UNDERSTANDING GENDER BACKLASH: SOUTHERN PERSPECTIVES

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Public University Students' Experiences of Anti-Feminist Backlash in Dhaka, Bangladesh[*][†]

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Abstract Public university campuses in Bangladesh have been historically significant sites of negotiating with social and political orders. Based on in-depth interviews with male and female students from three public universities in Dhaka, conducted between 2022 and 2023, this article identifies the ways in which formal and informal structures of power on campus reproduce patriarchal norms and gendered inequities. The students' narratives shed light on how the culture of residential halls, and practices of policing and surveillance, interact with patriarchal norms to limit women's agency and mobility. They also show the ways in which masculine practices which draw from hypersexual views on women and glorify violence become enabled and sustained by institutional power dynamics, wherein harassment and policing become instruments to negotiate power. The article provides new insights into the ways in which patriarchal power dynamics and gender norms promoted and practised within an institutional space create drivers of anti-feminist backlash.

Keywords public universities, moral policing, hierarchy, power, agency.

1 Introduction
Bangladesh has made significant progress in multiple indicators of gender justice, particularly on women's empowerment. This includes increases in girls' education rates, and greater female workforce participation in garment industries, as well as within the informal sector (Haque *et al*. 2019; Das and Susantono 2022). Scholars attribute these gains partially to donor-financed efforts for development, but more importantly to the growth in trade and economy propelled by a female-dominant workforce (Hossain 2017). While progress has been recognised at the national and international levels, it exists alongside persisting opposition and

resistance in various social strata – at state level, and within the family values and practices of civil society (Nazneen 2018).

Such resistance and opposition has been framed as anti-feminist backlash against gender justice and is commonly perceived as reactionary pushback against threats to current power arrangements (Faludi 1991; Mansbridge and Shames 2008). Contemporary conceptualisation around the nature of backlash is being undertaken to identify the complex ways in which it is entwined with populist forces, i.e. the rise of authoritarianism and hypernationalist agendas, transphobia, and homophobia (Edström *et al*. 2023).

Literature and evidence framed in the context of the global South is still evolving. The understanding that frames anti-feminist backlash so far in Bangladesh has been primarily focused on its more reactionary forms, such as fatwas being issued against women joining the workforce (particularly in the ready-made garments industry) in the 1980s and changes being resisted in discriminatory inheritance laws (Hashmi 2000; Naher 2010). While these are some of the more visible forms of backlash in Bangladesh, there are subtle forms of resistance and everyday politics which shape backlash at micro levels in the public space. The most common and pervasive tool which sustains gender power relations and may become a deliberate form of backlash in particular spaces is moral policing of women and gender-diverse people (Mahpara *et al*. 2022).

Public universities in Bangladesh have historically been important sites of power struggle in issues of national-level significance. These institutional spaces are shaped by national and local political power dynamics, where varying levels of power and privilege are attained by students who can form or show affiliation with politically significant figures (Suykens 2018). This results in power struggles by various student bodies who seek out opportunities to practise control over campus spaces, as being able to do so makes their position in the power structure of the institution stronger. Alongside this, campuses are also visible sites of contestations around gender politics and women's rights (Janjua 2020). Publicised incidences of sexual assault, violence, and rape on campuses have been highlighted time and again (Ferdousy 2023; Rozario 2001). In recent times, there has been pushback against progressive components of women's empowerment (i.e. bodily autonomy, mobility) through student demonstrations calling for 'decent clothing' (Farhat 2022). Yet these campuses have also been sites of demonstrations **against** rape cases and unsafe learning environments for female students (*Dhaka Tribune* 2020; *The Daily Star* 2018). Yet it has been noted that when students mobilise to protest these harms, victim-blaming against female students is used as a tactic to delegitimise their claims (Nasreen 2022).

By and large, public university campuses have never been considered safe spaces for women's mobility. Within institutions, aggressive surveillance and moral policing of young women's behaviour is a constant reality. While the presence of inequitable gender norms in educational institutions has been documented, the underlying ideologies, practices, and power dynamics which sustain it require further analysis. As coercive patriarchal forces are increasingly at work to undermine progress on equality and freedom (Khan, Tant and Harper 2023), it is crucial to understand how power dynamics and norms in public, institutional, and private spaces sustain and increasingly fuel patriarchal ideologies which enable backlash.

1.1 Moral policing, threats of violence, and patriarchal norms

In spaces where patriarchal gender norms are intertwined with systems of power and dominance, women embodying agentic behaviour is considered a threat to the status quo (Okimoto and Brescoll 2010). Across contexts, women and gender-diverse people frequently face repercussions for defying their prescribed roles or behaviours. Institutions are no exception to this as gender norms are built into how they operate. Rules, processes, and policies become gendered and systematically influence access to resources, freedoms, and privileges (Oosterom *et al.* 2022). Haas and Binard (2022) note that socio-political constructions of women's bodies are a key site for anti-feminist backlash. Historically, women's bodies have been used as a site for creating notions of masculine honour at macro and micro levels of social and political systems (Mookherjee 2015). Besides being used as instruments for furthering vested patriarchal power and privilege at the macro level, these constructions are used for backlash at the micro level. Srivastava (2012: 16) noted that conflict over 'local tradition versus foreign modernity' is a significant feature of the public sphere and the argument that 'in order to protect "our" traditions from "foreign" influence "our" women must also be shielded from change' contributes to masculinising[6] public spaces and normalising violence against women.

Within this frame, moral policing and surveillance as a control of sexuality and sexual objectification of women and gender-diverse people become tools to dominate and silence voices (Khatam 2023). While much of existing literature explores policing as enacted upon women by close male relatives, this article explores how students in public university spaces in Bangladesh (both male and female) carry out an intense form of policing of female students. Beliefs or ideology are legitimised through various means, including media, societal norms, and socialisation processes (Pratto, Sidanius and Levin 2006). Dominant groups formulate 'legitimising myths' to justify and uphold unequal social orders and set ingroup and outgroup boundaries, based on which unequal access to social and material capital is enforced (*ibid*.). The ways in which patriarchal myths influence dynamics between groups shapes processes of anti-feminist backlash

(Mansbridge and Shames 2008). Moral policing and harassment are used to enact coercive power on women's bodies and can be a consequence of expressions of manhood seeking to reinforce power or retain privilege.

The aim of this article is to analyse the extent to which moral policing and sexual harassment are backlash strategies enacted on women in public university campuses in Dhaka. Our study identifies a particular power dynamic within this institutional space – a strict hierarchy between senior and junior students which sanctions and enables misogynistic aggression and backlash against female students.

2 Methods

The study on which this article is based is part of a larger qualitative research programme – Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice – and was undertaken from January to May 2023 in three public universities in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Public universities were chosen as the study site due to the diversity of its student body, providing the opportunity to gather a wide range of insights. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten male and ten female students from Dhaka University, Jahangirnagar University, and Jagannath University – some of the most prominent institutes in Bangladesh.

Female members of the study team facilitated interviews with female students, and male study team members with male students. Researchers obtained informed consent from the participants. Convenient snowball sampling was used, and participants were initially recruited from the researchers' own acquaintances. Participants were current master's or undergraduate students, living in official residential halls. This was because students residing outside the university have limited experience of the power dynamics.

Participants were asked about demographic factors such as age, residence area, gender identity, ethnicity, subject studied, and political affiliations. A list of *a priori* codes or themes were drawn from literature which focused on understanding power dynamics in residential halls, gendered differences in living experiences, perception of gender issues on campus, and reactive actions or deliberate strategies to prevent gender-friendly discourses or women's agency within this space. The authors followed a grounded theory approach (Charmaz and Belgrave 2012) in manual coding and analysis of the data. Using a shared matrix, multiple iteratives of coding were completed, and each emerging code was discussed and decided upon.

In-depth interviews were focused on attaining a broader understanding of lived experiences within educational institutions and the gendered challenges. The researchers avoided asking direct questions about sexual harassment or violence.

Table 1 **Public university participant characteristics**

Ethnicity	Male	Female	Total
Bengali	10	7	17
Chakma	0	2	2
Marma	0	1	1

Religion	Male	Female	Total
Muslim	8	7	15
Hindu	2	1	3
Buddhist	0	2	2

Age range	Male	Female	Total
21–24	7	6	13
25–28	3	4	7

Location of hometown	Male	Female	Total
In Dhaka	5	1	6
Out of Dhaka	5	9	14

Academic year	Male	Female	Total
First and second year of undergraduate	1	3	4
Third and fourth year of undergraduate	5	5	10
Pursuing graduate degree	4	2	6

Source Authors' own.

However, these narratives were shared by participants themselves when the question regarding the challenges of living on campus was raised. The most prominent responses centred on students being monitored, policed, or harassed. To safeguard participants' personal integrity while also respecting their agency, researchers reminded them at various points that it was up to them how

much they wanted to share (Shannon 2022). Particular attention was paid to non-verbal cues such as tone of voice, emotional expressions, and body language (Thunberg 2022).

We share these young people's narratives while knowing that our interactions with them were not devoid of power dynamics. Being middle-class Bengali men and women, living and working in Dhaka's urban spaces have wholly shaped our experiences of navigating the fieldwork. With one exception, we were all students of private or overseas universities, with limited knowledge of the dynamics of Bangladeshi public universities. As such, self-reflexivity and introspection were crucial during fieldwork and analysis. The research processes described above resulted in providing the participants with a sense of control and agency, so that they did not feel obligated to participate, and any risks of re-experiencing trauma were minimised.

Most participants were Bengali and Muslim, and the average age range was 21–24 years. Of the participants, seven female and six male students came from outside Dhaka. Furthermore, except for four participants, all belonged to families with limited financial resources or social capital.

3 Findings

Here, we explore the narratives of young students in public university campuses and begin by unpacking how the senior and junior hierarchy (especially in male residential spaces) facilitates and normalises misogynistic aggression. We show narratives of young students which illustrate a culture of policing, surveillance, and harassment. We also reflect on the ways in which a lack of accountability within institutional systems contributes to facilitating backlash tactics. We argue that exacerbation of surveillance and policing in institutional spaces based on morality and normalisation of patriarchal attitudes can become strategies for patriarchal actors to retain power.

3.1 Initiation into a culture of misogyny

A key reality for students living on campus is that residential options are limited, but there is a further challenge when this limited resource is co-opted by influential actors on campus who are not part of the administration. Accommodation options in residential halls are usually of two kinds: legal and political. 'Political' options are controlled by influential students, whereas 'legal' options are available to students via the university's administrative process. Students reported that only a handful of accommodation options are available 'legally'. Much of the accommodation is reserved for new students who need to ally themselves with an influential senior student. This issue is more common within male halls than female halls – students attributed this to influential actors on campus being predominantly male. Young men who come from rural areas are often unable to find alternative accommodation, having limited financial resources

and networks in the city, and therefore resort to taking up 'political' accommodation options.

Forming this political relationship also provides young men with privilege and protection on campus. Senior male students, who model themselves as '*boro bhais*' (older brothers) tend to be men from well-connected or powerful families, often regarded to have impunity from being disciplined by university authorities. For example, they can assert power to intervene and reduce penalties in cases where a junior student might owe late fees for their academic session, or even be in trouble with law enforcement authorities for reckless behaviour. The possibility of availing these privileges is contingent on students always abiding by a strict code of conduct and obeying seniors without question throughout their undergraduate lives. As these young men move into their second year and onwards, they become entitled and are expected to reproduce the same power practices.

To survive within this space, young men adopt and constantly perform aggressive and misogynistic behaviours. Pathways to cultivating social capital within these campuses, especially for young men with limited resources in the city, become intertwined with the hierarchical power dynamics of residential halls. Within these halls, a common reflection of misogyny is gossiping about women. While this practice is normalised in the wider public space, within campuses – and especially in male student halls – it becomes intensified. This happens in extremely derogatory ways: 'We do not use *bhodro* [respectful] language when it comes to girls. We call them "*maal*" [goods]. For the most part, it is common to talk about the girls around you like this.'[7]

This established atmosphere of 'locker room banter', according to male participants, fosters an environment where some students take the hypersexualisation of women to a near obsessive level. Private social media chat groups are formed, with the sole intention of continuing hypersexualised conversations about women, and sharing women's photos (including intimate pictures) and their social media account details:

> *The general environment is such that it feels normal to talk about female faculty friends like this. Some guys open private chat groups with a small number of their peers... on WhatsApp or* [Facebook] *Messenger. Their conversation is nasty, they download or screenshot the pictures of the women they are added with on social media and share on such groups*.[8]

Seven male students, and all the female students, shared that males refusing to participate in hypersexualised gossiping in the halls or joining a senior for roaming the campus often resulted in them becoming ostracised by their peers and seniors, being relegated into crowded rooms, or bullied by being called effeminate or 'woman-like'. Young men's inability to adhere to

such practices results not only in punitive punishment, but also in losing patronage from their seniors – in the form of 'backup' during personal feuds, connections in terms of jobs, or academic support. Furthermore, young men expressed anxiety that failure to comply to the hierarchy would result in them being subjected to violence.

Resistance to young women's mobility, freedom, or agency on campus is reinforced through the discursive practices of the power hierarchy created (and sustained) by influential male students. These practices legitimise the categorisation of women's bodies as 'good/bad' and 'pure/characterless' on the basis of morality and patriarchal 'myths'. This propagation of myths narrows possibilities for women to claim greater space, visibility, or power on campus (Faludi *et al.* 2020; Lopes 2019). On campus, the normalisation of sexualising women's bodies occurs concurrently with young men needing to establish themselves as being aligned to masculine characteristics which are based on practices of dominance and violence.

3.2 Women's bodies as a site of power contestation
The manifestation of this misogynistic culture is mirrored in the female participants' experiences. Across the three universities, female students shared that over time, they witnessed their male classmates becoming hostile towards women. As they gain more power in the campus through seniority, male students begin to confront female students about their choice of attire and aspects of their behaviour:

> *Now in my third year, I began to notice that the guys in my class say a lot of nasty things about women. Who is wearing what, who has a lot of guy friends, they're always making nasty comments about all of that. As freshmen, their ideas are heavily influenced by their* boro bhais. *As they progress into their third/fourth year, they vocalise those ideas that they've been surrounded by in group discussions.*[9]

While policing subverts women's agency and mobility on campus, being harassed or stalked erodes it even further. All female participants reported having experienced at least one incident where they were inappropriately approached by senior male students during their first or second year. In most cases, male students are either influential themselves or have fostered strong connections with men who hold social or political power within the institution. The women's experiences included being stalked, harassed by a group of seniors, or receiving unwanted romantic and sexual advances via social media. In one incident, a 24-year-old student reported being photographed in the cafeteria without her consent by powerfully connected male students. Upon confronting the perpetrators, she reported being mobbed by several male and older female students: 'You think you're Ms Universe or something, that we're

all standing around trying to get a picture of you? Get over yourself or your whole batch is going to have to apologise for this *beyadobi* [impudence].'

Most female participants in this study shared facing taunts from their fellow male peers or being 'scolded' by senior male students. A 24-year-old third-year student from Jahangirnagar University described being taunted when her boyfriend visits her, or when she hangs out with male friends:

> *I hear things like 'I saw you hanging out with this male classmate after dark, what does your boyfriend have to say about that?' If they see my boyfriend has come to visit, they pass inappropriate comments about it the next time I see them in class.*

The participant, out of fear of facing verbal or even sexual harassment as backlash for voicing her discomfort, chose not to challenge them. Other participants resisted by choosing to avoid certain spaces and people, or by making themselves less publicly visible on campus instead of changing their behaviours or practices.

Within the female halls, young women targeted as being 'too modern' continue to face verbal abuse and humiliation from senior female students. Young women reported that often senior female students policed younger female students who they regarded as outspoken or deviating from the 'good, respectable woman' norm (i.e. they were smoking or making friends with male peers). The justification for these acts is cited as 'protecting norms of propriety' and 'maintaining discipline'. The older female students used tactics such as verbally abusing younger female students, forbidding them from wearing certain clothing within the halls or asking other younger students to shun the student they were targeting. Students also reported facing retribution for their social media posts, for refusing to leave their rooms after being bullied, or for getting wet in the rain.

The students shared incidents where rumours of them being 'indecent women' spread throughout the campus, causing other students to treat them differently. The 24-year-old student who had her photo taken non-consensually said that seniors in her residential hall began bullying her after the incident. This led to her feeling emotionally vulnerable, and she isolated herself within her room for weeks. Once she began interacting with her peers again, she found that they had spread rumours that she was drinking and smoking in her room. This caused her to become socially ostracised to the extent that she felt it was her fault.

The nature of the aggressions perpetrated by older female students is fundamentally different from those of male students. Older female students do not have enough influence on campus

to 'discipline' or demand unquestioning obedience from male and female juniors. Neither can they establish themselves as influential figures by exercising aggression over others with impunity in the same way as males. But older female students take up the role of enabling their male counterparts to use policing, surveillance, and harassment as strategies to exercise power on campus. Their practices effectively serve to enable and legitimise the abuse of power perpetrated by male students.

It is evident from the students' narratives that the power practice on campus is structured in a way which privileges influential male students and their networks. Their power relies on drawing on being 'protectors of women and tradition', disciplinary actors, and dominant figures within campus (Srivastava 2012). Inequitable gender norms serve as a 'disciplinary power' that patriarchal actors employ via policing, surveillance, and harassment to limit women's movement and bodily autonomy (Harper *et al.* 2022; Khan *et al.* 2023). The use of such power can be subtle, such as policing young women's performance of respectability, or overt, such as enacting violence on them when their behaviours are perceived as threats. Thus, women's behaviours and choices which threaten male authority or transgress patriarchal norms are met with backlash, and women's bodies become sites where power struggles occur.

3.3 Little recourse to justice

Given the frequency of harassment on campus, there were a stark lack of reports on students seeking justice through relevant university administrative bodies. According to participants, their universities had limited disciplinary or support mechanisms for students facing harassment or bullying. Most participants either did not know where to file a formal complaint or felt that the process was too complicated. Some feared that faculties may either stall justice or weaponise the issue for their own power-play:

> *Each department has to deal with complaints on their own, there is no central body or committee I know of. Whether the teacher who is assigned with this responsibility will take your complaint seriously, whether they will be able to take action if the man who harassed you is influential – depends on their own affiliations, self-interests, and power in the campus.*[10]

When spaces of formal support and justice are either questionable or do not exist, informal systems crop up in their place. When female students were in some way aggrieved, the only recourse was to report the incident to the perpetrators' seniors. A 25-year-old fourth-year female student shared her experience of being stalked by a group of seniors on campus – one of whom who was associated with the campus's primary student body:

> *When I would go to the food stalls or walk from one class to another, the men would follow me. They were always around –*

either on their bikes riding a few feet behind me [or] *sitting on the table right behind me. I lost count for how many months this went on for. I cut off my long hair, because at one point I thought maybe that will finally stop them.*

However, she never complained to seniors or peers, despite being well-known among influential student bodies. She feared that doing so would result in seniors co-opting the case brought to them and publicly parading themselves as upholders of equity. It was uncertain whether they would take any action against the perpetrator, but she would certainly face further harassment and public shaming.

In another instance, a female student reported that a male junior disrupted an exam and snatched her script to copy answers. The junior in question was the son of a politically well-connected individual. When she rebuked his behaviour, he responded by issuing threats of bodily harm (including death threats through social media), forcing her to complain to the police. The police, however, were reluctant to become involved, repeatedly urging her to 'settle the matter amicably'. The student claimed that they attempted to access her social media, to leverage potentially sensitive information to force her to withdraw her complaint.

News reports indicate that despite High Court directives to implement zero-tolerance policies on harassment and abuse in education institutions and workplaces, there is limited implementation and greater non-compliance (*Dhaka Tribune* 2022). Even when institutes follow the directives on paper, student narratives reflect that inaction and lack of implementation remains a key issue. Young women shared anecdotes of their friends pursuing cases of harassment or abuse with faculties and being advised to let it go in the interest of their own reputational and physical safety.

The highly patriarchal culture within campuses allows various actors – faculties, senior influential students, state authority – to justify reluctance for action and enables further backlash when issues are brought forward. However, this study does not cover the administration and faculty experience and therefore is unable to pinpoint the specific reasons as to why inaction exists. Deeper investigation is required to explore the perceptions and attitudes of actors within university administrative spaces for more contextual understanding of the gaps and challenges which sustain inaction and delegitimisation.

4 Discussion
The students' experiences play out within a context where influential actors on campus utilise moral policing, surveillance, and harassment as tools to maintain or regain control of the campus space. Power is primarily vested with influential male students who gain authority through powerful off-campus

connections and misappropriation of institutional resources. This power becomes legitimised through myths of being '*boro bhais*' which draw on patriarchal notions of masculinity and femininity. The narratives show policing and harassment as being intertwined with patriarchal masculine norms that are upheld and reproduced in residential hall culture. Participation in the culture of hostility becomes mandatory, and the policing of women's bodies becomes a strategy to subjugate others to prove one's own worth by young men (and some women) who hold limited social and financial resources to negotiate with the socio-political power structure they are pushed into.

When misogynistic behaviours and practices become normalised in public spaces, any deviation from this can be perceived as a threat to young men's power and privileges (Chalmers *et al.* 2023). Within such a context, this study shows that young female students expressing bodily autonomy, being outspoken, and roaming around campus can become the focus of backlash by young men and women who partake in and benefit from the political power structure. Existing literature shows how controlling sexuality takes centre stage in moral policing, which is executed through social control of women's bodies (Bhalerao 2021).

Our study finds parallels with Kamal (2019), who identified how men in Bangladesh justified violence against women through tropes of 'bad women' and 'teaching a lesson'. In exploring backlash in online spaces in Bangladesh, Mahpara *et al.* (2022) note that the narrative of tradition versus modernity is used in framing feminism as a Western import which destroys local culture. This study shows how older students (especially males) appoint themselves guardians of 'tradition' to legitimise policing female bodies on campus. The notion of men being 'morally superior' protectors of 'morally vulnerable' women remains paramount (Bari 2021); while in a different way, older female students also become enactors of violence against primarily younger female students. The role women play in this exercise of power is effectively as enablers of existing patriarchal actors within the campus space.

Harassment exists within campus spaces where there are no effective mechanisms to ensure accountability, justice, or support. Even in cases that warrant intervention from law enforcement bodies, the privilege and patronage of perpetrators often blocks any scope for justice. Additionally, backlash does not always involve obvious animosity to feminist initiatives; it can take the form of trivialising existing barriers to gender justice by demonstrating apathy and non-participation (Sultan and Mahpara 2023). Inaction, disinterest, delegitimisation, and deprioritisation can become strategies taken either deliberately or unconsciously to impede opportunities of challenging injustice (*ibid*.). Such actions are found in this study's narratives, where raising issues of harassment or bullying results in further

endangering young women and men. Additionally, there is far greater chance of issues being either co-opted or delegitimised; for example, to get a rival ousted from campus or to gain a reputation as a protector of women.

As pushback against gains from feminist initiatives becomes more pronounced in public spaces in Bangladesh, the legitimisation of misogynistic behaviours and calculated deployment of power through practices of policing women's bodies to secure male privilege can be seen as a microcosm of the wider prevalent social structures. Edström *et al.* (2023) point out that in countries where conservative ideologies remain dominant and gains for gender justice have achieved limited progress, backlash becomes deployed through a fuelling of structural discrimination. The students' experiences show how patriarchal dynamics normalise everyday violence and surveillance for women. This study sheds light on the covert ways in which anti-feminist backlash operates and becomes exacerbated by a lack of political will and accountability in institutional systems to enact change processes. We identify the tactics and tools employed by actors in Dhaka public universities to challenge progressive change around gender justice. The self-interest of politically motivated actors becomes tied to fostering opposition to progressive changes on campus, ultimately ensuring that patriarchal power is sustained, even when actors in the system change.

Notes
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2 Ishrat Jahan, Research Associate, BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, Bangladesh.
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4 Sabina Faiz Rashid, Professor and Chair, BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, Bangladesh.
5 Sharin Shajahan Naomi, Post-Doctoral Fellow, Krea University, India.
6 We took the word from the cited article where Srivastava (2012: 7) used the term 'masculinised' to describe the public sphere as inherently masculine.
7 Fourth-year male student, 25 years, Dhaka University.
8 Third-year male student, 25 years, Dhaka University.
9 Third-year female student, 23 years, Jahangirnagar University.
10 Third-year female student, 23 years.

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