

BRAC Development Institute (BDI)
19th Floor, University Building, BRAC University
66 Mohakhali C/A, Dhaka 1212, Bangladesh
Tel : +(8802) 8824051-4, Fax : +(8802) 8810383
Email : bdi_info@bracuniversity.ac.bd
Website : www.bracdevelopmentinstitute.org

Religion and Women Trajectories of Empowerment

Samia Huq
Sahida Islam Khondaker

BDI Working Paper # 02 ■ June 2011



Religion and Muslim Women: Trajectories of Empowerment

Samia Huq
Sahida Islam Khondaker

June 2011

BRAC Development Institute, BRAC University, 66 Mohakhali, Dhaka 1212, Bangladesh
Telephone: (88-02) 8824051-54, 4070 (Ex.) Fax: (88-02) 8810383

Working Paper No. 02

Copyright © 2011 BDI

June 2011

Published by:

BDI
66 Mohakhali
Dhaka 1212
Bangladesh

Telephone: (88-02) 8824051-54, Ext. 4070
Fax: (88-02) 8810383
Website: www.bracdevelopmentinstitute.org

ISSN: 2223-0114

BDI publishes research reports, books, monographs, working papers and research briefs in English and Bangla.

Printed by BRAC Printers at Tongi, Gazipur, Bangladesh.

Table of contents

Acknowledgement	v
Summary	vi
1. Introduction	1
1.1 Research issues	1
1.2 Informants	2
1.3 Key questions	2
1.4 Structure of the report	3
2. Methods and case study communities	5
2.1 Methodology	5
2.2 Site selection	6
2.3 Research communities	7
2.4 Inception workshop	9
2.5 Reading group	10
3. Understanding of religion: beliefs and practices	11
4. Purdah	15
5. Sexuality: male female relations	19
6. Rights and freedom	25
7. Greater awareness, greater reflection and new spaces	29
References	33

List of table

Table 1. Sites of research	7
----------------------------	---

List of figures

Figure 1. Site for religion research	6
Figure 2. Researched community	7

Acronyms

BDI	BRAC Development Institute
BNP	Bangladesh National Party
DFID	Department for International Development
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
NGO	Non Government Organization
NWDP	National Women's Development Policy
RMG	Ready Made Garments
Simorgh	Simorgh Women's Resource and Publication Centre, Lahore, Pakistan
UK	United Kingdom
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women

Acknowledgement

This report is based on research conducted by Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme at BRAC Development Institute, BRAC University. This paper draws upon a research entitled Women and Religion carried out between May 2007 and February 2008. The research was conducted under guidance of Lead Researcher, Professor Firdous Azim and led to this report. We are indebted to Professor Azim for her mentorship, insights and direction. Special thanks to Maheen Sultan, coordinator of Pathways of women's Empowerment, South Asia Hub and to Dr. Perween Hassan for the inputs and guidance she provided in her role as advisor to the research team. We are grateful to Fatema Jahan Seema for guiding our fieldwork and to Masuma Ahmed, Masud Rana, Marufa Akhter and Samia Rahim who were instrumental in collecting the data. Special thanks to Simeen Mahmud and Maheen Sultan who reviewed this paper.

Most importantly, we would like to thank all the respondents without whose active participation and willingness to share time and knowledge, this research would not have been possible.

This research was made possible through funding from UKaid through the department of International Development (DIFID).

The views expressed in this paper reflect those of authors, and they alone are responsible for any errors.

Summary

The report is based on a two-year research project in which we looked at women's everyday engagement with religion. We aimed to gain insights into how women conceptualize religion, the norms and concepts through which they understand what it means to be religious and the manner in which these concepts and ideals are brought to bear on the construction of the feminine self. The research focused on three arenas of women's understanding of themselves as women and Muslim. These arenas are purdah, sexuality - by which we mean male female relations - and freedom and rights. From the research findings we argue that women have moved towards a textually-based learning and interpretation of Islam, as opposed to engaging with Islam as a form of knowledge passed down from earlier generations. We also found that, in line with the need to "authenticate" beliefs, women express much respect for *taleem* - spaces where women congregate to learn about the *Quran* and other exegetical material as well as ideal Islamic comportment. From the findings we argue that the role of religion in women's lives cannot be understood through the binary of religious/conservative versus secular/liberal. Rather, by exploring the norms through which women understand religion and deploy corporeal as well as non-corporeal capacities to engage with those norms in "living" Islam we can shed light on greater nuances that undergird religious engagement. We then turn our attention to the negotiations these nuances represent and how they open up questions about the "contentious" relationship between women, religion, agency and empowerment.

Keywords: Religion/Islam, sexuality, empowerment, *taleem*, textual religion, agency, purdah, faith/Imaan, polygyny, rights, freedom.

1. Introduction

This section explains how and why we came to this research, the key questions posed and the format of the report.

1.1 Research Issues

In recent years, Bangladesh, along with the rest of the world has seen a resurgence of religion, sometimes in its most extreme forms. Manifestations of religious resurgence include the mass proliferation of veiling; faith based schools as well as the emergence of Islamic television channels and religious discussions on TV. We have also seen that issues around religion have made a rather explosive leap into the public space. For example, in March 2008, the government announced the National Women’s Development Policy (NWDP), which gave rise to a vociferous debate between liberal feminists and Islamists centered on the significance of the term “equal” and “just” as they pertain to relations between men and women in society (Daily Star 2008). While liberal women’s groups see justice as a step towards ensuring equal participation of women in public life and equal rights in the family, to religious groups justice refers to women’s assigned roles and responsibilities in religious texts such as the *Quran* and the *sunnah*.¹ The debate and opposition acquire in the national imaginary the status of a “clash” between different interest groups, ideologies and worldviews. Such a clash between secular and religious forces has a special resonance in Bangladesh. Religious forces are identified with “anti-liberation” forces of the 1971 war of independence, and contemporary manifestations of religion based politics are read not only as atavistic, but part of a historical and political process that works against the interest of Bangladesh, which is seen to rest on “progressive” secular principles.

The group researching the theme “Changing Narratives of Sexuality” aims to understand where three categories of women - factory workers, students and participants of gatherings organized around the discussion of religious texts and ideals referred to as *taleem* - stand in the clash between liberals² and Islamists.

¹ *Sunnah* refers to a body of oral traditions describing what the prophet Muhammad and his companions said and did and those acts to which he lent tacit approval.

² Here we use the word liberal to denote the bloc that envisions change through a liberal agenda consisting of employment, income, greater mobility and greater visibility in the public space.

Through women's articulation of religion and its effects on their everyday lives, we wanted to understand whether religious engagement for them is neatly divided between a "secular" and a "religious" way of life. Or, do they negotiate between the two, and what is the nature of that negotiation. In addition, our research aims to understand whether and to what extent the negotiation offers ways and spaces in which women may use religion for a heightened sense of self and greater empowerment.

1.2 Informants

The research divided informants into 3 main groups:

- Workers, including factory workers, home-based workers, and self-employed workers in small enterprises.
- Students, including university students of both public and private universities in and around Dhaka (Dhaka and BRAC University) and Sylhet (Shah Jalal University).
- *Taleem* women, consisting of a woman preacher/teacher, often referred to as the *taleem* apa, and a group of women of all ages, who listen sometimes passively, at other times ask questions about religion. These sessions are sometimes known as *tafseer* classes.

1.3 Key questions

The key questions around which the research took shape are the following:

- What do these women understand religion to be? What are the concepts, norms, injunctions, and practices through which they articulate the place of religion in their lives?
- How does their understanding of religion affect the manner in which they view themselves as women?
- What are the terms through which the self is expressed? What are the kinds of dispositions/interiorities that are valued or devalued by these women and how do such internal states correspond to the different ways in which acts and forms engage norms? In this correspondence between the internal and the external self, are the two contingent on each other? If so, does one precede the other, and if so which?
- How do women articulate rights? What kinds of rights do they think religion gives them? And what kinds of rights do they assert in spite of or because of religious edicts?

1.4 Structure of the report

This research report is divided into 7 sections:

1. Introduction- This section provides an introduction to the study. It explains why the research was undertaken, the key questions posed, and the format of the report.

2. Methods and case study communities- This section describes the key features of the methodology, the field sites where the research was conducted and the criteria for informant selection and the additional mechanisms - notably an inception workshop and a reading - through which the research agenda was set and analysis strengthened.

3. Understanding of religion: beliefs and practices- This section discusses what the women understand religion to be, along with what actions make them Muslims. The section also highlights how women define themselves as Muslim and “good” while negotiating expectations and religious dictates.

4. Purdah- Section four explains how the different groups of women conceptualize veiling - why they do and why they don't - and the reasoning they use for their actions.

5. Sexuality: male female relations- In this section we highlight how the different groups discuss premarital relationships, marriage, extramarital relationships, divorce and polygamy. We look at the norms and ideals women invoke to explain these features and how they bring religion to bear on the norms that condition relationships with the opposite sex.

6. Rights and freedom - In this section we explore women's understanding about their rights and freedom as stated in the *Quran*. How do the women define their rights and are they able to access their rights by using *Quranic* verses? Are they happy with their freedom and rights? Do they attribute any discontent to religion? This section examines women's understanding of freedom and rights, and what may or may not be sanctioned by the *Quran*.

7. Greater awareness, greater reflection and new spaces- This concluding section highlights our findings on the greater awareness and reflection about the applicability of religion in the women's lives.

2. Methods and case study communities

This section summarizes key features of the methodology that was designed and implemented and the process of field selection.

2.1 Methodology

Our research was conducted from May 2007 to February 2008. The political situation at this time was replete with tension and uncertainty as there was an emergency in the country banning all political activity. This affected our research, as we could not explore the political dimensions of some of our research groups. Standard qualitative research methods were used to conduct this research: focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, community and institutional mapping and participant observation. Case studies of particular Islamic women's groups were also used to generate the information.

Through community mapping we wanted to obtain a full picture of the social status and general lifestyle of the research group. We began by looking at the infrastructure of the surrounding area. We noted the number of mosques, schools, hospitals and community clinics. We also explored the number of NGOs active in the area. Furthermore, we gathered information on the sources of income of the community. Distances from the highway, education rates, etc. were also examined. The socioeconomic condition of our target groups was looked at in order to gauge at which level religion had the most impact, and how social structures determined the religious experiences of our respondents. When we undertook the community survey, we choose two to four key informants who had lived in that area for a long time and knew the community well.

Through focus-group discussions with women, we were able to get a broad idea of how women think about religion and experience it in their own lives.

Through in-depth interviews, we obtained a detailed and microcosmic picture of the experience of particular groups of women's lived experience of religion. Through the in-depth interviews we also examined the sources of the women's knowledge (through whom and how they acquired religious knowledge), their own experience of religion (for some people religion was to serve their husbands and in-laws, to others religion meant strengthening of Imaan or faith); their experience of religious rights, purdah, religious attitudes towards dress; their

views on relationships between men and women and how they relate this to their religious worldview. We asked them what issues within religion made them feel conflicted, and how they went about resolving those conflicts, if at all.

We also undertook participant observation research of *taleem* class/*tafsir* classes, with women belonging to both middle and lower middle-income groups. These were women who actively engaged with religion, cultivating personal and group piety. In *taleem* classes we observed the participation of women, their mode of dress, who talked and when and how issues were addressed and arguments constructed. We tried to assess whether *taleem* opened up a space for women to express their frustration with everyday life and voice their concerns. Observing the nature of interaction between the main speaker and other participants enabled us to discern the power relations within *taleem*. We also looked at the socio-economic condition and educational status of the *taleem* teacher - the *taleem* apa - as she held a position of authority in these classes.

2.2 Site selection

The research was conducted in twelve field sites. In order to get a diverse range of data from the field we chose different types of sites, such as urban and peri-urban. Universities and *Taleem* Classes are from urban area but we have categorized them as University and *Taleem* group. For worker class we have taken site from both urban and peri-urban, so we have categorized them as urban slum and peri-urban slum.

Our research was done in sites of four categories: urban areas, peri-urban areas, universities and *taleem* groups (Fig. 1). In total, we conducted 14 focus group discussions, 21 in-depth interviews and 27 participant observations (Table 1). At each of these locations, we also undertook community and institutional mapping.

Figure 1. Site for religion research

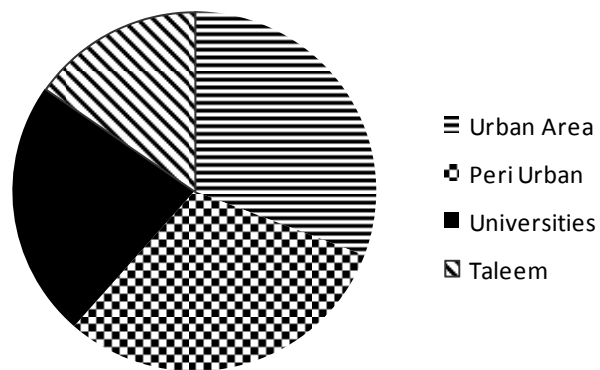


Table 1. Sites of research

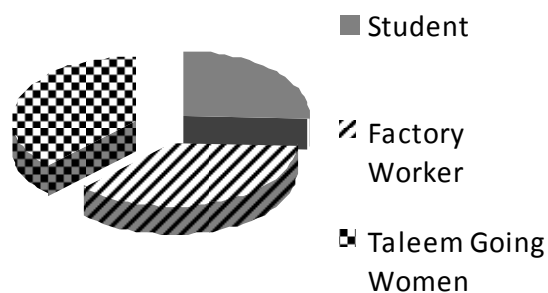
Sites		In-depth interview	FGD	Participants observation
Urban area	Kamrangirchar, Dhaka	2	1	-
	Bhashantek, Dhaka	2	1	-
	Shadarpara, Sylhet	1	2	-
	Teroroton, Sylhet	-	1	-
Peri-urban area	Bashail, Narshingdi	2	1	-
	Chandra, Gazipur	2	1	-
	Chandona, Gazipur	-	1	-
	Gerua, Gazipur	1	1	-
Universities	Dhaka University, Dhaka	2	2	-
	BRAC University	2	1	-
	Sylhet University	4	2	-
<i>Taleem</i> classes	Laxmi Bazar	3	-	15
	Dhanmondi	-	-	12
Total		21	14	27

2.3 Research communities

For the research, we selected groups of women whose age ranged from 18 to 35 years. We looked at urban and rural women and working and middle-class women. Our research had a special focus on social spaces for the young be they university students, working women or women who engaged themselves with religion (*taleem* women).

We interviewed a total of 267 women. 69 were students, 98 were factory workers and 100 were *taleem* women with whom we undertook participant observation. That is, 25.84% of our research groups were students, 36.71% factory workers and 37.45% *taleem* women (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Researched community



The category, working women, included women working in RMGs, plastic factories and yarn mills. The woman had mostly migrated from their village homes for work. Some of them lived with family members but a greater number of women lived individually in dormitories, or messes. Most of the women interviewed were from lower or lower-middle income groups and lived in urban and peri-urban slums. Our research uncovered that there were one or more mosques or *madradas* situated in these areas, and that *taleem* classes were held regularly in these sites.

Our interviews and FGDs with RMG workers revealed that most of them had migrated from outside Dhaka and that their ages ranged from 18 to 40 years. While our main focus was on RMG workers, some of our interviewees were engaged in home-based activities. In Bhashantek (a slum area in Dhaka), for example, we talked with RMG workers as well as women who worked at home, embroidering clothes, who were shopkeepers, or who worked as domestic help. At Narshingdi (a small industrial area outside Dhaka) most of our participants were workers in a yarn mill. The others were RMG workers. At Kamrangirchar (the largest slum in Dhaka) women interviewed worked in a plastic mill as well as the ready-made garment industry. Some were shopkeepers. In Sylhet, most of our respondents worked as domestic help though some worked as day labourers in a construction firm. The respondents of Gerua (Savar), Chandura and Chandona (Gazipur) (areas just outside Dhaka) were all RMG workers. We approached the Bhashantek and Kamrangirchar areas through BRAC. We went to the local BRAC School and the students and teachers of the school helped us gather the respondents. We used the BRAC School as a venue for carrying out our FGDs. In the other areas, researchers went to these sites on their own, and built rapport which in turn led to the FGDs. These discussions were held at the home of a willing respondent.

University students comprised both hostel residents and those who lived with their families. Public university students were from the middle class, while private university students were largely from upper middle class families. Students from Sylhet, which is known as a conservative area of Bangladesh and also famous for the migration of locals to the UK, were also interviewed. For non-residential students at Dhaka University the researchers went to the Arts Faculty of Dhaka University and tried to talk with willing students. After a day's rapport building, the researchers were successful in convincing students from different disciplines (Bengali, English, Sociology, Anthropology, Islamic History, Political Science and Women and Gender Studies) to take part in FGDs. This part of the research proved to be very difficult as students constantly wanted to know why we were researching religion, who our funders were and what the motives were, hidden or

otherwise, behind the research. On a positive note, however, we were able to use these same students to establish links with residential students. We chose Shamsunnahar Hall as it was reported that most of the science students lived in this dorm and we felt that we did not have enough students from the science disciplines and we wanted to diversify our pool of respondents by adding some. This particular hall presented an added appeal because through some existing contacts we felt that the hall would be easy to access.³

The third group represents those who are actively engaged with religion (*tafsir/taleem*). We studied two groups, one group in a lower-middle class area and the other in a middle-class area. The other group, in Dhanmondi, was more liberal than the Laxmibazar group. We undertook our participation observation with *taleem* classes/*tafsir* classes once a week for 5 months. We started our observation with the Laxmibazar *taleem* group, who are well known in the area. This group is linked with the *Tabligh Jama'at* (a preaching group), which, in Bangladesh, is headquartered at the Kakrail Mosque, a well-known mosque in Dhaka. One of our researchers had already worked with this group, and she helped us get in touch with them. The other group was situated at the Dhanmondi Taqwa Mosque, which we identified and approached on our own. To become accepted by these *taleem* and *tafsir* groups, researchers had to strategize, they had to wear 'modest' clothes, such as full-sleeved *kameezes*⁴, cover their heads and also participate in prayers with the women. Access to *taleem* class was difficult during this period when the country was in a state of emergency. Under this condition all political activity had been banned, as a result of which many *taleem* groups, due to their political links, some of which were real, while others were perceived, were lying low. These groups were wary of allowing outsiders into the classes, in the fear of being misrepresented and reported to authorities.

2.4 Inception workshop

To explore the possibilities entailed by and the myriad directions in which the research on women's everyday engagement with religion could be pursued, we organized an initial two-day workshop between 10 – 12 April 2007. We invited researchers in the field, including anthropologists, political scientists, historians, feminist activists and writers. The workshop also included development practitioners. Our Pakistani partners from Simorgh were present at the occasion, as well as participants from Afghanistan. These participants provided a South

³ In reality, however, access to the hall was quite difficult.

⁴ A *kameez* is a long shirt like garment worn on top of pants known as *shalwar*.

Asian perspective to the workshop and the differences in Muslim practices and Islam's relationship to women within the region were highlighted.

The workshop made us aware of the many and variegated dimensions of the research on which we were about to embark. Some of the issues that arose included the troubled political and cultural place of Islam within the South Asian region, and the challenges this posed for women. The issues that were most vociferously discussed and debated were veiling, modesty and comportment. Women's work, travel and migration were another cluster of issues that emerged from discussions at the workshop. The gap between textual analyses and religion as it is lived and practiced was another hotly debated theme.

The discussions and debates at the workshop gave us concrete ideas about the regional as well as international dimensions of Islam in South Asia. Furthermore, the workshop's discussion about women's active engagement with religion and modernity and about the effort to bring Islamic dictates within the discourse on women's rights and freedoms provided useful clues in formulating our research agenda. In addition to looking at women as they engaged with religion, and formed new arenas from where new discourses of empowerment emerged, we came out of the workshop with a goal of looking at some of our own positions and assumptions more critically, paving the way for a challenging research agenda.

2.5 Reading group

Setting out as we were on a contentious path, we thought we needed to arm ourselves with knowledge of the literature that had emerged about women's engagement with Islam, both in Bangladesh and worldwide. The theoretical underpinnings of such research and knowledge were also important, so we tried to couple this with readings about women in other related societies (such as, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, etc.) historically. The reading exercise proved to be very fruitful.

Following on from the field research, and while we were reading through the FGDs and interviews, the reading group met once a week through the months of October 2007 to June 2008.

There was and is much debate among the researchers as to whether we should have embarked on this exercise prior to the field research. Reading the literature along with the field reports, however, proved to be fruitful, and it really helped us to structure our findings.

3. Understanding of religion: beliefs and practices

In this section we highlight how women articulate belief and how their notion of belief guides the performance or absence of particular duties. We feel that explaining faith as it emerges through narratives, and the performance or lack of performing rituals, exclusive of one another, does not yield a very deep understanding of religiosity. We argue that one's religious worldview consists of a combination of how faith is perceived and how rituals are performed or negotiated around, in relation to the inner values, emotions and states one deems ideal, and the interiorities one seeks to change. Thus, in what follows, we demonstrate how women's articulation of their own understanding of beliefs and practices reveals statements about inner conditions and emotional states. We further highlight that differences in religious worldviews are results of different configurations of the links between belief, practice and inner states of being.

The general focus on subjectivities in this paper does not disclaim that subject formation occurs within a wider political and cultural context. To that end, this research recognizes the importance of several political factors that define the wider cultural terrain. First is the global situation informed by geo-political factors such as the war on terror, the conflict in Palestine, as well as migration to the Middle East and the influence of Wahhabi rhetoric on local Muslims and those in the diaspora. At home in Bangladesh, there is also local politics where centrist parties have courted Islamists, leading to their increased political stronghold as well as parliamentary presence. The global and the local context have led to two kinds of (often opposing) consequences in society. First, there has been a stricture imposed on liberal ideals, especially pertaining to women's self-expression and flourishing. This limiting is evident in the increased instances of *fatwas* and the Islamist onslaught on NGOs and the education of women, which they promote. Both of these were strongly prevalent during the regime of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and Jamaat e Islami (Riaz 2004). Next, there has also been a visible rise in Islamic engagement, evident in the proliferation of the hijab, Islamic discussion circles, Islamic preachers on TV, etc.

The two perspectives - one that stifles the self, and one in which the self engages intentionally and intently - lead to the conclusion that the discourse on Islam is a complex one, with complex political formations and even more complex modes of

cultural penetration. It becomes difficult to say that Islam only oppresses, or releases, or functions as a tool of reaction. The Islam on the ground also becomes variegated, represented through a localization of global discourses and a de-politicization of the political. By this, we refer to the ways in which Wahhabi ideas are interpreted and acted out in the vernacular along with the ways in which Islamist rhetoric is mixed with Salafi ideals, pitted against Sufi practices that have long been the favored form of Islam in South Asia, informs the beliefs and practices of politically unsuspecting/uncritical citizen. The religio-cultural terrain fragmented and we see the effects of different discourses working simultaneously upon the self.

How does the self respond? In this paper, this is the question we seek to explore. Again, we do not allude that the self exists in a vacuum, but rather in a context where “Islam” does not assume a homogeneous meaning. The lack of homogenization stems from simultaneous and opposing processes of globalization, the local rooting of global (Arab) ideals, politicization and de-politicization, and the need to engage with versus the need to discard age-old cultural practices. Within such a context, we ask: what speaks to the self? What ideals are understood as Islamic, and how are they exerted upon the self in the creation of the self? How do variations in the formation of the self occur? We begin with women’s understandings of religion.

Islam is articulated first and foremost as faith. Faith or belief was explained through the term *Imaan*. *Imaan* is faith in a supernatural power that is greater than humans. The actions that reflect *Imaan* are of two kinds. The first is ritual observances, which include mainly prayer and fasting. Factory workers reported that they have a sense of guilt about not praying and fasting as meticulously as they should. While many claim to be ritually observant, others have put the blame for ritual failure on time constraints due to work, and household chores. University students are the most ambivalent about ritual performances, asserting the importance of faith and a clean or pure heart, and social duties over rituals. “Prayers don’t turn a human being into a good Muslim. Being a good Muslim is about having qualities that do not affect others negatively”. For both groups, being a good Muslim is about the *mon*⁵. The ideal dispositions of the *mon* are reported to be *norom* (soft) and *komol* (tender). A factory worker from Savar said, “People will travel to different destinations and it is *mon* that will fix those destinations for them”. *Mon* has different functions for the *taleem* participant

⁵ The Samsad Dictionary translates *mon* as “mind, heart, mental state, mood, mentality, feeling, consideration, memory, inclination, desire, attraction, earnestness, devotion, sincerity, choice, resolve and decision.” It is safe to say that the term *mon* refers to a non-corporeal or mental entity that reflects upon one’s choices and dispositions.

where it is not the determinant of actions, but rather it is acts, through ritual performance that mould the interiorized values that constitute *mon*. For them, ritual observances are an integral part of obeying God and therefore a precondition to having the kinds of interiorities required of a good Muslim. One *taleem* adherent narrated that after attending *taleem* and being convinced that she was on the right path, one of the most difficult things she did was to break up all ties with her boyfriend. She said, "My *mon* did not want the break up." She said, however, that all the other acts such as prayers, fasting, remembering God, reading the *Quran*, and listening to *taleem* changed her desires. She says that over time her heart has accepted it as one of the best things she has ever done. Thus, interiority in and of itself has very little value. It has to subscribe to a rigidly constructed body of norms through repeated actions at the core of which is ritual observances. It is through the perfecting of rituals that one learns to acquire the requisite attributes and disposition of a "good person."

For factory workers and students, the disjuncture between ideal and real worlds of ritual performance are negotiated primarily through social observances - activities which allow women to lay claims on purity, in spite of a breach in prayers and fasting. Social observances include obedience to parents, looking after one's husband and children, home and maintaining a good relationship with one's in-laws. For the factory workers, earning a livelihood through work was an important obligation that affected their families directly. They said that while working helped ease financial hardship, they wished they did not have to work and could be taken care of. Given their poverty, however, they could not sit at home and let their children go hungry, even if it meant failing to perform religious rituals. One woman said, "God will understand that I need to feed my family. In fact He would want me to feed my family". University students place the least amount of importance on observances. Most end with faith, while some say that the "*mon* feels lighter" whenever they do perform any or some rituals. Thus, ultimately it is about whether one has fulfilled social duties and roles properly, and whether the correct performance of roles has lead to the inculcation of values that manifest in the maintenance of social cohesion and avoidance of conflicts.

For the *taleem* participants, avoidance of conflicts is also a means through which one becomes a "good person." How one goes about promoting cohesion, however, is different between *taleem* participants and the others. For example, while all groups say *ghibat* or backbiting reflects negatively on the *mon* as well as creating *fitna* or *fashad* or discord, the *taleem* participants delved deeper into the anatomy of *ghibat*, pointing out the special conditions in which it is permissible. For example, if one knows that someone's marriage is being fixed with a person

regarding whom she knows something negative and potentially harmful, she must inform the person of the suitor's negative traits. In such cases, even if there is temporary turmoil resulting from the marriage talks falling through, the informant will have averted a greater catastrophe and saved society by taking on the god given responsibility towards god and self.

Thus, all groups preserve the goal of social order. For the students and factory workers social order is upheld through the primacy of a non-belligerent and socially conformist *mon* as a marker of religious virtue. For the *taleem* participant the *mon* that averts social discord does not necessarily have to be "soft" and "tender", but should rather be imbued with religious virtue that is learnt and cultivated through textual edicts and formulas. Through the conditioning the *mon* receives, its significance lies not in its ability to dictate actions, but in its ability to be taught, thereby making it not a marker of virtue, but a means through which certain norms and virtues are lived to desired ends.

In conclusion, different groups make sense of beliefs and practices in different ways. It is the *taleem* participants who are the most religiously observant. Their performance of rituals, however, does not constitute an end in and of itself. Rather, rituals are intended to condition interiorities in a manner that leads to their self-definition as the "rightly guided Muslims." Other groups do not approach and conceptualize ritual performances as such an intrinsic part of the self.

4. Purdah

The word purdah literally means a curtain. For the different groups of women interviewed, purdah refers to covering that ranges from donning a large scarf (*orna*) which is the usual extension of the *shalwar kameez* worn by most working women, to the hijab and burqa with or without socks and gloves.

The factory workers believed that covering was an enactment of *shalinota* (modesty). It upheld *shalinota* by appeasing society as well as following religious edicts. Religious rulings and societal moorings were invoked interchangeably. Covering elevated them in society as well as brought them rewards from God. They felt that their poverty and their need to go outside the home for employment, however, did not permit them to observe purdah in the sense of complete seclusion. Nonetheless, a good majority wore a head covering and a burqa when they stepped outside their homes. Women took to head covering for a variety of reasons. One woman said, "I cover when I go far from my home, where there are many people that I do not know. It is a sin for a lot of people to see you. With a burqa on, I can go anywhere by myself. Without it I feel weak (*durbol*), I feel bad (*kharap*)". Other reasons include fulfilling in-laws' wishes, to avert harassment and for practicalities such as going out of the house and to the bazaar without needing to change and look presentable. Most women agreed with the worker who claimed that her "*mon* feels more fortified, strengthened and is happy at the understanding that I am held in good esteem by society". Thus, while the responsibility of enacting modesty through covering is the women's, it is primarily due to society that women cover.

Only fifteen percent of the university students interviewed covered. Amongst these students, the reasons for covering ranged from the convenience of not needing to comb one's hair before stepping out of the house, to increased mobility, to the fulfillment of religious obligation. The authority of religious edicts and the ultimate responsibility of the self in upholding veiling also characterized the *taleem* women's covering.

The norm or ideal that came up in all the discussion on covering was *shalinota* or modesty. Women argued that modesty could be enacted in different ways, where the physical act of covering can be replaced by the purdah of the *mon* (Kabeer 2000) and purdah of the eyes. Purdah of the *mon* and purdah of the eyes were

maintained through “doing God’s work, and by maintaining good relations with others, all of which kept the *mon* pure. A *shaleen* (modest) *mon* is that which does not “do punk”. Factory workers often invoke “to do and to be a punk” to refer to the wearing of tight clothing, western clothing, coloring and cutting one’s hair short. Also, a lot of workers were skeptical of burqa-clad women, as it was widely believed that they steal things and keep them under their burqas. Thus, the negotiation of the physical act of purdah through the purdah of the *mon* points to the primacy of internal state that may be compliant to religious authority, but is unquestioning of the challenges posed by the contextual features that allows women to gain a sense of purity from covering.

The great value placed over interiorities raises the question: is purdah then even required? Also, if internal states are what count the most, why bother with covering for strategy and convenience? Both categories: women who do not cover as well those who do so for religious reasons argue that covering for strategy diminishes the respect purdah commands. The non-coverers argue that if *shalinota* is at the heart of covering, one may enact *shalinota* by controlling lewd thoughts and speech, and walking and talking in a manner that deters men’s gaze - acts which may not necessarily be regulated by physical covering. A student of Dhaka University said, “I used to cover my head. But I was very uncomfortable because I was still doing “bad” things. So, I stopped wearing it. The next time I wear it I will make sure that I am ready for it”. This quote is indicative of the view that covering should be compatible with certain ways of feeling and acting. In not covering, the women are not necessarily rejecting the religious and cultural discourses that prescribe it. Rather, they are waiting to have certain feelings, strength and emotions (if ever they do) that will enable them to refrain from undesirable acts, so that they may finally possess an interiority which will validate the act of covering. Thus, inner states clearly need to precede physical acts before modesty gains the wholeness it deserves.

Taleem participants do not allow the nature of internal states to bear upon decisions of whether to cover or not. The act of covering has to be performed because it is one’s religious duty. Unlike the groups thus far discussed, covering was not contingent, but central to having desired dispositions, of which *shalinota* is a constitutive element. For these women, an important feature of their disposition is the ability to deflect men’s attention. One woman said, “If by covering I am able to keep away from men’s gaze, I have not only protected myself, but also maintained social order”. Thus, unlike the students who argued that purdah is a part of *shalinota*, for the *taleem* participants, *shalinota* is a part of purdah. They believe that the internalization of modesty that should manifest in speech and thought can never be without following the fundamental

commands of the *Quran*, of which, they understood veiling to be a crucial one. Thus, taking the veil physically was a way to tutor the interiorities to correspond to what God and religion expected of them. Without the physical act, the interiority lost a certain and fixed route through which it was to be formed and maintained, and risked falling prey to the will of family, culture and society. Many of the participants reported that their hijab (the scarf used as head covering) was not welcome by their families.

Both the *taleem* participants as well as the skeptical students point out the applicability of purdah to men, arguing that even men need to have purdah (of the eyes) by lowering their gaze. The female students are critical of societal ambivalence towards such injunctions for men. Several students of Dhaka University commented, “Where does it say that we have to wear a burqa. I don’t know if these dictates are religious or whether they come from the mullahs”. This comment is interesting on several grounds. It sheds light on the fact that women make a distinction between the social and the religious in conceptualizing acts women need to perform. This statement, however also reflects a desire to protect religion and pass the blame onto society, which is responsible for misconstruing religious teachings. Thus, the refusal to perform certain acts that are widely perceived to be religious is buttressed through their disassociation from religion and their affiliation with society. Unlike the students, *taleem* participants do not use male failings to negotiate their own responsibilities, arguing that just because a man is not obedient, it does not make sense that they would disobey too. After all, they will have to answer for themselves and “no one can intercede” for them.

Thus, in this section we find that purdah or covering is taken up as a symbol of modesty, as well as for strategy and convenience. We also find a deeper engagement, however, with purdah as a religious edict and its bearing upon the self. Such an engagement questions and critiques the reasoning of covering as strategy and convenience. Such critiques also alter the relationship between veiling and modesty, where modesty becomes not an accompaniment of but subsumed under the act of veiling. Such conceptualizations are most likely to ensure the presence of veiling. As we have seen, however, the absence of veiling may also indicate such an understanding where a woman rejects covering her head not because she is not religious, but because she needs to acquire the requisite qualities of a good Muslim before she can give the respect it deserves. In other words, the absence of veiling is not a statement of the rejection of religion, but part of a process of engaging with it more deeply.

5. Sexuality: male female relations

In this section sexuality refers to male female relations. An analysis of male female relations is broken down into opinions women hold towards premarital relationships, marriage, extramarital relations, divorce and polygamy. We highlight how women invoke religion to legitimize or denounce certain practices pertaining to their sexuality.

All the factory workers interviewed agreed that romantic relationships between unmarried men and women were on the rise. There were a good number of workers who spoke of it favorably as a partial result of mass literacy and the closer ties and openness that education has fostered between the generations. One woman said, "Nowadays parents are friendlier with and have more respect for their children, who are more educated. Children also have the confidence and courage to tell their parents that they have chosen a particular person to marry." While having a boyfriend and entering into a love match is viewed as a positive extension of the modernity that education is thought to bring about, the issue of obedience to parents is invoked as a consideration towards lesser flexibility in choosing one's own partner. One woman said, "It is okay for a girl to go ahead and choose a partner, but it should be someone her parents would approve of. Parents raise their children with a lot of hope. The children should remember that and not disappoint their parents". Thus, the ideals of education and obedience sit uncomfortably together in these women's lives as they engage in romantic ties and seek out marriage partners for themselves. Obedience is considered to be a virtue that is sanctioned both by religion as well as society. In other words, pleasing one's parents in choosing one's partner is considered to be both a social as well as a religious obligation. The failure in obedience occurs first when one chooses a man not after her parents' hearts, and also when a woman has "crossed the limit", and has had sexual relationship with a man. Not a single informant spoke of premarital sex favorably. Women worry that if relationships fail to lead to marriage, a woman will be subject to critique and condemnation by the man that she does not marry.

Marriage, for these factory workers, is an extremely defining and life-altering event. Most women, however, express regrets about the instability that characterizes this very important institution. One woman said, "These days, couples take marriage so lightly that everyone mocks married people, especially

those that work in garment factories.” They claim that marriages are becoming unstable for a number of reasons. First, they assert that the media’s portrayal of men and women’s fashion along with romantic liaisons between them works as a temptation that disrupts the marital unit. The temptation is harbored by the nature of employment and increased mobility and physical proximity, which it facilitates. Deeper in the fragile architecture that characterizes marriage, however, lies the roles played by a husband and a wife and the values that are deemed the ideal markers of marriage. There is agreement on the fact that the relationship between a husband and a wife is free of certain impositions and interferences that were an integral part of marriage before. For example, one woman said, “Before, being married meant that we had to take a lot of nonsense from our husbands or mothers-in-law. But nowadays, our work outside the home has reduced many of those pressures”. In spite of the lessening of stringencies, women continue to bear the brunt of domestic responsibilities, and the failure in performing household duties to desired levels justifies male discord and even aggression. One woman said, “I learnt at *taleem* (class) that we must obey our husbands, we must do everything we can to please him and his family. That is a duty Allah demands of us”. Another woman said, “If at the end of long day, my husband comes home to find the food not ready, and the home is a mess, of course he will beat me”. While, in addition to men “deserving” a certain amount of reverence, women also speak of excesses of male behavior that are unjust. One example of this is men beating their wives “too much” and leaving their wives and children for another woman. The women unanimously agree that breaking up of the family, especially as a result of extramarital relations is disapproved by religion. It is despised and even feared by the women interviewed. The sense of helplessness and vulnerability that women experience at abandonment is intense enough to make them claim that a marriage should be maintained at any cost possible. While only “bad” men cheat on, beat excessively and leave their wives, the ultimate responsibility of keeping a marriage alive is to be shouldered by the wife. One woman said, “There’s nothing a woman can’t do. If her husband is “bad”, she should know that it is very much within her power to turn him into a better man”. Underlying a woman’s role in preserving a marriage is the norm *dhorjo* (patience). The women claim that it is the failure to engage with this virtue that is leading to the increasing fractures in marriages - fractures that can be cemented over by women exerting themselves by being patient. Thus, patience is the virtue a woman needs to engage with in order to have the requisite interiority that safeguards a marriage, which is considered to be not only a social ideal but also a religious one.

While women should be the ones to take up the cause of fragile marriages, even if the man has many faults, polygyny is clearly seen as the man’s fault. The

women claim to be aware that Islam sanctions the act. Women, however, also engage with religious discourse and argue that a man can take a second wife only if he can treat both with equal attention and affection. Thus, while the onus of patience is on the woman and therefore needs to be cultivated for a marriage to work, the women do not talk of patience if a man seeks out a second wife. Women detach themselves from the situation and use religious reasoning to deter husbands from engaging in polygamy.

For the *taleem* women a romantic relationship prior to marriage is not acceptable. These women are intolerant of these relationships first and foremost because they go against the dictates of God as presented in the *Quran* and the sayings of the prophet. The women make sense of these injunctions by going into the depths of *Quranic* interpretations of these rulings. They believe that proximity of most sorts, especially ones that are laden with emotion and affection can lead to the arousal of sexual desires, desires that could lead to acts that are to be confined within marriage. Thus romance before marriage is to be avoided at all costs. One woman said that the hardest thing for her when she “came into” Islam anew was to cut off ties with her boyfriend. She said it troubled her immensely and ultimately she had to end the liaison. Some women, however, claim that while they would never again have a “boyfriend”, they would still like a role in choosing their partners. One woman said that she would definitely want to meet her potential partner and talk to him to assess whether they would be compatible in marriage. In this case, similar to the factory workers, obedience is key. Unlike the factory workers, however, obedience is driven by the authority of religious texts and interpretations, rather than by family. Obedience to religion cannot be interceded by education or any other factor that is a part of their everyday life. As a result, unlike the factory workers, women strive to completely remove it from their lives.

Marriage, for the *taleem* women, is not only life defining and life altering, but also a special relationship that needs to be invested with a lot of wisdom derived from religion. All the women claimed to share a closer relationship with their husbands since understanding the “correct” roles and duties of husbands and wives. They argue very fervently that women’s domestic duties are sacred and that in performing them, they serve the society by raising children that are obedient to “the will of Allah”. All the women claim to be in close communication with their husbands, especially when decisions need to be made about home, children and finances. The *taleem* women consider divorce to be one of God’s least favorite things. They recognize, however, that Islam allows it. They say that if a woman, after trying her best and failing to change her husband for the better, has the option to leave him. Her right to divorce is God given, although the right should

be exercised with caution and counsel. Thus, patience is interceded by religious knowledge that women believe gives them the right to not bear the unbearable. As a result, the norm that marriage has to be permanent does not hold. Neither does the norm draw in women to exert themselves in being patient (*dhorjoshil*).

The *taleem* women do not look upon polygyny favorably. All of them are aware of the fact that Islam allows it, with certain conditions. They are very upfront, however, in asserting that it is not something they would accept in their own lives. They further critique the reasons behind men having multiple wives in today's world. One woman said, "Men these days do not take a second wife out of duty, but out of lust. Lust is not allowed by Islam, and this prohibition is for both men and women. So, I don't think I would like to be married to a lustful man". Here, like the factory workers, women distance themselves from the discourse on polygyny, and make the matter much more about male attitudes and (lack of) responsibility. The responsibilities that would deter a man from taking another wife need to be marked more internally by the absence of lust, rather than practical, such as the equal financial maintenance of two wives.

Students are extremely tolerant of romance before marriage. Many of those interviewed claimed to be in romantic relationships, while all agreed that it was an extremely common phenomenon. Most of the students who are romantically involved are in a relationship with fellow classmates. For these women, many of who reside in university hostels away from home, it is an "openness and friendship", rather than romance that is new. Regarding parental and familial authority, one woman said, "My parents always warn me against being too friendly with male friends. They would not approve of my riding a rickshaw with a boy, and so I don't really discuss the extent to which I 'hang out' with my male friends". While most express little guilt and the fear of their family finding out, they are also confident that if the relationship progresses further, which it is expected to, the women will break the news to their families in anticipation of marriage. Thus, obedience to parents is negotiated in a way that sanctions the act of mixing with the opposite sex. Underlying the tension of "excessive" familiarity with and proximity to men is the issue of premarital physical affection, notably premarital sex.

Along with premarital romance, physical relations are also on the rise. One woman reported, "Now if anyone with a boyfriend says that she has not kissed him she is lying!" All the students interviewed, however, claimed to disapprove of premarital sex. Like the factory workers, they too feared pregnancy to be an undesirable outcome of such liaisons. Unlike the factory workers, however, the prime victim of such pregnancies would be more the family unit and not the

woman. One woman said, “In case of pregnancies the girl could just marry the father of the child or take other kinds of recourses”. Women’s fear of societal repercussions at unwanted pregnancies is superseded by a disdain for the effects of pre-marital sex on one’s interiority — one in which emotions are increasingly eroded. One woman says, “Imagine if a girl has had sex with her boyfriend and the relationship does not end up in marriage! It is then very likely that she will have another boyfriend, and in most probability will have sex with this person too. If she just keeps having sex, eventually will she even be able to feel the same kind of love, the same kind of emotions every time? Probably not, and so it is best to refrain from sex before marriage”. All the women agree that religious teachings are instrumental to creating the dislike they harbor towards premarital sex. They are more ready, however, to negotiate with religion over romance than over sex. Having said that, all of the women claimed that premarital sex is becoming more prevalent. Many of the women reported knowing girls who have already engaged in it. One woman said, “Who knows? It may become very common not too far in the future!”

All the students interviewed prefer love marriages. The most important characteristic of a marriage is *shomjhota* or understanding. Love marriages are preferred because they foster maximum understanding between women and men. Also, they are considered to keep evils such as dowry at bay. One woman said, “Dowry has nothing to do with Islam. In a love marriage, the boy and the girl are so keen anyway that people don’t really bring up the issue of dowry, which plagues arranged marriages”. They consider the roles of husband and wife to be fast changing, where women have much more of a role in the public arena. Most students did not focus on domestic roles, which the factory workers and *taleem* participants both stressed. In fact, they said that pressure, especially by in-laws, regarding housework, is to be resisted. One woman said, “If my mother-in-law wants to stop me from working, my husband has to support me”. Thus, the *shomjhota* or understanding, which is the most defining feature of a marriage, is expected to lead to the creation of a marital unit where the husband and wife are insular and take on the rest of the world together and on behalf of themselves and each other. With *shomjhota* as key, domestic duties become peripheral to the functioning of a marriage. Women also critique the validity of the “religious/social” notion that a wife is beneath the husband, questioning the authenticity of its religious roots. Thus, in questioning the absence of gender parity that characterizes conventional notions of husband wife relations, women set aside and protect religion, ascribing the injustice to the workings of a patriarchal social order.

Extra marital affairs are not favorably looked upon. While women's opinions resonate an understanding of how and why extra marital affairs can happen, all of them say that it is better to get divorced and then move onto the next person. There is much awareness among students that as Muslim women they have a right to divorce. In fact, unlike the factory workers, students felt that divorce is a valid recourse if the marriage is bad. Thus, in the maintenance of marital ties, *dhorjo* or patience does not have to come into play at all times. One woman narrated the story of her murdered professor who exercised patience in staying with a philandering husband. Her patience left her lying dead in her apartment. It is suspected that her husband had her killed. On the other hand, the women were also acutely aware of the fact that there are many obstacles that stand between a woman and divorce, such as familial support, social acceptance and economic vulnerability. The women think, however, that such stigma is again an extension of a patriarchal social system, whereas religion offers every right to divorce.

Women agree that Islam sanctions male polygyny. While a few amongst the devout decline to comment on it, others stay within a religious discourse and take recourse in religious reasoning to argue for its inapplicability in modern times. One woman said, "The prophet had been married to one woman (Khadija) for over twenty years until her death. It is only after losing his first wife that he took more wives, who were all war widows. We have to understand what these marriages meant and also the alliances they helped the prophet establish for the expansion of Islam". Thus, polygyny should be averted, and it is the man's role to think through his responsibility in removing it from everyday life.

Thus, in this section we see that ideals such as patience, the feminine heart, and the importance of domestic duties are dealt with differently to produce different understandings and outcomes of love, sex, marriage, and divorce. We also find that polygamy is despised by all the women interviewed - even the *taleem* women who are the most religious, and take a much more conservative position on women's roles and responsibilities in and outside of marriage. All three groups reject polygyny, but do so by drawing on clauses that are a part of a religious understanding on male behavior: that they must not be lustful, that they need to maintain (all) their wives and families (equally) and that it may be permissible if like the prophet, men took multiple wives as part of an effort to give distressed women shelter.

6. Rights and freedom

By rights, women refer to a variety of phenomena ranging from entitlement to property, control over their family, custody over children, the right to receive mahr⁶, the right to divorce and those rights related to citizenship. The term freedom was used to explain greater mobility, the power to choose, the power to express and vocalize their thoughts and opinions. In general, the term freedom refers to the feeling of being and having control over one's own life. In this section, we attempt to demonstrate the variegated ways in which rights and freedom are conceptualized by the different groups of women studied.

According to factory workers, they now enjoy greater freedom than women in earlier generations. This newfound freedom is attributed to their access to employment and the income that is generated by their participation in the labor force. As one woman said, "I am free because I work in a garment factory, and I am free to go out, travel to and fro from work and buy whatever I need". The freedom of mobility was unanimously regarded as extremely important, and most women appreciated enjoying greater mobility. Many women, however, also said that this freedom is optimized in a burqa, as the additional clothing and head covering protects them from harassment in the public space. Here burqa becomes a solution to a social problem - women's vulnerability to harassment by men. When we asked if they considered it to be a religious dictate, they responded that it is both religious and social. Women were quite unperturbed about religion, and did not articulate religion as having any constricting bearing on mobility. One woman said, "There is a hadith that asks one to treat a girl and boy equally. If a woman lives within religion, she can be absolutely free. There is nothing a woman can't do. She can do everything a man can do. She too can go to the office and to the market - she will only be helping herself by observing purdah. She can also have the freedom to stay home and spend time with her children". One woman from Sylhet said, "I can't spend enough time with my children because I have to go out to work. For me this is not freedom. I would like to have the choice to stay home". Thus, while women aspire to greater income, greater mobility and other fringe benefits such as more shopping malls,

⁶ *mahr* (Arabic: مهر) is a gift, mandatory in Islam, which is given by the groom to the bride upon marriage in Islamic cultures. It is considered to be a form of appreciation, as well as providing certain guarantees for the woman. The gift can be intangible or negligible; it can take the form of investments or real property. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahr>)

fashionable hairstyles and trendy clothing, they are also aware of a wider and more exhaustive notion of freedom. As we will discuss, however, in order to enjoy the freedom of staying home to look after one's household and children, the home also has to function in a way where women are secure and able to assert themselves.

While the factory woman's freedom consists of the liberal⁷ dream, the spirit of progress is dampened by her family life, where freedom is intrinsically and negatively linked to marriage. One woman from Bhashantek responded, "There is no freedom after marriage, after which the husband controls everything". Another woman said, "I feel as though I have no rights in my life. I have to ask my husband and my in-laws about everything I need and want".

While women's focus of the lack of freedom seems to reside in the marital family, women's rights within their natal families, especially by way of property inheritance is also problematic. Most of the women we spoke to came from poor families and claimed that their natal families simply did not have enough wealth for everyone to inherit. They are aware that Islam allows them half of their brother's share, and while they think that this is unjust, they do not fight for even that. They barter their property rights to their brothers in lieu of a good relationship with their kin.

Their relationship with the family was seen as important and was sanctioned as a social as well as a religious norm. The women argued that in order to maintain that relationship they must not strive for any freedom that lessens the social standing, "prestige" and honor of their families. Thus, accessing freedom meant tiptoeing around and staying within the bounds of what is acceptable. The common example of transgression was relationships with the opposite sex. One woman said, "Freedom is not doing whatever we please. If certain acts hurt our families or make them look bad in front of others, they cannot be positive channels of attaining freedom. We really should keep that in mind. By being rash and hasty, we can never gain true freedom".

Thus, for the factory worker, freedom follows the trajectory of work, income, mobility and improvement in lifestyle. Freedom, however, is also sought in the home, with kin and affine. While factory workers subscribe to the notion that acting as an individual - by one's wishes and desires exclusively is not a constructive conception of freedom - they feel that the social and economic

⁷ By the liberal dream/ideal, we refer to the progress envisioned by liberal, modern projects that conceptualize positive changes in women's lives through participation in the labor force and its accompaniments. For a detailed discussion see Feldman (1998).

make-up of the context within which their lives are embedded are also not amenable to that which is desirable and potentially attainable. In order for society to cooperate, they ask the aid of religion only in assigning them greater inheritance rights. On other matters, they feel that the stance religion takes is a fair one. It is men and the socio-economic conditions that affect them and that fail to deliver to women what they want and what they feel will grant them greater freedom.

The students responded much in the same way as the factory workers. Freedom consisted of primarily the “liberal dream” - that of income, mobility without harassment, etc. The students did not bring up *purdah* as a condition for their freedom of greater mobility. They believed that women should have this freedom without harassment even if they choose not to don a head covering or *burqa*. In addition, students also mentioned “equal opportunities.” They expected to be able to work in similar jobs as their husbands, and be remunerated the same way. Thus, one student said, “Freedom has everything to do with economic solvency”. In addition, freedom was also about equality in the family that is to be sought through education and by delaying marriage. The students believed that delaying marriage coupled with education would give them the leverage to negotiate a better standing within marriage, which they saw as an essential ingredient to attaining freedom.

The women interviewed argued that while a better status within marriage is essential, this component of freedom should be sought in a delicate way, without resorting to behavior that causes embarrassment to themselves or their families. Here, women articulate societal expectation and religion in tandem, arguing that both expect women to achieve their goals with “dignity.” The same women, however, are quite vociferous when talking about rights to *mahr* and the inheritance of property. Most of the students claim that the lesser share portioned to women is the doing of patriarchal rules in society and not religion *per se*. One student said, “I don’t believe that Islam, with its spirit of justice would assign women less. It’s our men - our husbands, fathers, brothers - who don’t want to give us [equal shares]. They only have to want to give us more - that would be more in line with religion”.

The *taleem* women have a completely inverted understanding of freedom - inverted in light of the liberal trajectory the other groups appear to be on. Before embarking on a discussion of what freedom and rights mean for *taleem* women, I would like to point out that their responses vary by the socio-economic groups to which they belong. Thus, the desire to have the freedom to work and be mobile varies by social positioning. While the responses vary from not wanting to go out

to for work and finding ways to infuse that with piety, the overarching issue for these women is motivation. These women's role models are iconic figures from Islamic history such as the prophet's wives, his daughter, etc. *Taleem* women believe that whether a woman has to or chooses to work, they must do so because it helps them become and feel closer to God. The kinds of work and modes of comportment within work that take them away from God are to be discarded. In other words, employment and mobility have to be circumscribed within limits set by religion, where the limits take precedence over those fixed by society. Thus, we have women who have given up pursuing degrees to engage in (informal) religious learning because they believed it brought them closer to God.

For the *taleem* women, staying within the limits set by religion and being true to those limits is the source of ultimate freedom - whether that freedom is manifested through labor force participation, through housework and child rearing or through education and learning. By staying true to a cause that serves God the best, these women feel that they will be able to attain a freedom that not only gives them status at home and in society, but also gives them their due (wealth, inheritance), liberating them from the shackles of societal influence and control.

7. Greater awareness, greater reflection and new spaces

In this research, the claims made about what Islam should be as well as reports on recent trends such as the proliferation of *taleem* indicate a shift towards conservatism and textualization as indicated by recent studies (Gardener 1998). The opinions of the informants suggest that there is a real desire to textualize and authenticate Islam, and it is this “educated and knowledge-based” Islam that holds greater value for the women interviewed.

The factory workers, most of who are barely educated also speak highly and favorably of “changes in Islam” that represent textual knowledge. Women reported actively seeking sources of religious knowledge, including through TV programmes and the preaching of the *taleem* apa, (the woman who conducts *taleem* lessons) rather than depending on the knowledge passed on in the family through mothers and grandmothers.

Women’s preference for a brand of Islam that is more thought through and is disseminated from extra familial sources, such as the educated *hujur*⁸ goes hand in hand with their affinity for *taleem*. A majority of the factory workers interviewed reported that not only is *taleem* held in their area, but that they have attended and enjoy attending the religious meetings for women.

One may or may not accept the changes *taleem* calls for, but all unanimously agree on the respectability of the *taleem* apa. The case of one particular *taleem* teacher is interesting. She is reputed to have been of “ill character”. Her husband did not earn a good salary and she was unhappy being with him. Then suddenly she became religious and eventually started conducting religious sessions in her home. She was now very well accepted and respected by society. The other *taleem* conductors were mostly well off and educated by the standards of the area.

⁸ *Hujur* is a man who knows how to read the Quran in Arabic with the correct pronunciation and intonation. Usually, his *madrasa* education will have also given him some knowledge on the hadith (sayings of and events in the Prophet Muhammad’s life). These men are usually employed by local mosques and *madrasas* and also go to people’s homes to teach children how to read the Quran, and how to lead a more religious life.

University students showed very similar tendencies towards the authentication of religious beliefs and practices. While there were a handful of university students who attend or had attended *taleem*, most claimed that their busy schedules did not leave them enough time for the classes. Those, however, who had not participated, also did not have anything negative to say about the classes.

In the report, we have demonstrated that education, work, access to and the desire for income allow women to negotiate with religion in ways that are not debilitating. These narratives of negotiation and change are very much in line with a liberal discourse that sees empowerment as arising out of a particular kind of negotiation with religion, where “religious” rituals and forms are separated from, or not so intrinsic to, a positive understanding of the interiorities that the self represents. Our research findings indicate that the lack of empowerment centers around women’s sense of sin and guilt, most of which is very intrinsically related to issues of sexuality. Thus, while these women have negotiated with religious dictates to establish a legitimate place for material aspects of their life such as education and work, the influence of religious norms on their bodies and relations with the opposite sex is quite hegemonic, where religion and society are considered to exert pressure in tandem. In other words, their sense of agency emanating from their ability to work, contribute to household income, etc, does not translate into a reduced sense of sin and guilt around sexuality. While, to many this may seem inconsequential for women’s overall empowerment, we argue that an understanding of women’s sense of self worth as emanating from the domain of religion and sexuality is important, especially in light of creeping religious conservatism that increasingly marks the socio-political landscape of the world in general and South Asia in particular. If it is enough that women’s empowerment scores well on the material front, the unresolved aspects of her non-material being are left open for “other” kinds of interventions that claim to offer a resolution of guilt and shame. This is where the *taleem* women enter, amongst who issues of sexuality are resolved through religion, which anchors all other projects of change. Thus, in these two different trajectories of change women are empowered through different routes, although not always without commonalities. Given that through *taleem* religion has been brought out of the public sphere where issues around women’s sexuality is key, I argue that it is important for other routes of change and empowerment to come to grips with how religion and sexuality may be brought within their fold in a manner that makes sense to the people on the ground.

Last but not least, what do we make of women for whom exterior acts such as praying or veiling are essential to forming the interior? Does the space of *taleem* with its focus on externalities and the ensuing position on purdah, marriage, love

and sex represent a domain where women are able to feel empowered? How do we read empowerment in the space circumscribed by *taleem*? The *taleem* women interviewed equate the primacy of external states with notions of responsibility and accountability in living a life in line with religious dictates. As pointed out earlier, such responsibility and accountability to religious authority may even lead to questioning and subverting societal norms and expectations. In overcoming ideals, which they come to view as societal impositions, women thrive in the processes of striving towards and attaining particular goals. My question at this point is: what do we make of this strife and sense of attainment? In line with Mahmood's⁹ redefinition of docility, if we equate "malleability required of someone for her to be instructed in a particular skill or knowledge" with achievement and agency, then the ability of external forms to influence interiorities signals the role of religion as empowering to women. In this particular understanding of agency and empowerment, patriarchy and subordination need to be reconfigured, where unequal relations are equated to complementarities of roles from which women draw prowess as gendered and sexual beings. The strength emanating from a clear understanding of their responsibility and accountability in fulfilling God ascribed roles is then used to throw light on men's roles and responsibilities and their accountability. Thus, women play an active role in cultivating their own roles as well as that of the men folk. In this cultivation, women may not throw out patriarchy, but reconfigure its constitution in new ways and redefine subordinate with a kind of complementarity that would lead to, in their opinion, a "just" society.

In conclusion, there are no absolute defining features by which one judges religiosity or the lack of it. Women seem to negotiate with religion in order to allow greater freedom from patriarchy, while also negotiating and re-configuring patriarchy as religion is allowed a greater place in their lives. The question then is: if through religion, women are able to assert and change themselves without necessarily challenging patriarchy, how does that strife and change reflect on the parameters through which we understand empowerment? Through the course of presenting this research to various audiences, we have sensed the great discomfort people have with seeing religious engagement that does not challenge patriarchy as a pathway to empowerment. The critiques to viewing this route as a valid pathway have been centered on the wider political implications of increased religiosity and certain intolerant and violent outbreaks that "political Islam" has led to in recent times. While our research has not addressed the political bases of religious engagement, we feel that it is an important factor that impedes the

⁹ Mahmood (2005). *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. New Jersey and Oxfordshire, Princeton University Press.

conceptualization of increased religiosity as agency. Thus, we end with the suggestion that we look into and agree on the limits of politics before we make judgments on female agency. We need to also work harder for greater conceptual clarity where political limits and female subjectivity are understood for the commonalities as well as the points on which they can be separated one from the other. Last but not least, we need to also question our own assumptions and biases as we understand “politics”, “the feminine” and “agency,” as we use these to construct for others their pathways of empowerment.

References

Feldman S, 1998. (Re)Presenting Islam. Appropriating Gender: women's activism and politicized religion in South Asia. Amita Basu and Patricia Jeffery (Eds). 33-50; New York and London: Routledge.

Gardener K, 1998. Women and Islamic Revivalism in a Bangladeshi Community. Appropriating Gender: women's activism and politicized religion in South Asia. Amita Basu and Patricia Jeffery (Eds).P.203-220, New York and London: Routledge.

Kabeer N, 2000. The Power to Choose. London: Verso.

Mahmood S, 2005. *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. New Jersey and Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press.

Riaz A, 2004. God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh. Lanham, Md. Rowman and Littlefield.

The Daily Star 2008. Women's Dev Policy: Women, HR bodies demand scrapping of review body, 22 April, Online Edition, Front Page.