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Women as Agents of Violence in Bangladesh—*The Perks of Being Wallflowers*

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Abstract: Violent extremism—the definition of which is still to be agreed upon by experts—has rather opened up this debate in a much larger scale—regarding women's 'nature'—are women inherently 'peaceful'? In this article, I draw upon the involvement of women as violent extremists in Bangladesh and argue that the patriarchal ideas regarding women as passive actors and peaceful in nature have driven a general lack of awareness regarding the true nature of women's involvement in extremism in the country. Such understanding has rather discouraged wider research on the matter as well as under-exploration on the roots and causes of female extremism in Bangladesh. Therefore, this study aims to fulfil this lacuna that exists in understanding the nature of violent extremism in a holistic manner in the country. Additionally, understanding the nature of female extremism in Bangladesh shall contribute in greater understanding on women's involvement in Islamist extremism—if there are any distinctive features that exist in Bangladesh that is absent in the global pattern or conforms to it.

Keywords: Gender and conflict, Bangladesh, Female extremism

Abstrak: Keganasan sering dilihat sebagai "domain" lelaki-sama ada konflik langsung atau tidak langsung. Wanita biasanya digambarkan sebagai aktor pasif dalam konflik. Pelampau atau ektremisme keganasan - takrifan yang masih belum dipersetujui secara umum oleh pakar - membuka perdebatan ini dalam skala yang lebih besar - mengenai 'sifat' wanita - adakah wanita secara lumrahnya lebih 'damai'? Dalam artikel ini, saya mengambil kira penglibatan wanita sebagai pelampau keganasan di Bangladesh dan berpendapat bahawa idea patriarki mengenai wanita sebagai aktor pasif dan aman telah mendorong

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kepada kurangnya kesedaran umum mengenai sifat sebenar penglibatan wanita dalam ekstremisme di negara ini. Pemahaman seperti itu tidak menggalakkan penyelidikan dan penerokaan yang lebih luas mengenai punca ekstremisme yang melibatkan wanita di Bangladesh. Oleh itu, kajian ini bertujuan untuk memenuhi kekosongan yang wujud dalam memahami sifat ekstremisme ganas secara holistik di negara ini. Tambahan lagi, memahami sifat pelampau wanita di Bangladesh akan menyumbang kepada pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang penglibatan wanita dalam ekstremisme agama berpandukan Islam - jika terdapat sebarang ciri khusus yang wujud di Bangladesh yang tiada ataupun akur dengan corak global.

Kata Kunci: Jantina dan konflik, Bangladesh, Ekstremisme melibatkan wanita

Introduction

> Tho' much is taken, much abides; and though
> We are not now that strength which in old days
> Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
> One equal temper of heroic hearts,
> Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
> To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

As M, the Chief of MI6 was testifying before a Committee to justify the existence of the Cold War relic, James Bond 007—she recites these verses from Tennyson's *Ulysses*. She argues that the threats have become opaque, not coming only from states anymore—which needs further scrutiny and overseeing by agents in the field (Mendes, 2012). While the movie was released in 2012, we have seen a known world transforming before our eyes since the 1990s. A stable international order where rules of engagement and actors were quite discernible, gradually transformed as the dragon was slayed and in the absence of structural peace in the jungle, the poisonous snakes emerged to make their claims—a metaphor used by former Chief of the United States (US) Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) James Woolsey to describe the post-Cold War disorder (Kilcullen, 2020, p. 17). Scholars have pointed out that not only a changing dynamic of warfare can be observed, but also in terms of motivations to go to war and actors of war, there have been significant variations in recent times (Kaldor, 1999; Munkler, 2005; Howard, 2006; Smith, 2008; Malesˇevic, 2008). The attack in

US on September 11, 2001 (9/11) was the first organized attack by terrorists—in other words—non-state actors on a state actor that brought about changes in the manner 'terrorism' used to be dealt with by both policymakers and scholars. It could no longer be brushed aside as law-enforcement or ideological issues—but there are deeper dissatisfactions emerging from societies which are producing 'terrorists' which need to be identified and addressed. In this article, I emphasize on the changing nature of actors in terrorism—also interchangeably termed as 'violent extremism'. In fact, this terminological shift is what makes the affair complicated in 21st Century. Not only is it puzzling to provide an acceptable definition of terrorism and/or violent extremism, but it is also equally, if not more, challenging to locate the process through which one *becomes* a terrorist/extremist. In the last century, wider emphasis was to identify terrorism as an internal threat—often it had transboundary effect since the mid-1960s but international cooperation was affected due to differing political ideas about the nature and causes of terrorism (Saul, 2005). Women's increasing involvement in terrorism and extremism has made the issue more complex than ever. It is in this backdrop that I articulate the central argument and methodology of the paper in the next section.

Central Argument of the Paper and Methodology

Taking a gender lens, I argue that the traditional understanding about 'women as agents of peace' or 'women are peaceful' compromises policymaking. We overlook that being peaceful or violent is a learned behavior, not a biological component connected to the sex of a person, when we internalize 'women are peaceful'. Additionally, this kind of understanding rationalizes violence as being a 'natural' part of men's domain. It ignores that the process of identity creation is relational in nature. Therefore, often women who chooses a violent behavior—either being a part of a group or otherwise, might be identified as a part of the deindividuation process—that is being merely 'antisocial' and aberrant behavior than this being a conscious choice. In this paper, I argue otherwise. First, I draw attention on how globally women were engaged in carrying out violent acts—which have drawn scholarly attention but seldom reflected in the policymaking. Then, taking Bangladesh's case study, I discuss how this discourse of 'women as peaceful' has enabled female extremists to carry out their acts in this country. Moreover, with the ongoing COVID-SARS pandemic that led to the *feminization of*

joblessness—a phenomenon where women are the first targets of job cuts—raises the fear of women's recruitment to be easier by extremists. This is where I bring the comparison of women with wallflowers. As wallflowers grow anywhere and wither any storm, these are often neglected—seen as lying on the path and not given significance—having taken for granted. The idea that women as mothers and being peaceful agents can also wither any storm—it is in their nature to do so, and therefore, they are taken for granted and their perspectives matter little in making vital family decisions. Thus, although the discourse has changed widely, studies show that economic empowerment does not necessarily mean that women have acquired decision making roles in families. This is where extremists come to the scene—they can convince women to acquire needed agency and the false promise that being violent can make their voices heard. I point out in this paper why this particular concern needs to be recognized with more urgency during the pandemic period. Due to the feminization of joblessness that is occurring in Bangladesh, where women are the first victims of job cuts—these women are left with little economic choices and therefore, are more susceptible to be targets of recruitment by extremists. We should not neglect the wallflowers—but lesser agencies for women may divert them to a wrong direction.

In discussing the pattern of women's involvement in extremism, this study primarily deals with a unpublished research that carried out social profiling of female extremists in Bangladesh from the first case (in December 2007) to October 2018—that includes a total number of 105 women so far apprehended by the members of law enforcement agencies to be connected with extremist acts. Along with this, this study also takes into consideration of the primary materials on female extremists as they were reported in mainstream media. As interviewing the detainee female extremists directly was not possible, this paper rather goes through the interviews and statements of Bangladesh's Counter Terrorism & Transnational Crime (CTTC) officials. Also, it deals with other scholarly materials available on this issue. The paper draws attention to a few practical gaps in the current research. First, it is difficult to come across to a generally accepted definition of terrorism and extremism worldwide and there exists an overlap in this regard. In the case of Bangladesh too, such an overlap exists. According to the

Anti Terrorism Act of 2009, the following practices can be considered as terrorist activities (but not limited to):

> Terrorist activities. – (1) If any person, entity or foreigner-
>
> (a) for the purposes of threatening the unity, integration, public security or sovereignty of Bangladesh by creating panic among the public or a section of the public with a view to compelling the Government or any entity or any person to do any act or preventing them from doing any act–
>
> > (i) kills, causes grievous hurt, confines or kidnaps any person or attempts to do the same, or damages or attempts to damage any property of any person, entity or the State;
> >
> > (ii) abets or instigates any person to murder, injure seriously, confine or kidnap any person, or abets or instigates to damage any property of any person or entity or the State; or
> >
> > (iii) damages or tries to damage the property of any other person, entity or the state; or
> >
> > (iv) conspires or abets or instigates to damage the property of any other person, entity or the state; or
> >
> > (v) uses or keeps in possession any explosive substance, inflammable substance and arms for the purposes of subclauses (i), (ii), (iii) and (iv).

This act was later amended to approve death penalty for assisting in terrorist financing (Fabe, 2017). However, the point is, extremists are also tried under this particular act. In other words, the differentiation in terms of who is a terrorist or who is an extremist has not been made in Bangladesh's context as well.[1] The second gap in this research is that no comprehensive profiling of female extremists of Bangladesh has been done yet. Most materials on this issue are often sketchy and written in journalistic manner than on a scholarly manner. Terrorism and extremism are often considered in an *agendered* manner for which gender lens is often absent. Keeping these particular gaps in mind, this study provides its analysis on the basis of existing materials. Scholars

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[1] This paper therefore uses the terms terrorism and extremism interchangeably.

believe that gross generalizations and myopic view towards terrorism have prevented Bangladesh to formulate a potent counterterrorism strategy (Hussain, 2008). Also, I add with this that the lack of research in a comprehensive manner on women's issues in Bangladesh has led to the assertion of the idea that "women are peaceful" and therefore, it has become easier for extremists to persuade women to join in extremist acts.

The paper is divided into several substantive sections after the introduction and this section on research question and methodology. The first substantive section discusses how gender and terrorism merge in global construction of women as peaceful agents. It uses the examples of how this discourse was used as a convenient ideology for extremists to employ women as agents of violence. It also highlights how women themselves chose to become a part of conflicts as well. This section also highlights that women are not naturally peaceful—rather they also make deliberate choices to act as violent agents alongside men when they find it necessary for the future of their communities. The next substantive section discusses case studies emerging from Bangladesh. The paper concludes by summarizing key discussions and the dangers of popularizing the discourse of women as agents of peace.

The Intertwining of the Discourses of Gender and Terrorism

Gender perspective in terrorism and extremism tended to be neglected and underexplored. The typical literature emphasized upon the concept of terrorism being gender-neutral or *agendered* in nature, although globally we have seen women's active engagements as part of different terrorists groups, specially during the anti-colonial movements since 1920s. David Rappaport (2004) identified how women were used as carriers of messages and other such activities in nationalist struggles carried out in Ireland, Israel and Algeria, although he argued that women's roles being limited compared to those of men. On the contrary, the movie *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) portrays the crafty use of women in their traditional roles that deceived the French and empowered the Algerian fighters to use women as carriers of ammunition and detonate those in right places. In fact, women played more robust roles being part of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and as suicide bombers for the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, women during British colonial rule in the subcontinent of India played more vigorous roles as both

leaders, convenors and trainers to create armed resistance. Mia Bloom identifies women's roles in conflicts as 'the third oldest profession', where women possess a win-win situation due to their gender identity. Bloom explains how women can easily get by from being checked by security personnel, and when they are, it is convenient to launch an attack of mishandling "our women" (Bloom, 2017). These, along with many other examples, demonstrate that women are capable of taking decisions to go to war willingly. Scholarships regarding this started to emerged that challenged the narrative of 'women as victims of war only' in the works of Jean Elshtain and Cynthia Enloe, who have shown, through systematic researches, that women are also active participants during conflicts (Elshtain, 1985; Enloe, 1990).

What I add with this analysis is that when we consider women as peaceful, we create a dichotomous relationship between women and men by justifying its binary opposition that men are violent. In other words, this discourse promotes that women and men are born with different nature—one is inherently peaceful and the other is inherently violent. Such a discourse promotes that women are natural agents of peace but ignores that being peaceful and violent is socially constructed and reproduced through different institutions of patriarchy starting from family, education and other institutions. This is also internalized by women and older women emerge as educators for younger women about the existing norms and culture by justifying them as traditions. In other words, women also act as gatekeepers of patriarchy by perpetuating and reproducing particular roles assigned by the society for women. It is a part of patriarchal assumption that since women give birth, they must bear patience and thus, are peaceful. In this connection, one cannot but remember the famous declaration of Helen Caldicott who argued that because we give birth, we understand the genesis of life. She was one of the leading figures of nuclear disarmament movements in Australia. But such an understanding about women's nature is also inherently flawed because if women are peaceful, such a peacefulness and love must extend beyond borders. We do see the discourse of an Indian mother regarding the Kashmir issue would be entirely different than the discourse of a Pakistani mother on the same issue. Similarly, it cuts across ethnicity, religion, caste and other identity issues. The fairy tales also provide testaments of existence of step-mothers and their repression and abuse against step-children. Ella acquired her name Cinderella as

she would be dusty after cleaning the cinder of the house by the order of her step-mother, who had two daughters herself. Mothers, therefore, do not treat all children equally—instead, prioritizes their own children over children of *other* women. In other words, women, just like men, are driven by the idea of self-preservation as they deem fit.

In the scholarship of 'women as peaceful' or as 'peaceful agents', it fails to pay attention to the tremendous roles that women have displayed in the face of adversaries. This discourse is unable to explain the acts of world leaders like Ms. Margaret Thatcher, Ms. Golda Myer and Ms. Indira Gandhi did not hesitate to use 'violence' to serve their national interests. They took strong decisions for fulfilling national interests of their respective countries which have had long term implications for the future of their country. Such decisions, often were deemed as 'manly' or in other words, necessary to rule in a man's world. Ms. Thatcher, along with US President Ronald Reagan, is regarded as one of the architects of Cold War victory for the West vis-à-vis Soviet Union. Ms. Thatcher's reputation earned her the title of Iron Lady, because she displayed strength and courage, which were considered atypical of women to possess. On the other hand, Mr. Reagan earned no such title as Iron Man—as men are supposed to tough and strong. This deindividuation process is what makes policymakers to take women as incapable of being agents of violence. That is, because women perform specific social roles, they are not aggressive. This particular idea sees sex roles and gender roles as indivisible one—that because women are mothers, women are always to be kind, peaceful and caregiver as opposed to having intentions to cause harm. Thus, studies undertaken in psychology contends that in deindividuated process, that is in the absence of social roles, women are capable of being aggressive (Lightdale and Prentice, 1994). I, however, contend that women are capable of being aggressive even in an individuated condition. This particular area and its relationship with understanding how terrorists and extremists have found a 'new' and 'unsuspecting' weapon that is the women-force that would hardly be questioned or challenged while carrying out their activities is what I add to the existing discourse on understanding female extremism.

It is to be noted that despite women being involved in terrorist activities and conflicts, research on women's involvement in terrorism started to begin since 1990s (Jacques & Taylor, 2009). However, these studies seldom explored the role of the flawed assumptions on

women being peaceful can be utilized successfully by extremists. The assassination of India's Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi would be an apt example in such a case. The very first person of the world to put on trial for carrying out terrorist acts, who did not shy away from proclaiming it to be so—I am a terrorist—was also a woman. The Russian woman Vera Zasulich attempted to assassinate the Governor of St. Petersburg, Fedor Trepov and was put on trial for this. While some studies appear to explore women's involvement in terrorism, the issue of women's involvement in Islamist extremism did not come under scholarly scrutiny albeit much later. While the concept of *jihad* was introduced as 'violent extremism' by Islamist extremists, the general idea was—as proclaimed by Al Qaeda—:

> A Muslim woman is a female Jihad warrior always and everywhere. She is a female Jihad warrior who wages Jihad by means of funding Jihad. She wages Jihad by means of waiting for her Jihad warrior husband, and when she educates her children to that which Allah loves. She wages jihad when she supports Jihad when she calls for jihad in word, deed, belief, and prayer. (Knop, 2007)

This particular trend shifted quickly with the emergence of other Islamist extremist actors in the scene who redefined women's role in Islamist extremism. *Dāʿish* or Islamic State (IS) took a lead in this. In one study, it was analyzed that *Dāʿish* was using women both in active fields and at online platforms (Pearson & Winterbotham, 2017), which eventually became a trend in contemporary extremism confirmed by other studies as well (Sanchez, 2014; Shapiro & Maras, 2019; Fitchett, 2019). Works on female extremism expanded to identify various areas which were hitherto overlooked but could not remain so anymore due to the changing landscape of extremism. Recent studies identify that women are no longer only passive actors in extremism; rather they are driven by ideological and religious motivations just like men do (Cunningham, 2003; Cook, 2005; Leede, 2018). Men and women, thus share certain similar experiences that provide them incentives to join in extremist groups such as such as "socioeconomic disadvantage, a perceived lack of belonging and failed integration" at the community level (Pearson & Winterbotham, 2017). However, for women, the artificial construction of gender roles also contributes to creating grievances that motivate them to assert themselves through being parts of extremist groups such

when women are seeking revenge (Bloom, 2007); women are pining for equality and recognition but not in a western sense (Cunningham, 2003); and peer pressure (Sageman, 2004), although this list is not exhaustive. Islamist extremist groups—particularly IS —recruit women to perform various types of work, from being "IS brides" to assisting in domestic chores to being active participants alongside men in their fights. In fact, it was also pointed out, "some women were more radical than their husbands" in the IS who insisted their husbands and sons to join the terrorist group, while some others did not want to marry anybody except frontline fighters (Mironova, 2019). In fact, the issue of female fighters achieving 'fighter's agency' has often remained ignored or overlooked in the mainstream (Bond, *et al*, 2019), which has started to be recognized only in the past few years.

This gender aspect of women joining in extremist groups out of their own volition needs to be connected with the rising landscape of extremism to assess how they can be transformed into potential 'workforce' for extremists. In 2019, the US-backed alliance of Syrian fighters declared the territorial defeat of the IS. It was argued often that it led to the end of IS ideology as well, which has been proved to be wrong gradually. We have seen extremism, especially lone-wolf attacks being carried out in Europe, terrorist attacks taking place in Christchurch, New Zealand and in Colombo Sri Lanka in 2019. During the pandemic, initially it was thought that due to the particular nature of the Covid-SARS disease, terrorist activities might wane, although we have seen that the UN Secretary General António Guterres issuing warning in April 2020 that the pandemic might endanger 'global peace and security' (Spence, 2020). If the pandemic is not properly managed, the ensuing economic crisis may lead to vulnerability of people, which would make them easy prey to extremists' goals and objectives. On the other hand, the need to maintain the 'economic health' of people that led the mafia of Italy and Brazil to find ways to effectively manage the pandemic first—a warning that they took seriously than political leaders.

There was this general understanding initially that the pandemic will put a cap on extremism as people would have remain locked in which would impact upon the goals, objectives and targets of the extremists. In the past few months, however, it seems that extremists are reorganizing themselves. Not only there have been cases of suicide bombing, but also

that of female suicide bombing as well as extremists using the lockdown situation to strategize and emerge stronger than before (Reuters, 2020). In September 2020, the representatives of the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and IS together declared that they are opening a Joint Terrorism Center of Excellence (JTCE), which was "intended to bring together the best minds of international terror organizations in an effort to streamline operations and standardize tactics" (OLeary, 2020). The declaration was made in the capital of the Helmand Province of Afghanistan. Thus, there are fears that terrorism is making a headway towards India and Afghanistan. Bangladesh may not be out of reach for such kind of extremism as I discuss in the next section how Islamist terrorism has been present here and how women are also an active part of that. In light of the ongoing discussions, in the next section, I highlight why there is a rising fear of women's involvement in extremism in Bangladesh, especially due to the pandemic situation.

Women as Agents of Violence in Bangladesh

The purpose of this section is to analyze women's involvement in terrorism in Bangladesh. While researching on this issue the first problem one stumbles upon is a simple lack of data on this. So far, no comprehensive work on profiling of female terrorists of Bangladesh has been done. In the existing literature review, Ali Riaz has a comprehensive study that profiles Bangladeshi terrorists but it also lacks a gender lens (Riaz, 2016). The work of Nazneen Mohsina very articulately analyzes the trends in female jihadists in Bangladesh by pointing out how often women are radicalized by their family members, while also they see this as a form of empowerment (Mohsina, 2017). This study is quite significant as this is the first study of its kind that draws attention on how Bangladeshi women see radicalization providing them with some kind of agency. The study, however, lacks comprehensiveness as it provides a general overview instead of being based on any specific set of data.

Historically, protests against the colonial rule started from the greater Bengal region, where women played significant roles. The works of Pritilata Waddedar and Kalpana Datta have inspired Bengal revolutionaries to fight against the British control. During Bangladesh's birth through nine-months of violent struggle too women have played significant roles, which have remained understudied both theoretically and empirically. Women during the Liberation War was very much a

part of the struggle either directly or indirectly. In Bangladesh's soul-searching over last few decades, a number of stories emerged in which we find how women actively participated through taking up armed trainings. It was not only educated and politically-aware urban women who decided to fight for independence but it is evidenced that women in rural areas also actively engaged in the fight. The contributions of Taramon Bibi, Geeta Kar, Hena Das and Dr. Captain (Rtd.) Sitara Begum among others are recognized as valiant freedom fighters of Bangladesh (Amin, Ahmed & Ahsan, 2016). Although the research on women's contributions in various capacities such as fighters, mothers or helpers during the liberation struggle is yet to be fully explored, but it is not surprising that they were very much a part of the struggle as active combatants.

The research on female terrorists and extremists that operated in the country has received the similar fate. As researches done on terrorism globally initially took an *agendered* approach, similarly in Bangladesh's cases, women's purported roles as mothers, wives or sisters in the cases of terrorists and extremists were not seen as essential to any serious scrutiny. An interesting observation in this case would be the case of family support to Bangla Bhai—the infamous terrorist who was the mastermind behind bombing 62 out of 64 districts of Bangladesh in a well-coordinated attack in 2005. When he was apprehended in 2007, the role of his wives or parents were not highlighted nor were researched to understand their involvement and support in terrorist acts. The first case of a female terrorist is believed to be apprehended on December 24, 2007. It is hard to believe that in a country, which has seen both leftist and Islamist terrorism for quite some period, that women were not associated with such acts. It is in this context, I add a short history of terrorism in Bangladesh to elucidate the point in question (Yasmin, 2019):

Table 1:History of Terrorism in Bangladesh

Phase	Name of the Militant/ Potential Militant group	Timeline and Origin	Use of Weapon	Target (Place and Personals)
First Phase	Muslim Millat Bahini (MMB)	1986; Pakundia, Kishoregonj;	Revolvers, Rifles, Bows and Arrows, Spears, Ammunitions	Abolished before involving in militancy
	Harkat ul Jihad Bangladesh (HuJI-B)	started in 1992 at Jessore; most active in late 1990s and early 2000s	Hand Grenade, Bomb; sometimes used 'suicide bombing' tactics	Secular political party, foreign envoys. Secular political party leaders, religious minorities, cultural programs
Second Phase	Jamaat e Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB)	Founded in 1998 by Shykh Abdur Raham; active in whole Bangladesh;	Bomb; sometimes used 'suicide bombing' tactics	Judicial Service, secular cultural groups, religious shrine, circus, cinema hall, Shia and Ahmedia community
	Jagrata Muslim Janata (JM-JB)	Founded by Siddique ul Islam (Bangla Bhai) in 2001-2; most active at Baghmara in Rajshahi	Bomb; sometimes used 'suicide vest'	Same as JMB
	Hijbut Tahrir	Yet to involve in militancy; originated in Great Britain	None	None
Fourth	Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT)	Started recruiting members in 2004-05; emerged as Ansar-ul-Islam as AQIS in September, 2014	Initially only machete; later pistol and explosives	Secular bloggers, publishers, doctors, LGBT activists

	Neo Jamaat e Mujahideen (Neo JMB)	re-emerged as Neo JMB in October, 2015; Dhaka	Crude bomb, pistol, AK-22 Rifle	Mainly foreigners, Shias and Ahmedia minorities; police

There have been very few studies on the real number of female extremists in Bangladesh. In an unpublished study that profiles female extremists of Bangladesh, it has been found that 105 women were apprehended by the members of law enforcement agencies from December 2007 till October 2018 as extremists (Ibid). In primary data collection and analysis, a number of reasons are cited for the radicalization of women. In Bangladesh, research through primary materials show that families are gradually turning into a source of radicalization for all the members. In cases, where the father is radicalized, he can successfully radicalize other family members as well. Women are also radicalized via their husbands and brothers. Thus, one common trend in radicalization of women in Bangladesh has been influence of family members (Ibid). In this context, one might point out in a study undertaken by the Election Commission (EC) of Bangladesh, the EC contended that voting behavior of women during 2008 general election showed that they are increasingly pursuing independent decisions than being influenced by their family members. This is a significant finding that contradicts with general assumptions regarding the way patriarchy works in Bangladesh and women's choices are often influenced and determined by the male members of the house. The information regarding women being radicalized by their family members in all such cases—therefore, can be questioned.

In other cases, where women recruited other women, they stated that they did this out of their own volition—as they believed in the particular cause—although they denied so after they were caught. The case of four cousins in Rajshahi, who were apprehended by police for circulating pamphlets together that identified the celebration of Bengali New Year as *unIslamic*, is interesting (Dulal, 2018). When I interviewed them after they returned in their house, free on bail from the prison—they simply said they had no idea what they were circulating as these pamphlets were handed over to them by one other man and woman who were barely their acquaintances. All four of the women were studying for higher degree in local colleges, in their early 20s and unmarried.

There is this puzzle that remains unresolved—all four unequivocally stated they were not aware of what they were circulating and that they did not believe in Bengali culture as *unIslamic* but still carried out the act.

There are two cases of self-radicalization of young sisters—Momena Shoma and Asmaul Husna. The story of Shoma is that she was self-radicalized after her boyfriend went to Syria to join the IS and died while fighting. Shoma knifed her landlord after going to Melbourne, Australia, for higher studies. Whether Asmaul Husna was self-radicalized or influenced by her sister is unclear. However, she attacked police officers who went to investigate Shoma's whereabouts in her house. Another case to consider in this respect would an extremist woman—a mother—when cordoned by the police, threatened to kill her child if she was not provided a safe passage to flee (Bashar, 2019).

As I stated before in this section—the stories of women are puzzling, to say the least. As they cannot be reached for in-depth interviews, and even when one can, as they refuse to answer—one might surmise several things on the basis of the stories reported in newspapers. Did they really want to commit such acts to gain agency, or were forced or influenced to do so or simply chose to carry out the acts? It is in this context, I answer that some of these women—the number may not be considered as significant statistically—chose to carry out the acts out of their own will. One can certainly invoke the nature versus nurture debate here although that would also indicate that a part of 'nature'—human nature that is in Hobbesian world works for self-preservation—plays a significant role here. With the on going COVID-19 pandemic, Bangladesh is witnessing a feminization of joblessness, as Imran Matin has put it to refer to how women are generally the first layer of job cuts during a crisis (Power and Participation Research Centre, 2020). From the onset of the pandemic, it was being reported that female small entrepreneurs in Bangladesh were losing their jobs. Gradually, by September, it was reported that about 65 per cent women entrepreneurs surveyed had no income while 58 per cent women working in the informal sectors had no jobs in the pandemic (The Financial Express, 2020). As we have seen that one of the ways to recruit women is via online chats, there is potential of these women being recruited as extremist groups are reforming themselves in South Asia. It is also apprehended that in the COVID-blighted world, opportunities to work abroad have dried up—hurting

economies and creating a pool of underemployed young men at home and abroad (Pantucci, 2020), who can be easy targets of extremists but such analysis ignores the gender dimension of unemployment. Thus, for self-preservation, women can choose to work for the extremists—it is human nature to do so.

Concluding Observations

Gender issues are often sidelined in prevention strategies of extremism due to underlying assumptions of 'women as mothers', 'women are peaceful', and even when women are involved, they do so being influenced by the male members of the family. It ignores that women can often be a part of extremism willingly, global and Bangladeshi cases testify that. It is the extremists who have made the best use of such myopic view towards women, and therefore do not hesitate to use women as potent and unsuspecting weapon to carry out their activities. Also, women can voluntarily join due to financial constraints, as the pandemic is leaving many men and women without effective employment despite qualifications. While this leaves men vulnerable, it also leaves women just as vulnerable. In this article, throughout the discussion, I have shown, how women can make the choice to actively carry out violence. It does not however assert that women cannot be peaceful. But the article points out the danger of ignoring the silent but potent role that women have played and are capable of playing globally and in Bangladesh in relation to terrorism and extremism.

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