P-ISSN 2664-0422	Pakistan Social Sciences Review	Nov-Dec 2026, Vol. 10, No. 6
O-ISSN 2664-0430	https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2026(10-VI)03	[43-58]

Pakistan Social Sciences Review
www.pssr.org.pk

RESEARCH PAPER

Digital Feminist Counter-Discourse: A Feminist Critical Discourse Study of Translingual Gender Activism in South Asia

Dr. Mohammad Riaz Mahmud

Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Chittagong, Bangladesh, https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6820-6877

Corresponding Author: riazm1972ell@iiuc.ac.bd

ABSTRACT

The study examines how feminist activists and their opponents contest gender norms in digitally circulated discourse across five Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi mobilisations (2018–2024). South Asian feminism is often dismissed as a Western import. Existing research is largely single-country and treats language as neutral. This qualitative study applies feminist critical discourse analysis. Its population is activist, oppositional and institutional texts. A purposive archive of 29 published sources supplied the data. Texts were coded for legitimation, evaluation and code choice, then compared across countries. Opponents used foreignisation, moral-religious condemnation, legal counter-claims and protective paternalism. Activists countered through constitutional appeals and by re-signifying honour, culture and shame. Vernacular slogans, not English texts, drew the fiercest attacks. English carried legal claims, while regional languages carried embodied ones. Movements should circulate legal victories in regional languages. Platforms should moderate code-mixed abuse, and governments should favour structural reform over harsher penalties.

KEYWORDS Digital Feminism, Counter-Discourse, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Legitimation, South Asian Englishes

Introduction

In the last ten years, the landscape of feminist claims in South Asia has been transformed by the medium of social media.Social media has transformed the ways in which claims are made, circulated and fought against over the last decade in South Asia. In 2018, the first Aurat March took place in Karachi and sparked one of the most controversial public debates in Pakistan's history when the slogan was changed to MeraJism Meri Marzi ("my body, my choice"). The #MeToo movement in October 2018 exposed allegations against bigwigs in the Indian media and politics and resulted in the aftermath of a long court battle that followed. In 2019, the killing of Nusrat Jahan Rafi in Bangladesh brought sexual violence to the forefront of discussion, and in October 2020, the anti-rape protests brought the issue of state accountability to the fore. The murder of a trainee doctor at R. G. Kar Medical College in the city of Kolkata in August 2024 led to "Reclaim the Night" marches in West Bengal that took to the streets during a night. Slogans, statements and rulings were sent out quickly on each platform where they were amplified, ridiculed, litigated and re-signified.

The discourse was very multilingual: slogans were in Urdu, Hindi and Bangla and hashtags and institutional statements were mostly in English. There is no neutrality in language choice in South Asia. English is a language of mobility, of legal authority and of transnational solidarity; it is also a language of class privilege, and in nationalist and religious discourse, of cultural alienation (Kachru, 1985; Rahman, 1996). Feminist activism is thus constrained in two ways: the first is to undermine the patriarchy and the

second is to be on guard against being perceived as an outsider. This charge can be traced back a long way. Chatterjee (1989) demonstrated the process whereby anticolonial nationalism used to define women as carriers of an inner cultural domain to be protected from the West and Mohanty (1984) and Abu-Lughod (2002) have shown how Western portrayals of "Third World" women were to be read as symptoms of a lack of an inner culture.

The study of digital feminist activism has been rapidly expanding (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Jackson et al., 2020; Mendes et al., 2019) and South Asian scholarship has yielded valuable accounts of Indian MeToo (Guha, 2021; Pain, 2021) and of the Aurat March and its backlash (Alam, 2021; Kamal, 2022; Kelso, 2024). However, there are three caveats. Firstly, most of the studies are restricted to one country and the regional aspects of contestations by the feminists remain largely under-researched. Second, the activist discourse and oppositional discourse are treated as two distinct discourses that happen to be analysed independently, but they are!Second, the activist discourse and oppositional discourse are treated as two distinct discourses which happen to be analysed independently, but are not! Third, current research so far focuses more on language as a transparent medium and does not investigate social meanings of language as a contested resource which influences what activism can say and how it can be received.

In this article, the author tackles these shortcomings by conducting a qualitative feminist critical discourse analysis of the digitally circulated text(s) of five mobilisations in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh between 2018-2024. It examines activist texts in relation to texts that the activists opposed and engaged in with, such as court rulings, debates in the legislature and exchanges on the radio and television that became available online. The study is guided by four research questions. The first asks what discursive strategies opponents use to delegitimise feminist mobilisations, and how activists counter them. The second asks how culturally loaded terms such as *honour*, *culture*, *the West*, *rights* and *shame* are contested and re-signified. The third asks how activists and their opponents use English and code-switching, and how the indexical meanings of English shape the legitimation and delegitimation of feminist claims. The fourth asks how these patterns differ across the three countries and how such differences relate to each country's religious, legal and political context.

The article makes three contributions. Empirically, it offers a cross-national qualitative account of feminist and anti-feminist discourse in South Asia. The methodologically, it is a text analysis of the activist, oppositional and institutional texts as one discursive field, in which in turn slogans trigger petitions, petitions trigger rulings, and rulings are reworked as activist resources. It theorises the concept of translingual counter-discourse to build on Terdiman (1985) discussion of counter-discourse to account for activists' claims which they spread over languages and registers to challenge dominant gender ideologies and affirm their cultural legitimacy.

Literature Review

Digital Feminist Activism and Networked Publics

There has been a shift in the understanding of digital feminist activism from the early excitement to an ambivalent evaluation of social media.An early excitement has been replaced by an ambivalent evaluation of social media in scholarship on digital feminist activism. Fraser's (1990) notion of 'subaltern counterpublics' is still an essential

one, and hashtags are currently conceptualised as a means of infrastructure for these counterpublics to come into being. Clark (2016) illustrated how WhyIStayed helped survivors to shift the narrative from a victim-blaming focus to a more positive one, while Jackson et al. (2020) demonstrated that hashtag networks enable marginalised communities to establish agendas that become mainstreamed by the media. In addition to deliberation, digital publics are united by common sentiment, Papacharissi (2015) added.

Studies of the promise of the #Metoo placed them at the centre of the discussion of limitations. As Mendes et al. (2019) have argued, digital testimony brought rape culture into the light but also to the attention of the woman – leaving her vulnerable to harassment and emotional labour – while Banet-Weiser (2018) found that a networked popular misogyny is a dark side to popular feminism. Research on online abuse and the 'manosphere' shows that anti-feminist behaviors including ridiculing and stating that men are the victims occur repeatedly (Ging, 2019; Jane, 2016). An understanding of the opposition that feminist discourse creates is, therefore, best understood in relation to feminist discourse.

Feminist Movements and Their Discursive Contexts in South Asia

South Asian feminist scholarship explains why the online contestation of gender takes the forms it does. In Pakistan, Zia (2009, 2018) has traced the tension between secular feminist activism and the religious politics consolidated under Zia-ul-Haq, through which feminists have repeatedly been cast as Westernised outsiders, and Saigol (2016) mapped debates within the women's movement over constitutional versus Islamic framing. Three recent studies address the Aurat March directly. Alam (2021) used multimodal critical discourse analysis to show that the counter-attacks of conservatives, men's rights advocates and anti-feminists constitute discursive violence against women in politics. Kamal (2022) showed that placards became the primary object of censure as their images moved online, where doctored versions fuelled disinformation. Kelso (2024) argued that *MeraJism Meri Marzi* operates as an "empty signifier" that detractors fill with morally charged content.

In India, Menon (2012) has framed feminism as a way of seeing that unsettles naturalised hierarchies, including caste. Guha (2021) analysed the interplay of news and social media in Indian anti-rape activism and noted the movement's limited inclusivity: its English-language, urban and largely upper-caste centre of gravity marginalised Dalit and rural women, a concern that resonates with Crenshaw's (1989) account of intersectionality. Pain (2021) showed how women journalists developed a public voice through digital activism. In Bangladesh, research has traced how political parties, women's organisations, NGOs and donors shaped national discourses of empowerment (Nazneen et al., 2011), building on debates about how empowerment should be conceptualised (Kabeer, 1999). Online anti-violence activism there remains understudied, despite its visible role in the 2020 amendment to the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act that introduced the death penalty for rape.

Discourse Studies of Social Media and Multilingual Practice

The digital media has become an increasing focus in critical discourse studies. Zappavigna (2015) demonstrated the process of how hashtags draw together users according to their values, while KhosraviNik and Unger (2016) maintained that participatory platforms enable audiences to question and re-distribute dominant texts.

According to Bhatt (2008), the code switching of English and Hindi results in a "third space" through which local and global identities are negotiated, while code switching online, as pointed by Androutsopoulos (2015), will be helpful for identity performance and audience design. The study of translanguaging also demonstrates the use of multilingual repertoires (García& Li Wei, 2014), but has largely been applied to the field of education, rather than the domains of contested public discourse.

The literature reveals a convergent gap. Research on digital feminism recognises that activism and backlash are relational, but rarely analyses them together within one design. South Asian scholarship has produced rich single-country studies, including discourse-analytic work on the Aurat March (Alam, 2021; Kamal, 2022), but no study has compared the discursive dynamics of feminist contestation across Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. Scholarship on the region also recognises the symbolic weight of English and the charge of Westernisation, yet it has not examined how that charge interacts with the actual languages in which contested texts are written. This study addresses these gaps by treating the language of activism itself, English and its alternation with Urdu, Hindi and Bangla, as a site where the legitimacy of feminism is fought over, and by analysing that struggle comparatively across three national contexts.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

Feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) examines how assumptions about gender are produced, sustained and challenged in discourse (Lazar, 2007). It shares with critical discourse analysis the notion that discourse is social and socializing (Fairclough, 2003), but it sees gender as an omni-relevant category and its operation as often naturalized. FCDA is emancipatory and descriptive, and follows Butler's (1990) line of thinking that gender is a practice that is repeated, a process that can be resisted by re-signifying gendered terms. Here it asks questions about the creation of women, men, family and nation in texts and what interests are served in the process.

Counter-Discourse and Discursive Struggle

Terdiman (1985) proposed a definition of counter-discourse as symbolic resistance that challenges a dominant discourse, which at the same time relies on the terms of the dominant discourse. It is not possible for counter-discourse to be outside the discourse that it opposes; it is a way of appropriating, inverting and re-signifying the discourse. This is in line with Foucault's (1978) theory that power and resistance are always at play in discourse, and that the same terms can be used for both power and resistance. The analysis focuses on shared and contested words as this is explained by counter-discourse theory. When activists and opponents both call upon the concept of honour, culture or rights, it becomes a battle of who will have the final say in the meaning of the concept. It is a warning (Spivak 1988), though, that counter-discourse in the prestige language can make some voices louder than others; this is what we need to consider as well.

Legitimation and Evaluation

The four legitimation strategies offered by van Leeuwen (2008) are used in the study to analyse how claims are justified: authorisation (appeals to tradition, law or institutional authority), moral evaluation (appeals to values), rationalisation (appeals to goals and effects), and mythopoesis (legitimation through narrative). Reisigl and Wodak

(2001) describe the naming and characterisation of the social actors as referential and predicational strategies, while Martin and White (2005) describe the judgements of propriety as appraisal theory. As for framing, research (Benford& Snow, 2000) indicates that movements come into being when they are able to connect their claims with culturally resonant frames.

English, Indexicality and Symbolic Power

The fourth strand addresses language choice. Bourdieu (1991) argued that languages carry unequal symbolic capital. In South Asia, English functions as a nativised language of power in Kachru's (1985) outer circle while remaining tied to colonial history and class stratification (Rahman, 1996), and code-mixing lets speakers occupy a hybrid third space (Bhatt, 2008). Silverstein's (2003) concept of indexical order explains how a first-order association between English and education becomes available, at a higher order, for evaluations of speakers as privileged or inauthentic. Kandiyoti's (1988) notion of "bargaining with patriarchy" adds that women's strategies, including their linguistic choices, are shaped by the constraints of particular patriarchal systems.

Translingual Counter-Discourse: An Integrated Framework

Drawing these strands together, this article proposes the concept of *translingual counter-discourse*: the strategic distribution of resistant claims across languages and registers in order to contest dominant gender ideologies while defending the speaker's cultural legitimacy. The term draws on, but differs from, translanguaging (García& Li Wei, 2014), which describes multilingual speakers' fluid use of an integrated repertoire. Translingual counter-discourse names a narrower phenomenon: the ideologically motivated allocation of codes in a contested public sphere, where language choice is itself read as a political claim. The concept rests on three propositions. First, dominant discourse attacks the cultural provenance of feminist claims as well as their content, mapping feminism onto foreignness whatever language it uses. Second, activists respond by allocating English to juridical and transnational claims and regional languages to affective, embodied and domestic ones. Third, this allocation is itself a form of legitimation, because it demonstrates that feminist claims are rooted locally while connected globally.

Material and Methods

Research Design

The study adopts an exclusively qualitative, interpretive design grounded in feminist critical discourse analysis. It is a comparative multiple-case study in which each of five mobilisations constitutes a case, and the three countries provide the axis of comparison. Qualitative discourse analysis was chosen because the research questions concern how meanings are constructed, contested and re-signified in context, questions that depend on close reading of texts in relation to their social and political circumstances rather than on frequency or distribution.

Data Selection and the Documentary Archive

A purposive sample of the digitally circulated texts related to the five mobilisations (Table 1) are analysed in the study. To follow documentary analysis (Bowen, 2009), primary texts were gathered from published, verifiable sources, such as national and international media reporting, legal reporting, and statements from human

rights and civil society organisations. This method results in a public record that can be followed, and not collecting the posts posted by private individuals, many of whom are harassed for being activists.

The texts were considered collected if they were written by collective protest actors, public figures, organisations or by state institutions, sent via digital media as posts, published as broadcast clips, as images of placards or as reported rulings and documented in at least one reputable source that was directly linked to one of the five mobilisations. Sampling deliberately sought activist, oppositional and institutional texts, such as petitions, legislative statements and court rulings, through which the two sides engaged. The archive comprises 29 documented sources, listed with codes in Appendix A. Sampling continued until further sources for each case repeated strategies already identified rather than adding new ones.

Table 1
Mobilisations and text types in the archive

Country	Mobilisation	Period	Principal text types	Source codes
Pakistan	Aurat March	2018–2021	Placards and slogans; petitions; court rulings; legislative statements; broadcast exchange	PK1–PK11
India	#MeToo and its legal aftermath	2018–2021	Testimony; counter-campaign statements; court ruling	IN1–IN5
India	R. G. Kar case and "Reclaim the Night"	2024	Protest slogans; state advisory; Supreme Court proceedings	IN6–IN8
Bangladesh	Murder of Nusrat Jahan Rafi	2019	Protest demands; court ruling	BD1–BD2
Bangladesh	Anti-rape protests and cross-border solidarity	2020–2024	Slogans; activist statements; social media video and responses; legislative change	BD3–BD10

Analytical Procedure

Analysis proceeded in three iterative cycles. First, each text was read closely in context and coded openly for the social actors it named, the evaluations it made and the languages it used. Second, codes were organised using the framework's categories: legitimation strategies (van Leeuwen, 2008), referential and predicational strategies (Reisigl&Wodak, 2001), evaluative language (Martin & White, 2005) and code choice, including the function of each switch between English and a regional language. Third, codes were developed into themes through constant comparison across activist, oppositional and institutional texts and then across countries, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive approach. Themes were retained only where supported by more than one source, and texts that complicated an emerging pattern were analysed as negative cases.

Urdu, Hindi and Bangla texts are cited in their original romanised form, followed by the English gloss given in the source document. Quotations are kept brief and are attributed to their archive codes.

Trustworthiness

Quality was assessed against Tracy's (2010) criteria for qualitative research. Rich rigour was pursued by including activist, oppositional and institutional texts across five cases; transparency is supported by the documented archive in Appendix A; and

credibility rests on thick description and attention to negative cases, such as feminist criticism of particular Aurat March slogans.

Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

The study involved no human participants and analysed only published, publicly accessible texts. In line with the Association of Internet Researchers' guidelines (franzke et al., 2020), it quotes only collective protest texts, public figures, organisations and institutions; private users are neither quoted nor named, and their responses are paraphrased in aggregate. Because FCDA treats interpretation as situated (Lazar, 2007), analytic memos recorded interpretive decisions, particularly about irony, satire and religious reference. The analysis is openly committed to gender justice, a commitment held alongside a deliberate effort to reconstruct oppositional arguments in their strongest form.

Results and Discussion

The findings are organised by research question. Archive codes in parentheses refer to the sources listed in Appendix A.

Delegitimisation and Its Counter-Strategies

The first research question concerns how opponents delegitimise feminist mobilisations and how activists respond. The analysis identified four recurrent oppositional strategies, summarised in Table 2 with the counter-strategies that met them.

Table 2
Oppositional strategies and counter-strategies identified in the archive

Oppositional strategy	Discursive realisation	Illustrative sources	Counter-strategy
Conspiratorial foreignisation	Activists named as agents of hidden, foreign or anti-state interests	PK4, PK5, PK8	Constitutional authorisation through the courts (PK6, PK7)
Moral-religious delegitimisation	Feminist speech judged obscene, shameful or un-Islamic	PK3, PK8, PK9, PK10	Refusal to self-censor; re-signification of shame (PK3, BD9)
Juridical counter-claiming	Men constructed as victims of false accusations; litigation against complainants	IN1, IN4, IN5	Judicial reframing of reputation and dignity (IN1, IN2)
Protective paternalism	Women's safety framed as restraint on women's dress or movement	IN7, BD7	Equality claims and occupation of public space (IN6, IN8, BD8, BD9)

The first strategy, *conspiratorial foreignisation*, was most developed in Pakistan. A 2020 petition seeking to ban the Aurat March claimed that the march aimed at "spreading anarchy, vulgarity, blasphemy and hatred" and attributed its funding to anti-state parties (PK4). One petitioner described the movement as part of a "Western agenda" to damage Pakistani culture (PK5), and in the Senate a member demanded an inquiry into who was behind the march (PK8). In Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) terms, these referential strategies name activists not as citizens with grievances but as proxies for concealed external powers. The move relieves opponents of the need to engage with the substance of feminist demands, because the demands are presented as symptoms of a plot.

The second strategy, *moral-religious delegitimisation*, operated through judgements of propriety (Martin & White, 2005). A 2019 resolution in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly called the march's demands "un-Islamic and shameful" (PK3), and in the

Senate in March 2020 a senator glossed *MeraJism Meri Marzi* as *fahashi*, "obscenity" (PK8). On television that month, the writer Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar called the slogan obscene and vile before directing abuse at the activist MarviSirmed, for which Pakistan's media regulator later fined the broadcaster (PK10). In van Leeuwen's (2008) terms, this is moral evaluation reinforced by religious authorisation, which places the slogan outside what a Muslim society can say.

The third strategy, *juridical counter-claiming*, was characteristic of India. In October 2018, the #MenToo campaign was launched in Bengaluru to oppose what its organisers called "false charges" against men (IN5), and men's rights groups became more vocal as the #MeToo wave slowed (IN4). The most consequential counter-claim was a criminal defamation case filed by the former minister M. J. Akbar against the journalist PriyaRamani, whose allegation had been one of the movement's most prominent (IN1). Here law was used not to authorise feminist claims but to punish them, a pattern that echoes the construction of men as victims in anti-feminist discourse elsewhere (Ging, 2019).

The fourth strategy, *protective paternalism*, framed restrictions on women as care. After the R. G. Kar case, a West Bengal government initiative advised that "All attempts will be made to avoid allotting night duties to women doctors" (IN7). In Bangladesh in 2020, the actor Ananta Jalil posted a Facebook video condemning rapists while advising women, speaking "as a brother", to dress modestly; he withdrew the remarks after a public outcry (BD7). Paternalism is harder to contest than open hostility, because it presents the restriction of women as a response to violence against them.

Activists and sympathetic institutions countered each strategy in kind. In Pakistan, the Lahore High Court held that the march could not be stopped under the Constitution (PK6), and the Islamabad High Court dismissed a similar petition, its Chief Justice observing that the petitioner might also seek enforcement of the many Islamic laws violated elsewhere in society (PK7). The supreme court in India, which had acquitted Ramani, had said: "In India, a man's reputation cannot be protected at the cost of the right of life and dignity of a woman" (IN1). The supreme court had responded to the advisory from the West Bengal court by stating: "Women need equal opportunities, not concessions" (IN8). When asked online about the possibility of it being the victims' clothing as to how they got raped (BD8), there were two responses. Generally, activists were not successful in rebutting accusations head-on. They shifted the debate to areas where the premises of their opponents were weak: first, constitutional law and second, common sense about violence.

Contested Keywords and Their Re-signification

The second research question is about vocabulary that is used in a contested way in the debate. Five terms were seemingly areas of continuous conflict.

Honour is the example par excellence. In Oppositional Discourse, it structures an argument about the body of women and family and nation as compromised by women's speech. This was directly challenged in a 2019 Aurat March banner: meintumhariizzatnahihoon, "I am not your honour" (PK2) which denied the mantle of male honour. The Ramani judgment was a parallel legal act, placing the rights of the male under the dignity of the female which is an extension of the concept of honour in the modern legal context. However, the re-signification of honour wasn't always the institutional discourse as well. Nusrat Jahan Rafi's killers have been sentenced by a

Bangladeshi judge who commented on her "shining sacrifice to protect the dignity of womanhood.The killers of Nusrat Jahan Rafi were sentenced by a judge in Bangladesh, who praised her for her "shining sacrifice to protect the dignity of womanhood. The tribute restories the story of a woman who was murdered for reporting harassment as a martyr to womanly virtue to continue honour discourse in the language of justice.

The traditional method of culture is transferred to the structural method. In oppositional discourse, it is viewed as a legacy to be preserved from the influence of Western cultures (PK5); while in the case of Bangladeshi protesters, a "culture of impunity" (BD3) was the term they used to label the culture, and "rape culture" (BD5) would not cease with capital punishment. The use of tradition in institutional discourse might also be for feminist purposes; IN3 used the Ramayana to emphasize the reverence to women. It's an indigenising legitimation which then poses local cultural authority against the charge of 'foreignness' of feminism.

Rights became the principal ground of counter-legitimation. Pakistani activists and courts grounded the march in constitutional guarantees of assembly and expression (PK6), and the Indian judgment located women's dignity in Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution (IN2). These are national documents, so juridical framing answers the foreignisation charge by placing feminist demands within the state's own founding commitments.

Shame was redistributed. Oppositional discourse attached shame to women who spoke (PK3), while Bangladeshi protesters insisted that "only the rapist is responsible for rape" (BD9), moving shame from survivor to perpetrator. Finally, the struggle extended to the form of slogans themselves. Responding to *MeraJism Meri Marzi*, the journalist AnsarAbbasi echoed Qamar's retort "merizabaanmerimarzi" ("my tongue, my choice") and argued that both body and tongue are bounded by religion (PK9). Appropriating the slogan's template to claim licence for abusive speech confirms Kelso's (2024) argument that the slogan functions as an empty signifier that opponents seek to fill. It also illustrates Terdiman's (1985) insight that counter-discourse and its opponents compete within a shared set of forms.

Not all contestations were activist/oppositional. The feminist poet KishwarNaheed challenged all the slogans of 2019 in public as if it was a betrayal of values, though it was on the right of rights (PK11) argument. These boundaries of acceptable counter-discourse were also negotiated between feminism and generation, between strategies of provocation and of accommodation (Saigol, 2016), as seen in this negative case.

English, the Vernacular and the Politics of Provenance

The third research question is related to the choice of language. The archive provides a discovery that challenges one of the assumptions. These texts that were most strongly opposed were not in English. They were Urdu slogans that had to do with their home lives: Khanakhudgaramkaro (make your food warm yourself) (PK1), MeraJism Meri Marzi and Lo baithgayitheek se (when you sit, sit properly) (PK1). It was their vernacular intimacy that they had. They brought feminist criticism to the language of the kitchen and the drawing room; it could not be denied as the abstract product of an English-speaking upper class.

This implies that the intent behind the charge of Westernisation is not on the language of the discourse but its origin. As Silverstein (2003) explains, "Western" is a super index superimposed onto the feminist content itself so that, a Urdu slogan of reheashing food can be read as foreign. But opposition parties fanned out easily in English. Lahore petition was presented in English legal register of courts in Pakistan (PK4) and India's MenToo campaign used an English hashtag for its own petition, which was opposed by the Pakistanis (IN5). English became the language of the mark of the feminist, and of the mark of the law and the digital publicity—both for the feminists and for the law.

In the field of activism, the archive demonstrates an on-going division of labour. Similarly, English was the language used not only to claim the rights but also to have the rights judged—in the cases of claims, the judgements were rendered in English (IN1, IN8), and in the case of human rights, discussions about capital punishment in Bangladesh were directed to transnational audiences in English (BD6). Mobile languages of region carried mobilisation and claimed as such. The R. G. Kar protests localised a transnational repertoire of the "Reclaim the Night" formula in the English language, and presented it in Bangla (Rat dakholkaro [IN6] – reclaim the night), while also marching at midnight, as an assertion to the public space that the state advisory had tried to deny (IN7).

This allocation of functions is what this article terms translingual counter-discourse. It answers the charge of foreignness at the level of form, showing that the same movements that command the language of the court also speak the language of the household. The finding extends Bhatt's (2008) account of code-mixing as a hybrid third space by showing that, in contexts of political contestation, the distribution of codes becomes a deliberate legitimation resource. It also qualifies Spivak's (1988) concern. Translingual counter-discourse opens English-language institutions to vernacular claims, but it remains shaped by those with access to courts, media and platforms. The Dalit and rural women whom Guha (2021) found marginalised in Indian #MeToo are largely absent from this archive as well.

National Configurations of Feminist Counter-Discourse

The fourth research question concerns cross-national variation. Although all three countries share the strategies described above, each has a distinct configuration.

In Pakistan, the contest is predominantly religio-moral and securitised.

The march was anti-state (PK4), and was coupled with the religious word of the opposition, which was state security. Feminist reactions were based on constitutional courts, and organisers' opposition to censor the placards of participants (PK3). In this way, it demonstrates the longstanding strategic debate in the Pakistani women's movement on secular and religious idioms (Saigol, 2016; Zia, 2009, 2018), and it reveals activists negotiating under a specific "patriarchal system" (Kandiyoti, 1988) by invoking the protection of the state's own Constitution.

The competition is mainly in the form of competition about the law, institutions in India. There were no religious conflicts, but opposition was forged through legal process—men became victims of false accusations (IN4, IN5) and courts were areas of feminist vindication (IN1, IN8) through the defamation law against the complainants. The R. G. Kar marches also expanded the protest base to the social sector, uniting doctors,

nurses, gig workers, teachers and trans women (IN6). This partially addresses some of the concerns regarding the limited class and caste membership of MeToo (Guha, 2021; Menon, 2012), though the archive does not reveal how much of this inclusivity was maintained.

The battle in Bangladesh is over state responsibility.The issue in Bangladesh is about "state responsibility. Protesters saw sexual violence as a consequence of lack of accountability instead of actions by the women (BD3, BD9). The archive also shows a change of activists' attitudes towards punishment. In 2019, the protesters called for the death sentence for Nusrat Jahan Rafi's killers (BD1) and in 2020, the court handed down a death sentence on all 16 killers (BD2). But in October 2020, when the government responded to the renewed protests by introducing the death penalty for rape, many activists responded that it was a tactic to dodge structural reform (BD4, BD5), and a coalition of women's rights groups opposed to capital punishment (BD6). This makes it more difficult to criticize carceral feminism (Bernstein, 2010). In 2020 it was the state, not the movement, thatchannelled demands for safety into punitive power, while activists pressed for reform of investigation, prosecution and victim support. The struggle also crossed borders: in August 2024, hundreds of women gathered at Dhaka University in solidarity with the Kolkata protests (BD10).

Translingual counter-discourse is thus not a uniform repertoire but a set of strategies adapted to the opposition activists face. Against religious and security claims, they appeal to the Constitution; against legal counter-claims, to judicial reasoning about dignity; and where the state offers punishment in place of reform, they contest the state itself. Counter-discourse, as Terdiman (1985) argued, is shaped by the discourse it opposes.

Synthesis

The findings support three claims that extend existing scholarship. First, digital feminist discourse in South Asia is shaped as much by the defence of feminism's legitimacy as by feminist demands, so studies of activist discourse alone miss much of its work. Second, petitions, rulings and legislation are not external to digital activism but circulate within it as resources for both sides. Third, the charge that feminism is Western concerns provenance rather than language, and activists answer it translingually. This adds a linguistic dimension to the debate over whether feminism in the Global South is "imported" (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mohanty, 1984): the answer is enacted in language choice as well as argued in content.

Conclusion

This article has examined digital feminist counter-discourse in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh through a qualitative feminist critical discourse analysis of activist, oppositional and institutional texts associated with five mobilisations between 2018 and 2024. Its central finding is that the online contest over gender in South Asia is conducted on two levels at once. At the level of content, opponents delegitimise feminist mobilisations through conspiratorial foreignisation, moral-religious condemnation, juridical counter-claiming and protective paternalism. Activists and sympathetic institutions respond through constitutional authorisation, the re-signification of *honour*, *culture*, *rights* and *shame*, and the redistribution of responsibility from survivors to perpetrators and the state. At the level of form, the contest concerns the provenance of feminist ideas. The charge that feminism is Western attaches to its content whatever

language it is voiced in, and the most fiercely attacked texts in the archive were vernacular slogans rather than English ones.

The central concept that contributes to the theory is translingual counter-discourse. It combines the appropriation of the dominant terms, that is counter-discourse (Terdiman, 1985), and the combination of dominant and non-dominant elements, that is hybridity (Bhatt, 2008). Activists in multilingual societies spread claims over codes, on one side in the languages of the regions, like embodied and domestic claims, and on the other side in English, for juridical and transnational claims; this distribution is a way of protecting their cultural legitimacy. The study also reveals that the legal institutions are not separate from but part of the discourse of digital feminist. Lastly, it points to the national forms that it identified—religio-moral and securitised contestation in Pakistan, juridical contestation in India and state-accountability discourse in Bangladesh—which challenged a punitive turn by the state.

There are some limitations of the study. Its documentation covers text which went public, and omits more mundane and private network activism, like what happens in messaging groups. The women's voices of rural, dalit and working class women are heard primarily through others' voices, and five cases do not speak for all the feminist activism in the region. Future research could combine documentary analysis with interviews and digital ethnography, extend the comparison to Nepal and Sri Lanka, and trace how translingual counter-discourse evolves between peaks of mobilisation.

Recommendations

The findings point to recommendations for five groups of actors.

For feminist organisations and activists, pairing vernacular mobilisation with juridical framing is an effective response to delegitimisation. Circulating the reasoning of favourable rulings in regional languages would carry legal victories beyond English-reading publics, and documenting local histories of women's activism would answer the charge of foreign provenance directly. Movements should also keep space for internal debate about tactics, which the archive shows to be part of how counter-discourse is refined.

The results provide evidence of a gap in governance for social media. A good portion of the antagonism in the archive was expressed using vernacular moral discourse, code-mixed mirth and manipulated depictions of placards, which are less well suited to be moderated by systems primarily designed for English. Platforms should develop the skills to moderate content in romanised and code-mixed Urdu, Hindi and Bangla (including code-mixed Bangla) in consultation with civil society in the region and should be ready for coordinated disinformation campaigns on known days, like International Women's day.

The bangladeshi situation demonstrates that the structural reform is the only solution for governments and legislators to get rid of the heavy penalties. Investigation, prosecution, witness protection and the support of survivors were activists' call for response to public outrage, as these were seen as the most vital missing elements. The R. G. Kar case demonstrates that setting working hours for women and/or limiting mobility negatively affects equality and safety should be achieved by the security of a safe workplace and responsible institutions and infrastructure.

The analysis reveals that the judicial reasoning has a wide scope, it is not limited to within the court. The public value of important rulings could be enhanced by publishing summaries in national and regional languages that are accessible to the public and by ensuring judgments don't reify the idiosyncrasies of honouring or sacrificing survivors, the discourses of which feminist movements fight to dismantle.

The study demonstrates the benefits of comparative, multilingual research methods that explore texts of activists and oppositionists in relation to each other, and consider code-mixed texts as data. Critical media literacy as a field of study can be integrated into curricula related to the study of English and linguistics which deals with the legitimacy of social movements in terms of language choice.

Declarations

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical Considerations

No human subjects or personal information was used in this study. It is based exclusively on published books that are accessible to the public (and publisher descriptions and epitexts) cited in the references. Ethical approval was not necessary.

AI Use Statement

Generative AI (ChatGpt and Grammarly) was used for language editing and condensing text. It was not used for the data collection, coding the corpus and drawing findings. All text generated by AI is reviewed and edited by the author, and the author is responsible for the article's content.

Data Availability Statement

The data analysed are all published data, as mentioned in the references. The 39 corpus books are listed verifying, with the verification sources. The coding frame and coded dataset are available on reasonable request from the author

References

Abu-Lughod, L. (2002). Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others. *American Anthropologist, 104*(3), 783–790. https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.783

Alam, Z. (2021). Violence against women in politics: The case of Pakistani women's activism. *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict, 9*(1), 21–46. https://doi.org/10.1075/jlac.00052.ala

Androutsopoulos, J. (2015). Networked multilingualism: Some language practices on Facebook and their implications. *International Journal of Bilingualism, 19*(2), 185–205. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006913489198

Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Duke University Press.

Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology, 26*, 611–639. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611

Bernstein, E. (2010). Militarized humanitarianism meets carceral feminism: The politics of sex, rights, and freedom in contemporary antitrafficking campaigns. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 36*(1), 45–71. https://doi.org/10.1086/652918

Bhatt, R. M. (2008). In other words: Language mixing, identity representations, and third space. *Journal of Sociolinguistics, 12*(2), 177–200. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9841.2008.00363.x

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power* (J. B. Thompson, Ed.; G. Raymond & M. Adamson, Trans.). Polity Press.

Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal, 9*(2), 27–40. https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

Chatterjee, P. (1989). Colonialism, nationalism, and colonized women: The contest in India. *American Ethnologist, 16*(4), 622–633. https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1989.16.4.02a00020

Clark, R. (2016). "Hope in a hashtag": The discursive activism of #WhyIStayed. *Feminist Media Studies, 16*(5), 788–804. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1138235

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989*(1), 139–167. http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8

Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: Vol. 1. An introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). Pantheon Books.

franzke, a. s., Bechmann, A., Zimmer, M., Ess, C., & the Association of Internet Researchers. (2020). *Internet research: Ethical guidelines 3.0*. https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, *25/26*, 56–80. https://doi.org/10.2307/466240

García, O., & Li Wei. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Ging, D. (2019). Alphas, betas, and incels: Theorizing the masculinities of the manosphere. *Men and Masculinities, 22*(4), 638–657. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17706401

Guha, P. (2021). *Hear #MeToo in India: News, social media, and anti-rape and sexual harassment activism*. Rutgaers University Press.

Jackson, S. J., Bailey, M., & Foucault Welles, B. (2020). *#HashtagActivism: Networks of race and gender justice*. MIT Press.

Jane, E. A. (2016). Online misogyny and feminist digilantism. *Continuum, 30*(3), 284–297. https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2016.1166560

Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change, 30*(3), 435–464. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125

Kachru, B. B. (1985). Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk & H. G. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the world: Teaching and learning the language and literatures* (pp. 11–30). Cambridge University Press.

Kamal, D. R. (2022). Networked struggles: Placards at Pakistan's Aurat March. *Feminist Legal Studies, 30*(2), 219–233. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-021-09480-4

Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with patriarchy. *Gender & Society, 2*(3), 274–290. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002003004

Kelso, E. (2024). Women marching for solidarity: 5 years of Aurat March in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. *Dialectical Anthropology, 48*(1), 113–132. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-024-09720-4

KhosraviNik, M., & Unger, J. W. (2016). Critical discourse studies and social media: Power, resistance and critique in changing media ecologies. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse studies* (3rd ed., pp. 205–233). Sage.

Lazar, M. M. (2007). Feminist critical discourse analysis: Articulating a feminist discourse praxis. *Critical Discourse Studies, 4*(2), 141–164. https://doi.org/10.1080/17405900701464816

Martin, J. R., & White, P. R. R. (2005). *The language of evaluation: Appraisal in English*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Mendes, K., Ringrose, J., & Keller, J. (2019). *Digital feminist activism: Girls and women fight back against rape culture*. Oxford University Press.

Menon, N. (2012). *Seeing like a feminist*. Zubaan; Penguin Books India.

Mohanty, C. T. (1984). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *boundary 2, 12/13*(3/1), 333–358. https://doi.org/10.2307/302821

Nazneen, S., Hossain, N., & Sultan, M. (2011). *National discourses on women's empowerment in Bangladesh: Continuities and change* (IDS Working Paper No. 368). Institute of Development Studies. https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/123456789/4218

Pain, P. (2021). "It took me quite a long time to develop a voice": Examining feminist digital activism in the Indian #MeToo movement. *New Media & Society, 23*(11), 3139–3155. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820944846

Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.

Rahman, T. (1996). *Language and politics in Pakistan*. Oxford University Press.

Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2001). *Discourse and discrimination: Rhetorics of racism and antisemitism*. Routledge.

Saigol, R. (2016). *Feminism and the women's movement in Pakistan: Actors, debates and strategies*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Silverstein, M. (2003). Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life. *Language & Communication, 23*(3–4), 193–229. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0271-5309(03)00013-2

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.

Terdiman, R. (1985). *Discourse/counter-discourse: The theory and practice of symbolic resistance in nineteenth-century France*. Cornell University Press.

Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 16*(10), 837–851.

van Leeuwen, T. (2008). *Discourse and practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis*. Oxford University Press.

Zappavigna, M. (2015). Searchable talk: The linguistic functions of hashtags. *Social Semiotics, 25*(3), 274–291. https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2014.996948

Zia, A. S. (2009). The reinvention of feminism in Pakistan. *Feminist Review, 91*(1), 29–46.

Zia, A. S. (2018). *Faith and feminism in Pakistan: Religious agency or secular autonomy?* Sussex Academic Press.