



Victim or Defiant? A Critical Reading of Contemporary Female Social Media Celebrities in Postdigital Bangladesh

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Abstract

This article explores how contemporary Bangladeshi Muslim female social media personalities challenge two dominant narratives: the Western-centric stereotype of Muslim women as passive victims and the local patriarchal expectations of middle-class respectability. Using a postdigital feminist framework, the study analyzes the online presence of three women: Barisha Haque, Rubiat Fatima Tony, and Laila Akhtar Farhad, who, through their entrepreneurial visibility and spousal choices, renegotiate gender roles, marital expectations, and public perceptions of Muslim womanhood. The analysis shows that these women demonstrate the agency and complexity of Muslim women from the Global South in ways that reject both Western-centric categories and local expectations. This work contributes to postdigital feminist scholarship by providing a grounded case study that highlights the nuanced, multimodal self-representations of non-Western women influencers.

Keywords Female entrepreneur · Muslim women · Marital norms · Digital Intimacies · Postdigital

Introduction

Recent scholarship has increasingly studied the role of social media in empowering women across the Middle East (AlAmmary 2022; Gangwani et al. 2021) and Asia (Melissa et al. 2013; Niroo and Crompton 2022). Hurley's (2021) postdigital feminist theories, for example, shed light on how transnational hierarchies influence the agency and empowerment of certain Arab women. Social media has also expanded rapidly in China and India (Lai and To 2015; Bali and Jagan 2017), and Bangladesh is no exception, with platforms becoming an integral part of citizens' everyday lives (The Daily Star 2024). Despite this growth, the gendered effects

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of social media in Bangladeshi society remain underexplored. Existing research mainly focuses on digital feminist activism, noting that global movements like #MeToo have resonated with Bangladeshi feminist groups (Das 2019) and even spurred local initiatives, such as a Facebook group challenging women's mobility restrictions in Dhaka (Das 2019). However, these accounts risk limiting the scope by emphasizing activism alone. They overlook a vital aspect of women's engagement with social media: how Bangladeshi women act as influencers, brand ambassadors, and cultural entrepreneurs. This article fills that gap by applying postdigital and postdigital feminist perspectives. The concept of the postdigital (Jandrić et al. 2018) emphasizes how digital and non-digital realms are interconnected, demonstrating how technology intertwines with social, cultural, and political contexts. Building on this, postdigital feminism examines how gendered power dynamics operate within these hybrid spaces. As Hurley and Evans (2025) assert, postdigital feminism explores the links between postdigital technologies, such as the Internet, and cultural, gendered, and racial identities, an approach especially relevant for understanding how Bangladeshi women navigate both digital and non-digital worlds simultaneously.

There are also various women's rights-focused NGOs in Bangladesh that provide both online and offline platforms for activism related to gender issues. This may be linked to a form of postdigital feminism in Bangladesh. According to Hurley (2023), postdigital feminism is a diverse field that critiques systematic gender inequalities in the postdigital age through critical scholarship, social engagement, protests, and the arts. Although feminist activism has always taken these forms, what makes it postdigital is that it explores how feminist action and thinking confront the challenges of a digital environment that extends beyond just new technology. The use of social media by Bangladeshi women as brand promoters, influencers, and celebrities, as well as how they navigate the online space, has been overlooked in academic discussions. This paper focuses on these women, who are often ignored in academic settings due to their presumed privileged socioeconomic status. This research sits at the intersection of Bangladeshi notions of feminine respectability, online presence, and the victimization of women from the Global South and Muslim communities, all of which are relevant for a postdigital feminist analysis. It is also important to note that Bangladeshi households now have Internet access eight times higher than they did ten years ago (Saif 2023); this has facilitated rapid growth among local content creators. It also signals a substantial rise in the number of women producing content online in Bangladesh. This situation calls for a postdigital feminist approach to examine how traditional gender roles are being challenged, negotiated, or reinforced within this changing social and technological landscape.

Digital anthropologist Abidin (2018) argues that female influencers are often perceived not as creative experts but as individuals seeking attention and profit. These dismissive attitudes highlight how opinions about female influencers are often gendered and disrespectful. Such perceptions also shape the context in Bangladesh, where female influencers face widespread online harassment from both men and women. Despite how common this harassment is, it remains underexplored in academic research on Bangladesh, leaving a significant gap in understanding the gendered dynamics of digital visibility.

Prominent scholarly research on women in Bangladesh mainly focuses on marginalized women in the garments industry and their experiences in global capitalist markets (Karim 2022a, b; Hossain 2019; Siddiqi 2009). For a long time, social science researchers (Nazneen et al. 2024; Jahan 2008) have studied international development, women's collective empowerment, and the activities of NGOs in Bangladesh. Research beyond working-class Bangladeshi women is limited, with a few exceptions like Hussein (2017), who looked at middle-class women's respectability. Sabur (2014) argues that wealthy middle-class Bangladeshi women hold power in marital negotiations while balancing traditional behaviors and patriarchal expectations. Similarly, Suchi Karim (2022a, b) investigates how single middle-class women negotiate heteronormativity in Bangladesh. Despite its relevance, the experiences of Bangladeshi social media influencers and how they negotiate gendered environments are still understudied. This article fills that gap by exploring how modern Bangladeshi female influencers challenge local patriarchal norms of gender and respectability while also challenging Western-centric ideas that portray Muslim women as naive and victimized. Resisting this Western-centric perspective is especially important in the postdigital context of Bangladesh, where digital platforms both reinforce global narratives of victimhood and offer new spaces for local women to assert agency and redefine womanhood on their own terms.

In this paper, I aim to study Bangladeshi female brand promoters and online influencers who often come from middle-class and sometimes lower-middle-class families. They gain agency through newfound wealth, confront abuse, persevere in their endeavors, challenge societal norms, and reshape their territories through online and offline social interactions. While I do not intend to claim that these women's lives and decisions are exemplary or that they are free from the influence of the neoliberal economic social structure, the courage they show in confronting daily misogyny is admirable. Contemporary feminist scholars and decolonization studies increasingly emphasize that Muslim women are not simply victims. However, these fields rarely provide concrete examples of how the lived realities of Muslim women from the global south contradict the Westernized portrayal of Muslim women's victimhood. Therefore, before analyzing the profiles of Bangladeshi female influencers, it is important to review the literature on the constructed notion of Muslim women's victimhood. A review of familial and material frameworks in the Bangladeshi context will follow this. The paper then turns to the methodology section, followed by a study of the celebrities' profiles and the subsequent analysis and conclusion.

Defying Muslim Women's Presumed Victimhood

Transnational feminist academic Mohanty (1988) has shown that Western feminist literature frequently simplifies women from the Global South into a singular victimized category, claiming that this perspective maintains rhetorical colonialism and obstructs solidarity. The depiction of Third World women, especially Muslim women, within Western feminist discourse has frequently been characterized by simplistic and stereotyped representations. These women are often portrayed as compliant, subservient, illiterate, and even primitive, perpetuating colonial narratives

instead of recognizing their autonomy and varied experiences (El Ouardi and Sandy 2019). Equally problematic are the portrayals of ‘Third World Women’ by the international development NGOs. For example, Dogra (2011: 335) argues that international development NGOs perpetuate a flawed, stereotypical, and homogenized portrayal of the ‘Third World Women’ in their advertising materials. This representation primarily fulfils the ideological and fundraising objectives of NGOs rather than accurately reflecting a complex reality of the women they claim to represent (Dogra 2011).

Anthropologist Abu-Lughod (2002) explained that initiatives aimed at saving Muslim women rely on and perpetuate a sense of superiority held by Westerners, a form of pride that should be contested. Khandoker et al. (2024) explain anti-Muslim racism as gendered, as the prevailing gendered racial ideology portrays Muslim women as the submissive counterpart to the presumed aggressive masculinity of Muslim males. These influential studies offer crucial frameworks to contest the assumed victimhood of Muslim women. However, there is a lack of substantial research detailing how Muslim women actively contest the perceived victimization associated with them.

Sabur (2014) argued that in Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority country, even five decades ago, joint family systems provided women the opportunity to navigate their roles independently; they gained knowledge and guidance from elder female family members when needed. This demonstrates how, even in the past, Bangladeshi women exercised agency during a time when Bangladeshi families and cultures were less changed than they are today. Sabur (2014) also emphasized that this differed from the views of liberal, Marxist, and radical feminists on patriarchy, which portrayed women as subjugated, exploited, and often lacking agency. Similarly, I want to highlight the importance of identifying key examples and facts that challenge Western narratives of Muslim women’s victimhood. Using a postdigital feminist framework, it is possible to challenge stereotypes about Muslim women in Muslim communities by examining how they redefine their presence through their digital footprints. In this paper, my analysis of Bangladeshi female social media influencers shows how the digital platform (Facebook in this case) is used to oppose dominant orientalist discourses on Muslim women.

At the same time, it is essential to examine this depiction of Muslim women’s vulnerability through an intersectional feminist lens. For example, when comparing women’s freedom and issues between Western and Middle Eastern countries, feminist scholar Hind Elhinawy acknowledges that patriarchy exists in the West. However, its severity there cannot be equated with the experiences of women in the Middle East (Allam 2018). From a transnational feminist perspective, this interpretation can be challenged. Nonetheless, it highlights that patriarchy and gender discrimination are present in both contexts, although they manifest differently. Similarly, within the same culture and geographic area, class differences can influence how social and gender issues affect women from various socioeconomic backgrounds. For instance, the plot of the 2020 Pakistani web series *Churails* features four women in Karachi who form an underground detective agency to expose their cheating husbands. Analyzing the series, Amir (2025) points out that affluent women drive the story, focusing on their husbands’ infidelity, rather than on poorer women who might be rescued

from abuse. Citing this web series illustrates that each woman experiences patriarchy and gender-based oppression uniquely, depending on her geographic and socioeconomic context. Transnational feminism has long supported this perspective.

In the next section, I review the literature on marriage and family structures in Bangladeshi society. This review provides a critical background on the sociocultural context of marriage in Bangladesh, which will help frame the analysis of the marriage choices of the three social media celebrities discussed in this paper. Situating this analysis within the framework of postdigital feminism allows for an exploration of how digital platforms intersect with traditional gender norms and family expectations, revealing the tensions and negotiations involved in contemporary Bangladeshi society.

Familial and Marital Frameworks in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the rise of neo-liberalization, an urban wage economy, and both domestic and foreign migration have significantly changed family ideologies and household structures (Hussein 2017). The power dynamics within marriages and families shifted during the 1990s, influenced by urban middle-class Bangladeshi women's participation in the public sphere as active economic agents (Hussein 2017). However, the tradition of joint families still persists in Bangladesh and continues to expand in metropolitan areas, even though some couples choose nuclear families instead (Minnee 2022). As a result, Bangladeshi women are responsible for managing the household and caring for their in-laws alongside their husbands and children (Minnee 2022).

For Bangladeshis, especially young women, family has consistently been a key organizing element in their lives (Rozario 2012). The behavior of women, particularly in their interactions with men, is controlled by their male guardians: fathers for unmarried women, husbands for married women, and brothers or sons for widows (Rozario 2012). This understanding gives rise to the idea of a protective patriarchal family, and an arranged marriage is often the first step toward such life goals. Religion, especially Islam, also plays an important role in this context. Despite Islam's increased visibility in modern Bangladesh, the middle class continues to follow a moderate interpretation of the faith. However, adhering to religious traditions and identities remains important for them, even if not rigid. Rozario's (2012) research on young Bangladeshis, Islam, love, and marriage in Bangladesh and the UK shows that young Muslims seek structure and guidance from Islam, which is essential when it comes to marriage and family.

Citing Ahmed (1986), Minnee (2022) has stated that in Bangladesh, as in most Muslim communities, arranged marriage is common, and therefore, the interests of families are prioritized over those of the couple. In the past, many couples might not have had the chance to meet in person until their wedding day. However, with changing social norms, couples are now allowed to meet within a family environment, and their choices are often taken into account before marriage (Minnee 2022). The Internet activity of the prospective bride and groom is also examined in these marriage considerations. Additionally, many men are hesitant to marry women who

are TikTok stars or popular online. According to Sabur (2014), the middle class in Bangladesh believes the most important criteria for choosing a spouse are age, appearance, education, occupation, reputation, and family background. In this paper, my analysis of the latest female celebrities on Bangladeshi social media shows how these women have challenged societal expectations surrounding marriage, domestic responsibilities, and gender roles. Their strong commitment to selecting and staying with unconventional life partners who do not conform to the traditional stereotype of a patriarchal provider is particularly noteworthy.

Methods

In this article, I analyzed the Facebook accounts of three Bangladeshi female social media influencers through the lens of Hurley's (2021) feminist postdigital paradigm. Hurley's (2019) approach can be understood as a feminist postdigital method, as it conceptualizes platforms like Instagram as postdigital artifacts made up of material elements, images, tools, and interfaces, as well as ritualistic social practices such as selfies, filters, and hashtags. I adapted this framework to examine similar nodes within the Facebook profiles of the personas discussed in this paper.

Facebook is recognized as the leading service provider among popular online social networking platforms (Brahem and Boussema 2023; Liew et al. 2014). It is the most widely used social media network by businesses and marketers due to its social, interactive, and consumer-focused features (Hossain and Rahman 2018; Alraja et al. 2020; cited in Brahem and Boussema 2023). This is also true for Bangladesh, where Facebook has been around longer than newer platforms like Instagram and TikTok, and most of the general population has at least a Facebook account, if not other social media accounts.

From a postdigital feminist methodological perspective, I engaged not only with the Facebook pages, promotional live streams, and reels but also with 17 media interviews featuring these three celebrities, which are publicly accessible on YouTube and Facebook. These videos serve as stimulating starting points for understanding how the physical and emotional aspects of digital life are connected. Video data reveals diverse dialogic modalities such as language, gestures, facial expressions, body posture, motion, and settings, providing rich insights that should be integrated into the analytical process (Fazeli et al. 2023; Goodwin 2013; Hall 1999; Pink 2007). In addition to postdigital feminist principles that prioritize not just textual data, these visual and material components are crucial to study, offering insights into the expression of power, agency, and identity across various platforms and modalities.

In a rapidly growing social media economy, several forms of self-employment have emerged that allow women to monetize creative pursuits from home, such as mommy blogging, lifestyle blogging, and craft micro-economies (Duffy and Pruchniewska 2017). Family blogs, travel, food, beauty, and fashion videos created by Bangladeshi YouTubers are common and highly popular in Bangladesh and among the Bangladeshi diaspora abroad. Among many Bangladeshi influencers, I selected three women whose frequent media appearances often involve unconventional

or controversial topics. Due to the word limit of this journal article, the analysis focuses only on these three individuals. Barisha Haque mainly functions as a brand promoter, Rubiat Tony as an entrepreneur, and Laila Farhad as a content creator. While these labels suggest different professional roles, all three are widely seen by their audiences as social media celebrities. They are over 30, have Muslim names, and identify as Muslim. Their content, which is different from family or mommy vlogging, often sparks intense debates on social media platforms.

Regarding ethics, all Facebook accounts are publicly accessible. I examined publicly available promotional and advertising videos and posts on Facebook from the verified pages of these celebrities for my research. The media interviews are also accessible on YouTube and Facebook. To address further ethical issues concerning third parties in the images used, I have concealed the name of the company Barisha is endorsing (Fig. 1) and the face of an individual next to Laila (Fig. 3). Finally, I recognize that reflexivity is highly relevant in all types of feminist research. Citing Denzin and Lincoln (2005), Hurley (2021) notes that self-reflexivity is a key aspect of feminist postdigital inquiry, recognizing that researchers always speak from particular gendered, classed, racial, cultural, and ethnic positions. I am originally from Bangladesh and have lived in the UK for the past decade for academic and professional purposes. As a fluent speaker of Bengali and a member of the Bangladeshi middle class, I acknowledge that my positionality inevitably shapes this research. Following Hurley's (2021) feminist postdigital framework, I sought to maintain reflexive self-awareness throughout the interpretation and analysis. Rather than assuming that bias can be entirely eliminated, I recognize that my Bangladeshi middle-class identity informs how I approach the material. I remain attentive to how this positionality both constrains and enables the knowledge produced in this study. The findings are presented below.

Synopsis 1: Barisha Haque

Barisha Haque, a 32-year-old Bangladeshi brand promoter and social media influencer, exemplifies the complexities of gender, celebrity culture, and digital economies in postdigital Bangladesh. As of March 28, 2025, she had approximately 1.9 million followers on Facebook. Her career progression from model, dancer, and



Fig. 1 Screenshot from Barisha Haque's Facebook (2025)

actor to social media star demonstrates how traditional entertainment industries increasingly intersect with digital platforms, creating hybrid forms of cultural labor (Jandrić et al. 2018). In podcasts and media interviews, she openly shares her personal struggles, including mental health issues, intimate partner violence, divorce, and remarriage. Notably, she recounts working tirelessly to save her first marriage despite experiencing abuse. This story emphasizes how patriarchal expectations continue to influence women's self-presentation both online and offline (Hurley 2021). At the same time, her remarriage to a partner who was a student and less publicly established than she is challenges traditional gender hierarchies, suggesting that social media visibility can reshape intimate relationships and domestic dynamics. Her current husband supports her by caring for their child, managing her business affairs, and assisting her career, which questions dominant ideals of male breadwinning and signals a shift in gendered labor in the postdigital era (Hurley and Evans 2025). In a recent interview, the couple revealed that their combined monthly income exceeds seven figures in Bangladeshi currency, emphasizing the economic significance of Barisha's digital work. From a postdigital feminist perspective, her practices demonstrate how digital and non-digital worlds are deeply interconnected: her online persona, financial success, and family life are mutually linked (Jandrić et al. 2018; Hurley and Evans 2025). Barisha's journey highlights both the ongoing influence of gendered cultural norms, like valuing marital endurance, and new opportunities for negotiating power, intimacy, and visibility within Bangladesh's evolving digital landscape.

Barisha has become one of the most prominent figures in Bangladesh's fashion and beauty industries, both online and offline. Her rise to fame as a brand ambassador for clothing, footwear, jewelry, cosmetics, automobiles, and food products highlights the complex links between digital labor, emotional performance, and gendered visibility on social media. In media interviews, Barisha often emphasizes the intensity of her work, frequently putting in up to twenty hours a day and getting only four to five hours of sleep. These disclosures reveal the uneven yet ongoing realities of platform-based entrepreneurial work, especially for women in the Global South.

Importantly, Barisha reveals that promotional strategies are not only about product placement but also about algorithmic attraction. She notes that brand owners often request provocative or sensational opening lines for Facebook Live sessions to maximize audience reach. A representative example is the caption featured in Fig. 1: 'Please help! I am captured in this makeup studio.' Barisha admits that such captions are deliberately performative, intended to manipulate platform attention economies by triggering curiosity, concern, or even moral panic. Barisha's public presence is especially stimulating and a good example of postdigital feminist issues because she continues to be active despite facing constant digital sexism. Even though she has achieved business success, she remains the target of malicious Internet abuse. During one live promotional event while she was pregnant, a viewer wished death upon her unborn child, asserting it was better that the child not see the world. She has also been ridiculed for sharing fitness videos and undergoing cosmetic procedures, with such criticisms rooted in normative expectations of female embodiment and authenticity. Despite ongoing harassment, Barisha remains active and continues to receive accolades such as the Best

Brand Promoter Award from various national organizations. This award serves as a form of digital marketing recognition, similar to those given by the Bangladesh Brand Forum, which celebrates excellence in digital campaigns, particularly those involving social media influencers.

Synopsis 2: Rubiat Fatima Tony

Rubiat Fatima Tony, a prominent Bangladeshi entrepreneur in her thirties and owner of Sanvee's by Tony with twelve nationwide showrooms, illustrates the contested terrain of female agency in South Asia's digital landscape. Rubiat's public persona is shaped as much by her entrepreneurial success as by the moral scrutiny surrounding her personal life, specifically her marriage to a partner 38 years her senior, now deceased. A male television broadcaster accused her of introducing a 'sugar daddy' culture to Bangladesh, a charge she forcefully rejected by historicizing age-disparate marriages as neither new nor inherently exploitative within the national context. By emphasizing love and mutual trust as the foundation of her marital choice, Rubiat resists dominant social media narratives that reduce women's agency to financial opportunism. Her decision not to remarry a younger man, citing gendered burdens disproportionately placed on daughters-in-law, redefines her marriage as a conscious strategy for negotiating independence within patriarchal constraints. In this way, her life choices exemplify a form of digital feminist resistance: personal stories amplified through digital media become spaces where gendered assumptions about intimacy, labor, and morality are challenged. Her bold responses to online harassment, often using colloquial slang and directly confronting cyberbullies, further undermine the expectation of female submissiveness, embodying her own assertion that 'not all women just submissively listen, some women speak up their minds too.'

The caption and fire emoji in Fig. 2 highlight a powerful act of digital feminist self-fashioning. The statement confidently claims leadership as innate rather than granted, contested, or dependent on male approval. The fire emoji enhances the sense of intensity, confidence, and virality. It makes the caption both playful and provocative, fitting with digital feminist practices of reclaiming social media aesthetics (Crepax 2020). In Bangladesh's patriarchal and entrepreneurial scene, female leadership is often seen as an exception or justified by sacrifice. Tony's post challenges this by asserting leadership as natural and unapologetic. It implicitly counters her critics: instead of being defined by her marriage or 'sugar daddy' accusations, she reasserts her identity as an independent, self-made leader. It shows how South Asian women entrepreneurs navigate digital spaces by balancing commerce, reputation, and resistance through bold self-expression. By connecting her marriage to the creation of jobs, she redefines the terms of public debate, turning accusations of opportunism into claims of social contribution. When refusing to lose control over her image, Rubiat shows how women entrepreneurs in the Global South use digital visibility not just as a business tactic but also as a way to negotiate autonomy, authority, and respectability. In October 2025, news of Rubiat's third marriage broke on Facebook, quickly going viral and drawing a mix of praise and criticism.



Fig. 2 Screenshot from Rubiat Fatima Tony's Facebook (2025)

Synopsis 3: Laila Akhtar Farhad

Laila, popularly known online as Blue Fairy Laila, has become a prominent figure in Bangladesh's social media scene, amassing over 1.2 million followers on Facebook. Her fame mainly stems from her romantic relationship with a much younger TikTok celebrity, a connection that has drawn intense scrutiny from both digital and mainstream media. Laila deliberately keeps her age private, instead emphasizing her personal history of marriage and divorce before this relationship. She presents her rise to online visibility as secondary to her private life, claiming that her younger partner introduced her to social media content creation. At the same time, she refuses to be labeled a social media influencer, arguing that her public image should not be defined solely by her online popularity, especially given her financial stability inherited from her family. Her relationship, characterized by sporadic cohabitation, the circulation of romantic videos, and highly publicized disputes including legal battles, makes her a controversial figure at the intersection of intimacy, spectacle, and the digital economy. From a postdigital feminist perspective, Laila's story demonstrates how women's private lives, when shared on digital platforms, serve as key sites where class privilege, gender respectability, and the politics of age and desire are publicly negotiated and challenged.

Laila is often ridiculed as a ‘sugar mummy’ because of her relationship with a man as young as her firstborn. She is frequently shamed for being in a live-in relationship within Bangladesh’s conservative social environment. However, her partner enjoys a large following among the TikTok audience, a popularity that the couple actively benefits from. Notably, while they receive broad support from general viewers, they are also mocked by more educated or elite segments of society. Besides her videos with her partner, Laila also collaborates with other younger men. She explains that these collaborators are either her partner’s acquaintances or aspiring content creators who approached her for joint projects. Laila sees her fame as a platform to help newcomers gain visibility and recognition on social media.

Her contested status becomes even more apparent in moments of public recognition. Figure 3 shows Laila accepting a prize as a digital content creator, with the caption describing it as a ‘moment of pride.’ While she often denies being an influencer, the award positions her precisely as one, formally validating her digital presence. This tension between her refusal of the influencer label and her public consecration as a content creator highlights the unstable boundaries between private intimacy, digital entrepreneurship, and gendered respectability.

This dynamic can be understood through the lens of digital feminism by challenging traditional gender norms and societal expectations within a digitally mediated space. Laila’s negotiation of age, relationships, and public visibility through social media demonstrates how feminist agency can be enacted and contested in ways that exceed the boundaries of offline life. These negotiations, shaped by the interplay between popular and elite perceptions, reveal how digital platforms operate as critical arenas for constructing identity, power, and feminist expression in Bangladesh. Read through the lens of Bassett’s (2015) notion of the postdigital, Laila’s practices highlight the inseparability of digital and analogue spheres: social media is not a revolutionary or external force but part of the everyday cultural fabric in which gendered identities and feminist politics are lived, negotiated, and contested.

As of May 2025, Laila and her partner have separated. She describes the relationship as a marriage, while he insists it was a live-in arrangement, revealing gendered differences in how marital status is framed in Bangladesh. Laila has

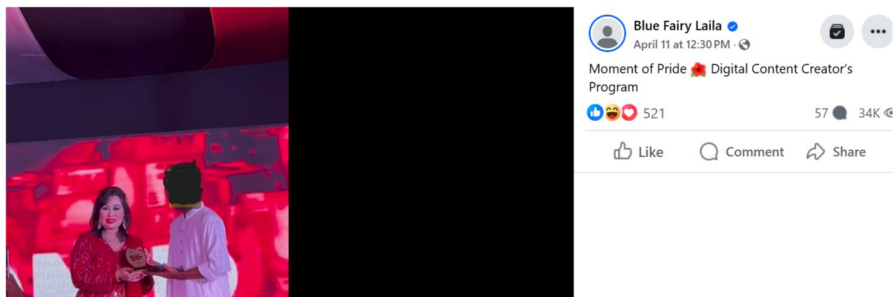


Fig. 3 Screenshot from Blue Fairy Laila’s Facebook (2025)

since reappeared online with a new, younger co-star, highlighting how intimacy, visibility, and respectability remain contested in her digital presence, reflecting broader issues of online intimacy (Miller et al. 2016).

Analysis

This study aims to examine three contemporary social media celebrities to highlight the experiences of commercially focused women who are rarely the subject of academic research that is focused on Bangladesh. My goal is not to uncritically praise online celebrity or the commercialization of digital fame, but to emphasize the resilience, strength, and agency these women demonstrate, whether in confronting abuse or challenging traditional middle-class marital expectations in Bangladesh. As Machirori (2023), cited in Hurley (2023), notes, postdigital feminist networks in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East challenge homogenizing notions of women in the Global South. The cases discussed here support this idea, even though these figures are not explicitly connected to feminist groups or activist organizations. Instead, they take on roles as entrepreneurs, brand ambassadors, and social media personalities while navigating visibility, respectability, and independence. Through their digital practices, media self-representations, and spousal relationships, I argue that: (1) they oppose Western-centric stereotypes of Muslim women as passive victims, and (2) they challenge traditional ideals of the respectable middle-class wife within Bangladesh.

By positioning their personal relationships and entrepreneurial identities within the hypervisibility of social media, these women use postdigital spaces as arenas where agency is shaped, stereotypes are challenged, and new standards of respectability are established. Their self-representations both oppose Western monolithic narratives portraying Muslim women as victims and defy normative ideals of the respectable middle-class wife in Bangladesh. In this way, the paper contributes to postdigital feminist scholarship by demonstrating how digital celebrity in the Global South becomes a crucial space where intimate life, gender politics, and neoliberal entrepreneurship intersect, and where women articulate autonomy in ways that complicate both local patriarchal structures and Western-centric ideas about Islam and femininity.

In Bangladesh and South Asia more broadly, traditional ideas of acceptable womanhood emphasize prioritizing family responsibilities over professional pursuits, highlighting domesticity, caregiving, social involvement, and moral behavior (Hussein 2017). The stories of the women discussed here challenge these expectations. Rubiat, for example, has shown how her husband took on responsibility for their children's daily routines while she pursued her entrepreneurial career, disrupting traditional gender roles. Together, these women express their spousal relationships in ways that emphasize independence and self-expression, while also openly and confidently responding to public scrutiny.

This sharply contrasts with dominant Western portrayals of Muslim and South Asian women, who are often depicted through one-dimensional stereotypes of oppression, passivity, or cultural backwardness. In popular Western media such as

the TV show *Homeland* or the film *The Namesake*, femininity is frequently associated with tradition, family responsibilities, and vulnerability, echoing what Mahmood (2005) criticizes as a liberal feminist teleology where agency is only evident through resistance to tradition. These narratives oversimplify the diverse experiences of Muslim women and create a binary division between a supposedly modern, free West and a traditional, patriarchal East (Abu-Lughod 2002; Puar 2007). In contrast, the women highlighted here use digital spaces to express independence, desire, and professional ambitions, challenging both local gender expectations and Western-centric ideas of Muslim womanhood.

The findings of this paper also challenge the ongoing vilification of Muslim men in dominant Western discourses. As Khandoker et al. (2024) argue, anti-Muslim racist ideologies often rely on myths and essentializing stereotypes that depict Islam as inherently misogynistic and Muslim men as violent, patriarchal, and oppressive. Such discourses not only homogenize Muslim identities but also conceal the diverse realities of gender relations across Muslim societies. In contrast, my analysis shows that the male partners of these women, such as Barisha's and Rubiat's spouses, have been supportive, receptive, and encouraging of their wives' professional ambitions. Rather than embodying the image of an oppressive patriarch, these men appear to act as enablers within spousal arrangements that value women's independence and economic agency.

What is especially important is that these dynamics are not only expressed privately but also made visible through women's curated self-representations on social media. By highlighting partners who actively support their entrepreneurial efforts, these celebrities leverage digital platforms to challenge dominant ideas of both Muslim femininity and Muslim masculinity. In doing so, they not only oppose patriarchal expectations within local contexts but also engage with Western discourses that portray Muslim men as inherently oppressive. Their social-media presence thus functions as a form of postdigital feminist practice, wherein the depiction of intimate relationships becomes a strategic tool for redefining gender identities and challenging racist, Islamophobic stereotypes, an enactment of what Evans and Ringrose (2025) term postdigital intimacies, a theoretical lens that views intimacy as constituted through entanglements that are more-than-digital and more-than-human.

Duffy and Pruchniewska's (2017) study of white, middle-class online entrepreneurs in North America highlights how women are pressured to craft digital personas that conform to conventional femininity, emphasizing modesty, sociability, and propriety. They describe this as the 'digital double bind,' wherein women's self-enterprise is marked as subordinate to male entrepreneurship (Duffy and Pruchniewska 2017: 845). In contrast, the Bangladeshi social media entrepreneurs discussed here present a different dynamic. While they retain some conventional markers of femininity, most notably their commitment to marriage, they do not attempt to embody modesty or restraint. For instance, Barisha openly recounts her struggles in a previous abusive marriage while actively portraying her current marriage as stable and fulfilling. This contrast illustrates how postdigital feminist practices are shaped by regional and cultural specificities rather than universal norms.

The synopses discussed earlier indicate that these women value marriage and recognize the importance of maintaining this institution within traditional Bangladeshi

society. At the same time, they remain open to partners or arrangements that depart from the conventions of patriarchal, middle-class marriages in Bangladesh. They prioritize love and personal freedom in pursuing their lives and careers, while simultaneously conforming to societal expectations by retaining their marital status. This negotiation aligns with media portrayals of women, culture, and the middle class in India. Such representations suggest that the modern Indian woman is expected to embrace both her national identity and modern ideals, embodying a global outlook while upholding values recognized by earlier generations (Fernandes 2000; Rajan 1993). Similarly, the women in my study maintain their social respectability while asserting autonomy in ways that reflect both individuality and resilience. Their strategies are particularly notable given the trolling and abuse they often face online for challenging traditional gender norms in Bangladesh. Their responses to such hostility show a commitment to self-assertion alongside entrepreneurial efforts. For example, Laila's choice to appear in reels with younger men to boost their profiles, despite expecting trolling, or Rubiat's rebuttal to an online critic who dismissed her viral fame as illegitimate, not only confirmed their agency but also led to tangible outcomes, including job opportunities for hundreds of workers in Rubiat's various showrooms.

The actions of the women in this study exemplify core contradictions that post-digital feminist analysis might encounter. Laila and Rubiat navigate a highly gendered online world in Bangladesh. They are not just victims of online sexism; instead, they reframe digital spaces as platforms for entrepreneurial and feminist empowerment. Laila's purposeful presence in reels with younger men challenges ageist and sexist norms while also using platform features to boost others' visibility. Rubiat's reinterpretation of 'going viral for the wrong reasons' as an example of job creation demonstrates an effective way to reshape the digital attention economy for real, offline benefits. However, it is important to note that feminist media studies challenge normative, commercial, and neoliberal narratives of women's empowerment online. Since popular feminism is deeply intertwined with neoliberalism and media logics, it often prioritizes the individual over the collective, self-confidence over structural transformation, and visibility over policy or institutional reform (Banet-Weiser 2018).

The objective of this article is to reinforce that Muslim women are not a single, uniform group. Veiling has been a key symbol of the widely reported repression of female Muslim sexuality under Western traditions that interpret sexual availability and, more recently, sexual self-expression against body display (Macdonald 2006). The depiction of Muslim women as victims in need of Western liberation, sometimes narrowly defined as exercising personal choice in the use of commercial products like lipsticks, nail polish, and high heels, was common (Mishra 2007). However, Muslim women are much more than whether they wear a veil or abstain from it, or how they use commercial products. The ongoing portrayals and assumptions of Muslim women from the Global South as victims and naive obscure the reality of their lives, where they often assert control and display strength. Grouping them into a single, homogeneous category effectively strips them of their agency.

It is also essential to recognize and critically analyze how female entrepreneurs on social media challenge gendered and family-related norms, especially given the

ongoing hostility they face. Online and offline bullies often avoid accountability for targeting women who defy traditional expectations of femininity and marriage. For example, well-known Bangladeshi actress Rafiath Rashid Mithila faced persistent harassment after her divorce from a famous singer and her subsequent marriage to an Indian film director. Trolls derogatorily called her ‘baro vatari,’ literally meaning ‘a woman with several husbands,’ a term used to shame women and police their sexual respectability. Similarly, the couple Tisha and Mushtak, who became famous through their romantic reels and wrote books inspired by their relationship, experienced both online trolling and direct hostility. At a public book fair, they were expelled by an angry crowd, accused of importing the Western idea of ‘sugar daddy’ into Bangladesh. These incidents show how women’s visibility online makes them more vulnerable to increased moral judgment and gendered abuse, even as they use social media to reshape cultural understandings of intimacy, entrepreneurship, and respectability.

These incidents reveal ongoing intolerance toward marriages that break from traditional norms, especially when women assert independence in choosing partners outside societal expectations. Conventional middle-class patriarchal marriages favor men, and those who harass female influencers often express fears that such influencers may motivate other women to reject conventional norms. Research on domestic violence (Dobash and Dobash 1979; Dutton 1994) shows how some men see patriarchy as a right, treating marriage as a space where men have unquestioned authority over women. In this setting, female influencers in Bangladesh who challenge traditional marital roles or gender routines become particularly vulnerable to increased harassment, as their visibility threatens longstanding patriarchal privileges.

Recent global media reports, such as those from The New York Times (2025) and The Guardian (2025), depict Bangladesh as dangerously close to an Islamist takeover. While incidents like protests against women’s football (BBC 2025) and calls for modest dress indicate rising Islamist sentiment, these have not resulted in widespread restrictions on women’s freedoms. As Netra News (2025) notes, such global narratives often misrepresent local complexities, which are shaped more by middle-class anxieties and external sensationalism than by everyday realities. A postdigital feminist perspective focuses on how women’s digital self-representations intersect with these political processes and can challenge simplistic binaries of empowerment and oppression. The social media figures I studied show that, despite growing conservatism, women continue to assert agency, often using class and digital fame as protective assets. While recognizing that not all women are equally guarded, this article challenges the uncritical belief in an unavoidable Islamist takeover. Instead, it highlights the situational and negotiated aspects of gendered life in postdigital Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Despite the growing importance of digital and social media in modern social changes, there is a notable lack of research exploring these dynamics in the Bangladeshi context. Although terms like brand promoters and entrepreneurship

appear in media and marketing studies, a thorough sociological analysis of these phenomena remains scarce. It is essential to investigate the connections between social media, gender, and power, especially within the larger framework of Western-centric representation and local realities.

Previous studies on Bangladeshi women have mainly focused on impoverished women, often portraying disadvantaged Muslim women as victims with limited autonomy. Postdigital feminism offers a critical framework that can challenge this narrow view by creating space to explore diverse gendered experiences, including those of middle-class women, beyond stories of suffering and marginalization. This approach provides a strong foundation for addressing gaps and disparities. Using this perspective, my research contributes to the growing field of postdigital feminist scholarship by highlighting the lived experiences of contemporary Bangladeshi female social media influencers. This work questions the long-standing tendency to see Muslim women as a homogeneous group. Instead, it emphasizes the varied and complex ways women from the Global South, especially Bangladesh, exercise agency in their daily lives. These women navigate multiple layers of identity, such as gender, class, religion, and digital culture, while challenging local patriarchal norms and resisting oversimplified Western-centric narratives of Muslim women as inherently oppressed.

This study highlights the importance of grounding postdigital feminist analysis in local and empirical research. By exploring the complex intersections of women's digital practices and daily lives, it demonstrates that Muslim women's experiences cannot be fully understood through simple binary frameworks. Postdigital feminism rejects clear-cut binaries that depict women as either victim or defiant; instead, it emphasizes the diversity and ambiguity of their roles within evolving digital and social landscapes.

This study examines Bangladeshi social media celebrities to expand postdigital feminist scholarship. It shows how digital celebrity in the Global South becomes an important space for reshaping gender norms, intimate life, and entrepreneurial identities. These examples demonstrate that postdigital feminist practices vary by context and are shaped by local cultural expectations alongside Western-centric discourses of Islam, femininity, and modernity. In doing so, the paper supports creating a more diverse understanding of postdigital feminism as a framework that reflects the different and often contested realities of women's lives in non-Western settings.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval Liverpool Hope University approved the ethics for this research in January 2025. No human participants are involved in the research. All data used in the paper is publicly available on Facebook and YouTube for promotional purposes.

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