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Targeted for Speaking Out: Gendered Disinformation and Digital Resilience in Bangladesh's Polycrisis

Farah Zahan Shuchy [1] and Md. Azaher Uddin [2]

[1] Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh
[2] Department of Computer Science and Engineering, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Correspondence: Farah Zahan Shuchy (s-13th-2018524666@mcj.du.ac.bd)

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Abstract

This article examines how disinformation and harassment targeted women activists since Bangladesh's July–August 2024 mass uprising—and how they responded. Focusing on Facebook and Telegram—central since the uprising—we show how vigilantism and misogyny turned these spaces into hypermediated battlegrounds. Sexualized slurs and visuals, fabricated scandals, and moral shaming worked as coordinated repertoires that blurred truth and falsehood, delegitimized participation, and spilled into offline intimidation. Based on semi-structured interviews with 25 activists and a feminist critical discourse analysis of social media artifacts, this study engages networked misogyny, digital vigilantism, and digital social resilience. It contributes, first, empirical evidence of gendered disinformation as violence that weaponizes visibility, mobilizes audiences as enforcers, and reconfigures reputations across online/offline spheres; and second, an account of resilience as collective and relational rather than solely technical or individual, while exposing platform and institutional failures. The analysis advances Global South feminist perspectives and recommends more context-specific interventions toward disinformation and resilience.

Keywords

Bangladesh; digital resilience; digital vigilantism; Facebook; gendered disinformation; Global South; misogyny

1. Introduction

In July–August 2024, Bangladesh experienced its largest uprising since independence. Beginning as student protests against the restoration of a long-contested public sector job quota—reserving 30% of government jobs for freedom fighters' descendants and considered inequitable—they quickly escalated into nationwide reform demands. Many viewed the quota as benefiting some groups while disadvantaging others from less

privileged backgrounds. Police crackdowns, mass arrests, around 1,400 deaths, and repeated internet shutdowns intensified this cross-societal uprising, ultimately ending the 15-year Awami League-led government rule and leading to the installation of an interim government (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025). Protesters used social media for documentation and coordination; it simultaneously became a space of mobilization *and* suppression. For the first time in Bangladesh's history, women marched at scale, led frontline barricades, and became the uprising's defining symbols (Begum, 2025). Their heightened visibility also made them immediate targets of digitally mediated misogynistic attacks (Akhter, 2025). Harassment, disinformation, and sexualized attacks, rooted in patriarchal norms, weaponized shame and moral panic to restrict their political participation (Judson et al., 2020; Sessa, 2020).

These dynamics unfolded amid what we conceptualize as "polycrisis" (Morin & Kern, 1999): overlapping political, economic, and civic-rights pressures intensifying one another. Following the caretaker system's abolition and successive elections with irregularities, boycotts, and constraints on opposition activity, Bangladesh's state power had increasingly become centralized, civic space narrowed, and public trust eroded (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025). Furthermore, widening economic inequalities, youth unemployment, and grievances over job quotas intensified discontent. Online spaces also became key arenas for acute gendered attacks.

Existing scholarship has documented Facebook-based gendered disinformation during elections (Baksh et al., 2024) and the vulnerability of women journalists to misinformation (Parvez, 2025). Violence and intimidation are deeply embedded in Bangladesh's political culture, disproportionately limiting women's participation (Paasilinna, 2016). But these studies largely quantified abusive content or treated gendered attacks as a subcategory of "misinformation." Less attention has been given to activists' own lived experiences and how resilience operates within polycrisis. Furthermore, the aftermath of the uprising, with intensified attacks (Akhter, 2025), demands more scrutiny. We therefore ask how women activists experienced attacks, how these harms influenced their visibility and safety, and how they practiced resilience in response.

Gendered disinformation—false, distorted content weaponizing stereotypes to discredit women and gender minorities—should be considered violence rather than merely a falsehood problem (Gehrke & Amit-Danhi, 2025). It thrives in upheavals, particularly when women challenge dominant political narratives (Judson et al., 2020; Otieno, 2024; Sen & Jha, 2025; Veritasia et al., 2025), and serves strategic political goals. It both spreads falsehoods and mobilizes shame and humiliation to weaken resilience. It differs from hate speech, harassment, and incivility, which are abusive or discriminatory but do not necessarily involve intentional deception, reputational fabrication, or coordinated circulation. Visual manipulations (e.g., memes, edited screenshots, and deepfakes) aim to evoke shame, disgust, and moral outrage, reinforcing gender norms and nationalist scripts that cast women as immoral, "Western," or destabilizing (Sen & Jha, 2025). Remedies like fact-checking and media literacy are limited because disinformation is structural, pervasive, and affective. Political falsehoods often resurface in slightly modified forms even after correction (Larraz et al., 2024). By extension, we can expect gendered disinformation to show similar persistence in patriarchal societies. Evidence from authoritarian, conflict contexts shows that corrective efforts have little impact (Badji et al., 2024).

We treat gendered disinformation against activists as violence, deliberately using force or power to intimidate or suppress participation for political ends and likely to cause psychological harm or coercion

(Krug et al., 2002). In Bangladesh's current context, through pornified deepfakes, impersonation, and fabricated scandals, it has been employed to "discipline" dissenting women and deter their civic visibility. These on-platform harms trigger severe real-world consequences, e.g., offline intimidation, family fallout, and professional damage, aiming for a chilling effect on participation. Thus, gendered disinformation is not incidental hostility but a *modality of violence* enacted through digital infrastructures. We find that, since the uprising, it has intensified, taking sexualized and more acute forms, seeking to erode women activists' legitimacy. Activists resisted through collective reporting, counter-speech, emotional solidarity, and deliberate re-engagement. Thus, we highlight lived experiences in a post-uprising transitional context and advance feminist, context-specific resilience as a *shared* ongoing struggle rather than only an individual trait.

2. Literature Review

Gehrke and Amit-Danhi's (2025) "triangle of violence" connects creators, targets, and audiences, showing how mis/disinformation, including visual and AI-assisted forms, inflict harm through reputational damage and witnessing effects, presenting disinformation as structural and patterned violence. Attacks also serve as semiotic violence—the use of words, symbols, images, metaphors, visual manipulations, or bodily representations to degrade, delegitimize, or discipline women in public life (Krook, 2020, Chapter 16)—that normalizes patriarchal norms and inhibits participation (Hedling, 2024). Similarly, false and misleading content function as a long-term misogynist strategy to reproduce women's historical exclusion from decision-making (Gehrke, 2023; Sobieraj, 2020). So, gendered disinformation, a specific form of violence against women in politics, needs conceptual precision in how it is studied and addressed (Bardall, 2022). Hameleers (2025) further demonstrates how visual disinformation often relies less on fabrication and more on the deceptive re-contextualization of authentic visuals, making it harder to detect and counter in gendered contexts. In our framework, harassment refers to abusive, derogatory content, whereas disinformation requires an element of intentional deception/manipulative reframing (e.g., fabricated quotes, falsified visuals, altered screenshots) aimed at damaging credibility.

Scholarship has recently begun differentiating gendered disinformation from adjacent phenomena. Peer-reviewed work remains limited, as much early definitional and practical leadership emerged from NGOs and policy reports (Gehrke & Amit-Danhi, 2025). A review finds only 14 of 143 studies mention gender (Alcântara & Valentim, 2023). Recent work urges greater focus here (Agajanian & Moran, 2025). Global South contexts are also underrepresented (Badrinathan & Chauchard, 2023). Together, these gaps motivate our empirically grounded, context-specific intervention.

Following Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016), we define networked misogyny as not merely individual hatred but a collective, platform-enabled, virulent policing of women. During elections, gendered disinformation intertwines with misogyny, racism, xenophobia, and foreign information manipulation to undermine women's legitimacy ("Gendered disinformation," 2024), producing psychological and reputational harms that suppress political participation. Disinformation intensifies existing racialized and gendered narratives (Marwick et al., 2023). Multimodal, especially visual, forms remain understudied (Gehrke & Amit-Danhi, 2025). Digital vigilantism—operationalized here as the coordinated, user-led monitoring, shaming, doxing, and reputational punishment—operates as extralegal punishment of individuals for perceived social or political transgressions (Trottier, 2017). Bangladesh's limited participation in the #MeToo movement further

highlights how patriarchal norms, taboos, and fears of retaliation limit women's ability to speak out, despite digital access (Moitra et al., 2020).

Across India (Sen & Jha, 2025; Vincent & Kumari, 2023), Pakistan (Javed, 2025), Kenya (Otieno, 2024), South Africa (Martiny et al., 2024), and Italy (Esposito & Semenzin, 2025), election cycles and cross-platform dynamics amplify harassment, smear campaigns, deepfakes, and technology-facilitated gender-based violence, affecting professional well-being and depressing activism. Bangladeshi women journalists face sexualized misinformation and religious shaming (Parvez, 2025). Tropes of seduction, betrayal, and foreign loyalty persist (Sen & Jha, 2025). Such harms undermine electoral integrity and democratic participation (Veritasia et al., 2025). Globally, 73% of surveyed women journalists report online violence, with 41% linking abuse to false information with offline consequences (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022).

Tomkova (2020) conceptualizes digital social resilience as mobilization, solidarity, and moral purpose under hybrid threats. Bangladeshi projects—Protibadi, ProtibadiNext, and Unmochon—document abuse and build informal support networks (Sultana et al., 2021). Despite being innovative, these designs show the limits of techno-fixes in the absence of social and institutional change, because they are unevenly accessible. Feminist perspectives reframe resilience as a relational, collective process, rooted in care, solidarity, and infrastructural repair, rather than individual "bounce-back" logics (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Gregoratti et al., 2024), emphasizing collective protection. Addressing platformized toxicity, therefore, requires multi-point interventions: mitigating spread, weakening illegitimate authority signals, and reducing harm through solidarity networks (Recuero, 2024). Platforms simultaneously exacerbate coercive control and hold potential for prevention (Dragiewicz et al., 2018). Traditional fact-checking largely fails to address symbolic and affective harms, as gendered disinformation circulates through emotion, belonging, and performativity rather than verifiable claims (Bardall, 2022).

Collectively, research shows that we know little about how disinformation, misogyny, and vigilantism interact in polycrisis and how targeted women themselves interpret, endure, and resist these harms, especially in Global South contexts. We address these gaps with the following research questions:

> RQ1: How have women activists experienced gendered disinformation and harassment online since Bangladesh's uprising?
>
> RQ2: How have these digitally mediated harms impacted participation, visibility, and sense of safety within a hypermediated polycrisis?
>
> RQ3: What strategies and meanings of digital resilience have emerged among targeted women, particularly in response to emotionally charged abuse?

3. Theoretical Framework

Since the uprising, intensified gendered attacks—coordinated rather than random (Jankowicz et al., 2021)—have used cultural norms to police women's visibility and delegitimize authority, showing how digital vigilantism and networked misogyny intersect. Simultaneously, activists and allies enact forms of digital resilience, countering erasure. Digital vigilantism explains the mechanics of gendered attacks. It often has

political goals (Trottier, 2017). Partisan networks mobilize ordinary users to dox activists, circulate manipulated content, and stage synchronized pile-ons. Visibility becomes weaponized, as the digital presence required for organizing is turned into a harm vector. Networked misogyny supplies the ideological script (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016). This modality is not spontaneous but an *organized* backlash. Smear campaigns recast the activists as immoral, sexually deviant, or traitorous. If vigilantism provides the *method*, then misogyny is the *justification*, turning scattered abuse into a coherent project of disciplining women's political participation.

These dynamics gain full meaning when we situate them in the polycrisis. Crises rarely unfold in isolation but overlap and intensify one another (Morin & Kern, 1999). Since 2024 in Bangladesh, overlapping crises, e.g., political instabilities, civic-rights pressures, and platform toxicity, created a context where disinformation and harassment could thrive. Plus, platforms are not neutral but infrastructures, magnifying incendiary content and harm. Paradoxically, platforms can also enable counter-hegemonic mobilization.

Here, digital social resilience becomes critical. Following Tomkova (2020), we consider it both recovery and sustaining social cohesion under hybrid threats, not only individual or technical, but a feminist counter-power. It insists on women's continued presence in public life. We view the uprising as a socio-discursive rupture. Figure 1 shows our conceptual framework, where each square is the continuation of the previous one.

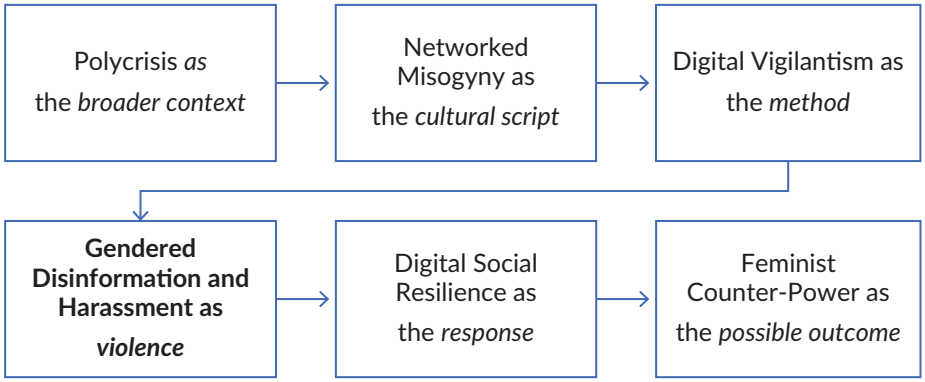

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

4. Methodology

This study is qualitative and abductive to understand the nature of attacks against women across Facebook and Telegram. We define *women activists* as those who self-identify as activists, engage online or offline in dissent or mobilization, and challenge authority, injustice, or gender-based repression, including both formal organizing (student/party-based) and informal actions (protests/digital resistance; Norris, 2009). To identify gendered disinformation, we only documented content meeting all three criteria:

- Falsity/distortion (e.g., fabricated allegations, manipulated visuals);
- Gendered stereotype (claims using norms of purity, modesty, nationalism, morality);
- Strategic reputational harm (discrediting political participation rather than expressing anger/insult).

4.1. Data Collection Methods

We conducted 25 in-depth interviews, selected through purposive sampling, with activists directly/indirectly attacked online. Recognizing the emotionally charged, context-dependent nature of these experiences, our primary method, semi-structured interviews, allowed participants to narrate experiences in their own words. We followed feminist traditions, considering activists epistemic agents whose situated knowledge constitutes essential data (D'Ignazio, 2024). They were diverse: from ages 20–45; affiliations across student political wings, political parties, feminist organizations, rights-based groups (for a detailed breakdown, see the Supplementary File); and across major divisional cities. We collected age because younger activists faced different familial-institutional constraints vis-à-vis older, party-embedded figures. We used open-ended questions on experiences, harassment, and resilience (see Table 1). Conducted in Bangla (May–August 2025) in person/via Zoom, interviews lasted 45–75 minutes (one lasted 125). We audio-recorded, manually transcribed, translated, and coded the sessions to preserve nuance. We cite participants by number (e.g., P1 refers to Participant 1). The complete protocol, detailed operational definitions, and ethical considerations are in the Supplementary File.

Table 1. Guiding themes.

Theme	RQ(s)
Changes since uprising; key platforms	RQ1
Attack types (insults/deepfakes/impersonation/sexualized/appearance-based memes/videos)	RQ1
Coordination (spontaneous vs. organized/political/ideological/cross-target patterns)	RQ2
Participation impacts (self-censorship/withdrawal/willingness to speak)	RQ2
Immediate responses (blocking/reporting/deleting)	RQ3
Support systems (informal networks/institutional/legal/tech support/meanings of resilience)	RQ3
Roles (for platforms/communities/state)	RQ3
Reflections on specific posts/episodes	RQ1, RQ2

We analyzed social media artifacts, posts, and announcements, posted from August 2024 to September 2025—all publicly accessible—as our secondary method. We focus on Facebook and Telegram because, since the uprising, they have been the primary arenas of activism and harassment, as confirmed by all interviewees. We systematically monitored high-visibility public pages, groups, and channels central to political communication. Using a combined keyword and seed-page strategy in both Bangla (predominantly) and English to locate relevant posts and snowballing from engagement trails, we narrowed the corpus from the initial 312 artifacts to 100. We used four inclusion criteria:

- Virality (engagement metrics—reactions, comments, views, shares, thresholds);
- Severity of harm (reputational, sexualized, or safety-related attacks);
- Clear identifiability of an *activist-as-target*;
- Completeness and analyzability of the content (e.g., excluding items deleted before systematic archiving).

Our dataset is uneven (80 from Facebook, 20 from Telegram) because Facebook remains the main site of (visible) political communication, while Telegram's (semi-)closed channels limited access. We archived Facebook content via screenshots and "Save" and manually stored Telegram content, redacting all identifying information. We categorized platform, attacker/sources/target type, and thematic/technical features. Sources ranged from anonymous users to coordinated groups.

4.2. Analysis Strategy

We integrated thematic coding of interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA; Lazar, 2007) of social media texts. We adopted FCDA as it extends critical discourse analysis by focusing on gender, power, and violence and is better suited to our emphasis on misogyny, semiotic attacks, and gendered disinformation (e.g., Vincent & Kumari, 2023).

We utilized a poststructuralist lens to understand misogyny as structural and how language constitutes violence, and interpreted discourses that framed dissent as deviance, activism as betrayal, and meme culture mobilizing disgust and ridicule, while acknowledging the materialist reality of platform economies commodifying outrage. We coded transcripts, mapping punishment, doxing, self-censorship, withdrawal, fatigue, and adaptation themes, and chose quotations for thematic salience and richness. FCDA (illustrated in Figure 2) traced how social media discourses attempted to discipline, shame, and silence women by emphasizing gender relationality and multimodal meaning-making, and was operationalized through:

- Identifying discursive strategies (moral policing, sexualized insinuations, reputational attacks);
- Conducting multimodal analysis of visuals and symbols as semiotic resources;

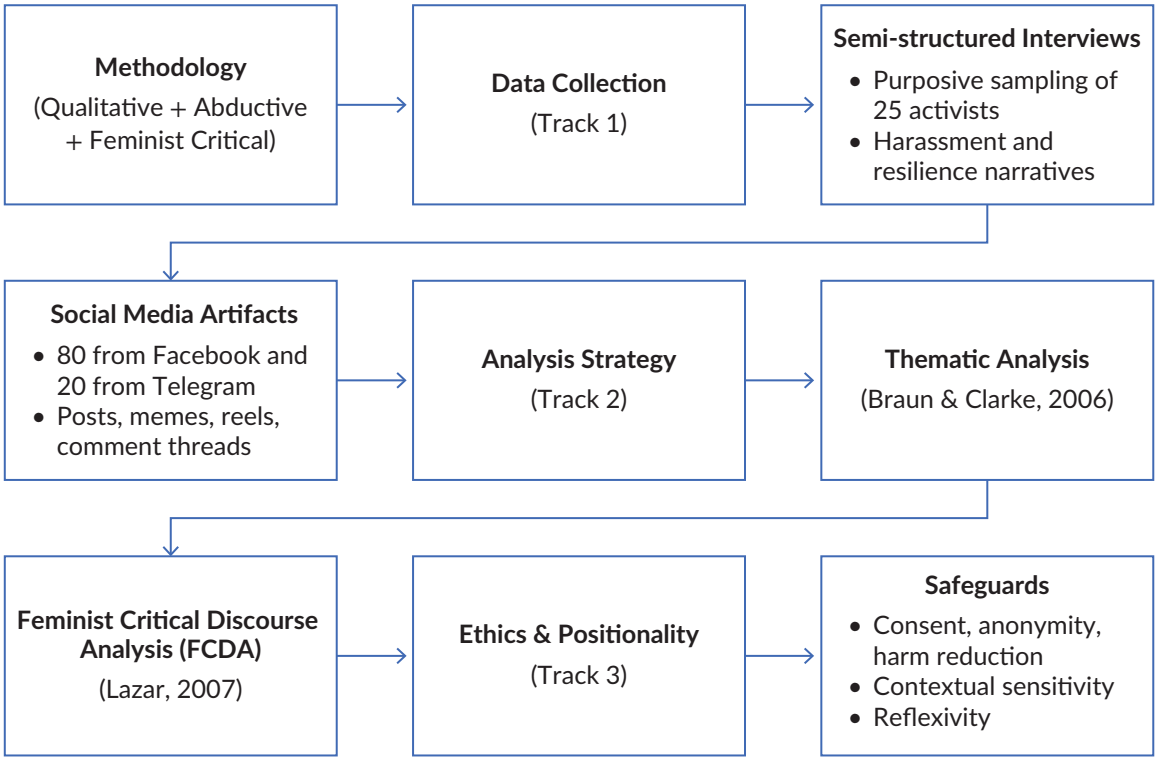

Figure 2. Research design.

- Tracing how they might mobilize audiences as *enforcers* of gender norms, thus reproducing gendered power asymmetries;
- Examining interdiscursivity across patriarchal, religious, and political discourses.

We examined every artifact for how linguistic and visual signs reproduced gendered power and harm (Krook, 2020, Chapter 16), i.e., moral positioning, delegitimization, and multimodal cues (e.g., news-template mimicry), allowing us to interpret gendered disinformation as a practice with strategic political goals.

We assessed intercoder reliability using Cohen's κ on a 15% pilot data subset. Reliability was substantial for both interviews ($\kappa = 0.80$) and artifacts ($\kappa = 0.76$). We resolved remaining discrepancies through discussion, after which coding proceeded independently. We reached thematic saturation around Interview 21 and the 93rd artifact, with subsequent cases only contributing stylistic variation. We retained all interviews and artifacts to preserve demographic and platform breadth.

4.3. Ethics and Positionality

As a non-interventionist qualitative study involving observation and interviews, Institutional Review Board oversight was not required under local practice. However, recognizing the sensitivity, we adhered to feminist ethical protocols of empowerment, reflexivity, reciprocity, and care (Kingston, 2020) as a rigorous alternative to standard practices. We prioritized "do-no-harm," utilizing encrypted written/verbal consent, anonymization, and continuous distress monitoring. Furthermore, to prevent re-victimization and re-circulation, we analyze descriptively but do not reproduce the original, crude, often non-consensual visual artifacts.

We are Bangladeshi, in our mid-20s, and speak Bangla fluently. All interviews were conducted by one interviewer with prior activism experience. This positionality influenced disclosure quality: Several participants viewed the interviewer as a trusted insider rather than a detached researcher, enabling unusually candid discussions of trauma and harassment. A different interviewer may not have generated such layered insights. To mitigate insider bias, we maintained reflexive memos and actively sought negative cases, challenging our emerging interpretations. However, our backgrounds may have made us more aware of certain dynamics while overlooking others.

5. Findings

5.1. RQ1: Experiences of Gendered Disinformation and Harassment

Since the uprising, online attacks have had three dimensions: coordination and personalization, the weaponization of institutional legitimacy, and the convergence of ideological camps in policing women's visibility. For example, P13, long active in cultural work, described a "180-degree change" after she spoke politically: "Everything changed overnight. Many attack and hurt me online, even people I don't know." P23 faced organized character attacks: false allegations of affairs and sexualized disinformation targeting her spouse. Rumors reached her workplace; she was followed after hours—a "wake-up call" that intimidation had moved offline.

Victim-blaming also compounded abuse, reframing harassment as the target's fault. P19, a physician and activist, described intra-party disciplining. She recalled senior political figures asking her, "Why are fake IDs

only opened on *you*?" This question exemplifies deep-rooted misogyny, shifts responsibility from perpetrators to the target, and reproduces institutional-patriarchal power. The question of why she maintained a Facebook account at all forces her to defend against the very attacks aimed at silencing her. It reframes women's mere presence as transgressive. A fabricated call and uncritical relays by national dailies amplify further abuse by borrowing institutional legitimacy and legacy media credibility. A falsified audio clip attributed to P15 changed how she was seen: "After that, all comments are sexualized, connecting everything to that event." One fabrication set a frame for later appearances.

P20 stressed coordination: "100% organized and linked to political actors against my views. Till now, I haven't found one neutral person criticizing me like this." She pointed to networked misogyny as politically driven. P17 reported impersonation and unauthorized image use—fake profiles with her photos, promotional edits without consent, and manipulated, sexualized images—intensifying since 2024. Filing an official complaint took time and yielded little; blocking became her main tactic. P2 described escalation against women specifically: "Before [the uprising], many people expressed sympathy for women activists. But after, online reactions turned *against* women." She linked harms to Facebook bots and coordinated real accounts spreading sexualized insults, appearance-based bullying, and political delegitimization.

Formatted within news-style graphics, visual disinformation often portrayed activists in fictitious "immoral/compromising" situations. P1's photograph was digitally reframed within mainstream media templates and paired with suggestive texts about invented "promiscuity." This deceptive (re)construction, borrowing the authority of news, formal composition, and language, and attempting to blur truth and falsehood, exemplifies semiotic violence (Krook, 2020, Chapter 16). FCDA highlights how this process weaponizes legitimacy to activate gendered moral categories and incite public shaming. By simulating authority through "official" cues—like breaking-news banners, cropped headshots, and declarative captions—these artifacts naturalize accusations as credible facts. These semiotic markers lower scrutiny and accelerate moral condemnation, thereby reproducing unequal legitimacy thresholds for women.

P25 saw spikes in abuse after sensitive speeches that undermined competence: "Intimidation, punishment, politically discredit…whenever women go against social norms." Women *across* parties were targeted once they voiced dissent. Additionally, after receiving public recognition for her work, P7 faced a barrage of comments alleging the achievement was due to sexual favors, turning professional merit into personal scandal.

P6, a university student, confirmed attacks cut across ideology: "It doesn't matter what party you belong to….The problem is that you are a woman who dares to participate politically." Attacks on opposition leaders and professionals were so vulgar that others avoided their content. Moral policing crossed ideological lines: Islamist-leaning critics policed dress/modesty, while secular users attacked P1 for wearing hijab. Opposed camps converged on disciplining women's visibility. Social media posts show continued escalation. Doxing pushed harms offline. After her number circulated, P21 blocked unknown callers to stop harassment. It illustrates how technology-facilitated gender-based violence becomes ongoing, resource-draining surveillance.

During university union elections, a male student's publicly documented call for a "gang-rape procession" targeted a female student who filed a legal writ challenging a candidate's eligibility, mobilizing threats of collective assault. The message was clear. Political participation carries threats of bodily harm for women.

Digital vigilantism, at its most dangerous, reflects broader hostility to women beyond party lines. Election cycles produced visual disinformation against women in authoritative positions. AI-generated images paired academics with their students. Alongside tropes like "step-mom," "sugar-mommy," and "bed-hopper," these fabrications collapse professionalism into scandal, undermining women administrators (Krook, 2020, Chapter 16) and warning others away from public roles.

Deepfakes mocking protest gestures, pornified captions sexualizing ordinary photos, incest-coded taunts commodifying women's bodies, "revenge"-style private chat exposes as reputational blackmail, and fabricated portraits casting women as indecent were recurring tactics. Deepfakes and doctored videos, though rarer, carried a disproportionate impact. Engagement metrics show that defamatory content spread quickly and amplified offline intimidation.

5.2. RQ2: Impacts on Online Participation, Visibility, and Safety

Online harms influenced how women participate politically. Harassment became a central factor in whether and how they spoke out. P13 shut down Facebook comments to reduce abuse—prompting backlash ("Why is the comment section off?"), turning a safety step into new grounds for delegitimization. The falsified audio clip (see Section 5.1) intensified this. Coverage of P15's speeches and panels became flashpoints, with comments recasting her as scandalous and eclipsing her professional identity.

Offline risks deepened insecurity. P14 was followed after being recognized online; some colleagues urged her to "step back." Her professional legitimacy also suffered. P11 noticed a broad chilling effect: "Women became reluctant to voice their opinions. Attacks make women silent." P18 saw the same trend *across* parties: "Whenever women go against social norms, they are intimidated, punished, or politically discredited." Abuse spiked around women's speeches. Joining a party intensified the chill: Women's critiques were discounted as "party talk," showing how harassment and labeling narrow legitimate speech.

Timeliness of fact-checking also mattered. When rumors spread unchecked, delayed corrections rarely repaired damage. Disinformation "stuck" and became long-term baggage. Several participants said delayed verification cannot erase such narratives. By contrast, a "fake" Facebook ID used to discredit a woman's complaint by spreading disinformation was quickly debunked by an independent fact-checker, preventing escalation. It enabled her to re-engage. Although based on selected activists' accounts and not statistically generalizable, Figure 3 shows the perceived importance of community-based independent fact-check timeliness in Bangladesh.

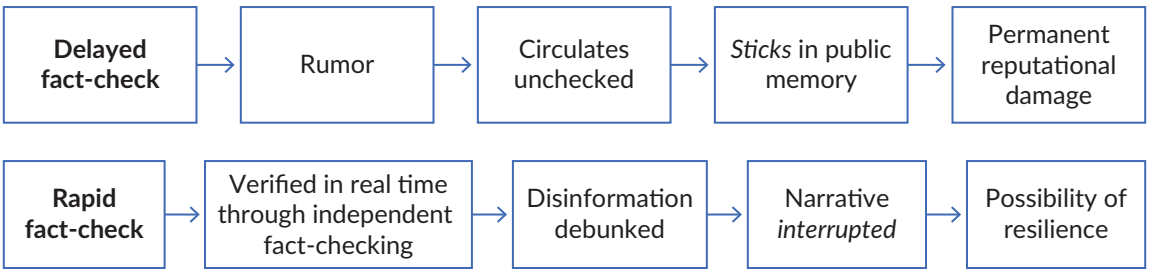

Figure 3. Participants' perceptions of fact-check timeliness (not generalizable).

Family surveillance added further pressure. P3 recounted:

> My father forbade me from running in the election, my mother cried over vulgar reels, and I hid from cameras, withheld photos, and concealed an attack from my family. The abuse damaged my reputation, strained family ties, and forced invisibility.

Institutions failed to protect. P13 reported harassment by a government employee and was told nothing could be done: "Someone more politically powerful might have gotten justice…but I didn't." Powerful men saw swift action; women did not. Platforms further compounded vulnerability. P21 identified Facebook as the more hostile of the two focal platforms, citing bots and coordinated accounts. Harassment spiked when women challenged sensitive issues, showing the mix of misogyny and polarization.

Social media analysis aligns with these accounts. Memes and manipulated images reframed leadership as scandalous. Algorithms rewarded outrage, and encrypted channels enabled unchecked abuse. Out-of-context YouTube clips exposed women to further hostility. Even beyond partisanship, harassment operated as bait. As P19 mentioned, attackers "get clicks by attacking me, making a product out of me," showing how attacks are commodified within platform economies.

As P6 noted, hostile comments dominated coverage. P1 faced a bind: Visibility triggered misogynistic reframing, while withdrawal drew accusations of weakness. P4 described increased family rejection and surveillance. Even as she continued activism, it heightened vulnerability. Furthermore, the gang-rape incitement drew complaints and condemnation. Yet, screenshots kept circulating in private groups. AI-generated images likewise turned routine duty into scandal. Hundreds of comments sexualized the academic and questioned impartiality, converting service into reputational liability. Platform virality and weak enforcement kept women in constant exposure.

Across generations, severity was clear. Senior figures and students reported distress affecting sleep and prompting thoughts of withdrawal. P16 mentioned, "If even senior women get distressed…imagine how much it harms younger women."

Women continually negotiated safety. Unequal power relations shaped their responses. Platform and state failures created an antagonistic digital sphere, where activists must self-manage risk, and the same exposure that amplifies activism marks them as targets for disinformation, harassment, and offline intimidation.

5.3. RQ3: Strategies and Meanings of Digital Resilience

Alongside endurance, women also developed varied strategies to cope, resist, and redefine resilience as emotional honesty, collective solidarity, tactical withdrawal, and critical reflection.

P9 used solidarity networks: "If anyone faced abuse, we would mass report together. It's like a shield." These low-barrier circles sometimes removed content but caused burnout. P22 relied on constant blocking, pre-drafted posts, tighter privacy, and public exposure of harassers: "I have seen no result by reporting….I usually just block."

Counter-speech and allyship also appeared. Across posts, we observed, a few young male political figures condemned slut-shaming "regardless of party or ideology" to interrupt normalization and legitimize women's pushback. P8 rejected resilience as denial: "Feeling low…should be accepted so that we can give time and heal, and then we come back." She credited counseling and family support. P22 used humor—screenshotting abuse and replying with sarcasm—to feel "mentally lighter." P7 and P12 described small, protective circles with limits on exposure. P24 noted that solidarity is historically rooted in women's collective action, even though parties tokenize or sideline them. Many participants emphasized that survival depends on peer support, especially when institutions fail to do so. But resources were unequal. Higher-profile women received more protection, and lower-visibility activists were left exposed. P2 highlighted this disparity. Continued participation often depended on strong family support—an uneven buffer many lacked.

P2 framed resilience as a cross-party struggle: "The attacks we women face are essentially the same." She called for unified resistance by women. P12 combined caution with critique: She self-censored yet pressed international actors on platform neglect in the Global South and pointed to weak state mechanisms: "Police aren't trained properly….Even *real people* attacking women don't face consequences." Without political will or legal reform, resilience places unfair burdens on victims.

P5 emphasized refusing erasure. For her, resilience is collective courage. She critiqued the "Hindi serial heroine syndrome" that celebrates self-sacrifice and recalled women rescuing male students: "Logic said no one would help, but we did….To be born as a Bangladeshi woman is already to be born into struggle."

Visual disinformation played a key role; for example, memes on activists' fabricated kissing scenes, edited images sexualizing or partially stripping women, altered clothing to imply indecency, AI-generated nude or explicit composites, obscene body language, distorted "uglified" facial edits, and pornified innuendo, like suggestive poses or manipulated screenshots, circulated, sometimes alongside pejorative labels like "*Shahbagi*" (used indiscriminately to identify "liberal/leftist" women). They worked to erase women's credibility and political authority (Krook, 2020, Chapter 16).

Also, resilience cannot mean ignoring trolls. It requires counter-narratives, feminist digital practices, and structural reform. Participants insisted on returning on *their* terms. P10 defined resilience as "coming back" after healing; P16 demanded accountability; and P24 rejected tokenism, insisting on presence. All converge on one insight: Resilience is collective. Activists and allies used rapid tactics—evidence documentation, cross-partisan condemnations, humor/meta-commentary, and coordinated reporting. They built resilience through persistence, networks, and refusal of erasure, illustrating its fundamentally collective character (see Table 2).

Table 2. Overview of findings.

Cluster	Category	Focus	Examples
A. Disinformation Tactics	Sexualized & moralized violence	Sexualized insults, body shaming, and policing.	Pornified captions, incest-coded memes.
	Defamatory fabrications	Fake news, false context, edited/AI images, doctored videos, and cheapfakes.	Falsified audio, deepfake video.
	Politicized attacks	Partisan, nationalist, and religious shaming.	"BNP-agent" labels, hijab/secular attacks.
	Coordinated manipulation	Impersonation/sock-puppet accounts, suspected bots, and synchronized brigading.	Impersonation, bot armies.
B. Consequences	Family & social fallout	Abuse spilling into households and reputations.	Family pressure to withdraw.
	Offline spillover	Escalation into surveillance and intimidation.	Number doxed → harassment calls. Stalking.
	Platform/algorithmic dynamics	Outrage-driven virality, coordination/suspected bots.	Facebook brigading, viral memes.
	Visibility penalties	Recognition reframed as scandal/liability.	Award → rumors of sexual favors.
	Internalized/horizontal misogyny	Women echoing visibility policing.	Female peers branding others "too visible."
C. Resilience Practices	Collective mobilization & tool-making	Coordinated defenses.	Mass-reporting, evidence, and blocking.
	Emotive solidarity	Support through emotion.	Humor, family support.
	Moral restoration quests	Calls for justice/accountability.	Condemning abuse, critiquing platform inaction.
	Counter-narratives & refusal	Rejecting erasure, reasserting presence.	Counter-posts, contesting elections.

6. Discussion

Our findings show how online attacks in Bangladesh intersect with overlapping crises of fragile governance, political instability, and platform dynamics. Disinformation, suspected "bots," and digitally altered visuals operate as repressive tools in hyper-connected networks. Simultaneously, coping strategies—blocking, tactical withdrawal, solidarity networks, and public critique—show why resilience must be redefined as relational, gendered, and deeply contextual rather than only technical or individual. Power operates at interlocking levels: structural (patriarchal norms and party hierarchies), platform-based (algorithmic and weak moderation), and discursive (sexualized/moralized/nationalist framings). Participants' narratives show these forces attempt to limit or silence women's political agency.

6.1. Gendered Disinformation as Violence

Disinformation campaigns are not isolated. They draw legitimacy from patriarchal beliefs that make punishing women appear "common sense." Gendered disinformation is a form of violence. Symbolic violence

(Bourdieu, 1991) shows how narratives cause lasting reputational harm, and semiotic violence explains how women's speech is reframed as indecent or disloyal (Krook, 2020, Chapter 16). Galtung's (1990) cultural violence situates these tactics within norms that normalize them. Echoing Jankowicz et al. (2021), we find sexualized rumors—most common—plus fabricated scandals and cheapfakes exploited to enact power over women activists in the uprising's aftermath.

Women are blamed for impersonation attacks that see abuse and disinformation toward them as *their* fault. Many participants mentioned that recognition often got twisted into scandal. Women's visibility gets recast as sexual quid pro quo. Networked misogyny clarifies these dynamics as cultural and patterned practices amplified by platforms. Disgust, shame, and outrage "stick" to women (Ahmed, 2004). Furthermore, uncritical media coverage lends legitimacy and extends harm. Timely fact-checking may interrupt the flow. But delays often make narratives permanent.

Attack tactics range from collective punishment threats to pornified depictions of women in authority. Across ideological divides, both religious and secular critics often converge on regulating women, making the hypermediated environment uniquely hostile for them. Guided by FCDA, we consider these attacks patterned discursive practices that reproduce—rather than merely express—patriarchal authority by converting women's political speech into "impropriety," "betrayal," or "deviance" that must be disciplined (Lazar, 2007).

Though long relegated to token roles, during this uprising, women could no longer be sidelined. Their unprecedented role helps explain why they are now persistently threatened in the digital sphere as partisan polarization resumes. The "gang-rape procession" call exemplifies how online speech mobilizes offline threats. P18 described it as "proof" that participation carried threats for women. Activists' images, speeches, and fabricated scandals are turned into viral content beyond their control. With the mechanism of coordinated retaliation (Trottier, 2017) and networked misogyny (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016), findings show that in the polycrisis, these merge into gendered civic repression—a tool of authoritarian consolidation enacted both by the state and by its social actors.

Homophily can fuel polarization (Esteve-Del-Valle, 2022). Bangladeshi partisan networks strengthen misogynistic narratives and hinder cross-cutting debates. Partisan actors/rivals also deliberately orchestrate vigilantism. In both cases, women activists are cast as "outsiders" deserving extra-legal punishment. Manipulated content, like obscene visuals about activists, audience engagement, and victim-blaming, interacts so that harms extend *beyond* individuals (Gehrke & Amit-Danhi, 2025). Families and colleagues absorb fallout, bystanders self-censor, and intimidation is reinforced.

In Bangladesh's patriarchal-political climate, reputation is vital. Women activists have to manage both their political *and* "character" reputations. Claims about relationships or family life are used to undermine women's credibility disproportionately. Attacks often bypass policy opinion critique and target their character and physical features to delegitimize them. Social media-based visual disinformation situates these strategies within semiotic violence, rendering women invisible, illegitimate, or incompetent (Krook, 2020, Chapter 16).

While activists did not always use theoretical language, they were active knowledge-bearers of this terrain. Many stressed that collective resilience is essential: Across parties, women face coordinated attacks the moment they voice dissent, even ordinary criticism. As they put it, if you are a woman, you *will be targeted for speaking out*.

Together, we show how disinformation functions: Digital vigilantism supplies the mechanism of denunciation, weaponized visibility the exposure tactic, networked misogyny the cultural rationale, and affective economies the adhesive. Misogyny is both an ideological fuel and an attention economy incentive, generating clicks aligned with partisan aims. These dynamics meet established criteria for violence: deliberate, coordinated uses of symbolic and psychological force to suppress (political) participation.

6.2. Digital Resilience in a Polycrisis

Morin and Kern (1999, p. 74) argue that contemporary challenges cannot be reduced to a "number one" problem. We *cannot* see the digital attacks against Bangladeshi women as isolated incidents. Rather, the repressive political climate enables attackers by guaranteeing them impunity, amplified by platform algorithms that reward outrage, rooted in deep-seated patriarchal norms seeking to police women.

Tomkova's (2020) triad appears here through encrypted chats, humor-laced counter-speech, and evidence documentation. Resilience is stratified. Higher-profile women often receive disproportionate protection, while lower-visibility activists endure greater isolation. Family and networks further influence whether women can persist. Whereas Koch, Russo Riva, and Steinert (2025, p. 16) find coping as individualized "preventive labor" that attributes unpaid, disproportionate burdens on women, our findings suggest that it is also usually relational, scaffolded by networks.

Even within biased technological systems, women generate counter-narratives and resist marginalization (Mukhongo, 2023). Plus, media can catalyze resilience for LGBTQIA+ youth by allowing coping, community, and validation (Craig et al., 2015). We also observe similar dynamics: Curated online spaces allow women to re-enter after attacks and reassert presence, solidarity, and confidence. Yet, findings show visibility's central paradox: Media amplifies women's voices, helps build coalitions, and confers legitimacy. It also, however, renders women more vulnerable as targets by intensifying political polarization and patriarchal norms, turning these into churning, inescapable features of women's environment and creating a draining negotiation between presence and self-preservation that complicates linear narratives of digital empowerment.

Resilience also changes across time. In July–August 2024, broad coalitions united around shared goals. This tendency lowered overt division and opened space for women's participation. But since then, as actors returned to partisan agendas, the same women who gained visibility are increasingly treated as *threats* by opposing camps. Despite now-expanded opportunity, the number of politically visible women declined as attacks intensified, and cross-party solidarity became unsustainable. Maintaining transformative solidarity is difficult (Ciccia & Roggeband, 2021). Burnout and fragmentation erode protective networks. We thus conceptualize activists' abuse documentation through archiving as "counterdata" (D'Ignazio, 2024). It is heavy emotional labor rather than merely anecdotal, technical work. These solidarity networks sustain resilience through collective witnessing and a refusal of erasure.

Collectively, digital resilience is built through relationships, solidarity, and institutional accountability. From an FCDA perspective (Lazar, 2007), survival practices like humor, tactical silence, withdrawal, counter-speech, re-entry, and blocking are not mere coping tools but discursive interventions, insisting on women's continued presence in digital-political life. As Figure 4 illustrates, resilience, a feminist counter-power, operates across micro, meso, and macro levels. It is fragile yet political, emerging through cycles of withdrawal, return, and accountability demands.

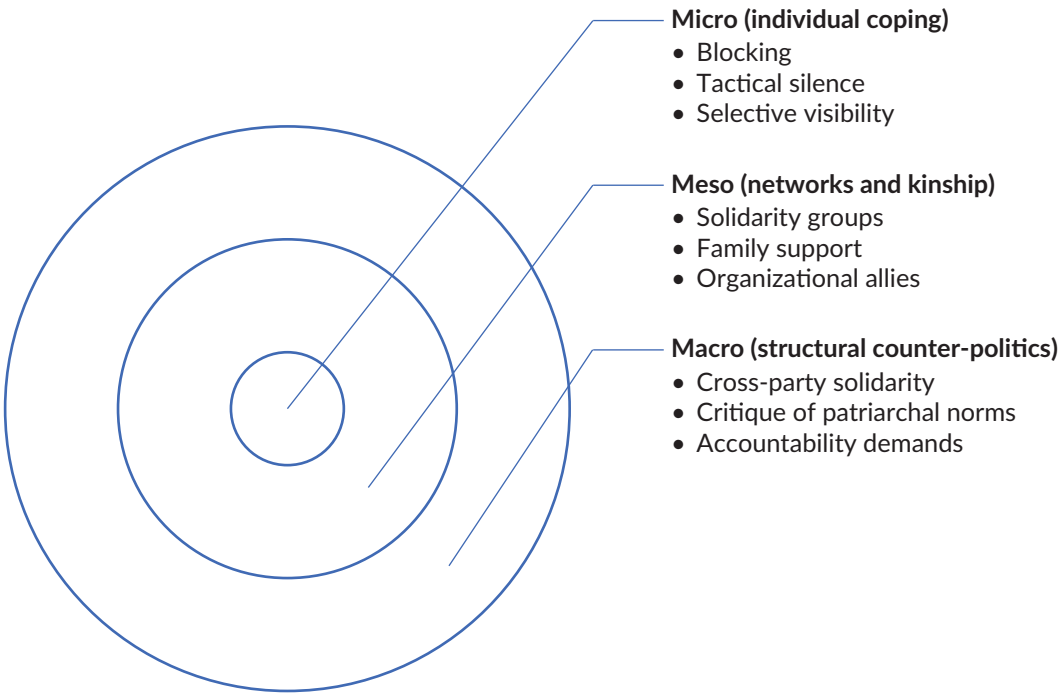

Figure 4. Layers of resilience in the Bangladeshi polycrisis.

This study extends several strands of scholarship. Misogynistic attacks reduce women's online political communication during election campaigns in Brazil (Koch, Ghawi, et al., 2025). Additionally, Koch, Russo Riva, and Steinert (2025) document the predominance of individualized coping (blocking, muting, and reporting). We similarly show silencing in civic life but expand upon the narrowness of coping. Resilience, in Bangladesh, is also family-anchored and network-based. Beyond content, network structures also matter (Esteve-Del-Valle, 2022). We extend the homophilic logic to gendered disinformation that intensifies within partisan enclaves and radiates outward.

Comparably, Chinese women intellectuals are denounced through betrayal and immorality discourses (Huang, 2023). In Bangladesh, these denunciations reinforce patriarchal control and partisan exclusion. Regionally, violence against women in politics is widespread in India, Nepal, and Pakistan; fear of violence deters over 60% of surveyed women from political participation (UN Women, 2014). Nearly 90% believe it breaks their resolve to join politics. Patriarchal power structures and weak enforcement of laws sustain this climate. Furthermore, India's Hindutva-aligned religio-political digital campaigns deploy misogynist memes, doxing, deepfake porn, and rape threats to frame women as immoral and politically illegitimate (Sen & Jha, 2025).

South Asia's paradox of iconic female leaders but limited systemic change across the region provides critical insight. They often rose via dynastic channels that upheld patriarchal party structures, leaving *even* them

vulnerable to sexist abuse and harsher scrutiny than men. Similarly, ordinary women activists are targeted with character assassination—the same patriarchal logic that limits leaders also limits grassroots actors, but without any dynastic protection.

Women hold only 20% of Bangladesh's parliamentary seats, mostly through quotas (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). Nearly all citizens report at least one bias against women (Liller, 2023). So, findings emphasize that these attacks are not merely a "by-product" but a deliberate tactic to discourage women's activism and leadership. We must therefore understand political participation not only in numbers but also in other contextual factors.

Bangladesh-specific research confirms structural barriers. A persistent "gender wall" limiting political agency (Ara & Northcote, 2020), with documented coordinated campaigns in the 2024 election relying on sexualized slurs, religious shaming, and homophobic insults, attempts to surveil and erase women (Baksh et al., 2024). So, gendered attacks become a structural *mode of exclusion* (Gehrke, 2023). We extend these ongoing debates on misogyny, vigilantism, and violence in fragile democracies.

To counter gendered disinformation, we suggest structural reform at multiple levels (shown in Figure 5):

- Civil Society: Build collective resilience through feminist digital literacy that treats disinformation as violence and fosters counter-narratives.
- Platforms: End reliance on user-led defenses. Corporations must ensure culturally competent moderation that recognizes localized gendered attacks.
- Governance: Design survivor-centered reforms without expanding authoritarian control. Establish independent oversight to hold states and platforms accountable.

Overall, solutions must dismantle patriarchal ideologies and unequal infrastructures while empowering women's narratives and collective resistance (Lazar, 2007).

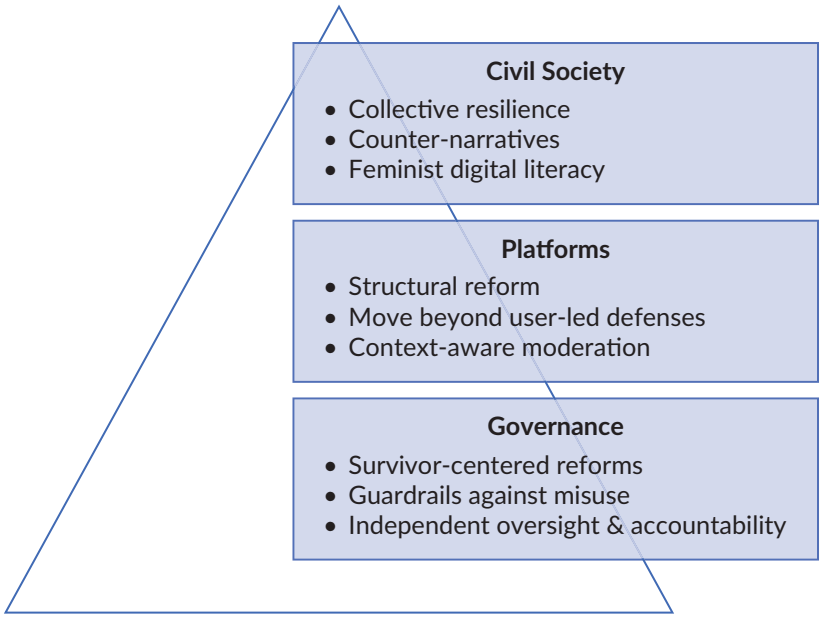

Figure 5. Levels to counter gendered disinformation.

7. Conclusion

We show that the online attacks against women activists since Bangladesh's uprising are not incidental, peripheral noise. Rather, these are part of coordinated violence. We conceptualize gendered disinformation as violence enacted through vigilantism and misogyny and demonstrate how women activists build collective, relational digital resilience in the ongoing climate. Sexualized slurs, fabricated scandals, and manipulated images blur the line between online and offline harm. They leave reputational scars, foster professional hostility, and trigger physical intimidation. We show how disinformation operates through discourse and the importance of centering women's voices in analyzing its impacts and responses (Lazar, 2007). It restructures both how women are perceived *and* the very conditions of their visibility. The coordination of digital vigilantism and the cultural framing of networked misogyny facilitate gendered disinformation. Together, they transform women's political speech into immoral or traitorous, while platform logics and algorithmic amplification intensify this process within a hypermediated polycrisis. Women activists respond to this situation by exercising resilience and creating protective networks. They demand accountability and present counter-narratives. Here, resilience is relational, contextual, and collective, rooted in care, persistence, and shared struggle rather than individual endurance alone.

Our qualitative design has several limitations. Prioritizing depth over breadth, the sample captures rich lived experiences but cannot claim representativeness. Our focus on Facebook and Telegram—central since the uprising—excludes other platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, X) where affordances, visibility, and moderation differ. So, findings should be read as specific to these platforms rather than generalizable across *all* platforms. We center targets' experiences and analyze impacts without mapping perpetrators or audiences. Concentrating in the capital, Dhaka, and major urban centers enabled dense access and intensive interviewing; triangulating that with social media artifacts strengthened credibility. The limitations also indicate paths for future research. Large-scale computational studies could extend this work with generalizable findings and assess effects on participation. Cross-platform comparisons would help explain how attack strategies differ between platforms. Most importantly, studies should explore perpetrators and amplification networks, including the role of malicious bots, currently on the rise, and reception to measure how they influence public opinion.

Empirically, we provide systematic evidence from an underexamined context of how gendered disinformation functions as violence, extending the analytical agenda of Gehrke and Amit-Danhi (2025). Conceptually, we redefine digital resilience as a feminist counter-power of survival and resistance and emphasize the need for intersectional strategies that consider class, religion, age, and party affiliation. Finally, we illustrate that gendered attacks are central to the contestation of Bangladeshi women's political presence. Thus, we advance a Global South perspective that challenges one-size-fits-all accounts and recommend more context-specific interventions.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the highly sensitive nature of the data, research materials cannot be publicly disclosed.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT (version 5) and Gemini (version 3) were used exclusively for language editing purposes.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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About the Authors

Farah Zahan Shuchy is a University of Dhaka graduate and currently serves as a research assistant on a British Academy-funded project there. Her research critically examines the intersection of media, gender, AI, politics, and the Global South.

Md. Azaher Uddin is a University of Dhaka computer science graduate and researcher, specializing in governance. His research and activism focus on cybercrimes, gender, politics, accountability, and tech policy, with emphasis on combating online harassment.