Uniform Family Code and Its Discontents: Reading Islamic Resistance in Bangladesh

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In this paper, I examine Islamic resistance to the Uniform Family Code in Bangladesh as an instance of anti-feminist backlash, a concept referring to organized resistance that emerges when advances in women's rights take place (Faludi 1991). I suggest that this backlash has been shaped by forms of postcolonial hegemonic masculinity—that is, historically dominant models of male authority produced through the intertwined legacies of colonial governance, nationalism, and religious politics. These masculinities position men as guardians of community identity, family order, and moral boundaries. To understand this backlash, however, it is necessary to revisit the longer history of the region—geographically known as East Bengal and later as East Pakistan —where Islam has, since the colonial era, been increasingly emphasized as a political identity.

Islamization in Bengal unfolded as a gradual and largely unselfconscious process rooted in agrarian expansion. Richard M. Eaton argues that spread of Islam was closely tied to ecological transformations—particularly shifting river systems and the clearing of forests for wet-rice cultivation in the eastern delta—which opened new frontiers for the settlers (Eaton 2025). Over time, Islam in Bengal became deeply indigenized through processes of cultural adaptation. It

was only under colonial rule that religious identity acquired sharper political significance. Eaton (2025) argues that West and East Bengal developed distinct religious trajectories. By the time Muslim rule arrived, Brahmanical influence was already more deeply established in the Western region of Bengal than in the eastern, making East Bengal comparatively more open to a scriptural religion like Islam. According to Joya Chatterji (1994), the idea of a united India and a united Bengal was gradually eroded by the rise of communal politics in the decades leading up to the Partition of India. She argues that communalism developed over time through political competition and mobilization along religious lines, rather than emerging suddenly at the moment of partition. Consequently, Bengal was divided along religious lines. The western, Hindu-majority areas became part of India, while the eastern, Muslim-majority region became East Bengal and joined Pakistan. Chatterji (1994) shows that this decision was largely justified on the basis of demographic realities, particularly the Muslim majority in East Bengal.

Following the partition of British India in 1947 and the creation of Pakistan, the emphasis on a Muslim-majority identity became central to modern state-building for both West Pakistan and East Pakistan (East Bengal). The new leadership sought to establish a modern nation-state grounded in strong Islamic values, attempting to balance religious identity with institutional modernization. This vision gradually evolved into the ideology of "One Pakistan," which assumed that religious solidarity could overcome the country's regional, ethnic, and linguistic diversity.This ideological orientation was not without resistance from East Pakistan (East Bengal). Tensions emerged early when Muhammad Ali Jinnah proposed the adoption of Urdu as the sole national language, framing it as a unifying element of Islamic brotherhood. This initiative was strongly opposed in East Pakistan (formerly East Bengal), where the majority of the population spoke Bengali and where language was deeply intertwined with literature, memory, and everyday life. For Bengalis, the language issue represented fundamental questions about representation, citizenship, and dignity.The language movement also

exposed the limitations of the "One Pakistan" ideology on the basis of religious-based identity. While the central government promoted Islamic unity, many Bengalis experienced economic neglect, political marginalization, and cultural domination by the western wing of the state. Religion remained important in public life and proved insufficient as the sole basis of national integration.Despite such challenges, the project of integrating Islamic principles within a modern legal framework continued. One of the most significant developments in this regard was the introduction of reforms in Muslim personal law, particularly through the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961 (MFLO), which still continuing in present day Bangladesh.The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (MFLO) was promulgated in 1961 under the regime of Ayub Khan. The law represented a landmark effort to reform and codify aspects of Muslim family law in Pakistan, especially in areas such as marriage, divorce, polygamy, and inheritance. The ordinance reflected the state's broader ambition to modernize legal institutions while retaining a liberal Islamic normative framework. The MFLO introduced several important reforms. Specially, The twin pillars of patriarchy—polygamy and unilateral repudiation by the husband were addressed though new regulations (Coulson 1963) . The law required men seeking to contract a polygamous marriage to obtain prior written permission from a local arbitration council and regulated divorce by mandating formal notification and a reconciliation process before the dissolution of marriage could take effect. It improved women's rights in inheritance, particularly regarding orphaned grandchildren. It also established procedures for marriage registration, making legal documentation a formal requirement. These reforms were significant because they attempted to harmonize Islamic legal principles with modern administrative mechanisms. Rather than abolishing religious law, the state sought to regulate its application through bureaucratic procedures and statutory rules. However, the reform was met with mixed reactions, although no major resistance came from East Pakistan. Religious scholar (Ulema whose political influence was tremendous on West Pakistan's political landscape) and conservative groups criticized it for deviating from traditional interpretations of Islamic law, while

reformists viewed it as a necessary step toward gender justice and legal modernization (Hassan, Qadri and Saleem 2021). The MFLO remains a foundational legal instrument in Pakistan and continued to influence family law in Bangladesh after independence in 1971. In Bangladesh, the ordinance endured as part of the inherited legal system, illustrating the complex legacy of Pakistan's attempt to combine Islamic identity, legal reform, and state modernization.After independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971, influential secular , liberal, and feminist groups emerged in Bangladesh with support from both the state and donor-driven transnational networks (Nazneen 2013; Nazneen 2017). Since the 1980s, these groups have consistently advocated for the promulgation of a Uniform Family Code based on liberal notions of equality, which would ensure constitutional guarantees of equal rights for all genders and religions. However, the political landscape of Bangladesh conveyed a different message to these groups. Following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the architect of secular Bangladesh, state-level and grassroots Islamization emerged with an unique strength. The rise of orthodox Islamic groups, including Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, Hefazat-e-Islam, Madrasas, and other affiliated organizations, became particularly significant. Their primary objective was to promote the rhetoric of a traditional orthodox Sharia-based Islamic state rather than a modern one. Their growing political influence became evident as successive governments increasingly took their resistance into account, particularly in refraining from introducing a Uniform Family Code, despite periodic attempts and ongoing debates on the issue.

In order to understand the power of Islamic resistance to the Uniform Family Code, I frame it as a form of anti-feminist backlash—a category in which religious and cultural resistance serves as a strategic patriarchal instrument for blocking further progress toward gender equality (Faludi, 1991). I argue that, in this case, the backlash has been shaped by a crisis of postcolonial hegemonic masculinity in a Muslim-majority country, where questions concerning women have become increasingly

central to the preservation and performance of religious and cultural identity. I propose this perspective as one of the possible approaches for understanding such resistance beyond the binary framing of secularism versus Islamic fundamentalism. Instead, I argue for an episodic reading of this backlash in order to develop a deeper and more context-specific understanding of its dynamics. The paper particularly focuses on the resistance that emerged after the July Revolution of 2025 and the fall of the Awami League government, in response to the proposal to introduce a Uniform Family Code through the state-appointed Women's Affairs Reform Commission.

In the post July political space, the Women's Affairs Reform Commission was established by the interim government in late 2024 to tackle systemic gender discrimination and suggest reforms (Akhter 2025). The commission put forward extensive changes, such as a standardized family law through uniform family code which sparked considerable controversy and resistance from certain religious and conservative factions. In response of the proposal of uniform family code, movements by the Islamic groups against uniform family code became visible which included open threats to the feminists who were in the commission for introducing the uniform family code and the then head of the state. This opposition as anti feminist backlash embodied a patriarchal political dynamic that aims to retain authority over family law, a domain that has historically been pivotal to male dominance in South Asian societies including India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The movement has primarily been spearheaded by men, showcasing dominant masculine characteristics that actively hinder gender equality and maintain male dominance within the realm of family law. This male-centric leadership prompts an examination through the lens of masculinity studies, which aids in uncovering the underlying post-colonial and post-modern anxieties that influence these responses. Viewed from this angle, the opposition is a display of threatened masculinity—an effort to reestablish control and stability in a situation where feminist reforms are seen as undermining entrenched

gendered power dynamics rooted in faith and tradition. This concept of masculinity should not be viewed as a fixed essence; instead, it ought to be perceived as patriarchal, contextual, and relational—molded by the particular historical and political circumstances from which it arises. Furthermore, it is intricately linked to a post-colonial critique of Western ideas of equality, which these groups perceive as foreign, alien, and at odds with Islamic cultural identity. However, this opposition did not originate from a desire to define equality within an Islamic normative framework. Rather, the movement aimed at stopping the possibility of uniform family code that would make a progressive stance in favour of gender equality.

The tussle between secularism and Islam in Bangladesh: Feminist battle and Islamic Resistance

The constitution of 1972 of Bangladesh enshrined secularism as a core tenet of the state, alongside democracy, nationalism, and socialism (Jahan 1973). Nevertheless, the Mujib government was toppled by a group of military officers, resulting in a succession of coups and counter-coups from August to November 1975 (Maniruzzaman 1976). The military regimes effectively acknowledged Islam into mainstream secular political discourse and public life and provided constitutional and political legitimacy to Islamic political groups (Wohab 2021). In 1977, military regime removed secularism from the constitution, replacing it with 'Absolute Trust and Faith in the Almighty Allah,' and also lifted the ban on religious political parties, such as Jamat-E-Islami (Ahamed 1983). Following another military coup in March 1982, General H. M. Ershad, then the army chief, assumed power and enshrined Islam as the state religion in the constitution (Rahman 1983). After 1975, the fall of Sheikh Mujib led government, Madrasa (Islamic religious schools) education flourished, extremist religious groups emerged as influential players, and tensions between the secular Bengali ethnic identity and Muslim Bangladeshi national identity intensified. However, Bangladesh is regarded as a prominent example of a

moderate Muslim nation, demonstrating harmonious coexistence of Islam and secular democracy, despite challenges to its secular identity and the state's compromisitng stance towards the integration of Islam into its policies (Fair et al. 2017; Riaz 2014). Nevertheless, study revealed an increasing Islamization process over time at the grassroots level and the political landscape of secular political parties governing the country (Lorch 2019). This Islamization cannot be understood only as the electoral strength of Islamist parties. The compromise regarding the secular nature of the state persisted even under the governance of secular political parties, such as the Awami League. In 2010, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh ruled that the 1977 removal of secularism from the constitution was unconstitutional (Ahmed 2024, Habib 2011), reinstating secularism as a fundamental principle of state policy, alongside democracy, socialism, and nationalism. However, despite this ruling, the state continued to recognize Islam as the state religion while also upholding secularism.Although the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is formally a secular political party within the constitutional framework of Bangladesh, in practice its political trajectory has often involved strategic compromises with Islamic forces and religious symbolism. Rather than maintaining a strict separation between religion and politics, the party has historically incorporated Islamic references into its nationalist discourse and cultivated alliances with Islamist actors when electorally advantageous.

Often the more significant process is the mainstreaming of Islamic symbols, language, values, and social norms across society, including by parties that officially identify as secular. The visible changes in religious expression in many setting include more widespread hijab adoption growth of Islamic fashion industries. increased religious programming online and on television and greater public emphasis on halal lifestyles. A study on the increasing rate of hijab use and Islamic fashion found that many women viewed this clothing as an important expression of their Muslim identity (Khondkar 2021). A self-conscious sense of collective identity, along with the idea of belonging to a global Islamic

community, is motivating many contemporary urban youths in Bangladesh to seek what they perceive as purer forms of Islamic practice (Siddiqi 2024). In broad terms, Islamization in Bangladesh is connected to the expansion of local and international Islamist movements—modernist expressions of Islam that emerged over the last century as a part of Muslim responses to modernity (Rozario 2004). The approach of these Islamic movements often combine elements of modernization with a strong critique of Western models of modernity. As part of that critique, they advocate a return to what they consider purer and more authentic forms of Islamic practice.

Interestingly, from the 1980s to the 1990s, during a period of compromising the secular nature of the state, a robust secular civil society emerged alongside development initiatives and feminist organizations advocating for women's empowerment (Nazneen 2017). Despite facing obstacles such as a patriarchal labor division, widespread Purdah practices, a high rate of early marriages, and violence against women, the country has received global acknowledgment for its substantial improvements in educational opportunities for girls and women in recent years (Arribas et al. 2021). To fulfill its international obligations towards gender equality, Bangladesh has ratified various international agreements, including the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1984, albeit with reservations that may conflict with Islamic principles. The country has actively engaged in global efforts such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted in 1995, secured donor funding for women's empowerment through NGOs and government bodies, and forged partnerships with international organizations like UNDP, ILO, World Bank, and UN Women to advance women's empowerment within the community. While the Bangladeshi government maintains conservative positions on certain aspects of women's rights, it has shown a commitment to upholding international standards concerning women's education, the prevention of violence against women, women's political participation, and economic empowerment. Feminist

movements and civil society in Bangladesh have embraced secular liberal values, have consistently engaged in international platforms, collaborating with global human rights and development organizations and have mobilized around critical feminist claims in a patriarchal conservative society addressing violence against women, women's political participation, reproductive health and economic empowerment, and reforms in religious-personal laws (Nazneen 2017).

Unlike many Muslim nations (e.g. Pakistan), the feminist movement in Bangladesh has primarily been a secular movement led by educated Muslim women from the upper and middle classes. Mainstream feminists in Bangladesh have nonetheless become intricately woven into the political history of non-theocratic nation. This secular character has played a crucial role in its steadfast resistance against extremist religious groups (Nazneen 2017). However, feminist organisations have been criticised for being class-biased, urban-centred, and closely associated with Western liberal frameworks, which has weakened their connection with grassroots communities. While they have made important contributions to women's rights, their agendas have often appeared more responsive to elite cultural debates than to the everyday material concerns of ordinary women (CBSJARA 2020). For example, issues such as reducing taxes on sanitary napkins, expanding affordable state-run childcare centres, or ensuring rural women's access to healthcare and safety have not always received the same visibility as symbolic controversies surrounding the private lives or extra-marital affairs of a public figure.

However, it is important to recognise that feminist movement has not only preserved its secular foundation amidst violent threats from the fundamentalist Islamic groups but has also evolved towards more progressive feminist claims regarding the refinement of women's modesty and bodily autonomy (Shajahan 2023).

The proposal to establish a uniform family code applicable to all women, irrespective of their religion and ethnicity, aimed at eliminating

gender inequality in property rights, guardianship, divorce, and marriage, was first put forward in 1985 (Nazneen 2013). The prolonged efforts of feminist organizations to raise awareness about the uniform family code and to lobby the government gradually drew the attention of Islamic political factions. In response, the Islamic groups began to oppose the uniform civil code, labeling it as anti-Islamic and a product of Western feminism.

It was not only the possibility of introducing full-fledged laws to promote gender equality that provoked opposition; any similar idea in which women's equality was mentioned became a target of attack from these groups. In 2008, following discussions with women's rights organizations regarding the National Women Policy of 1997, the draft National Policy for Women's Advancement was publicly released on March 8 by the military-supported caretaker government. This policy aims to ensure 'women's equal access and partnership in property, employment, market, and business' (Karmaker 2008). In response to the Draft National Women's Development Policy Bill, Hefazat-e-Islam (translates as the protection of Islam) was founded in 2010 (Pattanaik 2020). Hefazat-e-Islam (HeI) was recognized as the most recent and largest organization within Bangladesh's intricate network of ultra-conservative, radical Islamist factions (Wolf 2022).The movement against the Uniform Family Code took a significant turn in the post-9/11 era, marked by a notable increase in aggressive Islamization across Muslim nations. In 2013, HeI orchestrated a march of thousands of madrassa students to Dhaka, presenting a 13-point charter of demands that included a call for the death penalty for blasphemy (insulting Islam), the designation of Qadianis as non-Muslims, and the implementation of other strict Islamic laws (Pattanaik 2020). Although that protest did not directly target a uniform family code, their escalating demands for Islamization and an Islamic state opposed the establishment of any civil code aimed at promoting gender equality. The government responded with a crackdown on the protests, resulting in the deaths of participants. This crackdown, while heavily criticized by

human rights organizations, instilled significant fear regarding any attempts to advocate for an Islamic state in aggressive ways. Nevertheless, in 2014, the Awami League government became engaged in political negotiations with Hefazat-e-Islam, assuring that no legislation would contradict the Quran and Sunnah (The Daily Star 2014). The opposition from Islamic groups, spearheaded by Hefazat-e-Islam, compelled the Awami League government to acquiesce to their demands, resulting in a reluctance to enforce uniform family code. However, after all these incidents, the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed support for equal inheritance rights for daughters regarding their father's property (Dhaka Tribune 2019). This statement ignited protests form the Islamic groups, although it did not evolve into a significant political event. The Islamic opposition to the Uniform Family Civil Code also proliferated on social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube, reflecting shared Islamic values rather than a coordinated cyber movement (Hasan and Naomi 2023).

Throughout the prolonged backlash against the uniform family code, feminist organizations experienced a degree of freedom to advocate for their rights. This backlash was perceived as a reactionary response from orthodox Islamic groups, predominantly male, in contrast to the secular civil society and student groups in general. The space occupied by these Islamic groups was viewed as a contested arena, as the state, while negotiating with Hefazat-e-Islam, was prepared to confront their violence and aggression should it threaten the government's stability. However, the dynamics of the movement underwent a notable transformation during the popular uprising known as the Monsoon Revolution from July to August. Hefazat-e-Islam, Jamaat-e-Islami, and other Islamic factions joined forces with students and the public, gaining popularity, credibility, and increased influence in the emerging new political landscape after the movement (Karthikeyan 2025, Gupta 2024).

When the interim government of Bangladesh formed the Women's Affairs Reform Commission in 2025, they selected secular feminist

activists who submitted recommendations advocating for the establishment of a uniform family code (Akter 2025). The government expressed interest in implementing these recommendations. In May 2025, Hefazat announced a 12-point declaration during a large rally, demanding the dissolution of the Women's Affairs Reform Commission and the retraction of its report, labeling it as 'anti-Quran' (The Daily Star 2025). This rally included open threats against members of the Reform Commission and the head of the interim government, which went unchallenged by the state (TBS Report 2025). A Hefazat leader referred to the Women's Affairs Reform Commission as a 'prostitute commission' (Asia Post 2025). Subsequently, disturbing images and videos emerged online depicting Islamists violently attacking and desecrating an effigy of a woman on the Dhaka University campus, symbolizing their hostility towards the commission's advocacy for gender equality. Hefazat's protest was distinctively characterized by the involvement and support of the political leaders who played significant roles in mobilizing youth and students during the protests in July, 2024 (New Age 2025). Their participation heightened concerns regarding the endorsement of Islamic resistance by emerging student leaders who are increasingly influencing government policy. On social media, some secular intellectuals, not affiliated with Islamic groups, criticized the Women's Affairs Reform Commission as being too radical for implementation in Bangladesh. Following Hefazat's backlash against the uniform family code, a group of women, predominantly wearing veils, took to the streets to protest against the head of Reform Commission, claiming the report by the commission was a tool to impose Western culture. A women's group named *Sommilito Nari Proyash* organized working women and women academics to critique the reform commission and asking for Islam based women's equity (Ekhon TV 2025). After student led July movement, in a new political sphere in Bangladesh, the counter movement against uniform family has begun to enjoy greater inclusivity and acceptance which made secular feminist women's activism in Bangladesh contested unlike before.

In the post-July public sphere in Bangladesh, women became frequent targets for patriarchal surveillance and control regarding their mobility, clothing choices, and autonomy, often facing harassment from individuals or groups espousing Islamic values (Asia Post 2025, Dawn 2025). The newly constituted government and political groups by the students marginalized female student leaders in state and political decision-making processes (Sabur 2025). Young female leaders were found to be expressing despair pointing how they had a crucial role in making the movement successful, and how they were forgotten when came to decision making of the government and choosing leadership for newly formed political parties by the students (Sabur 2025). One female participant in the movement remarked, 'after the revolution, women as a community became sidelined. There's a sense of anger among many women as a result of this,' (Rashid and Sattar 2025, Paragraph 10). Young women and feminists were reassured with the phrase 'let the dust settle,' suggesting that patience was required on the part of women to achieve equality in the current political structure. However, that patience appears to be too difficult to continue on the part of women in the presence of heightened misogynist attacks. The ongoing marginalization of secular women's identities became increasingly evident in the recent opposition to the Uniform Family Code. Even after Bangladesh Nationalist Party came to power in 2025, the recommendations to introduce a uniform family code, to this day, remain unaddressed.

Understanding Islamic Resistance against uniform family code as an Anti-Feminist Backlash

Understanding Islamic resistance against uniform family code in Bangladesh as an anti-feminist backlash helps unpack the multiple dimensions of its nature and political dynamics. It reveals that such resistance is not merely a religious objection to specific reforms, but a broader reaction shaped by struggles over gender power, patriarchal authority and political opportunity,

The notion of anti-feminist backlash was initially brought to prominence by Faludi in 1991, in the context of feminist progress in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. Faludi characterized anti-feminist backlash as a form of resistance that hinders the pursuit of gender equality. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s in the United States, narratives emphasizing women's independence and newly acquired freedoms were employed to construct counter-narratives that positioned feminism in opposition to family structures, religious convictions, and the balance between genders and cultural traditions. The core of anti-feminist rhetoric is rooted in religious and cultural standards that advocate for the oppression of women (Kimmel and Aronson 2004). According to Edström et al. (2024), anti-feminist backlash is viewed as a form of crisis management, arising from a convergence of various crises—political, economic, environmental etc. This patriarchal response aims to reestablish order through a series of spatial interventions within the personal realm of the gendered body, the privatized domain of the conventional family, and the delineated, structured space of the culturally defined nation. In essence, anti-feminist backlash originate from an expression of resistance with a desire for a patriarchal restoration, as a reactionary politics against feminist advancement.

Anti-feminist or anti-gender backlash is a well-organized political initiative that has solidified over the past decade, linking religious entities, conservative civil society organizations, nationalist thinkers, and right-wing populists to create narratives of "gender danger" (Korolczuk 2025). Backlash functions in an intersectional manner, arising from the intersection of misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism, and authoritarian governance, all of which are collectively mobilized to reverse feminist advancements (Edström et al. 2024). Instead of being spontaneous outbursts, these backlashes represent strategic, interconnected, and ideologically aligned movements that evoke moral panic, cultural authenticity, and crisis narratives to justify regressive actions.

Hegemonic masculinity is often associated with antifeminist backlash starting from men's movements against women suffrage in the late 19th Century in the USA to Indian men's online activism against criminalization of marital rape through hashtags like #marriagestrike. Kimmel (1987) noted that the quest for women's equality, following the women's movement in the US during the 19th and early 20th centuries, posed a significant challenge to dominant masculinity, leading to backlash against women's entry into the workforce. The advancement of feminist ideals is often perceived as a threat to the established power dynamics of hegemonic masculinity, which is typically met with resistance.

Michael Kimmel (2000) posits that masculinity is a composite of gender roles and behaviors that are socially constructed and attributed to men within specific cultural and social frameworks. Raewyn Connell's seminal work (1995) on hegemonic masculinity defines it as a set of gender practices that uphold the legitimacy of patriarchy, thereby ensuring (or being perceived to ensure) the dominant status of men and the subjugation of women (Connell 1995,77). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) characterize hegemonic masculinity as 'the most esteemed way of being a man' within a given cultural and historical context, serving as a benchmark for other men to aspire to (p.832). The expression of masculine attributes varies according to cultural, religious, and socially constructed identities, yet certain masculine traits, such as the role of men as providers, are universally recognized across cultures. Furthermore, masculinity can exhibit hierarchical dimensions, including dominant and marginalized forms. These dominant and subordinated masculinities are configurations of social practices (Connell 1995, 72) that are shaped not only in relation to femininities but also in relation to each other (Connell 1987). Masculinity is frequently defined in contrast to femininity, particularly regarding its power dynamics with women in public, sexual, and private domains. While women are often socially conditioned to feel powerless in public and sexual contexts, this does not universally limit their ability to assert power and authority in areas such as childcare and domestic responsibilities (Lips 1994, 90).

The examination of collective resistance to feminist goal such as gender just reform in family laws, referred to as antifeminist backlash, can disrupt the conventional understanding of power dynamics, gender roles, state authority, and secularism, prompting a thorough evaluation of the complex nature of political power and negotiation. In Bangladesh, the advancement of feminism has garnered global attention and instilled national pride through improvements in women's education, financial employment, and healthcare access (Nazneen et al. 2023, Nazneen 2017 and Nazneen 2009). This progress has also incited various cultural and religious backlash over time, driven by fears of undermining the patriarchal status quo (Rashid 2020).

If we consider the backlash against the proposed uniform family code in Bangladesh, it becomes evident that Islamist groups were primarily seeking to block the very possibility of introducing a unified legal framework for family law through the state. However, they did not advance a clearly articulated alternative set of proposals, and it remains ambiguous whether they aim to preserve the 1961 Muslim Family Laws Ordinance in its current form, despite its relatively non-orthodox character.

Their overwhelming aggression is directed primarily at questions of women's equality rather than at replacing the country's other criminal and civil laws, many of which remain inherited from the British colonial legal code. Family law becomes a particularly charged arena because it concerns women's rights, marriage, inheritance, and domestic power—areas through which broader religious and cultural identities are often defended and contested. In this sense, the resistance may be understood less as a straightforward legal opposition and more as a broader reaction shaped by historical memories of colonial interventions in religious and personal laws in undivided India, as well as fears of Western influence over women's bodies and family life. The commission responsible for proposing the uniform family code was established under a head of state who was widely criticized by Islamist groups for promoting women's empowerment at the rural level through interest-based

microcredit initiatives, which they regarded as un-Islamic. Furthermore, the commission members were not generally associated with Islamic feminist perspectives, and their work was often perceived as aligned with Western donor-driven policy frameworks.

Islamist groups gained increased visibility and political influence in the aftermath of the July movement, which brought together a diverse coalition of Islamist actors, feminist groups, secular political parties, and students. This convergence provided them with a degree of political legitimacy, particularly in the context of challenging a strong female political leadership. Their influence became evident in the strong reaction against the uniform family code proposal, while the state response remained notably restrained. The absence of a decisive governmental response—either to defend or reject the backlash—further underscored the political weight of this resistance.

It is also important to understand the resistance to a uniform family code within the broader landscape of Bangladeshi feminist politics. Much of institutional feminism in Bangladesh has historically evolved through donor-driven development agendas shaped by Western liberal frameworks of individual rights and autonomy. While these interventions contributed significantly to women's education, health, and mobility, they often remained rooted in urban, middle-class spaces and operated through NGOs that spoke the language of international agencies rather than the lived realities of village women and men. As a result, many grassroots Muslims—both women and men—experienced these reforms as externally imposed, culturally distant, and inattentive to the relational, family-centred, and religiously grounded ethos that structure their everyday lives. This classed and culturally asymmetric feminist discourse inadvertently created tensions: secular feminist demands for uniform legal reform appeared, to many, as a challenge to Islamic moral authority and community-based gender ethics. Consequently, opposition to feminist legal change often emerged not only from patriarchal anxieties but also from a profound sense of cultural displacement, where ordinary Muslims felt that their family

values, and religiously informed gender roles were misunderstood or dismissed by elite, urban feminist actors. In this context, men's protective role—central to Islamic masculinity—became a symbolic defence of communal identity against what was perceived as elite and foreign encroachment. It is in this highly complicated defensive stance the relevance of hegemonic masculinity emerges. The defence of existing gender norms becomes intertwined with defending religious authenticity and postcolonial sovereignty.

The masculinity of Muslim men varies according to societal conditions and national contexts, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) highlighted the role of social processes in shaping the idealized definitions of masculinity. They also noted the significance of geographical factors in forming and differentiating patterns of hegemonic masculinity at local, regional, and global levels. Hegemonic masculinity among Muslim men can be characterized by certain traits rooted in traditional Islamic teachings regarding gender roles, which emphasize a division of labor where men are seen as providers and protectors, while women are primarily homemakers, although they may work without the obligation to financially support their husbands. According to traditional Islamic doctrine, the hegemonic masculinity of Muslim men is manifested in their control and supervision of family members, particularly wives, children, and younger relatives, as part of their responsibility to gain recognition and respect from others (Mungai and Pease 2009, Donaldson and Howson 2009). This includes aspiration to be respected as protectors and providers. Furthermore, the hegemonic masculinity of Muslim men often idealizes hierarchical relationships between masculinities and femininities, which can involve practices such as restricting the social mobility of female relatives, imposing micro-regulations on women, and asserting male authority and superiority over women as expressions of hegemonic Islamic masculinity (Farahani 2012, Suerbaum 2018). It is important to acknowledge, that many Muslim men do not adhere to these hegemonic notions of masculinity and instead seek to deconstruct their religious identities from a secular lifestyle and personal agency.

The concept of men as providers is intricately linked to a gendered framework of Islam in which, even if a wife is employed, she is not obligated to provide financial support, whereas Muslim men are required to support their wives (Siddique and Gul 2019). Similarly, Muslim women are not required to provide financial support to their fathers, who are expected to maintain their daughters (Nisha 2022). In the Islamic perspective, women are primarily responsible for managing the household and childcare, while fathers and husbands are tasked with their financial support. This does not imply that women are prohibited from working; however, their employment is not viewed as a means of providing for the family in the same manner as men. In Islam, daughters receive a smaller inheritance than their brothers from their father's estate, a disparity often rationalized by the notion that women benefit from financial support provided by their fathers and husbands. Muslim men are permitted to have multiple wives, though this is not mandatory (Safiyanu 2014). The practice of early marriage was prevalent during the time of the Prophet and is considered to be lawful under Shariah law (Wafa 2017). Contemporary Islamic laws in modern Muslim states are often a contested space for negotiation between international human rights standards and modern values (Tønnessen 2013). Often a classification based on traditional Islamic law versus progressive interpretations of Islamic is promoted to reconcile the conflict between Islamic law and modern notion of equality in the lives of Muslim women. In Bangladesh, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is shaped by socio-cultural and religious norms, which dictate that men should serve as the primary breadwinners and maintain dominance over women both at home and in public spheres (Haque and Kusakabe 2005). The financial obligations of men are closely linked to the power and respect they command within their families and communities (Imtiaz 2013; Khan 2021). The expression of hegemonic Muslim masculinity in Bangladesh is particularly pronounced among Islamic groups that adhere strictly to traditional Islamic teachings regarding manhood. Notable among these groups are Hefazat-e-Islam and Jamat-E-Islam, which interpret women's roles solely through the lens of traditional Islamic shariah law (Lutful 2023).

These organizations are further bolstered by militant factions and informal Islamic groups operating through numerous Madrasas that educate millions of students across the nation.

The rise of women in the labor force and education has fostered greater mobility and agency, particularly among working-class women, thereby challenging the established power dynamics of hegemonic masculinity. This challenge has led to a crisis for hegemonic masculinity, particularly among Muslim men who identify themselves as the main protector of a Muslim nation. Study shows that crisis for the hegemonic masculinity of Muslim men manifest in stress and resistance against women's mobility and agency, including instances of domestic violence to control women (Donaldson and Howson 2009, Farahani 2012, Mungai and Pease 2009). Cultural and religious values are frequently manipulated to sharpen this resistance, enforcing women's subservience to traditional hierarchical gender norms. The opposition from Islamic groups against the implementation of a uniform civil code for women in Bangladesh exemplifies this backlash. Such resistance embodies the prevalent anti-feminist rhetoric that perceives gender equality and women's choices as values espoused by a minority elite, or claims that feminism has overreached (Corredor 2019, Hennig 2018, Korolczuk and Graff 2018). In the context of Bangladesh, the uniform civil family code is often viewed as a Western feminist imposition, deemed premature or a radical initiative benefiting only some westernized women. This resistance aligns with Kenneth Clatterbaugh's (2017) observation of a recurring theme in anti-feminist backlashes: the belief that existing social orders do not reflect divine will (21-22). In Bangladesh, the Islamic opposition also contends that the government's policy to adopt a uniform family code is un-Islamic and a transgression of divine will.

Conclusion

Resistance to a Uniform Family Code in Bangladesh is a complex form of anti-feminist backlash where the opposition of Islamist groups

becomes highly selective. Rather than demanding the replacement of all colonial-era laws, their strongest resistance is directed toward family law —the domain that most directly governs marriage, inheritance and domestic authority. This reveals that the deeper issue is about preserving patriarchal control embedded within religious and cultural norms. The concept of hegemonic masculinity is crucial for understanding why family law becomes such a sensitive issue. In the Bangladeshi Muslim context, masculinity is strongly tied to ideals of men as providers, protectors, and guardians of family honour. As women's education, employment, and mobility expand, these traditional masculine roles are destabilized, generating a crisis of authority. Opposition to feminist reform therefore becomes a symbolic effort to restore male status and defend a familiar gender hierarchy. However, this backlash cannot be reduced to misogyny alone. It is also shaped by postcolonial memory, anxieties over Western influence, and distrust of elite, donor-driven feminist agendas that often appear socially distant from rural Muslim communities. In a postcolonial hegemonic masculinity crisis, gender relations become entangled with unresolved histories of colonial domination and contemporary struggles over sovereignty. In South Asia, colonial rule deeply intervened in personal laws, religion, and the regulation of family life, leaving a legacy in which reforms concerning women are often read through the lens of foreign intrusion. In Bangladesh, when legal changes are associated with Western liberalism, donor agendas, or urban elite feminism, many men experience them as challenges to household authority. As a result, the defence of male guardianship acquires a wider symbolic meaning: protecting women's prescribed roles becomes synonymous with protecting religion, community, and postcolonial identity. Islamist resistance thus draws power from the fusion of masculine insecurity with anti-colonial sentiment, transforming family law into a battleground where the restoration of patriarchal order is framed as the defence of sovereignty itself.

The most recent resistance to the uniform family Code in Bangladesh reveals a distinctive political dynamic shaped by the post-July

revolutionary landscape. This backlash emerged during the interim government period in direct response to the report of the state-appointed Women's Affairs Reform Commission. What made this moment unique was that Islamist groups were not acting from the political margins; rather, they had participated alongside students, feminists, and other opposition forces in the July movement that helped topple the previous government. This shared role in regime change gave them renewed legitimacy, confidence, and a stronger sense of ownership over the new political order.

As a result, their resistance carried greater political weight than before. Even in the face of severe verbal attacks against the head of state and members of the Women's Affairs Reform Commission, the government offered no meaningful response or defence of the reform agenda. The silence of the state signalled both the growing influence of Islamist actors and the fragility of the interim regime in confronting them. Most significantly, the proposed uniform family code was never pursued. In this sense, the success of the movement lay not only in public protest, but in its ability to transform political pressure into state inaction. The episode demonstrates how anti-feminist backlash can succeed most effectively when conservative forces are politically empowered, institutionally tolerated, and able to frame resistance as part of the legitimacy of a new political era.

Finally, the case of Bangladesh exposes an important paradox: while presented as the defence of tradition, such backlash often functions to preserve unequal power relations. Understanding this complexity is essential, because it shows that meaningful gender-just reform in Bangladesh cannot rely solely on legal change, but must also engage questions of class, political power, religion, and masculine identity.

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