

RESEARCH REPORT

Challenging norms underpinning gender-based violence: feminist and LGBTQI+ movements working together in Bangladesh



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About Bonhishikha

Bonhishikha – unlearn gender is a Bangladesh-based feminist organisation committed to ensuring equality and justice across all spectrums. All of the organisation's work promotes uniform access to opportunities. It works to integrate innovative and emergent approaches and honour feminist and Indigenous epistemology, understand the intersections of systemic oppression, and build evaluation designs that are responsive to the practical work of feminist movements and funders.



Bonhishikha has held a prominent role in fostering feminist leadership and building cross-movement alliances as an organiser and participant in multiple collaborative platforms. One focus of its work is to engage with youth-led feminist groups from various community-based movements across Bangladesh who often lack strong connections to the mainstream or national feminist space. The youth groups come from different communities within the broader feminist movement that include climate and land rights, Chittagong Hill Tracts-based Indigenous rights, women's rights, Dalit rights, disability rights, and gender-diverse rights. Given Bonhishikha's long-standing role within the feminist and gender-diverse movements, it is in a unique position to be able to engage with the movement actors and explore the dynamics of intersectionality, segregation, and underlying tensions.

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Table of contents

About Bonhishikha	2
Acknowledgements	2
About the authors	3
Acronyms	5
Key terms	5
Executive summary	7
1 Introduction	10
2 Literature review	12
3 Methodology	15
4 Findings and discussion	18
5 Reflections and recommendations	32
6 Conclusion	34
References	35

Figures

Figure 1 Examples from visioning exercise during FGDs	32
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Tables

Table 1 Sampling categories and corresponding numbers	17
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Acronyms

FGD	Focus group discussion
GBV	Gender-based violence
IDI	In-depth interview
KII	Key informant interview
LBQ	Lesbian, bisexual and queer
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (the plus sign represents people with diverse orientation and/or gender identity who may identify using other terms)
MSM	Men who have sex with men
NGO	Non-governmental organisation

Key terms

Digital violence: In general, this refers to any form of harm that is perpetrated through the misuse of digital technologies and tools such as computers, smartphones, and the internet. Cyberviolence, technology-facilitated gender-based violence, and digital abuse are other terms used to describe digital violence.

Disruption penalty: Penalising someone for being a disruptor.

Feminist participatory action research (FPAR): A collection of methodologies that amplifies participants' voices instead of binding them with close-ended answers. It also shifts power to the participants and lets them decide what they want to share.

Gender binary: A societal and cultural framework that classifies all human beings into two distinct, opposite categories (male and female) based on sex assigned at birth.

Gender-based violence (GBV): Any form of violence inflicted on a person solely based on their gender identity.

Heteronormativity: Heteronormativity recognises heterosexuality as a macro-structural institution, thus illuminating it as a socially constructed institutional arrangement. Heteronormativity is based on the belief that all persons fall into two opposing but complementary genders (i.e., man and woman).

Hijra: Members of the Hijra community are typically assigned male at birth and identify outside the traditional male–female binary, including intersex and transgender identities. Historically rooted in South Asia, Hijras have a distinct social and cultural identity organised around the *guru–chela* (teacher–disciple) system, which provides affiliation, mentorship and support. Their traditions draw on Sanatan Hindu practices while incorporating distinct beliefs, customs and community systems. Traditionally, Hijras were invited to bless newborns, newlyweds and new businesses in exchange for gifts or money. As these roles and social recognition have declined, many now rely on informal income, including soliciting money in public spaces.

Identity politics: Organising politically around the experiences and needs of people who share a particular identity.

Intersectionality: A concept, originating in Black feminism, and coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), which explains how social categories interconnect to produce intersecting experiences of oppression and privilege for marginalised groups of people (according to their race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality or other forms of identity).

Lateral violence: Lateral violence, also known as horizontal violence, refers to hostility or aggressive behaviours among individuals at the same hierarchical level within organisations or communities.

Medical pathologisation: The social and psychological process of interpreting normal human behaviours, physical traits or benign variations as medical conditions, illnesses or diseases.

Mobile journalism: News or digital content created using mobile devices, often by journalists, but now used much more widely by people, especially digital content creators who are not directly affiliated with any media house.

Performative inclusivity: The practice of appearing to be inclusive through words, gestures or symbolic actions without sincerely supporting inclusion or taking meaningful steps to achieve it.

Social norms: The unwritten rules that define acceptable behaviour in a community and arise from unplanned interactions.

Sufi pluralism: Islamic mysticism, commonly known as Sufism, is a belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God, whereas pluralism is the philosophical and political belief that diversity, multiple perspectives and competing interest groups are beneficial to society.

Third gender: As prescribed under the law of Bangladesh, this is an identity-based category for people who do not identify as either male or female. This term is also often thought to be synonymous with intersex or Hijra individuals.

Transgender: An umbrella term referring to individuals who do not identify with the sex category assigned to them at birth or whose identity or behaviour falls outside of stereotypical gender norms. The term encompasses a diverse array of gender identities and expressions, including identities that fit within a female/male classification and those that do not.

Wahhabism: An austere, puritanical revivalist movement within Sunni Islam that emerged in the 18th century, spearheaded by the scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, advocating for a strict, literal interpretation of the Quran and Hadith.

Executive summary

In Bangladesh, gender-based violence (GBV) remains deeply rooted in patriarchal structures, rigid gender binaries, and the enforcement of heteronormative social expectations. Although the country has a rich history of women's and feminist coalitions fighting inequalities and oppression of marginalised groups, recent political transitions have shrunk civic spaces and triggered a harsh right-wing and online backlash against both women and gender-diverse communities. The literature suggests that women's rights organisations such as Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Naripokkho and Ain o Salish Kendra have historically mobilised against patriarchal violence through coalition building, public protests and advocacy for women's rights. Younger feminist groups and LGBTQI+ activists have, over time, pushed these movements toward a broader understanding of violence – one that includes homophobic and transphobic abuse, digital harassment, and the denial of institutional protections. Historically, mainstream feminist spaces and LGBTQI+ activists have operated in parallel or fragmented spheres, often leading to tokenistic inclusion or gatekeeping driven by class, geography and language barriers.

This report is based on research that aimed to understand the role of the feminist and LGBTQI+ movements in Bangladesh, through the work they have been doing to shift gender norms and engage on issues of GBV within their communities. This qualitative research was conducted between November 2025 and April 2026 across three regions of Bangladesh – Dhaka, Chattogram, and Sylhet – and included 52 participants in 6 focus group discussions (FGDs), 15 key informant interviews (KIs), 5 in-depth interviews (IDIs), and 24 participants in a sensemaking workshop followed by an extensive literature review. The report documents existing alliances, regional variations and structural gaps to support movement actors to co-create safer, more sustainable and more inclusive strategies for collective action.

Dynamics of inter-movement collaboration in Bangladesh: There is a fundamental gap between the sense of ideological kinship these movements feel and the practical reality of how they organise together. Engagement frequently relegates LGBTQI+ movement actors to a peripheral role, functioning as invited participants rather than core strategic architects excluded from fundamental decisions about movement priorities and resource allocation.

Similarly, the data also points to the fact that movement spaces frequently reproduce the very class, geographic and educational hierarchies they aim to dismantle. Activists who attempt to bridge these movements and call attention to these divisive issues are often being perceived as aggressive, a troublemaker, or a disruptor (IDI, young LGBTQI+ activist), whereby emphasising intersectional concerns or specific needs of sexual minorities is seen as divisive and threatening to the unity of the movement.

Social and gender norms underpinning GBV within both movements: At the core of GBV is a societal control with a strict male–female binary, where any deviation is discussed not as a diversity of human experience but as an 'ailment' or a 'mistake' that requires violent correction (Humbert and Strid, 2025). Within activist circles, this manifests as 'lateral violence' and internal gatekeeping. In feminist spaces, trans women and Hijra individuals are often excluded or subjected to 'tests' of their womanhood, which mirrors the exclusionary logic of the broader society. This internal replication of norms places a 'double burden' on activists who must fight for their rights on the streets while also defending their legitimacy within their own communities.

The research reflects a structural gap between how violence is officially recognised and how it is actually experienced by women, gender-diverse individuals and marginalised communities, showing that violence is not simply increasing – it is diversifying and specialising. As perpetrators are finding new tools and new vulnerabilities, it most affects those that are already marginalised, such

as LGBTQI+ individuals and Indigenous women. This points to an urgent need for the movements themselves to develop a broader, more fluid conception of GBV that can keep pace with its evolution.

Religion emerged as a strong contributor to norms that drive GBV towards feminist and LGBTQI+ individuals. The data reveals a more complex picture than simple religious conservatism, whereby the pattern is one of selective, politically motivated deployment of religious authority to suppress specific identities, combined with a genuine absence of counter-narratives reaching mass audiences. While feminism itself has been labelled anti-Islam, creating a barrier to feminist–LGBTQI+ solidarity that movements struggle to navigate, the movements are making efforts to reclaim religious institutions as sites of contestation rather than simply treating them as obstacles, recognising that sustained, strategic engagement with progressive voices within these spaces is both possible and necessary.

In this new environment, GBV is often justified as a means of ‘protecting’ traditional and cultural values and there is a marked shift in the social and political fabric of the country from a historically ‘Sufi-influenced’ culture – which allowed for more ambiguity and tolerance regarding gender and sexuality – to a more rigid, ‘Wahhabi-influenced’ religious sentiment. Any attempt to advocate for LGBTQI+ rights is framed as an ‘imported’ or ‘alien’ agenda, despite the deep historical roots of these communities in Bangladesh (Gardner, 1999; Mostofa, 2024; Ahamad, 2025).

Political visibility has also emerged as a huge contributing element in how the two movement actors experience GBV. It is seen as both a resource and a risk – the same visibility that creates community also creates exposure. Anti-gender influencers and political actors use social media and digital platforms to spread disinformation, often framing LGBTQI+ individuals as deviants, criminals or threats to children. This digital conditioning creates an environment where online ‘outing’ or vitriol often leads directly to physical mob violence.

Another notable strategic shift within the LGBTQI+ movement is the transition from a health service provision model to a rights-holding citizen framework for collective action. For decades, gender-diverse communities were largely visible to donors and the state only through the lens of HIV/AIDS and public health – a paradigm that provided resources but pathologised their identities and limited their political claims for self-definition.

Regional perspectives on collaboration and normative underpinnings of GBV: The regional analysis points to the structural disconnect in Bangladesh’s feminist and LGBTQI+ movements, which have historically been heavily concentrated in Dhaka and are activated by crisis, shared events, and individual relationships – but it is not held together by shared institutional infrastructure or a common long-term agenda. The data from regional discussions in Sylhet and Chattogram divisions bring up that the feminist movement’s exclusion of women from structurally excluded communities and its inability to shape deeper alliances with the LGBTQI+ community entail the same structural flaw. Both exclusions are rooted in a movement that has historically organised around the concerns and comfort of its most visible, least vulnerable members.

Although external hostility towards the LGBTQI+ movement has intensified across all three research sites, the data also reveals a pattern of internal fragmentation that is weakening the movement precisely when solidarity is most needed. The central fracture is between Hijra and transgender identities; participants described active separation between the two groups. These divisions are not merely ideological; they have real operational consequences. Activists are either migrating out of the country, minimising their visibility, or retreating entirely underground, which has ultimately led to emerging leadership vacuums.

The other emerging outcome at the regional level includes tensions around how donor funding weakens the movement priorities, whereby movements that were once sustained by voluntarism and political conviction have become increasingly structured around project cycles, deliverables, and

donor preferences. Most of these rights-based organisations now spend much of their time on project implementation, administrative and financial management, and report writing for the NGO Affairs Bureau and donor agencies, leaving less time for actual movement-based work (Sabur, 2021).

Reflections and recommendations

Overall, the research shares that the collaboration between feminist and LGBTQI+ movements in Bangladesh remains fragmented but politically significant. These interactions are gradually reshaping public understanding of GBV by challenging heteronormative assumptions, questioning binary constructions of gender, and foregrounding intersectional experiences of violence. However, enduring hierarchies within movements, rising anti-gender backlash, and limited institutional support continue to constrain the transformative potential of these alliances.

Building power together: coordination and collective action

There is a critical need for a common pathway that moves beyond organisational mandates and prioritises the common goal of challenging socio-cultural norms and heteronormative narratives. There need to be spaces where different groups can surface tensions, share ideologies, and agree on common priorities; where they can actively address and dismantle these divisional hierarchies within movements; and where they can build common pathways and engagements to collaborate on.

Democratising knowledge and resources

Resources that are developed by individual organisations and collectives should be consolidated, translated to simplified Bangla language, and made publicly available through common and accessible sources. This should be a priority agenda for all collaborative future work, not just for optics but also for ensuring knowledge equity and accessibility for grassroots organisations.

Collectively fighting for advocacy and policy shifts

Given the reduction of resources in the movement spaces, the need for collaborative strategies is imperative. These strategies go beyond individual demands to develop and present common goals that can be achieved through different kinds of engagements across movements. There is also a need to map and build relationships with sensitised political allies rather than engaging broadly, identifying who will actually listen, and making direct sensitisation efforts with those actors.

Conclusion

This research highlights how feminist and LGBTQI+ movement actors in Bangladesh see an urgent need to build bridges, co-create strategies for mobilisation, and build stronger pathways for consistent advocacy with different stakeholders. They recognise that the fight is bigger than the differences, and some actors have already taken steps to enable solidarity and allyship for each other. To move forward, there is a definite need for more open conversations and respectful disagreements in order to strengthen trust in each other.

What the data calls for is not a new agenda but a deepened commitment to an existing one through building movements from the margins inward, investing in sustainable structures rather than project cycles, taking internal fractures as seriously as external threats, and understanding GBV as a category that must keep expanding to match the lived reality of those it affects most. The overall vision from those involved in movement-building showcases their hope for building more accessible spaces, collective actions and inclusive results. The current context highlights how vital this is to ensure the strength of the movements going forward.

1 Introduction

We are living in a world for which old forms of activism are not enough, and today's activism is about creating coalitions between communities.

(Angela Davis, cited in Hernández and Rehman, 2002: 16)

Bangladesh has a rich, strong history of people-centred movements, including the women's rights movement. Even before the establishment of Bangladesh as a nation state in 1971, and formal recognition of the women's movement, women had been participating in pre-independence broader political struggles in the Bengal region, including anti-imperial, nationalist, class or caste-based movements. As the country gained independence, Bangladesh was seen as a place of revolutionary potential mostly by the nationalists, leftists and civil society groups advocating for equal rights for all, and at this time, women activists channelled their feminist energy into the goal of creating a more equal society (Sabur, 2021). By the 1990s, the women's rights movement became increasingly led by feminists, whose analysis of patriarchy remained largely focused on cis-women's issues. Following the Beijing Declaration in 1995,¹ and aligning with global movement objectives, the women's movement focused more on legal reforms such as anti-rape laws, acid violence prevention, and domestic violence prevention (ibid.).

During this time, organising around LGBTQI+ issues mostly focused on service provision directed to the health needs of men who have sex with men (MSM) and later expanded to include other gender and sexual identities such as Hijra, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people (Outright International, 2026). Although the gay men's movement gained momentum in the 1990s and early 2000s by building alliances with the feminist movement (Karim, 2018, in Browne, 2019), other groups (lesbian, queer and trans) lacked visibility until the 2000s. In parallel, there is also a long history of the Hijra or trans women's movement, which eventually led to recognition of the 'third gender' as a legal identity in 2013. Even today, Bangladesh upholds Section 377 of the Penal Code – a colonial-era provision that is more than 150 years old, which criminalises voluntary 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal', and is often used to deny recognition of LGBTQI+ individuals in the country (Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2019). This has contributed to the lack of services, as well as denial of housing and employment, and discrimination and violence. Historically, LGBTQI+ activists have remained within the feminist movement space and acted from within that movement. It is only over the past decade that a strengthened, visible LGBTQI+ movement space has emerged in Bangladesh.

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains one of the most pervasive forms of violation and inequality in Bangladesh to date. Violence against women unfortunately remains so prevalent that it is frequently highlighted in literature (Shahen, 2021). However, in the context of Bangladesh, GBV cuts across all boundaries of class and identity and affects people of diverse gender and sexual identities (Browne, 2019). The 2024 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) survey reports that 75.9% of ever-married women have experienced intimate partner violence (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and UNFPA Bangladesh (2025)). Additionally, 15% have faced physical violence and 2.2% have experienced sexual violence from non-partners. Tech-facilitated GBV and digital abuse are rising rapidly in Bangladesh, with 8.3% of women reporting having experienced forms such as blackmail, image-based abuse, and unwanted sexual communications. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2025),

¹ The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995 is a visionary agenda for the empowerment of women. This landmark text was the outcome of the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China, in September 1995. After two weeks of political debate, exchange of information on good practice and lessons learned, and sharing of experiences, representatives of 189 governments agreed to commitments that were unprecedented in scope.

83% of transgender individuals have experienced violence in their lifetime. Furthermore, a 2026 Outright International report reveals that 73% of lesbian, bisexual and queer (LBQ) people have faced digital violence, yet zero reported cases have been filed so far to official channels.

In Bangladesh, the changing face of GBV is increasingly shaped by the intersection of changing social norms, technological specialisation, and the selective use of religious authority. The narrow, traditional framing of GBV as an issue that impacts only cisgender women fails to sufficiently capture the lived realities of marginalised groups, especially LGBTQI+ individuals and Indigenous women. The prevailing social and gender norms significantly shape how GBV is understood, measured and addressed in Bangladesh. Conservative attitudes toward gender and sexuality, marginalise gender and sexually diverse communities, limiting the visibility of their experiences in data and public discourse (Akhter and Zillur, 2024).

Women's experiences of violence are also influenced by intersecting social factors such as marital status, economic position, disability, ethnicity, and geographic location (ibid.). These norms reinforce broader social inequalities and contribute to the persistence of violence and unequal access to support and protection. Lack of relevant legal frameworks, gender-affirmative care, and social marginalisation further compound the experiences of LBQ people and prevent victim-survivors from accessing justice (Outright International, 2026).

Although there is a stark paradox in the socio-political evolution of Bangladesh, as reflected in the literature, each phase of visibility is countered with an equally sophisticated counter-mobilisation. The inability of legal frameworks to protect sexual minorities from police extortion and societal discrimination forces civil society to seek solutions externally, in international platforms (Chaney et al., 2020). However, the domestic realities are still shaped by a dangerous environment of cyber-violence and online character assassination directed at LGBTQI+ individuals (Mahpara et al., 2022). The historical record shows that even when democratic transitions occurred, women and queer movements were severely marginalised as the state structures continued to be tied to religious nationalism and patriarchal political bargains (Khan and Sharp, 2025).

Addressing GBV against LGBTQI+ individuals requires challenging the inequalities and gender and social norms that operate at the individual, community and institutional levels. This research investigates how feminist and LGBTQI+ movements build solidarity to operate within these restrictive political environments. The purpose of this report is to introspect how these aligned movements identify GBV risks facing LGBTQI+ communities, build alliance for protections and empathy, and advance cultural shifts to dismantle the root causes of discrimination, violence and criminalisation of LGBTQI+ individuals and the community.

2 Literature review

In Bangladesh, the progress of feminist and transgender rights movements is rooted in an ongoing struggle against established heteronormative social norms, GBV, and organised online backlash (Barua and Khan, 2023). Although the feminist and women's rights organisations historically coordinated efforts to achieve democratic reforms and combat patriarchal violence, they navigated a strict culture of pretence, sexual pleasure and prohibition (ibid.: 8) in which social norms rigidly mandate a heteronormative trajectory centred on marriage and reproductive duties (Karim, 2022). Furthermore, under successive authoritarian regimes, early civil society advocacy struggled within a heavily restricted civic space, in which women's movements frequently had to prioritise broader democratic survival and resistance against politicised religion over specific intersectional rights (Khan and Sharp, 2025).

Historically, coalition-based movements had proved to be a success during the 1960s to 2000s. As Sabur (2021) has documented, 'the women's movement gained the most out of the coalitions that women's organisations managed to establish among themselves and with NGOs, political parties, media and other civil society groups' (ibid.: 63) to work on violence against women and women's political, legal, sexual and reproductive health rights, along with other forms of discrimination. Some of the early coalitions during the 1980s and 1990s, such as the *Nari Nirjaton Protirodh Committee* (Violence Against Women Resistance Committee), *Oikkyoboddho Nari Samaj* (United Women's Society), *Shammilito Nari Samaj* (Coalition of Women in the Society), *Patita Shangram Parishad* (Sex Workers' Rights Coalition), *Shanghati* (Solidarity), and *Protirodh* (Resistance) Network, are some of the examples that brought in multiple women's rights groups, activist groups, civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on different occasions. These platforms aimed to combat wide-ranging problems such as dowry-related violence and murder, rape and murder, acid violence, bodily autonomy and access to safe birth control methods, sex workers' rights, women's human rights and family law reform, reserved quotas for women and Indigenous people in government jobs, and minimum wage and equal pay for women in the ready-made garments sector (Nazneen and Sultan, 2011; Sabur, 2021) culminating in various law reforms, introduction of policies and formation of new rights-based organisations. Most of these coalitions were led by leading women's rights organisations such as Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Naripokkho, Ain o Salish Kendra, and Women for Women.

In later movements, especially the sex workers' rights movement, feminist activism expanded its horizons with an intersectional lens, focusing on broader equality and human rights issues. This opened up space for male and transgender sex workers, followed by other gender-based rights groups, which later emerged as LGBTQI+ groups fighting for their sexuality and rights (Azim, 2012, in Sabur, 2021). Some of the large coalitions that are currently active in the movement space are the Social Action Committee convened by Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, *Durbar* (Unstoppable) Network convened by Naripokkho, and the Rape Law Reform Coalition convened by the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust. Although women's and other rights-based organisations are well represented within these coalitions, there remains potential to further strengthen inclusivity through the participation of LGBTQI+ movement actors.

The emergence of LGBTQI+ movements was marked by landmark initiatives, especially the founding of *Roopbaan* (loosely meaning 'beautiful') in 2014, the country's first and only queer magazine (Karim, 2022). These developments occurred alongside important, complex legal victories such as the state's formal recognition of the 'third gender' or Hijra classification. Despite this institutional progress, the literature demonstrates that the lived realities of LGBTQI+ individuals are still characterised by severe human rights violations, including state-sanctioned criminalisation through colonial era laws, police brutality, extortion, ubiquitous public discrimination (Chaney et al., 2020) and severe psychological

trauma (Browne, 2019). The digital space has quickly transformed into a merciless frontline for GBV and anti-feminist backlash. LGBTQI+ individuals and communities are bullied and harassed online, with name calling and people trying to damage reputations (Mahpara et al., 2022).

To counter these threats, CSOs have increasingly relied solely on international rights-affirming platforms, such as the United Nations Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review, to frame and vocalise these prevailing suppressions where domestic legal avenues remain hostile. This strategic axis has occurred in tandem with activists retreating into secure, encrypted digital networks to escape state and extremist surveillance (Sabur and Hassan, 2026).

With recent acute civil unrest in Bangladesh, such as the political upheavals of late 2024, this systemic oppression was further intensified, which exponentially increased the incidence of lawlessness, domestic abuse, and targeted intimidation directed at women and sexual minorities who lack robust institutional safeguards (UN Women, 2025). The rise in anti-transgender and anti-queer violence following recent political crises exemplifies the ongoing confluence of digital violence, institutional failure, and social policing. In July 2024, the uprising (a student-led protest against discriminatory government job quotas that quickly escalated into a national uprising joined by the masses) toppled the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's 15-year autocratic regime and shifted the political landscape. The fall of the regime generated a surge of hope for a pluralistic and inclusive democracy, but the immediate fallout exposed serious vulnerabilities for non-binary and marginalised populations as transitional political arrangements quickly erased the LGBTQI+ population and left them in a perilous terrain of increased domestic abuse and lawlessness (ibid.).

The violence that surfaced at this time was driven by a 'newly minted anti-transgender politics' (Hossain, 2025: 496) that deliberately conflates Indigenous Hijra or 'third gender' concepts with globalised categories of homosexuality to delegitimise gender-affirming advocacy, which ignited public book-banning campaigns and textbook vandalism. This institutional targeting is a direct extension of the organised digital smear campaigns and cyber-harassment previously weaponised to police non-conforming behaviours in public spaces (Mahpara et al., 2022). The resulting elimination from the post-uprising political arena has pushed remaining proponents into underground networks, trying to preserve a fragile 'code of courage' under the surveillance of hostile actors (Sabur and Hassan, 2026: 23). In the end, this backlash is an extension of patriarchal control over women and LGBTQI+ people, with harsh social and physical sanctions used to prevent anyone from transgressing the prescribed boundaries of gender, marriage and family structure.

Although third-wave feminism and queer feminist movements have emphasised coalitional politics, identity-based movements continue to play a crucial role in addressing systemic oppression and creating safe spaces for socially excluded communities (Kang et al., 2017). Identity-based movements, such as women's movements, gender-diverse and disability justice movements, provide a necessary foundation for individuals to organise around their shared experiences of discrimination, exclusion and violence. These movements have been instrumental in advocating for legal protections, social recognition and policy changes specific to their communities (ibid.). At the same time, inclusive queer feminist movements, inspired by third-wave feminism, highlight the interconnectedness of struggles and the need for cross-movement collaboration. They critique the hierarchies within identity-based movements and work towards intersectional approaches that address overlapping oppressions, such as racism, ableism, casteism and classism, in addition to gender and sexuality-based discrimination (ibid.).

This dual approach – centring identity-based advocacy while promoting coalition-building – ensures a more holistic and transformative response to structural inequalities, particularly in the context of challenging gender norms that underpin GBV. Understanding these dynamics will be central to this research, as it will examine both the tensions and possibilities in collaborations between feminist and LGBTQI+ movements.

2.1 Significance of the study

While both the feminist and LGBTQI+ movements share the goal of a society free from identity-based exclusion and discrimination, much of their work has remained separate when it comes to mainstream mobilisation and advocacy on GBV issues. In Bangladesh, feminist movements interact with civil society through coalitions to advocate for changing norms, counter backlash, and mobilise protests. Young, digitally connected feminists are pushing for intergenerational coalitions and including LGBTQI+ issues in the feminist movement to address intersecting oppressions that older generations often viewed as fragmented (Sabur, 2022).

In the recent shifting political context, particularly after the uprising in July 2024, there was hope of a more inclusive, youth-led, transparent social and political change. But this was short-lived, as decision-making spaces soon became visibly majoritarian-focused, with Bengali Muslim men at the helm. Gender-diverse people, ethnic minorities, non-Muslims, and queer communities were rendered structurally invisible, not through direct legal exclusion, but through institutional disinterest, discretionary silences, and carefully curated symbolic gestures that substitute presence for power (Asgar, 2025).

In this emboldened role, anti-gender and right-wing voices are engaging consistently in building up narratives to encourage anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQI+ and anti-minority discourses that have led to an increase in harassment in public spaces, online bullying, hate speech, and moral policing of bodies. In March 2025, after the publication of the *Women's Affairs Reform Commission Report* (Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2025) outlining the movement's demands, the criticism and backlash organised by religious groups made support for anti-women positions more explicit throughout the country (Chakma, 2025). Using cultural norms and religion as the basis for their narratives and demands, the anti-gender movement often targets women, feminists, LGBTQI+ individuals and gender-diverse communities within the same rhetoric. This creates a necessity for strong collaborations and allyship within the spheres of gender rights work.

This research therefore aimed to explore Bangladesh's feminist and LGBTQI+ movements to understand what kinds of inclusive and collective engagements have existed, the challenges of forming coalitions, and what has enabled allyship even within restrictions and political upheavals. The intended outcome for this research would be to showcase findings and stories that help support movement actors to develop strategies and pathways that can foster stronger, more sustainable collaborations going forward.

3 Methodology

3.1 Objectives and research questions

This research aimed to understand how the broader feminist movement and constituency-led LGBTQI+ groups in Bangladesh engage, partner around and navigate these deep-seated tensions to challenge the norms that drive GBV. The report documents existing alliances, regional variations and structural gaps to support movement actors to co-create safer, more sustainable and more inclusive strategies for collective action.

The research was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the dynamics of inter-movement collaboration in Bangladesh?
 - 1.1 In the context of Bangladesh, what are the characteristics of the collaborative effort between these two distinct movements? Furthermore, how do they mutually influence and support one another?
 - 1.2 How do the intersecting factors of gender, identity, class, religion and ethnicity shape the dynamics of collaboration aimed at addressing GBV?
 - 1.3 To what extent does existing divisiveness among identity groups, coupled with escalating hostility toward specific populations, impede activist endeavours and hinder movement-building?
2. What is the understanding of social and gender norms underpinning GBV within both movements?
 - 2.1 What social and gender norms underpin GBV against gender-diverse individuals and communities in Bangladesh?
 - 2.2 How do the historical and cultural contexts of the feminist and gender-diverse movements shape their understanding of social and gender norms related to GBV?
 - 2.3 Are norms defined differently by various constituencies, resulting in distinct behaviours related to both perpetration of violence and responses from survivors? (Also considering how different identities can face violence differently)
 - 2.4 What role do social media and popular culture play in shaping public perceptions of GBV and reinforcing harmful gender norms against gender-diverse communities?
3. What has been a strategic shift in the way the collaboration tries to understand and address different forms of GBV?
 - 3.1 What has been the process of co-creation of strategies and its implementation (decision-making roles, internalised bias, power hierarchy's effect) to address GBV?
 - 3.2 What factors led them to collaborate successfully? What does success look like?
 - 3.3 Where do tensions still exist?

3.2 Approach

This research was guided by feminist participatory action research (FPAR) methodology by engaging the participants through a co-creation process, and ensuring that their needs, concerns and desires were centred throughout the research process. The research acknowledges that the politics of defining research methods – where knowledge and methods are not separate from researchers, their beliefs and politics – are not removed from the gendered, transphobic, ableist and colonial underpinnings of knowledge creation as a practice in itself. During the research design phase, the research methods were finalised in a participatory manner with key members from the feminist and LGBTQI+ communities to best suit the research context and navigate any structural barriers towards creating safe and meaningful participation across the process.

3.3 Sampling and data collection

Given the complexity of the existing movement spaces along with the context in which these movements have been and are currently operating, this research used different qualitative narrative-based methodologies, including key informant interviews (KIIs), in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). These interviews were semi-structured and flowed between personal histories, collective power and community mapping, observations and reflective dialogues. Data collection tools were developed, acknowledging that there is a high level of fear and fatigue that was expressed by movement actors when it comes to participating in research processes and general burnout within the movement spaces. Data collection tools and processes were designed to centre rest, care and safety, thus ensuring attention to the needs of participants when setting up interviews and discussions, and integrating somatic grounding and creative methods into the tools. The FGDs were designed as a 'playshop', inviting participants to engage in arts-based activities that elicit peer-to-peer reflection and sharing. A total of 72 participants took part in the study across all three methods.

The FGDs covered three divisions of Bangladesh (one in Sylhet in the north, Chattogram in the south, and Dhaka, the capital) where Bonhishikha is working very closely with the feminist and diverse marginalised communities. Data collected from these three divisions provided regional as well as cultural diversity to capture intersectional perspectives and scenarios.

The research followed purposive and snowball sampling. Data collection began by conducting KIIs and IDIs with prominent feminist and LGBTQI+ activists and scholars across Bangladesh, of different ages and genders. Due to the national election, Eid break, and safety and logistical preferences of participants, these interviews were conducted online and in-person. All FGDs took place in-person, and the participants were selected in consultation with the active networks at the division level, ensuring representation of activists from different constituencies.

Table 1 Sampling categories and corresponding numbers

Categories	Number of participants		
Key informant interview (KII)	15 (virtual)		
In-depth interview (IDI)	5 (3 in-person, 2 virtual)		
Focus group discussion (FGD)		Participants from feminist movement (# of FGD)	Participants from LGBTQI+ movement (# of FGD)
	Dhaka	9 (1)	7 (1)
	Chattogram	8 (1)	10 (1)
	Sylhet	12 (1)	6 (1)
	Total	29	23
Sensemaking workshop	24 (8 in-person in Dhaka, 16 virtual)		

3.4 Data analysis and validation

The data collected was recorded, transcribed and translated into English and coded thematically using an intersectional analytic lens. The narrative and content method was used alongside field observations and notes to make meaning. Given the positionality of the researchers, some of whom are LGBTQI+ individuals and engaged as movement actors, reflexivity was critical to the analytical processes, to examine their own positionalities, biases and experiences and how they might shape the interpretations of the data. A sensemaking workshop was organised in hybrid format to co-create knowledge and make sense of the key findings of the research, involving participants and collaborators from across the feminist and LGBTQI+ groups.

3.5 Limitations and risk mitigation

Political instability

The research was conducted during a period of political transition in Bangladesh, when unrest and mass protests occasionally restricted movement and the ability to conduct in-person activities. It was also a period of heightened surveillance and safety concerns. This resulted in postponement of the data collection plan, but the research timelines had been accounted for in the research plan and budget. The research plan also included measures to ensure the utmost safety and security of the research team, participants and collaborators.

Safety and security constraints

Due to the sensitive nature of the subject and the risk of backlash from extremist groups, data collection had to be highly confidential. This required anonymising participants and restricted the public dissemination of findings to invite-only audiences. All the data (including narratives and observations) is stored on an external hard drive with restricted access.

Representation of diverse identities

Though the research team has made efforts to ensure representation of intersectional and diverse identities from both movements, participation of persons with disabilities and disability rights activists

within the study sample remained limited. Through snowball sampling, there were also very few disability organisations and disability rights activists referred to in the collaboration space. This may reflect limited visibility or integration of disability rights actors within the movements explored in this study, hence the findings may not fully capture reflections from a disability rights viewpoint on the norms underpinning GBV among this group of people as well as their engagement with the broader movements.

Emotional and psychosomatic risks

Engaging in narratives regarding GBV and exclusion posed a risk of re-triggering trauma, both for research participants and research team members. The research plan budgeted and arranged for an on-call Bangla-speaking psychological service for those who might require it.

4 Findings and discussion

The pragmatic findings of this study profile the complex and often fractured terrain of collaboration between feminist and LGBTQI+ movements in Bangladesh as they work together to challenge the structural mechanisms of GBV and social norms. This section of the report triangulates extensive secondary literature and primary qualitative data collected through key informant interviews, in-depth interviews at the national level, and focus group discussions in Dhaka, Sylhet and Chattogram divisions. It explores the strategic shifts as well as the underlying tensions that characterise contemporary cross-movement alliances that aim to challenge and transform existing social and gender norms and the institutional structures that perpetuate GBV against feminists and LGBTQI+ individuals and communities.

4.1 Dynamics of inter-movement collaboration in Bangladesh

The collaboration between feminist and LGBTQI+ movements in Bangladesh is an important, though uneven, strategy to challenge the gender norms that underpin GBV. The literature suggests that women's rights organisations such as Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Naripokkho, and Ain o Salish Kendra have historically mobilised against patriarchal violence through coalition-building, public protests and advocacy for women's rights. Younger feminist groups and LGBTQI+ activists have, over time, pushed these movements toward a broader understanding of violence – one that includes homophobic and transphobic abuse, digital harassment, and the denial of institutional protections:

'Recently, we [Bangladesh Mahila Parishad and Bonhishikha] have written a position paper [advocacy document consisting of recommendations from the women's movement to ensure gender equality and social justice] and a charter of demands [grounded in the intergenerational and inclusive women's movement in Bangladesh, it outlines collective demands from the movement to achieve gender equality and empowerment of womxn² in all their diversity] in collaboration with the rest of the women's movement actors...

2 womxn is an alternative spelling for women that denotes the inclusion of trans women, non-binary and anyone who identifies as a woman despite their sexual identity.

and we [women's movement actors] have been having this conversation – how do we align queer space and the feminist space?... We thought of a space [through this collaboration process of creating the charter] where we could hold multiple voices, and it's not only women... even when we were writing, we did talk about the violence, but we didn't have the data [beyond violence against women].'

(KII, feminist activist)

The data from across commonalities (the IDI and KII datasets) strongly recognised that while feminist and LGBTQI+ movements are aligned in resisting patriarchal control and state hostility, their partnership is still tenuous and often feels performative to the LGBTQI+ community.

The architecture of collaboration is a fragile structure built on shared ideals and undermined by exclusionary foundations

There is a fundamental gap between the sense of ideological kinship these movements feel and the practical reality of how they organise together. The triangulated data reveals that while an ideological kinship exists regarding the structural nature of gendered oppression, the practical framework for engagement frequently relegates LGBTQI+ movement actors to a peripheral role, functioning as invited participants rather than core strategic architects. This leads to what experts call 'performative inclusivity', in which marginalised groups are invited to the table to demonstrate diversity but excluded from fundamental decisions about movement priorities and resource allocation:

'People often say, "We should do something," but in reality, they don't really come forward, especially when it comes to working with the queer movement. The big organisations, the ones that call themselves feminist or say they work on rights, you'll see that many of them include gender-diverse people. Often, it's because there's a demand from donors. Maybe otherwise, they wouldn't even consider it... It's more like a checkbox. So, what happens is, inclusion becomes a small, limited task, something to show rather than something deeply practised or believed in.'

(IDI, senior LGBTQI+ activist)

The data suggests that this is not simply an individual failing but a structural one, often motivated by a desire to protect a movement's 'legitimacy' by keeping sexual and gender diversity in the background in order to avoid external backlash.

During interviews, experts highlighted that international funding has fundamentally transformed how events are run. Previously, activism focused on sharing personal stories and ideas, building friendships, and making deep community connections. Today, practices are entirely dictated by donor compliance, logical frameworks and 'check-box' metrics:

'Now it's more like... there's going to be a Human Rights Day programme. We are going to need 30 participants, so can you bring 10 people?... Numbers have become more important.'

(KII, senior feminist activist)

Often, mainstream rallies or massive coalition events in Bangladesh call upon LGBTQI+ and Hijra individuals to join but treat them merely as a 'crowd' to display diversity. Their specific demands are routinely excluded from the core manifestos or public messaging to avoid political and social backlash from conservative groups, influential actors and sections of the wider public.

There is also a frequent mandate from donors that every project should demonstrate gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) and the presence of 'cross-movement collaboration'

as a condition for funding. When alliances are forced by financial necessity, they become purely transactional. Instead of uniting activists, this dynamic creates a scramble for survival resources, sparking internal friction and driving groups further apart into defensive, competitive factions.

Replicated hierarchies and gatekeeping

A recurring and critical finding is that movement spaces frequently reproduce the very class, geographic and educational hierarchies they aim to dismantle. For many activists, moving to Dhaka is a political act intended to find anonymity and freedom, yet the city functions as a 'primary construction site' where only those with specific social capital can truly participate. Both datasets also highlight the political aspect of language capabilities, with participants describing how high-level advocacy is often conducted in English or academic Bangla, which systematically gatekeeps the movement from grassroots activists — particularly the Hijra community and those with limited formal education. This 'elite capture' means that the visible leadership of these movements often reflects a privileged urban profile, leaving the communities most affected by violence — such as garment workers or Indigenous women — without a seat in the rooms where strategy is set:

'If grassroots, rural or marginalised communities are supposed to benefit, then decision-making spaces should include people from those communities, not just those with elite education or international exposure. It's not enough to have ideology or good intentions; the leadership and structure must reflect inclusivity and diversity.'

(IDI, senior LGBTQI+ activist)

The intersectional 'penalty'

Activists who attempt to bridge these movements or bring their full selves into the room are often perceived as being aggressive, troublemakers or disruptors. The data points to a persistent pattern whereby emphasising intersectional concerns or specific needs of sexual minorities is seen as divisive and threatening to the unity of the movement. This often leads to queer women entering the space in the form of 'hidden participation', where they contribute labour and support the agenda but do not fully share their experiences, as the price of being 'whole' is too high. This has been compounded by the hostile 'do not disclose' environment, where the threat of surveillance, blackmail and mob violence makes anonymity a necessity rather than a choice, leading to serious and systemic burnout among generations of activists:

'I was once at a Women's [Affairs Reform] Commission event where someone asked a feminist leader directly about including Hijra and trans women in the Commission's work. Her response was very clear: 'This is not in our mandate.' Hearing that was deeply painful... It makes you realise how far we still have to go. Our existence is constantly under threat... The state does not provide even basic protection for us to live with dignity.'

(IDI, young LGBTQI+ activist)

The blueprint for meaningful solidarity

Finally, both KII and IDI datasets converge on the idea that successful collaboration requires an identifiable and replicable architecture that has rarely been sustained. Activists referred to one of the most recent visible instances of collaborative success — *Narir Dakey Moitri Jatra* (which loosely translates to 'women's call for solidarity march') organised on 16 May 2025. Even with much criticism for the lack of LGBTQI+ visibility, the process demonstrated that solidarity is built through rotating leadership, where no single group monopolises the narrative, and by centring shared human rights principles rather than narrow identity politics. The evidence from the data concludes that 'safe

spaces’ are not automatically safe but require constant, active maintenance and a willingness to engage in difficult, structured dialogues that make room for discomfort and disagreement.

Multiple activists expressed that the movement’s future depends on moving away from ‘performative consensus’ toward a decentralised, collective governance that shares resources and validates the personal foundation of every activist. One activist noted that the community is often used to provide ‘representation in terms of the crowd rather than genuinely including their demands’, where issues are sometimes treated as an ‘opportunistic add-on’ rather than a core component of the feminist platform:

‘When [feminists] want to do big programmes, you invite [LGBTQI+ activists] in, and they are there, so you show you’re so inclusive as a feminist group... And [when] they have programmes, they invite feminists to show that yes, we are getting your support, but there’s no such open and strong, clear dialogue. I think from both sides, there’s still kind of a curtain.’

(KII, senior feminist activist)

These findings from the primary data (KIIs and IDIs) correspond with the existing literature, which identifies significant tensions within these collaborations, with the feminist movement often described as urban, secular, and cisgender-focused, leaving queer and trans communities marginalised or symbolically included without meaningful decision-making power (Barua and Khan, 2023; Hossain and Rahman, 2024; Alim, 2025):

‘People in Bangladesh move away and do not come forward whenever the topic of sexuality arises. So, by keeping the human rights [agenda] in the foreground and being strategic about including sexual identities... the work of the collaborations can be moved forward.’

(KII, senior LGBTQI+ activist)

Existing literature also emphasises that gender-diverse and LGBTQI+ activists frequently face tokenisation, class-based exclusion, and heightened exposure to backlash, particularly in digital and political spaces. For example, in the aftermath of the 2016 killings of Xulhaz Mannan and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy, and amid the growing influence of religious conservatism, intensified surveillance pushed much of the activism into less visible forms of community care and survival (Sabur and Hassan, 2026). Xulhaz Mannan and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy were LGBTQI+ activists who were murdered in their Dhaka apartment on 25 April 2016 by members of a religious extremists’ group. They were leading figures behind *Roopbaan*, Bangladesh’s first LGBTQI+ magazine, which promoted acceptance of people of diverse sexual orientations (Hammadi and Gani, 2016; *The Daily Star*, 2021). In the days before the attack, Mannan had received repeated death threats but did not report them, fearing police persecution of LGBTQI+ rights defenders (Amnesty International, 2017):

‘Post-Xulhaz’s murder there was a sort of discord which started to take place because... most queer folks would rely on feminists as possible allies. And even socialists as possible allies... When things get really volatile, these are the first two groups that people would reach out for support. And if you [LGBTQI+] don’t receive support... it questions the idea of allyship... So the queer movement had suffered for several years before things started to get a little better and people could start interacting and mobilising.’

(KII, young LGBTQI+ activist)

Overall, the reviewed literature and the primary data indicate that collaboration between feminist and LGBTQI+ movements in Bangladesh remains fragmented but politically significant. These interactions are gradually reshaping public understanding of GBV by challenging heteronormative assumptions, questioning binary constructions of gender, and foregrounding intersectional experiences of

violence. However, enduring hierarchies within movements, rising anti-gender backlash and limited institutional support continue to constrain the transformative potential of these alliances.

4.2 Social and gender norms underpinning GBV within both movements

The transition from the structural dynamics of movement collaboration to the underlying social and gender norms is not merely a shift in research focus, but an exploration of the causal relationship between societal conditioning and political resistance. While the first part of this section (4.1) detailed the architecture of how movements interact, this part (4.2) investigates the foundation upon which those structures are built – the rigid gender binary and patriarchal enforcement mechanisms that necessitate activism in the first place.

Understanding the norms that underpin GBV is essential to understanding why collaboration is so fraught; the same societal ‘correction’ logic that targets gender-diverse bodies in public spaces often infiltrates the internal cultures of progressive movements, creating the very hierarchies and ‘disruption penalties’ that hinder collective action. By examining these norms, the researchers move from observing the external symptoms of movement fragmentation to diagnosing the deep-seated social codes that movements must dismantle, both within society and within themselves.

The analysis of social and gender norms underpinning GBV across both the in-depth interviews and key informant interviews reveals a landscape where violence is not merely an isolated act but a tool used to enforce a rigid, binary social order:

‘When a person’s gender identity gets revealed, their family starts mistreating them. If we ignore the family, then the other people around them in society start discriminating against them. Because of the social stigma, many people commit suicide.’

(KII, senior LGBTQI+ activist)

The following subsections elaborate on these themes, weaving together the personal lived experiences of activists with expert structural analysis.

The enforcement of the gender binary as a root cause of violence

At the core of GBV is a societal obsession with a strict male–female binary, where any deviation is discussed not as a diversity of human experience but as an ‘ailment’ or a ‘mistake’ that requires violent correction. This notion is deeply embedded in the recent literature on social norms and in the lived realities of activists (Humbert and Strid, 2025):

‘We are often treated as a source of ridicule. Words like, Hijra, are used as insults. Everywhere – within families and in society – we face bullying and name-calling: Hijra, half-ladies, *maikka* [a local slur used to mock someone as feminine/girly], *chokka* [implying a man is a eunuch or not a ‘real man’], *chaiya* [implying a man is emasculated or sexually inadequate], and many other hurtful terms. We all grew up hearing the same things.’

(IDI, young LGBTQI+ activist)

Both the datasets highlight that this binary is enforced through ‘identity verification’ harassment – a specific and commonly cited form of violence, whereby gender-diverse individuals are physically touched or publicly interrogated to verify their biological sex. This systemic policing of the body creates an environment in which the very existence of non-conforming, non-binary or trans individuals is treated as a provocation.

The existing literature review supports such a role of heteronormative and binary gender norms in legitimising violence. It argues that Bangladeshi society continues to privilege rigid categories of 'male' and 'female', alongside expectations of heterosexual marriage, masculinity, femininity, and reproductive family structures (Alam and Marston, 2023). The gender-diverse individuals are therefore perceived as violating the accepted social order, and any forms of harassment, exclusion and violence appear socially acceptable or even morally justified (Alam et al., 2023). Several cited studies connect this directly to colonial legal frameworks and postcolonial state practices that criminalise or stigmatise non-normative sexualities and gender identities, which are further perpetuated by religious and state-led actors today (Rashid et al., 2011):

'How people experience gender-based violence actually differs based on their identities. For LBQ women... a lot of them are pressured into getting married... There are incidences of abuse, they are restricting their movement, and their families are trying to get them married off to a man. And then we also get cases where they are in heterosexual marriages, but they want to break free, but maybe they do not have the resources or money to get out of the partnership. We also hear about intimate partner violence that is very difficult for anybody to address because we are already criminalised; we cannot really take these cases forward to the police, and there is no mechanism within the community as well.'

(KII, young LGBTQI+ activist)

The data explicitly demonstrates this reality, as activists strongly explained how society has strict rules about what is considered correct behaviour. Here, violence against LBQ women is used to discipline them for transgressing accepted gender norms and expected heterosexuality. The current research suggests that society operates on a corrective logic; when an individual does not fit the expected structure, violence is used as the primary mechanism to force them back into the binary or to expel them from public space. Activists emphasised that the feminist movement must return to the foundational principle that 'the personal is political' – to draw from the personal pain, complexities and lived experiences of individuals from LGBTQI+ or other distinct groups to understand and dismantle the political systems and structures that actively oppress them.

The structural realities of the existing social and gender norms shaping GBV within the movement

One of the most consistent narratives to surface across the focus group discussions – particularly in Sylhet and Dhaka – is that patriarchy is not just an external structure, but an internal system sustained by the generational conditioning of women. The system socialises women to internalise, police and pass down the very norms that limit their bodily autonomy and freedom, turning the oppressed into the custodians of their own subjugation. This does not shift accountability away from structural or male-perpetrated violence. Rather, it points to a more sophisticated understanding of how norms are sustained – through everyday enforcement by those who are themselves constrained by them.

Across all three research sites, participants consistently named forms of GBV that often do not appear in existing legal frameworks, policy documents, or mainstream feminist advocacy. This is not incidental – it reflects a structural gap between how violence is officially recognised and how it is actually experienced.

These new and emerging forms of GBV include: tech-facilitated violence (doxxing, blackmail via dating apps, intimate image abuse, account-sharing exploitation) and identity-based financial violence (withdrawal of family economic support and inheritance rights specifically because of gender identity); 'silent violence' (family pressure to enter opposite-gender marriages – named and

theorised by participants as violence, despite receiving no legal or social recognition); and organised mob violence targeting queer individuals under the pretence of sexual harassment accusations:

‘As different identities are emerging, new forms of violence are also emerging – and GBV doesn’t happen with women only but also with other identities.’

(FGD, LGBTQI+ activist)

Additionally, as GBV or ‘gender issues’ are often connected or understood as cis-women issues, this does not recognise other gender identities affected by GBV. There is therefore a lack of data on GBV against LGBTQI+ people that can be used for mapping, strategising or doing advocacy:

‘The data is not there, like, there’s no gender-diverse group... So, yeah, that is one of the basic problems. And then, like, having to talk about violence of both groups and how it can be brought into the movement becomes our second challenge.’

(KII, feminist activist)

The pattern across sites is that violence is not simply increasing – it is diversifying and specialising. Perpetrators are finding new tools and new vulnerabilities. The communities most affected are those that are most marginalised, such as LGBTQI+ individuals and Indigenous women, who are also least served by existing frameworks. This points to an urgent need for the movements themselves to develop a broader, more fluid conception of GBV that can keep pace with its evolution.

Among multiple contributing factors, religion emerged as a strong contributor to norms that drive the GBV experienced by feminist and LGBTQI+ individuals. The data reveals a more complex picture than simple religious conservatism, whereby the pattern is one of selective, politically motivated deployment of religious authority to suppress specific identities, combined with a genuine absence of counter-narratives reaching mass audiences:

‘If any *hujur* [Muslim clergyman] tries to spread positive messages about women, they will not be able to gain financially. What gets covered more and becomes viral on social media is also an issue here.’

(FGD, feminist activist)

Participants described how religious leaders are spreading misogynistic and anti-LGBTQI+ content across all regions. Feminism itself has been labelled anti-Islam, creating a barrier to the feminist–LGBTQI+ solidarity that participants struggled to navigate. At the same time, participants did not frame religion as uniformly hostile. There has been a long-term engagement with the Islamic Foundation in Sylhet, which has produced some attitudinal shift. In Chattogram, participants mentioned engaging with faith leaders. The data suggests that religious institutions are sites of contestation, not simply obstacles – and that sustained, strategic engagement with progressive voices within religious spaces is both possible and necessary.

Visibility has also emerged as a huge contributing element in how the two movement actors experience GBV. It is seen as both a resource and a risk, and communities are navigating this daily. A tension that runs through every FGD site – most acutely among LGBTQI+ communities – is that visibility is simultaneously enabling and dangerous; not a paradox that can be resolved, but a structural condition that communities are managing in real time, with varying degrees of support. On the enabling side, social media visibility has allowed LGBTQI+ individuals outside Dhaka to find community, understand their identities, and access solidarity networks and spaces that would otherwise not exist.

In Chattogram, a participant described how social media was the first space in which they encountered others and found language for their own experience. Other participants from LGBTQI+ focused FGD in Chattogram highlighted that self-identity and expression are central to the movement and proceeded to say how they did the self-assessment using social media and got to know other people like them exist. Across sites, participants noted that the broader public now has more awareness of transgender, gay, and lesbian identities – partly because of digital content.

On the other side, the same visibility that creates community also creates exposure. Participants in all three sites agreed that increasing online visibility has raised the threat of violence against the trans community, such as artificial intelligence (AI)-based surveillance being used to build profiles of community members. Participants cited some examples of the negative impact of social media, such as when affluent Hijra gurus display assets on those platforms, it creates the false impression that all Hijra individuals are financially secure, fuelling targeted robbery. Also, activists who expressed solidarity with feminist protests/marches online faced immediate backlash as a result of visibility:

'We have to have a space where those discussions and conflicts can be had. Those could be through creative expressions... But the threat is that if we raise certain issues, you actually face physical danger. And we need to push for a democratic space where you can have those, you know, very contentious debates without fearing for your life.'

(KII, feminist researcher)

The reproduction of patriarchy within movements and families

An important and critical theme found in both datasets highlights that patriarchal norms are not only external forces but are frequently reproduced within the movements and families that claim to be progressive. The datasets note that patriarchy is often enforced by women against other women – such as through the role of the mother-in-law in situations of domestic violence – demonstrating that gendered power structures are more about hierarchy and control than biological sex:

'People in power can misuse and sexually abuse women just because they are women. Now you don't have one single source of power and control – you have many different types of control and power. So, wherever they put control and power, it's patriarchal. It's going to be women who are going to be getting the brunt of everything, economic, sexual, definitely, but economic, social, everything – just the day-to-day existence and life of walking around.'

(KII, senior feminist activist)

Within activist circles, this manifests as 'lateral violence' and internal gatekeeping. In feminist spaces, trans women and Hijra individuals are often excluded or subjected to 'tests' of their womanhood, which mirrors the exclusionary logic of the broader society. This internal replication of norms places a 'double burden' on activists who must fight for their rights on the streets while defending their legitimacy within their own communities:

'I wore punjabi-pyjama [men's traditional outfit] to visit their house [to attend a meeting]. They [activists from the women's movement] didn't really accept me at first and asked, "Why are you here? You're a boy." I said, "Yes, I may look like a boy, but inside I feel exactly like you"... They softened after hearing me out [much explaining needed]. Perhaps because they were part of the women's movement, they understood.'

(IDI, senior LGBTQI+ activist)

The shift from Sufi pluralism to rigid, moral, policed environments

The analysis of the KII dataset specifically traces the historical evolution of gender and social norms, noting a transition in the social and political fabric of the country from a historically 'Sufi-influenced' culture (which allowed for more ambiguity and tolerance regarding gender and sexuality) to a more rigid, 'Wahhabi-influenced' religious sentiment. This shift, which has been affected by Gulf migration and the influence of remittances and ideologies as well as institutional and religious shifts towards Wahhabi-style madrasa, has redefined the social landscape, moving from a culture of 'live and let live' to one of active moral policing. This transition is not merely religious but is framed as a political project that uses gender norms as a tool for social control (Gardner, 1999; Mostofa, 2024; Ahamad, 2025).

In this new rigid environment, the rise of public and targeted GBV serves as a direct disciplinary mechanism to safeguard traditional patriarchal norms that conservative actors feel are under threat from foreign, un-Islamic impositions. Right-wing fundamentalist groups and backlash actors have strategically weaponised this narrative by framing alternative gender politics, LGBTQI+ rights, and progressive mobilisations as external, Western deviations that are automatically synonymous with atheism. GBV is often justified as a means of 'protecting' traditional and cultural values, and any attempt to advocate for LGBTQI+ rights is framed as an 'imported' or 'alien' agenda, despite the deep historical roots of these communities in Bangladesh:

'We have been very much influenced by Sufism, and Bangladeshi Muslims have never been very intolerant in that sense in the past. But right now, we see that Wahhabism is on the rise, along with more extreme forms of belief that are being promoted among the general public and adopted by different political entities.'

(KII, young LGBTQI+ activist)

The fear of foreign encroachment translates into strict public policing, whereby toxic men feel structurally emboldened to police women's ways of dressing, moving, and their bodily autonomy in the streets. When women protest these violations, conservative actors utilise digital echo chambers to quickly mobilise violent public mobs, framing these attacks not as random abuse but as necessary acts of cultural and moral preservation. Furthermore, the state apparatus and the legal system are actively used to codify this backlash rather than protect citizens.

The literature also highlighted a strong theme around the relationship between conservatism and backlash politics, emphasising how religious nationalism and anti-gender rhetoric frame queer rights as 'Western' or immoral, enabling public hostility towards LGBTQI+ people (Siddiqi, 2019; Contractor et al., 2022). Gender-diverse individuals are portrayed as threats to culture, religion or national identity, which creates social legitimacy for discrimination and violence (Rashid et al., 2011; Alim, 2025). Following episodes of political unrest and feminist mobilisation, anti-trans and anti-LGBTQI+ narratives reportedly intensified through religious sermons, social media campaigns and organised protests (Shah, 2019; Edström, 2024).

Digital echo chambers and orchestrated violence

The role of digital spaces has fundamentally altered how gender norms are enforced and how GBV is triggered. The literature review (Section 2 of the report) highlighted a detailed account of this issue. Social media came up in the research findings as a 'double-edged sword' that offers community for marginalised people while simultaneously serving as an engine for 'orchestrated propaganda'. Anti-gender influencers and political actors use digital platforms to spread disinformation, often framing LGBTQI+ individuals as deviants, criminals or threats to children. This digital conditioning creates an environment in which online 'outing' or vitriol often leads directly to physical mob violence.

'For example, with the rise of digital media, even within families, transgender people have been vilified by backlash actors, especially over the past two years. As a result, people have started talking about these issues within their families, which didn't used to happen. However, the discussion is often very negative because these backlash actors have gone out of their way to criminalise trans people at a new level that wasn't there in the past.'

(KII, youth LGBTQI+ activist)

The data emphasises that these are not organic social reactions, but calculated campaigns designed to maintain traditional gender hierarchies by making the public visibility of marginalised groups life-threatening. As one participant from the FGDs in Chattogram mentioned, 'Before, misinformation used to be spread person to person, but now, with social media, it takes no time to spread misinformation on a mass level.'

The literature review demonstrates that experiences of violence differ according to class, geography, religion, gender expression, and access to social protection. Middle-class LGBTQI+ activists may have greater digital access or institutional safety nets, while working-class Hijra and queer individuals face heightened vulnerability to police abuse, housing insecurity, workplace discrimination, and public harassment. The data particularly emphasises that Hijra communities are often simultaneously visible and excluded: recognised symbolically by the state, yet still pathologised, economically marginalised, and exposed to violence:

'Mobile journalists are one cause of online harassment. Anyone with a mobile phone claiming to be a journalist can go around and capture videos and interviews. They go to spots like the parliament area [open space near Manik Mia Avenue in Dhaka] and capture videos and interviews of Hijra people. The online journalists do this to generate income, though they are not registered journalists, and the Hijras tell their story – it causes online backlash.'

(FGD, LGBTQI+ activist)

Digital space emerges as another important site where harmful norms are reproduced. The review documents show that online abuse (including misogynistic attacks, hate speech, outing, threats, and image-based harassment) is used to discipline feminist and LGBTQI+ activists. Social media becomes both a space for resistance and a mechanism for enforcing conformity through fear and intimidation:

'Social media has become a new space for violence. When someone becomes a victim, their story goes viral, and instead of getting support, they are often "slut-shamed" and blamed. I've also seen young people in my rural area share their passwords and PIN codes with their partners, and later they face online abuse, including blackmail and public shaming. Another thing that's becoming more common is doxxing, where people's private information is exposed online to intimidate or harass them.'

(FGD, feminist activist)

From medical pathologisation to the rights-based backlash

A central strategic thread highlighted across both datasets is the ongoing transition from a medicalised 'health patient' framework to a 'rights-holding citizen' framework. For decades, gender-diverse communities were largely visible to donors and the state only through the lens of HIV/AIDS and public health – a paradigm that provided resources but pathologised their identities and limited their political claims. The datasets confirm that the move toward a rights-based framework is a deeply personal and political act of self-definition. This shift has removed some of the 'safety' norms

provided by the health lens and has triggered increased repression. Activists see this backlash as evidence of the political significance of their demand for full citizenship:

‘They said they would work on HIV prevention. I said I will not do it. I stopped and did not go there anymore... Later, another gentleman came to me and he said they were working on MSM [men who have sex with men]. At that time, MSM was used as a code in HIV prevention work... I asked, “So where do I fit in this?”... Later, they explained things through the “wheel” concept – how HIV spreads, how we were being affected and abused in many ways within that system. It wasn’t just about sexual transmission in a simple sense... When I heard all of this, I felt like we were actually trapped in a chain – a cycle we couldn’t easily break out of... From that point on, I told myself, “I need to build an organisation”... Through working with [name of feminist organisation], I clearly understood... that we have to be organised. If we stand together, we can speak with one voice.’

(IDI, senior LGBTQI+ activist)

However, this claim to citizenship has triggered a violent backlash, as it moves the conversation from the ‘charitable’ management of a health crisis to a ‘political’ demand for equality. The data points to a significant transition in the frontline of the current struggle against GBV, where study participants considered the backlash itself as proof that the movements are moving away from issue-based organising and finally challenging the deep-rooted power structures of society:

‘From 2016 onwards, a lot of funds regarding LGBTQI+ issues entered Bangladesh. This impacted the vigour and motivation the movement had. It eventually focused on project-based work and partnership to get more funds. However, it does not mean the LGBTQI+ people are getting jobs because of this, they are only being invited for project design but never called for advisory roles.’

(FGD, LGBTQI+ activist)

The overall data suggests that feminist and LGBTQI+ collaborations are beginning to challenge these norms by reframing GBV more broadly. Emerging alliances, storytelling practices, intergenerational feminist dialogues, and queer activism are gradually expanding understandings of violence beyond cis-women’s experiences. The review also points out that tensions remain within feminist movements themselves, where sexuality and gender diversity are sometimes sidelined due to fears of backlash or political risk.

4.3 Regional perspectives on collaboration and normative underpinnings of GBV

The regional analysis points to the structural disconnect in Bangladesh’s feminist and LGBTQI+ movements, which have historically been heavily concentrated in Dhaka. These movements often exclude the very communities most affected by GBV, such as Indigenous women in Chattogram and tea garden workers in Sylhet, because they do not fully reckon with internal power differentials. The use of regional data from FGDs is important to challenge this ‘elite’ feminist canon and to build a more inclusive advocacy framework from the margins inward.

Regional results point to both movements navigating a complex web of compounding constraints, such as rising external hostility, deep internal fragmentation, and funding structures that distort grassroots priorities. The analysis points to a key dynamic at play: until these movements address and

resolve the power imbalances within their own organisational structures, they are poorly positioned to effectively challenge systemic violence and inequality in the wider socio-political environment.

Although bringing in regional perspectives is crucial for understanding differences in movement spaces, the authors by no means intend to compare these regions against one another. This subsection captures the dynamics of collaboration and the underlying norms of GBV in Bangladesh across different geographies, as evidenced by the findings from FGDs in Dhaka, Sylhet and Chattogram.

Dynamics of inter-movement collaboration in the selected three regions

The most consistent outcome across all three sites is that collaboration between the feminist and LGBTQI+ movements is real but thin. It is activated by crisis, shared events and individual relationships – but it is not held together by shared institutional infrastructure or a common long-term agenda:

‘There was a way in which there was solidarity, but more in terms of welcoming people or creating a space for, to do more on a personal level. Some progressive pockets, but this was never really institutional. And I’m not necessarily sure that there are institutional projects, specifically trying to kind of build that kind of bridge... It was more like on a personal level, not really in terms of institutional mobilisation of resources to bridge that gap. Rather it was more like, individually, a feminist is progressive and would also create that space either in their own homes or maybe even allowing their office space to be used for some kind of meeting.’

(KII, LGBTQI+ researcher)

A diverse array of collaboration emerged, where organisations as sites of collaboration and connections are largely service-oriented and depend on specific individuals. An expanding collaboration across tea garden workers, ready-made garments workers, and Indigenous communities has emerged, but it is still concentrated in pockets rather than woven into movement architecture. Lastly, a common ground among the feminist and LGBTQI+ movements on issues such as GBV and sexual and reproductive health rights exists, yet the two spaces were described as scattered, lacking harmony, and often working in parallel rather than together.

Internal fractures and coalition-building in the feminist movement

Across all three research sites, a consistent critique emerged from within the feminist movement itself – characterising the movement as elite, Dhaka-centric and fragmented, noting that these internal divisions severely hinder its ability to build broader coalitions. Participants in FGDs noted a long list of missing constituencies from the existing broader feminist movement space, such as women farmers, tea garden workers, Dalit women, sex workers, Indigenous women, transgender people, domestic workers, coastal women, women with disabilities, and more:

‘Despite everyone talking about feminism, Indigenous women are still left behind by most organisations – the major reasons being we are still a minority, we do not have enough financial resources to reach our goals, and there is lack of education... Indigenous women are not included in most places, including in feminist discussions, and organisations are not focusing specifically on them. The rights of Indigenous women have been mentioned in the Constitution, but they have not been acknowledged yet... Even a person from civil society told us that we have so many conditions or requirements that will never be fully fulfilled.’

(FGD, Indigenous feminist activist)

The data suggests that the feminist movement's exclusion of women from structurally excluded communities and its inability to shape deeper alliances with the LGBTQI+ community reflect the same structural flaw. Both exclusions are rooted in a movement that has historically organised around the concerns and comfort of its most visible, least vulnerable members.

Internal fractured movement spaces during a critical moment

While external hostility toward the LGBTQI+ movement has intensified across all three sites, the data also reveals a pattern of internal fragmentation that is weakening the movement precisely when solidarity is most needed.

The central fracture is between Hijra and transgender identities. In all three regions (Dhaka, Sylhet and Chattogram), participants described active separation between these groups. These divisions are not merely ideological; they have real operational consequences. The focus group with the LGBTQI+ community revealed that a deep fault line has developed between the Hijra community and the transgender community in Bangladesh, from a state of co-existence to one of defensive isolation. Initially, the split was fuelled by the difference in lifestyle and street-based collection practices among the Hijra community, unlike the trans community. This division severely widened following the 2023 'Sharif-Sharifa' school curriculum controversy (a story on transgender identity in a 7th-grade history and social science public textbook – see Rita, 2024), which provoked intense public backlash and aggressive anti-trans campaigns by religious extremists. Hijra gurus have since completely rejected the labels 'transgender' and 'LGBTQI+', denying any public association with the trans community.

In Sylhet, a Hijra FGD participant recounted religious sermons including the rhetoric to 'kill transgender people but respect Hijra people' – demonstrating how external actors are weaponising internal distinctions to divide the community.

This fracturing is historically specific. The rollback of legal protections post-2023, the attack on a national NGO office following the Sharif-Sharifa controversy, and the alarming effect of the Xulhaz-Tonoy murders have each forced narrower self-definitions as a survival strategy.

The other emerging outcome at the regional level involves tensions around how donor funding weakens the movement priorities. Across all three sites, participants raised the relationship between donor funding and movement integrity as a serious concern. One FGD participant from Dhaka explained that:

'Social movements were not donor-funded before. Activism and volunteerism have become paid now. Such practices hamper the movement as it is becoming donor-driven and not sustainable.'

(FGD, feminist activist)

The pattern is consistent, whereby movements that were once sustained by voluntarism and political conviction have become increasingly structured around project cycles, deliverables and donor preferences. Most of these rights-based organisations now spend much of their time on project implementation, administrative and financial management, and report writing for the NGO Affairs Bureau and donor agencies, leaving less time for actual movement-based work (Sabur, 2021).

Participants from all three regions also described an emerging environment in which hostility towards LGBTQI+ activists and movements has intensified and become multi-layered. What is significant is not just the scale of hostility but also its simultaneity – it operates at the provincial level, at the community level, and through digital platforms, making it harder to evade. The consequences are visible across all sites – the shrinking of the space in which movement work is possible. Activists are leaving the country, reducing their visibility, or moving entirely underground. Leadership gaps are opening up.

Transformative alliances: reimagining collaboration beyond additive solidarity

Intersectionality is not just an additive; it produces qualitatively different experiences of GBV. The data across all three sites pushes back against an additive understanding of intersectionality – the idea that being Indigenous and a woman and gender-diverse simply means experiencing three types of discrimination layered on top of each other.

In Chattogram, participants reported how Indigenous women face violence from both Bengali and Indigenous perpetrators and are often excluded from both mainstream feminist and LGBTQI+ advocacy spaces. In Sylhet, tea garden community women described being invisible not because of lack of ability but because of a specific convergence of economic precarity, community expectation, and family structure. In Dhaka, LGBTQI+ community members described being invited to feed into project designs but excluded from decision-making and advisory roles – a position that is neither full inclusion nor full exclusion but a specific form of instrumental incorporation that extracts labour without distributing power.

The implication for both movements is that ‘inclusion’ is not enough. Adding structurally excluded groups to existing frameworks without restructuring those frameworks reproduces the exclusion in a new form. What the data is pointing toward is the need for movements to be built from the margins inward – designing for the most complex, most constrained experiences first, rather than incorporating them as an afterthought:

‘The feminist movement can and should be able to accommodate everyone – but we have to be strategic to include everyone and their movement.’

(FGD, feminist activist)

Envisioning a path forward

To sum up, while systemic forces actively attempt to dismantle LGBTQI+ lives, they have failed to crush the community’s agency. The drive for transformative change persists, proving that the vision for a more inclusive, feminist future cannot be suppressed by institutional violence. Across all three study sites, feminist and LGBTQI+ participants concluded the FGDs with acts of imagination, drawings, visions, and articulations of a different future. These were not incidental but rather structured into the research design and produced meaningful data.

What participants across the three sites imagined was remarkably consistent in its underlying logic: a world in which identity does not determine access; where people of all genders, religions and communities share the same roads, parks, schools, and decision-making spaces; where legal systems deliver justice rather than re-victimise survivors; and where the movement itself is no longer necessary because the rights it demands are guaranteed.

Participants across the three sites reimagined a more inclusive society: (in addition to Figure 1) in Chattogram, a symbolic ‘picnic bus’ brought LGBTQI+ individuals and religious leaders together; in Sylhet, visions centred on gender-equal education and shared cultural spaces for marginalised communities; and in Dhaka, power was redefined as a woman’s journey from a conservative family to corporate leadership to dismantle systemic barriers. What is analytically significant is that these visions consistently exceeded what either movement has been able to build. These imaginations are forms of solidarity and inclusion that the movements themselves, according to participants’ own accounts, have not yet achieved. This gap between aspiration and current movement reality is not a failure – it is a map that details what the movements’ own participants most want them to become:

‘Solidarity between feminist and LGBTQI+ movements to demand the rights of the people is the resource we need to support the future we envisioned.’

(FGD, LGBTQI+ activist)

Figure 1 Examples from visioning exercise during FGDs



5 Reflections and recommendations

5.1 Building power together: coordination and collective action

Move from intent to a concrete collective pathway

There is a critical need for a common pathway that moves beyond organisational mandates and prioritises common goals and agendas together as movement actors. The shared ground in challenging socio-cultural norms and heteronormative narratives is real for both movements – fighting patriarchal control of bodies, resisting state indifference or hostility, and seeing GBV as a structural rather than individual problem. These common objectives need common pathways and engagements that bring together actors from women's rights, feminist and LGBTQI+ movements to collaborate on.

Create regular cross-movement spaces for honest dialogue

Currently, there is no space or common platform upon which to gather when the movements are not facing immediate threats or crisis. There need to be spaces where different groups can surface tensions, share ideologies, and agree on common priorities. Although there is unanimous agreement that hierarchy within movement spaces is a socio-cultural practice embedded in how movements operate, there is a lack of structural alternatives to actively address and dismantle these divisional hierarchies.

5.2 Democratising knowledge and resources

Make research and documentation a collective asset

Knowledge that is created with and about the feminist and LGBTQI+ community is often not disseminated widely. Findings of critical research, a community charter of demands, and resources that are developed by individual organisations should be consolidated and made publicly available in a common and accessible source.

There is also a critical call to democratise and simplify language, including resource allocation towards translation of knowledge products into Bangla. Language barriers have been critical in cutting off grassroots organisations from knowledge that should be owned by them. This should be a priority agenda for all collaborative future work, not just for optics but also for ensuring knowledge equity. Democratising resources also includes building a shared knowledge commons covering legal rights and constitutional entitlements, which cause community members to fear and therefore not utilise state justice and security services and provisions.

5.3 Collectively fighting for advocacy and policy shifts

Tap potential alliances

It is also important to map and build relationships with sensitised political allies rather than engaging broadly. There is a need to identify who will actually listen, and to direct sensitisation efforts there strategically. An under-utilised avenue is engagement with the Supreme Court in Bangladesh, by using legal and constitutional frameworks as tools for rights claims and calling for the creation of a broader affirmative legal infrastructure.

Develop a five-year sustainability and movement-strengthening plan

With drastic reductions in overseas and national development budgets and shifting priorities away from gender and rights work, this need for a collaborative strategy is not just aspirational but urgent. The collaborative strategy goes beyond individual demands and will put forth a common goal that could be achieved through different strategies and kinds of engagement across movements. The charter of demands, mentioned above, was cited as an example of a successful collaborative strategy from the recent past. The collaborative strategy also needs to go hand-in-hand with developing strong and collective counter-narratives to extremist discourse. Extremist groups are already setting the agenda and defining focus points, but rights-based movements have not come together on this yet.

6 Conclusion

This report is based on research that aimed to understand the role of the feminist movement and LGBTQI+ movement in Bangladesh in terms of the work they have been doing to shift gender norms and engage on issues of gender-based violence within their communities. Through this exploration, the objective was also to explore the intersectional, inclusive role of the feminist movement and whether collaborations with the LGBTQI+ movement have proved successful.

Both movements acknowledge their shared goals – to challenge the patriarchal system and binary politics of gender identities that dominate the institutionalisation and normalisation of GBV. Thus, collaborative engagements have been part of the strategy for feminist movements to engage in broader evidence-creation and advocacy with state and non-state actors. Even with the challenges and gaps that have been identified in how these initiatives are coordinated, their success has been underscored by the visible effects they have had on the broader society and patriarchal mindsets.

Previous successes of the women's movement in shifting norms and on GBV issues highlight how collaborative efforts have led to better legislative mechanisms, pushback against political and religious groups, and bringing about change within institutions and homes through consistent long-term engagements. These examples can also help movements to embrace the good practices of co-ownership, rotating leadership, and broadening advocacy points to ensure that demands from different communities are heard.

This research paper highlights how feminist and LGBTQI+ movement actors see an urgent need to build bridges, co-create strategies for mobilisation, and build stronger pathways for consistent advocacy with different stakeholders. They recognise that the fight is bigger than the differences, and some actors have taken steps to enable solidarity and allyship for each other. To move forward, there is a definite need for more open conversations and respectful disagreements in order to strengthen trust in each other.

What the data calls for is not a new agenda but a deepened commitment to an existing one through building movements from the margins inward, investing in sustainable structures rather than project cycles, taking internal fractures as seriously as external threats, and understanding GBV as a category that must keep expanding to match the lived realities of those it affects most.

The overall vision from those who are building movements showcases their hope for building more accessible spaces, collective actions and inclusive results. The current context highlights just how vital this is to ensure the strength of the movements going forward.

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ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that supports a global community of researchers, practitioners and activists, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – patriarchal gender norms.

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