

DATA PRIVACY DAY

Don't the poor have a right to privacy?



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In Bangladesh, a common joke revolves around the absence of a Bangla equivalent for "privacy." Goponiyota suggests confidentiality, and ekaante thaka, used as a verb, implies being left alone. Some argue the lack of a specific term in our vocabulary might suggest a perceived absence of the right to privacy. There are TikTok videos humorously referencing the lack of privacy in joint families, or how parents get into the business of their teenagers, or how even a newlywed couple can't catch a break in a house full of guests.

Do these real-world privacy principles, or lack thereof, apply to the digital ecosystem? Sharing mobile devices is a common behaviour across South Asia, attributed to economic and cultural factors, according to research. In other words, if people are comfortable sharing devices, does this indicate that they do not care about their privacy? By the same assumption, is it fair to infer that the public lacks a reasonable expectation of privacy when sharing their personal data while buying a SIM card or on digital platforms?

Several months ago, while travelling in southern Bangladesh, I met with women in savings circles. Some had their own devices, while others shared a mobile phone with their spouses or parents. When asked about their concerns, almost everyone indicated that they wanted more privacy. This ranges from owning their own devices, to finding more secure ways to send mobile payments, to safely accessing their social media accounts. An overwhelming majority had accounts on Facebook, TikTok, or Imo, where they feared not only "abusive" content attacking them but also the possibility that reporting to law enforcement would grant unauthorised access to all of their data. For a community that's facing long-standing societal discrimination, these women—housewives, small business owners, farmers, and garment workers—were well attuned to their expectations around privacy.

This shouldn't come as a surprise because women and minority

communities worldwide bear the brunt of "digital abuse." They face a disproportionate risk of privacy erosion, including invasion of their personal spaces, non-consensual sharing of visual content, and the use of personal data for surveillance and blackmail. However, these risks are more acute for communities in low- and middle-income countries (referred as the Global Majority), who lack the institutional safeguards that wealthier Western democracies can sometimes take for granted. Moreover, the rights of the poor are frequently undermined with the promise of techno solutionism, an idea that the "right" technologies can solve society's problems.

A year ago, Marium Akter (pseudonym) received her smart national identification (NID) card. At the time of collecting her personal information and biometric data, the "officer" promised that this would make receiving her social safety benefits easier and provide security against fraud when accessing any device or online services. Weeks after signing up, Marium started receiving strange phone calls at midnight. The caller claimed to have access to her NID information, even shared some of it accurately, and blackmailed her for money in exchange for not leaking her information online. They threatened to provide false criminal allegations about her to the local police, suggesting it would impact her government benefits. Based on the threats, it appeared that the police and local government officers might be involved in the scam, leaving her unsure on whom to approach. She eventually disconnected her device out of fear.

Marium's case may seem anecdotal, but last year, TechCrunch, along with multiple national dailies, reported that a Bangladeshi government website leaked personal information of more than five lakh citizens. To grasp the scale and severity of the breach, it's worth noting that personal information in the government's NID database is tied to an individual's birth certificate, SIM card registration, bank account/s, passport, voter cards, and pretty much every service imaginable. At the time,

the government acknowledged the breach and attributed it to "weak web applications" and "poor security features" of "some government organisations." A few months later, NID data was available on Telegram, easily accessible and searchable using a bot. The then system manager of the NID wing of the Election Commission confirmed

ads, but also to decide what should appear on someone's feed, which product features they can access, recommend "friends," and impact the entirety of their online experiences. Although there is increasing public and regulatory pressure to protect user data, leading to some product changes globally, these have little to no impact on communities outside

separate research on 224 fintech and loan apps, targeting African and Asian customers, found 72 percent had some level of cybersecurity risks that exposed sensitive personal and financial data—and shared data—without explicit consent, with third parties.

To where does the individual citizen turn? Neither the government

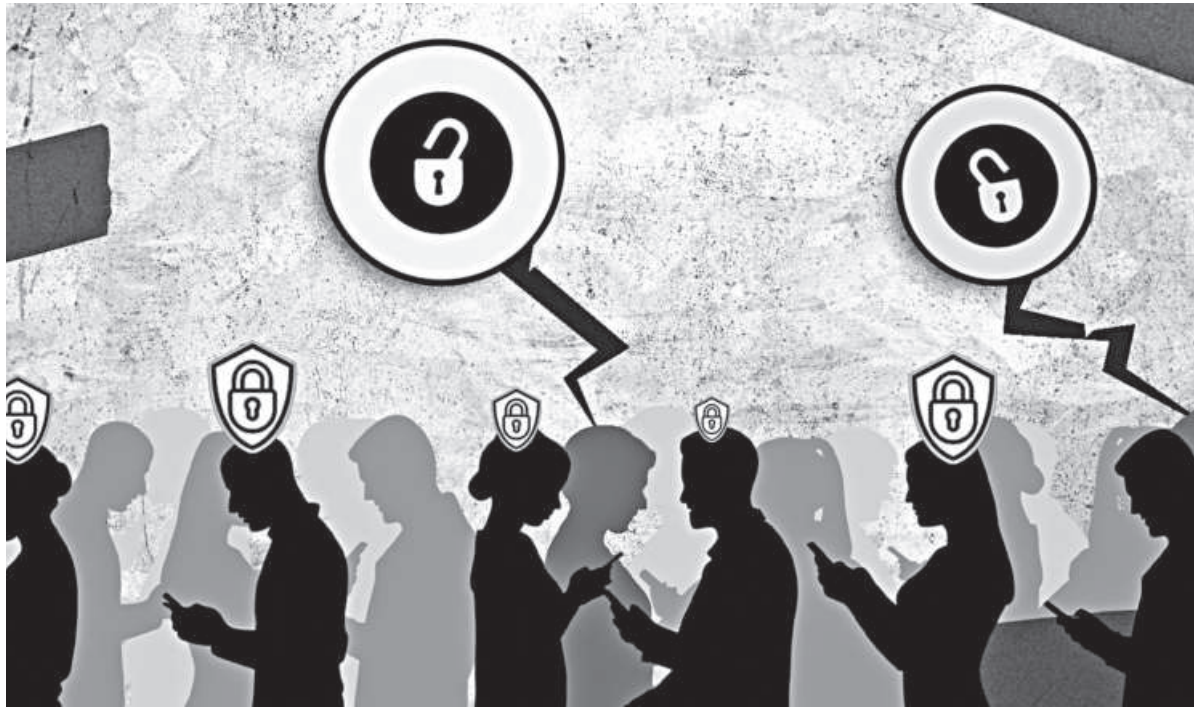
personal data.

In a nutshell, by replicating existing frameworks, the draft Personal Data Protection Act misses out on critical local nuances, rendering it likely ineffective in addressing privacy concerns.

An alternative approach could have been for the draft act, and other data protection and privacy interventions, to mandate product and policy changes that would meet privacy expectations. For example, firstly, it could have required tech companies and digital products to simplify their terms and privacy policies, including providing visual cues and modularising consent, and ensuring they can be easily understood by all communities. Secondly, the draft act could have instituted a robust grievance redressal mechanism within tech companies and government agencies, with clear timelines for resolution that can be used by anyone, irrespective of their digital literacy skills.

These changes, however, are not about one legislation or lever. Fundamentally, privacy as a practice within digital ecosystems has never been investigated in Global Majority contexts. It is largely still seen through either legacy or imperialistic lens, resulting in weak regulatory interventions and performative safeguards that pose significant risks of undermining fundamental rights. For decades, people in poor countries have been made to believe they have to choose between using a great product and expecting it to protect privacy, be safe, and respect human values. And that it is their fault, their lack of knowledge, that made technologies difficult, intimidating, and harmful. More often than not, mitigation approaches try to change the behaviours of the end consumer, rather than centering design, development, and governance around what works for the people.

Research indicates that mobile devices equipped with multiple profiles, akin to Windows or Mac operating systems, offer privacy safeguards rather than attempting to alter device-sharing behaviour in collectivist societies like Bangladesh. While there are recent efforts to incorporate human-centered design into pro-poor technology solutions, this is built on economic values rather than human rights. And perhaps this is the fundamental framework-shifting that we need to do: to begin respecting the rights of the poor on par with meeting their economic aspirations, instead of believing in the fallacy of a zero-sum game.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

that 174 organisations had access to the NID server; anyone could have their security compromised.

In the months preceding the leaks, the then Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan told the press that there was a process underway to shift the central NID database from the EC to the Ministry of Home Affairs, referring that most countries maintain their citizen records more securely under the executive branch. The National Identification Registration Act was passed in September last year, confirming the move. In November, a Wired story found that millions of NID data, along with other sensitive personal information, was left exposed online by the National Telecommunications Monitoring Center, a national intelligence outfit under the home ministry.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg.

For nearly two decades, social media companies have collected vast amounts of personal data, extending from activities on the platforms themselves to third-party websites, browsers, and devices. The data is not only used to micro-target

of Western democracies. The privacy policies are not written for the average non-native English speaker and, even with translations, are framed in ways that are incongruous with Global Majority behaviours. Similarly, transparency features like "Why Am I Seeing this Ad?" or standard privacy controls are opaque, contextually inappropriate, and do not address the needs of non-Western communities. Eighty-nine percent of social media users in 19 surveyed countries, including Bangladesh, indicated they do not understand platform privacy policies or product features, according to a study conducted by the Tech Global Institute.

And if large platforms are one side of the dystopian coin, the other side belongs to a plethora of app-based startups. Women's health apps (under mHealth) are increasingly popular in low- and middle-income countries. But research on 23 of the most popular mHealth apps have found that all of them allow behavioural tracking. Sixty-one percent of the apps also allow location tracking and 87 percent shared data with third parties. A

nor private entities can be trusted to safeguard their privacy.

In an ideal system, legislative action would have been a way forward to hold both the public and private sectors accountable. The draft Personal Data Protection Act, having received in principle approval from the Cabinet Division, should have been a step in the right direction. However, it became a concoction of provisions drawn from the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act, and Singapore's Personal Data Protection Act, while retrofitting within Bangladesh's legacy institutional frameworks. In simpler terms, the draft act consists of arbitrary consent mechanisms, undue compliance burdens, and weak grievance redressal systems, combined with data access obligations without procedural safeguards, similar to requirements under the Cyber Security Act and the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Act. When read together, Sections 33 and 34 of the draft act imply that government institutions do not have the same duty of care as private entities towards safeguarding

White feminism and the 'Barbie' Oscar snub rant

Is it only anti-feminist when White women are overlooked?



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The nominations for this year's Academy Awards (the Oscars) came out last week, and *Barbie's* smacking headlines again—for being "snubbed" from the Best Director and Best Actress categories. This "controversy" is really a manufactured one for all the wrong reasons. It's a reflection of the ridiculous entitlement—of both the makers and fans—of the most commercially successful movie of last year. There's a strange misconception that not critically rewarding this more-than-billion-dollar-making movie undermines the supposedly unworlly feminist values in the film. *Barbie*, a subversive satire on the patriarchy, landed eight nominations, including for Best Picture. But that's seemingly not enough. Fans and Hollywood insiders alike have taken to social media referring to Margot Robbie, the lead actress, and Greta Gerwig, the director, being left out of their respective categories as proving "the whole point of the movie: the patriarchy."

The new cycle of rage frankly shows how White feminism has gone haywire. Hillary Clinton—who has never uttered a word about the sufferings of women in Gaza—has now chimed in with her iconic White feminism. Posting on X, she writes to Margot Robbie and Greta Gerwig, assuring them they're "Kenough."

Using the viral phrase "Kenough" also brings the male doll, Ken, into the picture. Clinton's self-defeating post is the perfect example of surface-level White feminist solidarity, bereft of any sort of intersectionality that can truly make a difference.

On the other hand, America Ferrera—a woman of colour, born to Honduran parents in Los Angeles—received a nomination as best supporting actress for her role in *Barbie*. That seems to mean nothing because she's not Greta Gerwig or Margot Robbie—the two immensely popular and commercially successful leading White women in Hollywood, both previously nominated for Oscars. The Academy has a vast history of sexism and racism, but raising hell for *Barbie* not sweeping every category takes us further away from advocating for inclusivity in the entertainment industry. This frankly shows that Hollywood's White feminism problem has spilled over to viewers, nurturing a culture of tone-deaf browbeating on social media.

Barbie "stans" are particularly upset that Ryan Gosling, who played Ken, received a supporting actor nod while Margot Robbie missed out—which seems to "scream patriarchy." But Gosling wasn't rewarded against Robbie. The Academy is not saying Ryan Gosling was better in the movie than Margot Robbie. There's no

logic in seeing his recognition in a different category as undermining his co-star. The competition in different races are different; that's just how it is.

Yet, even Gosling himself released a statement disapproving of the Academy's decision to not nominate Robbie and Gerwig. "There's no Ken without *Barbie*, and there's no

Ferrera, who received her first-ever Oscar nomination, expressed disappointment. This ostentatious theatre of calling out some supposed grave injustice against *Barbie* by nominated actors of the film and everyone else making a huge deal about it has another side to it: a glib indication that someone else in the categories of Best Actress and Best

performances outside of Hollywood.

Lily Gladstone, a Native American actress who played the lead role in *Killers of the Flower Moon*, won the Golden Globes and the race is projected to be between her and Emma Stone—for *Poor Things*—who won the Critics' Choice. Most importantly, Gladstone's nomination is historic, yet it is getting drowned out beneath the alleged snub headlines for Robbie. The lead actress category was a tight race this year, with excellent performances by many actresses. Margot Robbie is not a victim of the patriarchy. She lost out in the competition, and that should be acceptable. Dropping big words like "patriarchy" where it doesn't apply is as counterproductive as it gets.

The *Los Angeles Times* wrote: "It was a great year for film and all of the nominees did tremendous work, but no director or actor faced the same degree of difficulty as Robbie and Gerwig." These sorts of statements are borderline racist, as they completely turn a blind eye towards the struggles of Gladstone, the first Native American woman ever nominated, who was ready to drop out of Hollywood before being cast in the movie. One of the other supporting actresses nominated, Da'Vine Joy Randolph for *The Holdovers*, is a Black actress who has publicly spoken about her struggles as a Black woman in Hollywood. It's their moment, but this false controversy has stolen their spotlight and turned it into a moment of darkness, to snatch further praise for Margot Robbie. And since we are talking about "snubs," Korean-American actress Greta Lee from *Past Lives*—who delivered a subtle yet immensely touching performance, and was nominated in

the Golden Globes and in the Critics' Choice Awards—was also left out. Where's the outrage for her? Is it only anti-feminist when White women are overlooked?

Let's also take a look at Gerwig's snub, deemed as a heinous misogynistic crime. The Best Director category is voted by 582 voters, about a quarter of whom are women. Justine Triet, the director of *Anatomy of a Fall*—a brilliant French film—was the only woman nominated this year. But, of course, celebrating her work is not as fun as complaining about Gerwig's snub. Another point of argument for the *Barbie* snub has been the lack of logic in not nominating the director of a film that is up for best picture. Celine Song, the female director of *Past Lives*—which made it into the best film category—was also not nominated. Why is that not considered misogynistic?

There are many performances by women, non-Americans, and people of colour to be celebrated as well. There are many great films that have been rewarded in the Oscar nominations, and many that have missed the cut—such as the *Origin* directed by Ava DuVernay—and they deserve their fair share of recognition too.

Raging about Greta Gerwig and Margot Robbie, tearing away from the achievements of the other nominated women, and overlooking others who have also lost out in the competition just shows that Western (and specifically the US) society's feminism is still consolidated to White women. While the Oscars have a long way to go, so does everyone who has chimed in on the "*Barbie* got snubbed" controversy, laundering social issues (such as "women's empowerment") for the non-issue that this is.



COLLAGE: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

Barbie movie without Greta Gerwig and Margot Robbie," he stated in a wordy rant. But no recognition of any of the actors in any category is ever possible without the team effort, across multiple departments, in any film. Leonardo Di Caprio, the lead actor in *Killers of the Flower Moon*, was also not nominated while Lily Gladstone, his co-star, was. You don't see Gladstone ranting about Di Caprio missing out.

Gosling himself cannot seem to appreciate his own performance being honoured, perhaps in an effort to appear feminist. Even

Director shouldn't be there.

So let's look at the lead actress category where Margot Robbie was apparently snubbed. Who should've not been nominated then? The list is the exact same as the SAG (Screen Actors Guild) awards nominations, except Sandra Huller—the German actress who delivered an exceptionally ambiguous performance in *Anatomy of a Fall*—being on the Oscars nominations, and not Margot Robbie. If anything, Huller making it into the list shows the voters' attention to diversity and honouring outstanding