The paradox of women in power and the myth of soft leadership

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For 15 and a half years, Bangladesh showcased Sheikh Hasina as the ultimate symbol of female empowerment; the woman who survived assassination, exile, and persistent threats to become the longest-serving leader in our history. But her shocking downfall and the extraordinary reality of her death sentence have forced us to confront a deeper truth about gender and power that we have long avoided. Women's leadership is not, and has never been, inherently soft, compassionate, or morally elevated. The comforting narrative that women will rule differently with tenderness or ethical clarity collapses when examined against the political histories of women who, like their male counterparts, have wielded the machinery of the state with force and sometimes with violence.

Hasina's rule was a stark reminder that women do not transcend systems simply by occupying them. Her government expanded digital surveillance, tightened police control over dissent, criminalised criticism through the Digital Security Act, 2018, and presided over a political culture where fear and patronage became governance tools. That this apparatus was commanded by a woman did not soften its impact. If anything, it highlighted something feminist scholars have long argued: institutions shape leaders far more than gender shapes institutional behaviour. In the recent volume *Gender and Nation in South Asia: Feminist Positions, Scholarship and Directions*, scholars remind us that South Asian nationalism often elevates women symbolically, as mothers, cultural guardians, and embodiments of the nation,

while leaving the structural hierarchies around them untouched. Bangladesh followed that script. The patriarchal and increasingly authoritarian state beneath Hasina grew stronger, not weaker, during her tenure, although she was celebrated as the "*Jononetri*" (leader of the nation).

This is not a uniquely Bangladeshi contradiction. Margaret Thatcher governed Britain with an iron fist that crushed unions and deepened working-class precarity, disproportionately harming the very women her symbolic victory was supposed to uplift. Angela Merkel, though far more restrained, presided over a Germany that stabilised but did not transform gendered inequities in pay, care, and safety. Women leaders do not automatically alter the structures they inherit; they often adapt to them. The mythology that women ascend to power and soften it from within is one of the most persistent fantasies of liberal politics and one of the least supported by evidence.

The limits of symbolic empowerment
Bangladesh has developed its own version of the fantasy that women in power will automatically lift all women. Instead of building a political movement, we built an NGO-ised vision of empowerment, locating change in microfinance, garment factory floors, and donor-led "awareness" campaigns. For years, empowerment was something women received, never something they organised to claim. Millions of women entered the economy as microfinance clients and wage workers, but they did so as individuals—

economically active but politically isolated. The result is that women became engines of export earnings, but not a constituency that could negotiate, demand, or transform.

This explains why, when horrific violence unfolds—such as the rape and murder of an adolescent girl by her elder sister's father-in-law earlier this year—Bangladeshi people protest without any major party machinery rallying behind them. No national platform

VISUAL: **MAHIYA TABASSUM**

exists to treat gender-based violence as political violence. After decades of celebrating women's labour force participation, we still do not have a women's movement capable of shifting the moral centre of politics. Instead, millions of women navigate systems that neither protect nor represent them.

Women at the top, women left behind
The paradox Bangladesh cannot ignore is this: we can produce powerful women, but too often, powerless women continue to fall through the cracks. Even now, as the country wrestles with Hasina's legacy, conservative

voices like Jamaat-e-Islami are resurfacing proposals that subtly steer women back into the domestic sphere. For example, Jamaat's leader, Shafiqur Rahman, has promised to reduce women's official working hours from eight to five if his party comes to power. He frames this as a way to "honour" mothers, but critics see it as a deeply patriarchal message wrapped in dignity. The implication is clear: women are morally superior when they stay home or limit their public roles.

Meanwhile, Hasina's political journey shatters any notion of fragility that we might expect of women leaders. Her decades in power showed that women can wield state power with discipline, force, and even ruthlessness if need be. If her example teaches us anything, it's that leadership is not naturally soft and that strength should not be gendered. While the state was able to produce a woman prime minister who commanded the military, controlled parliament, and dominated national narratives for over a decade, it still failed to create avenues through which ordinary women could shape their own

futures. Legal rights remain difficult to access. Single mothers remain deeply stigmatised. Divorced women are treated with suspicion. Mental health remains a luxury, not a right. Domestic helps, mostly women, live and labour without meaningful protections. This lack of transformation after years of female leadership feels deeply personal as a friend's domestic help, a single mother, took her own life recently. Her life, like so many others, folded quietly into the country's indifference after she had to give up the tiring battle for land rights and the custody of her child. Her invisibility stands in stark contrast to the spectacle of Hasina's downfall.

Beyond soft leadership
Hasina's era teaches a clear lesson. Women are not inherently gentle or morally superior. They are fully human, capable of the same range of leadership, ambition, brilliance, ruthlessness, and error as men. The problem lies not in women leading but in how we conceive power itself. The real danger is absolute power, unchecked by institutions, transparency, and civic accountability.

The lesson for Bangladesh is twofold. First, we must reject the narrative that women belong at home, fragile and protected, and that "honour" is only realised within domestic boundaries. Second, we must reject the fantasy that women entering the workplace or politics will magically purify broken systems. Leadership is not gendered; it is structural. What changes the experience of women in Bangladesh is not having a woman at the top, but creating systems in which women at all levels can claim voice, rights, safety, and dignity.

If we truly want a different future, we must build systems, not symbols. We must build collective power, not rely on singular women. We must build a politics where *every woman*, not just one at the top, has rights, a voice and autonomy. Only then can Bangladesh finally leave behind the myths of feminine virtue and masculine authority, and step into a politics grounded in equality, not fantasy.

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16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

We must tackle digital violence to fight gender inequality

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Every year, the global community observes countless designated days, organises events, undertakes projects, and spends millions with the aim of eradicating gender-based violence against women and girls. Yet, despite decades of effort, the needle has barely moved. Globally, around 73.6 crore women—nearly one in three—have faced gender-based violence in their lifetime. Among adolescent girls, one in four has been abused by her partner. According to a report by UN Women and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), one woman or girl was killed every 10 minutes by her intimate partner or family member in 2023, often inside her own home. This enduring brutality is more than a crisis; it is one of the greatest moral failures of our time.

Once again, the global community is observing the annual campaign "16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence," under this year's theme "UNiTE to End Digital Violence against All Women and Girls." More than thirty years have passed since this campaign began, yet violence persists—only now it has evolved into new, more insidious forms. As our lives move increasingly online, a new front has opened in the fight against gender-based violence: technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV).

Technology has undoubtedly empowered societies—expanding education, communication, and opportunity. But the same tools that connect us are being weaponised to control, intimidate, and silence women and girls. TFGBV refers to any act of harm, harassment, or abuse committed, assisted, or amplified through digital technologies. It includes sextortion, deepfake pornography, cyberflashing, doxxing (the release of private information online), trolling, cyberbullying, online hate speech, hacking, and surveillance.

The consequences are devastating. Victims often suffer from anxiety, depression, job loss, withdrawal from education, and even commit suicide. Digital violence does not just happen "online"; its scars are deeply real. Studies show that 16 to

58 percent of women globally have experienced some form of online harassment. Young women and girls, who depend most on digital platforms for learning, work, and social connection, are particularly at risk.

In Bangladesh, the situation is no less alarming. Although more women are using digital tools, the gender digital divide remains stark. A Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) survey shows that 52.9 percent of men use the internet, compared with only 44.4 percent of women—an 8.5 percentage point gap. Meanwhile, 72.7 percent of men own a device compared to 57.2 percent of women. The latest GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report paints an even bleaker picture: Bangladesh has the highest gender gap in mobile internet adoption in Asia—a staggering 40 percent.

This inequality means women face a double bind: fewer opportunities to benefit from technology, and greater exposure to harm when they do. Despite lower internet use, digital violence against women is rampant. A recent NETZ Bangladesh study revealed that over 78 percent of Bangladeshi women have experienced some form of tech-based abuse in their lifetime. Many reported restricting their social media use, avoiding sharing personal information, or even changing phone numbers to protect themselves from harassment. The consequences were not just emotional—some women left their jobs or had to relocate because of online abuse. Most victims never reported their experiences, fearing humiliation, inaction, or further victimisation by law enforcement.

Disturbingly, online misogyny is spilling into public life. During the recent Dhaka University Central Students' Union (Ducsu) election, female candidates were relentlessly targeted on social media with sexist slurs, slut-shaming, and even threats of gang rape. Their campaign pages were flooded with obscene comments and doctored images. Despite widespread outrage, authorities remained largely silent. That silence sent a terrifying message to women

across the country: that their voices, even in democratic spaces, can be bullied into submission. If this culture of impunity persists, online harassment could become a major barrier to women's participation in politics, including in the upcoming national election.

The roots of this problem run deep. There remains a limited understanding of digital violence, even among policymakers and law enforcers. Many still dismiss it as a "virtual issue," ignoring its real-life consequences. Bangladesh's legal and institutional frameworks are outdated and ill-equipped to respond to the fast-evolving digital landscape. Law enforcement agencies lack both technical expertise and gender sensitivity, while the justice system remains slow, stigmatising, and often hostile to survivors.

Meanwhile, tech companies have largely escaped accountability. Their platforms are designed for engagement, not empathy. Algorithms amplify outrage, hate speech, and misinformation, while content moderation remains inconsistent and opaque. The rise of artificial intelligence has made the situation worse: deepfakes and non-consensual AI-generated pornography are spreading faster than they can be removed, leaving victims powerless and unprotected.

The government's response has been mostly reactive. Despite repeated reports and media coverage, there is still no comprehensive national strategy to tackle digital GBV. Following last year's student-led mass uprising, cases of both online and offline abuse surged dramatically. Yet, instead of addressing the crisis head-on, the interim administration seems to have inherited the culture of denial and silence. Without coordinated action, digital spaces will remain unsafe, and inequality will deepen.

So we must ask ourselves: are we truly doing enough to make the digital world safe for women and girls? The answer is painfully clear: no.

We need urgent and comprehensive action. The government must update legal frameworks to explicitly define and criminalise technology-facilitated violence. Law enforcement agencies need specialised training and dedicated cyber units to handle such cases with sensitivity and expertise. Digital literacy programmes should be scaled up in schools, universities, and rural communities, empowering women and girls to navigate online spaces safely. Tech companies

must be held accountable for user safety through stricter regulations, transparency, and stronger content moderation.

But the government alone cannot fix this. Civil society, educators, rights activists, development partners, and relevant stakeholders must collaborate to raise awareness, support survivors, and hold institutions accountable.

Ending digital violence is not just about online safety—it is about protecting fundamental human rights. It is about ensuring that women and girls can learn, work, express themselves, and lead—without fear.

We can no longer afford to treat this as a secondary or "virtual" issue. Digital spaces are the new public squares. They shape how we live, think,

and participate in society. If women and girls are unsafe there, then our nation's progress remains incomplete.

The time for symbolic speeches is over. What we need now is real action—stronger laws, responsible technology, shared accountability, and louder voices—to build a digital world where every woman and girl can speak freely, dream boldly, and live without fear.