

# Negotiating Gender Norms: Youth Perceptions Through a Feminist Lens at the University of Rajshahi

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**Abstract:** *This research looks at how feminism is perceived in a university culture of Bangladesh, with the University of Rajshahi being used as the case. Guided by feminist theoretical perspectives and mixed methods design, survey findings from 230 students are juxtaposed with qualitative reflections grounded in secondary literature. Results reveal that, overall, the majority of business students do have positive attitudes toward feminist concepts and think about feminism in terms of gender equality and women's rights. But some major fallacies are still in play, like the notion that feminism is anti-male, too political, or foreign to one's culture. Although a large number of respondents agree that feminism applies to higher education and has the potential to increase inclusivity, many are indifferent or ambivalent on these matters, suggesting minimal formal exposure to feminist theory. Incidents of students or faculty facing gendered biases are another significant reminder that structural inequalities prevail in academic settings. The article contends that universities are important sites for the encounters between global and local feminist ideas about socio-cultural norms. It argues that more robust curricular linking, institutional mandates and inclusive pedagogical practices are necessary to support informed and contextually sensitive understandings of feminism among young people.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, Youth Perceptions, Higher Education, Gender Equality, Bangladesh.

## Introduction

Feminism has emerged as an intellectual and political critique that interrogates gendered power relations within social, economic, political and cultural institutions. Early studies in feminist literature focused on the position of women's rights in law and politics, calling for equality within established sociopolitical systems (hooks, 2000). Later theoretical advancements expanded upon these factors, recognizing patriarchy and the institutionalization of gendered hierarchies as the structurally based roots of inequality and casting gender as a socially constructed system rather than one determined by biology (Walby, 1990; Oakley, 1972; Butler, 1990). These have situated feminism as a central analytical lens from which to examine power, inequality and social transformation.

As feminist theory evolved, it has become diversified in intersectional, postcolonial and transnational forms that have de-centered universalist assumptions about women's experiences. Intersectional work underscores how gender intersects not only with class and race but also other social

axes to predetermine diverse axes of inequality (Crenshaw 1991). Postcolonial feminists also challenge the centrality of Western feminist framings, stressing that historical, cultural and geopolitical specificity are required in analysis, particularly for Global South contexts (Mohanty 2003; Yuval-Davis 2006; Kabeer 2015). Such feminist deliberations in South Asia are inseparably tied to religion, family and culture, as gender relations frequently are negotiated within what Kandiyoti calls 'patriarchal bargains' (1988).

The current exposure of feminism in popular culture, social media and academia has also complicated the reception of feminism in the public. While visibility has certainly brought more attention to gender-equity issues, many scholars are wary of the fact that liberal and popular feminisms often do so by placing an excessive focus on individual empowerment at the cost of obfuscating systemic oppression and shared action (Gill: 2007; Banet-Weiser: 2018), duties toward gender equality. These simplified images reinforce stereotypes of feminism, especially in the minds of youth.

Universities are key spaces through which these global feminist discourses meet local norms. Thus, higher education has the potential to disrupt gender hierarchies but more often than not reproduces existing inequalities through everyday practices and institutional cultures (Unterhalter 2012; Morley 2013; Bourdieu 2001). Studies show that students may express favorable attitudes towards gender equality while refusing to identify as a feminist or expressing ambivalence (Ahmed, 2017). In Bangladesh, we witness a trend in the rise of the acceptability of equality-based constructs alongside enduring patriarchal beliefs inside universities (Ridgeway, 2011). Despite such studies, few empirical inquiries explore the ways in which feminism is conceptualized by Bangladeshi university students. This paper fills this gap by analyzing how students perceive feminism in Bangladeshi higher education.

### Methodology

This study is quantitative and qualitative in nature, which strongly supports the integration of both approaches qualitatively and quantitatively to explore youth views at White Flower Pedestal in the University of Rajshahi. Data were gathered from 230 students through a structured questionnaire focusing on perceptions of academic and institutional experiences. In addition, to substantiate the empirical results without being myopically focused on my case field, secondary sources such as academic books, peer-reviewed articles, official documents and credible web sources have been used to guide the conceptual explanation and provide context analysis. The study comprised of three phases: data collection, data validation and systematic analysis parallel to the objectives of the review. This mixed-method approach provides an in-depth view of the way in which young people feel, creating a balance between empirical evidence and theoretical knowledge.

### Literature Review

Feminist theory delivers a way to think critically about how gender norms are formed, sustained, and resisted in educational institutions—such as the academy. Feminist theorists in their infancy, including Oakley (1972) and Walby (1990), conceptualized gender as a product of social construction that is situated within patriarchal structures where roles, power and access to resources are regulated. These works laid the analytical ground for a later examination of institutionalized inequality in the form of sex and gender differences. Extending this onto a structural platform, Bourdieu (2001) and Connell (2011) discuss that gender is dominated via symbolic power and routines of everyday life; similarly, Connell & Messerschmidt's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity details how the dominant model of manhood is popularized and replicated in various contexts, including universities.

Post-structuralist feminist theorizations have added to these understandings by challenging the very stability of gender identities. Butler's (1999, 2004) concept of gender

performativity criticizes essentialist concepts of gender and stresses that people constantly perform gender through repetition and imitation. Such a lens is particularly valuable in the study of young people's navigating feminist identities, illuminating the ways students' beliefs are influenced by talk, peer relations and institutional norms as opposed to static orientations. In line with these approaches, hooks (2000) and Ahmed (2017) conceptualize feminism as a political practice that is also ethical in nature, emphasizing the significance of experience, affect and everyday resistance to feminist consciousness.

Much feminist theory and literature has emphasized intersectionality and context, warning against universalist readings of women's oppression. Crenshaw's (1991) original work on intersectionality, which shows how gender intersects with race, class and other social identities to offer differential accounts of inequality and Yuval-Davis (2006), who extends this analysis to feminist politics and belonging. Mohanty (2003) and Kabeer (2015) criticize the Eurocentric feminist discourse for constructing women in the Global South as passive subjects, exemplifying subaltern agency within certain historical, socio-cultural and economic limitations. "Bargaining with Patriarchy", as proposed by Kandiyoti (1988), provides another framework to understand how peasant women not only resist a patriarchal institutional order, but are also strategic in negotiating it, an approach well-suited for South Asian and Muslim settings.

Currently, feminists are also critiquing the impact of media and neoliberalism on younger generations' views of feminism. Gill (2007) and Gill & Scharff (2011) were against postfeminist narratives in conjunction with the new liberated woman, highlighting this approach as being symbolic of the neoliberal woman who could dispel any gender related oppression. Banet-Weiser (2018), too, illustrates how popular feminism and popular misogyny operate alongside one another to create contradictory logics through which feminism is seen both as empowering and threatening. These mechanisms contribute to an enduring perception of feminism as either anti-male or far too political, especially among college-goers.

Scholars in higher education have long recognized universities as gendered institutions even when they make formal gender-equality commitments. Morley (2013) and Ridgeway (2011) show that, to this day, leadership structures, curricula and everyday academic practice remain dominated by masculine norms. Simultaneously, education has been popularly perceived as a transformative arena for empowerment and social justice. At the level of national policy, Nussbaum's (2000) capabilities approach and Sen's (1999) understanding of development as freedom have highlighted education as important in fostering individual agency and social inclusion. Together, this literature implies that young perceptions of feminism in higher education are being shaped through complex interrelations among structural

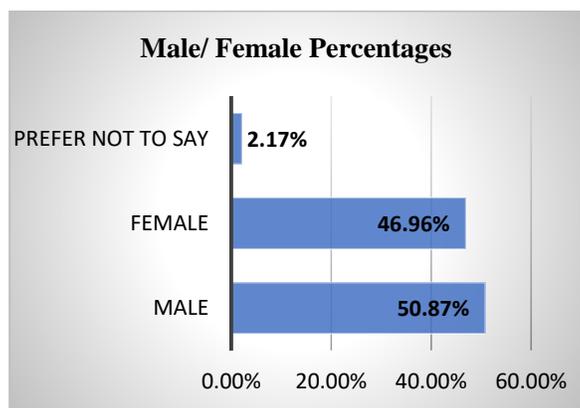
patriarchy, cultural norms, media narratives and institutional practices, highlighting the urgent need for feminist pedagogy and curricular integration in order to make way towards informed, inclusive and context-sensitive understandings of gender equality.

**Results and Discussion**

**Gender:**

This analysis is among the 230 respondents to the gender question. The distribution reveals a small gender gap with 117 (50.87%) of Males and only 108 (46.96%) Females in the sample. The rest of them were included in the Prefer not to say option (2.17%). On the whole, the sample is quite evenly divided between the two primary genders but not perfectly equal, suggesting that males are somewhat over-represented in these research data.

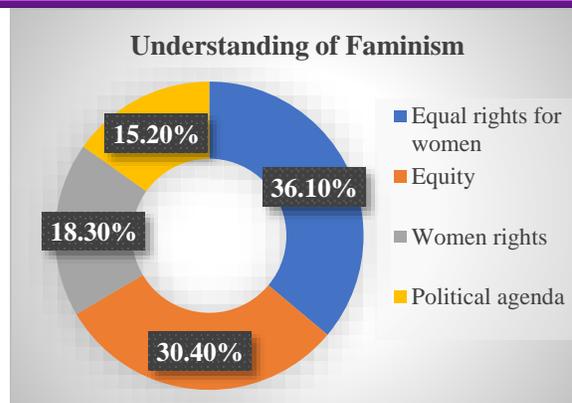
**Figure: 1,** Developed by the Authors Based on the Collected Data



**Understanding of Feminism:**

Regarding the perception of Feminism (230 answers), 83 respondents answered “Equal rights for women,” which was chosen most often, representing 36.1% of all responses. The second most frequent theme of responses is “Equity,” where 70 responses (30.4%) include the notion of fairness or equality, meaning that in all 66.5% of respondents link Feminism with fairness and equality. In contrast, 42 voted it to be “Women rights” (18.3%), and 35 called it a “Political agenda” (15.2%). The results indicate a prevalent understanding of feminism as an effort towards equal rights and social justice.

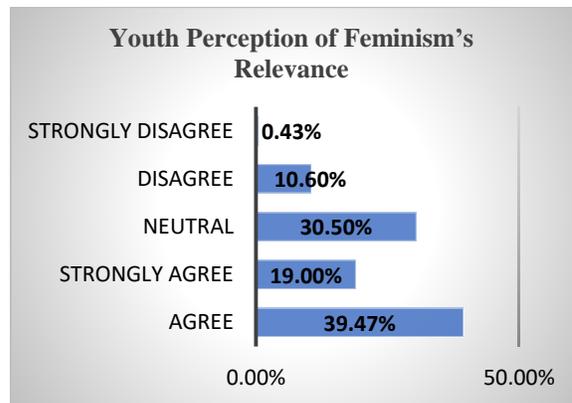
**Figure: 2,** Developed by the Authors Based on the Collected Data



**Youth Perception of Feminism’s Relevance in Today’s Higher Education Context in Bangladesh**

Of 230 responses, almost all agree that feminism is pertinent in the context of Bangladesh’s higher education. In particular, “Agree” was the dominating response with 89 (39.47%), followed by “Strongly Agree” with 43 (19.00%). 132 respondents in total (58.5%) positively found it relevant, likewise with strong support. However, a large number, 69(30.5%) respondents were “Neutral” on this statement and only 24 (10.6%) of the sample “Disagreed” in some context and only 5 (0.43%) respondents “Strongly Disagreed” with the given proposition.

**Figure: 3,** Developed by the Authors Based on the Collected Data

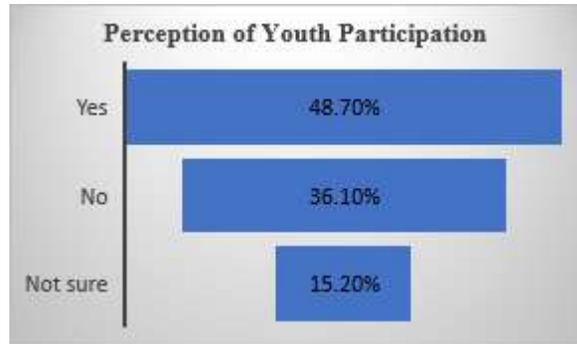


**Youths' participation in any discussion, seminar, or course that addressed feminist ideas or gender equality:**

Among 230 responses, the prevalence of “Yes” was highest among those who had participated in such a stakeholders’ group discussion, seminar or a course to discuss feminist ideas and gender equality (112 participants; 48.7%). On the contrary, 83 (36.1%) replied “No” to formal exposure and thus a large proportion of the sample seems not to have played in these settings. Additionally, 35 (15.2%) had “Not Sure” whether they had participated, indicating uncertainty or lack of recall with regard to past engagement. The data as a whole show that engagement in formalized discussion re:

feminism and gender equality was neither infrequent nor universal among participants.

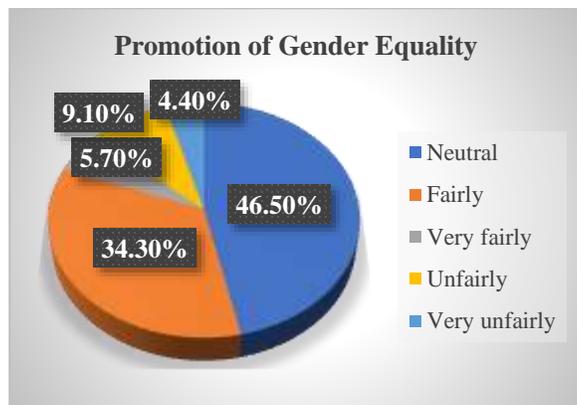
**Figure: 4**, Developed by the Authors Based on the Collected Data



**Promotion of Gender Equality in Academic and Social Activities:**

The predominant attitude of the 107(46.5%) respondents among 230 is “Neutral” to the question about the fairness in promoting gender equality at the university. More respondents, however, view as “Fairly” 79(34.3%) and 13(5.7%) for “Very Fairly”, that is, 21 (9.1%) of the Unsustainable Natural Environment Group see it as “Unfairly” and 10(4.4%) viewed it “Very Unfairly”. Which shows that, while the public may think it fair, still the largest single grouping has yet to come down for or against. Overall, the positive view (Fairly/Very fairly) outweighs the negative view (Unfairly/Very unfairly) by three to one.

**Figure: 5**, Developed by the Authors Based on the Collected Data

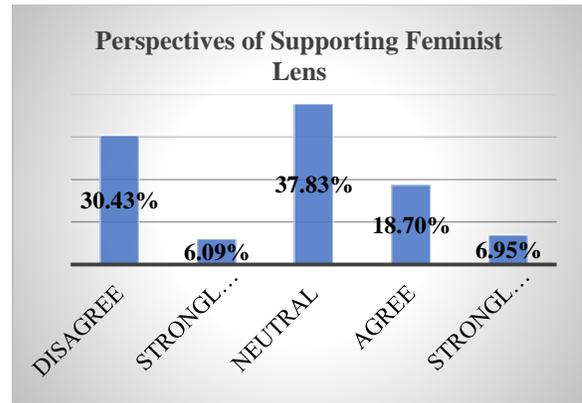


**Perspectives of Supporting Feminist Lens among Male and Female Students:**

Male/female breakdown is 230 responses; was asked about the existence of a gender divide in students’ support for feminist perspectives on campus. The general trend seems to be disagreement, with 70 (30.43%) going with “Disagree” and 14 (6.09%) going with “Strongly Disagree”. The most common response is “Neutral” 87(37.83%), so a large non-trivial portion of people are ambivalent, or not taking a stance

on this issue. On the other hand, “Agree” 43 (18.70%) and “Strongly Agree” 16 (6.95%). This tells us that not a lot of people think men and women support feminism equally (or most don’t know/don’t have an opinion) and that, on average, there’s a belief that men actually get more support.

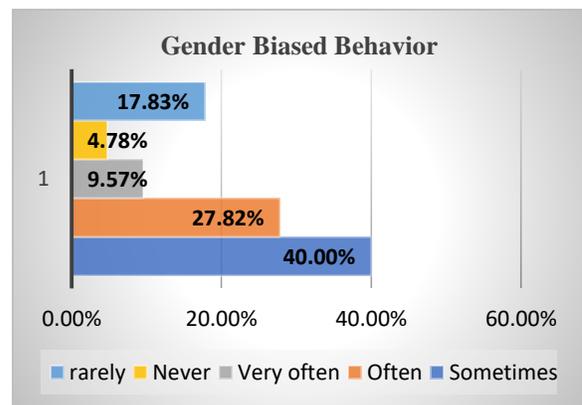
**Figure: 6**, Developed by the Authors Based on the Collected Data



**Gender Biased Behavior or Attitudes among Students or Teachers:**

Out of 230 responses, sometimes is the most common response to have experienced gender bias behavior/attitudes in university by 92 (40.0%) respondents. with “Often” 64 (27.82%) and “Very Often” 22 (9.57%) responses. “Never” was chosen by only a few participants, 11(4.78%) and “Rarely” was new to 41 (17.83%), of whom were selected as their response. This information shows gender bias is a pervasive experience for the majority in this higher education environment.

**Figure: 7**, Developed by the Authors Based on the Collected Data



**Belief in Feminist Ideas Can Contribute Positively to Creating an Inclusive Academic Environment:**

Analysis 230 answers show a clear and strong belief in the 'feminist' contributes to a good academic climate. 82 (35.65%) out of 230 for “Agree” and 33 (14.35%) out of 230 for “Strongly Agree” were reported as strongly agree by most

patients. But the single response that is most prevalent, "Neutral", is selected by 93 (40.43%), thus hinting at a substantial number of undecided or cautious participants. On the other hand, "Disagree" 13(5.65%) and "Strongly Disagree" 9 (3.92%) have significantly low positive position in their comments. This information demonstrates overwhelming positive sentiment, tempered with a high level of ambivalence towards the concept.

**Figure: 8**, Developed by the Authors Based on the Collected Data



#### Main Misconception of the Students About Feminism:

The main false assumption students report is that feminism is about females being dominant over men, and it's "anti-male" because it wants to push down male power. A second major theme suggests that many students also misunderstand what feminism is in general, believing it only encompasses women's rights or particular concerns such as dress code and not the overarching goal of equality among all genders. Second, there are a lot of opinions that criticize feminism as an unnecessary, exaggerated phenomenon or as a Western/political intrusion in their culture/religion. Together, these misconceptions reveal that a deep ignorance abounds in many areas and indicate that the real, all-encompassing definition of feminism is frequently lost on university students.

#### Conclusion

The study explored how students at Rajshahi University understand and interpret feminism in the socio-cultural and academic context of Bangladesh. The results reveal that the majority of students associate feminism with being about equality and women's rights; however, they still hold on to misconceptions, such as believing feminism is all about hating males or a Western political movement. These observations indicate that despite the visibility of feminist enough already! 269 ideologies, meanings attached to them are strongly mediated by media, traditional norms and limited academic involvement. Students also note the significance of feminism in higher education and how it can foster inclusivity; however, general campus knowledge is still comparatively low and disjunct between awareness and informed knowledge. Suggestions for increased institutional support, notably in the curriculum, seminar exposure and policy engagement are proposed from this qualitative data as

ways to better equip students for critically engaging with feminist perspectives. In conclusion, the study highlights the significance of academic intervention to challenge misconceptions and create a more inclusive and gender sensitive university landscape.

#### Recommendations

Respondents generally agree on three key things universities can do to promote a clearer concept of feminism. The most recommended measure to respond to is to hold obligatory and non-optional seminars, training courses, discussions and open talks which shall target the incorrect ideas as such. Second, it is often suggested that gender studies and feminist thought need to be more formally included in the curriculum of all disciplines (providing a structured education approach towards the concept). Finally, universities should embrace and challenge gender equality as a policy, take an active stance in shaping student-led clubs to punish unsporting behavior on the playing field and champion equal representation of women as both coaches/leaders and athletes on campus to demonstrate what feminist ideology looks like in action.

#### Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. Limitations The findings of this study were drawn from the observations at one public university, and may not therefore be generalizable to other university contexts. Further, the use of self-reported responses is subject to social desirability and may mediate the accuracy of participants' perceptions. The research also records perceptions at a particular period in time and cannot reflect differences in attitude trends. Notwithstanding the limitations, this research adds to our understanding of how youth perceive feminism in a localized Bangladeshi university context.

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#### Conflict of interest

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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