the age of 18. Reinforcing the message from both religious and scientific sources amplifies credibility and inspires confidence and is thus more likely to be assimilated. Caritas noted that religion is often interpreted in a negative way, especially in regard to women's rights; they pursue approaches to their work that involve taking in context scholars, having open Q&As with leaders and communities, and challenging leaders on certain subjects.

Most organizations during the interviews echoed the sentiment that collaboration among FIAs and secular organizations is integral to fighting GBV at scale and with more lasting impact. Policies, passage of laws, and law enforcement can only do so much. Religious communities need to be brought into the effort, creating an enabling environment where different actors play significant roles in providing protection to at-risk girls and women. A key to lasting social change is to develop projects that focus on capacity building with different stakeholders, including FIAs, law enforcement agencies, and local government systems.

PROPOSALS ON WAYS FORWARD

The research findings point to clear pathways to strengthen existing partnerships and forge new bonds between faith and secular actors towards shared goals in countering GBV. This section draws on the findings to advance specific proposals and recommendations to foster sustainable partnerships among faith and secular actors. It includes ideas shared by organizations and actors who participated in the study. An overarching recommendation for all actors, within and beyond academia, is to conduct more research to address knowledge gaps that the study has identified.

For Secular Actors:

1. A tempered approach to discussions on sensitive topics like child marriage is essential. Rather than addressing the issue directly, a more effective approach, for example, is to develop the conversation focusing initially on menstruation and reproductive health. Similarly, taboo topics like sexual relations may be unwelcome, but creative approaches to knowledge dissemination may be possible through thoughtfully crafted posters, brochures, and audiovisual content.

2. Secular organizations starting work in a new locality should begin by mapping networks of power, trust, and dependence. Where strong links between community members and faith actors are present, rapport-building and consultations with the faith actors can proceed. Establishing some level of support from faith actors in contexts where they are particularly influential will help to reduce risks of backlash, smooth program implementation, and draw greater participation from the community.
3. Capacity-building dialogues and workshops can be instrumental in giving religious communities an understanding of laws and human rights frameworks, especially younger members of communities who may be more open. Engaging and mobilizing youth networks to raise awareness and speak out against GBV is vital. Working with young boys from madrasas, talking to them about gender rights and respect, can be helpful, as they are often eager to learn and listen. Historically, youth groups have also been instrumental in stopping and campaigning against child marriage.
4. There is a well-justified trust deficit in working with faith leaders, one pitfall being a possibility that some leaders might use platforms and resources to undermine efforts to counter GBV and child marriage. Rigorous vetting processes as part of recruitment and pre- and post-participation surveys are important, and it would also be useful to design workshops that take a graduated approach to increasing access and exposure.
5. “Moderate” faith leaders are often underfunded because they are not part of established conservative hierarchies. To alter the society’s dominant religious discourse, it is vital to champion receptive faith leaders, giving them platforms to propagate their views. Secular organizations would be better advised at times to work with a smaller number of promising leaders, helping them build their reach, rather than seeking to work with large numbers of disinterested and less moderate religious leaders who will likely not commit to long-term anti-GBV initiatives.
6. Organizations offering support services to victims should include religious leaders as part of the permanent team or at least as consultants, so that support services are oriented to a victim’s religious identity, perceptions, and expectations. This can help in mediation services where religious expertise would benefit the organization in dealing with perpetrators of GBV.
7. Attention to framing and language surrounding GBV is vital. While poor framing can push people away, setting anti-GBV language in terms of the Quran and its teachings or within a family-focused argument can help. Language and terminology used when talking about gender equality and GBV is important because some terms and jargon can alienate people, offend them, or be seen as too Western or imperialistic.

For Faith Actors

1. Conservative faith leaders tend to be more vocal than less conservative leaders. The more receptive faith leaders need to seek out platforms and resources to reach their communities and present progressive readings of scriptural verses on GBV. More coalition-building among progressive-minded faith-inspired organizations and similar collective action on the part of moderate faith leaders is also needed.
2. Faith leaders sometimes limit discussions on gender issues to their peers, as part of an academic/intellectual exercise, but such insights could be made actionable through prevention and awareness-raising initiatives from within the faith community that counter gender bias and GBV.
3. Working with some individual faith leaders, for example to deliver fatwas against specific forms of VAW, has been possible. It would be useful to identify receptive faith leaders at the national level and

foreground them in media. Progressive media outlets need to be identified and supported as this can have impact-multiplying effects. Faith leaders and organizations have an important role to play here.

4. It may, in some situations, be preferable to begin anti-GBV work by collaborating with actors from different faiths, rather than secular actors who may be less receptive to religious approaches. Finding common ground among the major faiths in Bangladesh through outreach and advocacy could advance common goals in countering GBV.
5. Religious scholars in Islam are mostly men and thus gender issues are often addressed from men's perspectives, offering guidance and relief for men's concerns. Faith communities need to develop female scholars who can speak authoritatively on religion and bring the much-needed women's perspective to bear on critical questions of gender and GBV. Specific measures can include educational programs, mentorship programs, scholarships, working groups, conferences and forums for publication, public speaking, and scholarly exchange. *Taleem* groups (albeit, not all) and informal women's religious gatherings offer an obvious outlet to start consultations on the specific range and design of appropriate measures. Women's voices need to emerge from women's collectives, not overseen by men in their communities.
6. There is a broader need for educational diversity in Bangladesh's religious scholarship. Specifically in the context of gender and GBV, historical readings of scriptures and advancing religious knowledge about social progress and the growth in intellectual thinking on critical questions of religion, progress, and gender are important. The University of Notre Dame's Contending Modernities' Madrasa Discourses Project¹¹² is an example of an academic initiative that might benefit Bangladeshi Islamic scholars as they contribute to dialogue on the subject.

For Governments:

1. Policy approaches to address child marriage and permissive attitudes towards domestic violence need to begin with consultations at the community level that engage faith actors, both leaders and organizations, who can contribute to understanding causes, perceived justifications, and consequences of the practice. This could gradually open into wider dialogue on family law reform, women's empowerment, and gender roles.
2. A significant body of law addresses GBV, but the corresponding infrastructure to ensure implementation and enforcement is weak. Secondary legal intervention and administrative rulemaking is needed. It is important to establish clear pathways of communication and coordination between law enforcement agencies and community faith actors, who are often the first responders in GBV cases.
3. Despite the common acknowledgement that secular and faith organizations can mutually benefit from collaboration against GBV, the trust deficit between them inhibits sustained and meaningful work. Here, government can be a powerful facilitator, bridging gaps as a hopefully honest broker and an important coordinator, acting through relevant ministries including the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Ministry of Women and Children Affairs.
4. The scope for building more effective relationships within the different government functionaries is substantial. The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs could actively work with the Ministry of Religious Affairs to develop educational and training materials for religious leaders. The Islamic Foundation (under the Ministry of Religious Affairs) is key to such efforts, but its work lacks public visibility and synergies with other government organs are underexplored. For instance, the Islamic Foundation runs an imam training academy that aims to offer training to imams on a range of issues

including women and children's rights, but little information is available on what is covered and how these key issues are approached. The foundation's most recent progress report mentions that its women's branch has conducted 240 events to spread the teachings and values of Islam among women, but it notes no activity undertaken towards Islam-based women's empowerment or anti-GBV work.¹¹³ Given the institution's tremendous potential for advancing faith efforts to counter GBV, this agenda is underwhelming and would benefit from the insights and expertise of other government organs that work on gender and GBV issues, including the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs.

5. Education, an important area for advancing progressive gender norms, can indirectly drive a normative revolution to counter GBV. There is much scope for improvement in NCTB textbooks.¹¹⁴ The government could exercise its regulatory powers to introduce standards for madrasa textbooks, under both Alia and Quomi systems, so that there is consistent and cohesive basic education on gender in the country.
6. Given the expanding role of information communication technologies and platforms in propagating derogatory views on women and spreading radicalizing content, the government can take appropriate steps to regulate content and communication in the cyberspace. The draft Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission Regulation for Digital, Social Media and OTT Platforms, 2021 attempts to address such concerns, but it carries significant risks of over-censure and does not contextualize its provisions to the source, content, and spread of content that incites GBV and entrenches unequal gender norms. Regulation in this area should be framed after consultation with all stakeholders, including faith and secular actors. Online counter-speech programs with partnerships with respected faith leaders and faith-inspired organizations can be helpful.
7. Along similar lines, digital literacy programs for both children and adults are needed to guard against the dangers of online mis/disinformation and extremist content that entrench biased gender norms and incite GBV. Digital literacy should encompass both technical competencies and the skills needed to evaluate information and be discerning about the information consumed, created, and relayed. School curriculums and activities should thus incorporate digital literacy. Learning initiatives for higher education institutions and those outside the formal education system are important. Connecting with faith networks and other community-level networks can help in fostering digital literacy among adults.
8. Government coordination with traditional and new media platforms can determine optimal approaches to disseminate progressive gender views. This will require a mapping of the media use by different demographic groups and their key influencers on particular platforms. This can inform the design of a targeted national advocacy campaign to counter narratives that support GBV and uproot unequal gender norms.
9. Government can support female religious scholars through scholarships and exchange programs, public education opportunities, and encouraging work opportunities to incentivize young females to pursue such career paths. Emerging female religious scholars need platforms to address the nation and their work should be promoted, through the government's institutional fora such as the Islamic Foundation, and media fora, such as the Bangladesh Television (BTV) and the government's social media handles.
10. Governments at all levels have important roles to play in supporting receptive FIAs and NGOs and limiting the influence of religious actors who resist changes in negative gender norms. This study demonstrates that organizations can sustain anti-GBV work only with the support of local administration, law enforcement, and political backing more broadly. Government support needs to be sustained and better coordinated, and should be institutionalized and systematized, so that

organizations working directly against GBV have clear channels for seeking support and need not dedicate precious resources to networking and the upkeep of ad hoc political backing. Consultations with the stakeholders can inform the design of appropriate frameworks for government support and intervention, with clearly delineated points of contact, channels of communication, and methods of action.

11. Government officials at all levels should aim for gender sensitivity training. Such training is often scant at local levels where, arguably, it is most needed. For government functionaries to spearhead anti-GBV efforts, coordinate and support the work of other social actors, and regulate those resisting progressive social change, government itself must be gender-progressive. It is important to build gender considerations into recruitment, performance review, and feedback processes. Gender and human rights impact assessments, along with gender-based monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning mechanisms, should be standardized across government programs

For Foreign Actors:

1. Foreign aid providers should, in grants for anti-GBV work and gender work more broadly, specify engagement with religious actors, as they have key roles in this context. The particulars would depend on the nature of the project, but where appropriate, such strategies should be expected, monitored, and developed upon.
2. International organizations like UN bodies share some features with governments, in terms of a veneer of less partiality and some credibility as coordinators. They can offer platforms for secular and faith actors to engage on anti-GBV work, or simply to engage in dialogue to foster mutual understanding that can later enhance collaboration. The Islamic Foundation, for instance, has the capacity to host seminars at the top level for religious leaders to disseminate gender-progressive messages to counter GBV; a high-ranking representative observed that the foundation is open to doing so, with support from appropriate government ministries and UN bodies.
3. The COVID-19 emergency has brought to light the importance of partnering with faith actors to ensure that key messages have the farthest reach across communities and the greatest impact on promoting positive behavior. As organizations like UNICEF have experienced, efforts to counter harmful community practices are multiplied when faith leaders are engaged and trained to join the efforts.¹¹⁵ UN bodies and other foreign actors should build on relationships formed during this emergency and invest resources into growing their networks with faith actors, design capacity-building programs, and include these actors in addressing GBV.
4. Foreign experts on faith and gender who seek to share their expertise in Bangladesh need to understand the history and challenges that are specific to this context. Abstract ideas about the common good have little impact and comparative lessons may not seem actionable to those working at the ground level, unless specifically framed in terms of the local context. A lack of awareness of the local context undermines the credibility of a speaker and their perceived competence in speaking to local challenges, no matter how important and pertinent their insights. Efforts absent context can fail to inspire confidence and stimulate the deep engagement that is necessary for effective change.

For Media:

1. Traditional media, including TV, radio, and newspapers, have important roles in moderating what is publicized, and which stories receive coverage. Policies can promote moderate religious views that aid efforts to counter GBV and not sensationalize incidents and actors whose positions entrench harmful gender stereotypes that perpetuate GBV. On the other hand, naming-and-shaming strategies may also be effective in sidelining repeat bad actors who propagate regressive views on gender and GBV. Similar recommendations apply to content creators and influencers in the entertainment industry, attuned to their respective roles.
2. Social media platforms have been increasingly weaponized to further extremist views and incite violence, with derogatory attitudes towards women one aspect of misuse of social media. While social media companies come increasingly under fire for incitement to mass atrocities, enabling radicalizing content, and disseminating harmful content to children worldwide, internal policy changes still focus on Western user bases. Online GBV has received some attention in the West, but the harm caused by religious leaders perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes and inciting GBV, particularly in countries like Bangladesh, continues uninhibited. The situation has worsened during the COVID-19 emergencies. The Facebook Oversight Board is a model worth considering for overseeing content moderation in local contexts, where content can be reviewed by a local expert panel, to recommend actions to the platform, from removal of specific posts to the de-platforming of repeat offenders.
3. Journalists should receive specific training on issues of faith and gender, as reports reinforcing bias, possibly informed by dangerous interpretations of religion, are rampant in Bangladesh. Industry guidelines and oversight mechanisms could encourage industry self-regulation without infringing on freedom of speech.
4. It is important to develop local media outlets, bolstering their capacity for innovation in content creation, distribution, and consumption. Local news in remote and rural parts of the country is seldom part of national-level oversight and capacity-building efforts but can have crucial roles in the transmission and perpetuation of harmful gender norms and attitudes in specific communities.

CONCLUSION

Religious institutions and practices are structurally embedded in Bangladeshi society, and they are historically implicated in GBV. Contemporary roles are complex, multifaceted, and span vast networks of actors, interests, and visions. Effectively countering GBV demands a clear recognition of the roles and importance of religion in Bangladeshi society and the power of actors to shape norms, influence behavior, and contribute to the social life of generations to come. A feature of many crises is active roles of faith actors and this has been true for the COVID-19 emergencies in Bangladesh. However, the crisis also underscored the dangers of some forms of religious authority, particularly as it affects women and girls and perpetuates normative and practical modalities that subject them to different forms of GBV, including DV and child marriage. While relationships between the faith and secular worlds can be fraught with mutual mistrust, differences, and anxieties, both neglect engaging with the other to their peril, as this compounds the challenges to achieving common goals.

Historical factors that contribute to divides between the religious and the secular in Bangladesh are well understood, but precise maps of the contemporary landscape draw in large part on anecdotes. This limits options of all actors on the ground, who may well recognize the reality of mutual dependence but see few paths forward to bridge obstacles to effective and sustained collaboration. This study aims to identify paths forward, drawing on wide-ranging views of actors, approaches, and expectations at the intersections of faith and gender in Bangladesh. It highlights that, despite mutual interest to engage, few initiatives operate at scale or sustainably. The study focuses on what stymies such efforts, to understand better why fertile ground for productive solutions remains unplowed. Action proposals for different actors are advanced as helpful starting points in a necessarily long process of social healing, reconciliation, and trust-building, all with the goal that future Bangladeshi society can internalize full gender equality.

ABBREVIATIONS

ASK Ain o Salish Kendra

BLAST Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust

BNPS Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha

BRAC HRLS Human Rights and Legal Aid Services

CEDAW Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

DV Domestic Violence

FAs Faith actors

FIAs Faith-inspired actors

FIOs Faith-inspired organizations

GBV Gender-based violence

GNB Girls Not Brides

HRCB Human Rights Center for Bangladesh

HRW Human Rights Watch

ICRW International Center for Research on Women

MJF Manusher Jonno Foundation

MLAA Madaripur Legal Aid Association

SDGs Sustainable Development Goals

SRH Sexual and Reproductive Health

UNFPA United Nations Population Fund

UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund

VAW Violence against Women

WASH Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene

WCC World Council of Churches

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Aisha Binte Abdur Rob is a former research associate for the Centre for Peace and Justice at BRAC University in Dhaka, Bangladesh and is currently pursuing an LL.M at the University of Ottawa.

Sarah Thompson is a project manager for World Faiths Development Dialogue in Washington, DC.

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berkeleycenter@georgetown.edu

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