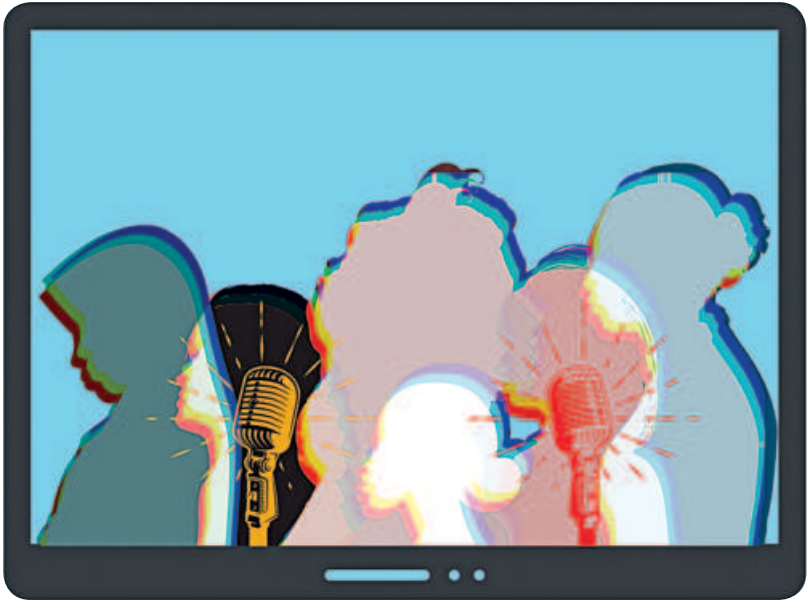


# Women’s right to free speech is under threat in online spaces

And the perpetrators are thriving on our collective silence



Rape threats, alongside more insidious forms of sexualised violence—such as the non-consensual use of a woman’s face to fabricate pornographic videos—are not merely expressions of malice; they are warnings designed to remind women that their presence in public discourse is conditional.

ILLUSTRATION:  
SYEDA AFRIN  
TARANNUM

AZRA HUMAYRA

What led me to lock my Facebook profile wasn’t an impulse but a slow accumulation of bitter incidents—unsolicited photographs of genitals, strangers lobbing obscenities in the comments, and messages that made my skin crawl with the chill of knowing that, as a woman, my very presence online is perceived as an offence. And yet, as a writer, I feel compelled—perhaps even obligated—to speak, to offer my modest two cents on matters that stir me. But even those small offerings are enough to summon a torrent of verbal bile, so wildly disconnected from the substance of my words that it becomes clear: the attack is not on the argument but on the audacity of my expression.

When a woman raises her voice against the status quo, she is not merely heard as a dissenting citizen but first—unfailingly—as a woman, and then, only incidentally, as a rebel. Her defiance is not evaluated for its merit but for its audacity. And in that space where disagreement ought to invite dialogue, a single, brutal word is often flung to end all conversation: rape. The threat of it, the invocation of it, shushes women. It has long served as the most chillingly effective tool in the arsenal of those determined to keep women silent, and still, it works.

When a man dares to speak against the status quo, he may be met with hostility—coarse insults, the promise of a black eye, and perhaps a few garden-variety threats tossed from the safety of anonymity. But rarely, if ever, is he met with the “r-word”. That particular threat is not in the arsenal reserved for men. For women, it comes first—before reason, debate, and consideration of what she has actually said. It is less of a rebuttal and more of a ritual, a brutal way to remind her that before she is a mind, she is a body and a body that can be punished.

Listening to Nourin Sultana Toma, a fourth-year student at Dhaka University, posed a serious concern: how rape threats are used as a tool. She claims, “I have been the target of body shaming, rape threats, and pornographic deepfake videos using my face. These are employed as tools of domination.” According to her, these individuals intimidate

women who attempt to voice their opinions by threatening to rape them. She finds it painful that rape is being used as a political tool.

Rape threats, alongside more insidious forms of sexualised violence—such as the non-consensual use of a woman’s face to fabricate pornographic videos—are not merely expressions of malice; they are warnings designed to remind women that their presence in public discourse is conditional.

Nourin recalls two recent instances: one in which she opposed Mostafa Asif Arnab’s release after he was charged with harassing a female student on the DU campus and the other in which she objected to the use of elephants in the DU Eid procession. “I have received rape and death threats for talking about these incidents,” she claims. This detracts from the primary concern and deters individuals from engaging in productive discussions.

A familiar pattern runs through these conversations: a woman raises an important issue, only for the focus to shift entirely. Instead

Victim blaming is nothing new to women. When a woman speaks out about the threats she has received, people often respond with a smirk, pointing to the photos she has posted or how she looks – as if to suggest she brought it on herself and the abuse is somehow deserved.

of engaging with her argument, commentators warn her to be careful, imply danger, or hint at something awful that might happen to her (in the guise of concern). The original topic is pushed aside, and suddenly, the conversation becomes about her gender—about misogyny—not the issue she was trying to discuss in the first place.

Asmita Mehefin, a third-year student at BRAC University, says, “The fact that we are reduced to objects and our value in this society can be taken away by someone else touching us without consent and violating us makes my skin crawl. Sometimes even after being on the receiving end of a crime, you’re the one who is blamed and shamed. It makes me really angry and fills me with rage, honestly.”

Victim blaming is nothing new to women. When a woman speaks out about the threats she has received, people often respond with a smirk, pointing to the photos she has posted or how she looks – as if to suggest she brought it on herself and the abuse is somehow deserved.

A graduate student of Jahangirnagar University, Sneha Talukdar\*, indicated that she had been subjected to bullying, slut-shaming, trolling, and rape threats over the previous seven or eight years. However, recently, there has been an increase in everyday abuse directed at her via bot accounts, bogus Facebook pages, comment sections, and inbox messages. She

no longer dreads the onslaught, since it has become usual.

But what does all this mean for the interviewees’ freedom of speech? Are they paralysed by fear, silenced before they can speak—or do they persist, raising their voices in protest despite the threats of sexual violence? The answers, as ever, are varied.

Asmita puts it succinctly, “There are times I have questioned if writing this poem and publishing it would result in slut shaming and rape threats. There is a constant fear that works in favour of misogynists and patriarchal institutions.”

Self-censorship to prevent rape threats means compromised freedom of speech. Asmita adds, “Specifically if I write a poem in a language which is more accessible to people, that makes the fear of receiving threats more prominent. There are times I have watered down my writing to make it more palatable to people so that I don’t get threats.”

On the other hand, Nourin realised that to remain in the political realm of a patriarchal country, she would have to continue fighting. She says, “When I started to write online, I witnessed women who spoke online being subjected to harsh consequences, but that did not deter me. These threats could not make me falter. I try not to think about whether I will receive rape threats or not if I post certain things. I have received rape threats for writing the simplest of things. So why should I bother thinking about receiving rape threats?”

But she emphasises the fact of the ever-present existence of rape-threat culture. She laments that the fear of receiving rape threats prevents women from coming forward. Nourin says, “I may have been able to overcome this reality of being a woman living in Bangladesh, but this is an exception.”

These testimonials reveal an ongoing practice of harassment, they also expose a strategy for suppression. An infrastructure of dread created using rape threats, doctored pornography, and the persistent policing of female expression. These women are more than just victims of online harassment; they are the collateral of a society that is alarmed not by violence but by the audacity of a woman speaking her opinion. And in this grim equation, to be a woman and vocal is to court danger; to persist is resistance itself.

But resistance must not be the burden of the silenced alone. If our government claims to uphold the right to free speech as enshrined in our constitution, then it must reckon with the reality that women are being systematically denied that right. Let us not forget that rape threats are political tools.

Authorities must act with urgency and resolve: to investigate these threats, hold perpetrators accountable, and make the online space a terrain where women can speak without fear. Anything less is complicity. And silence, at this point, is no longer neutral; it is violent. Those who stand by, who choose not to take an active stance against such abuse, are not outside the problem – they are part of it, enabling a culture that thrives on their silence.

Azra Humayra is majoring in Mass Communication and Journalism at the University of Dhaka. Find her at: [azrahumayra123@gmail.com](mailto:azrahumayra123@gmail.com)

## What you should know before joining a gym for the first time

NUSRAT MEHERIN FAIZA

You have finally decided you are done being that one person who simply scrolls through fitness posts or videos on social media while muttering “I will start my own fitness journey next week” and are finally ready to hit the gym for real. Suddenly, the doubts start creeping in.

Where do I even start? Can I do this? What if I can’t get fit? Such questions are bound to pop up in your mind. But remember that everyone starts somewhere, even the most experienced bodybuilders or fitness junkies were once beginners.

If you’re serious about starting your fitness journey at the gym, here are some of the most important things you should know.

**Location of your gym**  
A gym close to your home or university makes it much easier to stick to your preferred fitness routine. Knowing the city traffic, after a long, tiring day, the last thing you want is to navigate traffic across the city just to squeeze in a workout. And often it becomes an excuse to skip the workout.

Choosing a conveniently located gym removes that barrier, making it easier to stay committed.

**Equipment, hours, and trainer availability**  
While location tops the list, equipment, gym hours, and availability of trainers at the gym are just as crucial. Proper, well-maintained equipment matters to let you stick to your routine. Also, check if the gym gets too crowded during peak hours.

Ask if there are certified trainers for enough guidance. When you’re just starting, proper advice is crucial to avoid any injury and build a routine that works for you.

**Payment plans and flexibility**  
Membership fees vary depending on the facilities, location, and the overall brand value of the gym. Some require hefty fees or tie you into long-term contracts, while some offer a monthly package.

Be clear about things like whether or not you can pause or cancel your gym membership if needed. Also, check if there are any hidden charges, like having to pay extra if you have dedicated trainers.

As a beginner, always opt for a gym that offers flexible payment plans, one that doesn’t stress you out financially.



PHOTO: UNSPLASH

**Hygiene and cleanliness**  
Cleanliness in a gym is an absolute necessity. Observe how well the facility is kept before you enrol. Are their shower areas, bathrooms, and locker rooms clean? Is the equipment cleaned regularly? Do the restrooms have hand sanitisers available?

A clean gym not only conveys professionalism but also helps shield you from possible health risks.

**Gym culture and environment**  
When you enter a place that seems judgmental or unwelcoming, it can cause needless stress and gradually push you away from going there. Hence, it becomes essential to pay attention to the gym culture.

Notice if the staff and other members at the gym are welcoming, respectful, and sincere. Also, make sure the culture at your gym is welcoming to people of all body types and fitness levels. A positive and supportive environment can motivate you to keep going.

# The many avenues for physical wellness

It is inevitable that almost everyone will face some sort of physical ailment in their lifetimes, whether it be temporary or permanent. In order to alleviate its effects, paying attention to our physical health is the first big step towards wellness.

A.M. FAHAD

Our bodies are machines made of meat and electricity that run into problems more often than we’d like them to. The degree of these problems varies greatly among people of different age groups. With that in mind, it is important to consider the various outlets available to us. Here are some options that can be accessed from the comfort of your home or a nearby spot.

**Gym**  
The gym is usually the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of physical wellness. It’s also among the most accessible spaces available for wellness. Joining a gym comes with many pros. Not only do you find a community of people, each with their own fitness goals, but also a space that caters to people’s needs through the availability of a wide variety of equipment. The tools at your disposal can be used for strength training and cardio amongst other things.

Good gyms also usually have trainers who guide newcomers and help them build a routine and diet plan to follow throughout their wellness journey. Gyms tend to possess a strong air of motivation where people are constantly seen pushing themselves, which can be incredibly motivating.

**Zumba**  
Zumba is a dance-based workout that

involves high-beat music and cardio. It might not seem like an exercise in the most traditional sense, but it most certainly is going to make you break a sweat. Zumba classes are filled with extremely high energy. The community-driven activity of letting your body dance to the rhythm of the music will also fill your reserves with endorphins.

Many fitness studios in Dhaka offer Zumba routines to help you schedule your first class. The other good part about Zumba is that there are tons of resources on the internet. Most importantly, it’s perfectly fine to do it from home. If you don’t want to get into running or lifting heavy weights, Zumba may be the perfect alternative for you.

**Pilates**  
Pilates is a body-conditioning routine that helps you build flexibility and endurance without putting on muscle. It focuses on improving your core strength and the quality of your breathing using repetitive small movements to target specific muscle

groups. Pilates is especially beneficial to people with sedentary jobs or people who lack active movement, as it helps improve your posture, and makes you more aware of how you move through daily life. Pilates can also be done both from home and at a studio.

**Rock Climbing**  
If

that combines strength and balance with strategy and mental focus. Rock climbing gyms contain different categories and levels for people with varying levels of expertise. They’re set using videogame-like level-up mechanisms in which you clear a stage to move to a more challenging climb. Rock climbing is particularly beneficial for improving core strength and back strength, as well as your overall strength while adding an element of adventure to it. It is deeply rewarding, and every climb feels like solving a puzzle!

**Yoga and stretch-based wellness**  
Yoga remains one of the most holistic wellness practices out there, as it improves flexibility and physical strength while grounding the mind with breathwork and mindfulness practices. Whether you’re looking for a slow meditative approach or a dynamic workout, the benefit of yoga is that it will always meet your energy level. Though yoga and stretch-based exercises may not fill

you with adrenaline, they provide you with something just as valuable: stillness and an improved emotional connection with the body.

**Tai Chi, martial Arts, and boxing**  
Tai Chi is a gentle, flowing practice that looks like martial arts in slow motion. Tai Chi is similar to both yoga and martial arts, as it combines the motions of martial arts with the slow flow of yoga to create meditation in motion. Like some of the other activities in this list, Tai Chi can also be done both in your own house and in a professional studio.

On the other hand, martial arts and boxing, especially kickboxing, have grown popular in recent years. Karate, judo, and kickboxing combine physical skill with mental discipline. Although boxing is not a martial art in the most traditional sense, it has shown great results in alleviating stress and tension.

It is inevitable that almost everyone will face some sort of physical ailment in their lifetimes, whether it be temporary or permanent. In order to alleviate its effects, paying attention to our physical health is the first big step towards wellness. By staying active in ways that suit our bodies and interests, we build resilience that supports us throughout our lives and improves our overall quality of life.

PHOTO: UNSPLASH