

THE DRESS DILEMMA OF BENGALI MIDDLE CLASS WOMEN: A SONG OF ICE  
(VIOLENCE) AND FIRE (RESISTANCE)

by

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(Under the Direction of Patricia L. Richards)

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how the bodies of urban middle-class Bangladeshi Muslim women function as sites of agency and resistance amid pervasive patriarchal controls. Grounded in McKinzie and Richards' (2021) social constraints on agency framework, it examines how clothing practices shape the post-colonial identity of women in Bangladesh. The study illuminates the intersection of gender, class, religion, and culture, emphasizing purdah and respectability norms that both constrain and catalyze resistance. Drawing on qualitative methods and interviews with 25 urban middle-class women (Islamists, Moderate Muslims, and Secular/Liberals), it reveals multifaceted constraints—ideological, interactional, institutional, internalized, and geographical—and strategies of direct resistance, strategic balancing, avoidance, and conformity. It also addresses whether modest attire protects women from harassment in public spaces, finding that it neither mitigates, nor eradicates, sexual harassment. Overall, this thesis contributes to understanding how urban middle-class Muslim women negotiate identities and assert rights within a rapidly changing post-colonial context.

INDEX WORDS: agency, constraints, resistance, clothing, sexual harassment, Bangladesh.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to myself. Far from a selfish gesture, it is a tribute to the person who persevered despite daunting challenges and countless moments of doubt. Many nights felt unbearable, but I chose to believe in my own strength rather than surrender. In doing so, I affirmed my worth and the belief that I deserve the best life has to offer. This research not only marks my first U.S. graduate degree but also serves as a testament to my relentless hard work and unwavering commitment to forging my own path. I am proud of myself to become whatever I am today.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Conceptualizing the Bangladeshi Urban Middle-Class: Ideologies, Cultures, Agency & Constraints**

#### **Introduction**

Dress is defined as “an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body” (Roach-Higgins & Eicher 1992, p. 1). Sociologists have emphasized the significance of the “dressed body” as a fundamental aspect of identity (González & Bovone, 2012). They highlighted how dress choices serve as “personal narratives,” enabling individuals to express their social position and communicate their belonging, exclusion, or even ambivalence to the outer world (González & Bovone, 2012, p. 71). Clothing serves as a medium through which individuals express and obscure their identities (Foucault, 1975). This is a concept particularly relevant in Bangladeshi societies, where clothing choices are deeply intertwined with the negotiation of power and identity of the wearer. The adoption or rejection of religious, cultural, or modern-secular ideologies in this post-colonial context has influenced this identity construction through clothing norms among urban middle-class Bangladeshi Muslim women.

There is a vast amount of literature examining Muslim women’s struggles and/or resistance to clothing (specifically veiling) in the Arab world (Al-Ali, 2000; Karam, 1998; Holt & Jawad, 2013). Among them, Marion Braizaz (2018) notes that current research strongly focuses on how individuals use clothing to develop agency, with extensive literature examining dressing practices as tools of resistance (Karimi, 2018; Fortier, 2017; Arthur, 1993). Fewer articles address South Asian and/or Bangladeshi Muslim women’s similar struggles; however,

these primarily focus on poor rural women's issues (Shehabuddin, 2008). A nascent body of literature addresses sexualities, non-heterosexual relationships, and post-liberalization lifestyles in urban Bangladeshi women since the 2000s (Osella & Osella, 2004; Karim, 2010). Recently, there has been a noticeable growth in research on Bangladesh's new and affluent urban middle class, their contribution to social transformation, and their unique characteristics, cultural diversity, and gender dynamics (Hussain 2015, 2017; Lewis 2011). This research contributes to this body of literature.

In this project, I examine how the bodies of urban middle class Bangladeshi women work as sites for agency and resistance to different forms of control and violence. I show how brown Muslim women have historically been used to construct and re-construct the identity of a post-colonial nation-state through the embodiment of different ideologies in their clothing. I answer research questions related to the bodily autonomy of brown Muslim women, utilizing McKinzie & Richards' theorization of social constraints on agency. I argue in this thesis that though certain patriarchal societal norms (such as purdah and culture of respectability in the Bangladeshi post-colonial societal context) restrict women's agency, thereby directly or indirectly exposing them to violence, urban middle-class Bangladeshi women resist such constraints and exercise their rights over their bodies in various ways.

In this chapter, I will explore the historical trajectory of violence against Bangladeshi women and define the varying ideological identities—including Islamist, moderate Muslim, and liberal/secular—to provide a contextual foundation. I will examine how urban middle-class womanhood in Bangladesh is shaped by the intersection of gender, class, religious, and cultural identities. For this research, I will particularly focus on the class-specific culture of “respectability” and the religious norm of “purdah,” as well as how these factors influence

women's bodily autonomy and agency in terms of clothing. Furthermore, I will discuss social constraints on women's agency and their forms of resistance, outline the research methods employed, and provide an overview of the subsequent chapters.

## **Background: A Song of Ice (Violence) and Fire (Resistance)?**

### ***Conceptualizing the History of Violence against Bangladeshi Women***

Tracing the history of violence is important because this thesis is situated in Bangladesh, a nation built on colonial legacies. Bangladesh continues to operate under centuries-old colonial legal and social structures fueled by patriarchal norms. In such a gender-traditional social structure, crimes against women and other minorities<sup>1</sup> have been historically institutionalized through various social (family, religion, and culture), political (state and the political parties), and legal (statutory laws and law enforcement agencies) institutions.

In Bangladesh, the ideological construction of women as “violate-able” (Speed 2014) has underpinned genocidal policies against sub-continental peoples from colonial through modern state times. The social settings that facilitate violence against Bangladeshi women today are inextricably linked to violence during the anti-colonial movements against the British and the independence war against Pakistan. As Speed (2014) argues, state violence cannot be extricated from other forms of violence—it is the state's discourse and practice that set the context and generate the conditions in which such violence can be enacted. However, the women in this region cannot be defined only as the objects of historical violence and subjugation; instead, they are also subjects of resistance in social movements against such patriarchal oppression. In this

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<sup>1</sup> I will limit my discussion to the violence against women here as the important topic of the human rights violation of the LGBTQI minorities in Bangladesh is beyond the scope of this research.

thesis, I narrate the story of such women, a story that I have titled *The Song of Ice (Violence) and Fire (Resistance)*.

I begin by examining how colonialism influenced the socio-legal status of women in Indian<sup>2</sup> society. While colonial rule led to reforms like the abolition of sati, allowance of widow remarriage, and eradication of illiteracy, it also promoted the idea that Indian traditions, rather than socio-economic factors, were the root cause of women's oppression (Moase, 2008). This prompted the urban middle-class Hindu and Muslim men, particularly the "bhadrolok" (respectable people), to champion the cause of women nationalists as part of a broader defense of Indian traditions (Kabeer, 1991; Gangoli, 2007). Nationalists resisted colonial intervention by separating the inner spiritual realm of Indian families from the outer world shaped by Western materialism (Moase, 2008; Chatterjee, 1989). This distinction promoted a model of 'Indian womanhood' that emphasized preserving women's honor through seclusion from the outer world, aligning with purdah and respectability norms.

Despite this approach, women actively participated in anti-colonial movements in the early 20th century, with organizations like the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) facilitating their mass mobilization. Although women were key participants in anti-colonial movements, they were often subjected to patriarchal control within these efforts, reinforcing traditional gender roles in the name of national identity (Chatterjee, 1989). During protests and movements like the Non-Cooperation Movement and Quit India Movement, women activists and participants were subjected to harassment, assault, and rape by colonial forces (Chakravarti 1993). Finally, the Partition of

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<sup>2</sup> The examination of the Indian historical society is important because Bangladesh formerly was a part of the colonial Indian subcontinent before the partition in 1947 took place. I discuss more about this historical trajectory in later sections.

India in 1947, based on religious demographics, ended British colonial rule but resulted in widespread violence, mass migration, and the displacement of millions (Butalia, 1998).

In the newly formed Islamic State of Pakistan, women became the primary targets of brutal violence, such as rape, abduction, and forced conversions, for their religious communal identity (Butalia, 1998). Bengali middle-class women's cultural practices, such as wearing bindis on the forehead or singing Rabindranath Tagore's<sup>3</sup> songs, dancing, and drama, allowing them to perform in public, came under attack by the Pakistani state as "non-Islamic / Hindu practices" and unacceptable in the Islamic State of Pakistan (Hussain 2015; Kabeer 1991; Shahabuddin 2008; Ahmed, 1985:47). As a result, Bengali Muslim women's bodies continued to be violatable by state forces in a post-colonial 'independent' state.<sup>4</sup> This violence was rooted in the idea that a woman's body represented the honor of the family, community, and nation, making them vulnerable to symbolic acts of retribution and control (Butalia 1998).

Finally, the birth of Bangladesh in 1971 involved the continuation of gendered political violence. During the 9-month-long independence war between Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Pakistani military systematically raped and murdered Bengali women, justifying their actions by labeling these women as "non-Muslims" due to their cultural similarities with Hindus. This dehumanization, rooted in a perception of Bengali women as culturally impure (Islamic) and therefore violatable, facilitated the perpetration of gendered violence on a massive scale. These atrocities were never prosecuted, reflecting the deep-seated impunity for such acts of violence. Moreover, one of the ways these war victims are still referred to today is as women who "lost their honor" in service to the nation (Azim 2022).

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<sup>3</sup> The first non-European and Indian to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 and a pivotal figure in the Bengali and Indian literature, music, and art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

<sup>4</sup> Yes, I added the emphasis to mock the meaning of independence.



The history of state-sponsored violence in Bangladesh continues to shape the experiences of women today through societal norms and state practices. After the recent overthrowing of the fascist government of Sheikh Hasina (2009 – 2024), a new interim government headed by Nobel Laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus assumed the leadership. While the citizens of Bangladesh are looking forward to a change-making process under his rule, the reality may be disappointing for women and other minoritized groups. I have been noticing a surge in social media posts (videos and pictures) from numerous women based in Dhaka and Cox's Bazar getting harassed and beaten on the streets by mobs due to their clothing (Rashid, 2024).<sup>5</sup>

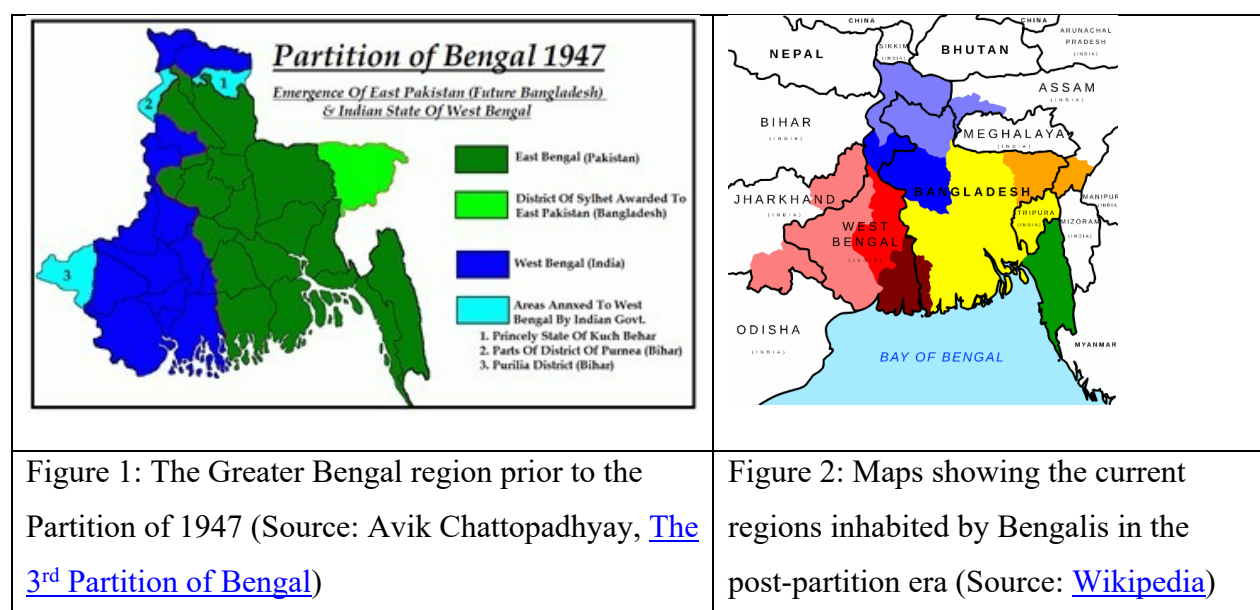
In these posts, nobody (neither law enforcement agencies nor laypeople) comes to help or save them when they are being attacked. Rather, I see a majority of people supporting and applauding these criminal acts, claiming that women who do not cover themselves up deserve it. I am also witnessing women on social media claiming to be scared and afraid to walk on the streets of Dhaka because of how commonplace such incidents are. Surprisingly, I could hardly find any national news media coverage for these incidents. These recent events further reinforce, albeit anecdotally, my claim that Bangladeshi women's bodies have been historically violatable and that this has continuously been institutionalized through various social (family, religion, and culture), political (state and political parties) and legal (statutory laws, and law enforcement agencies) institutions up to this date.

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<sup>5</sup> This is the only news reference that I could find on these incidents apart from the social media posts of the victims. However, this is not a news report, rather an opinion written by a columnist named Raffat Binte Rashid.

## ***“Bengali” vs “Bangladeshi”: Intersection between Religious, Cultural and Territorial Identities***

The terms ‘Bengali’ and ‘Bangladeshi’ refer to different, though sometimes overlapping, aspects of identity-related to the region of Greater Bengal and the countries of Bangladesh and India. ‘Bengali’ generally denotes the ethnic group native to the Greater Bengal region prior to the 1947 partition, encompassing both the Indian state of West Bengal and the country of Bangladesh. ‘Bangladeshi Bengali’ specifically refers to individuals residing within the political borders of Bangladesh, while ‘Indian Bengali’ pertains to those living within the political boundaries of India.



However, Bengalis in both nation-states are united by a common language, Bengali (aka Bangla), and a rich cultural heritage that includes literature, clothing, music, cuisine, and festivals. Culturally, Bengalis share traditions, customs, and festivals such as Pohela Boishakh (Bengali New Year), Durga Puja (predominantly among ‘Hindu Bengalis’), and Eid (among ‘Muslim Bengalis’). However, the distinction between the cultural identities of ‘Indian Bengali’

vs ‘Bangladeshi Bengali’ and the religious identities of ‘Hindu Bengali’ vs ‘Muslim Bengali’ did not arise until the 1980s. Since then, Bangladeshi Muslim Bengalis have navigated the complex task of redefining their cultural and religious identities amidst a shifting political landscape, as discussed below.

### ***Islamist, Moderate Muslim, and Liberal/Secular Identities: Muslims (by birth) with Different Ideologies***

All participants in my research were born into Muslim families and now identify as Islamists, Moderate Muslims, or Secular/Liberals. I define these terms in this section. The term “Islamist” has been defined differently by various scholars, often influenced by religious or political factors. In Western media, Islamists are portrayed as those seeking to impose sharī‘ah, often through violent means, and seen as violating human rights, particularly women’s rights (Shepard, 1996). Such portrayals are objectionable because they generalize Islamists as violent fundamentalist extremists imposing ultraconservative interpretations—particularly on women. Such notions oversimplify and stereotype a diverse group influenced by various religious and political factors.

Discarding such a biased portrayal, I choose to use the term in a more positive sense, reflecting my insider’s perspective on the Muslim world. In its original form, Islamism sought to revive Islam’s “past assertiveness and glory” by purifying it of “foreign elements and reasserting its role in both social and political life” (Burgat, 1997; Berman, 2003). Fuller (2003) broadens the definition, describing Islamism as a form of “identity politics,” emphasizing Muslim identity, revivalism, and community revitalization. Roy (1994) defines Islamism as a mix of faith revival and anti-Western sentiment rooted in resistance to imperialism and colonialism. I adopt Roy’s definition as most fitting for contemporary Bangladesh, where Islamists aim to maintain their

Muslim identity through practices like purdah and seek to reorder government and society according to Quranic principles. This reflects their commitment to reviving Islamic values and resisting Western influences.

The next term to discuss is “Secular/Liberals.” The term “Secular/Liberals” combines the principles of liberalism, which promotes democracy, equality under the law, and the separation of religion from government, with secularism, which seeks to limit religion’s influence in public life (Dunn, 1993; Galen, 2016). In Bangladesh, following India, secularism is practiced in the political sphere. As a secular state, the focus is on ensuring everyone is treated equally under the law, with the government maintaining a neutral stance towards all religions. However, in the Bangladeshi context, this doesn’t mean that the state is absent of religion. Instead of completely separating religion from the state, the constitutional emphasis is on fairness and equal treatment for all beliefs (Hashemi 2009). For example, marriage, divorce, and inheritance of properties are governed by the Shariah Law for Muslims and Hindu Law for Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains in Bangladesh. However, this pluralist legal system often leads to unequal treatment of citizens based on gender, ethnicity, and religion, conflicting with the constitutional principles of equality. Some participants argued that secularism is essential for modernization, while others saw it as ensuring freedom of religious or non-religious practices. The reliance on religious laws for personal matters, however, creates tension between political secularism and human rights standards. Secular/Liberal participants, along with some Moderate Muslims, expressed concerns about these inconsistencies.

The third ideology is “Moderate Muslims.” The concept of “moderation” in Islam is controversial. Some scholars argue that labeling Muslims as “moderate” implies that Islam is inherently violent, which is misleading (Younus 2017; Vidino 2010). They believe this term

creates a harmful stereotype, suggesting a small group of peaceful Muslims opposing a large group of extremists and equates “moderate” with “progressive” or “secular” (Manzoor, 2015; Younus, 2017). However, many Bangladeshi Muslims positively embrace the term “Moderate Muslims,” rejecting those stigmatized interpretations. Moderate Muslims identify as Muslims but do not practice religious teachings strictly and seek a balance between religious and liberal ideals.

Politically, Moderate Muslims support a secular state while allowing religious laws to govern personal matters. This reflects a middle ground between liberal secularism and religious conservatism. They also respect liberal ideals, such as human rights and individual freedoms, but do not fully align with Western secularism’s push for complete separation of religion from the state. They emphasize upholding Bangladeshi culture and nationalism, placing themselves in the grey area between Secular/Liberals and Islamists. Their existence highlights the fluidity of cultural and social identities, demonstrating that ideologies do not always follow patriarchy-influenced binary labels. The existence of Moderate Muslims highlights the diverse and hybrid identities that break away from binary categorizations of faith-based ideologies. In the next section, I discuss the emergence of the middle-class identity, which helps more fully understand the positionality of Bangladeshi Moderate Muslims.

### ***Urban Middle-Class Womanhood: Intersection between Gender, Class, and Cultural Identities***

While conceptualizing the history of violence against Bangladeshi women above, I mentioned the emerging middle class in the Indian subcontinent. Colonial middle-class people were in the ‘middle’ of the classes and in the middle between colonialists and other Indians (Hussain, 2017). In addition, most middle-class Hindus were of high caste. Due to this

combination of high caste and middle-class status, they emphasized certain key values as a community, such as scientific and rational education for men and respectability for women (Gilbertson, 2011:25). Developing a dominant educated class identity, they further claimed to represent the broader population (Karim, 2012, p. 9). The cumulative efforts of this progressive and reformist group eventually led the Indian subcontinent to gain independence from colonial rule in 1947 through partition. The partition led to the creation of three new countries: India, West Pakistan, and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).

After the partition, women started entering the public workforce in the Pakistani regions, mainly in teaching and government roles within urban areas. Following that, the liberal movements led by this group in the 1950s accelerated women's education, especially among Muslims. As more urban middle-class Bengali women joined the Bengali nationalist movement during the 1950s and 1960s, their involvement was seen as a form of "cultural resistance" against Pakistani rule (Shahabuddin, 2008; Kabeer, 1988). Within the next decade (1970s), professional women became more integrated into the middle-class social structure. Ultimately, this class of urban middle class Bengali women participated in the nationalist mass movement that resulted in Bangladesh's independence in 1971.

Bengali middle-class women had unique cultural practices, such as wearing sarees and bindis on the forehead and performing arts in public, that distinguished them from Pakistani Muslim women in other classes and regions. These cultural practices later became central to Bangladesh's independence movement as a reaction against state intervention in people's personal lives. During this period, women participated in street marches and protests, demanding political freedom and democracy for "Bengalis" (Ahmed, 1985; Murshid, 2008), as distinct from "Pakistanis." Bengali women became symbols of the nationalist discourse, and their social

position was defined by their identity as Bengali women, as opposed to Muslim women. They sought to establish a “secular” fusion identity that included aspects of Islam (saying prayers, wearing longer clothing items, and keeping faith) as well as Bengali cultural practices (celebrating Bengali New Year, singing Tagore’s songs and dancing). This secular fusion identity has shaped the characteristics of Bengali middle-class women since that time, eventually evolving into the contemporary “Moderate Muslim” ideologies explored in this research.

Economic reforms in the late 1970s and 1980s in the newly independent Bangladesh further contributed to the growth of a new urban middle class (Shahidullah, 1985). The middle class played a significant role in fostering Bengali cultural pride, engaging in politics and economics, and investing in education (Schendel, 2009). This social class is influenced by economic capital, including income and wealth, which grants access to higher education, social networks, and cultural experiences, helping to maintain and reproduce class status (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). In this way, this group transitioned from being a socially and culturally distinctive group to a significant economic force driving consumer markets in contemporary Bangladesh (Hussain, Z 2012; Sohail, 2023). The middle class in Bangladesh currently encompasses about 25% of the population (PPRC, 2021). For the initial selection of the participants in this research, I identified women falling within the middle-class category based on economic factors. As the group is characterized by disposable income ranging between \$2 to \$20 per day (Chun, 2010; PPRC, 2021), I chose the final participants who self-reported their monthly income falling within this range.

Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, serves as the primary hub for the nation's urban middle class due to several interrelated factors. As a "primate city," Dhaka is disproportionately larger than other Bangladeshi cities, with a population exceeding four times that of Chittagong, the

second-largest city (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2024). This concentration results in Dhaka accounting for one-third of the country's urban population and one-fifth of its national GDP (Romee, Gapihan & Lee, 2019). Moreover, Dhaka's status as the political and administrative center of Bangladesh strengthens its position as the focal point for the urban middle class. The presence of government institutions, educational establishments, and healthcare facilities encourages the migration of individuals from other parts of the country (Aminuzzaman, 2020). Consequently, the city's infrastructure and services are more developed compared to other urban areas (Aminuzzaman, 2020), which further attracts the middle class.

Dhaka is home to the country's most prestigious educational institutions, including the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), and numerous private universities and colleges. These institutions attract students and intellectuals from across the nation, fostering an environment where academic excellence and critical thinking are valued. The urban middle class often places a high premium on educational attainment as a means of upward social mobility, and Dhaka's educational infrastructure provides the necessary resources and opportunities for such aspirations (Siddiqui, 2020). Dhaka's status as the cultural capital of Bangladesh is another crucial factor in its appeal to the urban middle class. The city hosts key cultural institutions, such as the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, Bangla Academy, and national museums. These institutions facilitate the production and dissemination of cultural knowledge, art, and performance. Festivals like the Ekushey Book Fair (Amar Ekushey Boi Mela) and the Dhaka International Film Festival attract a large urban middle-class audience who see participation in these events as a marker of cultural sophistication and social distinction. Cultural consumption, such as attending concerts, exhibitions, and literary discussions, is a vital



part of urban middle-class identity, and Dhaka provides access to these spaces of leisure and learning.

The urban middle class in Dhaka actively consumes and participates in producing cultural narratives that promote modernity, cosmopolitanism, and social mobility (Amin, 2021). Entertainment and recreational spaces, such as cinemas, art galleries, and theaters like the National Theater, are also concentrated in Dhaka, creating a diverse cultural landscape. The city's extensive cultural infrastructure, which includes public libraries, auditoriums, and cultural organizations, enables the urban middle class to participate in civic engagement and public discourse (Amin, 2021). Participation in book fairs, human rights campaigns, and gender justice movements is particularly prominent among Dhaka's middle-class youth (Siddiqui, 2020). Civil society organizations, advocacy groups, and NGOs are often headquartered in Dhaka, and they engage middle-class citizens in various forms of activism, volunteer work, and public intellectual debates (Chowdhury, 2019). Such platforms allow the middle class to participate in social change and development, further reinforcing their identity as informed, cultured, and socially responsible citizens.

### ***Class Specific Culture of 'Respectability' and Religious Norm of 'Purdah'***

As mentioned earlier, during the rise of the colonial middle class reformist group, a model of "Indian womanhood" emerged in the nationalist and colonialist discussions (Bhatia, 2003). These discussions often focused on women's bodies and clothing as symbolic spaces for addressing and resolving these concerns (Bhatia, 2003). Therefore, the newly formed middle-class group sought to protect the Indian tradition of "religious spirituality" and "honor" within the 'home' besides raging nationalist movements in the 'outside world' (Gilbertson, 2017:25). I

refer to this religious spirituality observed by Muslim women as the norm of ‘purdah’ and the honor maintained by them as ‘respectability’ culture throughout the analysis.

I adopt Hussain’s (2017) definition of ‘respectable femininity’ to define ‘respectability,’ a synonymous and interchangeable term. She defines respectability as “a symbolic form of capital that highlights the interconnectedness of gender and class” (Hussain, 2017). Respectability is based on particular types of femininity, aesthetics, caring, and morals, always seeking to get something “right”; it is articulated as a process through which women add value to themselves (Skeggs, 1997). It manifests as behavioral expectations in workplaces, streets, and homes.

In Islam, the culture of respectability is central to maintaining modesty, particularly for women. The Quran and Hadith<sup>6</sup> provide guidance on women’s dress and behavior, rooted in the principles of *haya* (modesty) and *izzat* (honor). Quran advises men and women to lower their gaze and maintain modesty, instructing women to cover their adornment except in the presence of immediate family (An-Nisa 24:30-31). The Hadith of the Prophet emphasizes modesty as a key part of faith (Sahih Muslim). This illustrates the significance of modesty as a core component of a Muslim’s religious spirituality. Therefore, it is not only the woman but also the (male) family members’ responsibility to protect the chastity of women and conserve the family honor. A family with honor has social status; in contrast, a family whose honor has been damaged loses its social credibility (Bartels, 1993: 48; Jansen, 1997: 145).

Respectability is a symbolic capital that women seek in order to gain symbolic profit and class status (Hussain, 2017). Hussain (2017: 2) writes that “middle-class women can change their

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<sup>6</sup> The Hadith are recorded sayings, actions, and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad, serving as a fundamental source of Islamic guidance alongside the Quran. They provide detailed insights into the Prophet's teachings on various aspects of life, including law, ethics, and social conduct, and are essential for interpreting and applying Quranic principles in daily life. (Brown, J. A. C., 2009; Burton, J. 1994).

gendered roles within the family and society through gaining access to higher education, highly paid employment, capital investments of goods, high-fee English-medium education, concerted cultivation of children, and foreign tourism.” Based on these elements of achievements, Hussain contends that middle class Bengali women enjoy significant control over their own life trajectories, even though they do not eliminate conventional expectations of middle-class respectable femininity.

Along the lines of respectability, the norms of ‘purdah’ can be analyzed as these two are distinct but often overlapping concepts. The Quranic modesty prescribed for women includes the acts of “not displaying their beauty (including body shape) and ornaments, drawing their veils over their bosoms” (Surah An-Nur, Verse 31), and “casting their outer garments over their persons (when abroad) ...” (Surah Al-Ahzab, Verse 59). Therefore, purdah’ is broader than just covering the women’s face and body. “Purdah,” meaning ‘curtain,’ refers to the system of secluding women from public life and enforcing modesty standards (Papanek, 1973). Purdah begins at puberty and applies outside the immediate family (Papanek, 1973).

The English word synonymous with purdah is ‘veiling.’ Winter (2006) correctly observes that the term ‘veil’ is often inaccurately used as a synonym for ‘hijab’ in the West. To resolve this conceptual ambiguity, I propose a broader definition of the term ‘veiling’ as practiced by Muslim women in the contemporary Bangladeshi context. According to Islamists’ observance in Bangladesh, ‘purdah’ or ‘veiling’ means the practice of covering oneself using various forms of clothing (including traditional attires) such as the hijab, burqa, niqab, saree, salwar-kameez, and other garments, and secluding oneself from public spaces. Observance of body-covering forms of veiling enhances perceptions of femininity, modesty, and religiosity, while secluding forms of veiling offers different levels of conformity to religious and cultural norms (Papanek, 1973:282).

Therefore, purdah is a specific religious practice that dictates women's seclusion and modesty in dress and behavior, primarily rooted in Islamic traditions. Respectability, meanwhile, is a broader social construct that encompasses moral behavior, aesthetics, and class expectations, serving as a form of symbolic capital that women navigate to add value to themselves within Indian sub-continental societies. These two concepts overlap in that both purdah and respectability impose expectations on women's conduct and appearance, intersecting with the maintenance of modesty and honor as essential components of a woman's identity and social standing. However, the expectation to maintain modesty often limits women's ability to act according to personal desires, as societal and familial pressures dictate adherence to traditional norms (Barazangi, 2004). While Islamic teachings may empower religious women through religious piety (Mahmood, 2005; Karam, 1998; Lughod, 2013), they can simultaneously constrain non-religious women's agency, especially if enforced arbitrarily. This is crucial in societies where violence is sponsored by the state and society structure, with men controlling women's bodies and behavior to maintain family honor (izzat) (Papanek, 1973). Therefore, the discussion of women's agency in their clothing decisions and the constraints they face in exercising their choices is an important sociological debate.

## **Theoretical Discussion: Clothing, Agency, Constraints, and Resistance**

### ***Women's Bodily Autonomy, Agency, and Class Construction of Respectability***

Women's bodily autonomy is the right of women to exercise full control over their own bodies (including appearance and clothing matters), free from coercion, violence, or the imposition of external norms and expectations (Sen, 1999; Cornwall, 2007; Crenshaw, 1991; Nussbaum 2000). Bodily autonomy is deeply interwoven with broader notions of agency and self-determination (Kabeer, 2001; Mahmood, 2001). The absence or limitation of bodily

autonomy of women often manifests in the form of gender-based violence (Heise, Ellsberg, & Gottemoeller, 1999). I argue throughout the thesis that using the norms of purdah and culture of respectability, the post-colonial patriarchal society limits women's freedom to choose their attire, thereby directly or indirectly exposing them to harassment or violence.

Agency is another critical concept for this thesis. Following Speed (2014), I adopt Long's definition of agency as an individual actor's "capacity to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion" (cited in Moser & Clark, 2001:23). One should "think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood, 2001: 203). Therefore, women's agency is crucial for practicing their bodily autonomy, as it enables them to safely navigate through violent social structures. I contend that such conventional expectations of middle-class respectability and modesty impose constraints on these women's clothing choices, which can be external or internalized.

The normative conceptualization of middle-class respectability originally constructed respectable Indian womanhood as women who choose the 'ghar' or the home over 'bahir' – the outer world. Therefore, stay-at-home mothers are regarded as the most respectable women in traditional India (Radhakrishnan, 2009), as well as in Bangladesh. However, the professional new middle-class woman (who emerged during the 1970s – 1980s) engages in the global economy of work and consumption, claiming her high cultural and symbolic status through the 'assertiveness and autonomy afforded by her education and earnings' (Gilbertson, 2017:119; Radhakrishnan, 2009). Talukdar and Linders (2013:103) claim that 'new liberal Indian' women use their bodies as a form of "capital and distinction," constructing boundaries of gender and class position in society through practices of how they feed their bodies, how they clothe them,

manage them and present them in public. Honor, therefore, is like a property or “capital” of respectable Bengali womanhood, which must be protected through practicing purdah and maintaining respectability and cannot be restored if somehow “lost or stolen.” Nevertheless, various social constraints on women’s agency prevent them from fully participating in their communities and exercising their human rights as citizens (Fried, 2003, p. 91). Such constraints, perpetuated by their partners, family members, peers, and strangers, are aimed at limiting women’s freedom of expression through clothing.

### ***Social Constraints on Women’s Agency and Their Navigation Using Resistance***

I adopt McKinzie and Richards’s (2022) theory to interpret the constraints on agency women face in the intersectional context of Bangladesh. They theorize ideological, interactional, and institutional constraints in the context of Evangelical Christian society. In the Bangladeshi context, ideologically, like purity culture in Christianity, Islamic teachings can impute agency onto women by holding them responsible for maintaining the ‘honor’ of themselves and all the other social institutions they represent. On the other hand, they are also held liable for maintaining the moral conduct of men around them by dressing modestly to prevent arousing male desire. This imposition restricts their agency, as it shifts the burden of male behavior onto women, thereby reinforcing a societal expectation that women must regulate themselves to manage the actions and desires of others.

Institutionally, schools and workplaces impose unwritten and informal dress codes, often mandating religious attire like hijabs and burqas while discouraging Western clothing in order to uphold religious modesty and respectability. These institutional constraints reflect patriarchal norms that often limit women’s agency and equate professional capability with adherence to specific cultural dress codes.

Furthermore, interactional constraints on women's agency are reinforced through personal interactions, beginning with their families, who often impose restrictions for failing to uphold modesty and respectability. These constraints, ranging from mild advice and scolding to mobility restrictions, are further perpetuated by intimate partners, in-laws, colleagues, and even strangers in public places through unsolicited opinions, moral policing, and verbal or physical harassment, limiting the social support available to women in these situations. Patriarchal control is deeply entrenched in many families, with Islamist men controlling women's bodies, with some women (i.e., mothers and mothers-in-law) complicit in maintaining this order.

In addition to the constraints theorized by McKinzie and Richards (2022), I conceptualized two additional constraints on women's agency: internalized and geographical constraints. From childhood, women are made to internalize societal norms about appropriate dress, leading to mental roadblocks that restrict their clothing choices in adulthood. The internalized fear of judgment or criticism in case of failure to uphold such norms inhibits women from freely choosing clothing that aligns with their preferences. I term this constraint as "internalized constraint." Again, many participants mentioned facing varying levels of social constraints on their clothing choices based on their location. In urban areas like Dhaka (the capital metropolitan city of Bangladesh), women enjoy more freedom in their attire due to liberal attitudes and urbanization. In contrast, women in conservative regions outside Dhaka face stricter societal expectations and moral policing. This creates a disparity where women must adapt their clothing choices depending on regional norms and pressures. I theorized this phenomenon as "geographical constraint." I argue that intersections of all five constraints shape urban middle class women's autonomy over their clothing choices.

This discussion on constraints brings us back to the continued history of violence against women in Bangladesh. The notion of respectability places the burden on women to uphold the honor of the family, religious community, and even the state, while the middle-class Muslim “bhodrolok” (respectable men) (also some women) act as a vanguard against any failure to uphold such honor. A post-colonial patriarchal society, combined with gender-traditional religion, therefore, continues to nurture and re-construct a fertile ground for violence against women. In line with this argument, next, I inquire: how do women exercise agency in responding to various forms of violence? I use the concept of *social navigation* as a lens to understand how urban middle-class Bangladeshi women exercise agency in their clothing choices amidst shifting and violent social environments.

Social navigation, as articulated by Vigh (2006, 2009), highlights how individuals respond to and move within a dynamic social landscape, particularly in contexts marked by instability and rapid change. As I have been arguing, the clothing decisions for urban middle-class Bangladeshi women are deeply intertwined with their identity construction and are directly influenced by their social positioning and access to resources. The discussion of agency and constraints brings attention to the intricate relationship between patriarchal social structures and individual actions, which gives rise to gender-based inequalities. Butler (1998) further underscores the potential backlash against those who challenge gender norms, illustrating the resilience of these social structures. The concept of agency and structure, therefore, is crucial in this context, as theorized by Bourdieu (1977) through *habitus* and Giddens (1984) through the notion of the duality of structure.

These theories together suggest that the environments in which women live are continuously evolving, affecting, and being affected by their actions. Such actions and reactions



informed by the women's capability to overcome oppression individually and collectively are often termed "resistance" (Mead, 1967; Homans, 1958; Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Garfinkel, 1967). However, other theories suggest that such structures do not always limit but sometimes enable women's agency (Giddens, 1984; Goffman, 1961) by creating power or making space for individuals (Marx, [1845–6] 1970; Foucault, 1980; Butler, 1993).

Kabeer (2016) notes that while women's access to economic resources can enhance their agency, it often aligns with socially compliant forms of behavior. However, this access can also lead to transformative forms of agency that challenge such gendered social constraints. The literature on women's empowerment has shown that access to resources can improve women's self-worth, decision-making power, and public mobility, among other aspects (Hussain, 2017; Hanmer & Klugman, 2015). Therefore, the notion that victimized individuals are inherently powerless and unable to act in their lives is not always accurate. As a result, agency does not always equate to express resistance (Villalon 2010:553) — such as harassed women loudly protesting against their abusers. Instead, agency can also be expressed through compliance (Kabeer 2016; Villalon 2010) —such as when women follow religious norms and cultural expectations.

Agency can result from conscious, strategic balancing (Villalon, 2010) — like when women resort to code switching their clothing based on differential contexts and circumstances. Moreover, agency can also be revealed as conformity (Villalon, 2010) — such as when constrained women intentionally or unintentionally follow religious norms and cultural expectations to blend in with the group. In chapter 5, I show that women's agency is not only about making choices within these constraints but also involves reshaping these boundaries through various strategies—*direct resistance*, *strategic balancing*, *avoidance*, and *conformity*.

These strategies showcase the varied ways in which women resist patriarchal norms and negotiate their identities within a changing social landscape. The “cultural resistance” that motivated the middle-class Bengali women in nationalist movements against Pakistan still exerts its influence in these ways. Therefore, following how Speed (2014) discusses the resilience of Indigenous women migrants, I also conclude my discussion about Bangladeshi women, saying: “The most remarkable thing is not? the seemingly relentless violence they are subject to, but rather that they continue to demonstrate significant agency in struggling to move beyond violence.” This is the story of urban middle-class Bangladeshi women, which I call the Song of Ice (violence) and Fire (Resistance).

## **Research Methods**

This study is based on in-depth interviews with 24 participants, aged between 18 – 40, over a period of 9 months from October 2023 – June 2024. I used myself as the 25<sup>th</sup> participant in this research to add an auto-ethnographic lens representing insider knowledge of the social and cultural context of the study. By blending auto-ethnography with interview-based data, I aimed to create a study that is both deeply reflective and analytically rigorous. By incorporating my own experiences and perspectives, I was able to situate myself within the research, acknowledging the ways in which my identity and background influence my understanding of the subject matter. This method aligns with post-positivist feminist ideals by emphasizing the role of the researcher as an active participant in the knowledge production process rather than a detached outsider observer.

Aside from myself, all the participants are currently living in Dhaka, Bangladesh’s capital city. All participants shared some other common characteristics, such as access to college education, participation in the workforce, and a similar middle-class background (earning \$20 -

\$200 per day). Out of 25 participants, 10 had graduate degrees (i.e., LLM, MBA, MSC), and the rest either had a bachelor's degree or were still undergraduate students. Thirteen participants were employed in various fulltime professions such as banking, teaching, legal practice, and marketing. There were some differences between them: 11 were married, and just 2 had children. Moreover, there were differences in household settings; some lived with their parents, some with their in-laws, and they all lived in different parts of Dhaka.

| Sl | Pseudonym | Age | Religious Belief | Ideology        | Education             | Job Status        | Marital Status | Place of Residence |
|----|-----------|-----|------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| 1  | Mishti    | 26  | Islam            | Islamist        | Post-Graduate         | Employed          | Unmarried      | Dhaka              |
| 2  | Mila      | 23  | Islam            | Moderate Muslim | Undergraduate Student | Full-time Student | Unmarried      | Dhaka              |
| 3  | Ayesha    | 37  | Atheism          | Liberal-Secular | Post-Graduate         | Employed          | Married        | Dhaka              |
| 4  | Tanisha   | 26  | Islam            | Moderate Muslim | Post-Graduate         | Banker            | Married        | Dhaka              |
| 5  | Rubi      | 24  | Islam            | Islamist        | Graduate              | Unemployed        | Unmarried      | Dhaka              |
| 6  | Mou       | 21  | Islam            | Moderate Muslim | Undergraduate Student | Full-time Student | Unmarried      | Dhaka              |
| 7  | Aditi     | 26  | Islam            | Moderate Muslim | Graduate              | Employed          | Married        | Dhaka              |
| 8  | Tamanna   | 37  | Islam            | Liberal-Secular | Post-Graduate         | Unemployed        | Married        | Dhaka              |
| 9  | Fatima    | 27  | Islam            | Islamist        | Post-Graduate         | Employed          | Married        | Dhaka              |
| 10 | Naila     | 31  | Atheism          | Liberal-Secular | Undergraduate Student | Employed          | Married        | Dhaka              |
| 11 | Anila     | 27  | Islam            | Moderate Muslim | Post-Graduate         | Employed          | Married        | Dhaka              |
| 12 | Rumana    | 28  | Islam            | Secular/Liberal | Post-Graduate         | Unemployed        | Unmarried      | Dhaka              |
| 13 | Suzana    | 23  | Islam            | Moderate Muslim | Undergraduate Student | Full-time Student | Unmarried      | Dhaka              |
| 14 | Mumu      | 22  | Islam            | Moderate Muslim | Undergraduate Student | Full-time Student | Unmarried      | Dhaka              |
| 15 | Toma      | 22  | Islam            | Islamist        | Undergraduate Student | Part-time Tutor   | Married        | Dhaka              |
| 16 | Nupur     | 22  | Islam            | Secular/Liberal | Undergraduate Student | Full-time Student | Unmarried      | Dhaka              |
| 17 | Rahima    | 22  | Islam            | Islamist        | Undergraduate Student | Full-time Student | Married        | Dhaka              |
| 18 | Suraiya   | 28  | Islam            | Secular/Liberal | Graduate              | Employed          | Married        | Dhaka              |
| 19 | Navila    | 20  | Agnosticism      | Secular/Liberal | Undergraduate         | Full-time Student | Unmarried      | Dhaka              |
| 20 | Borsha    | 27  | Islam            | Islamist        | Post-Graduate         | Employed          | Unmarried      | Dhaka              |
| 21 | Lamisa    | 23  | Islam            | Secular/Liberal | Post-Graduate         | Employed          | Unmarried      | Dhaka              |
| 22 | Taslima   | 28  | Islam            | Moderate Muslim | Post-Graduate         | Employed          | Married        | Dhaka              |
| 23 | Shaila    | 38  | Islam            | Islamist        | Post-Graduate         | Employed          | Unmarried      | Dhaka              |
| 24 | Runa      | 25  | Islam            | Islamist        | Graduate              | Full-time Student | Married        | Dhaka              |
| 25 | Myself    | 27  | Deism            | Secular/Liberal | Graduate Student      | Full-time Student | Unmarried      | USA                |

Table 1: Demographic Details of the Participants

As is consistent with the emerging middle class, some of the participants not only have higher education but also have studied and lived abroad, and this breaks down in two ways across the three groups. One of the two Islamist participants, who lived abroad in the past, spent 12 years in Saudi Arabia, where she became accustomed to wearing black burqas, influenced by the dress norms of the local society. Upon returning to Bangladesh for college, she continued wearing black burqas and hijabs, as wearing other colors made her feel uncomfortable. Despite living in a “comparatively secular society,” she maintained her commitment to Islamic attire, reflecting the lasting impact of her childhood experiences. On the other hand, there were two Moderate Muslim and two Secular-Liberal participants who went to Europe and Canada for their graduate studies and returned to Bangladesh after completing their degrees. They shared contrasting accounts to that of the Islamist participant above, claiming that they could practice higher levels of control over their clothing choices outside of Bangladesh. They could wear Western clothes and show as much skin as they preferred, which was not possible in Bangladesh due to the existing higher social constraints in a comparatively conservative society. However, their experience of studying abroad still broadened their sense of self and bodily autonomy, allowing them to practice agency in their clothing choices upon returning to Bangladesh. Exposure to multicultural and liberal environments encouraged them to resist traditional expectations, creating a self-determined approach to personal attire upon their return to Bangladesh. The Islamist participant also exercised personal agency in maintaining her Islamic attire, which she found most comfortable; however, unlike the Moderate Muslim and Secular-Liberal participants, her choice was socially celebrated rather than constrained. This duality reflects the varied ways transnational experiences play a role in identity construction and dress practices within the middle class in Bangladesh.

Participants were selected using the snowball method: I identified a small group of people online using my social media platforms, such as Facebook and LinkedIn. I also published my research flyer asking for interested participants to fill out the Google Form questionnaire. I interviewed the first 5 participants from this pool, who then proposed other participants with the relevant experience and characteristics (Bryman, 2012, p. 424). To avoid any inherent bias in the method, I used several snowballs in this research. I sampled women from my peers, ex-colleagues, managers, friends, and family members, then expanded this to distant informants who self-identified as middle-class, lived in Dhaka, and had a college education.

I collected initial data through questionnaires via Google Forms to invite the participants for the final interview. A semi-structured interview was conducted online with each participant via Zoom. Most participants spoke in a mixture of English and Bengali, a common form of speech among urban middle-class Bangladeshis and a defining characteristic of the new middle class. This helped overcome the difficulty of accurately translating Bengali words. For example, participants frequently used the term “male gaze,” which was relevant to the analysis of non-verbal interactional constraints. Recognizing that I might be speaking from a position of privilege—due to factors such as my age, education, and economic status due to living in the US—I was mindful of the potential power dynamics at play. However, my goal was not to dominate or impose my views on the participants but to understand and reflect on their lived experiences as authentically as possible. Despite my relative privilege, I am also an insider, sharing many commonalities with my participants. I have walked the same streets, attended similar institutions, and lived through many of the same societal challenges. This insider status allowed me to build rapport and gain deeper insights into their perspectives while also maintaining a critical awareness of my position.

This research is deeply personal and matters to me on multiple levels. Firstly, as a transnational feminist, my research approach reflects a commitment to put emphasis on the diversity of women's experiences and the deconstruction of universalist narratives. I made an effort to provide a framework that allows for the exploration of how Muslim women navigate the intersections of gender, class, religion, and culture. This perspective is particularly relevant in Bangladesh, where societal expectations surrounding women's clothing and behavior are deeply embedded in both cultural and religious norms. Secondly, as a woman who identifies with liberal ideologies and holds a progressive mindset, I strongly believe that women should have full autonomy over their bodies, including the freedom to choose their clothing, without fear of violence or social retribution.

Growing up in a middle-class family in Dhaka, I have experienced firsthand the societal pressures and constraints placed on women in terms of dress and behavior. My father's background as a graduate of the University of Dhaka and a member of the intellectual community as a journalist has also shaped my understanding of the social and cultural dynamics at play. This project is not just an academic exercise for me; it is a reflection of my lived experiences and my commitment to advocating for the rights and agency of women in Bangladesh. The data I gathered here is so vast and rich that I constantly struggled to pick and choose the examples to mention while writing the chapters. I believe I can only do justice to the data on the lived experiences of the participants if I turn this master's thesis into a PhD dissertation with a more detailed analysis. Nevertheless, I believe I am able to lay the theoretical and analytical foundation for broader future research on this important topic through this thesis.

## Overview of Chapters

Across the next five chapters of this thesis, I narrate the story of urban middle-class Bangladeshi women's issues of agency, identity construction, social constraints, and resistance. In Chapter 2, I explore the evolution of women's clothing in Bangladesh by providing a visual description of the three dominant styles: traditional, Islamic, and Western attire. I show that the variations in clothing practices among urban middle-class Bangladeshi women are deeply influenced by their presence in public versus private spaces. Clothing choices are often influenced by religious (purdah) and cultural (respectability) norms, balanced with personal comfort. In Chapter 3, I build on the discussion by identifying five types of constraints—ideological, interactional, institutional, internalized, and geographical—that impact women's agency in choosing their clothing. I argue that these constraints interact with creating complex social pressures that influence their decisions. In Chapter 4, I identify four strategies—direct resistance, strategic balancing, avoidance, and conformity—that urban middle-class Bangladeshi women use to navigate changing social structures. These strategies reflect the complex ways in which these women resist patriarchal constraints and negotiate their identities within a shifting social landscape. In Chapter 5, I conclude by arguing that adherence to norms of respectability and purdah does not protect women from physical harassment in public spaces. I point out that no specific type of clothing can shield women from gender-based violence, highlighting the limitations of these societal norms in addressing the root causes of such violence. Finally, in Chapter 6, I discuss the overall findings and the importance of the research.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **The Historical Genesis of Bangladeshi Women's Clothing Culture**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I explore the evolution of women's clothing in Bangladesh by providing a detailed description of the three dominant styles: traditional, Islamic, and Western attire. This brief examination traces the historical origins and cultural significance of each style, beginning from the pre-colonial era (5<sup>th</sup> century BC) to post-modern times (early 2010s). By offering an overview of the religious, cultural, and colonial influences throughout the historical trajectory, this chapter provides context for the subsequent analysis of how these factors continue to impact women's agency and clothing choices in modern Bangladeshi society in the following chapters.

#### **'Saree' and 'Salwar-Kameez': Genesis of the Traditional Bengali Clothing**

Religion has always been one of the dominant driving forces shaping the clothing choices of Indian subcontinental people. Hinduism was the primary religion practiced in the Indian subcontinent until the arrival of Muslim traders and the Arab conquest in the 6th century BC (Thapar, 2002). The saree, a traditional garment still widely used by contemporary Bengalis, is deeply rooted in Hindu culture and is often seen in various religious and cultural contexts. It is a long piece of cloth, typically ranging from 5 to 9 yards in length and about 2 to 4 feet in width. The saree is wrapped around the waist, with one end draped over the shoulder, leaving the midriff bare. It is usually worn over a petticoat (a long skirt) and paired with a fitted blouse (see Figure 1 below). The saree's draping style, color, and fabric often reflect regional variations and

caste distinctions. For example, the vibrant colors and intricate designs of sarees in South India reflect the influence of Hindu temple culture (Bayly 1998; Thapar 2002; Bose 1998), whereas the handwoven Jamdani saree in Bangladesh, characterized by its intricate patterns and delicate weaving techniques, reflects the influence of Mughal Muslim culture (Eaton 1993; Ahmed 1999). Women often use the anchal (end part of the saree) to cover the head and upper body, symbolizing respectability and modesty. Therefore, traditional Hindu attire also emphasizes modesty and purity, similar to Islamic purdah culture. In addition, the use of specific ornaments and jewelry, such as bangles, nose rings, and anklets, carries religious and cultural significance (Mukherjee, 2011) and is often associated with the respectability of married women. This practice is still prevalent in contemporary Bangladeshi societies, as discussed in Chapter 4.



Figure 3: A Bangladeshi woman wearing a Tangail Saree and Bengles around her wrists (Source: The Facebook page of Sadia Khan Kasas, Makeup Artist)



Figure 4: A Bangladeshi woman in a three-piece suit – Salwar (yellow bottom), Kameez (black and white printed long top), and Orna (red scarf/dupatta) (Source: Pinterest page of Aarong)

The salwar-kameez, originating in the Punjab region during the 15th century, became widely prevalent in the Indian subcontinent. It is a three-piece suit consisting of a tunic (kameez), trousers (salwar), and a dupatta (called ‘orna’ in Bangladesh) (see Figure 2 above). The Punjab region, now part of India and Pakistan, favored this attire for its comfort and practicality, especially suited to the agrarian lifestyle of Punjabi people. The Mughal Empire, which ruled large parts of the subcontinent from the 16th to the 18th centuries, further popularized this attire among the Muslim population. This trend continued during the colonial period. After independence in 1947, the saree remained a key garment in the subcontinent, while practical options like the salwar-kameez also became popular (Mines & Lamb, 2010).

In urban areas, Western-style clothing gained acceptance among younger women and professionals, indicating a blend of traditional and colonial influences. Textile historians note that in the post-colonial era, women were encouraged to work, making the traditional Bengali sari draping cumbersome and non-practical for many (Banerjee & Miller, 2003). This led to the modern style of draping with pleats and the ‘anchal’ (the loose end of the saree) on the left shoulder, instead of covering the head, being considered more appropriate and elegant (Banerjee & Miller, 2003). This shift away from purdah gradually influenced women in both urban and rural areas in what is now Bangladesh, encouraging the acceptance of “lifting the veil” (Papanek, 1973, p. 299). However, local religious leaders kept emphasizing observing ‘purdah’ to stress Islamic heritage among the Bangladeshi Muslim population (Papanek, 1973, p. 299).

### **‘Hijab’ and ‘Burqa’: Origin of the “Purdah” Culture in Bangladesh**

The introduction of Islam in the Indian subcontinent took place in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century by Muslim traders and was further solidified with the Arab conquest of Sindh in 516 BC (Thapar 2002; Wink 1991; Hardy 1972). Over the centuries, Islam spread through trade, missionary

activities, and the establishment of Muslim rule in various parts of the subcontinent (Thapar 2002; Hardy 1972), significantly reshaping its cultural and social sphere. Since then, the Islamic norm of ‘purdah’ has been duly practiced among Muslim women in the Bengal region. The attire relevant to ‘purdah’ norms are hijab, niqab, and burqa. The hijab is a headscarf that typically covers the hair, neck, chest, and sometimes the shoulders, leaving the face visible (see Figure 3 below). Unlike the hijab, the niqab is a face veil that conceals most of the face and is often worn with an abaya/burqa (BBC, 2018) (see Figure 4 below). The loose-fitting garment that covers the body from shoulders to feet is known as the ‘burqa’ in Bangladesh (Figure 5).<sup>7</sup>

|                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                               |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                           |                                        |                           |
| <p>Figure 5: A Bangladeshi woman in a colorful hijab and burqa (solid blue colored) (Source: <a href="#">Pinterest</a>)</p> | <p>Figure 6: A Bangladeshi woman in a black niqab and burqa (solid brown colored) (Source: <a href="#">Modest BD</a>)</p> | <p>Figure 7: A Bangladeshi woman in black burqa, hijab, and niqab (Source: <a href="#">Asha's Closet</a>)</p> |

<sup>7</sup> In the US, the term ‘burqa’ now is most commonly associated with Afghanistan and covers the entire body, including a mesh screen over the eyes. The abaya, on the other hand, is a long, flowing cloak that is usually worn over everyday clothes, covering the body from the shoulders to the feet. It is more common in the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in Saudi Arabia. While the abaya does not cover the face, it is often worn with a hijab or niqab (Kaya, 2019). Bangladeshi burqa follows the Saudi Arabian abaya style.

During the colonial period (1858 – 1947), Muslim women of the sub-continental region kept practicing both traditional attires (i.e., saree and salwar-kameez) and ‘purdah’ culture simultaneously. Research indicates that while few village women wore burqas at that time, they generally observed purdah by covering their heads and breasts with a dupatta (orna) over salwar and kameez (Slocum et al., 1960). However, during the religious riots among Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs during the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan, many Muslim women discarded the burqa so that they would not be recognized as Muslims, while Hindu women adopted it for the opposite reason. In a study on the employment of middle-class Muslim women in then Dacca (now Dhaka), A. F. A. Husain (1958) identified three indices of purdah observance for women: ‘not going outside the house usually,’ ‘wearing a burqa while going out,’ and ‘not talking to males other than close relatives as a rule’ (Papanek, 1973, p. 296).<sup>8</sup> Village studies revealed regional and class variations in purdah practices. In the Comilla district of Bangladesh, Florence McCarthy (1967) found widespread burqa-wearing and strict seclusion. Village women reported that the burqa increased their freedom of movement outside the home, indicating that seclusion was a strong custom even in rural areas in the early 1970s (Papanek, 1973, p. 297). These findings demonstrate that purdah practices among Muslim women in the subcontinent were not monolithic but varied significantly across regions, classes, and historical contexts, adapting to both cultural norms and political needs.

After gaining independence in 1971, Bangladesh started its journey with ‘secularism’ as one of the four pillars of its basic state constituency (Kanta, 2021). However, the observance of purdah was still present in urban and rural areas, as wearing an ‘orna’ with other types of

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<sup>8</sup> A. F. A. Husain notes that “purdah seems to be observed more in the lower income families than in the higher income families of the employed women.” About half of the families in the lower income group observed purdah (in the sense of wearing burqas) while one-tenth of the highest income group did so.

Western dress (such as frocks, skirts, and tops) was the norm. Since 1973, the ‘orna’ has become thinner and shorter in Bangladesh, with some urban middle-class and high-class women discarding it—a significant departure from tradition (Papanek, 1973, p. 295). These shifts in attire and purdah practices reflect the evolving cultural, religious, and social dynamics in Bangladesh. Understanding this historical progression is crucial for analyzing contemporary attitudes toward women’s dress in Bangladeshi society.

### **‘T-shirt’ and ‘Pants’: Introduction of ‘Western’ Clothing in Bangladesh**

British colonization (1858 – 1947) introduced Western secular values, institutions, and cultural practices, often at the expense of indigenous traditions and religions in the sub-continent. Besides imposing secular education systems and introducing Western legal principles, colonial rulers also enforced Western education, language, dress codes, and social norms on the colonized region (Bose & Jalal, 2017; Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006). In the Indian subcontinent, Western clothing began to permeate as British officials and settlers introduced Western formal clothing, i.e., the suit, overcoat, pants, and boot. Such clothing was gradually adopted by the local elite as a symbol of modernity and status.

Western women’s fashion includes a wide range of dresses and skirts, from casual sundresses to formal evening gowns. The influence of British colonial rule brought changes in urban women’s clothing, especially among the elite, who began adopting Western-style dresses, blouses, and skirts, though traditional attire like saree remained predominant for most (Banerjee & Miller, 2003; Tarlo, 1996). After the partition in 1947, Western clothing continued to gain popularity in the Indian and the East and West Pakistani regions. Globalization facilitated the exchange of cultural ideas, leading to increased acceptance and adoption of Western clothing

(Bose 1998). Economic reforms and liberalization in the late 20th century followed, opening markets to global brands.

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| <p>Figure 8: Bangladeshi model Sunehra Azmee in a top and pants (Source: <a href="#">Gorur Ghash</a>)</p> | <p>Figure 9: Author in a top and long skirt at Cox's Bazar seabeach in May 2024 (Source: Author)</p> |

After independence in 1971, rapid urbanization and the rise of the urban middle class fostered a desire for modernity and global connectedness. Western clothing became associated with professionalism, progress, and cosmopolitan identity (Ahmed 2014). In the early 2000s, t-shirts and jeans, simple and comfortable, became popular due to their versatility and as a symbol of casual and youthful fashion. Younger generations, influenced by global youth culture, embraced Western fashion as a form of self-expression and rebellion against traditional norms. However, Islamist and Moderate Muslims who followed religious or traditional norms did not sanction the wide acceptance of 'Western clothing' as it contradicted the Muslim Bengali tradition of maintaining women's 'modesty'.



## ‘Hijab’ with ‘Saree/T-shirt’: The Fusion Fashion Era

From 2010 onwards, pure Westernization lost its appeal, giving way to fusion fashion that blends Eastern and Western styles. This fusion fashion movement highlights the evolving cultural landscape and the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity in Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2017; Mahamud, 2016). Sarees have regained popularity, with innovative blouse designs like jacket blouses, net blouses, and halter necks adding a modern twist (Chowdhury, 2017).

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| <p>Figure 10: A Bangladeshi woman in hijab with a saree and blouse (Source: <a href="#">Pinterest</a>)</p> | <p>Figure 11: A Bangladeshi woman in hijab with salwar-kameez and orna (Source: <a href="#">GMB Akash – Photographer</a>)</p> | <p>Figure 12: A Bangladeshi student, Muhsana Naeer, in hijab with tops and pants. (Source: Author)</p> |

Many professional women in Bangladesh, working with diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, developed their own concept of modernity suited for global work environments (Mahamud, 2016; Chowdhury, 2017). They have adopted hybrid or fusion clothing, combining ethnic and Western elements to convey their educated middle-class status and professional competence (Chowdhury, 2017). For example, students and working women started wearing



shorter hijabs to cover their heads and hair. Instead of wearing a long, flowy burqa to cover their full body, they may wear a hijab over a salwar kameez and saree. Some professional women aligned their personal religious ideology with the multinational corporate culture's emphasis on modern self-presentation. They adopted hijab over Western attires such as tops and jeans or even pant suits. Therefore, the fashion landscape during this period illustrates a dynamic interplay between global influences and local traditions, shaping the sartorial choices of Bangladeshi women (Thomson Gale, 2006; Nahar, 2006).

### **What Do Urban Middle-Class Women Wear NOW?**

In contemporary Dhaka, the clothing culture of urban middle-class Bangladeshi women varies across three ideological groups: Islamists, Moderate Muslims, and Liberal/Secular individuals. These three groups' clothing choices are significantly influenced by two primary factors: the religious norm of 'purdah' and cultural norms - centered around the notion of 'respectability.' significant variations are evident in the clothing practices of these three groups based on their presence in public versus private spaces (home vs. outdoor). Among the groups, the Islamist group demonstrates a more stringent adherence to religious dress codes in public spaces by maintaining a strict adherence to the burqa and hijab. At home, however, they prefer Western clothing for its comfort, avoiding the orna unless necessary. On the other hand, the Liberal/Secular group exhibits the most significant shift towards individualism in their clothing choices. Both at home and outside, they prioritize personal comfort by wearing casual Western attire like T-shirts and pants.

Middle-class Moderate Muslims take a unique approach to balancing personal comfort with normative expectations by often preferring comfortable and practical clothing depending on the context. At home, they wear comfortable Western attire such as T-shirts and palazzos like

those in the other two groups. Outside, they showcase the most versatile clothing choices among the three groups. On a typical working day, they choose a traditional three-piece suit or saree, which may or may not be accompanied by a hijab, highlighting a good example of adopting fusion clothing styles. On other occasions, they may wear Western attire like suits or tops, jeans, etc., leaving out the hijab. This behavior further underscores their negotiation of agency according to varying contextual settings.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I traced the evolution of women's clothing in Bangladesh from the pre-colonial era to the early 2010s, focusing on the interplay between traditional, Islamic, and Western styles, providing a foundation for understanding the broader social, cultural, and religious influences shaping women's clothing choices in Bangladesh. I showed that women's clothing choices among Islamist, Moderate Muslim, and Secular/Liberal participants reflect varying degrees of personal agency and resistance to societal norms. For Islamist women, wearing the burqa or hijab in public signifies adherence to religious norms, while their preference for Western clothing at home reflects private autonomy. Moderate Muslims balance public expectations with private preferences, choosing traditional attire in public and Western clothing at home, showcasing a negotiation of comfort and identity. Secular/Liberal women prioritize personal comfort over societal expectations, both in public and private. Religious norms, especially the concept of modesty (purdah), shape the clothing choices of the Islamist group. Meanwhile, Moderate Muslims and Secular/Liberals are more influenced by the cultural norm of respectability, balancing family image with personal comfort. This highlights the complex interplay between religious, cultural, and individual factors in shaping women's clothing decisions.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Constraints Faced by Bangladeshi Women While Practicing Agency**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I will answer the question of what sorts of consequences urban middle-class Bangladeshi women report facing when they do not dress according to the religious norm of ‘purdah’ and the cultural norm of ‘respectability.’ I will examine this question considering theories related to women’s autonomy and agency in gender-traditional religious social structures. I will apply and extend the theoretical framework of agency and its constraints developed by McKinzie and Richards (2022) in answering this question. I argue, based on the findings, that in addition to ideological, interactional, and institutional constraints (as theorized by McKinzie and Richards, 2022), there are internalized and geographical constraints on the agency of women in practicing their clothing choices in the Bangladeshi context. Intersections of these five types of constraints explain why urban middle class women choose what to wear and what not to wear in different patriarchal social settings. I further argue that women from all three groups—Islamists, Moderate Muslims, and Secular/Liberals—are subjected to control and constraints, regardless of their ideological beliefs. However, it is also crucial to recognize that these constraints manifest differently, with women at the more extreme ends of the ideological spectrum experiencing distinct pressures and forms of regulation.

## **Ideological Constraints**

As discussed earlier, maintaining the honor of the family is the main goal of a ‘respectable’ middle-class Muslim family in Bangladesh. The sexual vulnerability of the female body represents this danger regarding the loss of chastity and, thereby, family honor (Storms 2017). Within Islam, sexuality is explicitly acknowledged for men as well as women (Storms 2017), and the ‘fear’ of sexuality in Islam affects both men and women (Jansen 1997: 145). However, it has a more severe impact on women as the responsibility of behaving ‘modestly’ in public and having a good reputation is considered their responsibility. Purity culture places responsibility on Evangelical Christian women for maintaining not only their own purity but also that of men and boys (McKinzie & Richards, 2022). Similarly, respectability culture imposes the same expectations on Muslim women to uphold the honor of themselves and their male counterparts. This creates a paradox, where their ability to act according to their own desires is constrained (McKinzie & Richards, 2022). Instead of being treated as individuals with their own agency, these women are viewed as objects of discipline by religious and social authorities (McKinzie & Richards, 2022).

During interviews, I asked participants if they felt they were able to dress as they wanted to within the purview of purdah and the culture of respectability. Rahima (Islamist) highlighted the importance of maintaining modesty through proper dress code according to the religious indictments. She mentions the fear of punishment in the afterlife as a motivator for maintaining modesty, saying, “In Islam, there are specific punishments mentioned for a woman who does not cover herself. Like in hell, each hair would turn into a snake if her head was not covered in earthly life. Even though sometimes I wish to wear Western clothes like my friends do, the fear of hell makes me try to do what I must.” Toma’s (Islamist) statement mirrors Rahima’s

observation about choosing to dress in a religiously sanctioned way in fear of the afterlife. She states, “It’s not just about staying safe in this world, but also about the afterlife. The afterlife is more important than this worldly life, so people do it out of fear.” Rahima and Toma’s statements highlight that the main motivation behind internalizing the ‘purdah’ culture was the fear of God’s punishment in their afterlife. Rumana (Secular/Liberal), on the other hand, highlights the misinterpretation of religious teachings by some religious leaders, who blame women for men’s immoral behavior due to their attire. She states:

Our religious leaders, who are responsible for preaching religion, often announce in sermons or religious gatherings that a woman’s clothing causes men to end up in hell. Why? Because their eyes commit sins by seeing a woman—and her beauty. They spread such a false notion that has no existence—that a woman without a veil will lead fourteen men to hell, including her husband and brother. This kind of talk is a misinterpretation of religion. Islam says men should lower their gaze. The primary reason for sexual harassment is that men do not control or lower their gaze; instead, they start by blaming women for everything. Our society’s men blindly believe this without knowing the true essence of Islam or considering whether this aligns with human rights or not. This way, they put the entire responsibility of modesty on women. It’s not about what a woman wants; it’s about what men want. Nowadays, men define how a woman should dress.

Rumana points out the selective interpretation of religious texts, where the responsibility for modesty is disproportionately placed on women, ignoring the Quranic directive for men to lower their gaze (Quran 24:30). This selective interpretation supports patriarchal structures by reinforcing gender-specific ideologies and constraining women’s agency. This reflects the patriarchal tendency to hold women accountable for men’s actions, perpetuating gender

inequality (Connell, 1987). She highlights another very important point about the absence of women's positionality in women's matters, which is rather filled out and dictated by men in authoritarian positions.

To sum-up, in middle-class Muslim families in Bangladesh, women bear the responsibility of upholding family honor through modest behavior and dress, driven by a selective interpretation of religious texts that places the burden of modesty on them while ignoring similar expectations for men. These ideological constraints are often internalized from a young age, with women viewing modesty as a way to avoid the male gaze and social criticism. Women's adherence to modesty is often reinforced through social policing by family members and community figures, who may impose dress codes and behavior standards to ensure conformity with Islamic norms. This policing can be done openly through direct criticism or, more subtly, through social pressure and gossip (Bartels, 1993). I will explore this further in the next section.

### **Interactional Constraints**

Ideological constraints are further reinforced through personal interactions. If a woman fails to maintain modesty and respectability, the first constraint she faces on her agency is carried out by her family through hostile forms of interaction. Such interactions range from mild advice, strict prohibition, and harsh scolding to a restriction on the mobility of such women out of their homes. These same lessons and tactics may be used by intimate partners, in-laws, distance relatives, colleagues, friends, and even strangers, restricting the social support available to such victims. These often come in the form of unsolicited opinions, verbal or non-verbal harassment, moral policing, and physical sexual abuse. As I discuss the interactional constraints manifested

through physical sexual abuse in Chapter 5, I will, therefore, limit my discussion to the other forms of interactions here.

As the head of a patriarchal family, fathers enforce interactional constraints directly – as reported by several participants. Mishti (Islamist), who always wears a burqa outside, mentions her desire to go out in a sari without a hijab. But she quickly acknowledges that she cannot do so as her father does not permit this. Mishti says, “Mainly, my father will not allow it... He won’t scold me too harshly; at most, he will tell me that I can’t go out like that. He’ll just say that I need to go with the hijab.” The father’s role in enforcing these norms aligns with Jansen’s (1997) argument about patriarchal control and its impact on women’s lives. Mila, a Moderate Muslim, further describes how her father monitors the length of her hoodie every time she goes out. She states, “If my hoodie’s length is a little bit above my knees, my father measures it and starts shouting at me.” Mila shares the discomfort she faces with her father’s behavior. This indicates the unwanted pressure and surveillance she goes through to maintain the respectability culture.

The experiences of the Secular-Liberal participants are more challenging. Nupur (Secular-Liberal) shares how her father did not like it when she wore Western clothes. She says, “Going outside, I can wear a three-piece suit (salwar-kameez) or even maybe a skirt, but I must wear an orna. If I don’t wear an orna, ... (laughs) my father thinks that boys will look at me in a different way, so he insists that I must wear it. And I shouldn’t go out if I don’t wear it.” Nupur’s father’s insistence on her wearing an orna to prevent inappropriate attention from boys reflects the patriarchal belief that women must dress modestly to avoid provoking male attention (Connell, 1987; Bartels, 1993). This highlights the paradoxical agency imputed on women to protect the honor of themselves and men (McKinzie & Richards, 2022). Nupur further observes,

Our society is very restrictive ... and conservative towards women only. They believe that girls who want to remain *respectful* should wear a three-piece outfit and behave modestly. In patriarchal societies like Bangladesh, .... they believe that if women dress modestly and cover themselves properly, boys will not look at them inappropriately. This way, they will remain in a so-called safe zone.

Such constraints limit women's freedom to move and express themselves, reinforcing their subordination in a male-dominated society (Connell, 2005). Navila (Liberal/Secular) shares how her father used to support her clothing choice, reflecting a more liberal attitude but changing his behavior in the face of social criticism. "My father's dress choices are quite good. For instance, he was the one who bought me a very beautiful western dress," Navila continues, "I wore it and showed it to him. He said it looked very beautiful on me and posted a picture of us on Facebook. In that picture, one of his Facebook friends commented, "Masha Allah, the three girls look very beautiful, but they would look even more beautiful if they wore the hijab." After seeing this, my father got really upset. Even though he had bought the dress himself, ... he got mad and started blaming us, saying, "You will go to hell for not covering yourself." Community pressure, as seen through the comment her father received on Facebook, shows how deeply ideological constraints based on religious 'modesty' influence women's clothing choices. Navila's father's shift from approval to disapproval after facing criticism illustrates how familial patriarchal control can be reinforced by external social pressure. This example reflects the patriarchal idea that family honor is closely linked to controlling women's bodies and clothing.

Mothers also enforce patriarchal norms of respectability on their daughters through similar interactions. Rinaldo (2014) explains this phenomenon by recognizing that some agentic women choose not to resist unequal social arrangements; instead, they embrace the family,



nation, or other patriarchal social institutions that feminists often view as oppressive. Some women may even participate in the subjugation of others as a form of agency (Rinaldo, 2014). I argue that this is what is happening in the case of the mothers of many of the women I interviewed. I will start with Rumana's story. Rumana (Secular-Liberal) shared an instance when she was wearing fusion clothing—a Western top with an orna—but still faced opposition from her mother. She mentioned her mother asking her to dress modestly and act piously as both of her parents were pious. By doing so, the mother upholds the idea a daughter's appearance should reflect the family's honor and religious values. Rumana also noted that if her father didn't like her clothing choices, he would question her mother about it rather than addressing her directly. This highlights how the mother, despite possibly being a victim of the same patriarchal norms herself, becomes a tool of control through which these norms are perpetuated. On a similar note, Mila (Moderate Muslim) adds, "One day, I was wearing a crop top and a pair of jeans. After putting them on, I was thinking of sneaking out so that my mother wouldn't notice. But my mother came into my room and scolded me for wearing such a short dress. Then she forced me to put on a hoodie over the crop top before going out." These two accounts reflect patriarchal control exercised through maternal authority, even as mothers may be exercising agency by enforcing societal norms (Rinaldo, 2014).

Similar to fathers, mothers are also susceptible to social scrutiny of their daughters' clothing. Ayesha (Secular Liberal) shares her experience, "My mother is the type who would run behind me with an orna when guests come over. When I am going out, for example, to Ibn Sina Hospital (a conservative institution), my mother will ask me to take an orna or wear loose clothing because the people there have conservative views." Another participant, Tanisha (Moderate Muslim), adds, "My mother is very religious. So, even if she initially allows certain

things, when people around us start commenting on how her daughter behaves or why she wears this or that, my mother gets very angry. So, even if there was some leniency before, such leniency is now out of the question. That's how it is." These statements capture the essence of the community pressure that puts mothers under the spotlight to reconstruct the patriarchal culture of respectability. Suzana (Moderate Muslim) makes an important observation on this:

I believe that from a young age, Bangladeshi girls are taught that their respect is tied to their body, and it's their responsibility to maintain the honor of their family and parents. If there is even a slight hint of disrepute, it is said that the honor of their parents and family will be lost. ... Actually, what happens is that our families, especially from previous generations, prioritize the opinions of others, the 'third persons'—like what people think and how they perceive them—over their own children's. This creates a sense of fear among the women from a young age, which persists into adulthood. Even when these women fall victim to any major crimes, their parents feel hesitant to report it to the police due to this internalized fear. They think if neighbors find out about something, they might gossip, make comments, or spread rumors, and they will lose their honor in society.

Therefore, these same daughters grow up to be the mothers of the next generation. Then, they perpetuate the same internalized fear of losing their family's honor by doing what their mothers did to them. They continue controlling their daughters' agency through interactional constraints to uphold their family's honor, thus creating a generational cycle. Regarding this, Navila (Secular Liberal) mentions how her mother often puts her in a "pick and choose" dilemma due to her gender role. She says, "I'm forced into a situation where I have to either choose one thing or another. In contrast, those on the opposite side of the gender role spectrum, like my brothers at

home or my husband at my in-laws', do not have to face such 'pick and choose' situations." The need to "pick and choose" between respectability and personal agency is a common experience for women living under patriarchal systems. Women must often weigh the potential consequences of their choices, considering how their actions might affect their reputation, family honor, and social standing (Storms, 2017).

Marriage also plays a vital influence on mothers to reenforce patriarchal norms on their daughters-in-law. Marriage is not only a relationship between spouses but also a social contract that creates in-laws. Therefore, in many societies, families seek spouses for their children who are most suitable to ensure a good relationship between the two families. Choosing an unsuitable spouse can lead to conflicts between family groups, which may, in turn, reduce the chances of survival for both parents and children (Bartels 2007: 29-30).

Historically, marriage has been an important institution in Muslim societies. Typically, relationships between men and women are socially and culturally restricted to family life, as any relationships before/without marriage are prohibited. Hence, the custom of arranging marriage for adult children by their parents is highly practiced in Bangladeshi societies. The primary responsibility of parents with a female child is to ensure she is married to a "suitable groom." To achieve this, the bride must embody modesty and represent coming from an ideal, respectable family. Anila (Moderate Muslim), a mother of a little girl, highlighted the societal expectations and cultural norms surrounding married women in the Indian subcontinent, particularly in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> She states:

It's common across the subcontinent that married women have a specific dress code so that people can immediately tell they are married. For example, they should wear gold

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<sup>9</sup> I mentioned the historical origin of this cultural phenomenon in Chapter 2.

earrings and gold bangles—this is considered the standard. People believe that married women should only wear salwar kameez and Kabli pajama (flowy pajamas) or sarees. Then there's the issue of the mandatory nose piercing. I haven't faced pressure to pierce my nose in my family yet because my mother-in-law doesn't have it. So, I was saved from that hassle. However, many of my friends, no matter how much they resisted, had to get their noses pierced, even if it was six months after their wedding. Nose piercing is mandatory for married women.

These norms around jewelry dictate a specific dress and accessory code for married women, which serves as a visible marker of their marital status and expectations of respectability. This societal pressure can limit women's autonomy and reinforce patriarchal control over their bodies (through forced piercings) and choices (in clothing). While some women, like Anila, may escape certain pressures due to family dynamics, others face significant pressure to conform. Tanisha (Moderate Muslim) shares her experience with arranged marriage during the interview. She shared how her mother insisted on her taking pictures with hijab just so she could be projected as a respectable bride fitting the normative standards of modesty. This pressure from her mother highlights the normative culture about a Bangladeshi woman's role and worth in a marriage. Tanisha shares, “the men themselves do not adhere to these practices but expect them from the women.” This entails a double-standard that exempts men from upholding the culture of respectability.

Rather, in the case of married women, the husband and the in-laws take on the authoritarian roles to control the women's clothing choices for the sake of their family honor. This happened in Tamanna's case. Tamanna's (Secular/Liberal) husband is a professor at a top public university. Teaching is a highly respectable profession that pays well in Bangladesh.

Tamanna shares, “My partner’s profession has certain expectations. For instance, when we visit his colleagues’ homes, my husband strictly asks me to wear an orna and a three-piece outfit. He says that all his colleagues are considered very respectable, and they dress in a certain (traditional/Islamic) way. If I dress differently, it won’t look good on him and would be disrespectful towards my husband’s honor.” This is an example of how husbands exert control over women’s appearance to maintain social respectability in their professional circles. Another participant, Mou (Moderate Muslim), adds,

Personally, I believe that the concept of imposing clothing restrictions on women is very common. I’ve heard this from many of my friends, particularly after marriage; the in-laws say they can’t dress like that anymore and must wear a hijab. Then, the husband starts insisting that she wear certain clothes. If she doesn’t wear them, they emotionally blackmail her for it.

Aditi (Moderate Muslim) shares her experience with her mother-in-law. She says,

Before marriage, I usually wore Western clothes. However, after marriage, I had to change my dressing style. I was forced to wear a burqa and hijab at my mother-in-law’s order. I also remember seeing another school friend who had a similar story; she had to wear a burqa because it was her husband’s choice. It was an arranged marriage. So, it is like this.

Naila (Secular/Liberal) shares her story about facing pressure from her in-laws to adhere to traditional family values. Her in-laws’ disapproval restricts her ability to wear the clothing she prefers, such as shirts and tank tops, at home. This situation highlights the importance of maintaining family honor over individual comfort and agency by the daughters-in-law.

Rubi (Islamist) shared her observations about what happened to her own family members, like her aunts - who had joined their family through marriage. They told stories to Rubi about how they used to dress during college and how they changed after marriage. Rubi mentioned that after becoming part of the family, her aunts started wearing a burqa or trying to live more modestly. She says, “They may not have strictly worn a hijab or full sleeves before, preferring three-quarter or half sleeves. But now they wear full sleeves and pin their hijabs properly, ensuring no hair is shown. It has become stricter for them.” My findings highlight how Bangladeshi women face interactional constraints propagated by their husbands and in-laws after marriage. This reinforces the idea that marriage in patriarchal societies is not just a personal relationship but also a social institution that enforces and perpetuates gender roles and expectations.

Participants report facing severe interactional constraints on their clothing choices outside their family, as well. Friends, peers, colleagues, acquaintances, and even complete strangers on the road exert their patriarchal dominance over women. The most common ways to do so range from verbal harassment, such as moral policing or sharing unsolicited opinions, to non-verbal and physical assaults. In this section, I confine my discussion to verbal harassment.

Rumana (Secular/Liberal) shares a memory of a guy in her friend circle who would often tell her not to wear jeans, a T-shirt, and a jacket during group studies. He would warn her that wearing those clothes in public might attract unwanted attention. He repeatedly asked her not to wear such clothes anymore. This made Rumana very uncomfortable, and she finally stopped wearing those clothes in front of him. Another participant, Mishti (Islamist), shared a similar experience of choosing to wear Islamic clothing. Mishti always prefers to wear a burqa and hijab outside. The only exception is when there are any cultural programs on her campus, and she

wears a saree with a sleeved blouse and a hijab. She shared a memory when a male classmate of hers made a comment seeing her in a saree. He said with a demeaning tone, “You are not as religious as you typically show us. Why do you always wear a burqa, then?” Mishti did not know how to respond to such a sudden comment. She just smiled nervously and left. Rumana and Mishti’s male friends embody patriarchal norms and feel entitled to give unsolicited opinions to them regarding their clothing choices. Such norms perpetuate the idea that women’s bodies are inherently sexualized and must be controlled by responsible male authorities to prevent unwanted male desire.

The embodiment of such norms is further perpetrated by the members of extended families of the women, including both men and women. I will start with my experience here. I visited Bangladesh this summer after two years. As expected, my relatives visited to see me after a long time. One of my paternal aunts could not come in person and called me on the phone. After five minutes of casual chitchat, she started lecturing me on maintaining ‘purdah.’ She gave me a guilt-trip explaining how I was letting the family down by not dressing ‘modestly.’ She asked me to promise her that I would carry an orna and cover my head in the future. I felt uncomfortable at this, but I saw this coming, knowing that she is the most religious person in our family. I wanted to avoid any conflict, so I just quietly listened to her lectures before hanging up. This is one of the many times I had to experience such things.

Ayesha (Secular/Liberal) shares a similar account, saying, “When I attend any family events, my relatives often ask me, ‘Why are you wearing your orna on one side of your shoulder like that? Why haven’t you draped it properly covering your chest?’” Ayesha explains the reasons behind such questions, saying that her relatives engage in social policing as a way to control women. They dictate when women in the family should leave the house, what clothes

they should wear, and what behavior is acceptable. They use shame and guilt to enforce these rules, socially humiliating those who do not comply. According to Ayesha, this is a form of social control mechanism that is not always visible. The use of shame and guilt to enforce compliance with ‘purdah’ and ‘respectability’ reflects the argument that patriarchy regulates women’s bodies and sexuality to maintain power dynamics.

Strangers also do not hesitate to voice their own efforts to control women’s bodies. Ayesha (Secular/Liberal) shares her experience on this: “There have been times when I was standing on the street. Some elderly man, with a beard and wearing a long robe, would sweetly ask me, ‘My dear, it would be nice if you covered your head, wouldn’t it?’” Ayesha mentioned that although the man expressed his opinion kindly, it was still a form of moral policing. She noted that similar interactions occurred on other occasions. For example, in crowds, she has experienced instances where someone touches her inappropriately or whispers something offensive while passing by. She also observed that similar incidents had occurred to others she knew. According to her, the people who made such comments often appeared to be Islamists in their attire, including women in burqas and hijabs or men with beards and robes.

Mumu (Moderate Muslim) was a professional gamer, and she used to livestream while playing video games. Videogame streaming is predominantly a male-dominated medium of entertainment (Taylor 2018; Witkowski 2018; Yee 2017). Mumu, being a college-going woman, had to be courageous to step foot in such an arena. However, she had to quit streaming after a year because of constant online bullying by men. She explained that even though she dressed modestly while streaming from home, often wearing a loose, long T-shirt, some viewers would criticize her for not covering her head or for wearing a T-shirt, which they deemed inappropriate. She noted that these comments, which often came from older viewers, were focused on her attire



and were delivered as religious preachings. She exclaimed with anger, saying, “They feel they have the right to say it because they think they are men and older than me. Obviously, it’s the middle-aged or elderly people who say these things.”

Ayesha and Mumu’s stories also reveal an intersectionality between gender, age, and religion. This reflects a broader cultural norm in the Bangladeshi context where age is equated with authority and wisdom, complemented by the religiously sanctioned gender privilege. This grants older male religious individuals the perceived right to control younger women’s bodies by harassing them verbally in public and online spaces. However, following men, the women who fit such categories of age, privilege, and piety also produce the same patriarchal norms of maintaining respectability through imposing constraints on women. These women replicate their behavior in public spaces in the same way they do at home, acting as ‘mothers.’

Suraiya (Secular /Liberal) shares about facing interactional constraints by such women. She usually boards the women’s compartment in the metro to avoid harassment by men. However, this doesn’t save her from experiencing similar constraints by women. She adds, “I saw a woman on the metro. She was wearing a salwar kameez with an orna on her head. I was also wearing the same. The azan<sup>10</sup> (call to prayer) was going on. And when she was passing by me, she commented, ‘Your clothes are fine, so why don’t you cover your head?’ Another time, I was walking down the street in Dhaka when a woman came up to me, saying, ‘You look like a girl from a good family. Can’t you hear that the azan is almost over? Why haven’t you covered your head yet?’ It’s the way it is on that street. I face this everywhere.” Naila (Secular /Liberal) shares a similar experience, saying, “I was walking down the street during Ramadan, wearing

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<sup>10</sup> The Azan, also spelled as Adhan, is the call to Islamic prayer, recited by a designated person known as the muezzin. It is announced from a mosque to inform the community of the time for one of the five obligatory daily prayers (Salah) in Islam.

salwar kameez, and someone felt they could call out to me, saying that in a country with 90% Muslims, you can't dress like that, you need to cover your head." Suzana (Moderate Muslim) shared something similar, saying: "I was leaving my office to go home during Ramadan with my sister. I was wearing a salwar-kameez with an orna. As I was walking down the street, a random middle-aged woman—who was wearing a burqa but not with a hijab, just had an orna draped over her chest normally—stopped me suddenly. ... and said, 'My dear, you should always cover your head and not wear clothes like that.' She was a random stranger. She felt she had the right to say such things to me."

Suraiya, Naila, and Suzana were reprimanded for not covering their head during azan and Ramadan. Even though they were wearing salwar-kameez and orna, the traditional attire that is considered modest next to burqa and hijab, they faced interactional constraints from stranger older women on the street. This experience highlights the public scrutiny to make women conform to higher standards of cultural stereotypes, which are often not sanctioned by religious texts.<sup>11</sup> While it could be argued that the women who made these comments were exercising their own agency by reprimanding other women for their clothing—as tools of patriarchal control mechanisms similar to their roles as 'mothers' at home—participants also reported that these interactional constraints were not only present in their homes but also persisted in private spaces like educational institutions or workplaces. I will discuss it in the next section.

To sum up, ideological constraints on women's agency are reinforced through personal interactions with family members, especially fathers, enforcing modesty through hostile actions such as advice, scolding, and restricting mobility. These interactional constraints are echoed by

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<sup>11</sup> The Quran and Hadith do not specifically require women to cover their heads during the Adhan (call to prayer). Some scholars and cultural practices (like that in Bangladesh) might encourage covering the head as a sign of respect during the Adhan, but it is not a direct religious obligation according to the primary sources of Islam.

other figures like intimate partners, in-laws, and even strangers, who impose further limitations through unsolicited opinions, moral policing, and harassment.

## **Institutional Constraints**

McKinzie and Richards (2022) define institutional constraints as the limitations placed on women by religious and educational institutions. Such limitations prevent women from understanding or coping with experiences of abuse. Additionally, these institutions often blame the victims when they report abuse, thereby reinforcing the ideological positions that perpetuate gender-based oppression (McKinzie & Richards, 2022). McKinzie and Richards (2022) were able to explore the institutional constraints experienced by participants who attended Evangelical Christian churches. However, examining similar constraints within the context of Bangladeshi Islamic mosques was not feasible in my research. This limitation is due to the cultural norm in Bangladesh that restricts Muslim women from entering mosques for prayer. Consequently, none of my research participants had ever attended a mosque for prayers.

While Islamic teachings do not prohibit women from praying in mosques, interpretations and practices do vary widely across different cultures and societies. In Bangladesh, the majority of Muslims follow the Hanafi School of thought that adheres to conservative interpretations of Islam. According to the Hanafi teachings, women are expected to pray at home rather than in mosques (Ahmad 2012). Moreover, many mosques in Bangladesh do not have adequate facilities to accommodate separate spaces for men and women, making it impractical for women to attend (Khan & Nia, 2023). Consequently, women who attempt to pray in mosques may face social disapproval or criticism. This societal pressure manifested through interactional and institutional constraints can discourage women from participating in communal prayers at mosques (Khan &

Nia, 2023). However, participants did face institutional constraints on their clothing choices in educational and employment settings.

Educational institutions in Bangladesh often impose informal dress codes that discourage or outright prohibit certain genres of clothing (i.e., Western attire) despite there being no official written policies. In some schools, burqas and hijabs are compulsory parts of the uniform, reflecting an institutionalization of religious norms. The private high school I attended from class three to ten was an example of this. The dress code required us to wear a scarf or hijab with our uniform from classes one to three. From class four onwards, wearing a burqa over our uniform was mandatory. Later, due to extreme heat during the summer, many students were getting sick. As a result, the requirement to wear the school uniform under the burqa was eliminated, and only the burqa and hijab became the mandatory uniform.

Rubi (Islamist) shared a story about a similar conservative private school that she attended. She states, “My school was very Islamic-minded. The school’s culture was such that from class six, we had to wear our school uniform inside and a burqa over it.” Ayesha (Secular/Liberal) also shared, “Our school puts a lot of emphasis on wearing orna properly. Reminders were given repeatedly to ensure it was worn correctly. Even if the teachers wore salwar kameez instead of burqa, they had to face criticism as well.” Rubi, Ayesha, and my own experiences at our respective institutions show how the norms of ‘purdah’ and respectability are institutionalized in Bangladesh. These are conservative private institutes that follow the national educational curriculum. These are not Madrasas.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, girls were expected to represent

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<sup>12</sup> A madrasa is an educational institution in the Islamic world where students receive instruction in religious subjects, such as the Quran, Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), and other Islamic sciences. In many Muslim-majority countries including Bangladesh, madrasas range from small, local religious schools focusing on elementary religious education to larger institutions that offer advanced studies in Islamic theology and law. The curriculum of a madrasa typically emphasizes memorization of the Quran, understanding of Islamic law (Sharia), and the interpretation of religious texts.

the values of these institutions, just as they were expected to uphold the honor of their own and their in-laws' families.

Higher educational institutions in Bangladesh, including both public and private universities, are seemingly secular (unless announced otherwise). Except for some military universities<sup>13</sup>, universities in Bangladesh do not require uniforms. Even so, there are unwritten rules that dictate which type of clothing is expected and which are not acceptable on campus. Anila, a Moderate Muslim, shared that when she enrolled in a predominantly conservative private-owned university, there was no official dress code in place. However, she noticed posters throughout the campus featuring images of girls in “hijabs and modest clothing,” which suggested that the institution preferred students to dress in a covered manner. She also observed that many girls at the university wore full burqas, hijabs, and even hand gloves and socks, reflecting the Islamic clothing expectations on campus. Anila says, “I wore salwar-kameez or longer tops and pajamas in the classroom; I just didn’t cover my hair, which was dyed and highlighted. People would still pass comments on my attire. One day, a professor called me to her room and asked, ‘Why do you wear tights or leggings? You should wear loose pants.’ Another day, a lecturer insulted me in class, saying, ‘Look at your dyed hair! You come here just for style, not to study.’ I felt very ashamed. I realized as I didn’t wear hijab or burqa, my teachers didn’t like me and judged me for it.” Anila’s experience of being chastised for not wearing loose pants and for having highlighted hair demonstrates how women (in this case, university teachers) enforce patriarchal expectations. The public shaming she faced from her professor shows how institutionalized patriarchal systems use power positions to regulate women’s bodies and behavior. Despite there being no official dress code, the presence of posters depicting modestly

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<sup>13</sup> Such as the Military Institute of Science and Technology (MIST) and Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP)

dressed women indicates an institutional preference for Islamic dress, indirectly pressuring students to comply with the status quo. This subtle form of control restricts women's ability to dress as they choose, thus constraining their agency.

Similar incidents were also seen in some public (state-funded) universities. Mila (Moderate Muslim), studying business at a renowned public university, shares an incident regarding a notice announced by their class representative (CR).<sup>14</sup> She mentioned that the CR group-messaged them, notifying them that there would be a class presentation and instructing all the men to come in formal (Western) attire while asking the women to wear “modest clothing.” Mila said that this made her “really mad,” as she felt it implied that the women usually dressed inappropriately, especially those who wore Western clothes like herself. She expressed her frustration, saying that her clothes were not considered modest in their view, which she found unacceptable. The CR's implication that the casual (Western) clothing of the women students was inappropriate suggests that societal standards of modesty are deeply ingrained, influencing not only institutional policies but also peer expectations. The expectation that women must wear “modest clothing” while men only need to wear “formal attire” highlights a gendered double standard. This standard restricts women's freedom to choose their clothing while allowing men greater flexibility in how they dress.

However, it is not only women students who choose to wear Western clothes who face such constraints. Those who follow the Islamic dress code may face backlash in secular institutes as well. Rubi (Islamist) shared: “I've heard from my friends and roommates that in their

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<sup>14</sup> In Bangladeshi universities, a Class Representative (CR) is a student selected or elected to act as a liaison between the students and faculty or administration in a specific class or course. The CR is responsible for conveying important information such as class schedules, exam dates, and administrative announcements to their peers. They also communicate students' concerns, issues, or feedback to the teachers or department heads, ensuring effective coordination between students and the institution.

departments, teachers or friends don't look kindly on those who wear burqas or niqabs. They think and say that they aren't smart, don't know English, and can't speak smartly in the presentations." Rubi's statement points out the typical stance held by many people in contemporary Bangladesh who pit Islamic culture and modern culture against each other. This underscores the age-old notion that people who adhere to eastern, specifically Islamic culture, cannot possibly embrace any element of modernity, such as speaking fluent English or being smart enough to ace a presentation at college. The institutionalization of such anti-Islamic attitudes constrains Islamist women's agency, just as secular women's choices are constrained at more conservative institutions.

Institutions, both schools and examination bodies, impose rules that can further conflict with personal and religious practices. Borsha (Islamist) adds, "I wear hijab. However, for the public service job examination, I am required to show my ears, even though I don't want to. I now feel like I don't want to take public service job tests at all. This is a significant constraint." On a similar note, Rahima (Islamist) shares, "Even though I wear a hijab, I had to show my hair and ears for the university admission photo. I had no other option." Borsha and Rahima's accounts illustrate that while they preferred to follow their religious practice of wearing a hijab, they had to compromise by showing their hair and ears for official documentation. This requirement signifies a form of institutional control that overrides individual religious preferences. The necessity to comply with institutional norms, even if they conflict with personal beliefs, highlights the limited agency individuals have in such settings. The limitations placed on Borsha and Rahima demonstrate how institutional and societal norms restrict their bodily autonomy, undermining their broader agency and self-determination (Kabeer, 2001; Mahmood, 2001).

Borsha's experience in the corporate sector reveals how societal expectations regarding women's attire persist across different professional spaces. As Borsha chose not to take the public service examination, she started working in a private corporate institution in the marketing department. However, she faced similar constraints regarding her Islamic attire there as well. "From the moment an intern and I joined the company," Borsha shares, "we were judged by a number of colleagues based on our appearance." She explains the reason for this saying:

This happened because I wore a burqa and a longer hijab, and the intern wore a full-black burqa. In the corporate sector, everyone thinks that women working in marketing or brand communication departments will dress in a Western or 'modern' way. They think that women wearing burqas or hijabs aren't an appropriate match for the marketing department. They assumed we couldn't even speak properly.

Borsha highlights the corporate sector's reluctance to accept women who wear burqas or hijabs, particularly in departments like marketing or brand communication, where personal presentation is deemed crucial. This indicates an institutional bias against religious attire, equating professional capability with Western or modern dress codes, as has also happened in universities. However, in other workplaces, the opposite is true. Naila (Secular/Liberal) explains, "Now I work from home, but when I used to go to the office, I had to be very cautious to ensure my dress was traditional. Office environments are ruthless, and appearance is judged before work performance. Everything, from makeup to dress, is scrutinized." Naila's statement highlights how not only the women donned in Islamic attire but also women wearing traditional (salwar/kameez & saree) have to be "very cautious" in maintaining their clothing in the predominantly secular workplaces to avoid the verbal or non-verbal harassments. The common thread across these experiences is the control over women's dress, whether it aligns with religious modesty or secular expectations, underscoring the regulation of female appearance at both ends of the spectrum.



Suraiya's story is relevant here. Suraiya (Secular/Liberal) works as a Lecturer in Law at a renowned private university. Before stepping into academia, she worked in some corporate legal chambers and non-profit organizations. She appeared before the interview board at a workplace but was instantly rejected because she was wearing a hijab. After some time, due to some life incidents, she became an ex-Muslim and left the hijab. However, she finally landed in the non-profit sector, but she constantly faced judgments about her attire depending on the demographics of the clients/donors in those organizations. She says, "I was said to be 'overdressed' at my workplace for a meeting with foreigners. Though the office didn't have any dress code, my boss came up to me and asked why I was wearing a salwar-kameez. They wanted me to wear a saree. This happened at another workplace, too." Suraiya's experience reflects a specific cultural expectation within workplaces that may not be expressed through official notice on dress codes but are enforced through interactional constraints. Borsha, Naila, and Suraiya's experience underscores the significant role of unwritten dress codes in corporate institutions in Bangladesh. These norms often reflect societal expectations and can be as powerful as written policies. Interestingly enough, although the workplaces mentioned above were forcing women employees to stick to 'modern' or 'traditional' attire in the corporate sectors, some workplaces actively reprimanded such clothing practices. This dizzying inconsistency creates a complex environment for women, where their personal autonomy over clothing choices is continually undermined.

Aditi (Moderate Muslim) mentions that while her educational workplace did not have a formal dress code, the office management discouraged wearing Western clothes. When she wore a T-shirt and jeans, they advised her to dress more like a teacher. Despite the feedback, she continued wearing Western attire since she worked remotely and did not face further issues. However, she thinks that if she didn't work remotely, she might have faced more serious

consequences. In Aditi's case, the insistence on dressing in a way that aligns with traditional views of a teacher's attire indicates that professional competence and respectability are visually signaled through specific types of clothing. This mirrors broader societal norms that value modesty and traditional attire over Western styles, particularly for women as teachers who are considered role models for students and thus expected to embody modesty.

All the instances of institutional constraints in the workplace above were propagated by male bosses. These constraints often stem from deep-seated patriarchal norms and are perpetuated by male-dominated leadership structures, demonstrating the interplay of power imbalance and gender hierarchy. However, women bosses and colleagues also reinforced patriarchal norms. Tamanna (Secular/Liberal), a lawyer, shares an experience in which she was reprimanded by a female colleague at the Court House. After a challenging trial submission, she went to the washroom without her coat and was wearing a white shirt without an orna. A fellow female lawyer told her that dressing like this dishonored the court, even though she was not in the courtroom at the time. This incident illustrates the enforcement of dress codes and how women may police each other's behavior based on internalized patriarchal norms.

Beyond traditional professional arenas such as education and law, women also reported facing institutional constraints in other settings, such as an experimental laboratory. Lamisa (Secular/Liberal) describes a lab environment where, despite no official dress code, there is an unwritten rule about modest dressing, including wearing an orna and avoiding certain hairstyles and makeup. This informal dress code is enforced and practiced by her female peers and male superiors, creating an atmosphere where deviation from these norms is highly discouraged and morally policed. The pressure to conform to these unwritten dress codes leads to self-censorship, and Lamisa feels compelled to avoid wearing certain clothes or makeup to avoid criticism. This

self-censorship reflects how internalized norms and the fear of judgment can limit women's agency and personal freedom in workplaces.

To sum up, women are compelled to adapt to the fluctuating and conflicting expectations of different institutions and work settings, leaving little room for self-expression or comfort. In one setting, women may be required to embrace Western professional attire, while in another, traditional clothing may be mandated to align with cultural norms of modesty and respectability. The lack of consistent standards highlights the broader issue of how women's bodies are policed through institutional constraints in professional spaces, limiting their agency and reinforcing patriarchal control over their appearance.

## **Internalized Constraints**

Ideological, institutional, and interpersonal interactions are often internalized from childhood, shaping women's understanding of societal norms and expectations regarding appropriate dress. This leads to mental roadblocks in adulthood that inhibit their ability to choose clothing that aligns with their personal preferences and identity. These mental roadblocks stem from the fear of being judged, criticized, or deemed immodest by others. For example, a woman might hesitate to wear a sleeveless dress because she anticipates negative comments or moral policing from family members or society at large. This internalized fear can limit her clothing choices and reinforce conformist behavior. I will analyze how internalized constraints affected the agency of urban middle-class Bangladeshi women, beginning with Tamanna's story.

Tamanna (Secular/Liberal) shared about a childhood harassment incident when she was physically harassed by her home tutor. She was 13 years old and did not understand what was happening when the tutor was sliding his hands under her skirt. He told her that he was punishing her for not completing her homework. She did not tell her parents about it but shared it with the

family's housekeeper. The housekeeper then informed Tamanna's parents about what she was going through, and they immediately terminated the tutor. However, Tamanna did not receive any emotional support from her parents. Instead, they started blaming her clothing (she wore knee-length frocks at that age) for the abuse she had faced. This instilled a life-long trauma within her, making her feel like speaking up would not change anything and the blame would always end up on her. After that incident, her parents made her wear salwar-kameez at home and forced her to wear a burqa and hijab while going to school. This reflects how interactional constraints, particularly those involving authority figures like parents, can lead to significant psychological effects on the victim. These effects often result in the internalization of self-restricting behavior (Parker, 2022).

Tamanna added that even after growing up, it was difficult for her to resist unfair treatment or violence. Instead, she developed escapist tendencies, making her want to leave or avoid everything unfair that was happening to her. Her vulnerability as a victim-blamed child was further exacerbated by the lack of coping resources or support to challenge these imposed norms (Kessler & McLeod 1984). As Tamanna exclaims, "I never had any family who told me once that it was not my fault. I wish I had someone to give me the emotional support that I needed as a kid. Now, I try to be the mother to my daughter, which I never had."

Similar to Tamanna, Rahima (Islamist) also shared how facing childhood sexual harassment shaped her ability to resist in later life. Rahima recounts an incident from when she was in seventh grade (13 years old). She was walking through the local market with her mother when a man groped her and then simply walked away. She mentioned that the experience left her so traumatized that, as a teenager, she did not share it with anyone at home. She felt ashamed and thought that there was no point in informing her family as it would not have led to any positive

reaction. Rahima's silence illustrates a significant internalized constraint. Just like in Tamanna's case, Rahima had internalized the belief that incidents of harassment are somehow her fault and that discussing them would bring dishonor to the family. This internalized fear of being judged or blamed leads to a form of self-censorship, where victims like Rahima prefer to endure the trauma in silence rather than risk familial shame. When Rahima states that she did not inform her family because "nothing would have happened," it reflects her perception of a lack of support or recourse, which exacerbates the internalized constraint.

Unlike Rahima, Mila (Moderate Muslim) took a chance and told her mother about an incident of physical harassment. One day, she was returning home from school with her mother, wearing a burqa-like uniform that covered her whole body. Suddenly, a bearded man who was wearing a 'jobba,' aka Islamic clothing, groped her chest and quickly walked away. As a 12-year-old child, she could not understand what was happening. She started crying and immediately told her mother about it. Her mother, who hadn't seen what had happened, tried to give the man a stern look, but he had already walked away. However, when they got back home, instead of consoling her, she scolded Mila for crying and even called her names. Though Mila was severely traumatized by the abuse, her mother was more concerned about the honor of the family. This aligns with the cultural norm of respectability, where women are expected to maintain silence to protect their family's honor, even at the cost of their own mental well-being. Mila grew up to be an introverted, timid adult who fears speaking about unfair things happening around her. "Nobody will ever support me; I know how my mom and dad are. So, I just let them decide whatever is good for me. I don't even buy my own clothes; I wear whatever my mom buys for me," concludes Mila.

Most often, such ideological constraints are internalized by women since their childhood. Mishti (Islamist) shares her story on this, saying: “Since we are Muslim women, we have to cover up— my parents taught me this, and it’s a practice I have done from childhood. Additionally, it is done so that people don’t look at you in the wrong way or see anything inappropriate. It’s probably about avoiding the male gaze. Also, as we live in Bangladesh, not only men but women also criticize us as well. People talk if you don’t cover up properly.” Mishti mentioned that she now feels compelled to cover herself because of two reasons. Firstly, due to her internalization of the religious belief imputed on her since childhood, and secondly, she believes that covering is necessary to protect herself from social criticism and the male gaze.<sup>15</sup> Ayesha (Secular/Liberal) shares a similar experience with moral policing on women’s dress from an early age, saying, “That’s a very impressionable age, isn’t it? We try to follow the rules we are told as kids, and we are taught to be ‘good girls.’ So, there was a pressure at that time to wear an orna or to ensure the orna is properly placed.” Mishti and Ayesha describe how the concepts of modesty and respectability have been ingrained in them from a young age as objects of discipline by religious and social authorities (McKinzie and Richards, 2022).

Participants also spoke of how experiences in the public sphere contributed to the development of internalized constraints. Rumana (Secular/Liberal) shared that verbal and non-verbal harassment on the streets had led her to stop wearing her favorite attire for the sake of safeguarding her own mental peace. She exclaims with regret, “Wearing my preferred attire sometimes leads to receiving scornful stares or negative comments from the people around me, which disturbs my peace of mind and affects my mental health. As a result, I cannot always wear the clothes of my choice.” This is a classic example of how internalized fear—stemming from

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<sup>15</sup> I discuss in Chapter 5 if covering up could actually protect her from social criticism and the male gaze or not.

the anticipation of judgment and harassment—limits women’s agency. Rumana also states that when she desires to wear those clothes (three-quarter pants and a T-shirt), she opts not to go outside at all. She says, “The way people stare at me makes me feel as if I am walking naked. This distracts my attention and creates a sense of mental discomfort. Consequently, I just avoid going out that day.” An internalized constraint, therefore, restrains Rumana’s navigation in the public sphere.

Anila (Moderate Muslim) spoke of her regrets about not being able to dress as she wished because of such internalized constraints. She says, “I cannot even go to BFC (a fast-food chain shop in Bangladesh) wearing certain clothes. Even if I want to wear my favorite T-shirt outside, the security guards, the people on the street, and countless street vendors will just stare at me, which I find unbearable.” This experience of judgmental gazes leads to mental distress, ultimately discouraging her from wearing what she prefers.

The above discussion is consistent with Dr. Lynette Adams’ observation that harassment can have a profound impact on one’s sense of belonging and trust, further deepening the psychological effects of such constraints (Parker, 2022). These constraints are not merely external pressures but are deeply internalized, leading to self-censorship and the reinforcement of conformist behavior. These also highlight the broader impact of the religious norm of purdah and respectability culture on women’s mental health and well-being. According to Foucault’s concept of self-governing subjects, individuals internalize societal norms and begin to regulate their own behavior in alignment with those expectations, even in the absence of external enforcement (Foucault 1975, 1980). In this way, ideological and institutional constraints not only shape external actions but also contribute to the development of internalized mechanisms of control, making individuals active participants in their own subjugation.

To sum up, through a lifetime of ideological, interactional, and institutional constraints, these norms become internalized, leading women to regulate their own clothing choices and conform to societal expectations of appropriate dress in adulthood. The internalized fear of judgment or criticism in case of failure to uphold such norms inhibits women from freely choosing clothing that aligns with their preferences.

## **Geographical Constraints**

During the interviews, several participants mentioned facing different levels of constraint on their clothing agency depending on where they are. I term such constraint as the “geographical constraint.” I use this term to refer to the restrictions on women’s clothing choices imposed by differential standards of cultural, social, and religious norms that vary by region, even within the same city. In urban capital cities like Dhaka, women experience more freedom in their attire due to liberal attitudes, rapid urbanization, and exposure to global cultures. In contrast, women in more conservative regions, such as smaller cities like Barisal, face stricter societal expectations and moral policing, compelling them to conform to traditional dress codes. This disparity creates a form of “geographical constraint,” where women must navigate different societal pressures for conformity to the status quo, depending on their location.

I will begin by discussing Mou’s experience. Mou (Moderate Muslim) grew up in the proper city of Barisal and has now moved to Dhaka to pursue higher education. She notes that even though both Dhaka and Barisal are cities, the environments are quite different. In Dhaka, she says, people do not pay much attention to what others are wearing. As a law student, she prefers to wear blazers, shirts, and pants because they are more comfortable for her. However, in Barisal, things are different. She believes that if she wears such attire in Barisal, she will face “gossip among her relatives and neighbors.” In her own words, “In Dhaka, I don’t care what



others think when I'm walking around in such attire. But when I come to Barisal, I have to keep that in mind. ... The difference is in the cities."

Mou's experience reflects how societal expectations for women's clothing depend on place. Dhaka, the fast-paced urban life, creates an environment where people have little time or inclination to judge others based on their clothing. In Dhaka, relative anonymity gives women more freedom to wear Western clothing without fear of social scrutiny. In contrast, Barisal maintains stricter conservative values, where societal norms dictate more conservative clothing, creating a "geographical constraint" for women like Mou, who feel pressured to adjust their attire to meet these expectations. Fear of gossip or negative attention from neighbors and relatives further reinforces this constraint, limiting their agency in choosing comfortable and practical clothing—a concern also voiced by Rubi (Islamist). She says:

Coming to Dhaka, I became familiar with a different culture. I noticed that for many religious women, wearing a black burqa isn't the only option. A full-sleeve three-piece suit, all covered up with a hijab— could be an alternative to a burqa. Also, if I wear a saree with a full-sleeve blouse and take a hijab with it, that's acceptable here. But in my hometown, Chandpur, this is not normalized yet, especially in small towns. There, people still think that you must wear a burqa—specifically, a black burqa to follow the proper purdah.

Rubi's statement further elucidates the constraints on clothing agency faced by Islamist women besides Moderate Muslims in different geographical regions. In Dhaka, she observes a more blended and flexible approach to religious attire, where women could choose from a range of 'modest' clothing options, including three-piece suits or sarees paired with hijabs. However, in Chandpur, the expectation for maintaining purdah is still firmly rooted in wearing a black burqa,

without exceptions. This reflects the persistence of normative culture in smaller towns, where deviations from the accepted dress code are more noticeable and subject to scrutiny. She further mentions that in smaller towns like Chandpur, people are more likely to notice and comment on a woman's appearance, which happens less in Dhaka. She suggests that the reason behind this might be the diversity in larger cities like Dhaka, where people are accustomed to seeing a variety of appearances. However, in smaller towns, even minor things become widely gossiped, and everyone notices them more keenly. The diversity in Dhaka offers a form of social protection where differences are less likely to be singled out, allowing women more freedom in their diverse clothing choices and protection from harassment. Similar data was also found in other participants, namely Aditi, Nupur, and Tanisha's statements.

Some participants also reported that parents controlled their daughters' clothing differently depending on the region. I discussed previously how Rumana's mother and father forced her not to wear Western clothes in Barisal as they have a reputation as being a pious family in the neighborhood. Rumana shares:

When I am in Dhaka, they say nothing (laughs). But if I go to the village, they warn me not to go outside the house without wearing a three-piece suit (salwar kameez) and orna. So somehow, if I wear a top—a long top—they will still insist that I wear a three-piece suit when going out, saying, 'There are people around, what will they say? Think about your father's reputation.' This usually happens when I go to Barisal. This means they are also kind of influenced by what people think. They don't say anything when I'm in Dhaka because they don't have to face anyone here.

Rumana's statement adds further data on the importance of 'anonymity' in bypassing the norms of respectability that are upheld by urban middle-class families in Dhaka. While in Barisal,

Rumana's hometown, the fear of social judgment and the importance of maintaining the family's reputation within the local community makes her parents overtly conscious about controlling her clothing. On the other hand, Dhaka, a liberal big city that provides a certain level of security to their family honor through anonymity in the community, helps drive this change in her parents' behavior. This reflects how geographical constraints manifest through the expectations of family members, who adjust their level of control based on the perceived social environment.

Naila's (Secular/Liberal) statement is also relevant here. She says, "My mother used to say, 'Wear these clothes when you're in Dhaka—just don't wear them in front of me.'" Naila's statement further explores how geographical constraints affect perceptions of morality and respectability. Her mother, who is highly religious, paradoxically allows Naila to wear certain clothes in Dhaka but not in their local area. This dichotomy reveals the powerful influence of local societal norms over individual beliefs. In Dhaka, where diverse lifestyles are more accepted, Naila's mother is willing to overlook (more like out of sight, out of mind) what she might consider inappropriate attire as per her religious belief. However, in their local community, where societal scrutiny is more intense and conservative values are dominant, she cannot tolerate the same behavior. This creates a situation where geographical location determines the acceptability of certain actions, interacting with personal or religious convictions.

The geographical divide between urban and rural or semi-urban areas is not just about location; it also reflects deeper cultural and class divides, where different sets of norms apply. Even within Dhaka, certain parts of the city are more liberal, and others are more conservative. I will start by explaining with my own experience. I grew up in the Khilgaon<sup>16</sup> area, situated in the

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<sup>16</sup> Khilgaon Thana had a population of 380,740 with an average household size of 3.81 members, and an average literacy rate of 85.33 percent, more than ten percent higher than the national average (Population and Housing Census 2022). Overall, it is a region with a population of educated urban middle-class nuclear families.

Southern part of Dhaka. My family moved here because I got into a local private school which was highly ranked on the national education board at that time. (The same conservative school I mentioned earlier.) My parents believed it would be beneficial to send their daughters to a religious school so we could grow up adhering to the norms of modesty and respectability. In the previous chapter, I discussed the school uniform I had to maintain: a deep ash-colored burqa and a white hijab with black shoes.

My mother would strictly control my clothing inside and outside the home, as she was highly concerned about what people would think about our family. When going outside, I was forced to wear three-piece suits, mandatorily carrying an orna and covering my chest properly. I can still hear my mother's harsh voice ringing in my ears, saying, "Orna thik koro!" – meaning "Wear your orna properly" – every time the wind blew a little harder, misplacing my orna from over my chest. My body was the site of constant tension between any wardrobe malfunction and the honor of my family as well as my school.

However, the situation changed when I was admitted to college and started choosing my own lifestyle. Regardless, given that I continued to reside with my family through my college years, I still had to navigate between my mother's control of my clothing and my own autonomy. Moreover, I was not rich enough to hang out in the more liberal and affluent parts of the city, such as Gulshan and Banani<sup>17</sup>. The area we lived in, Khilgaon, was more conservative. So, I faced geographical constraints of my own.

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<sup>17</sup> Gulshan is a highly affluent residential cum commercial area in the Northern part of Dhaka, neighbored by Banani. It is home to a number of the city's expensive restaurants, five-star hotels, shopping centers, schools, banks, offices and international members' clubs; it also hosts the majority of embassies and high commissions in Bangladesh (Rubert 1972). Most of the international visitors and expatriates live in this area (Dhaka Tribune 2016). Therefore, Gulshan and Banani is the most culturally and racially diverse part of Dhaka.

After moving to the US in 2022, I could finally practice agency over my clothing to the fullest sense. I got used to wearing comfortable T-shirts, pajamas, jeans, pants, shorts, etc., without fear of control and judgment. Therefore, before visiting Bangladesh the last summer, I was anxious about the upcoming arguments I would have with my mother regarding my clothes. I bought a couple of loose-fitted shirts and pants to mitigate between her expectations and my own agency. Wearing a three-piece suit, especially while carrying the orna, has always been a hassle for me, and I wanted to avoid that at all costs. However, my mitigated strategy was not quite happily accepted by my mother. During the first two weeks of my stay, she constantly nagged me to wear longer clothing (i.e., kameez) that would reach below my knees and cover my hips. By refusing to wear the kameez she suggested, I directly resisted her expectations. My experience outside the home was even worse. Within the first seven minutes in Khilgaon, I got harassed. I was in a rickshaw with my sister when a man made a comment on my body and quickly passed by. Later, at least three more men stared at me in a way that made me feel super uncomfortable. This resulted in a mental roadblock, and I decided to only visit places (such as malls and restaurants) in the Gulshan and Banani areas. Thus, interactional and internalized constraints became geographical constraints, as I restricted my own freedom of movement.

When walking down the streets of Gulshan and Banani wearing Western clothing, my experience was completely different. I did not feel any eyes glued to my body. The roads were bustling with traffic and hustling with busy people, but nobody seemed to care about others. Probably for the first time, I felt I could move freely in Western clothing in the busy streets of Dhaka without any constraints. My experience is further supplemented by data from other participants. Rahima (Islamist) mentions, “In our area, including Rampura, Banasree, and Badda, I rarely see women wearing Western clothes. However, I notice more women wearing Western

attire when I go towards Gulshan and Banani.” Anila (Moderate Muslim) also says, “I feel Gulshan and Banani are the good parts of the city. My office is in Gulshan. I walk there most days, and nothing ever happened to me on the streets. But I cannot speak the same about the other parts of the city. For example, I live in Norda, and my area is very conservative. I fear harassment every time I walk back home.” Lamisa (Secular/Liberal) adds on a similar note: “I don’t wear an orna with the shirts I wear. I wear jeans with a shirt. My mom asks me to wear an orna in this area, then put it in my bag when I reach the university campus or wherever I am going. And I follow her advice because the area where I live is not like Gulshan-Banani. It’s an older part of Dhaka. People here are very judgmental and backward. If I wear something like in Gulshan here, it wouldn’t be good for me.”

The statements of the participants above reveal how living in a close-knit community where their family’s reputation is dependent on controlling their bodies results in stricter clothing restrictions. Interactional constraints create pressure to conform to the normative culture. On the other hand, the same participants experience a more liberal environment in Gulshan and Banani, where their bodies are less scrutinized. These areas are perceived as more liberal, where the rigid norms of respectability are less enforced compared to more conservative or traditional neighborhoods like Nikunja, Norda, Khilgaon, or Rampura. This is a clear example of how constraints differ on the basis of geographical location, even within the same city. This creates a fragmented experience of freedom, where women must continually negotiate their autonomy based on their location, highlighting the intersection of geography, gender, and social control in urban Bangladesh.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how multiple forms of constraints—ideological, interactional, institutional, internalized, and geographical—intersect and overlap to shape the lives of urban middle-class women in Bangladesh, particularly in relation to their clothing choices. These constraints, rooted in both religious and cultural norms, limit women's ability to exercise full autonomy over their bodies and decisions. While McKinzie and Richards' (2022) framework provided a useful starting point, my analysis reveals the added complexities of internalized and geographical constraints that further restrict women's agency in this specific socio-cultural context of Bangladesh. The convergence of these constraints creates a layered experience of control, where women navigate societal expectations across different spheres of their lives, from family dynamics to public interactions. Although women from across the religious-secular spectrum face these pressures, the ways in which they experience and negotiate their agency differ, depending on their position within that spectrum. Nevertheless, it is also important to acknowledge that even within these constraints, women still find spaces to exercise agency. In the next chapter, I highlight women's agency as they respond to, resist, and accommodate the multiple constraints imposed upon them in gender-traditional, post-colonial, and patriarchal Bangladeshi society.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Navigation through Violence: Resistance, Avoidance, or Conformity?**

#### **Introduction**

In previous chapters, I have discussed how the social environment in Bangladesh has changed since its independence in 1971 to the present. In this chapter, I explore how urban middle-class Bangladeshi women navigate these changing environments, exercising resistance and agency in regard to their clothing. One concept that particularly captures this dynamic interaction between individuals and their environments is social navigation, as articulated by Vigh (2006, 2009). Social navigation refers to the ways individuals move within and respond to a shifting social landscape, often in contexts of instability or rapid change. It recognizes the interplay between structural constraints and individual agency (Vigh, 2009), particularly in settings like post-colonial Bangladesh, where social forces are in flux.

Following Speed (2014), I adopt Long's definition of agency as an individual actor's "capacity to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion" (cited in Moser & Clark, 2001:23). The discussion of agency, and the constraints on women's agency in the previous chapters brings attention to the intricate relationship between patriarchal social structures and individual actions, which gives rise to gender-based inequalities. Butler (1998) further underscores the potential backlash against those who challenge gender norms, illustrating the resilience of these social structures. The concept of agency and structure, therefore, is crucial in this context (Storms, 2016), as theorized by Bourdieu (1977) through habitus and Giddens (1984) through the notion of the duality of



structure. These theories suggest that the environments in which women live are continuously evolving, affecting, and being affected by their actions. Such actions and reactions informed by the women's capability to overcome oppression individually and collectively are often termed "resistance" (Mead, 1967; Homans, 1958; Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Garfinkel, 1967).

However, other theories suggest that social structures do not always limit but sometimes enable agency (Giddens, 1984; Goffman, 1961; Marx, [1845–6] 1970; Foucault, 1980; Butler, 1993).

Therefore, the notion that victimized individuals are inherently powerless and unable to act in their lives is not always accurate. Moreover, agency does not always mean expressed resistance (Villalon 2010:552) — such as harassed women loudly protesting against or leaving their abusers. Instead, agency can also be expressed through compliance—such as when women follow religious norms and cultural expectations. Agency can result from conscious, strategic balancing — like when women resort to code-switching their clothing based on differential contexts and circumstances. Moreover, agency can also be revealed as conformity — such as when constrained women intentionally or unintentionally follow the religious norms and cultural expectations to blend in with the group. The analysis of the data gathered in this research helped me uncover the similar ways in which Bangladeshi women navigate their social structures using their available resources in practicing their agency.

Though my focus in this thesis is on individual level resistance against social constraints on women's dress, some women also engaged in collective resistance. One of the secular-liberal participants, Ayesha, is a founding member of a feminist organization that actively engages in protest against incidents of gender-based harassment. In 2022, a notable case occurred in Narsingdi, a city near Dhaka, where a young woman was publicly assaulted by an older woman for wearing Western-style clothing, a crop-top with jeans, which was deemed "indecent" by the

aggressor. In response, Ayesha and other members of her feminist organization decided to organize a protest as an act of collective resistance. Within four days of the incident, they mobilized all the willing participants, wearing red T-shirts displaying slogans like “My Street, My Body, My Choice” and other protest messages. To ensure safety and avoid potential backlash, they did not pre-announce their demonstration, thereby preventing counter-mobilization from local opponents. Upon arriving in Narsingdi, the group gathered at the exact location of the assault, holding hands and walking around while displaying their slogans. Ayesha emphasized that the purpose of the protest was to reclaim women’s right to public space as equal citizens of society. This event serves as a powerful example of organizational resistance by feminist groups in Bangladesh, aimed at challenging harassment and violence against women based on clothing choices. While this thesis acknowledges such collective forms of resistance, my primary focus is on individual acts of resistance against clothing norms in Bangladesh.

Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to answer two critical questions: First, what factors drive these women to select specific types of clothing in different settings despite the potential for adverse reactions or violence? Second, how do these women exercise agency in different ways to safeguard their bodily autonomy and resist various forms of violence? My argument is that urban middle-class Bangladeshi women across the three ideological groups engage in resistance through four different strategies, which I have termed as *direct resistance*, *strategic balancing*, *avoidance*, and *conformity*. These strategies reflect the complex ways in which women exercise agency, resist patriarchal constraints, and negotiate their identities within a shifting social landscape.

## Direct Resistance to Constraints

In response to the constraints imposed by patriarchal social structures, women may directly oppose or defy restrictive norms or practices, such as choosing to wear non-traditional clothing despite social expectations or openly advocating for their rights in public forums. This form of resistance aligns with what Scott (1985) describes as “everyday forms of resistance,” where individuals take small but significant actions to assert their autonomy. Mumu (Moderate Muslim) shared how she grew up wearing a burqa and hijab for easier navigation and practical reasons. However, after she started college, she chose to give up wearing a burqa and hijab. Nevertheless, she faces her mother complaining to her about this change frequently as her parents are very pious. However, instead of yelling at her mother, she tries to explain the reasons behind her actions to her nicely. In this way, Mumu is not only resisting societal norms but also educating her family, thereby creating a buffer between external societal expectations and her personal autonomy. On the other hand, Ayesha’s (Secular/Liberal) resistance is more direct and confrontational. She explains:

When I’m going to Ibn Sina (a conservative medical institution), my mom says, “People’s gazes are different there; will you take an orna or wear something loose?” But I deliberately refuse to do so. At family gatherings, a relative might ask me, “Wouldn’t it be better if you wore the orna on both shoulders?” I’d smile at them sweetly and say, ‘Today, I’m wearing the orna just for style, but usually, I don’t wear it. For example, my office is in a madrasa (religious institution) area. When I go out on my bike without an orna, the boys around there just stare at me, surprisingly. ... I’ve never changed my clothes deliberately because I think it’s a matter of getting used to it. As long as I’m safe and if I can, I’ll push the boundary as far as possible.

It is evident from Ayesha's statement that she consciously chooses not to comply with societal expectations, even when advised by her mother or relatives to dress 'conservatively' in certain areas. Ayesha's actions demonstrate a form of resistance that challenges the notion of conformity by pushing societal boundaries and asserting her right to dress according to her preference.

I asked participants how they practiced resistance in their relationships with their intimate partners. Research suggests that women who engage in open and honest communication with their partners are often able to build stronger psychological intimacy, leading to a more harmonious and supportive relationship (Laurenceau et al., 2005). However, intimate partners may also enjoy greater control over the bodies of women. I discussed in Chapter 3 how women face interactional constraints from their husbands and in-laws. Though most of the participants report being forced to give up their preferences and dress according to their husband's choices (discussed in the next section), some also resisted such constraints. Suzana (Moderate Muslim) shares how she indirectly resisted a potential boyfriend when he tried to control her body. Suzana adds:

I had known this guy for a very long time. So, I went out with him. I was wearing a kameez but no orna with it. He told me, "...you would have looked even more beautiful if you wore an orna." However, he tried to say that as a well-wisher, I'm sorry that the advice was criticism. I didn't ask for his opinion on my dress. I was comfortable with what I was wearing. But his words made me uncomfortable at that moment. He wanted to have a relationship with me. But I realized that if I accepted these small things now that I can't actually tolerate, it might lead to something more in the future. So, I stopped it right there and never talked to him again.

Suzana's reaction to this incident highlights her agency in recognizing when her boundaries were being encroached upon. Her date tried to impose his own standards of beauty and modesty onto her by suggesting that she would look "more beautiful" with an orna, which she perceives as a criticism rather than a compliment. Her decision to withdraw from the interaction and ultimately halt the progression of the relationship is a form of direct resistance to the subtle encroachments on her autonomy. Mou (Moderate Muslim) shares a similar account, saying: "If I am in a relationship with someone and I see that he insists on something that I do not want to do, I will immediately leave that relationship without a second thought." Mou's approach is proactive and decisive, reflecting a strong sense of personal agency and boundaries in the context of romantic relationships. She states that she would leave such a situation "without a second thought," indicating that she prioritizes her well-being and self-respect over maintaining a relationship that could become controlling or toxic. Rubi (Islamist) also shares her proactive and assertive approach to relationships, saying:

Before entering any relationship (laughs), I will openly discuss my clothing style with him. What do I currently follow? What is his opinion about the Islamic dress code? And what is set in my mind is that I will follow what I believe to be perfect according to my ideology and understanding. Maybe I can explain it to my husband in the best possible way, but I can never follow something that is imposed on me. I will certainly not give in; I will resist.

Rubi emphasizes her commitment to following her own ideology and understanding what is "perfect" or correct to her. This shows her determination to maintain her identity and values within a relationship, resisting any pressure to conform to her partner's preferences if they conflict with her own. Based on the several factors that might contribute to the application of

direct resistance by these women, I categorize direct resistance into three types: experiential, cognitive, and economic, as discussed in detail below.

## **I. Experiential Direct Resistance**

Participants in this research who experienced harassment and multiple constraints on their autonomy from an early age reported developing the ability to resist such behaviors as they mature. This can be termed *experiential direct resistance*, where past negative experiences become a foundation for developing coping mechanisms and resistance strategies. According to Pells and Morrow (2017), experiences of violence in childhood and adolescence can shape women's later capacity to resist and assert their rights as adults, but often in a negative direction. Ayesha (Secular/Liberal) shares her experience in a previous relationship where she stood up against the sexist behavior of her ex-boyfriend. She notes:

I think this awareness of resistance has come with age. We tend to let a lot of things go casually, especially when we are younger and in love with the person. But this casual sexism, these small passive-aggressive behaviors, build up over time and can lead to bigger offenses or major incidents. These frustrations also build up inside us. So, yes, I think over time, I've started to speak out about these things.

Ayesha's statement emphasizes how, in some women, early experiences with subtle forms of discrimination accumulate, leading to a greater willingness to resist and challenge these behaviors as one matures.<sup>18</sup> Her statement reflects a shift in her approach to dealing with sexism as she has matured. Initially, she might have been more tolerant or dismissive of casual sexism, particularly in the context of romantic relationships where affection for the partner could

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<sup>18</sup> However, the examination and analysis of the mechanism enabling these people to such resistance and not the others are beyond the scope of this research and thereby unexplored.

overshadow the need to confront such issues. However, as she grew older, her reflections on these experiences likely led to a realization of the long-term impact of ignoring these behaviors. This maturation process, coupled with a growing awareness of her own rights and dignity, likely empowered her to start speaking out against sexism. Her insights can be analyzed through the lens of accumulated experiences, a form of direct resistance that emerges from lived experiences and personal growth over time.

Toma (Islamist) was one of the more seemingly introverted, docile, and humble-natured participants in this research. At the beginning of the interview, she shared her childhood experiences of harassment and her inability to resist such violence. However, she mentioned later how her personality has developed throughout the years, and she became more vocal against such harassment. In her own words:

Once, I was on a bus, and a man was trying to press against me. ... so, I immediately told him to sit properly, and he adjusted himself, maintaining enough distance. I felt really proud of myself for being able to speak up. Maybe my mentality has changed a bit as I've grown older. If someone tries to touch me inappropriately, even if I'm wearing a burqa, I will resist. A girl wearing Western clothes will definitely be able to resist because she is comfortable in her dress. ... Then why shouldn't I resist? What gives them the right to touch me? It is not our fault; it's their (men's) fault... It's my personal freedom to dress as I please.

Toma reflects on how she has grown in her ability to resist harassment as she has matured. Initially unsure of how to react to unwanted advances, she now confidently confronts harassers, understanding that the issue lies with the perpetrator, not with her clothing choices. She also

highlights the resistance practiced by women wearing Western clothes, to which Naila (Secular/Liberal) also comments:

When I am not wearing salwar-kameez, they might think that despite everything, this girl has the guts to wear Western clothes—she has the courage to go against the norms. This means she has that resistance within her. So, they don't dare to touch me anymore. When I was younger, I wouldn't say anything, but now I don't tolerate these at all. The last time anything like this (harassment) happened, I reacted very strongly.

Naila discusses how her resistance has evolved over time. As a child, she remained silent in the face of harassment, but as an adult, she actively confronted those who tried to impose their moral judgments on her. This shift reflects an experiential growth in confidence and a refusal to conform to societal expectations that restrict her agency. However, experiential resistance not only applies to interactions with strangers but also within familial relationships. Naila (Secular/Liberal) shared about the changing dynamics of the relationship between her and her mother. She explains:

Sometimes, if I wear a slightly shorter dress to a friend's gathering, my mom will confront me, saying, "What are you wearing?" But I think as I've grown older, my mom's control over me has lessened, or maybe I've become a bit meaner. Now, if my mom comments on my clothes, I snap back at her, asking, "What's wrong with this dress?"

Naila notes how her mother's control over her clothing choices has diminished as she has grown older and more assertive. This change demonstrates how experiential resistance occurs within familial relationships, where women negotiate and push back against the expectations for



respectability placed on them by their family members. Mumu, Ayesha, and Suzana's statements, as discussed at the beginning of this section, are also examples of this.

## **II. Cognitive Direct Resistance**

Access to higher education can empower women by making them more aware of their rights and the injustices they face, which leads to resistance against patriarchal norms (Hussain 2017). This can be referred to as *cognitive direct resistance*, where increased knowledge and awareness fuel women's ability to challenge and resist oppressive structures. Research by Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender (2002) emphasizes the role of education in enhancing women's agency, allowing them to resist societal constraints more effectively. As Ayesha (Secular/Liberal) notes, "When I was much younger, I used to take offensive things very casually. But as I became more aware through education, these offensive tones started to bother me more, and I started protesting." Ayesha's statement highlights how her awareness of sexist remarks made by her intimate partners evolved as she matured. She gained more knowledge and experience through education and began to perceive these remarks as harmful and offensive. This shift illustrates how cognitive resistance develops over time as one becomes more informed and reflective about their experiences and the underlying power dynamics (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender 2002).

Anila (Moderate Muslim) shares a similar realization, saying:

When I was younger, I was expected to accept everything without question. My sudden (arranged) marriage at a young age and adjusting to a new environment made me lose much of my confidence and self-awareness. I started to adopt the mindset that I had to be good in others' eyes. Even if I didn't like many things, I couldn't protest and say, "No, I will be myself." But after completing my master's, it was a turning point in my life. In my university, I was highly influenced by the knowledge shared by my faculty members.

I studied the theories of feminism, Marxism, and other contemporary scholars related to English literature and analyzed different situations, dialogues, and possibilities. I realized that life cannot remain confined only to religion or Bangladesh. The scope of knowledge should be much broader. That is when I started to speak out against things that I didn't like happening to me. I started wearing what I liked and stood up for my choice.

Anila's exposure to feminist, Marxist, and other contemporary scholarship during her graduate studies played a pivotal role in broadening her understanding of societal structures and her place within them. Education provided her with the tools to critically analyze her experiences and the social expectations placed on her, which aligns with the concept of cognitive direct resistance as discussed in the literature (Freire, 1970; Hooks, 1994). Paulo Freire, in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), argues that education should empower individuals to question and challenge oppressive structures, leading to greater personal and social freedom, which happened in Anila's case. This process of challenging internalized norms is central to cognitive direct resistance and is supported by scholars such as Judith Butler (1997), who discuss how individuals resist and subvert societal norms through the development of critical consciousness. Navila (Secular/Liberal) further discusses how the educational progress and financial independence of her elder sister led to a decrease in restrictions on her own clothing choices. She says:

When it comes to our dress, there were more restrictions when we were younger. As we grew older, the restrictions started to lessen. Now, this probably has a lot to do with education. My elder sister had a significant influence on my life. When she got into a public university, she became financially stable, earning a very good income—she earned more than my mother. She started living in a dorm and underwent changes in her

behavior and appearance; all of this influenced us. When everyone sees that the elder sister is wearing various types of clothes and nobody is saying anything, that's when I also get to wear what I want.

Navila's statement reflects the interplay between education, financial independence, and the reconstruction of the culture of respectability, particularly in the context of clothing choices. Navila's statement points to the concept of social navigation—how individuals adjust their behavior and choices in response to changes in their environment (Vigh 2006, 2009). Seeing her sister successfully navigate the challenges of education and financial independence while exercising greater freedom in clothing choices provided Navila with a model to follow. This also suggests that resistance to restrictive norms can be socially contagious within families or peer groups. This discussion takes us to our next section.

### **III. Economic Direct Resistance**

Financial independence, gained through employment and access to economic capital, often empowers women to resist traditional gender roles and expectations. This type of resistance can be termed *economic direct resistance*, as it is grounded in the economic autonomy that allows women to assert their agency. Kabeer (1999) discusses how women's financial independence significantly contributes to their ability to resist and negotiate within the family and society. Research has shown that financial independence can enhance women's ability to exercise agency in various aspects of their lives, including personal appearance (Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 1999).

I will begin with my experience. After starting my undergraduate studies, I began working part-time as a tutor to pay for my tuition and other expenses. Before getting into college, my mother and father had strict control over my outdoor clothing, as I mentioned earlier. My mother would take me to the shopping center and only buy dresses that she assumed to be “appropriate”

and “decent” for me. My opinion did not matter as she was paying for the clothes. When I started earning and buying clothes for myself, I had the freedom to choose what to buy and wear. I still had to face severe constraints wearing these while going outside in front of them. However, I was able to resist them directly by saying: “I bought these clothes with my own salary. I don’t think you have a say in what I wear when I buy it with my hard-earned money.” My direct confrontation caught them off guard at first, but eventually, this strategy worked. They stopped calling me out on my clothes. One of my uncles also recently made a comment to me: “You are now a working woman, living in the US and self-dependent. You can wear whatever you want. Nobody is going to have the courage to question your clothing choices.” My financial independence, therefore, brought me the bargaining power to exercise my agency through clothing and protecting my bodily autonomy. Anila (Moderate Muslim), currently working as a corporate manager at a multinational corporation, asserts her stance on this point, saying:

After I joined the .... corporation, I started wearing loose-fitted formal pants with Western tops and let go of my hijab. I feel these clothes are the most comfortable for my daily office wear. My husband and my mother-in-law tried to ask me to wear salwar kameez to the office, but I did not care about that. Now that I am not dependent on my husband’s earnings anymore and can buy my own clothes, I choose to wear what is most comfortable for me.

Anila’s statement highlights the importance of financial independence as a means of resisting societal and familial pressures. By earning her own income, she feels empowered to resist pressures from her family and align her attire with her personal comfort and preferences. This aligns with the argument presented by Kabeer (1999) and Sen (1999) that economic resources

are crucial for enhancing women's ability to exercise agency within the family and society.

Lamisa, Naila, and Rumana shared similar accounts.

To summarize my arguments, in response to patriarchal constraints, women from all groups engage in three direct forms of resistance, which I categorized as experiential, cognitive, and economic resistance. Experiential direct resistance develops from past experiences, empowering women to assert their rights as they mature. Cognitive direct resistance arises from access to education as cultural capital, which enhances their awareness to challenge oppressive norms. Finally, economic direct resistance stems from financial independence, enabling women to resist traditional gender roles and assert their agency more effectively. These are the forms of direct resistance utilized by women as they navigate and challenge societal structures.

### **Strategic Balancing between Constraints and Agency**

In social navigation, negotiation is a crucial aspect practiced by women in claiming their place in a male-dominated society where structural inequality limits their agency. As discussed by Bianco et al. (2017), women use negotiation as a strategy, both in the workplace and beyond, to manage the constraints imposed by gendered expectations. While some women may engage in direct oppositional actions like strikes or labor organizing, many opt for non-confrontational strategies to avoid retaliation (Bianco et al. 2017). This form of negotiation reflects a broader trend of women balancing their personal agency with the need to conform to societal norms.

Similarly, Storms (2016) highlights how women seek to secure the best possible position for themselves within their social environments by navigating the complex interplay of legal, religious, cultural, and symbolic forces. The concept emphasizes that one's social position and access to resources significantly influence one's ability to control and navigate these social forces (Storms 2016). "Strategic balancing," as I term this approach, thus emerges as a code-

switching form of social navigation where women carefully manage their public and private identities. I argue that by strategically balancing their clothing choices with societal expectations, women are able to practice their agency while minimizing the potential for conflict or social backlash, demonstrating an indirect form of resistance within patriarchal and normative social structures.

Nupur (Secular/Liberal) shares her experience of strategically code-switching through a male-dominated social structure. She explains that when she visits places like Cox's Bazar or beach resorts, which makes a three-piece suit seem out of place, she feels more comfortable wearing Western clothes. However, when she goes to school or college, she adheres to the prescribed uniform. She also mentioned that she chooses Western clothes when visiting upscale markets like Bashundhara Mall but opts for a three-piece suit when going to a regular grocery market near her home. This demonstrates how her social position—dictated by the setting—affects her ability to control and navigate social forces, as discussed by Storms (2016). Nupur navigates different social environments by altering her clothing choices to match the expectations of those settings.

On the other hand, Suraiya (Secular/Liberal) describes her gradual approach to asserting her clothing preferences by starting within a supportive circle and then gradually expanding to more mixed environments. She claims, "This helped me to balance things out. I now wear whatever I like wherever I go. It works out because those who appreciate it make me feel good, and those who don't fail to get too much attention from me." Suraiya's approach aligns with Bianco et al. (2017), who discuss how women often employ non-confrontational strategies to manage societal constraints. She selectively engages with supportive environments first, which helps her build resilience against potential negative reactions in less supportive settings later.

Women negotiate not only their identities in the public domain but also in familial environments. As evidenced from Boshra's (Islamist) statement:

I resist at home by telling my mother that I don't feel like going out of my bedroom to greet the guests right now, or I don't think I must wear a kameez before doing that. On the other hand, what I sometimes do is that even if I was wearing a long T-shirt, I'll put on a prayer hijab, go out nicely, give my greetings, and then come back to my room.... But no, I don't always change my clothes according to what they say.... I feel like, as a person, how I dress isn't that important.

Borsha's narrative illustrates a subtle but significant form of resistance where she negotiates her clothing choices based on her comfort rather than familial expectations of respectability by wearing modest (traditional or Islamic clothing, in this instance) clothing. By occasionally wearing a prayer hijab over Western clothing to appease social expectations while maintaining her personal comfort, Borsha exemplifies a strategic form of resistance that balances social norms with personal autonomy. Participants report that they often follow familial restrictions to avoid conflict or negative attention. However, they still find ways to practice their agency within these limits. Mila (Moderate Muslim) shares:

I wanted to wear the tops and jeans that I bought for Eid to my friend's house. But my mother insisted that I wear a Koti (vest) or an orna (scarf) with it. The orna didn't go with the style of the tops. I really didn't want to carry it. However, I wore it in front of my mother while leaving home. Then I took it off and put it in my purse. Later on, before entering my home, I took it out and wore it to show my mother that I had been wearing it the whole time.

Suzana (Moderate Muslim) reports resorting to the same strategy, as does Lamisa (Secular/Liberal), who adds, “I don’t wear knee length or pencil skirts at home. I mainly wear them outside. It is not possible for me to just walk out of the house in this area with bare legs. So, I wear leggings. Then, once I get to that place, I take them off.” In these statements from Mila and Lamisa, a specific strategy is evident that allows women to navigate patriarchal social structures without fully surrendering their autonomy. They comply with familial expectations initially to avoid confrontation but later change back into their preferred outfit. This behavior reflects a strategy of balancing societal expectations with personal comfort—they outwardly conform to avoid conflict but ultimately prioritize their agency when they are out of the familial boundaries.

Women employ “strategic balancing” to navigate patriarchal social structures. They adapt their clothing choices to different social environments to avoid conflict while maintaining some degree of autonomy. This approach involves complying with societal or familial expectations in public or at home but later asserting their preferences in more supportive or private settings as an indirect form of resistance.

### **Avoidance As A Coping Mechanism**

Avoidance describes how individuals evade potential conflicts, social sanctions, or uncomfortable situations by not engaging with them directly. In this research, some participants choose to avoid situations where their agency might be constrained completely. This meant opting out of certain public spaces or activities where they felt their clothing choices or behavior might be judged or restricted. Therefore, finding themselves in such situations of pick and choose limits their mobility. This form of resistance is a way of preserving their mental and emotional well-being by avoiding the stress and discomfort of social scrutiny.



Naila (Secular/Liberal) articulates the discomfort she feels when she sees most women around her adhering to Islamic dress, which she does not follow. Her description of feeling like an “alien” highlights the psychological impact of being perceived differently in a conformist society. The fear of verbal harassment and social judgment pushes Naila to consider avoiding public spaces where she might face such scrutiny, as she mentions: “The only thought that comes to my mind is how to avoid these environments or how to steer clear of these situations, how I can protect myself from the trauma of potentially being verbally insulted or demeaned. Verbal harassment is something I fear the most. It’s really about how far I can cover myself, given that my social security is low, and how far I can personally defend myself.” Naila’s narrative underscores the mental and emotional strain of non-conformity and how it can drive individuals to adopt avoidance as a survival strategy. This aligns with theories that discuss how individuals, particularly women, may withdraw from certain social interactions or environments to minimize the risk of conflict or harm (Kabeer, 1999; Thoits, 1991).

Aditi (Moderate Muslim) was confronted by her friends about why she stopped wearing hijab. She chose to face such interactional constraint with avoidance instead of resistance. She explains the reasons for this, saying, “I didn’t have that courage to talk back. I just said to them I liked it, that’s why. This is because how can you argue with your friends? So, I thought it was better to avoid such disagreements altogether. I just avoided it and didn’t say anything.” Aditi’s narrative reflects her decision to avoid conflict when questioned about her decision to stop wearing the hijab. This is a classic example of avoidance, where Aditi chooses silence and compliance to maintain social harmony rather than risking the potential fallout with her community due to a disagreement.

On the other hand, unlike Aditi, Navila (Secular/Liberal) chose to completely cut off the relationship with her paternal uncle to avoid such uncomfortable situations, who gifted her and her sister two burqas. He indirectly implied that they were immodest and should start covering themselves up. Navila mentions: “So when he bought us burqas as gifts, I didn’t say anything. He was the only uncle I liked. But after this, I could not stand him anymore. I blocked his number and cut off all kinds of contact with him. It’s like creating a kind of social avoidance—avoiding places where you feel you are not welcome just the way you are.” Navila describes a more proactive form of avoidance, where she distances herself from a family member who encroached on her personal boundaries. This form of avoidance involves restricting one’s own movements or interactions to evade environments or relationships that do not accept one’s authentic identity. To summarize the discussion, women use avoidance as a form of agency, where they actively choose to evade potential conflicts, social sanctions, or uncomfortable situations to protect their well-being and autonomy. In these settings, avoidance serves as a strategy for maintaining agency within restrictive social frameworks.

## **Conformity to the Status Quo**

Conformity is another coping strategy to mitigate the social constraints women face in environments that demand adherence to strict norms. This strategy is often employed in patriarchal settings where the cost of resistance is high, leading individuals to prioritize social harmony and personal safety over self-expression. I term this strategy as “conformity,” which involves the perpetual or temporary conformity of women to societal expectations to navigate through certain spaces or achieve specific goals. It is a strategy to avoid social conflicts and achieve group acceptance. For example, a woman might wear traditional clothing during a job interview to meet the expectations of a conservative workplace but return to her preferred style

once she gets back to her comfort zone (i.e., home). This strategy reflects a pragmatic approach to resistance, where women use their agency to adapt to their environment. For example, Lamisa's (Secular/Liberal) case is relevant here. She says:

The lab environment where I work is very conservative. There have been a lot of issues in the lab regarding women's appearance. I am the only person in the lab who didn't wear a burqa. Sometimes, I also wore makeup and lipstick. But I received comments from my colleagues on that. So, now I go like a homeless person to the lab.... I don't wear makeup or lipstick. I still don't wear a burqa, but other than that, I try to look very modest and traditional, as expected.

Lamisa's experience in the lab clearly demonstrates conformity. She alters her appearance and behavior, avoiding makeup and dressing in a manner deemed "modest" by the normative standards of her lab environment. Although she does not wear a burqa yet, she adheres to other norms to minimize friction and negative attention. This example shows how conformity is a strategy employed by women to navigate restrictive environments, particularly those characterized by patriarchal norms. Anila's (Moderate Muslim) experience in the conservative university similarly demonstrates conformity. She explains the reason behind this, saying:

I'm the kind of person who often can't respond when someone says something negative to me. I might just smile and walk away. When the professor told me, 'Dear, if you wear tights and leggings, your body is visible to others, so you will accumulate a lot of sins. You should dress more modestly.' She gave me a sort of religious lecture and tried to explain things to me. I walked away that day without saying anything to her. Later, I started wearing a hijab to fit into that university environment. Everyone there was wearing hijabs and burqas. If I wore tight clothes or had colored hair, everyone, even the

teachers, would look at me with disapproval. So, to adapt to that environment, I started wearing the hijab.

Anila's narrative highlights how she conformed to the dress norms of her university environment to avoid negative judgments by fitting in. Despite her personal discomfort, she adopted the hijab, which was the dominant cultural expectation within the university setting. This behavior is indicative of "conformity," where an individual suppresses their personal preferences and adopts the dominant culture's practices to avoid conflict and maintain social acceptance. Nupur (Secular/Liberal) further provides another clear example of a compliant form of agency. She shares a story of hers, when faced with interactional constraints from her relatives regarding her attire, saying:

I would visit my relatives' house wearing something I like. If they say that I don't look good in that outfit and that I shouldn't wear it, then I feel bad and think to myself, "Alright, if everyone is telling me not to wear this, I won't wear it." So, for me, it's more about avoiding what people advise me not to wear rather than following my own preferences.

Nupur's narrative highlights the compliant form of agency, where women negotiate with society by following social norms, regulations, and cultural expectations (Villalon 2010). She adheres to the unsolicited advice/judgment her relatives give to avoid further criticism. Participants in this research also share details on their resorting to "conformity" in professional workplaces to negate "further nuisances." Naila (Secular/Liberal) mentions that her wearing T-shirts to the office might be a probable cause behind the harassment she faced at a previous workplace. Her boss, who was the owner of the company, made advances towards her despite being married and having kids. Though Naila could recognize the inappropriate behavior of her boss, she chose not

to actively resist or confront the situation. Naila explains her reasoning behind such inaction: "I didn't react because I needed the job at that time. To avoid further nuisance, I handled the situation technically by refusing him in a joking manner. He understood the gesture. After that, no matter how much work I did, I never got promoted. I was stuck in that position."

Naila's experience in the workplace demonstrates how power dynamics and fear of retaliation can lead to conformity. This is indicative of how women, particularly in male-dominated environments, may feel compelled to conform to avoid further victimization. While Naila's actions may appear as a limited form of resistance, they also reflect a calculated response to the limitations imposed by a patriarchal system, highlighting how agency can manifest in the form of survival tactics rather than overt defiance. Another similar account regarding workplace harassment shared by Tamanna (Secular/Liberal) is already discussed in the previous chapter. Tamanna faced interactional constraints from a colleague in the washroom of the Court House. I asked her about what happened next, and Tamanna replied:

I could have complained or reported to my seniors about the woman in court who said those things to me, but I didn't do it. I could not even reply to her; I just foolishly looked at her face and walked away. In every other similar incident, when someone touches me inappropriately in public, I can't react as if a trauma takes over me. When I was a child, if I told my parents about something like this, they would have blamed me instead. They would say it was my fault. So, I guess, even at this age, I feel like if I protest, people will blame me. I can't escape that trauma.

Tamanna's narrative sheds light on the psychological impact of past experiences that shape her current inability to resist harassment. I discussed this phenomenon in the previous chapter, which I termed the "internalized constraint" on women's agency. This constraint resulted in a form of

conformity, where she avoids confrontation entirely, even in situations where she is clearly wronged. This phenomenon is a clear example of how some women practice their agency through conformity.

Conformity is a form of agency that women employ to navigate restrictive and patriarchal environments. This pragmatic approach allows them to use their agency to survive and adapt rather than openly resist, highlighting how agency can manifest through survival tactics rather than direct defiance. In this way, conformity serves as a coping strategy to mitigate the high costs of resistance.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discuss and analyze the complex ways in which urban middle-class Bangladeshi women navigate patriarchal social structures through various forms of resistance. Moreover, I adopt the theoretical framework of Villalon (2010) and Speed (2014) to understand the flexible forms of agency that range from direct opposition to more subtle forms of compliance and balancing out. I explored how urban middle class Bangladeshi women exercise their agency of clothing through four distinct strategies: direct resistance, strategic balancing, avoidance, and conformity.

Direct Resistance involves actively opposing the culture of respectability, while Strategic Balancing allows women to navigate societal expectations by adapting their behavior and clothing choices to different contexts. Avoidance, on the other hand, is a strategy used to evade potential conflicts or social sanctions by opting out of certain situations altogether. Lastly, Conformity reflects a pragmatic approach where women conform to societal norms to avoid confrontation or achieve specific goals, demonstrating how agency can manifest through survival tactics rather than overt defiance. The analysis shows that whether through direct resistance or

subtle forms of conformity, women of all three groups exercise their agency in ways that challenge, adapt to, or avoid the societal expectations governing their behavior. This critical understanding of agency underscores the importance of recognizing the diverse strategies women employ to assert their bodily autonomy within patriarchal social structures.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Beyond Attire: Unveiling Patriarchal Narratives and the Myth of Clothing as Protection Against Harassment**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I discuss the impact of clothing on women falling victim to violence. Clothing is a powerful form of nonverbal communication, influencing how people judge the wearer's character, social and political attitudes, and sexual intentions (Lennon et al., 1993:403). For example, individuals often associate body-revealing clothing with sexual availability, leading to judgments that a woman is more likely to provoke sexual assault if she wears "provocative clothing" (Lennon et al., 1993:405). Kennedy (1993) defines "provocative clothing" as clothing that differs from the expected norm and suggests a more sexually charged setting than the actual one. I adopt this definition of provocative clothing for this chapter.

The theoretical framework guiding this analysis emphasizes how societal biases influence perceptions of clothing and its supposed link to sexual behavior. Both men and women have been found to attribute more blame to victims of sexual assault if they are dressed in provocative clothing compared to more conservative attire (Lennon et al., 1993:406). Which clothes are provocative and which are not – there is no universal standard to determine these. Therefore, the acceptable standard of non-provocative clothing perceptions varies from person to person based on their ideological differences (though there may be some social standards). Research has shown that these perceptions are often inaccurate and biased, yet they persist and influence



behavior (Edmonds & Cahoon, 1986; Cahoon & Edmonds, 1987; Abbey et al., 1987). The idea that clothing can signal a woman's sexual intent or justify harassment is deeply entrenched in both men's and women's perspectives, reflecting broader societal norms that perpetuate gender inequality.

Data in this research suggest that women have been conditioned from their childhood to believe that their bodies are the sites of maintaining their own honor and that of their family. As I have shown in Chapter 3, many participants reported that their family members, friends, and peers have advised/expected or coerced them to choose Islamic or traditional clothing over Western attire. They perceive dressing modestly as a social and religious obligation, believing it serves as a protective measure against unwanted male attention and potential harassment. Implicitly, this also suggests the notion that women who do not adhere to modest dress codes may be seen as responsible for any harassment they experience. This perspective frames modest attire as a preventative safeguard within societal and religious expectations. The notion that clothing can either provoke or prevent sexual harassment is rooted in the patriarchal belief that if victims had dressed or behaved differently, they would not have been subjected to such attacks. Therefore, the social conditioning of women is not the only driving force behind such belief. Rather, patriarchal social structures and norms systematically position women as objects for male consumption and regulate their presence and behavior in the public sphere.

In this chapter, I delve into whether any particular clothing (for example, clothes sanctioned by the religious norm of 'purdah' or approved by the cultural standard of 'respectability') can prevent Bangladeshi women from experiencing various forms of harassment. Specifically, I explore whether clothing choices can protect women from interactional constraints ranging from verbal to non-verbal and physical harassment in public

spaces. Originally, this was not one of the main research questions that I planned to investigate. It was a theme that surfaced over and over during the interviews. Interestingly, despite their different ideological beliefs, all participants gave similar responses to the question of whether modest clothing can help prevent sexual harassment against women.

## **Can Modest Clothing Really Save Women?**

I would like to start with accounts of harassment, beginning with my own story. It was in early March of 2017. I was a second-year college student back then. I used to wear a trendy printed cotton salwar kameez with ‘orna’ known as the ‘Pakistani Lawn.’ My mother chose this attire for me as I did not have any special fashion preferences of my own at that time. “Cotton would be the perfectly comfortable fabric in this hot, humid summer of Bangladesh,” my mother said to me, and I took her words as my own. So, I started wearing those three-piece suits to college. One fine afternoon, I was walking down the street from the bus stop to my home with my headphones on. Seeing a car passing by my side, I moved a few inches toward the footpath to let it pass. After a few seconds, to my utter surprise – I felt someone grabbing my hips. I almost froze up for a second but quickly looked behind. I saw that exact car that had just passed me, trying to drive away speedily. The driver literally grabbed me from inside the car – stretching his hand out through the open window. I screamed at the top of my voice at him, but he was already 20 meters away. There was nobody else on the road to witness the incident, so he took advantage of the situation. I came back home feeling disgusted at myself, and my body felt violated. I was wearing a full-sleeved red salwar kameez with a silk orna, ‘properly’ spread over my bosom, my hair tied in a bun, and normal sandals on my feet. Only my face, my hands, and my feet were visible. My traditional attire—sanctioned by my mother as “appropriately modest clothing”—could not save me from the harassment.

Naila (Secular/Liberal) shared a similar experience of harassment while reminiscing about her “chaotic young adulthood.” When she was in college, she felt comfortable wearing loose-fitted t-shirts and baggy pants outdoors. She used to take the public bus to travel from her dorm to the class. One day, two women who were sitting behind her on the bus started calling her out for wearing a t-shirt and baggy pants. They made a comment saying: “Women like you have no shame nowadays. You wear indecent clothing like these and pollute the whole society.” Naila got very frustrated at this and quickly got off the bus before reaching her stoppage. After that incident, she started wearing, in her own words: “comparatively modest clothing,” that is, a salwar kameez and orna, whenever she rode the bus.

Among the Moderate Muslim participants, Aditi (Moderate Muslim) shared with me how, a couple of years ago, she was molested on a public bus. She used to wear a hijab and loose-fitted long kameez. She was tired from a long day of class and dozed off, leaning on her female friend’s shoulder while sitting on the bus. Suddenly, she felt someone groping her chest from the aisle side. She was half-awaken and could not understand what was happening until her friend realized what was going on and started yelling at a man. He hurriedly got off the bus. Aditi’s mental health was deeply affected by this incident. She started blaming herself and tried to cover her body even more after it happened.

Anila (Moderate Muslim) talked about a period when she wore a burqa and niqab to avoid harassment. Initially, she felt safer and believed that covering up protected her from the male gaze. She says: “I initially felt safer after wearing the burqa as I thought that boys couldn’t see me anymore. They couldn’t see what I looked like, my physical structure, or my face.” This feeling of invisibility in public places gave Anila a temporary feeling of security from harassment. However, her belief was shattered when she experienced harassment on a crowded

bus, similar to what Aditi faced, despite being fully covered. The incident made her realize that harassment is not about physical visibility but about being targeted for her gender.

Now, I will move on to our Islamists participants. Mishti (Islamist) is a primary school teacher who is habituated to wearing a loose-fitted, fully black burqa and a hijab. When I asked her about her experience on the streets wearing a burqa, she said: “Clothes can never prevent harassment. Even if you wear a burqa, people still stare. The same goes for wearing a sari. Even applying red lipstick attracts their gaze!” Mishti only wore a saree with a hijab on special occasions like a friend’s wedding or a formal presentation at school. As her head is usually covered up by a hijab, leaving no space for wearing jewelry, she sometimes wears lipstick, the only makeup that she prefers with a saree. However, she was still troubled by the ‘antagonizing stares’ that she received while navigating the public sphere. One day, in the early morning, while she was crossing the street to catch a bus, a man grabbed her buttocks and quickly vanished into the crowd before she could even react. She was in her typical daily outdoor wear – fully covered in black burqa and hijab, with no makeup.

“Whether a woman wears a burqa or not, they will stare; essentially, their own inherently bad gaze is unaffected by anything. Their job is to stare at women...” another participant, Toma (Islamist), retorted in a deeply despairing manner. She also chooses to wear a burqa every time she travels outdoors. Still, one morning, while she was going to school, at around 7:00 or 7:30 AM, she became a victim of abuse. Instead of taking her usual road, she thought of taking a shortcut that morning. Her sole intention was to avoid any unwanted situation. However, at the end of the narrow and empty alley, a guy was standing. As she was passing by him, he suddenly jumped onto her and groped her chest. “I was wearing a burqa at that time. I was so shocked and embarrassed at the incident that I’ve never told this to anyone,” Toma paused while honoring me

with the privilege of sharing a very emotionally haunting but secret memory that she never told anyone before. She continues, “So, as I’m saying, whether I wear a burqa or not, there are people with the tendency to attack women.”

Another participant, Suraiya (Secular/Liberal), who is a Professor of Law at a renowned private university, observed a troubling trend among her female students. Despite her insistence, the students repeatedly refused to buy some required textbooks from the Nilkhet Book Market<sup>19</sup>, a crowded area notorious for sexual harassment. They kept requesting her to provide online access options to the books. When she asked them about the reason behind such behavior, they expressed their intention to avoid the inevitable touching, grabbing, and harassment they feared in that area, no matter how they were dressed. So, what are the reasons behind such harassment if clothing has nothing to do with it?

### **Who is to be Blamed for Harassment: The Victim or the Perpetrator?**

When I asked Naila (Secular/Liberal) if wearing ‘modest dress’ such as a salwar kameez instead of a t-shirt and baggy pants could protect women like herself from harassment, she replied negatively with a stern voice, saying: “No, it can’t. If someone steals my laptop, it’s the thief’s fault. Similarly, when someone commits a crime of sexual harassment, it’s the criminal’s fault. The responsibility for such actions should never be attributed to the victim. So, the clothing can help women in no way.” Navila (Secular/Liberal) also voiced the same opinion. Pointing towards the ‘abuser’s mindset,’ she claimed that no matter what a woman is wearing, the perpetrator has no right to touch or abuse her. “First of all, it’s on him, it’s totally on the abuser. Clothes can’t be blamed at all,” Navila exclaims with disappointment. Nupur (Secular/Liberal),

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<sup>19</sup> Nilkhet Book Market is the biggest open book market in Dhaka with more than 400 stalls that sell all kinds of academic and non-academic books at a reasonable price.

an undergraduate college, stressed the fact that no matter what dress a woman might choose to wear – Western or Islamic – the mindset of the perpetrators will not change towards her. These men focus on the gendered body of women. She says: “Those who observe purdah (to cover themselves) are not necessarily safe either. They face such incidents, too.”

Aditi (Moderate Muslim), who was harassed on the bus despite wearing hijab and salwar kameez, initially started to blame herself for this. However, after 6-7 months of the incident, she could finally wrap her head around the fact that it was not her fault. She says: “He is the one who is responsible for his behavior. It’s not me. I didn’t provoke him or anything. During that time in Bangladesh, I think a 6-month-old baby was raped. A five-year-old child was raped. So, gradually, when I realized it was not me, that fear went away.” This personal realization, coupled with her awareness of other brutal cases of rape involving very young children, underscores the fact that the idea of purdah, or covering one’s body as a safeguard against violence, is a myth. The violation of even the most vulnerable and innocent, such as infants and young children, who are clearly not in any way wearing provocative or violating dress codes, further debunks the belief that sexual violence can be prevented through modest clothing. As I mentioned earlier, in Anila’s (Moderate Muslim) case, the perpetrator was focusing on Anila’s gendered body as a woman before harassing her, regardless of how covered she was. This further strengthens my argument that the root cause of harassment lies in the patriarchal objectification of women’s bodies rather than their non-maintenance of purdah or respectability.

Rahima (Islamist), a 22-year-old undergraduate student, was one of the Islamist participants who believed in the Islamic revival movement and actively practiced the ‘dawah’ culture of Islam. “It is my duty as a Muslim to ask my fellow Muslim sisters to observe the teachings of Islam. I ask them to cover up themselves to protect themselves in earthly and

afterlife,” – this is how she defined her responsibility as a religious preacher of the ‘dawah’ culture. However, when I asked her if she believed that covering themselves could protect women from harassment, she replied negatively, stating:

In similar contexts like the Bangladeshi societies, it doesn’t matter what you wear; the concern for harassment remains constant. Whether a woman wears a burqa, salwar kameez, or Western clothing, the men will stare at her. More important than dress is the character of men. No matter if a woman is old, young, or dressed in any way, if they want, they will stare at her. They have the tendency to harass women in crowds. This issue really resides within them.

Observing the limitations of the expectation of safety through the ‘purdah’ observance in the societal context of Bangladesh, Rahima blames the perverted characteristic of men who ‘pervasively’ and ‘intrusively’ stare at women regardless of their ages and dresses. She also claims that these men do not follow the religious teachings either, as Islam orders men to lower their gaze first. Therefore, she believes that Muslim women should cover up only to follow the ordinances of Islam and to get rewarded in their afterlife. Subscribing to religious clothing will not provide them with any sort of worldly protection from harassment. Another Islamist participant, Fatima, shared a similar account.

Borsha (Islamist) claims that it is entirely irrelevant to think that a person gets raped because of their dress. “In our country, even women with a religious mindset get raped, as do those who dress according to their own choice. So, it’s totally a false statement,” she argued. Then, like Rahima and Fatima, she also mentioned the Quranic direction on ‘purdah’ for men, asking them to lower their gaze (Quran 24:30).<sup>20</sup> “In our religion, boys are always told to lower

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<sup>20</sup> The verse states: "Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that is purer for them; surely Allah is well aware of what they do." (Quran 24:30)

their gaze when they see girls. But boys don't follow this," – Borsha thought this was another underlying reason for women being victims of harassment by men. "From my experience, I believe they don't really consider women's clothing. Blaming the dress-up is just an excuse," she reminded us again about the control mechanism of the patriarchal society through the culture of victim-blaming. Finally, she ended her statement by asking a very thought-provoking question: "Personally, I don't dress in a very Western way; I try to dress modestly. So, why does it still happen to me?"

### **Beyond Attire: Social Conditioning Leading to Sexual Harassment**

The experiences shared by these women underscore that modest clothing, which adheres to religious and cultural norms, does not serve as a safeguard against harassment. Naila's and Aditi's experiences demonstrate that even when women alter their dress to be more "appropriate" or "modest," they are still subjected to harassment. Rumana (Secular/Liberal) emphasized the 'social conditioning' of women - to believe in the narrative that clothing has a role in perpetuating or preventing harassment. She shares:

It's said that someone wearing Western clothes may receive more comments just because of her dress, and it has almost become a myth that perhaps (modest clothing) will keep me safe. But there is no guarantee that this will provide security. But we are accustomed to hearing this, which might have created a psychological impression that maybe I can stay safe by doing this. But there is certainly no guarantee that this is true.

Rumana acknowledges the powerful influence of social conditioning on women's psyches. The repeated message that modest clothing can provide safety has, over time, created a psychological impression among women that conforming to these dress codes might protect them. The impact



of this internalized constraint is significant because it affects how women navigate public spaces, often leading them to modify their behavior and clothing in hopes of avoiding harassment.

However, Ayesha (Secular/Liberal) puts the onus of responsibility on the ‘social conditioning’ of men in patriarchal settings. She pointed out that the moral degradation of perpetrator men who are influenced by media, specifically pornographic movies, is beyond the control of women. She shares, “I could go out wearing many layers of clothing, but the person who sees me and behaves violently towards me is getting unlimited freedom in the media world. When he watches a movie or pornography, no one dresses there according to standard norms. He then behaves violently towards other women on the street.” Furthermore, Nupur (Secular/Liberal) shares her insights, pointing to a deeper understanding that the issue is not about clothing but rather the objectification of the female body. The focus of the perpetrators is on the woman’s gendered body, regardless of how she is dressed, indicating that the root cause of harassment lies in the patriarchal perception of women as objects rather than individuals with autonomy.

Tamanna (Secular/Liberal), a housewife and a full-time mother to an 8-year-old daughter, added important socio-economic perspectives to this concept of ‘social conditioning’ of both men and women. She adds:

There is no actual dress that can save women. I mean, if that were the case, then there wouldn’t be any records of any girl wearing a burqa being raped in Bangladesh or any girl wearing a kameez being a victim of violence in India. Even during those incidents happening in Bollywood or in India, I saw men’s comments under such news of crime, saying, “These women confuse men with their dress.” With their confusing mentality, they rape those poor women on the street or those who are accessible. So, if you are in a

privileged position, economically or otherwise, whatever clothes you wear, you will remain secure. But those who are accessible to men, maybe a poor girl, even if she wears a kameez... they will victimize her. So, I don't think dress determines these things at all in terms of security. Rather, it's just an excuse to oppress women, nothing more.

Tamanna's reference to cases in both Bangladesh and India highlights a broader post-colonial societal context where women's attire is historically linked to sexual violence. The demographic details of the victims show that certain women are more vulnerable to harassment, indicating that class status and visibility in public spaces contribute to the risk of violence. This highlights two critical issues.

Firstly, the discussion brings us back to the religious norm of 'purdah' that enforces the seclusion of women from public places as a measure to save them from violence. Tamanna's statement that even women in Islamic attire have been victims of abuse, however, debunks such claim that the 'purdah' through clothing and seclusion can be a protective measure from violence. Secondly, her mention of "women holding privileged positions" and "accessible victims" alludes to the intersectional identities of women based on their gender and class in patriarchal societal structures. These intersecting identities further exacerbate their victimization. Her distinction between "privileged" richer women, who are less likely to be targeted regardless of their attire, and "accessible" poor women, who are more vulnerable due to their lower socio-economic status, underscores the role that class, gender, and social hierarchies play in the perpetuation of violence. Finally, Tamanna argues that using women's clothing as an excuse for violence is a way to oppress women and distract from the real issue of male entitlement and patriarchal societal norms that enable such behavior.

This notion was also expressly voiced by another participant named Mumu (Moderate Muslim), who says: “It feels to me like they target such women, whom they can overpower. They think that victimizing this girl will not have any consequences for them.” Mumu’s observation that harassment occurs when perpetrators believe they can escape consequences points to systemic impunity and a lack of effective social deterrents. Such systemic impunity enjoyed by the perpetrator men stems from the prevalent normative cultures. In patriarchal societies, men are socially entitled to have the authority to control women’s bodies and to punish them if needed to maintain the status quo. They behave and act like they can ‘police’ women anywhere based on their perceived standards of respectability. As the majority of the men and women in such societies perpetuate and re-construct the patriarchal social norms, the perpetrators get an easy pass for such actions. The absence of effective social deterrents leads these abusers to believe that their victims won’t resist or fight back. This perception makes them more likely to target women, thinking they can commit violence without facing the consequences. Building on these arguments, Tanisha (Moderate Muslim) names some more elements, such as the lack of education, misuse of religion, lack of restraint, lack of morality, and the social or cultural situation in our country, being the factors contributing to this situation.

To sum up, it is not just social conditioning of women; it is patriarchal social structures/norms that position women as objects for the consumption of men and also govern the public sphere. Therefore, the testimonies of these women underscore that clothing does not deter perpetrators who are driven by a flawed sense of entitlement and a patriarchal notion that victimizes women regardless of their dress.

## Conclusion

Participants from all groups reported experiencing both physical (e.g., touching, grabbing, groping, pushing) and non-verbal harassment (e.g., male gaze) in public spaces, regardless of what they were wearing. In the end, the belief that certain clothing can prevent harassment is a form of social conditioning that reinforces gendered violence. Women are socialized from a young age to believe that they are responsible for the harassment they face due to their clothing choices. Conversely, men are conditioned to feel entitled to control women's bodies, believing they are justified in harassing women who do not adhere to norms of purdah or respectability, bolstered by their higher status in a patriarchal society. Therefore, based on the data collected in this study, I argue that no particular type of clothing can prevent violence against women. Furthermore, the belief in clothing as a deterrent to violence is a product of the social conditioning of men and women that both reflects and reinforces patriarchal power dynamics.

The findings in this chapter reveal that clothing, whether sanctioned by religious norms of 'purdah' or by cultural standards of respectability, does not prevent Bangladeshi women from experiencing harassment. The data shows that women from diverse backgrounds—Islamist, Moderate Muslim, and Secular/Liberal—report similar experiences of harassment, regardless of their clothing choices. This data challenges the deeply ingrained belief that modest dress can protect women, highlighting instead that such beliefs are a product of social conditioning that reinforces gendered violence. This finding indicates that the issue lies not in what women wear but in the patriarchal social structures that position women as objects for male consumption and regulate their behavior in the public sphere. This objectification, coupled with socioeconomic

status and visibility in public spaces, contributes to the risk of violence rather than their failure to adhere to purdah or respectability.

The findings suggest that using women's clothing as an excuse for violence is another way to oppress women. It is a strategy to distract from the real issue of male entitlement and patriarchal norms that enable such behavior. Women's choices in carrying on their preferred clothing, even in the face of constraints and violence, prove the overpowering force of their agentic practices to have control over their bodies. The Islamist women continue to maintain 'purdah,' not to secure themselves from harassment in worldly life. They do it to uphold their religious faith and be rewarded in their afterlife. On the other hand, the Moderate Muslims and the Secular/Liberal participants' clothing choices are also informed by their own will based on comfort and practicality in student and professional lives. Sometimes, they choose to dress traditionally to represent their Bengali fusion identity that can be traced back to the 1970s revolutionary new middle-class culture.

In conclusion, the data clearly indicate that no particular type of clothing can prevent violence against women. Instead, it is the patriarchal structures and the social conditioning of both men and women that perpetuate this violence. This underscores the need for a fundamental shift in societal attitudes and norms.

## CHAPTER 6

### **Concluding Insights: Rethinking Identities, Redefining Respectability, and Social Navigation by Bangladeshi Women**

#### **Introduction**

The primary objective of this thesis has been to explore how the clothed bodies of women function as sites for agency and resistance against various forms of social control. I explored this objective by interviewing urban middle-class Bengali Muslim women about their clothing choices and the social constraints (often resulting in sexual harassment) they face for such choices in Bangladesh. In this final chapter, I bring together the key findings of this research and reflect on their broader significance. While doing so, I critically engage with Vigh's concept of social navigation.

The goal of this chapter is to strengthen our understanding of how agentic actors who differ by intersectional identities, such as gender, class, religion, and political ideologies, reproduce or resist societal norms. I address each of the research questions posed at the beginning of the thesis by summarizing the key findings of the study and situating them within these theoretical frameworks. In this final chapter, therefore, I aim to bring together the central themes of bodily autonomy, agency, social constraints, and resistance, linking them to the overarching framework of analysis: divergent ideologies, reconstructing the boundaries of respectability, and social navigation amidst such unstable social structures.

## **Divergent Ideologies, Shared Vulnerabilities: Construction of a Unique Identity**

Before interviewing the participants, I had a preconceived notion that there are cultural, traditional, customary, and/or religious norms at play that dictate the dress choices of urban middle-class Bengali women. I was not sure exactly what those norms were for all women. This is why I formulated the research questions in an open-ended structure to get organic data from the participants. After analyzing the collected data, I found that the *religious norm of purdah*, in particular for Muslim women, and the *cultural norm of respectability*, which can be traced back to subcontinental history, are the main two factors at play. The consequences urban middle-class Bangladeshi women face when they do not dress according to the religious norm of ‘purdah’ and the cultural norm of ‘respectability’ are ideological, interactional, institutional, internalized, and geographical in nature. At least two or more of these constraints are continuously intersecting to subject these women to follow the norms of purdah and respectability in a dominant social sphere.

The third important question informing this research was how middle class, educated women in Bangladesh resist these constraints to protect their bodily autonomy. My findings suggest that urban middle-class Bangladeshi women across the ideological spectrum engage in resistance through four different strategies: direct resistance, strategic balancing, avoidance, and conformity. Direct resistance involves actively opposing the culture of respectability, while strategic balancing allows women to navigate societal expectations by adapting their behavior and clothing choices to different contexts. On the other hand, avoidance is a strategy used to evade potential conflicts or social sanctions by opting out of certain situations altogether. Finally, conformity reflects a pragmatic approach where women conform to societal norms to avoid

confrontation or achieve specific goals. This demonstrates how agency can manifest through survival tactics rather than overt defiance.

The final and overarching question of this research asks: does following the cultural and religious norms of respectability and purdah actually protect women from facing gender-based sexual violence? All the participants from three different ideological groups unanimously responded negatively to this question. My finding that patriarchal structures in Bangladeshi society perpetuate violence against women, regardless of their adherence to purdah or respectability, supports Speed's (2014) assertion that broader socio-political structures often enable violence against marginalized women. Speed's (2014) work on Indigenous women shows that resilience, not the violence itself, is what marks the experience of many women, and my findings mirror this sentiment, showing that Bangladeshi women continue to resist despite the violence they face.

The first overarching theme is that the clothing choices of urban middle-class Bangladeshi women vary across three ideological groups: Islamists, Moderate Muslims, and Secular/Liberal individuals. This was an unexpected finding as I only anticipated the existence of two ideological groups, secular/liberals and conservatives. At least nine out of twenty-five participants denied associating themselves as Islamists or secular/liberals. They wanted to place themselves in the middle of the far-left and far-right spectrum of ideology, thereby giving rise to this unique group called "Moderate Muslims." Moderate Muslims are an ideological group distinct from both Islamists and Secular/Liberals. This finding challenges the traditional binary division of conservative versus secular women's identities in Bangladesh. This finding also provides an understanding of ideological diversity within the Muslim middle class by adding to theoretical debates on identity politics and agency.



While interacting with a patriarchal society, the three ideological groups of women—Islamists, Moderate Muslims, and Secular/Liberals—understand and react differently to the norms of purdah and respectability. Each group expresses its ideological and religious identities through specific clothing choices that distinguish them from one another. Therefore, it is essential to avoid giving an overgeneralized definition of what it means to be a respectable, middle-class Muslim woman, as the participants in this study show significant variation in what this identification means to them. This diversity of understanding and expression highlights the different ways women embody respectability and agency within the cultural and social framework of urban Bangladesh.

As I discussed in Chapter 1, the policies and statutes formulated during the colonial-era have contributed to the ongoing marginalization of Bangladeshi women, often serving to reinforce patriarchy while offering impunity to perpetrators of violence against women. Today, these patriarchal norms continue to shape the lived experiences of women, impacting how they negotiate respectability and dress codes within a predominantly male-dominated social structure. Middle-class educated women of Bangladesh, who identify themselves as Moderate Muslims and Secular/Liberals, were more integrated into the women's movement during the liberation war in the 1970s. This shows a heightened sensitivity to ideological differences within this framework. As they remained more proactive about their cultural rights and differences, this access to cultural capital played a role in shaping their contemporary gender and religious identities.

This sensitivity to ideological distinctions has resulted in the Secular/Liberals and some Moderate Muslims organizing around women's issues more readily than the Islamists. For

Islamists, religious belief is the core of their identity and their sense of duty as Muslims (Karam, 1998:14-16). Often reluctant to identify their claims as feminist issues, Islamist women focus on broader recognition of Muslim rights rather than individual gender-specific rights (Karam, 1998:10). Their discourse on human rights is deeply intertwined with their religious identities and a desire for an Islamic state that upholds these values, setting them apart from the more secular or moderate groups (Karam, 1998:11). Karam (1998:11-13) contended that Moderate Muslims (she addresses them as Muslim Feminists) and Secular/Liberals (addressed as Secular Feminists), in contrast, advocate for the privatization of individual religious beliefs and seek state support for ensuring their rights to bodily autonomy and agency in clothing choices. In this research, I show that when divergent ideologies intersect with class aspirations, for them, these political goals (separation of state and religion) are tied to their middle-class, educated identities and aspirations for a secular state that respects individual freedoms.

Ultimately, the varying approaches to clothing, ideology, and autonomy among the three groups illustrate how women's identities and agency are defined not just by religious faith or secular beliefs but by the broader socio-political structures that continue to influence their lives and choices. Whether through the Islamist pursuit of religious observance, the Moderate Muslims' balancing act, or the Secular/Liberals' embrace of autonomy, each group demonstrates a unique approach to agency within the framework of middle-class respectability, underscoring the complex nature of identity politics in contemporary Bangladeshi society.

However, across all three groups, there is a shared desire for acknowledgment of their ideological differences while defining 'respectability' rather than being grouped into a monolithic identity based on class, religion, or gender. They call for the creation of parallel

social identities that reflect the unique worldview of middle-class Bengali Muslim women in contemporary times. This recognition challenges the essentialist notion of a respectable, middle-class womanhood constructed by men in the colonial era and highlights the importance of respecting ideological differences in modern Bangladeshi society. In line with this desire for distinct identities, Bengali middle-class women's quest for recognition and bodily autonomy exemplifies Vigh's (2006, 2020) concept of social navigation. In navigating these intersecting identities, women actively reshape the boundaries of respectability, pushing against the limitations imposed by both religious and cultural expectations within a patriarchal society.

### **Re-constructing the Boundaries of Respectability**

The second overarching theme for the conclusion is the reconstruction of the boundaries of respectability. As middle-class women gain access to cultural capital such as higher education and well-paid employment, these help reshape their gender roles within the family and society. Hussain (2017:2) contends that "these achievements give these women more control over their life paths, though they do not entirely remove the conventional expectations of middle-class respectable femininity... having a professional career and making capital investments add to a woman's respectability, making it more acceptable for her to have autonomy and live on her terms in Bangladesh." This reframing of respectability enables women to transcend basic dichotomies of tradition and modernity, or respectable and unrespectable, to establish a third or alternative space (Menon 2005) where they can enhance their social standing within a patriarchal culture.

Access to cultural and economic capital is enabling middle-class Muslim women in Bangladesh to redefine the boundaries of respectability, navigating both traditional and modern

expectations. These women use their social, cultural, and economic resources to challenge established norms and transform the concept of modesty in dress, presenting new forms of agency that contrast sharply with prior generations. For instance, according to Quranic instructions, *purdah* traditionally involves both physical seclusion between the sexes (and limiting women's movement inside their houses) and the covering of the female body and face (Papanek, 1973). However, the younger generation of Islamist women in this study are expanding their presence in public and private domains while maintaining the veiling form of *purdah*, a marked shift from their predecessors who adhered to strict seclusion from the outer world. Due to their urban, middle-class status and access to education and professional opportunities, these women now engage more visibly in public life, bridging their religious beliefs with their need for economic participation and professional identity.

Because of having access to such cultural capital (higher educational degrees and workforce participation), the younger generations of Muslim (non-Islamist) women are developing varying consciousness regarding their ideological beliefs. Though being born and raised in traditionally religious Muslim families, they are adopting or integrating the elements of non-religious secular/liberal ideologies in creating a new type of identity. For example, moderate Muslims respect both family expectations and societal norms while wearing Western clothing in certain circumstances based on their individual comfort and practicality. In contrast to these two groups, Secular/Liberals prioritize personal comfort and autonomy in their clothing, often directly defying religious or cultural norms to assert their bodily autonomy.

The participants' educational background, particularly those from prestigious public universities, grants them access to unique social capital as college graduates. This recognition

not only simplifies their paths to employment but also offers a degree of freedom regarding their bodily autonomy and choice of dress. In redefining modesty and respectability, middle-class Muslim women in Bangladesh exemplify a nuanced consciousness that enables them to construct distinct ideological identities. Their agency, enabled by economic and cultural capital, allows them to reconstruct personal and collective boundaries. This asserts new definitions of respectability that blend traditional values with contemporary individualism. This ongoing negotiation builds on Nazia Hussain's (2017) findings, which emphasize that middle-class women, especially those with educational and economic resources, are reshaping how respectability is understood and enacted within Bangladeshi society from the perspective of rights to clothing practices.

### **Navigating Respectability: Adaptive Agency Among Middle-Class Bangladeshi Women**

Finally, practicing agency through clothing choices allows middle-class Bangladeshi women to navigate society's gendered norms and constraints. This act demonstrates how social navigation operates as a tactical approach to maneuvering within restrictive social structures, which is the final theme of this chapter. Vigh's (2006, 2009) concept of social navigation aptly describes how these women balance their aspirations for autonomy and respectability as they continuously adjust to the dominant expectations of purdah and modesty while seeking ways to extend their agency.

Vigh's concept of social navigation acknowledges the dynamism in maneuvering through complex social terrains: "When we navigate, we imagine and trace a route through unstable social terrain, simultaneously crossing the next wave or obstacle and negotiating many more that will come our way" (Vigh, 2006, p. 99). Bangladeshi middle-class women similarly trace

adaptive routes to overcome the social constraints on their agency, carefully balancing between different methods of resistance. For instance, some women belonging to all three ideological groups maintain ‘modest’ clothing in public spaces but adopt Western clothing in private, illustrating this form of negotiation. They tactically adapt to societal norms while carving out spaces of personal comfort and autonomy, embodying Vigh’s notion of social navigation in a “changing social terrain” (Vigh, 2006, p. 99).

In contexts where bodily autonomy and safety have diminished and legal recourse is limited, social navigation enables Bangladeshi women to find agency within minimal opportunity structures. They make use of symbolic and cultural capital—such as their educational achievements, workforce participation, and social class standing—as tools for respectability, using these forms of capital to tactically assert independence within socially approved frameworks. As Vigh notes, “social navigation offers insights into the interplay between objective structures and subjective initiative,” a concept that resonates with how these women adopt different strategies like strategic balancing and avoidance to adjust their behavior based on context and social demands (Vigh, 2009, p. 35). This adaptability reflects their agency as both tactical and fluid, working within a system that often constrains personal freedoms.

Finally, as they seek social status and autonomy, these women encounter obstacles shaped not only by class but by generation. Unlike previous generations of women who largely adhered to rigid purdah norms, this generation leverages access to education, professional opportunities, and social capital to redefine respectability. This marginality drives their navigational efforts to “ensure an acceptable standard of living,” even under restrictive societal expectations, where agency is reduced to incremental gains of limited personal autonomy and where survival strategies are prioritized over direct resistance (Vigh, 2009, p. 35).

Through this social navigation, Bangladeshi middle-class women effectively create a third space between respectability culture and agency to practice bodily autonomy, one that allows them to slowly, albeit carefully, shift societal expectations. Their adaptive strategies showcase a pragmatic form of agency in a social landscape where power remains deeply unequal and embedded in patriarchal structures.

## **Conclusion**

Why should anyone care about what Bangladeshi Muslim middle class women are facing in practicing their clothing choices? This question is important because it addresses an essential but often overlooked issue: the complex social, cultural, and institutional constraints faced by women in practicing their clothing choices. Examining these constraints sheds light on broader issues of women's bodily autonomy and human rights. Clothing choices may appear to be a personal matter, yet in Bangladesh, like many other countries in the world, they are shaped by patriarchal expectations and bear profound implications for women's safety, agency, and respectability within society. Understanding these experiences reveals the intersection of gender, class, and culture, highlighting how women must navigate a web of norms that affects their daily lives.

This women's issue extends beyond Bangladesh; research has shown that women across different countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, face discrimination, harassment, and victim-blaming based on their clothing. Evidence shows that these prejudiced beliefs are fairly widely accepted among the general population, with over 50% of people endorsing them to some extent (Buddie & Miller, 2002; Burt, 1980). Notably, men tend to support these beliefs more strongly than women (De Judicibus & McCabe, 2001; Jimenez & Abreu, 2003; Kopper, 1996; Russell, 2004). A 2021 UN Women UK survey revealed that 97%

of young women (aged 18-24) in the UK had experienced some form of sexual harassment in public spaces, with 43% of women reporting they were harassed for wearing “inappropriate” clothing. These findings reflect widespread experiences of harassment and a tendency to link women’s attire to blame.

Despite the universality of human rights that purportedly recognize bodily autonomy, countries worldwide continue to grapple with these issues. Women’s rights, enshrined in international human rights treaties to which Bangladesh is a signatory, are undermined when the state fails to protect women from violence. In Bangladesh, the lack of state enforcement allows perpetrators to act with impunity, often justified by moral and political support. Women, meanwhile, are frequently victim-blamed, with their clothing used as a rationale for the violence they endure. This pervasive issue, affecting even developed nations, reveals the global need to confront the dilemma of dress to safeguard women’s rights effectively.

Moreover, this research illustrates that Bangladeshi women are not a monolithic group with uniform aspirations. While all participants express a desire to exercise agency over their clothing choices, they approach this issue from varied ideological perspectives. Islamists, Moderate Muslims, and Secular/Liberals hold different views on clothing norms shaped by religious, cultural, and personal beliefs. Each perspective stems from a distinct standpoint, offering unique insights into how women perceive their agency within a restrictive society. Recognizing this knowledge is crucial, not only within Bangladeshi feminist discourse but also within broader feminist movements, which often overlook or undervalue the distinct experiences of Muslim women.

Finally, this study calls attention to the need for intersectional understanding and respect for the lived realities of middle-class Bangladeshi Muslim women. Their experiences, though



partial and specific, reveal essential truths about the broader structures of power and oppression that shape women's lives worldwide. Confronting these issues contributes to a more inclusive feminist framework that values the unique perspectives of women from diverse backgrounds. By recognizing the legitimate agency of these women in their choice of dress, we can advance a more comprehensive approach to human rights and gender equality that respects the autonomy and dignity of all women, regardless of their social or cultural context.

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161. Use of AI Disclaimer: As per the approval of the thesis committee, I have used ChatGPT to refine some sentence structures, and Grammarly to check the grammar in my writing in this thesis manuscript. Except for this particular usage, all the concepts and data used are my own. I have practiced diligence in properly citing and referencing the authors while quoting their work/ideas unless there has been any mistake on my part.