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## Lost In Translation: South Asian Muslim Women'S Interpretation Of Religious Gender Role Expectations, Women'S Agency, And Women'S Identity

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LOST IN TRANSLATION: SOUTH ASIAN MUSLIM WOMEN'S INTERPRETATION  
OF RELIGIOUS GENDER ROLE EXPECTATIONS, WOMEN'S AGENCY, AND  
WOMEN'S IDENTITY

TAMANNA TASMIN

126 Pages

This study investigates South Asian Muslim women's interpretation of religious scripture and the women's agency to influence the contemporary patriarchal religious culture. Previous research indicates that the religious customs of the region follow traditional orthodox Islamic scripture that promotes patriarchal practices, yielding barriers for women in the family, education, and professional sectors. Based on an understanding of the religious education system, the history of traditional orthodox Islamic practice, and traditional gender role expectations of the region, I use structuration theory to understand South Asian Muslim women's identity negotiation and the agency they perceive regarding their ability to influence the society. I interviewed 17 Muslim women from four countries (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Indonesia) of South and South East Asia. Results indicate that there is a gap between gender role expectations of the region and the Muslim women's interpretation of the religious scripture. While these women believe that Islam empowers them, the current social practice is patriarchal, and the women do not have an adequate agency to voice their differing ideologies. Findings support the idea that the region is male dominant, and women are practicing their agency within the boundaries of the patriarchal system by self-education, research, and educating their inner circle.

KEYWORDS: Muslim women, Oppression, Islam, Patriarchy, Agency, Identity, Translation of Scripture

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OF RELIGIOUS GENDER ROLE EXPECTATIONS, WOMEN'S AGENCY, AND  
WOMEN'S IDENTITY

TAMANNA TASMIN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

School of Communication

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2021

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LOST IN TRANSLATION: SOUTH ASIAN MUSLIM WOMEN'S INTERPRETATION  
OF RELIGIOUS GENDER ROLE EXPECTATIONS, WOMEN'S AGENCY, AND  
WOMEN'S IDENTITY

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This thesis is a tribute to all the South Asian women who silently endure the oppressive system of patriarchy as well as those who speak up. Together they are developing a generation of educated and well-informed women who are attempting to break the barrier in their own way. I hope that this thesis opens a much-needed dialogue to reform cultural gender role expectations and that it gives the women's attempts proper justice.

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T.T

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Forty-five-year-old Jahanara was subject to severe domestic violence by her husband. He threatened to kill her if she complained. Jahanara fled her marriage and sought help from the local *kazis* (Islamic judges) as her husband denied her custody or visitation rights of her children. The husband refused to pay her alimony, which is mandatory in Muslim marriage law in the case of divorce or separation. Although the role of *kazi* is to dispense justice according to the Qur'anic guidance, to no surprise, all the *kazis* she went to refused to help her. According to them, this is Jahanara's fate, and she is to endure it. Instead of losing faith, she kept wondering if this was the justice prescribed by Allah. Because of this incident, Jahanara was inspired to become one of India's first female *kazis*. She strongly believes that Allah does not discriminate; it is the men who promote a patriarchal practice of Islam that denies women of their legal rights (Dhillon, 2017).

Like Jahanara, I had the same question, which inspired this research topic to explore the issue of gender equality in South Asian Muslim cultures. I grew up in Bangladesh, a predominantly Muslim South Asian country. From childhood, I was taught the history and regulations of Islam, including learning to read and write Arabic, which was not our language. As the holy book of Islam is written in poetic Arabic language and the language is deemed holy, it was important to learn. Interpretations of Islamic rules and regulations came to us through the family elders and local Islamic leaders, rather than the book and the history of Islam itself. It is also a family tradition for every child to be able to read and memorize the holy book, the Qur'an. However strong the focus was on reading the holy book, there was little emphasis on comprehending the book. We were taught to respect the book as a holy object rather than to take it as a manual of the Islamic way of life. The resulting faith was more of a blind belief rather than a loved and cherished relationship with Allah.

In our religious learning, we were taught about all the Prophets and their caliphs (companions) but there was little emphasis given to the leading female roles of early Islamic history. Alongside our Islamic education, we grew up learning to respect the local Islamic leader and male figures of the family more than the women in our life. I observed women being on the submissive side of society regardless of their social and educational status. In South Asia, when women become victims of rape, murder, dowry, and domestic violence, the majority of society engages in victim-blaming in the name of religion.

According to a report by Rashid (2014), local law enforcement agency officials and religious leaders of Bangladesh consider rape the result of women roaming around freely at night and not covering up in a “proper Islamic manner.” Victim blaming is almost always associated with religious norms. While accusers place blame on victims, rapists remain unscathed. “Women should reside in their homes, covering themselves up as Islamic rules say, in order to avoid being raped,” is the most common statement used when blaming a victim. Other victim-blaming statements include, “Men cannot be controlled—it’s the women who should be careful,” and “She went partying—what else did she think was going to happen?”

In 2019, nearly 1000 women were victims of “honor killing” in Pakistan (Ijaz, 2019). Honor killing is the process where a family member is killed by other member(s) of the family due to the perpetrator’s belief that the victim brought shame upon the family. In most cases, women are the victims of honor killing in Pakistan. In many parts of Pakistan, women are not allowed to leave the home unaccompanied, and the family’s social standing depends on the women’s obedience. The male members of the family can kill the women if they are being disobedient (Jozuka & Saifi, 2020). Although it is a criminal offense by the law of the land, in many parts of the country, it is still a socially accepted phenomenon.

Research states, however, that, in early Islamic days, women had control over businesses, women played important role in spreading the religion, women educated both men and women, and women also lead wars. The Prophet Muhammed himself used to consult with his wives in critical matters. His respect towards the women in his life was exemplary. Women used to pray in mosques, unsegregated from men. The holy Qur'an references independent women, without any male kin, pledging oath to the Prophet. The first Caliph of Islam, Umar, appointed women to serve as officials in the markets of Medina (*Women and Islam*, 2020). Umar wanted to cap the amount of *mahr* (a mandatory monetary gift made to the bride by the groom at the time of their marriage). A woman opposed Umar's decision using the Qur'anic verses, and Umar withdrew his decision saying, "Umar is wrong, the woman is right." Aisha, the youngest of the Prophet's wives, was known for issuing Islamic rulings and correcting false information about the holy Qur'an (Carland, 2019). The Qur'anic verses and life of the Prophet provides a rich history of women's rights and equality (Bunting, 2001). Why then, now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are women treated as the subservient sex in many Muslim cultures, and stripped of their individuality and voices? Why is it that Islam is now considered as a barbaric religion that disrespects women and limits their rights?

One of the reasons behind such derogatory representation of Muslim women in South Asia is due to the mistreatment of women in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, which are supposed to be considered the guardian of Islam. Until recently, in those countries, women weren't allowed to drive, women were denied visitation rights to their children if divorced, and women were faced divorce without any ground; women were not to work, women were not to study, women were not to travel without men; and men were considered to have the ultimate supremacy over women as a mandate of Allah (Alibhai-Brown, 2015; Power, 2015). The influence of these countries has gone beyond their borders and impacted more Islamic countries (Alibhai-Brown, 2015). Discussion of these countries is important because South

Asian Muslim cultures often follow Saudi Arabia and Gulf States blindly. This has led South Asian Muslim nations to practice the patriarchal way of Islam that allows them to treat women similarly.

Today, the iconic symbol of Muslim culture has become the veil or *hijab*, worn by women. The Qur'an mentions *hijab* as a way of seclusion or distance, not as a prescribed attire for women. According to the Qur'an, *hijab* is the division between good and evil (Alibhai-Brown, 2015; Mernissi 1991). However, in Muslim countries today, even those with more lax prescriptions regarding *hijab*, women wearing *hijab* are perceived as pure, and women not wearing *hijab* are subject to severe personal and societal consequences. Along with oppressing women, this practice has also diverted society's attention away from an array of guidance the Qur'an has prescribed about male and female roles in society. The Qur'an prescribes both men and women to dress modestly and to be in control of their gaze and desire. The roles of both men and women in family and society are clearly written in the Qur'an, which declares equality (Barlas 2002, Carland 2017, Mernissi 1991, Wadud 1999). Arguably an eccentric focus of an entire societal system on oppressing women enables men to escape their responsibilities set forth by the Qur'an.

The Qur'an is not a feminist text; rather, it is a humanitarian and egalitarian scripture that dictates equality. It is an individual's action and faith, irrespective of race, gender, and class, that allocates them their position in Allah's chamber (Bahar, 2020). As today's Muslim cultures have become oblivious to the egalitarian reading of the Qur'an, women have started to go back to the original text and authentic *hadith*(s) (the Prophet's lifestyle and saying). This also made them question certain prohibitions of the outdated Sharia (Islamic law) and *fatwa* (a nonbinding portion of Sharia law). They argue that, since the scripture is written in poetic Arabic language and is vague in many instances, it requires a neutral and contextual reading (Barlas 2002, Carland 2017, Mernissi 1991, Wadud 1999).



Most of the prominent Islamic feminists are from Europe, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States. There are not many prominent Islamic feminists from South Asian Muslim countries. One reason for this can be the lack of records and suppression. Researchers have emphasized women's voices being heard, which does not occur in South Asia, especially in religious settings (Carland, 2019). These patriarchal Islamic practices and the lack of the female voice have made the religion confusing for many young women. For this reason, in this study, gender roles in South Asian cultures will be discussed based on the lived experiences of modern day South Asian Muslim women. I focused on the Qur'anic verses and their scholarly interpretations as contexts of the lived experiences of South Asian Muslim women.

This is not a theological study. It is focused on the lived experiences of South Asian Muslim women. Little research records South Asian Muslim women's lived experiences considering the verses of the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet. My study bridges previous scholars' contextual reading of the Qur'an and South Asian Muslim women's experiences. The objective is to understand how Muslim women in South Asia experience and interpret patriarchal religious practices, how the oppressive societal norms have been communicated to them, and how South Asian Muslim women comprehend their agency to influence the culture from a religious standing. This study also uncovers the women's knowledge of the religion to reveal how they understand their own rights. The review of previous literature provides a contextual understanding of the most debated topics in the Qur'an and *hadiths*, the impact of Sharia and *fatwa* law, and existing gender roles practiced in South Asia. Furthermore. The methods section describes the recruitment and sample of Muslim women who participated in the study. The analysis chapter incorporates the findings of the study based on the interviews of South Asian Muslim women, with a discussion chapter following that interprets the results of the study in light of previous research. This study provides a ray of hope for Muslim

women in South Asia with proper knowledge about their beloved religion and voices, that can be their ultimate liberator.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Islam and Women

To achieve the objective of comprehending South Asian Muslim women's experiences, it is important to understand the overall religious backdrop and scholarly analysis of the same religious setting. In this chapter I discuss primary scriptures and laws of Islam, different translations of religious scripture, depiction of women's rights in Islamic scripture according to various translations, and women's social status in early Islamic days as these influence the current lived experiences and agency of women in South Asian Muslim cultures. I use structuration theory to make sense of the ever-changing religious practices in South Asian Muslim culture and women's agency in said culture.

#### The Religion

In order to comprehend the practices and norms of South Asian Muslim cultures, it is important to have a rudimentary understanding of the religion, and scriptures of the religion. Islam is a considerably newer religion compared to other major religions of the world. This religion is monotheistic, and its followers are called Muslims. The Arabic word *islam* translates to "surrender," and *muslim* translates to "one who submits to the will of Allah." The core establishment of Islam lies in believing that Allah is the only creator of the universe and the human race. Muslims believe that there is no other entity that has the power to create or dismantle anything that Allah has created.

Throughout the pre-historic years, Allah sent his messengers, who are known as the Prophets, to the earth to spread his message. Prophet Mohammad was the last Prophet of them all and believing in his messages is the second point of belief for Muslims. Muslims must follow only Prophet Mohammad as Allah's messenger and abide by the way of life practiced by him as it was directed by Allah himself.

To precisely follow the lifestyle prescribed by Allah and shown by the Prophet Mohammad, Muslims need to believe in six tenets of Islam. These tenets are belief in (a) one god, (b) spirits, (c) the Prophet Mohammad, (d) the Qur'an (although other scriptures, e.g. Torah, Bible, Zabur, and Injil were also sent by Allah), (e) the Day of Judgment, and (f) the supremacy of God's will (Bagheri, 2012).

The Qur'an is the primary scripture that Muslim must follow. There are supplementary scriptures to support the Qur'anic teachings like *hadiths* (the saying and deeds of the Prophet). Muslim countries claim to follow the Qur'an as the benchmark of their cultural identity. However, South Asian Muslim cultures follow different interpretations of religious scriptures. To understand the differences of interpretations, it is important to understand the significance of various religious scriptures.

Barazangi (2004) emphasizes that Islam is essentially textual. They argue that the texts written in the Qur'an are direct guidance from God about humankind's lifestyle on earth and should, therefore, be followed exactly. However, due to the ambiguous and poetic nature of some of the verses, *hadiths*, Sharia law (Islamic law) and *fatwa* (legal consultancy) were introduced to lessen the ambiguity and provide a holistic approach for the Islamic way of life. It is important to discuss the Islamic scriptures, Islamic laws, and interpretation of the scriptures because these texts and history, along with the culture and religious education, influence South Asian Muslim women's agency.

### **Religious Texts: Significance of *Hadiths*, Sharia and *Fatwa***

Muslim cultures follow *hadiths*, Sharia and *fatwa* closely alongside the Qur'an. Therefore, it is important to understand the history, original objective, and current implications of these texts to set the context of gender equality in Islam.

## *Hadiths*

The Qur'an and *hadiths* are two separate texts. However, Muslim cultures consider them to echo, inform, and reinforce each other. *Hadiths* describe the deeds, saying, and lifestyle of the Prophet. Collections of *hadiths* have been a key source of information regarding legal formulation. The Prophet's closest companions are known to have memorized them, and then, after the death of the Prophet, *hadiths* were orally passed on from generation to generation (Amer, 2014; Barazangi, 2004; Mernissi, 1991; Wadud, 2000). The first multi-volume compilation of *hadiths* was published in the ninth century. Sunni Muslims (one of two major denominations of Muslims) consider six compilations of *hadiths* as canonical. These are Al-Bukhari (d. 870), Muslim (d. 875), Abu Dawud (d. 888), Al-Tirmidhi (d. 892), Ibn Majah (d. 889), and the Musnad by Ibn Hanbal (d. 855). Some of these *hadiths* are important for Shia Muslims (the second major denomination of Muslims) as well. Each of these *hadiths* went through a complex process of acceptance where the most reliable stories were accepted, and the ones considered false were disregarded. This process involved a chain of reporters who had heard or seen the Prophet or was closely related to someone who had heard or seen the Prophet manifest the respective *hadith*, and their reliability has been challenged (Amer, 2014).

Mernissi (1991) argues that there is a strong tug of war regarding the *hadiths*, between the desire of male politicians to manipulate them and the fierce determination of scholars to oppose the politicians by elaborating the *fiqh* (jurisprudence or science of religion). Of all the *hadith* compilations, Al-Bukhari's is considered the most authentic. Al-Bukhari was an Islamic scholar who worked on *hadith* compilations for two centuries after the death of the Prophet. At that time, work on Islam was nothing less than a scientific endeavor. Al-Bukhari approached his work of *hadith* compilation in a methodological and systematic way. He only included a *hadith* in his work if he had 1080 individuals testifying for it. Mernissi (1991),

however, questions Al-Bukhari's methodology as there was no precise way of acknowledging the honesty of a witness. At the time of Al-Bukhari, there were 596,725 *hadiths* in circulation, and he only included 7275 *hadiths* in his compilation after due verification. This gives a wide picture of unreliable *hadiths* being spread around. Evidence supports that many people have lied about *hadiths* for material or ideological advantages. The increased lies about *hadiths* were an indicator of rising political greed within Muslim cultures (Mernissi, 1991).

Malik Ibn Anas (cited by Mernissi, 1991) is another prominent Islamic scholar who urges that religion is a science and that it is important to pay attention to whom one should believe regarding religious facts. He was against blindly trusting anyone because of their social or scholarly status. He was so cautious with his *hadith* compilation that he rejected witnesses whom he knew to have lied in their personal affairs. According to him, knowledge is not enough if the morality of the witness is questionable. Despite such challenges regarding the authenticity of certain *hadiths*, Muslim cultures pay much attention to them.

Mernissi (1991) devoted an entire section of her book proving the inauthenticity of misogynistic *hadiths*. According to Mernissi, misogyny refers to a strong prejudice against women that is systematically ingrained in the culture. She argues that certain misogynistic *hadiths* have been circulating for hundreds of years, many followers showing great devotion to implement them without checking facts. Al Faruqi (Barazangi, 2004) reminded Muslims that they are to respect and love the Prophet because of the Qur'an and not the other way around, which many Muslim cultures have forgotten in their actions. Similarly, Barazangi (2004) argues that the Prophet's explanations do not supersede the Qur'anic texts. The above-mentioned discussion suggests that, despite their high importance in Islam, some of the sources and accuracies of *hadiths* remain controversial. Therefore, scholars have urged followers to focus on the Qur'anic scripture, which is the unquestioned source of authority.

## ***Sharia***

Sharia is one of the most common terms related to Muslim culture. The word Sharia means path. In the Qur'an, Sharia is defined as a body of rules established by Allah, and Muslims must follow these rules: "We have set you [Muhammad] on a clear religious path, so follow it. Do not follow the desires of those who lack [true] knowledge." (45:18)

Barazangi (2016) argues that the contemporary Sharia law or Islamic law does not represent the Qur'anic disposition of Sharia. As the Qur'an was vague in many instances and the Prophet was not alive to clarify some of these meanings, Muslim scholars and jurists began to elucidate Allah's law, leading to the development of a set of laws.

Sharia law is built on four components that govern all aspects of a faithful Muslim's life. Undoubtedly, the first source is the Qur'an itself. The second component is *sunnah* or *hadiths*, defined above as the sayings, lifestyle, and deeds of the Prophet. The third source refers to consensus. This signifies an agreement between the jurists on any particular law. The fourth component is analogical reasoning—applying the textual rules specified of one situation to another in which the rule was not specified. This application requires a common underlying cause between the two situations.

Although Sharia law was introduced to maintain justice and defend social welfare, many Muslim cultures have taken jurisprudence out of context to favor male supremacy. According to these communities, prevailing discriminatory practices, and the personal opinions of the community leaders, are congruent with Sharia law (Mashhour, 2005). These practices have continued to stipulate discriminatory practices in the name of Islam.

## ***Fatwa***

*Fatwa* is a part of Sharia that is practiced widely in Muslim cultures. In this system, the Islamic legal consultant is asked for an opinion about a particular issue by an individual or a *kazi* (Esposito & DeLong-Bas, 2004). It is important to note that *fatwa* is not a decision.

The intention of *fatwa* is to clarify Islamic jurisprudence, which can help future *kazis* to reach a verdict when making decisions. In South Asia, *fatwa* became a political tool during the British colonization for the Muslim inhabitants to defy the colonial rulers (Riaz, 2005). Even after the India-Pakistan division in 1947, many renown jurists have issued *fatwa*. Nowadays, *fatwa* has merely become the opinion of the concerned persons. Therefore, *fatwas* were never part of prominent public discourse. In rural Bangladesh, community leaders often whimsically use *fatwas* without following a specific pattern. In some instances, community leaders have used *fatwa* against opinions which the leaders personally deemed objectionable. Therefore, the *fatwa* system has now become devoid of religious value and practice. Now in Bangladesh and other Muslim countries, *fatwa* is deemed illegal due to such misuse.

This discussion suggests that the intentions of writers of the Qur'anic verses, *hadiths*, Sharia law, and *fatwa* were to establish an equal, respectful, and knowledge-based society for both men and women. However, contemporary Muslim theology has varying interpretations of the contexts and historic background of these religious scriptures. Although there are straightforward regulations and history in Islam that give Muslim women the same status as men, the practices and teachings in most Muslim cultures do not represent this perspective. History attests that women had higher status and respect in earlier days on Islam, unlike today. To help explain these discrepancies between the prescribed and practiced treatment of women, the next section of this study will discuss the reformist and traditional interpretation of selected the Qur'anic verses that discuss women's rights, to stipulate the differences.

### **Different Interpretation of the Qur'an**

The Qur'an is the ultimate sacred text for Muslims. It is the words of God that haven't been altered. Allah verbally communicated the Qur'anic verses to the Prophet, and he then conveyed the verses to the followers. These words have stood the test of time. However, the holy verses are written in poetic Arabic language that was revealed based on different



contexts. The globally spread Muslim culture has a wide variety of languages among its followers. Therefore, the interpretation of these verses is significant.

Scholars have identified two major approaches to interpreting the Qur'an – the traditional approach and the reformist approach (Stowasser, 1996; Wadud, 2000). The traditional interpretation is the conservative and literal translation of the book that ignores the contexts of its writing, while the reformist approach focuses on the context and intention of each verse as well as their connection to other verses in the scripture.

According to Wadud (2000), the traditional interpretation of the Qur'an considers the entire text with certain objectives in mind. These objectives can be legal, esoteric, grammatical, rhetoric, or historic. Regardless of the objective, in the traditional interpretation, the translation begins with the first verse of the first chapter and then moves on to the next until the last verse is translated. This literal understanding of the Islamic doctrine leads to a conservative lifestyle that includes an old-fashioned approach of Mosque attendance, prayer, dietary restriction, and dress code (Bagheri, 2012). This literal interpretation does not take into consideration any emerging theme or historical context. The traditional approach is often favored by male scholars or religious leaders. This can mean that the interpretations were highly motivated by the lived experiences and intentions of men, without necessarily considering the female experience. Therefore, the traditional approach provides more benefits for men, establishing them as the higher authority in society, and overrules women's position as an independent entity.

Since the traditional approach of the Qur'anic interpretation does not include women's experiences and their direct involvement in the early days of Islam, another school of thought emerged—the reformist interpretation of the Qur'anic text. The reformists argue that the Qur'anic text needs to be approached from a contextual stance to establish gender balance in Muslim cultures. According to these scholars, although the six tenets of belief and

five pillars of Islam are undebatable, major portions of the Qur'anic text are ambiguous and require contextual understanding (Bagheri, 2012). One standpoint of reformists is that the poetic Arabic language of the Qur'an makes some regulatory terms seem equivocal. They also provide a broad evaluation of *hadiths* as opposed to instinctively trusting the sources without adequate assessment of the sources. A major issue for the reformists is the underrepresentation of women's voices in the traditional interpretation. Therefore, the objectives of the reformist interpretation of the Qur'an often comes from feminist ideologies that intend to elucidate women's role and position within Islamic texts. Reformist scholars have argued that there is a missing link in the traditional approach between women's liberation and the Islamic text. They strive to rebuild this link (Wadud, 2000).

Conservative and reformist, both schools of thought agree that there are indications within Islamic texts that men are superior to women (Barlas, 2002; Rahman, 2009; Wadud 1999). However, they argue that the translation of male superiority is subject to contextual interpretation. According to the traditional interpretation, men have superiority over women due to their mental and physical strength to protect women and provide for them financially. This also insinuates that women are the weaker sex who need men's protection. It is safe to say that this approach endorses a traditional patriarchal ideology. According to Koc (2016), patriarchy refers to men being superior and making them the ultimate decision makers. In a patriarchal system, women are generally sidelined and discounted from major decision-making process (Koc, 2016).

On the contrary, reformists interpret the Qur'an as being written in a sociopolitical context in which patriarchy was an integral part of the social fabric in the pre-Islamic era (Barlas, 2002; Wadud, 1999). Foss and Griffin's (1992) argument about patriarchy also comes into consideration here. According to them, patriarchy is not inherently a negative aspect of human society. Rather it is the reflection of the absence of female voices when the

society was constructed thousands of years ago. Barlas (2002) argues that the verses that suggest inequality need to be interpreted contextually. She points out that the differential treatment between women and men in the Qur'an was not tied to the biological inferiority of women, but rather to the social context in which the text was revealed.

Afsaruddin (2005) depicts the construction of Islamic education as ranging from a maximalist to a minimalist understanding. The minimalist approach of knowledge means that an individual is exposed to the education of Islam without having a critical understanding of it, whereas the maximalist approach suggests that individuals should have a critical understanding of the Qur'anic knowledge and understand why they are suggested to behave in certain ways instead of blindly following the doctrines of Islam. The maximalist approach encourages the critical thinking capabilities of students and fosters an ethical learning community that is centered around "defending justifiable claims for any truth." As Islam focuses on social justice, the maximalist approach helps individuals achieve a sense of justice and service to others (Waghid, 2011).

Reformists focus on a maximalist inferring of the Qur'anic verses as opposed to the traditional minimalist interpretation. Religious practices of South Asian Muslim cultures are heavily influenced by the traditional minimalist approach of the Qur'an. The contradicting ideologies of these two schools of thought created a difference of religious understanding between males and females. The traditional approach established male dominance in Muslim cultures.

This male dominance has established patriarchal norms in Muslim cultures that is beyond the lifestyle prescribed by the Qur'anic teaching. Scholars argue that Islam is an egalitarian religion, but in many South Asian Muslim cultures, patriarchal norms have kept women subdued. These norms have created an imbalance of power between men and women. To eliminate this power imbalance that sidelines women, Islamic feminists emphasize a

contextual view of Qur'anic scripture, which has implications for social life that ensure equal rights for men and women (Barazangi, 2004; Jeenah & Vally, 2006; Mernissi, 1991; Wadud, 1999).

### **Islamic Feminism**

Islamic feminists are a group of scholars, believers, and practitioners who aim to create a new discourse of gender and establish Islam as an egalitarian religion based on the Qur'an and other Islamic scripture (Badran 2011; Davids, 2014; Morin, 2009). They refute the patriarchal practice of Islam that prevails in many Muslim cultures (Morin, 2009). According to Wadud (2009), these patriarchal notions are the product of male religious leaders who claim themselves as the authority, leaving women out. These notions allow men to evade their duties towards their families and society as prescribed by the Qur'an, by shifting the expectations of obedience and submission exclusively to women. If women object to such notions, they are seen as non-submissive; this makes it unlikely that anyone will question the patriarchal authority about gender equality.

Islamic feminists challenge men's duties as prescribed by religious scriptures. They demand women's right to participate in the congregational worship space in the mosque; they demand complementary roles for both men and women in the family; and, most importantly, they strive to establish respect for women as an equal entity in society. With their research, Islamic feminists prove that the patriarchal practice of Islam, which is currently prominent in most Muslim countries, contradicts the Qur'anic ideals (Badran 2009). To do so, scholars of Islamic feminism have elaborated on Islamic teachings to identify specific religious commands or texts within the scripture that establish gender equality.

Fatima Mernissi is considered as one of the founding scholars of Islamic feminism. She is a Moroccan sociologist who wrote about early Islamic history, women's voice in Islamic scripture, and the widespread misogynistic practices of Muslim culture. Her first

book, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* was published in 1987. From then she continued her work on establishing Muslim women's rights, using religious scripture and early Islamic history. In Mernissi's (1991) book, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, she discussed how men's lust for political power altered historical facts to jeopardize Muslim women's rights. Amina Wadud's (1999) book, *Qur'an and Women* sheds light on misconstrued gender issues and provides a contextual background of the Qur'anic verses that is often discounted. Such gender issues include male authority in family and society, polygamy, women as witnesses, women's share in inheritance, and women's right to divorce.

Other Islamic feminists like Barazangi worked on clarifying the misconceptions surrounding religious scripture in her books *Women's Identity and Rethinking the Qur'an* (2004) and *Women's Identity and Rethinking the hadiths* (2016). Works of Ahemd (1992) and Barlas (2002) further establish Islam as an egalitarian religion and accentuate reinterpreting the scripture from a non-patriarchal standpoint. These works indicate a persistent gap in translation and understanding of religious scripture between male and female Muslims, a gap that has been forced on women for several centuries by the patriarchal society. The works of Islamic feminists attempt to mitigate this vacuum of information by focusing on the contextual interpretation of the Qur'an. Following this argument, in the next section I have emphasized widely debated verses of the Qur'an from a reformist standpoint.

### **Women's Experience as Evidence**

Women in South Asian Muslim cultures have lived through the above-mentioned issues and negotiating their identity with their religious understanding every day. Since little research have been done on their lived experiences, it is important to acknowledge their everyday experiences in research.

Traditional research methodologies validate knowledge produced by lived experiences from a male-dominated perspective. Thus, Foss and Foss (1994) argue that women's narrative and experiences are important in research because methodology is an avenue for women's experiences to be taken seriously. They also highlight that information gathered from women's experiences cannot be processed using traditional methodologies and theories, as these constructs were developed without the consideration of women's perspectives. Incorporating women's voices in research is important because they are the marginalized sex and their voices have not been as prominent as those of men, who are considered as the dominant gender. Powerful male-dominated discourses have overshadowed women's narrative, although without fully controlling those narratives (O'Brien Hallstein, 2000; Harding, 1991).

Collins (1990) argues that no scholar can ignore the cultural ideas that a participant brings to the table that intersect with the oppression they have experienced due to their race, gender, color, and/or ethnicity. In traditional scholarship, if a scholar produces knowledge that is far from the traditionally held beliefs, they run the risk of being discredited. However, the widely held beliefs are male dominated and not welcoming towards different schools of thought. Therefore, the discreditation of non-mainstream scholars leads to suppression of marginalized voices. In such instances, voices of women who have lived through the experiences of being oppressed are more powerful as evidence to understand their realities.

Although Collins (1990) discusses the lived experiences of Black women in the U.S and the oppression these women face in their everyday life, the same is applicable in the instances of South Asian Muslim women. Accounts of South Asian Muslim women have received little scholarly attention. For centuries, Qur'anic interpretations have been dominated by male scholars (Koc, 2016). A few decades ago, feminist theologians started a movement to question these male-dominated interpretations and present their own

understanding based on research (Shaheed, 2000). According to Muslim scholars across the world, women in Muslim communities are being oppressed in the name of religion to support patriarchy. A notable contributing factor to women's suppression in Muslim communities is the communication of uneven Islamic laws and religious values by the *kazis* and local religious leaders. The communicating of such differing religious values and laws results in the differentiating treatment of women, because the fathers and husbands of the community receives and practices these values. Therefore, the communication of uneven religious laws and values shapes Muslim women's lived experiences. According to Shaheed (2000), Islamic law is not uniform across the Muslim world. Thus, the experiences of Muslim women vary according to their region. Hence, this study highlights the lived experiences of South Asian Muslim women and how they make sense of patriarchal practices in their everyday life from a religious standpoint.

### **Women in the Qur'anic Verses**

Ali (2010) highlights *surah* Al-Nisa and *surah* Al-Ahzab as the two most important *surahs*, or chapters, among others in the Qur'an that specify women's rights and gender equality. Widely known interpretations of these verses represent women as a secondary entity in a society based on conservative interpretation and minimalist practice. Reformist interpretation of the same verses presents women as independent entities who have equal rights in every sphere of society. Previous scholarship from the literal/traditionalist and reformist camps of interpretation interpret the scriptures differently as these relate to key issues regarding male and female status in Muslim societies.

### **The Origin of Humankind**

Scholars have argued against the prevalent concept that woman was made from man's rib (Brazangi, 2004; Wadud, 1999). This statement refers to the well-known events of the

garden where humankind was created. The Qur'anic verse that refers to the creation of humankind states as follows:

O Mankind! Be careful of your duty to your lord who created you from a single *Nafs* (individual) and from it created its *zawj* (pair) and from that pair spread abroad [over the earth] a multitude of men and women. (4:1)<sup>1</sup>

The word *zawj* might be interpreted as either *husband* or *pair*. Traditionalists follow the interpretation as *husband*, suggesting that women come from men. However, interpreting this verse, Barazangi (2004) and Wadud (1999) argue that humankind was created from a single entity regardless of their gender. Thus, both genders share equal responsibility and honor in the earth. The clarification on origin is important because it indicates that, at the time of creation, no specific function was assigned to the sexes. Individuality and certain traits were equal for all of humankind at the time of creation (Wadud, 1999).

Other verses encompassing the importance of individual devotion to Allah are as follows:

Allah does not change the condition of a folk until they (first) change what is in their *anfus* (soul). (13:11)

All human activity is given recompense based on what the individual earns. (4:124)

Allah does not tax a *nafs* beyond its scope. For it (is only) that which it has earned and against it (is only) that which it has deserved. (2:286)

It is important to notice the non-gendered identification of devotion in these verses. This indicates that Allah created and conferred responsibility on both genders, equally. These verses also indicate that, more than physical differences, men and women both have spiritual responsibility towards Allah (Wadud, 1999).

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<sup>1</sup> Translations of the verses were retrieved from <https://Qur'an.com/>



## Inheritance

Another contentious topic in Muslim cultures is women's share in the inheritance. The verse on women's inheritance was published at a time when there was no inheritance system available. The verse about women's inheritance on their father's and husband's wealth was revealed in *surah Al-Nisa*:

Allah instructs you concerning your children: for the male, what is equal to the share of two females. But if there are [only] daughters, two or more, for them is two thirds of one's estate. And if there is only one, for her is half. And for one's parents, to each one of them is a sixth of his estate if he left children. But if he had no children and the parents [alone] inherit from him, then for his mother is one third. And if he had brothers [or sisters], for his mother is a sixth, after any bequest he [may have] made or debt. Your parents or your children - you know not which of them are nearest to you in benefit. [These shares are] an obligation [imposed] by Allah. Indeed, Allah is ever knowing and wise. (4:11)

In order to understand this verse, it is important to consider the context when it was published. In the pre-Islamic era, women were traded like camels. They did not have any right to inherit wealth. When a woman's husband died, if any man threw a piece of cloth on that woman, she would be his property. Along with the woman, the man would also gain access to her wealth. Thus, when this verse was published, most Arab men refused to obey it by directly opposing the rule to share wealth with women, but the Prophet was adamant in establishing the rules (Mernissi, 1991).

Wadud (1999) proposes a reformist approach to this verse. According to her, this verse does not acknowledge all the probable scenarios that can take place according to the current socio-economic structure. As many women work outside of the home and also provide for their families, the verse does not necessarily indicate the unequal division of

wealth. In her hypothetical example, if a widow is taken care of by her daughter, although she has a son, the majority portion of the wealth should not go to the son. The division then should be according to the good deeds, not the biological gender.

### **Domestic Violence**

Wife beating is perhaps the most controversial issue of all in the field of sex relations in Islam. Traditional and reformist scholars have had long debates about this verse. The following verse prescribes male authority over women and permits the man to beat his wife if she is being overtly disobedient. The commonly found translation of the verse 4:34 is:

Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband's] absence what Allah would have them guard. But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is ever Exalted and Grand.  
(4.34)

Some scholars disagree with this literal translation (Ally, 2020; El Fadl, 2006; Ibrahim, 2020). According to them, the tricky word in this verse is *daraba* that translates to “beat, strike or hit.” They argue that this verse does not indicate that a man has the legal right to beat his wife; rather, it indicates that in case of sexual infidelity, the Islamic authority or judge holds the right to punish. These scholars also elaborate on the fact that this verse is often taken out of context because it gives men certain power. They state that, while the Qur’an has identified punishment for women’s infidelity, it did the same for men in verses 4:16, 19 and 24:2. Islam does not tolerate or promote any kind of violence, let alone domestic violence (Ibrahim, 2017). However, many Muslim cultures promote masculine power structure devoid of the true Qur’anic teaching.

## **Polygamy**

Most men in Muslim culture argue that, as the Prophet had nine wives, it is their right to be polygamous in the eyes of Islam. This is based on a widely used verse that many Muslim men use to establish their superiority. What these men fail to understand is that the Prophet married each of his wives for a specific purpose necessary to establish the religion. The verse from the Qur'an allowing men to marry up to four women is,

If you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls, then marry those that please you of [other] women, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one or those your right hand possesses. That is more suitable that you may not incline [to injustice]. (4:3)

Wadud (1999) and Ahmed (1992) stress the context rather than the literal text. According to Wadud (1999), the word to focus on this verse is "justly." Men are only given permission to marry four women if they can be "just" to their wives and orphans. Ahmed (1992) elaborates on the context of orphans. This verse was revealed after the battle of Uhud. In that deadly battle, thousands of men died leaving their wives widowed. In those dark times, for a woman to be a widow with an orphan was extremely dangerous. Therefore, men were encouraged to marry them in order to save them from non-believing men who would treat them without any respect. However, considering the socio-economic situation, many Muslim countries have enforced laws against polygamous marriage, barring one man from marrying multiple times.

## **Witness**

The Qur'anic verse about women as a witness for any legal case states:

And to witness two witnesses from among your men. And if there are not two men [available], then a man and two women from those whom you accept as witnesses - so

that if one of the women errs, then the other can remind her. And let not the witnesses refuse when they are called upon. (2:282)

On the surface, this verse seems to suggest that if it is a male witness, only one suffices, but if the witnesses are women, two are required. At first glance, this verse seems to indicate superiority of male witnesses over female witnesses. However, Wadud (1999) provides contextual interpretation for this verse. In pre-Islamic era, when this verse was published, women could be coerced into falsification easily due to their vulnerable socio-economic status in the society. Hence, Wadud (1999) argues that God wanted two women for securing accurate conviction. If one woman were to be coerced into giving false testimony, another woman can remind her of the truth.

### **Divorce**

In many Muslim countries, men have ultimate superiority over women in terms of divorce. They can divorce their wife verbally, and that will be respected in society. However, scholars argue that this is an extremely non-Islamic method of divorcing. The Qur'an specifies a lengthy and exhaustive method for divorce. According to the Qur'an, a couple must wait four months before committing to divorce (2:226), and they must also council with families to rectify the situation (4:35).

Then, if he divorces her after that, she becomes unlawful for him unless she marries a husband other than him. If he then divorces her, they incur no blame for returning to one another if they think that they will uphold God's limits. These are God's limits; He clarifies them for people who know. (2:230)

When you have divorced the women and they have fulfilled their interim, then either retain them equitably or release them equitably. Do not retain them against their will in order to be vindictive. Anyone who does that has indeed wronged himself. (2:231)

According to these verses after divorce, the husband cannot forcefully retain the wife or harm the wife in order to be vindictive. This establishes honoring the wife's wish in case of a

divorce. The Qur'an also heavily imposes the wife's divorce settlement and accommodation, and children's alimony, on the husband (65:1, 2:233, 2:241). Wadud (1999) and Mernissi (1991) give ample examples in their scholarly works of both present times and in pre-Islamic era where women alone or with their husband have initiated divorce in the presence of a judge.

### **Male Authority**

Reformist scholars have argued repeatedly that the Qur'an does not provide any specific text that indicates men as the natural leader. However, they have agreed that men had physiological, experiential, and public privileges in ancient Arabia. According to them, the Qur'an requires everyone to perform as per their best capabilities regardless of their sex. For example, the Qur'an describes Bilqis, a woman, as a leader of a clan. Islamic history also regards well the Prophet's wives, daughter and granddaughter for their role in religious advancement (Wadud, 1999). The Qur'an states that "women have rights similar to the rights of men in a just manner and the men have a degree (of advantage) over them." (2:228)

### **Family Roles**

Islam is largely a family-oriented religion. Scholars have agreed that the predominant role for a man as the husband is to provide financially for his wife and child(ren), while the wife will bear children for the couple. As Islam regards bringing a new life as the most sacred duty of all, it has freed women of the financial responsibility for the family. However, the Qur'an does not state that caring for child should solely be the mother's responsibility:

Mothers shall suckle their children . . . (that is) for those who wish to complete the suckling. If instead a couple or a mother decides to give [the] children out to nurse, it is no sin for you. (2:223)

This verse highlights that caring for a child is not solely a mother's responsibility. The Qur'an also states that the roles of a husband and wife are complementary to each other. According

to the Qur'an, marriage is a teamwork, and both members of this team should support each other at every step of the marriage (30:21). However, women in many Muslim cultures are forced to give care to children along with additional household work without help from their husbands. Many people in Muslim cultures believe that this will increase their good deeds, which is important, for the Qur'an clearly states that anyone who does religious good deeds will enter into heaven. Islam considers men and women as equal parts in a marriage, in which partners should find respect, mutual understanding, spirituality, and devotion to Allah. In other words, Islam suggests respectful teamwork for a marriage to be successful (Barazangi, 2004; Wadud, 1999).

They (feminine plural) are raiment for you (masculine plural) and you are raiment for them. (2:187)

### ***Hijab* - Sexual Modesty**

*Hijab* is an Arabic word that occurs a total of seven times in the Qur'an (Q 7:46; Q 17:45; Q 19:16–17; Q 33:53; Q 38:32; Q 41:5; Q 42:51). In five of those seven times *hijab* is used as a separation between people or a way to distinguish between groups. For instance, the word has been used as a separation of inhabitants between hell and heaven (7:46), as a separation between unbelievers (17:45), as the division between night and day (38:32), as the veil atheists have on their heart (41:5), and as the shield that Allah uses to speak to humans to protect them from his divine glory (42:51). One of the times the word *hijab* was used in relation to women was when Virgin Mary sought seclusion and silence during her pregnancy (19:16 -17). And the other verse that refers to *hijab* concerning women indicates the seclusion between the Prophet's wives and other men (33:53).

However, the Qur'an has clear instruction for women to dress modestly considering their relationship with men:

Enjoin believing women to cast down their looks and guard their private parts and not reveal their adornment except that which is revealed of itself and to draw their veils over their bosoms and not to reveal their adornment save to their husbands, or their fathers, or the fathers of their husbands, or of their own sons, or the sons of their husbands, or their brothers, or the sons of their brothers, or the sons of their sisters, or the women with whom they associate, or those that are in their bondage, or the male attendants in their service free of sexual interest, or boys that are yet unaware of illicit matters pertaining to women. Nor should they stamp their feet on the ground in such manner that their hidden ornament becomes revealed. Believers, turn together, all of you, to Allah in repentance that you may attain true success. (24:31)

Amer's (2014) research shows that, although the Qur'an is prescribing women to cover their private parts and their "adornment," it does not define how or what to wear. It also does not define the specification of what constitutes a female's private parts. The text does not specifically mandate women to wear a headscarf, to wear a long cloak and/or to have a face veil.

According to Islamic feminist scholars (Ahmed, 1992; Amer, 2014), it is male Muslim theologians who defines proper clothing for women and increased the restrictions over time. In the early tenth century, the Qur'anic decree for women to cover up their adornments was interpreted as the women covering up their bodies except for hands and face. Over time, Muslim cultures redefined which female body parts were considered shameful or which adornments were immodest. Three centuries later, this same verse was used to mandate that women strip off their makeup and jewelry and that they cover neck, ears, arms, and face (Ahmed, 1992; Amer, 2014). This means that the definition of adornment and private parts has changed with time and become more restrictive. Such change has more to do with politics than the religion itself.

In 2003, Linda Clarke published a detailed study on how veiling was described in the *hadiths*. According to that study, most discussions about attire and adornment are focused on men, not women. Although most Muslim cultures today associate the word “shameful” with women’s body parts, in most *hadiths* such body parts were referred to as men’s. Clarke identified only one *hadith* relating to the *hijab*, that was reported by Abu Dawud. *Hadiths* are recorded based on testimonies through a chain of reporters, and Dawud did not follow this procedure while recording the *hadiths* about *hijab*. Regardless of such limited attention given to *hijab* in both the Qur’an and *hadiths*, Islamic clerics did not shy away from making it significant in today’s Muslim cultures. Arguably they chose to highlight whichever the Qur’anic interpretation and *hadiths* suited their conservative ideology (Amer, 2014).

Today, Muslim women wear a *hijab* for various reasons. Nowadays, *hijab* is more than a fabric. It has become a cultural reflection. Depending on how it’s used, it can be either a symbol of resistance or oppression (Heath, 2008). For example, Saudi Arabia and Iran made it compulsory for women to wear *hijab* in that the women do not have any say. On the other hand, in the post 9/11 era, many Muslim women have chosen to wear *hijab* in the U.S. to establish that *hijab* is just a choice they made. They do so to prove that their agency allows them to wear *hijab* without being forced (Ijaz & Abbas, 2010). Some suggest that Muslim women should consider *hijab* as an inseparable part of their identity (Duffy & Gordon, 2017; Ruby, 2005; Bunting, 2001). Bunting (2001), in her interview with six *hijab*-wearing women, stated that these women felt liberated and empowered wearing *hijab*. A study based on focus group discussion among 14 Muslim women from 12 different countries further proved that Muslim women consider *hijab* as a representation of their identity. Besides that, *hijab* is also considered as a part of a broader Muslim sisterhood community. Clearly, *hijab* is the most iconic symbol of Muslim culture today. The overarching focus on this symbol might have made other important guidelines of the Qur’an, obsolete.



The above discussed translations of the Qur'an demonstrate that Islam intended similar status for both genders in the society. As today's Muslim women are not experiencing the same status, it is important to look back in history to understand women's status in early days of Islam. This will further clarify the gap between translations, practice, and history.

Women in the History of Islam

### **Muslim Women in Early Islamic Days**

The Qur'an states that Islam gives women equality in society. Islam gives women the right to contract marriage, allows them to inherit and control property, and protects the widows and orphans. Beyond the interpretation of the Qur'anic verses, narratives of active female participation, and engagement in early Muslim society are being minimized in today's Islamic education (Afsaruddin, 2005). Scholars have argued that Qur'an was designed to improve women's status and strengthen family ties in a Muslim society (Esposito & De Long-Bas 2004). Wadud (1999) claims that there are more passages in the Qur'an addressing women as individuals and as members of a family than all other issues combined, which gives women special regard.

The Qur'anic interpretation states that Khadijah, the Prophet's first wife, was the first individual to whom the Prophet revealed the proclamation of Islam. Khadijah became the first adherent of monotheistic Islam. As the religion kept developing and unfolding, the Prophet Mohammad shared the directions from Allah to both men and women. Although the details of the Prophet's daily life and quotes were recorded mostly by men, a noteworthy amount of the quotes were relegated to the authority of women (Ahmed, 1992). These women were often either the Prophet's daughter or his wives. Aisha, the Prophet's youngest wife was a significant contributor to verbal sayings of the Prophet, that are now known as *hadiths*.

Islamic history of eminent women from earlier days of Islam such as the Prophet's wives Khadijah and Aisha, his daughter Fatima, his granddaughter Zaynab, and his great-

granddaughter Sakina, proved that women were involved in various important roles within the society (Carland, 2017; Nasr, 2010; Wadud, 1999). Women who pursued scholarly knowledge within the field of Islam were mostly from elite families. Besides pursuing their education, they also played a vital role in teaching society the religious values. Therefore, Ahmed (1992) and Afsaruddin (2005) highlight the pivotal role of these women in cultivating the dimensions of Islamic knowledge.

In the early days, women used to actively participate in religious services and attended the Prophet's sermons (Ahmed, 1992). In the medieval Islamic era, women participated freely alongside men in studying. They used to partake in study circles in madrassas (Islamic colleges). During that period women could teach both men and women after receiving their certificates as qualified religious teachers (Afsaruddin, 2005). Women not only participated in knowledge dissemination in that period, but they were also actively involved in the business, war, and sociopolitical decision making (Mernissi 1991, Wadud, 1999).

### **Female Role Models in Early Islam**

The Prophet's vision was to establish Islam as an egalitarian religion where men and women were given equal rights, and no one was above the other. When we look at the societal structure of early Islamic days, it becomes clear that Islam was not a male-dominated religion from the beginning. In order to demonstrate the roles played by female leaders in early Islamic days, it is important to review the lives of the four most iconic female figures of Islam. Therefore, this section will focus on female role models who are undisputedly respectable in Muslim culture.

#### ***Khadijah***

Khadijah was the Prophet's first wife and his first true love. She was a forty-year-old businesswoman when they got married. The couple had about 20 years of age difference

between them as Khadijah was older than the Prophet. Despite the age difference, they were heavily in love, and the Prophet did not remarry until she passed away.

Khadijah was the first person the Prophet turned to when the prophecy was bestowed upon him. The Prophet was shivering after returning from the cave where he received the proclamation of Islam during his meditation and requested his wife to cover him with a blanket. He was still in doubt and was questioning his state of mind. Khadijah reassured him and accepted Islam. She was the first human to accept Islam as a religion after the Prophet. The couple then started their journey of spreading the religion among others. Their companionship and the Prophet's dependence on his wife explain how he treated his wives. There was not a hint of disrespect of subordination in their relationship (Afrasiab & Valipour, 2013; Haylamaz, 2007).

### ***Aisha***

Aisha was the youngest of the Prophet's wives. The Prophet never shied away from openly declaring his love for Aisha. She was known as the "Mother of the Believers" (Walker & Sells, 1999). In elaborating Aisha's importance in Islam, the Prophet said, "Draw a part of your religion from little *al-humayra* [Aisha's pet name given by the Prophet]" (Mernissi, 1999). Aisha holds an eminent role in protecting the Prophet's authentic *hadiths*. Her *hadiths* are undisputed and pure. She also corrected many *hadiths* where the Prophet was wrongly quoted. For example, one *hadith* published in Al-Bukhari (the most widely trusted book of *hadiths* collection) states, "Three things bring bad luck: house, women, and horses" (Mernissi, 1999). This *hadith* was initially told by one of the Prophet's companions, Abu Hurayra. Upon hearing this, Aisha was disappointed and said, "Abu Hurayra interpreted the Prophet's words out of context. He entered the Prophet's house when he was in the middle of a sentence." Originally, according to Aisha, the Prophet was referring to the believers of another religion that trusts houses, women, and horses bring bad luck.

Muslims pray in the direction of Mecca; this direction is called the *qibla*. A widely known *hadith* dictates that if a woman and/or a donkey cross between a praying man and the *qibla*, the prayer will be void. Upon hearing this, Aisha angrily protested saying, “I laid in the same room, between the Prophet and the *qibla* while he was praying. I did not disturb him, and I did not move” (Mernissi, 1999). Thus, Aisha has corrected many misinformed and unauthentic *hadiths*. She also revealed many *hadiths* relating to purification rituals and conjugal intimacy. She was known for issuing *fatwa* and teaching Islam to both men and women (Geissinger, 2011).

Aisha’s willful and strong personality makes her one of the strongest female role models in Islam. She was politically involved and led Muslim troops in war after the death of the Prophet. Although many of her endeavors are not widely known among contemporary Muslims, she is a well-respected female in the Muslim world. However, her role as an empowered woman is not highly focused on modern Islamic history (Geissinger, 2011; Mernissi, 1999).

### ***Umm Salama***

Umm Salama was a divorced woman before getting married to the Prophet. Umar and Abu Bakr, two of the four Caliphs of Islam, sent her marriage proposals after the death of her husband, but she refused. She even rejected the Prophet’s marriage proposal twice before finally accepting it. The Prophet respected her for her wisdom and often sought her counsel. She accompanied the Prophet in several of his wars. Umm Salama had accounts (collections) of *hadiths* like the Prophet’s other wives, and these *hadiths* were as unquestionable as those of Aisha.

The Qur’an was revealed in parts, grounded in specific contexts and queries. Some of the verses of the Qur’an were revealed in Umm Salama’s house and based on her questions (El Omari, 2019; Marnissi, 1991). One such question was why the Qur’an addresses men but

not women. This question was ignited by the fact that women have accepted Islam like men, women have fought side by side with men, women have migrated through cities like men, and women have sacrificed equally. Why then would there not be enough mention of women in the Qur'an? A few days after this question, the Prophet recited the newly revealed verse 33:35 that ensured equality between men and women.

Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who do so and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so - for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward. (33:35)

According to Mohammad Ali Syed (2004), this verse was the start of a trend as, after the revelation of this verse, many other verses were revealed that clearly stated the status of men and women. Umm Salama asked more question that prompted additional verses about inheritance. Umm Salama asked the Prophet why was it that women only inherited half of what men inherited, and she wondered whether it was because men were obliged to fight wars. Her queries were answered in verses 4:32 and 4:34, where equality between men and women have been declared. Apart from prompting verses, and similar to Aisha, Umm Salama also revealed important *hadiths* about personal hygiene and sexual intimacy between spouses that treat men and women equally.

Umm Salama helped the Prophet in sensitive times during the treaty of *Hudaybiyyah*. The Prophet's companions were angry at the weak negotiation terms of the treaty. After the treaty was signed, the Prophet asked his companions to shave their heads for the ritual of

sacrifice. As a sign of protest, they refused to listen to the Prophet. The Prophet went to Umm Salama's tent frustrated and explained the situation to her. Umm Salama wisely said:

O Prophet of Allah! You can't make these fifteen hundred men do what they don't want to do. Just do your own duty; which Allah has imposed on you. Go ahead and perform your own rites in an open place so that everyone of them can see you (El Omari et al., 2019).

The Prophet took Umm Salama's advice, and, as a result, the men also shaved their heads. The story of Umm Salama was a glorious chapter in Muslim women's history; her value is heavily understated. However, her role in Islam is almost forgotten in today's Muslim history.

### ***Fatimah***

Fatimah was the fourth daughter of the Prophet and Khadijah. She is believed to be the Prophet's most favorite person in the world. To date, she is remembered with honor in the Muslim world. Her piety is legendary, and so is her dedication to her father. Historians claim that her skin used to glow when she prayed and recited the Qur'an (Mukherjee, 2005; Reem, 2012). Her spiritual connection with her father is exemplary. She served as a caregiver in the war of Uhud. It is important to understand that she did not have an easy life. Her marriage with Ali, one of the four Caliphs of Islam, faced many difficulties. They fought with poverty and had to overcome political hurdles. Regardless, her demeanor was not compromised. Her devotion to the services of Islam was unquestionable (Mukherjee, 2005; Reem, 2012).

Her hardship in life is often used as an example of how a wife should behave. Using her example, clerics and family members encourage Muslim wives to tolerate financial difficulties that might not be necessary. This takes the focus of shifting the cause for financial difficulty from the duty of men to provide for their family to women's need to put up with financial difficulty. The respect and devotion that Fatimah's family had for her often remain

untold. This is another example of a patriarchal alteration of historical content being used to serve the hegemonic gender ideologies.

### ***Sakina***

Another noteworthy character in early Islamic days was the Prophet's great-granddaughter, Sakina. She was an extremely beautiful and independent individual. She put conditions in her marital contract to make sure her husband could not disobey her. When her husband disobeyed her, she took him to court. She was cherished for both her beauty and critical intelligence. She argued with the most powerful men of her time and never hesitated to express her mind. She married five men at different points in her lifetime. Her zeal in poetry and political intellect were noteworthy (Carland 2017, Mernissi, 1991).

Despite having a dynamic personality, Sakina received a little mention in Islamic history. Mernissi (1991) was attacked by a protester at a public conference for referring to Sakina as a powerful female figure in Islamic history. The protester arrogantly claimed that Sakina died as a child with her father despite Mernissi's list of proofs to prove him incorrect. This gives us a hint of patriarchal practice in Muslim culture in which powerful women are obliterated from history.

The lives of these women offer a testament of definitive strength and higher status of Muslim women. Barazangi (2004) stressed that Islam not only emphasizes a woman's freedom of speech, independence, and sexuality, it describes women as spiritual and intellectual human beings with the capacity to change history. Today, these principles have become obscured in many Muslim cultures. Representation of these female leaders is hardly present in contemporary Muslim history, which has created a deceptive silo of information that serves patriarchal purposes.

Endeavors of many Muslim women were lost because they were not recorded or the history have been narrated orally (Carland, 2019). History often represents stories of men that are written by men. Due to this male-dominated narrative, women's voices and representation

became marginalized. A major shift in the narrative of Muslim women occurred during the nineteenth century. During that period, Muslim women became the subjects of cultural writing instead of being the objects.

It is clear based on above discussion that, unlike the doubts about authenticity and controversy of some *hadiths*, Sharia law, and *fatwa*, the Qur'an is the stable undisputed source. As the Qur'an is the divine scripture without human intervention, Islamic feminists have built their key arguments surrounding the Qur'anic texts themselves, rather than emphasizing the *hadiths*. The scholarship also highlighted the prominent role of Muslim women in helping the religion to flourish, that is disregarded and sidelined in contemporary Muslim history. This study will follow the footsteps of Islamic feminists and investigate the South Asian Muslim women's life experiences based on the Qur'anic verses. In order to do so, it is important to comprehend the existing gender role belief and practice in South Asia.

### **Gender Role Beliefs and Practices of South Asian Muslim**

Based on an array of researches done on South Asian Muslim cultures, it is evident that existing religious practice is overshadowed by patriarchal notions. Alexander and Welzel (2011) argue that Muslim countries, in general, hold a patriarchal view. Regardless of the type of society, Muslim cultures continue to be patriarchal. According to these researchers, both Muslims and non-Muslims in Muslim society tend to have patriarchal values. Their research suggests that Muslims connect patriarchal values with social power. They also suggest that, with an increasing rate of education and jobs among Muslim men and women, these patriarchal values tend to decrease. This aforementioned power struggle explains how South Asian religious practices favor men and disenfranchise women. This is reflected both in specific studies of perceptions regarding gender roles in South Asia as well as in the specific understanding of the religious and educational influences in the area.



## **Studies of South Asian Perspectives of Gender Roles**

Khalid and Freize (2004) developed a study that included 195 Pakistani residents and 140 Pakistani immigrants residing in the U.S. The researchers gave the Islamic Attitudes Towards Women Scale (IAWS) to both men and women. Although the sample reported being more liberal than conservative, men were more conservative than women. The findings of this study also indicate that recent male immigrants were more conservative than older men, who have lived in the U.S for a longer period. Another aspect of this study examined the relationship between the conservative attitude towards women and the acceptance of violence towards women. The conservative participants leaned towards the acceptance of violence against women.

Another study conducted with 24 British Muslim youth, aged 14 and 15, revealed that this age group supports the traditional cultural practices (Archer, 2001). The participants were born in England, but they were of Pakistani descent. Data collected through six focus group discussions demonstrated that practices such as taking control of women's sexuality are seen as normal in South Asian cultures. Another study on British Muslims of South Asian descent proved that traditional masculine gender identities in Muslim cultures include men being financial providers, protecting Muslim women, and having heterosexual romantic relationships (Ramji, 2007). According to the men in Ramji's study, women prefer to be housewives, and women like to do household tasks while the men provide financial support for the family. These norms grant men social and economic power over women. This segregation of labor is also related to Muslim women's modesty as addressed by both Archer (2001) and Ramji (2007). Participants in these two studies described Islam as practicing patriarchal norms. These norms varied among the working class and middle-class

participants. The working-class participants appeared to be more conservative than the latter ones.

As noted, traditionally Muslim women are expected to take care of the children and look after the extended family. This also means that they are expected to give up their career as, in many Muslim cultures, it is considered to be a shame for family if a woman works after marriage (Tariq & Sayed, 2017). Even if a woman works after getting married, she will seek a job with flexible hours, less responsibility, and low prospect of promotions.

A focus group conducted among young Muslims of Scotland revealed that these youths believe that most Muslim males adhere to the patriarchal reading of Islam in terms of defining masculinity (Hopkins, 2006). Data derived from focus group discussions and interviews indicated that the participants claimed to have liberal views while at the same time exhibiting sexist stereotypes concerning gender roles, beliefs about women, and their relationship with parents. For example, the boys stated that, even if a husband believed in gender equality, he would also believe that women are more interested in household tasks than having a career. The perspectives of these participants reflect the poor treatment of women in Pakistan while endorsing patriarchal values of their culture. This means that, while Muslim youth acknowledge patriarchal practices, they have accepted it as a cultural norm.

In another study, in-depth interviews of two women, one young and one older, suggest that women in Muslim culture value Islamic notions differently (White, 2010). The younger woman robustly claims that Islam doesn't mandate women to cover themselves but requires everyone to dress modestly. She also believes that, in this scientific age, a child doesn't need to be limited only to religious schooling (madrassa). On the other hand, the older woman preached against women going out of the household and being involved in politics. According to her, women's place is in the home and being obedient to their husbands, as she believes it is the "Islamic way of life." She also believes that, even if a

husband is bad, the wife's piety can bring the husband to the light of Islam. These two women also reflected varying ideas about what pollutes Islamic practice. According to the young one, the local Islamic leaders are promoting conservative ideas of Islam, which pollutes the original ideas of the Prophet. The older woman believes that the local culture is polluting Islamic practices. She calls it the culture of non-believers.

Eidhamar's (2018) study of 59 Muslims in Indonesia found that they believe that male leadership is prescribed by Islam. They also believe that Islam permits husbands to beat their wives. Of these participants, 33 were female, and, of these, 17 reported being beaten. Some of the female respondents believe that being obedient to their husbands is their rightful way to heaven. These women believe that a husband beats his wife to teach her a lesson and that she deserves it. They believe that even if such beatings are painful for them now, they will be beneficial for them in the afterlife. According to these women, accepting their husbands' punishment is a crucial part of their piety. However, there is another side of the coin. Five of the female respondents strongly objected to wife-beating as a part of religion.

The above-discussed research suggests that South Asian Muslim men and women are accustomed to the patriarchal reading of the Qur'an. Because of this, the culture is more accepting of male dominance in social and family structure while women are expected to be submissive and dependent. Although this dominance appears to be male-centric, in practice, it is the culture that has incubated this dominance and established men as an authority in society. As a result, the entire society, including women themselves, is comfortable with this dominance. This prolonged cultural practice has made women unaware of their religious rights.

Amanullah De Sondy (2009), in his much-acclaimed thesis about the crisis of masculinity in Islam, discusses 20th-century practices where Muslim men claimed ultimate superiority over women as a part of claiming Islamic masculinity. However, he concluded his

research on a note that the relationship between Allah and his believers is not dependent on any gender. Before unveiling the historic background of Islam in South Asia, it is important to understand the overlapping relationship the culture of a nation has on religion because the national cultures of South Asian Muslim countries are closely tied with religious practices.

### **Deobandi Islam of South Asia**

It is important to understand why people in South Asian Muslim cultures tend to adhere to a traditional minimalist interpretation of the Qur'an when it comes to Islamic jurisprudence related to women. Arguably, this might link back to the traditional orthodox Islamic practice started in this region that dates to the 19th century. That is when the Deobandi madrassa was established in 1867. At that time, the practices of *Tablighi Jama'at* and Deobandi, two specific sects of Islam, promoted traditional orthodox Islam in South Asia, which limited the rights of women. The *Tablighi Jama'at* movement started in India in the mid-nineteenth century during the collapse of Muslim power and the consolidation of colonial reign. It was during this period when *madrassas* (Islamic schools) started to grow rapidly. *Tablighi Jama'at* was founded on the teaching and practices of traditional orthodox *Dar-ul-Ulum Madrassa* in Deoband. Deoband was a town near Delhi and the practice was named after this town (Metcalf, 2002; Sikand 2002).

The Deobandi movement shared an overriding emphasis on behaviors associated with piety, attire and regular activities (Metcalf, 2002). These actions are deemed central to Sharia law. According to Roy (2002), these movements are called “neo-fundamentalist.” They are different from the mainstream Islamic movement, so he calls them an “Islamist” movement. The “neo-fundamentalists” implement Islamic values merely based on Sharia law regarding piety, attire, and behavior without having a systematic ideology. These are the group that is commonly known as the “traditionalists” (Metcalf, 2002; Kabir, 2009).

To date, Tablighi Jama'at is the most influential Muslim religious community in South Asia. Millions of Muslims consider the *Dar-ul-Ulm Madrassa* located in Deoband the “mother of all madrassas” (Kabir, 2009; Sikand, 2002; Zaman, 2007). To further strengthen their influence in South Asia, Deoband practitioners fund madrassas all over South Asia (Kabir, 2009). Despite the overarching impact of Deobandi practices across South Asia, little scholarly work is done on them. However, an ample amount of journalistic work has been done on Deobandi practice. One of the repeatedly discussed topics about Deobandi practice is the way practitioners target Muslim women's independence, rights, and agency. The proof of patriarchal influence in Deobandi practices was prominent in Sikand's (2011) detailed analysis of the Deobandi official website and other published articles.

For example, Sikand (2011) states that, according to the Deobandis, Muslim marriage is an exchange of women between two men. The father of the bride is the giver, and the husband is the receiver. The bride has no opinion in the matter of her own marriage. This can be linked to a Deobandi regulation that dictates that only the father is the legal guardian of a child. This means that, even if the child is female, her mother will not have any say in her marriage, just as the bride herself has no say. Deobandis insist that even a distant relative has a greater right to be a child's legal guardian than the mother. In the Deobandi tradition, men have a superior status than women in every aspect of life (Ali et al., 2017).

According to the Deobandis, the best wives are those whose *mahr* (a gift to the bride) is very simple, although Islam does not dictate any specific amount for this (Sikand, 2011). They also mandate that, once the *mahr* is paid off, a women's right to go out of her marital house should reside only with her husband. The Deobandi tradition provides no detailed description of the dissolution of marriage. They have two scenarios where divorce is allowable, and in both of them the woman is accused of infidelity and the marriage is

automatically dissolved. Such patriarchal practices that bar women from free practice of their rights are widespread in South Asian countries.

These mandates are contradictory to the reformist interpretation of the Qur'an. And these teachings of the Deobandi traditional orthodox system trickle down into the South Asian society through the education system. Therefore, along with the discussion of history and practice of Islam South Asia, it is also important to understand the contemporary education system to comprehend the communication process of religious ideologies.

### **Religious Education in South Asia**

Traditional practices of Islam are closely related to cultural norms in South Asian Muslim communities. Islamic education is taught in nearly every Muslim family informally as a part of family tradition. Religious subjects are also a part of the secular schooling system. However, the institutional Islamic teaching is done in madrassas or Islamic schools. Madrassas are the guardians and cultivators of traditional orthodox Islamic practices in South Asia (Ahmad, 2004). Ideologies that are produced and reproduced in madrassas are intentionally conservative, to retain the religio-cultural essence in South Asia. The madrassas in today's India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are carrying the legacy of the Deoband Madrassa (Ahmad, 2004; Kabir, 2009; Sikand, 2004). These madrassas cultivate traditional orthodox Islamic practices because they believe that the Muslim belief runs the risk of intrusion from non-believers.

The madrassa curriculum of South Asia consists of twenty subjects including grammar, rhetoric, prosody, logic, philosophy, Arabic literature, dialectical theology, life of the Prophet, medicine, mathematics, polemics, Islamic law, jurisprudence, *hadith*, and *tafsir* (exegesis of the Qur'an). Of the 20 subjects, only eight are considered completely religious; the rest are taught to equip the students for civil service careers and as an aid to understanding religious texts. However, facilities and books for subjects such as medicine,

mathematics, history, philosophy, prosody, and polemics are not updated or available in many madrassas. Some books for secular subjects in these madrassas are as old as eleventh-century text and is still considered an authentic source (Ahmad, 2004).

According to scholars (Boyle, 2006; Bradley & Saigal, 2012; Sikand, 2004), the negligence towards secular subjects is linked with South Asian Muslim community's experience with colonialism. There is a prevailing mistrust among madrassa administrators and educators for British and Western education as they assume that secular education will lure their students from pursuit of Islam (Bradley & Saigal, 2012). Part of the Islamic education system is memorizing the religious scriptures at an early age. In an interview study by Boyle (2006), individuals from a wide range of stakeholders (e.g. teacher, parents, students, administrators,) in Morocco, Nigeria, and Yemen identified that memorization of religious scripture is important because the educators believe that if a child memorizes the Qur'an at an early age, the scripture will be embedded in their hearts for them to seek out meaning of the verses when they are mature.

Of course, the approach toward women is not uniform across all madrassas or all cultures. For example, Bradley and Saigal (2012) highlight Pakistan's divided opinion regarding the purpose and orientation of female education. This division is among the provision of mass schooling of girls and the desire of the religious community to maintain a sense of control over women. Control over women is important for people in the religious community because people in the community see women as the symbol of the community and an integral part of transmitting the religious values to the next generation. Some religious educators perceive secular education for women as a threat to some religious educators and leaders as they see secular education as a poison for their women's religious ideologies. The traditional madrassas aim to create women who will remain docile, subservient, and domesticated. Some madrassas also follow different curriculum for boys and girls where the

girls learn less than men. These curricula are approved by the government and revolve around preparing women to have good homemaking skills, to be good wives, and to be subservient to the male authority (Boyle, 2006; Bradley & Saigal, 2012).

### **Overlapping National and Religious Culture**

National and religious cultures have always been contested terms due to their overlapping nature (Brubaker, 2012). Culture consists of a shared system of knowledge, language, social norms, values, and behaviors (Johnson et al., 2009). Therefore, national and religious cultures are intertwined, and the combination of cultures has impacts both at the individual and group level (Johnson et al., 2009). Similar to national culture, religious culture also encompasses a set of beliefs, moral codes, symbols, practices, artifacts, and norms. Scholars have observed that historically, religion reshapes the cultural facets of a region according to the culture of the geographical location, just as the culture of the local culture may shape how individuals see the religion (Johnson et al., 2009). It is important to understand that, while national beliefs are shared among individuals located in a specific geographical location, religious belief might not be shared among the masses of the same geographical location. Religious and national cultures both influence an individual's sense of community, schema, identity, and the way they make sense of the world. This process is known as worldview which assists individuals to understand and negotiate their identity and agency in a cultural environment. Therefore, an individual's worldview is their bridge between national and religious culture (Johnson et al., 2009).

South Asian cultures in general tend to be male dominated regardless of the national culture. For example, the father of the family is the undisputed leader in South Asian households. Lawyers and scholars agree that, in these countries, there is no law or law of the land that is overtly discriminatory against women. However, the common culture or tradition makes the societal practice discriminatory for women (Niaz, 2003). Due to the heavy



influence of culture, women are subject to injustice and oppression despite their legislative rights. This phenomenon is also true specifically for Muslim women of South Asia. Due to the influence of national culture and the passing of time, Islam was reshaped by local cultures to be oblivious to women's fundamental rights. This legacy of subjugating women is now carried forward by half-educated *maulanas* (religious preachers and teachers). Although women's experience varies according to which geographical location they live in, the face of oppression remains similar. Usual facets of injustice and oppression for Muslim women in South Asia include denying women's right in inheritance, denying women's opinion in marriage and divorce, ignoring women's opinion in society and family issues, and overall dominance of men over women. Niaz (2003) argues that the Islamic practices of South Asian Muslim cultures are contradictory of Islamic teaching. However, the local manifestation of a minimalist approach to Islam in the South Asian countries exemplifies the influence of local cultures upon religious practices.

These practices, coupled with the traditional interpretation of the Qur'an and disregarded history of female role models of Islam, have created an environment in South Asian Muslim cultures that supports the oppression of women in all spheres of life. This oppression not only creates a power imbalance between people of the two sexes, but it also portrays Islam as a religion that demeans women. In order to understand such practices, it is important to understand why and how the deviances between scripture and practice persist in South Asian Muslim cultures.

### **Structuration Theory**

To understand the rationale behind minimalist and patriarchal practices of Islam, I am looking at this issue through the lens of structuration theory. This theory highlights the social structure that is being continuously recreated by mundane social practices. The idea of

structuration helps us understand how the prescribed religious practices have been altered by ongoing social activities and behaviors. According to Giddens,

Society is not a structure, rather a series of activities fueled by the participation of people. We should see social life, not just as society out there or just the product of the individual here, but as a series of ongoing activities and practices that people carry on, which at the same time reproduce larger institutions. (Giddens & Pierson 2013, p. 76)

The strength of a structuration approach lies in the interaction between the society and its individuals. Here the emphasis is on both and on the societal process that explains how the interaction between these two impacts the oppression of Muslim women in South Asian Muslim cultures. When the prescribed religious practices become a prominent part of the society, this creates a snowball effect as the society evolves. A “snowball effect” indicates an initial start that builds up the significance of itself over time and with changes of the society. Therefore because of this ever-changing nature of society, contemporary South Asian Islamic interpretations of religious scripture, practice, and history differ from the early Islamic days. Communication of religious scripture from generation to generation has impacted this difference between current and earlier interpretation of religious scripture that has shaped today’s religious norms in South Asian. These religious norms have shaped the lives of South Asian Muslim women based on the resources of the society.

Behaviors of social actors are guided by rules and resources. Giddens (1984) describes rules and resources as properties of the social system. Resources are divided into two categories. Allocative resources have the “transformative capacity generating command over objects, goods, or material phenomenon,” (p. 461). Authoritative resources have the “transformative capacity generating commands over persons or actors” (p. 461)). For example, in South Asian Muslim cultures, women have agency to use allocative resources

that might allow them to use books and resources to educate themselves. Men, however, have greater access to both type of resources; for example, men can provide or deny access for women into the mosque.

Giddens (1984) also differentiates between two forms of “rules.” According to him, rules of social life, which comprise of “generalizable procedures applied in the reproduction of social practices” are different from “formulated rules,” which are “coded interpretations of rules” (p. 17 - 23). According to Giddens, these rules provide the structure where individuals are able to describe rituals for certain situations without understanding the underlying cause.

According to the structuration theory, social actors relentlessly reflect on their everyday practices and actions. They are aware of how social practices motivate their actions. Even though social actors might know how to behave in a certain society, they are not always in control of their actions. “The production or constitution of society is a skilled accomplishment of its members, but one that does not take place under conditions that are either wholly intended or wholly comprehended by them” (Giddens, 1984, p. 108).

In South Asian Muslim cultures, social actors act within the prevailing patriarchal system that invests them with different “authoritative resources” based on sex and follow the rules of social life that define the repression of South Asian Muslim women. These rules allow the South Asian men to behave in a dominating manner that expands with time without them being aware of the root cause behind the rules.

Structuration theory centers around the relationship between individuals and society. In this theory, human agency is defined as the capability of undertaking voluntary action by individuals. As it is associated with capability, it is closely related with power of that individual in the society (Giddens, 1984; Kabir, 2010). These individuals alter societal structure by being a part of it. Thus, “the seed of change is there in every act which

contributes towards the reproduction of any ‘ordered’ form of social life” (Jones & Karsten, 2008, p. 132).

This knowledge is further categorized into two types: discursive consciousness and practical consciousness. Discursive consciousness is the state where social actors are completely aware of the condition of their actions and can put words to describe it, whereas practical consciousness is the state where individuals are aware of their actions but cannot put a name to those actions to amplify the contexts of these actions in society (Jones & Karsten, 2008).

Time and temporality are also important concepts of structuration theory. Giddens focused heavily on these concepts as these links the human life span with social structure. Structuration theory employs three “intersecting planes of temporality”: *Durée* defines the temporality of the scenario an individual is thrown into. The “*Heideggerian dasein*” defines the direction of human life in a particular scenario from birth to death, and the *longue durée* defines the temporality of social institutes (Jones & Karsten, 2008). Here, the South Asian Muslim women are thrown into a patriarchal culture.

Thus, structuration’s focus on production and reproduction of social structure through actions of a human agent over time establishes “routinization” (Giddens, 1984. p 87) of the three temporal planes. Routines are of particular importance in this theory as these links the continuity of human agent to the institutions of society. Recurring routines provide security that underpins the individual identity of human agents in society.

Giddens expands on a social structure that is built upon mutual duality of human agency and structure. According to Giddens, although social agents’ behavior is constrained by the societal structure, the agents’ behavior also redefines the structure by challenging the current social system (Jones & Karsten, 2008). Giddens defined this phenomenon as the duality of structure. Therefore, the structure is dependent on the behavior of an agent to

change the dimensions of the structure. Religion is a structure within a South Asian Muslim society, and the individuals following this religion would be human agents. Behaviors of these agents are constantly rebuilding the structure with practical consciousness, in that the agents are not (always) able to define their action with words, but it has been routinized through the temporality of the societal life span. South Asian Muslim women have been following religious norms that are already part of the societal routine. Although their actions and those of other human agents are constantly reshaping the routinized religious structure, it is not always possible for them to define these actions. The same is applicable to the male social actors we well.

Structuration theory has been used to analyze many circumstances. This theory provides a clearer lens to examine the co-existence between structure and agency in a migratory and intercultural situation. Conway (2007), for example, examined gender inequality and class structure using the concepts of structure and agency within migrant African society. Their study exhibited the informal influences of migrants' home culture on the transitional cultural structure they get exposed to.

In another study about identity management in Latino-American church, Choi and Berho (2015) employed structuration theory to understand how the church influences social lives of its members and vice versa. The researchers conducted interviews of 25 Spanish-speaking pastors from urban and rural areas. These interviews revealed that people in different denominations react differently within their congregation. The diversified background and generation gaps of these congregations also restructure the original setting of the church by introducing a new multi-cultural audience.

McGarry (2016) used structuration theory to analyze intercultural experiences from a migratory standpoint. McGarry collected the accounts of 33 Muslim immigrant teens in a small town in Ireland using an in-depth qualitative research method. The majority of these

teens were from South Asian backgrounds. Participants explained that their life trajectory had three different spheres: the family unit, Muslim community, and local town. Each of these spheres had its individual values and norms. Based on structuration theory, this study revealed how these teens constantly negotiated their identities between these spheres. The participants, as social actors, used their own agency to accommodate themselves within these spheres that were the structure. Alongside negotiating their identities between multiple spheres, these teens had to accumulate resources to manage the conflicting ideals that exist between these units.

South Asian Muslim cultures have experienced the duality of structure as a result of interaction and change between social actors and the religious structure. Islam as a religion has its own structure that is to be followed by its congregation. However, the existence of Deobandi practice that emerged in post-colonial India was an example of how social actors reshaped the religion with their behavior and practice. There are different layers of actors who are changing the structure of religion according to the South Asian Muslim cultures that are not necessarily intended by the scripture. On the other hand, there is another group of actors who are willing to reshape the structure by viewing the scripture from a different approach. Therefore, all of these actors are playing a vital role in shaping and reproducing the behaviors, norms, and schemas of the religious structure. And in this process of reshaping and reproducing, women can play a vital role in establishing their voice by utilizing their agency.

### **The Current Study**

Religion is an inseparable part of human society. Often, the values, norms, and schemas of a culture are shaped by the dominant religion of that society. For South Asia, Islam is one of the major religions, and the culture is heavily influenced by the traditions of Islam. Along with other sectors of the society, gender roles are impacted

by religious practices in this region. As the earlier discussion indicates, due to varying interpretations of religious scripture, underrepresentation of female role models, and traditional oppressive behaviors towards women, the gap in social status, and responsibility between the two sexes is enormous. The previous discussion highlighted the traditional and reformist interpretation of religious scriptures.

While this study is not claiming one interpretation is superior to the other, it intends to further the examination by looking into how these varying readings and practices have affected South Asian Muslim women's lives. According to Roy (2014), religious norms are subjective to present cultural affiliations. This means religious sources are filtered through the influence of current culture. Arguably, this is a major consideration in South Asian Muslim cultures and their interpretation of certain verses of the Qur'an about women.

The values of surrounding society redefine religious belief and this belief are constantly changing as the society continues to evolve. Therefore, everyone understands religious norms differently. Whether an individual is reading a divine text directly or it is being transmitted through someone else, the meaning always filters through the individual's own cognition and social surrounding. Therefore, the divine scripture gets influenced by the social circumstances of an individual. In this study, I will explain women's perceptions of the changes in the relationship between social actor and religious structures are being influenced by culture, how these changes are being communicated to the women, how women decode the duality of religious structure that reflects the ever-changing relationship between religious structure and social actors, and how women negotiate their understanding of religious identity in everyday life.

This change in the relationship between social actors and religious structures seems to be unapologetically patriarchal in terms of women's rights in South Asia. The influence of this patriarchal practice of religion has diluted women's concept of their own rights. Although previous research reveals substantial patriarchal Islamic practices in South Asia, no work describes the lived experiences of South Asian Muslim women. This study will examine the lived experiences of South Asian Muslim women to understand their perceptions of those experiences and knowledge about their rights in Islam. It is important to give voices to the unheard Muslim women because they are the sufferers and their voice matters the most. Shedding light into the lived experiences of South Asian Muslim women provides insight into their understanding of women's rights, differences between their expectation and reality of how society treats women, and their version of the changes required in the current religious atmosphere of the region to uplift women's status in the society. By examining the experiences of Muslim women, this study will start a much-needed dialogue about the violation of women's rights in the name of Islam in South Asian Muslim cultures. Therefore, the objectives of this study are as follows:

Objective 1 To understand how South Asian Muslim women comprehend gender role expectations within their own community based on religious scriptures.

Objective 2 To understand how and to what extent religious teachings are communicated to South Asian Muslim men and women to reflect the said gender role expectations.

Objective 3 To understand how South Asian Muslim women negotiate their identity and communicate the discrepancies between their own religious understanding and contemporary practices of their society.

Objective 4 To understand how South Asian Muslim women, see their and the males' agency to influence the contemporary religious practices of their society.



## Conclusion

Islam is a centuries-old religion that has millions of followers around the world. The structure of this religion is based on the scriptures of the Qur'an and *hadiths*. As these scriptures were revealed and documented in poetic Arabic language hundreds of years ago, several translations of these scriptures and practices are now available. The widely available and practiced translation is the traditional method, which translates each verse of the Qur'an as it is without considering the context. And another approach is the reformist approach, which focuses heavily on the contextual translation of the scripture. These two methods of translation provide competitive ideologies regarding how Islam treats women.

Because of the differences between the methods of translation and the limitations of Islamic law, women are subjugated in many Muslim cultures. There are significant differences between the reformist and traditional reading of the scripture that has denied or altered women's rights and established a confusing image of Islam on various topics such as polygamy, sexual modesty, authority in the society, women's share in the family inheritance, women's ability to be a witness, and gender role in the family. In the cultures that follow the traditional translation of the scriptures, religious education does not highlight the female role models of early Islamic days who have played influential roles in spreading the religion. Due to this sidelining of female role models and promotion of traditional orthodox practices, Islamic feminists focus heavily on the reformist translation.

Like many Muslim cultures, Muslim women in South Asia have faced similar marginalization. In South Asia, Islam is practiced following the traditional translation that has further violated women's rights. In post-colonial South Asia, a group of religious preachers established this traditional orthodox Islamic practice that is known

as Deobandi. According to previous scholarship, South Asian Muslim men believe that a women's place is in the house and taking care of the children while the men should be financially providing for the family. There are Muslim women in South Asia who also believe the same. Such a belief system reinforces the gap between traditional and reformist translation and practices of Islam in South Asia that promotes patriarchy.

To make sense of this patriarchal religious practice and subjugation of women in South Asia, I used the lens of structuration theory. This theory explains how the religious structure was influence by the social actors of the South Asian society and their agency. In this study, I have focused on representing South Asian Muslim women's life experiences by interviewing them that mirrored the inconsistencies between their interpretation of the Qur'an and practice of the culture. Based on the scholarly interpretation of the Qur'anic verses and Islamic guidelines, this study sheds light on the prescribed rights of Muslim women according to Islam.

I have interviewed South Asian Muslim women to examine their experiences and gather insights about their life. The next chapter discusses the interview protocol, the criterion of sample selection, and data analysis.

## CHAPTER III: METHODS

This study examined gender roles as perceived by women in or from South Asian Muslim cultures. Research showed that the methodical difference of interpreting the Qur'an and *hadiths* has created a patriarchal practice in South Asia. As women are being denied equal rights given to them by Islam, this study focused on the women's lived experiences to understand how the women make sense of this difference between the religious scripture and prevailing patriarchal practice. To gather their opinions, I conducted interviews with women having significant cultural affiliation with South Asian Muslim culture. Their responses were coded into themes for analyzing.

### Participants

All participants of this study were South Asian Muslim women, regardless of their occupation, ethnicity, and location. South Asian Muslim women who were born in South Asia and resided in that region for at least 15 years were invited to participate in this study because they have the potential to be the mirror of South Asian Muslim culture's gender roles. Participants were 18 years or older. The invitation to participate in this interview were posted in my social media accounts and GroupMe chat. The invitation called for South Asian Muslim women. No specification was mentioned regarding the participants' views on religious values. There were 17 Muslim women participants from South Asian countries in this study.

Sampling followed a strategy aimed at achieving maximum variation combined with criterion sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The primary criterion for participant inclusion in the study is that the participants were South Muslim women. In terms of maximum variation, among the seventeen participants, 7 women were from Bangladesh, 4 women were from Pakistan, 2 women were from Indian, and 4 women were from Indonesia. The occupation of these participants varied, including students, homemakers, service holders, researcher, and

teachers. Details of the participants appear in Table 1:

*Table 1: List of participants*

<b>Pseudo Name</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Country of Residing</b>	<b>Level of Education</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
<b>Adriana</b>	Bangladesh	Bangladesh	Bachelors	Business Owner
<b>Daneen</b>	Indonesia	USA	Masters	Student
<b>Faby</b>	Pakistan	USA	Bachelors	Service holder
<b>Faiza</b>	Pakistan	Pakistan	Masters	Student
<b>Ivy</b>	Pakistan	Australia	Doctoral Candidate	Student
<b>Kaina</b>	Bangladesh	Canada	Masters	Homemaker
<b>Natasha</b>	Bangladesh	Malaysia	Bachelors	Student
<b>Nikita</b>	Pakistan	USA	Madrassa	Homemaker
<b>Parisa</b>	Bangladesh	USA	Masters	Homemaker
<b>Reina</b>	Indonesia	USA	Masters	Student
<b>Remy</b>	Indonesia	USA	Masters	Student
<b>Rimani</b>	Indonesia	Indonesia	Masters	Teacher
<b>Samira</b>	Bangladesh	Canada	Bachelors	Homemaker
<b>Sinka</b>	Bangladesh	USA	Masters	Homemaker
<b>Sophia</b>	India	India	Masters	Service holder
<b>Tara</b>	Bangladesh	Bangladesh	Bachelors	Homemaker
<b>Varisha</b>	India	India	Masters	Homemaker

### **Data Collection**

To obtain the perspectives of the women in this study, I utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Interviews were “respondent interviews” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2018). In the respondent interview, respondents answer to a series of open-ended questions about their own life and perspectives. Through respondent interviews, researchers can analyze the participants’ views of life, how they make sense of the world around them, and how they take actions. In the interviews, the participants responded with both narratives and thoughts regarding the issues mentioned in the interview protocol. Participants were allowed to include aspects or perspectives of their culture, and they could also bring their unique personal experiences to the table.

## Interview Protocol

A semi-structured interview protocol was used for these sessions, which allowed the participants to expand on their responses and draw conclusions from their own experiences. Questions centering around the topics of gender roles, the practice of religion, and identity negotiations were left purposefully vague and open (e.g., How do women negotiate their roles?) to allow for a deeper interpretation. Interview sessions commenced with questions about everyday religious practice and childhood adaptation of religious practices. Specifically, following initial lighter questions about their age, geographic location, introduction to Islamic education, and so on, the interview protocol moved towards deeper questions. Participants responded to questions about different gender role expectations, the origin of those expectations, and the mode of communication of those expectations in their respective cultures. I asked about the breakdown of these gender role expectations in specific points of practice in South Asian Muslim culture such as authority in the society, inheritance, family roles, and sexual modesty. Further, questions centered on the representation of historic famous female role models of Islam in their religious education. Additionally, participants answered questions about their understanding of religious scripture and women's rights in light of these scriptures. This included the participants' perception of the extent to which they see deviations between their understanding of the religious scripture and the practices of South Asian Muslim cultures. Further the participants responded to queries about how they, as women, negotiate their identities to match or defy societal gender role expectations and what are the circumstances of it. Next, they were asked if and how they communicate their understanding of religion and their religious identity to the society. To conclude each session, participants provided their opinion on how Islam as a religion can amplify women's role in South Asian Muslim cultures. While discussing each topic, participants gave personal examples and anecdotes to help define concepts and practices. This evidenced an

environment where participants were able to connect the interview protocol to their everyday life (Morgan, 1998).

### **Procedure**

The interview sessions were “synchronous transmission of computer-mediated communication” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2018). Due to geographical location between the participants and me, interview sessions were not face-to-face. I used a variety of software, including but not limited to Zoom, Facebook video/audio call, Whatsapp video/audio call, and FaceTime video/audio call to conduct the interview sessions. At the beginning of each session, I reminded participants of their voluntary participation, the use of audio recording devices, and the overall confidential nature of the session. For the sake of confidentiality, I informed participants that they would be referred to by pseudonyms in the final research paper. Participants had the option to choose their own pseudonyms, however no one chose to pick a name; thus, I assigned pseudonyms to participants in the transcription. Interview time varied among participants. On average, each interview lasted for 80 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

Discussions were recorded and transcribed using Otter. Otter is an internet-based transcribing software that claims 80% accuracy in its free transcription services. I manually re-read and re-listened the software-generated transcription for each session to ensure 100% accuracy in the final product. I then analyzed each of the transcriptions inductively by developing similar categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the inductive approach, researchers generate codes generated from the answers of the respondents. Coding helped me to define the responses by identifying similarities between words, sentences, and/or scenarios. I was able to link the collected data with my research objective by coding. After coding, I identified themes based on the similarities between codes to organize the responses. Lastly, these themes were analyzed based on similarities and predominant ideas that connected the

themes back to the previous literature and the objective of the study. Saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Saunders et al., 2017) was reached after 14 interviews.

The first objective deals with how South Asian Muslim women comprehend gender role expectations within their own community. For this objective I looked for codes such as, men are expected to, women usually, boys are more important, marry-off, education, career, safety, and independence. The second objective focuses on the communication of religious teaching in South Asia. To analyze this objective, I looked for codes like the Qur'an, *hadiths*, Sharia, *fatwa*, madrassa, surah, verse, pray, narration, interpretation, memorize, learn, Aisha, and role models. For the third objective, which deals with South Asian Muslim women's identity negotiation and communication of differing religious ideologies, I looked for codes such as, multiple marriage, cover-up, hitting wife, authority, leader, relating to culture, inner circle, sharing, progressive, and silent. The fourth objective referred to male and female agency to influence the South Asian Muslim culture. For this objective, I identified codes such as, treatment, equal, bias, resources, research, question, dignity, religious binding, discrimination, and liberal education.

### **Conclusion**

These interviews helped elucidate the everyday experience of South Asian Muslim women. The next chapter discusses the results of the interview alongside discussion, strength and weakness, practical implication, and future research. Life experiences of the participants will not only shed light on the mundane norms they experience but also bridge the gap between their understanding of the religious structure and their ability to comprehend their own agency by being a part of the same religious structure.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

This study is focused on South Asian Muslim women's lived experiences, their agency, and their identity as these relate to their religious perspective. To understand the women's lived experiences, I analyzed the difference between the Muslim women's interpretations of religious scripture and the culturally influenced religious norms the women regularly participate in. Literature suggests that these differences promote patriarchal practices in the name of religion that suppress women. To unveil the women's understanding of their agency, their identity, and their interpretation of religious scripture, I have conducted respondent interviews among 17 South Asian Muslim women. The interviews generated six themes: gender role expectations in South Asian Muslim culture; religious education in South Asia; culture, religion, and misinterpretation; disconcerting cultural practice and scripture prescriptions; identity negotiation and communication of differing ideologies; and male versus female agency to influence the community.

### **Gender Role Expectations in South Asian Muslim Cultures**

The participants' individual experience of growing up as women in South Asian Muslim culture addresses the first objective of this study. Participants shared an array of experiences of being Muslim women in South Asia. According to these participants' stories, most South Asian women face discrimination compared to males from an early age. Some participants considered themselves to be privileged for having a more liberal family upbringing than most of the women in their country. A few of the participants shared general experiences about traditional expectations, differentiating treatment of children based on their biological sex, heavy focus on marriage and family role, struggle to acquire higher education and a dream career, having a different social life than men, and having less safety and independence than men.



## **Traditional Expectations**

In South Asia, men and women both are expected to adhere to certain characteristics and roles. For women, the role is to focus on family, and for men the role is to be the breadwinner. Varisha elaborates on basic male and female traits. According to her,

Men are expected to be bread earners. But there are no set rules as to how to earn it. Men showing emotion is frowned upon. Women are told how to sit, how to behave, but men are not taught that. We are told that, since men are earning bread, the women must take care of them. Because men are not taught how to deal with their emotions, they don't really care about how to treat women. Men are not taught about their role; they just know what to expect. On the other hand, women are always expected to be patient and subservient. But the same is not taught to men.

Due of these gender role expectations and norms, behaviors of men and women are set to differ immensely. While men are expected to lead and take decisions, women are to be subservient and follow the men. According to some the participants, these behavioral expectations are ingrained in both genders from childhood.

## **Gender Bias Among Children**

Some participants expressed that it is a common practice in Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani cultures to prioritize a male child over a female child in the family. According to them, the society welcomes a male child more exuberantly than a female child. Faiza shared a memory from her childhood when discussing such differentiating treatment:

One of my earliest childhood memories is that a lady asked my mom how many kids my mom had, and my mom said she had two daughters and a son, then the woman said, "Thank God you have a boy." I felt lesser than my little brother.

According to these participants, male children get somewhat prioritized in a family, and that carries on to society as they grow up. This differential treatment establishes men as the superior gender from an early age. Faby said,

The family would make sure there is enough meat for the boys. You get the sense ingrained in your mind that boys are more important than girls. And I think that kind of stays with you. If there's a family with a lot of girls being born and then there's a boy being born, yeah, that boy is treated like a prince.

Ivy attempts to explain why a male child is given priority over female child:

Men are considered eligible to earn bread in the family as opposed to women. That is why the society thinks if a family has a boy child, that child can grow up to share the financial responsibilities like his father. Which does not make any sense in this day and age but that is the reality of South Asia.

Another reason for male children to receive special treatment is because the society believes that only a male child can “extend the bloodline” of their family. Samira questions this tradition and wonders whose blood she is carrying if not her father’s. Societal norms like this made some of the participants feel less valued than their male family members. These participants also discussed how these discriminatory practices continued as they grow up and added to the traditional gender role expectations.

### **Focus on Marriage and Household Chores**

In South Asian culture, the value of a female in the society is determined by her devotion to family life. As a result, some participants have shared that they were taught about the importance of marriage and the importance of being able to do household chores properly. According to Faiza, household chores are only imposed on female members of a family:

Our house-help did not used to come on Sundays. I remember me and my sister would have to get up early to do the chores. We even had to iron our brother's clothes. But our brother never had to do any household chores because it was only women's job. Since household chores and marriage are interlinked in South Asian cultures, women face the pressure to get married instead of pursuing their dreams. It is implied that the longer a woman waits to get married, the less desirable she becomes, and it is frowned upon for a woman to focus on career or education instead of marriage. Reina shared her thoughts on this subject:

Muslim women are expected to get married soon, and they are not expected to have higher education. If you are a boy, you will be expected to have a higher education. But when Muslim women graduate college, they are expected to get married. If you try to get a higher degree without getting married, people will question your choice, and no one will want to get married to you.

Varisha shared a similar experience regarding Muslim women required to focus on marriage and household chores instead of their higher education. According to her, Indian women have accepted this fate of being married off and having to denounce the life they truly want. A few other participants from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan indicated that such pressure for women to get married prevails nationwide.

However, according to the Indonesian participants, focus on women to get married prevails in rural areas mostly. Remy shared her understanding:

In rural areas, if a family has a daughter and they have lower income, they will marry off the daughter when they turn to adolescence, like 15 years old. The parents will match their daughter with a much older man who has a better income. They do it because they don't have to take care of the daughter.

As marriage is considered the most important part of a women's life, their education and career come secondary to it. Therefore, paths to achieve higher education and pursue the career of their choice become a struggle for these women.

### **Social Barriers to Higher Education and Career**

Some of the participants acknowledge their privilege of growing up in a liberal family but they have observed their peers and acquaintances living with discrimination in terms of achieving higher education or pursuing the career of their choice. As per these participants, having a higher education or choosing their own major was frowned upon for women in South Asian Muslim culture. According to Kaina, women have limited freedom to choose their educational institute and major:

Sometimes we wished we were a boy. Even which university we can go was a family decision. If a girl wants to go somewhere else than their hometown for higher education, the family will not allow her. Even the girl's choice of major (subject) was controlled by the family. If a guy does not like his major, he can change it. But a girl does not have this freedom.

According to some of the participants, financial investment for a woman's education was less important than that of a man. Parisa said that her family would not have spent as much on her education if she did not get enrolled in a public institute. At times, women must struggle to acquire higher education and a career of their choice. Samira shared her experience with her family when she wanted to go to the capital city for higher education and a career of her choice:

My family did not want me to have a good education in a big city. I had to fight to study in a good educational institution. My father didn't speak to me for this for two years. And then when I wanted to work, no one in my family wanted this. I ended up

working on a television channel, and no one wanted to accept this. My entire family boycotted me and said bad things to me.

Even if women can acquire higher education, the society does not expect much from them. According to Varisha, the society believes that subjects like math and science are considered to be perfect fit for men, and arts is considered to be a subject for women. In terms of career, it is not easy for women to shine in their careers without struggles. Sinka shared the experience she faced when she applied for her first job:

There were 300 applications for that position, and I was the only female applicant.

There were five phases to that interview process, and I passed all the phases. I did my medical and after my medical when I was almost about to join, they told me that they cannot take me in that position because I was a female.

### **Women's Social Life Compared to Men**

Most of the participants said that in South Asian Muslim cultures a woman's social life is different than that of a man. According to the participants, men enjoy more freedom and a more vibrant social life compared to women. Women are not allowed or expected to attend late night events and parties. Samira is an outgoing person, but she did not have the freedom to go to parties and enjoy the social life she wanted. She had to take help from her younger brother to do so, "I was close to my brother and he always got permission to go to parties, but I did not get any permission. My brother used to lie to my parents so that they would let me go to the parties."

As stated by some of the participants, sometimes the women's social circles are dictated by their families. Kaina shared her opinion:

A boy can choose whomever he wants as a friend. But a girl needs her family's approval to have a friend. For a girl's friend, the parents will check the friend's family background to make sure that friends will not be a bad influence on her.

The sex of the friends a woman can have is also subject scrutiny in some families. Tara said that her in-laws never liked the fact she had male friends or the fact that she would use the internet. Her in-laws would ask, “Why would a woman have male friends or use [the] internet.” Responses of these participants indicate that social life of South Asian Muslim women is subject to severe scrutiny by the women’s families. This leads the women to feel controlled and feel less confident in their own choice.

### **Safety and Freedom**

One of the most discussed topics in terms of gender roles was safety. Participants from all countries discussed about the streets not being safe for women. According to them, the society imposes a disproportionate number of barriers in the lives of women because sexual harassment is frequently present in public and private spaces in South Asian countries. This results in women having less freedom than men in that region. Parisa gave examples of street harassment for women in Bangladesh:

I used to use [the] public bus for going to my workplace. One day in the bus, someone was trying to grab my butt. I turned around and shouted. The guy said sorry, but a bystander said, “Why are you shouting? You’ll lose face.” That means that even though I am the victim, I should not protest, as I am a woman. Another incident happened in the same bus. I saw a college girl sleeping in the bus. A guy was trying to touch the girl. I woke up that girl. I used to take different routes to go to my place. I felt that someone was following me.

A few of the participants’ shared experiences indicate that the barriers in women’s lives are due largely to an unsafe social environment. However, although women are the victims of sexual harassment, society expects women to have a controlled lifestyle in order to be safe rather than educating men to behave appropriately.

## **Decision-Making Ability**

According to some of the participants, women's decision-making ability is questioned in South Asian culture. Regardless of the topic in question, women's voice is typically sidelined or given less importance. Varisha said, "It's not okay for women to make their own choices." Kaina shared her experience:

Parents think that the girl's voice does not matter because the girl is trained to be someone else's housewife. Our parents wouldn't consider our opinion if the son is older. Even if the son is younger, just because he is a male, his voice will be given importance. Girl's voice is not important at all.

Natasha gives example of why the society thinks men are more dependable than women, "Society thinks men understand better--that's why they can take their own decision. A family thinks a teenager [15/16-year-old] can be the protector of his 25/26-year-old sister or his mother just because he is a boy."

As per these responses, in some South Asian cultures, women are considered vulnerable and weak compared to men. Hence their decision-making ability and their ability to stand up for themselves is questioned.

## **Religious Education in South Asia**

The method and extent of religious education taught to South Asian men and women address the second objective of this study. To understand how the chain of communication regarding gender role expectation has evolved, it is important to understand the process of religious education in South Asia. This theme discusses the perception of religious education in South Asia from the participants' point of view. Participants elaborated that they had received religious education from both their families and educational institutes. Additionally, participants discussed their preferred religious scripture and the variation in interpretation of those scriptures. Mostly, the participants inferred that the religious knowledge they received

while growing up lacked information regarding female role models, and the education was not in-depth. However, there were a few differences of perception among the participants regarding the education about female role models.

### **Family and Structural Education**

Every participant indicated that religious education was an important part of their upbringing. Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, and Indonesian participants mentioned that they gained religious education in their schools, from family members, and from religious house-tutors. Religious house tutors are called *hujur* in Bangladesh, *hajrat* in India, *qari* in Pakistan, and *ustad* in Indonesia. Rimani said,

I learned to read Qur'an since I was three years old. My parents asked me to go to *ustads* every day like until five years old. And then in my elementary school, I have a subject for religion that required us to learn the *ayaths* (verses).

Besides the religious teachers, participants discussed gaining religious education from family members. For most of these participants, their introduction to religious practices were from observing their family members practice the rituals. Kaina said, "I saw my mom and grandma to pray, and that was one of my initial introductions to religious practices."

Participants talked about religious orientation obtained from their family more elaborately than they did about their religious education in schools. Varisha explained, "My mother was very particular about religion. She made sure we understood the Qur'an and its translations. She made sure just reading and praying is not all I am doing. She made sure I got the essence of Islam."

In some families, the participants played an important role in establishing a culture of religious practice. According to Sinka,

My family was not a hardcore follower, but I was hardcore. So even my parents didn't pray, but I used to pray. I used to push my dad to observe Ramadan and to pray.



Probably the reason was my best friend in first grade. She was very pious, and it influenced me. My total religious journey is individualistic.

Although participants appeared to be accepting of going through religious education from school and family, some of them expressed a negative connotation with religious schools that are known as madrassas. According to them, madrassas promote an atmosphere where religious education is fostered without context. Kaina said,

Our *hujurs/mollas* tell us about four marriages without a context. This *hujurs* also used to tell us that your husband is your key to heaven. They also used to tell us that if your husband beats you, you will go to heaven. With a passion, they hate women empowerment; it's bigger than their fear of Allah.

Other participants shared a similar opinion about the madrassa education system. According to Natasha, more than fostering religious education, the madrassa teachers foster a “toxic masculinity,” in which the male students are taught to be “in control of their women.” Participants also said that child abuse and sexual harassment cases are common in madrassas. Therefore, although the participants have a spiritual connection with their religion, they believe that the madrassa system is promoting a polluted religious education and encouraging oppression against women.

Although participants have received religious education from their families at an early age, some of them have negative perceptions regarding structural religious education. To these participants, the spiritual side of religious education is not emphasized in South Asian Muslim cultures. According to them, the outcome of such religious education, women in South Asian Muslim country face oppression.

### **Preferred Scripture**

All participants expressed that the Qur'an is the first and the most important scripture. A few women mentioned that, along with the Qur'an, an individual must follow

their own conscience as well. According to Parisa, “You are told to do everything. You just need to apply your own conscience to understand the depth of the scripture.” Alongside the Qur’an, respondents elaborated on the importance of *hadith*. According to them, *hadith* helps clarify instructions of the Qur’an. Sinka gave an example explaining this:

We were taught that women can't read the Qur’an when they are menstruating. So, I wanted to know more about this topic because we know menstruating is a natural process that allows women to give birth. So, I looked into the Qur’an for answers and I couldn’t find anything because it is written in poetic Arabic language. Then I turned to *hadiths* and I found that Aisha used to comb the Prophet’s hair when he was in the mosque, while menstruating. So that gets void.

Sikna’s example indicates that menstruating women are considered as impure and could not touch anything holy during that time, in South Asian Muslim culture. However, Sinka’s personal research suggests that since the wife of the Prophet could be with the Prophet in the mosque while menstruating, the cultural notion of impurity related to menstruation gets void. A few of the participants focused on importance of following authentic *hadith* as there are numerous *hadiths* available. Sophia said, “With the chain of narrations and classifications of *hadiths*, you have to make sure you are following the authentic *hadith* because there are weak and strong *hadiths*.”

Alongside the Qur’an and *hadiths*, some South Asian Muslim cultures follow the Sharia law and *fatwa*. Indonesian participants mentioned that they are not familiar with Sharia law because their country doesn’t follow this law. Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Indian respondents said that they are aware of Sharia law, but they also feel that since it is manmade, it has been manipulated, and it requires update. Most participants said that they do not believe *fatwas* are required. Ivy said, “*Fatwas* are patriarchal propagation of internal male ideas.”

According to Kaina, “*Fatwas* are very subjective and being manipulated by male-dominated

society.” In the same line, Reina said that she questions *fatwas* a lot because there are wrong practices of *fatwa* in Indonesia.

Tara’s perspective on *fatwa* is similar, but she discussed the origin and the current practice of *fatwa*:

*Fatwas* are of two types. The authentic ones are those that are based on proper research and given by Islamic scholars on specific topics. The other kind of *fatwa* is the one when people make up religious regulations out of nowhere.

### **Diverse Interpretation**

During the discussion of scriptures, some participants pointed out that the Qur’an has different interpretations. According to them, understandings of religious instruction vary among the interpretations, and the traditional interpretation, which is followed in South Asian Muslim cultures, serves the purposes of men. Sinka explained with an example:

I think South Asian culture follows the traditional translation, and it serves men’s purpose most of the time, for example, when they say do not enter a room where there is a woman. But they do not share the story behind this verse, and most of our culture relies on a single line without any context.

Rimani also discussed varying translations of the Qur’an, noting that its subjectivity depends on the translator’s perception. She presented an example from Indonesian culture that she had witnessed, “In Indonesia, if a CEO or the director is Muslim, they will hire only 30% of women because they think that the Qur’an says that women cannot do job in a higher position.” This indicates that employers hesitate to hire women because they believe that according to the Qur’an, women are incapable of career advancement and doing jobs in a higher position.

According to Ivy, this varying understanding and implementation of the same scripture support a patriarchal notion that has held Islam back. She said,

I feel that these verses have been subject to patriarchal propagation. Islam and the Qur'an and the narrative of *hadith* cannot be bound to a specific time and a place. I think if we don't move the religion along with time, the [traditional] interpretation of religion will be our demise because we have interpreted the religion according to a very pre-medieval era rather than adopting it with time.

Echoing a similar tone, Adriana presents a historical and contextual perspective about differing interpretation of the Qur'an:

The Qur'an is a philosophy, according to my understanding. The Qur'an is not written in a serial. So, to understand the Qur'an, you have to understand the journey and the stories behind it. For example, the Qur'an does not say alcohol is *haram* [forbidden]; it says any sort of addiction is forbidden. But we were not taught it like that. My understanding is that any sort of addiction that removes your ability to function properly is bad.

The shared opinion of a few of the participants regarding interpretations of the Qur'an indicates that some South Asian Muslim women comprehend the Qur'an from a contextual standpoint. However, these women are troubled by the non-contextual practices of the region and believe that such religious practices are the reason for patriarchal culture of the region.

### **Depth of Religious Understanding**

Although participants went through a rigorous religious education process while growing up, most of them expressed that those teachings were not the true version of Islam. For most of the participants, the religious education that they received from their school and their home-tutor lacked depth and openness. Most of these participants mentioned that they were "only taught to memorize the Qur'an and learnt how to pray." Participants shared that they thought this style of teaching lacked the accurate essence of Islam. Sophia shared her thoughts about the religious education she received as a child:

When I was young, a *Hazrat* would come home and teach me the basics, which was not in-depth. [The] *Hazrat* style of teaching was more ritual based like learn your *salah*, memorize the *surah* but you don't understand why you are praying. So, I did not understand the Qur'an in *Hazrat* style of teaching.

Responses of other participants of other countries echo this statement. They explained how this incomplete education affected their practice and understanding of religious practices. However, the participants agreed that, since Arabic is not their mother language, it is important that they learned Arabic in order to understand the Qur'an. Faiza said, "We had to study for three or four years to learn Arabic language. But it is important because that way you can learn the Qur'an differently than what the men are telling you."

Although all of the participants agree that understanding Arabic as a language to comprehend the Qur'an is important, some of them disapprove the current religious education where spiritual enlightenment comes secondary to the rituals.

### **Absence of Female Role Models in the Religious Education System**

As a part of the discussion about the religious education system in South Asia, the participants answered question about their knowledge about female role models of the early Islamic era. Most of the participants said that they were not taught in-depth about female role models as a part of their religious education. Others said they were taught about the female role models, but they do not think that those narratives represented the true self of those role models. When asked to name the female role models they were taught about, they could talk about Aisha, Khadijah, and Fatima. They have never heard about anyone else while growing up. While talking about her orientation with female role in traditional religious education system, Adriana shared her opinion about absence of female role models in the religious education system:

I only knew about Aisha. But basically, we were taught how good of a wife she was. Her identity was not who she was, but her identity was whose favorite she was. The women came into our religious teaching to highlight the fact that the Prophet was not biased towards men. Not to highlight the fact that you can be a leader.

Nikita disagreed and said that she had enough exposure to female role models. She emphasized that she was aware of the piety of the female role models.

However, Ivy proposed a different understanding of the gap of education about female role models in South Asian religious education system that is being shared by some of the participants. She believes that women don't need to be taught about these role models because they are already mentioned in the scripture. According to her,

I don't think we need to be taught this because it's literally in the Qur'an. I don't think Allah said that a woman's Islam is different than that of a man. But no *maulavi* [religious teacher] is going to teach you this. The patriarchal narrative of Islam has imprisoned the essence of Fatima in the kitchen.

Faiza agreed with Ivy's notion that *maulavis* discount female role models in South Asian religious education. According to her, the religious teachers intentionally downplay these female role models, and this is the main reason why female role models have been disregarded in the religious education system.

Some of the participants also believe that discounting and downplaying the history of female role models is a strategic propaganda of South Asian patriarchal society. According to Kaina, "Islam has a patriarchal practice in the South Asian Muslim community. The parts of female role models were systematically erased from our education system."

Most of the participants agreed that teaching about the female role models from an early age would impact the society differently. It would create a sense of gender equality and women empowerment from an early age among the children of the society. Adriana said she

believes that if they were taught about female role models from an early age, girls would have had someone to look up to: “Being a woman, knowing other women’s success stories inspires us. Think about how children want to be superheroes, like Supergirl or Wonder Woman, because we see them to be a strong and powerful individual.”

Faiza and Faby had a different understanding about including female role models in religious education process. They think some people’s mindset is not alterable even with education. According to them, even if the South Asian religious education system included stories about female role models of Islam, men would have manipulated the story to serve their purpose which would not have the lives of the women of that region positively.

### **Culture, Religion, and Misinterpretation**

Some of the participants discussed in-depth their understanding of the South Asian Muslim community’s confusion between religion and culture. These discussions created a theme that refers to gender role expectations of the region being tied to the traditional religious understanding. These participants believe that their community confuses culture for religion and uses religion as a shield to retain power and oppress the marginalized. While discussing this topic, participants also talked about probable causes of this practice and its impact on society.

### **Confusing Religion with Culture**

Some of the participants believe that majority of the religious norms, practices, and regulations gets blended with culture in their communities. According to Parisa, previously discussed gender role expectations are closely related to culture, but these gender role expectations are commonly referred to as religious norms:

More than religion, these gender role expectations relate back to culture. And I think we have a lot of wrong explanations of religion because our religion teaches both the genders to control their gaze and cover up. We have very bad religious leaders, and

they impose things on the women more. They don't teach the same thing to the men.

They use religion as weapon because people don't really want to talk about religion.

Similarly, Kaina touched on how society blends religion with culture. According to her, religion is more of a “festivity” than spiritual. In Kaina's family, “Religion was sort of a culture more than spiritual.” Sophia gave examples of how Muslim cultures in South Asia differ from the religious prescription: “I don't see all men treating their wives right. In our religion, the Prophet used to clean his clothes, do his dishes and cook. I think a lot if it is dictated by the culture more than the religion.” In the same line, Tara believes that madrassa teachers have an influential role in this, “Our madrassa teachers do not follow the deeds of the Prophet. Madrassa teachers promote women's oppression. Islam does not promote oppression.”

According to these participants, some South Asian Muslim cultures often blur the boundaries of cultural norm with religious structure. The culture of this region interprets the text and the deeds of the Prophet within their own cultural context. The result of such religious practice impacts women of the region.

### **Origin of Blending Religion with Culture**

All participants agreed that the gender role expectations in South Asian Muslim cultures do not match the Qur'anic scripture. Some participants who displayed somewhat conservative overview of the gender roles, such as Nikita, believes that it is the women who do not adhere to the prescribed Qur'anic gender roles. Although these participants have substantial exposure to South Asian Muslim cultures, most of them are not certain about the roots of the blending of religion with culture and the religious misinterpretation. Ivy attempted to explain the origin and prevailing of nature of religious practice:

We have been told millions of times to not do certain things in the name of Islam. I think it all boils down to the sense of control and supremacy. Men have always



controlled religion. But that's not what Allah and his Prophet wanted. It's a narrative controlled by men and for men. They have ritualized this fake religion.

Natasha believes that these practices in the name of religion are the influence of Middle Eastern countries, "This came from Arab culture because Arab culture was like this and they thought us this. Our people are simpler, and they believed whatever Saudi Arabia said."

Parisa connects the origin of this practice of using religion as a tool of oppression:

I believe this wrong practice has been going on for hundreds of years as a technique of controlling the general people because they know people are scared to ask questions about religion. Our religion promotes asking questions and seeking answers.

Even though the participants are unclear of the origin of a culture that uses Islam as a shield to promote norms and values that limits women's freedom and proper education, they are certain that these norms and values are not a part of their religion.

### **Using Religion as a Manipulative Tool**

According to some of the participants, mixing religion with culture empowers a certain category of religious leader in South Asian Muslim cultures. These religious leaders abuse that power to manipulate mass people. Parisa shared an example of such scenario:

I strongly believe that our religion has explanations for everything according to science. But some parts of the country force things upon us without any explanations. I think villagers and lower-income people are perfect targets for the religious leaders who use religion as a shield.

The culture of this region does not welcome questions regarding the religion, and some participants see religious leaders as the primary reason for an incoherent religious practice. According to Adriana, "We have such binding culture that doesn't allow anyone to openly discuss religion, because of the *mollas* and the *hujurs*. They are the religious leaders

who are polluting the environment.” Kaina gave examples of power retention and oppressing women in the South Asian Muslim culture in the name of religion:

Our culture does not follow the proper religious prescriptions. Our culture focuses on women more because, if a woman is equal to the men, the men are losing their stand and dominance in society. That's why they use social and religious tools to dominate women. For example, a bride went to her wedding on a motorcycle, and the entire social media went crazy. She did not break any rule or religious prescription, but the fact that she is choosing her own way is wrong in our culture.

Suppression of women inside their own families is another common practice. Remy shared a typical cultural practice in Indonesia: “When a woman is pregnant, the husband and in-laws will control the full pregnancy. She will not have any choice about health care, nutrition or what kind of treatment she can have.”

Nikita is from Pakistan, and she shares similar norms in the name of religion: “They make it mandatory that, after the child is born, the woman has to stay certain days in the house, and she can't leave the house. It has nothing to do with religion.” As per some of the participants, society prevents women from exploring all options of life in the name of religion, there is often no proper religious reference associated with such bindings. Sinka has faced similar questions about her judgement as a woman in the name of religion:

So, whenever the socio-cultural environment is not supporting my choice, they relate that with my religion, saying, ‘Does Islam permit it? Why you are doing that? Is it in the Qur’an?’ But if you ask them for a reference, 99% of time they wouldn't be able to give you any reference. And these are the people who probably doesn't even pray.

In a nutshell, enforcing bindings on women in the name of religion is common practice in South Asian Muslim cultures. According to the participants, the reason behind such bindings is to promote and sustain male dominance.

## **Impact of Religious Misrepresentation**

Some of the participants shared that South Asian Muslim communities focus heavily on topics related to women. The religious leaders are considered powerful in the communities and questioning the religious norms these *hujurs* promote are frowned upon. This leads to oppressing and abusing women. These participants shared incidents happening to them by these religious leaders, which they shared hesitantly. Parisa said,

We had two *imams* [individual who leads the group prayer at mosque] at our local mosque. I used to go there to give food to them from my house as a kid. One of them touched me very inappropriately.

Adriana's experienced brutality from her religious teacher, which she could not forget:

I had a *hujur* coming to my place to teach me how to pray and read the Qur'an. And every time we were a bit sleepy, he would beat us. He used to put a pencil in between my fingers, and he used to press it hard to punish us.

Typically, religious leaders are respected in South Asian Muslim cultures and never questioned. Some of the religious leaders abuse this power, leading women to question the religion. Faiza said, "I lost trust in religion because of such explanation and oppression."

## **Disconcerting Cultural Practice and Scripture Prescriptions**

There is a variance between the participants' interpretation of religious scripture and the traditional cultural gender role expectations in South Asian Muslim communities. The participants discussed specific topics in-depth where they felt the differences were prominent. These discussions refer to a section of the third objective of this study that attempts to uncover the discrepancies between the participants' religious understanding versus the contemporary practices. The most widely discussed topic was *hijab* or sexual modesty, as prescribed by the Qur'an versus how it is perceived in South Asian Muslim cultures. Other

topics included polygamy, authority, domestic violence, family roles, divorce, and women's share in family inheritance.

### ***Hijab* or Sexual Modesty**

Participants had mixed responses when discussing the topic of *hijab* or sexual modesty. All participants agreed that the Qur'an mandates sexual modesty. But their opinion varied on the extent of sexual modesty and methods of enforcement. Socio-cultural norms impact women's decision to wear *hijab*. According to Ivy, men and women both are equally responsible for the wrongful translation of sexual modesty in South Asian Muslim cultures. Ivy shared her experience with her *maulana* (religious leader), which made her stop going to the mosque:

I stopped going to my local mosque because the maulana made a sexist comment about *hijab*. He said, "Women are very dignified in our religion and they have a very high status. But *hijab* is very mandatory. Because, when you go to a candy store, you don't pick the sweets on the front self, you take the sweets that are on the back that are covered." The problem is, women are enabling these thought process because they don't want to change, and they are comfortable in their zone.

Some women perceive *hijab* as spiritual ramification. Remy's understanding of *hijab* is that "the Qur'an mandates for the women to wear *hijab*. This is equal to praying five times a day. It only applies to women to cover all of their body and face and head." Kaina also understand *hijab* both as a garment *and* as a spiritual duty:

*Hijab* is mandatory for both men and women. Our religion doesn't prescribe the *burqa* (body cover-up), but our society imposes it. Men are supposed to maintain *hijab* as well. But it's more imposed on the women because of our body structure. In our culture *hijab* is more important than *namaz* [prayer]. But our religion says both are equal. If your faith is strong, you'd do *hijab* for Allah, not as a safety measure.

Faby discusses the topic of sexual modesty from a spiritual understanding. According to her, sexual modesty should reflect complete behavioral change rather than it being an attire. She said,

In the West, people think that a woman is wearing a *niqab* or *burqa* because her husband is forcing them to do so. I think there's different levels of *hijabs* that we need to work on first. Like, why don't we work on purifying our eyes and not gaze at women or watch porn. *Hijab* doesn't make you a good or bad Muslim.

According to Kaina, the true essence of *hijab* lies in self-control and rejecting false beauty standards. However, she does not believe that people from South Asian Muslim cultures tend to understand modesty from a spiritual lens. She said,

Islam prescribes *hijab* to protect us from materialistic beauty standards that hurt our self-confidence. *Hijab* is a symbol of renouncing earthly pleasures. But most Muslim culture does not catch this main essence. *Hijab* is not to safeguard us from the opposite gender.

Sinka's experience matches with Kaina's understanding of relating *hijab* with safety. She shared stories of her cousins who had started using *hijab* recently, "Last year, I saw that most of my cousins are wearing *hijab* now. I thought probably they find a calling that they want to do it. But they said that they do it because it feels safe."

Beyond the mandate of the Qur'an, some women also think of *hijab* as an icon of Muslim culture. Daneen believes that her *hijab* helps identify her as an Indonesian Muslim woman: "*Hijab* is an identifying icon for Muslim women. If I don't wear *hijab* people will think I am Chinese. Men should also show that they are Muslims. But they are more lenient."

Other participants focused on importance of sexual modesty for both genders. According to their interpretation of the scripture, Islam mandates sexual modesty for both genders. However, they think it has become more of a cultural icon than a religious duty.

Some participants could not recall the scripture's mandate about men's sexual modesty.

These participants focused on women's need to cover up and maintain sexual modesty.

According to Nikita,

A lot of people ask why women should *hijab* and not men. Allah created a woman in a way that they should cover-up. But women don't cover-up and compare themselves with men. We are asked to cover up to follow the footsteps of the *sahabas* [the Prophet's companions] and the Prophet.

Although there are different understandings regarding the meanings and purposes of sexual modesty among the participants, these concepts reflect their own interpretations of the scripture and cultural norms.

### **Polygamy**

Participants unanimously agreed that the verse of the Qur'an that allows men to marry up to four women, have been taken out of context in South Asian Muslim culture. According to these participants, men misinterpret this verse out of personal whim. Some participants also said that Muslim men in South Asia are prone to focusing on this particular verse as the misinterpretation of this verse gives men power over women. According to the participants, this verse has been implemented in a twisted manner that allows men to mistreat their wives.

Kaina said,

The wrong explanation of this verse has been going on for centuries. The main reason for this was to increase the number of Muslims and Muslim families. A guy cannot procreate but a woman can. And also, you have to treat everyone equally, which no one else than the Prophet could do.

Sophia's understanding of polygamy in South Asian Muslim cultures further explains

Kaina's notions about the Prophet marrying multiple women for religious reasons, "The

Prophet married each woman to convey a message because he was a man on a mission. Each of his marriages had purposes. He did not marry anyone out of his desires.”

As participants agree, the verse regarding polygamy has been taken out of context to favor the men. They give examples of how this verse is implemented in the society in a twisted way to oppress women. According to Faiza,

Pakistan is now making it mandatory that you [as a man] need to have permission from your current wife [to marry other wives]. It's manipulative because they'll say that they'll divorce you if you don't agree with your husband's multiple marriages. My aunt was making this same joke about marrying multiple women to my cousin. And my mom watches multiple series where they are showing that men are having multiple affairs and marriages. These jokes and media exposures are basically reinforcing the wrong interpretation.

In South Asian Muslim culture, the verse about men having four wives has been used to indicate that men are superior to women; hence, Allah has allowed men to have multiple partners. The opinions of the participants vary from the region's practice.

### **Domestic Violence**

Most of the participants agreed that according to the Qur'an, a husband can hit his wife to discipline her. However, their understanding regarding the process varied. Remy's understanding of this verse was straightforward: “The husband can hit the wife but in a very gentle way and it must be the last resort if the wife has crossed the line.” Along the same line, Nikita explains the pretenses when it might be acceptable for a husband to beat his wife. According to her, “Islam says you can only use a *miswak* [wooden stick used to clean teeth] only if she is unlawful and rebellious.” Natasha's understanding about the level of beating was slightly different than rest of the participants. According to Natasha,

They can hit us without fainting us. I don't think they tell us the context, but they use it [the verse] to use their power. I don't believe Allah wanted husbands to hit woman. It has a lot to do with how we translate this.

Some participants displayed mixed reactions to this verse. According to Adriana, this verse has been taken out of context and has been misused in South Asian Muslim cultures:

This is something that makes me stop reading the Qur'an. From my research, there are phrases before you can hit your wife. I strongly feel that this verse is the reason why there are so many [acts of] domestic violence in our community because no one goes into the depth of this verse and [people take] it out of context.

Varisha's understanding matches Adriana's regarding taking the verse out of context to empower men and oppress women. Her explanation sheds light into why women tolerate domestic violence in the name of Islam. According to Varisha,

Most of the time, women just bear with it [domestic violence] because divorce is frowned upon. This happens when abuse is normalized. But Islam does not permit this [domestic violence]. There are certain aspects of the religion that makes it patriarchal. Men are supposed to take care of the women. But nowhere does it say that you get to control the women. The Prophet, himself did not do it, then why do we even talk about it?

There is a variation in the comprehension of this verse according to the participants.

Regardless, they all believe that this verse should not be taken out of context to harm women or ignite domestic violence; however, the participants admit that, in South Asian Muslim cultures, this verse is often taken out of context to bestow power on men.

### **Authority and Family Roles**

Some of the participants believe that, according to the scriptures, men have the authority and leading position in family and society. According to Adriana,



Islam says man is the authority in a family. Till date and being a modern family, my father still gets the head chair. If I want to buy a simple thing like a TV, my mother says let your father decide. But I think it's more of a cultural thing [perspective] than a religious thing [prescription].

Rimani believes it is natural for men to have the authority in a family. According to her, it is important for her to have her husband's permission as he is the head of the household, for her career. She said,

I work as a teacher in a public university. Sometimes it requires long hours and I have to stay away from family. And I am lucky that my husband gave me permission to work and devote so much time for my career.

Sophia believes that men have a higher status in God's eyes because of certain physiological weakness women have:

Islam also gives men a degree [higher status] above women. I believe it's the system of Allah because we do have our weaknesses. For example, when we are going through PMS, men have to put up with us. I think if we accept these weaknesses, it only makes us stronger.

Kaina's understanding is that the Qur'an prescribes men to lead only to "maintain order and not to create confusion." In her opinion, it has nothing to do with providing men with authority over women.

According to some of the participants, Islam is a family-oriented religion, and taking care of family is a superior task than being financially responsible for the family. Although the Qur'an emphasizes family, it does not restrict women from flourishing outside of the family. Reina's perspective on authority and family roles further explains specific provision the Qur'an has for women's role in the society:

The Qur'an says the women must take care of the family, but it does not say that that's all women have to do. We also must play roles in the society as leaders. There is nothing [in the religious scripture] that says that there are certain leadership roles that are only [suitable] for men. This indicates that woman can be a leader too. I don't think the Qur'an restricts women to a specific role.

Most of the participants believe that, according to the scripture, men and women have distinctive roles to play in family and society. However, some participants believe that the educational and societal systems have presented a different interpretation of authority and gender roles in family. According to Faiza,

In my primary school, a lady [teacher] taught us *hadith* and told us that women should always obey their husbands. She said that she would cook a hot meal for her husband, and, when her husband got back from work, she would give him a stick and ask him to beat her if he did like the food. How messed up is that she is teaching this to a 7-year-old.

Although society endorses male authority, most of the participant believe that Islam has glorified women roles in both family and society that treats both genders equally. Kaina said,

The Qur'an distinctly defines male and female roles [in family and in society]. The Qur'an gives importance to family work more than earning money. But It does not bar woman from working. Our religion respects women in an unequivocal way. For example, it says our heaven is under the foot of our mothers, but not our father. This glorifies the importance of women in our religion. To Allah, both are equal, but our society does not follow it.

Some of the participants agree that, although the Qur'an gives women a higher status in family and society, South Asian Muslim cultures do not follow it. Men and institutions in

these cultures tend to demean and disrespect women. In terms of family roles, women's role is seen as menial while men are treated like the head of the households.

In South Asian Muslim cultures, taking care of the family and children is considered a feminine role and earning bread for the family is considered a masculine role. According to the participants, the feminine roles do not get proper respect. Men tend to hold the authority over the family and society because they are the providers. However, the participants feel that this is not the Islamic way of life.

### **Divorce**

Divorce was a difficult topic for some of the participants. According to them, in South Asian Muslim cultures, women are victimized after a divorce. Sinka said,

I believe divorce is not an easy thing to deal with. It takes a huge mental and emotional toll on you. Our culture will consider the woman to be a victim and blame her. They will refer back to Islam and say Islam doesn't allow women to get divorced.

Varisha further explains how and why women are victimized when it comes to divorce:

A lot of time, women just stay in an abusive marriage because divorce is frowned upon. This happens when abuse is normalized. They normalized it by saying, that your mother and grandmother have suffered through this—so should you. But Islam does not permit this [abuse].

When discussing the Islamic procedure for divorce, Nikita said, "If a man says 'talak' [divorce] three times, that couple is divorced in the eye of the religion, but there are other rulings about it. Both families have to get together and have a long discussion."

Participants state that divorce is a long and complicated procedure according to the Qur'an and that women have an equal right to initiate divorce. Kaina said,

Divorce is [the] only *halal* that Allah hates. Although it's permitted, it has a very complicated and long process. When there is a big conflict, only the couple is not enough [to mitigate the issue]. But our religion permits a woman to initiate a divorce. According to the participants, people of both sexes have equal right to initiate divorce and get out of a difficult marriage. However, in South Asian Muslim cultures, a divorced woman is mistreated and looked down upon. In South Asian Muslim cultures, men can initiate and divorce women by saying the word “talak” (divorce).

### **Inheritance**

Most participants were not aware of the Qur’anic prescription of women’s share in family wealth. Only Nikita and Kaina had knowledge about this topic. Even though they knew the basics of this issue, they had confusion about certain areas of the inheritance law. Regardless, they both agree that the Qur’an places importance on women’s financial wellbeing and gives women a bigger share than men in family wealth. According to Kaina,

If you calculate it properly, women will get more [share of asset] than a man. But since a guy is responsible for financially providing for his family, the man is supposed to get more assets. But we have distorted the meaning of it, and people would think Islam is depriving the women [from equal share of asset] which is not the case.

Nikita’s understanding about inheritance law is similar to Kaina’s. Nikita adds,

People think [that] Islam is trying to put women down. But Allah never wants to put a woman down. If you look at it, a man [has] to raise the kids and [financially] maintain the family. Since the men are financially responsible [for the family], it makes sense for the men to get more because women are not paying bills.

These responses indicate that, although it might seem that women are getting fewer assets in family inheritance, considering all the calculations, women would get more share than men. Participants also emphasize that, since men have to ensure the women in their

family are properly taken care of, men get more share from their father. But women get a share from their son, husband, and father, which men don't get. Although the calculation of inheritance seemed complicated to the participants, they were confident that Allah did not discriminate against women. They believe that the calculation of inheritance has been taken out of context.

### **Identity Negotiation and Communication of Differing Religious Ideologies**

Participants of this study presented an array of understandings of their religion. Their experience regarding the cultural practice of religious norms also varied. If the participants' understandings of religious prescription differed from the cultural practice, they often chose to stay quiet instead of discussing their interpretation of the scripture with family members or others. They discussed reasons for women's silence such as women being unaware of their rights, avoiding potential conflict within the family, being unsure of the level of acceptance, and being uncomfortable sharing their opinion within their inner circle. This theme touches on the remaining part of third objective to understand South Asian Muslim women's identity negotiation and their communication of differing religious understandings.

### **Unaware of Their Own Rights**

According to most of the participants, one of the reasons that prevent South Asian Muslim women from questioning or countering the on-going discriminatory gender role practices that are done in the name religion is that they do not want to get out of their comfort zone. Faby discussed her observation of Pakistani women's awareness about their rights:

I didn't hear many women complain, so maybe they're used to it [suppression]. It could be that either women were used to it, or they just didn't want to complain, and they just think that this is what I'm supposed to do. So, this is what I'm going to do.

Ivy's opinion regarding this topic explains more:

A regular girl living in Pakistan would never discuss these issues even with her most inner circle. Her conversation would revolve around what should I wear for Eid or what food should I make [cook] for my brother tomorrow. Practices of these patriarchal rituals have become her faith, and she would not challenge it.

According to these participants, the generations of ingrained teaching have made women numb to their own oppression. The Muslim women in South Asia are not aware of their rights and they are comfortable with their life.

### **Inner Conflict**

To some participants, understanding their own self, and coming to terms with their own confusions and inferiorities was a priority. Dealing with their inner confusions helped them understand their own agency. Ivy shared the emotional outbursts she used to have:

When you speak out about these differences, if you talk about rights and power that your religion has given you, you are labeled as progressive. Sometimes I sat on my bed crying, thinking, would I have accepted Islam as my religion if I was not born in Pakistan? And these are times I get back to reading Quran and reestablish my faith and try to understand my core.

Arguing with one's inner self and calming down one's inner self are the way to achieve success according to Tara. She believes that, regardless of the situation, everyone needs to empower themselves by prioritizing themselves. Tara describes how she managed to circumvent the difficult situations:

I believe marriage is a teamwork. Our Prophet used to give time to his wives. But my husband and in-laws have traditional South Asian gender roles. Where the husband would be dominating, and the mother-in-law would control my life. I decided that I have to feel good about myself, and only then I can fight back. I negotiated with

myself a lot to calm myself down and I started explaining things to my mother-in-law in a calm manner.

According to the participants, being a woman in South Asian Muslim culture requires them to negotiate their identity between their own understanding of the scripture and the traditional gender role practices of the same culture. They go through this process by constantly re-learning about and evaluating their own personalities and their religion.

### **Inner versus Outer Circle**

Some participants said that they would feel comfortable sharing their differing ideologies only with their inner circle. Some participants might choose to share their objection to the traditional interpretations of gender roles, creating a sort of “inner circle” for sharing. But different criteria might determine who is in this circle. It might, for example, be based on the level of closeness of the relationship. According to Remy:

We have to understand the environment first to be able to discuss such topics. Say for example, if the receiver is my friend and they are interested in discussing, then I can speak. But I also don't want to push them to accept my perception.

Another possible criterion for disclosing one's divergent perspective might be a perception that the other shares the participant's perception about the religious scriptures. According to Parisa,

I would not share this with my in-laws because they follow orthodox practices. But if they are my friends and my close someone else, I can argue about this [differing ideology]. But if they are elderly people, I wouldn't even start talking. Our country is not ready to accept a different religious ideology.

Kaina elaborated the strategic method she follows to share her thoughts regarding religion:

If I do [share], there can be two types of argument [the other person might present]- constructive argument and bullying. If it's a bullying environment, I wouldn't go [to

talk to them] because I know there will be retaliation, and I would not have the courage to do it. But if I feel there is scope for constructive criticism, I would open up.

However, Adriana's understanding regarding sharing differing ideologies was different. According to her it is not safe for women to discuss differing religious ideologies in South Asian Muslim culture. She said,

I wouldn't be able to talk to anyone about these feelings. I am scared that if my identity is leaked, I might be imprisoned or attacked. I can only share my unique take on religion within the privacy of my home and with someone whom I absolutely trust.

According to these participants, South Asian Muslim culture is not open to discussion about religious topics when one might have a different take on traditional practices. Due to this unwelcoming nature of conversation, women usually do not feel comfortable sharing their understanding.

### **Level of Acceptance**

One of the major concerns for the participants regarding sharing their differing opinion about religion is the level of acceptance they might receive. According to the participants, women who voice their opinion regarding religion are not welcomed in the South Asian Muslim culture. Samira said,

Women cannot express their opinion. It would be said that "we understand too much" or "we are over-smart." Because they [the men] don't prioritize us, therefore, our voices don't matter.

Faiza feels the same way regarding acceptance of her opinion. She said, "If we talk about these things, they will take you as a rebel because most of them are men, and one of them told me that God made women as entertainment for men." Sinka shared that she had tried to discuss differing religious ideologies, and the experience was scary for her.



At times, sharing opinions regarding religion questions one's level of faith. Natasha said, "I don't have any avenue to share my thoughts. They might say I'm an atheist. I stay quiet in front of them."

These participants seemed confident that sharing or questioning traditional religious methods and norms were not welcome in South Asian Muslim cultures. Often, sharing thoughts about religion or questioning traditional practices is considered as rebellion or atheism. This restricts the participants from voicing their concerns.

### **Avoiding conflict**

Sharing a differing opinion regarding religion creates conflict in South Asian Muslim cultures. According to a few of the participants, they avoid discussing religious ideologies to avoid conflicts. Reina said,

It's so hard to discuss these [differing religious views] with everyone. I wish we had more of "agree to disagree." But if I feel that the person on the receiving end would not accept it positively, I would not discuss it with them because I don't want to argue with anyone.

Rimani had a similar opinion regarding sharing her opinion about religious practices. She said, "I don't communicate my thoughts because I try to avoid debate. Sometimes I did try to have this kind of discussions, but not everyone is welcoming."

Sometimes even when some of the participants feel the urge to voice their opinion, they do not share their thoughts. Faby said she would not voice her opinions because she does not want to get involved in a conflict. According to her,

If I'm seeing something wrong, I would just be quiet because I don't want to stir the pot and start an argument. Does that mean I'm part of the problem? Maybe! But I just didn't want to get into any debate or cause family drama.

Women in South Asian Muslim cultures do not feel welcomed to share their thoughts. This unwelcomed feeling has trained them not to voice their opinion even when they want to.

### **Male versus Female Agency to Influence the South Asian Muslim Communities**

The fourth objective of this study is addressed in this theme, that discusses male versus female agency to influence the culture of the region. According to the experiences shared by most of the participants, women have less ability than men in South Asian Muslim communities to voice their opinion including their thoughts on religious practices. In South Asian Muslim cultures, a woman's agency depends on her family's mindset, the woman's research, battling with her own identity, and understanding her dignity. Although men have more agency in South Asian Muslim cultures, their authority is rooted in having liberal upbringing, and, therefore, men's agency does not get directed towards change.

### **Family influence**

Most of the participants said that they belong to a progressive family and did not experience the same level of oppression as the women of their country. According to these participants, their family's mindset helped them have a privileged and knowledgeable lifestyle. Sinka said she was from a privileged family in the capital city, which helped her have a different thought process:

I was born and brought up in a metropolitan area. I went to one of the top schools, and my mom was a working mother. So, I grew up in very supportive environment. I was always treated equal [to male family members].

In the same vein, Varisha shared how being brought up in a good family reflected on her religious understanding: "I was born into a good family. I did not face any bias from my family. I had the freedom to question people who taught me. It made a difference in my religious exposure." Sophia explained how having a supportive family helped her to have an

open discussion: “I was more comfortable discussing these issues with my dad. And being able to talk to him gave me courage to talk to anyone.”

Experiences of these participants indicate that having a liberal lifestyle impacted their opinion regarding religion and women rights.

### **Personal Research**

Another source of South Asian Muslim women’s agency is their personal research conducted on religious topics. Some of the participants expressed that, as they grew up, they started questioning the traditional religious practices and conducted their own research.

Varisha said,

I was younger, and we were told about the female role models of Islam, in a homely manner. But as I grew up, I did my own research and got to know about a lot of them. From my own research, I got to know how the Prophet's wives and daughters were so much more than what was taught to us. These women were not the women who stayed home and cooked all day.

Reina’s reason for doing her own research is similar to Varisha’s. According to Reina, the availability of resources has made her research possible:

Me and my siblings went to Islamic schools from kindergarten. I grew up receiving Islamic teachings from school. I did not question a lot of things back then, but I question more now. Because now there are more resources, and I have access to them.

These participants found their own source of knowledge regarding religion. Sophia’s religious understanding also varied from what she was taught in her childhood. Therefore, she found an institute that can support her curious mind:

When I was young, a *Hazrat* would come home and teach me the basics of it [Islam]. It wasn’t very in-depth. But as I grew up, I started meeting more people, and learning in-depth [about religion]. Now I go to this institution that is just for women to get in-

depth knowledge about Islam. Here we learn more about connecting with Allah instead of just following the rituals.

The traditional religious practices and norms made these women look for sources that would help them feel more connected to Allah and understand more about their religion.

### **Self-Worth**

According to a few of the participants, South Asian Muslim women do not prioritize themselves enough to feel empowered. These women feel that they have been sidelined to not recognize their own dignity in the society. Ivy explains how a sense of feeling less than men starts in the house:

I think the issue [of recognizing self-worth] starts in home. If you don't stop teaching your son that when you're coming home tired, your sister doesn't have to get you a glass of water, you can get your own glass of water. Women should have these dignities within themselves. They do have that dignity, but the realization of that dignity has been snatched from them by patriarchal practices.

Parisa thinks the society and the education system of South Asian Muslim cultures make the women doubt their self-worth. She said, "I think our women blame themselves a lot and they endure a lot. We women don't value ourselves. I feel like people forcefully try to make us impure for having period."

Faiza describes women not having a high ambition or not valuing themselves enough to acquire higher education. According to her, if the religious education system included the valuable roles that women had in early Islamic era, women would think differently about themselves. She thinks Muslim women need feminism to understand their potential:

I am a feminist, and I think if we were taught differently, we would have strong female leadership. I see a lot of women posting that we don't need feminism because we have Islam. If we were taught that women don't have to be in-home and just give

birth, it [women's status in the society] would have been different. People think feminism in anti-Islam.

As per the responses of the above-mentioned participants, South Asian Muslim women have been taught to be subservient to the male members of their family. Posing their own opinion is considered to be rebellion in the region.

### **Male Agency**

To understand men's agency to influence the contemporary religious practices of South Asian Muslim cultures, I asked the participants about their opinion regarding men's religious orientation in South Asian Muslim cultures. According to most of the participants, men are the dominant gender in South Asia Muslim cultures, and men's religious education is more liberal than that of women in that it focuses more on religious rituals, whereas participants indicated that the men don't get as elaborated religious teaching about gender roles as the women do, and that prevents men from practicing equal gender roles. According to Varisha,

They don't get the same religious gender role expectations. We are taught about wearing feminine clothes, but men never learned that. Since they don't know there is a *hijab* for them, they think it's their right to comment on our *hijab*.

Nikita's understanding about men's religious education is similar. She believes that "some families teach the proper Islamic values, but not most." In the same vein, Kaina shares her opinion regarding men's religious understanding,

"No, they don't get so many religious bindings. They were only told to go to the mosque on Fridays. Our men know only one thing that they can marry up to four women."

Faiza thinks men's religious education is different than women's. According to her, "most of these things are taught to women. I did not see anyone teaching the same things to their son."

Reina explains why men's understanding of religion is different than women's and how it impacts the society: "Men should protect the society. But right now for the patriarchal system, there are a lot of discriminations. Sometimes these discriminations happen because men are not aware and because they are brought up in that patriarchal society."

According to the participants quoted in this section, because of on-going patriarchal practice of religion in South Asian Muslim cultures, men are oblivious to their proper gender role. Therefore, they are not contributing in influencing the system.

### **Conclusion**

As per the experiences shared by the participants, lives of men and women are somewhat different in South Asian Muslim cultures in terms of gender role expectations, and level of exposure to religious values. Although a few of the participants researched in-depth about religion and most of the participants have their own interpretation of religious scriptures, they often feel unwelcome to share their understandings. As a result, they participate the traditional gender norms that conflict with their interpretation of religion. In the next chapter, I analyze the results using structuration theory.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Discussions with seventeen participants from four countries of South Asian Muslim cultures revealed similar results with varying focus. Participants from Bangladesh focused heavily on sexual harassment, lack of safety, the barrier to higher education, and workplace discrimination. Discussions of Indian and Pakistani participants highlighted discrimination within family alongside societal issues. Indonesian participants emphasized a significant level of women's oppression in rural areas. Despite the varying focus, overall results indicate that women have less agency than men in South Asian Muslim cultures. Participants shared the experience of facing discrimination within their families and across society. Stories of these participants indicate that, despite having a liberal upbringing and higher education, the participants do not have an adequate agency to convey their interpretation of religious norms in South Asian Muslim cultures. Furthermore, results indicate that religious education in that region is more norm-based rather than spiritual: The education system does not include female role models, and questions from women about religion are not welcomed. As a result, these women negotiate their identities in every step of life to maintain a balance between their understanding and the societal expectation of gender roles.

### **Summary of Findings**

According to the participants of this study, gender roles in South Asian Muslim cultures primarily favor men. In this region, women are expected to take care of their husbands, their household chores, and their children while men should be the breadwinners. Although a large number of women from these countries are highly educated and exploring diverse career options, society still prefers that women prioritize their family over their career. Men are considered the natural leaders in the family and in the society; they should withhold emotional expressions while women are expected to be submissive and nurturing. The teaching of these traditional gender roles is ingrained in individuals from an early age

with differentiating treatment of a male and female child in families. Societies expect the male children to take financial responsibility for the family, which gives the male child importance over the female child. As these children grow up, the men enjoy complete freedom and an exuberant social life while the women are expected to have a controlled social life due to safety concerns. Some participants felt that women are sometimes protected as precious jewels which makes them feel devoid of their individuality. According to the participants, women scarcely have a nightlife or male friends. South Asian Muslim cultures follow the traditional interpretation of religious scriptures, and, often, the restrictions on women are imposed in the name of religion. However, participants indicate that religious restrictions were imposed on women more than men, and that men received more liberal teachings of Islam that excludes gender-based restrictions such as *hijab*, respecting women, and so on.

Participants received religious education from both educational institutes and the elders of their family. Religious education is an important part of the family upbringing in that region. However, religious education was often treated more as a set of instructions and duties than with the teaching of the scripture within its original context. Stories of successful women role models were missing from the traditional religious education of South Asia. Participants stressed the negative impact of institutional religious education on society. According to them, madrassas foster an environment that is geared towards expanding traditional orthodoxy, narrowing down the scope of accountability for religious leaders, and limits women's rights.

Patriarchy is ingrained within South Asian Muslim cultures and the traditional inferring of religion is aiding the patriarchal system. Some of the participants believe that, due to the deep-rooted religious tradition of the society, it is difficult to separate the religious norms from the cultural values of the region. The obstacles these participants face every day



are the results of the blurred line between religion and culture. As an outcome of this continuing blurring, a group of religious leaders has gained trust and power in the society; these leaders bar people from raising questions regarding religion as this would be considered an audacity. The power of these leaders can be so overarching that sexual abuse by them will go unnoticed and unpunished.

While stressing the differences between religious and cultural practices, participants discussed examples from religious scripture that are followed differently in their region. These examples included religious guidance regarding issues such as polygamy, *hijab*, domestic violence, authority in family and society, right to inheritance, and divorce laws. According to the participants' perception of religious scriptures, each of these guidelines has been misinterpreted by the traditional religious practice, to support patriarchy. For example, the verse about allowing men to marry up to four women was originally only applicable to the Prophet as no other human can achieve his level in doing justice and treating everyone equally. Each of the Prophet's marriages is an example of the Islamic lifestyle. However, the South Asian Muslim cultures relay this verse as a means to prove men's superiority over women.

Participants believe that Allah does not discriminate among his followers and loves everyone equally despite their strength and shortcomings. However, several of the participants suggested that the literal translation of verses that discuss the husband's right to beat his wife, women's lesser share in family heritage, and men's right to initiate divorce has created a submissive environment for women in the region. According to the participants, women can initiate divorce and should have a greater share of their son's and husband's assets than a man, and they believe that the verse about domestic violence should be understood in its original context and is only applicable by a judge in cases of infidelity for both genders.

Although participants possess a differing ideology compared to the society they live in, it is difficult for the participants to communicate their own interpretation of the religious scripture. People in the region discourage women from having conversations about opposing religious ideologies. However, participants can sometimes communicate about their interpretation of the Qur'an with their intimate inner circle, from the safety of their homes, and with someone they absolutely trust.

### **South Asian Muslim Women's Perspectives and Identity Negotiation**

Findings of the study are organized to address the research objectives. Results indicate that South Asian Muslim women's perceptions of patriarchy and Islam represent findings of previous research. One of the specific outcomes of this study is an understanding of the participants' identity negotiation and agency to influence the current structure, two issues that resonate with prior scholarly work.

### **Muslim Women's Perception of Patriarchy and Islam in South Asia**

Results show that the South Asian Muslim women who participated in this study consider the Qur'an to be the ultimate religious scripture, despite their concerns about human misinterpretations of the original Qur'an and their concerns about the authenticity of *hadiths*, Sharia law, and *fatwa*. Barazangi (2004), Mashhour (2005), and Mernissi (1991), presented similar concerns about the authenticity of *hadiths*, Sharia law, and *fatwa* in their works while considering the Qur'an as the undisputed source of authority. The religion of the region follows the traditional interpretation of the Qur'an, and religious education excludes the female role models of the earlier Islamic era. Although some participants are aware of Aisha, Fatima, and Khadijah as wives and daughter of the Prophet, the influential characteristics of these and other powerful women remain unknown to them, rendering a deficit in self-confidence and informed decision-making practices (Geissing, 2011; Mernissi, 1999; Mukherjee, 2005; Reem, 2012; El Omari et al., 2019). Findings of this study

indicate that stories of these female role models are being left out from the education process in a way that promotes patriarchal values and manifests a historical disempowerment of women (Carland, 2019).

The education system of the region plays a significant role in setting gender role expectations. Religious education is a major part of family upbringing in the region. However, South Asian Muslim women's responses presented in this study suggest that formal religious institutes such as madrassas foster traditional Islamic practice in the region that discourages equal rights for women and promote male dominance in the society as a way of detaining power in the society. This outcome regarding madrassa education matches with the findings of Kabir (2009) and Sikand (2011), whose works have linked the traditional Islamic practices of madrassas with suppression of women in that region.

As stated in previous studies, the women in this study reflect that the religious education of the region follows a traditional interpretation of the Qur'an that somewhat matches with the Deobandi teaching (Kabir, 2009; Sikand, 2002; Zaman, 2007). As supported by previous scholarship, these teachings often take the original scriptures out of context, and this often disenfranchises women (Boyle, 2006; Bradley & Saigal, 2012). Such teachings promote male authority in family and society, hinder women's free will, suppress women's equal rights for education and career, and endorse female role only within the house as a mother, and wife (Eidhamar, 2018; Hopkins, 2006; Soudy, 2009; Tariq & Sayed, 2017; White, 2010,). Gender role expectations set by the South Asian Muslim society also prevent males from expressing emotion and emphasize that the male to be financially responsible for the family (Archer, 2001; Ramji, 2007). An equal share of family responsibilities between a couple and equal importance of women's voice in society is frowned upon.

The religious education of the region interprets verses in a way that the meaning is advantageous for males, such as the verse regarding the Prophet's multiple marriages,

domestic violence, women's share in inheritance, men's right to divorce their wives, and women's sexual modesty. These interpretations overlook men's duties as prescribed by the scripture. Previous reformist scholars have argued against the literal translation, and the opinions of the South Asian Muslim women presented in this study support that, by enforcing the literal meaning of these verses, the society is establishing male dominance from within a religious perspective (Ahmed, 1992; Ally, 2020; Amer, 2014; Brazangi, 2004; El Fadl, 2006; Ibrahim, 2020; Wadud, 1999).

Based on the statements of the participants, it can be conferred that the cycle of communication of traditional religious education is influenced by patriarchy. As a result, both the traditional interpretation of religious scriptures and current religious practices represent patriarchal values that create barriers for women. It can be argued that the religious education system and the culture of the region are overshadowed by patriarchy in way that patriarchy is seen as a hidden power source. This has damaged women's confidence in themselves, and men have enjoyed the status of authority without having to think about the women's perspectives or experiences.

### **Identity Negotiation and Agency of South Asian Muslim Women**

Several of the South Asian Muslim women participants in this study comprehend the religious scripture from a reformist standpoint by focusing on context rather than their initial education of the traditional translation. Some women of the region are more informed about their religious rights than others due to a liberal family upbringing. For these South Asian Muslim women, Islam does not restrict them from any activity, and Islam provides people of both sexes equal rights. This notion opposes the traditional religious interpretation and practices of the established societal structure.

Despite having a different comprehension of religious scripture and guidelines, these women continue to be a part of the ongoing social structure by following the rules and

resources as described by Giddens (1984). In this instance, the structure is already set in place, and the agency of Muslim women is not influencing the structure enough to influence change, which somewhat opposes Giddens's (1984) notion of social agents' influence on the structure. Furthermore, according to Giddens's (1984) concept of duality of structure, both social structure and social agent influence each other and redefine structure. Although the established social structure is influencing everyday lives of the South Asian Muslim women, the women are unable to equally influence the structure due to their limited agency.

Therefore, similar previous research findings (Berho, 2015; Conway, 2017; McGarry, 2016), these women are constantly negotiating their identity to fit within the established structure of the society as they have limited agency to influence the structure (Giddens, 1984). Women's limited agency in South Asian Muslim cultures refers to the pre-existing male-dominated structure, where women's voice is not always given equal importance. Therefore, some of the women struggle with their inner self to fit within the existing structure and practice the religion from their own interpretation, at the same time. Additionally, the interpretation and actions of the South Asian Muslim women match with Giddens's notion of discursive consciousness (Jones & Karsten, 2008) as these women are aware of their limited agency to communicate their religious ideologies.

Stories shared by the South Asian Muslim women who participated in this study indicate that discussions and opposing ideologies about religion are often negatively accepted in some South Asian Muslim cultures. At times these negative connotations are associated with the powerful agency of local religious leaders who discourage open communication about religion and further enforce traditional orthodox practices. Therefore, despite being oppressed by the same religious leaders and having a differing interpretation, some women often choose to stay silent because opposing religious ideologies are often met with negative notions in the region. A few of the South Asian Muslim women can share their understanding

of the scripture with their trusted inner circle but not with a wider population as they fear the loss of face.

On the other hand, South Asian Muslim men have a substantial agency to influence the structure. Findings indicate that the same barriers and social norms that are used to limit women's rights are not imposed upon men in the name of religion in the region (Boyle, 2006; Bradley & Saigal, 2012). Therefore, men are likely to be oblivious to the advantages they possess over women. This reaffirms Giddens' (1984) notion of routinization and temporality. As men are a part of the routinized system throughout their lifespan, they lack the self-awareness to be a part of the bigger change for equality (Niaz, 2003).

It is evident that these women have agency over their own conscience through research and discussion with people within their intimate circle, but they are unable to project the same agency to influence the ongoing societal structure. On the other hand, society has influenced the lifestyle of these women momentarily in that the women are a part of the patriarchal structure without having ample influence on it. Experiences of the participants indicate that religious Muslim women can empower themselves from within a place of devotion. These women have empowered themselves by research, self-education, and educating their inner circle. Therefore, the agency is effective from within the boundaries of an established patriarchal structure and in a selective manner.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This research created a space for less-present but much-needed dialogue about an important issue. This research describes the lived experience of women from four South Asian Countries. Although this study does not generalize women's lived experiences in South Asian Muslim cultures, it provides a rich contextual description of the experience of specific women regarding gender role expectations of the region, women's duality of identity negotiation, and women's agency based within their contexts. A variety of insights gathered

from women from these four countries gives future researchers a contextual understanding of women's lives, women's identity, and women's agency from a religious standpoint.

Within a day of my posting the invitation for this research on social media, twelve participants showed interest, and eight interviews were completed within the first two days. Some of the interviews escalated emotionally as the participants teared up while sharing their experience of being a woman in South Asian Muslim culture. This overwhelming response suggests that these women longed to vent and share their perspective for a long time. However, there was no avenue for them to discuss their perceptions openly. This research allowed these women to share untold stories, to reveal life-long dilemmas, and to imagine a future with changes they could not make for themselves.

Although this research incorporates participants from four Muslim countries of South Asia, the participants are not diverse in terms of social and economic status. One reason for this somewhat homogenous group of participants is the mode of invitation. Due to geographical barriers, the invitation was sent through my social media networks, where most of the women are educated and are aware of their religious rights. As social media are an internet-based tool, women who do not have access to internet were unintentionally excluded. Also, all these women are from the capital or major cities of each country. They have somewhat liberal parents and a broad scope of education. Some of these participants are well versed in different interpretations of Islamic scriptures and have experience with prior research. Results related to identity and agency might have been different with participants from the rural area where participants would have been less exposed to modern research and education. Another contributing factor to the somewhat liberal and homogenous population is the participants' country of residence. A few of the participants are currently residing outside of South Asia, which might have influenced their sense of agency. Finally, participants of this study are all women who never went to madrasa. However, they displayed a negative

understanding of madrassa teaching, which can be questionable given they have no direct experience.

### **Practical Implication**

This research represents the lived experiences of South Asian Muslim women. The findings showcase that the participants have expressed a desire to see impactful changes for themselves, as well as for the next generation of men and women. This research can prove to be monumental in paving the path towards change through education and knowledge sharing.

Non-profit organizations and non-government organizations have been operating with social and behavioral change communication (SBCC) in South Asian countries for decades. These organizations educate local opinion leaders and the community to alter certain aspects of their everyday lives to improve the lifestyle of women (and men) in the region. This research can be part of a training program for Imams (religious leaders) and influential small groups of the community. Experiences shared in this research can enlighten the community's understanding of women's perspective regarding their agency, their interpretation of religious scripture, and their struggle of identity negotiation.

Currently, there is a stigma regarding asking questions about religion and demanding justice regarding the roles of women. Stories and opinions shared in this research can push to open dialogue at the policy level of each country's government. Laws and policy dialogue to implement a reformed information dissemination process, active freedom of speech, and gender-based equality in every sector of the society can be the starting step towards eradicating such stigmas in that region.

Another possible implication for this research can be to educate the mass media organizations. Media play an important role in shaping a society's mindset. When media makers are properly educated about women's perspectives, they can voice women's concerns in an acceptable manner. This research can be used in training future journalists and editors



who can portray women's agency proficiently and give voice to women's identity across various fields. Bringing new perspectives to the media regarding women's interpretation of religious scripture can help future journalists portray issues related to women's rights from a neutral standpoint, which will leave room for dialogue and growth.

As the participants stated, their religious education started at home, with their parents. This research can also be a developmental tool for current and future parents and local educators. Stories of these participants can make parents aware of the impact they have on their children. These parents can raise a generation of well-informed and empowered individuals who knows their rights and treats each other with respect. Educators can learn how to disseminate information based on facts and proper research because the results of this research imply that participants felt misinformed by their educators. As society becomes educated, there is a possibility that the next generation of women can have different experiences.

### **Future Research**

Considering the limitations discussed above, future research can include participants from all walks of society to ensure diversity and representation. For that to happen, future researchers would need to visit the country's rural and semi-rural areas to ensure maximum variation. It would also give the research maximum breadth if the responses of participants from different sectors of the society were cross-compared. For example, if data were obtained from both rural and urban societies, it would be beneficial to cross-compare both datasets. Another way to diversify the participation base is to include participants from different generations (White, 2010). For example, future research can incorporate the experiences of women from different generations and compare their understandings. This will further elaborate on the context of this research by shedding light on upbringing, education, identity

shift, and agency management from generation to generation. Such a multifaceted dataset gives a wider context of the issue to the reader.

This study is focused on women's lived experience and women's narrative of agency and identity negotiation from a religious perspective. The results highlight that women consider themselves to have less agency and less power to negotiate societal and religious norms compared to the males. According to the participants, male members of the society have superior standing. Similarly, Soudy (2009) studied the crisis of masculinity in Islam but did not embrace a female perspective. Future research can incorporate a male point of view to have a balanced representation. Both male and female perspectives would provide a richer understanding of understandings of gender roles and identity negotiation.

Giddens (Cassell, 1993) suggests that human agents have power to influence the structure with their agency by being a part of it. Experiences of the participants suggest that, despite being a part of the structure for decades, Muslim women are struggling to have a noticeable impact as of yet. However, these women have done their own research and have educated themselves on their religious rights from within the suppressive environment. Furthermore, their participation in this study indicates that these women are attempting to be a part of a process that can change the structure. This suggests that South Asian Muslim women are using the "limited power" that they have (Cassell, 1993) to influence the structure. Future research can branch out into different areas to observe the impact of South Asian Muslim women utilizing their power to influence the restrictive structure of the region.

This is a comparatively new topic of research given the limited number of prior researches done on a similar topic. Therefore, this study can open up a wide variety of future research prospects. Some of the participants shared that they conducted their own research to gather alternative answers to their queries about religious mandates that they have been taught in the traditional setting. Future research can explore made these women search for

alternative answers. Another aspect of such future research can be a diasporic communication study that looks into immigrant South Asian Muslim women's perspective on agency and identity negotiation across cultural and the generational gap. Future research can also incorporate the impact of media on South Asian Muslim women's agency and identity negotiation from a religious perspective. Media research can utilize cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) alongside structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) to understand if and/or how media have impacted women's and agency and power to negotiate their identities overtime in that region.

### **Conclusion**

One controversial topic about Muslim cultures has been the treatment of women. The findings of this study prove that there are significant differences between how women interpret their rights from a religious standpoint and how the society practices religious culture that leads to women's' oppression. South Asian Muslim women lovingly interpret Islam as an egalitarian religion that has been reshaped by the patriarchal social system of the region. Whereas the region's cultural practice situates women at home taking care of the family, the religion promotes equal rights for men and women. Further, local practices encourage several behaviors and policies that work against women's rights, although none of these follow a contextualized understanding of the Prophet's teaching. This unequal treatment of women is the result of religious education passed on for generations through madrassas, where traditional and non-contextual religious teaching is endorsed.

Despite having sound knowledge about their own rights, South Asian Muslim women remain as silent members of the current religious structure as their agency within the boundaries of the structure does not permit them to voice their concerns openly. However, these women practice their agency to self-educate and to research scriptural interpretations with the hope to share the spirit of Islam among the next generation. Therefore, the dialogue

of women's agency and identity within religious and cultural boundaries will remain a topic of conversation and bring a ray of hope in the future.

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## APPENDIX A: SOCIAL MEDIA INVITATION

Hello everyone! I am a graduate student in the School of Communication at Illinois State University. I am looking for people who are willing to help me with my thesis. You are invited to participate in one-on-one online interviews, to explore the gender roles in South Asian Muslim Cultures. In this study I'm trying to understand how South Asian Muslim women experience and deal with patriarchy in their everyday life from a religious standpoint. To participate, you must be over 18 years of age to participate, and a woman who has resided for at least 15 years in a South Asian (e.g., Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia). The occupation of these participants will vary, including students, homemakers, service holders, businessperson, and/or teachers.

The research will begin with brief demographic questions and will then be followed by an interview that will take approximately 90 minutes in length. The researcher will keep findings confidential. No identifying names or comments will be used in any write-up or presentation of the study. Your participation will be completely voluntary, and you will receive no compensation for participating in this study. You may decide not to answer any question, and you can stop participating in the interview at any time without penalty.

If you would like to participate in an interview, please contact Tamanna Tasmin (ttasmin@ilstu.edu) to volunteer, and she will give you possible times for interviews. If you know someone else who might like to participate, please feel free to forward this invitation on to them.

Sincerely,

Tamanna Tasmin

ttasmin@ilstu.edu

Graduate Student, School of Communication

Illinois State University

## APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

### **Introduction**

This research study is being conducted by Tamanna Tasmin at Illinois State University, under the direction of Dr. John Baldwin, to research gender roles in South Asian Muslim cultures. You must be over 18 years of age to participate, and a woman who has resided for at least 15 years in a South Asian (e.g., Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia). The occupation of these participants will vary, including students, homemakers, service holders, businessperson, and/or teachers. You cannot participate if you are currently residing in the European Union.

### **Procedures**

If you choose to take part in this research study, you will be asked to participate in an online interview session. This session will take approximately 90 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded (not video recorded) to ensure accuracy of transcription.

### **Risks/Discomforts**

The study seeks information about your everyday experience of being a Muslim woman in South Asian Muslim culture. You may feel discomfort about sharing details of their everyday life. Also, participants may feel that confidentiality is at stake, or that social repercussions could arise, due to the audio recording. However, you have the freedom not to participate or to refuse to answer any question without penalty. In addition, we will keep all data confidential and will not mention any location by name, nor provide any identifying details, even should you mention them. Other than this, there should be no risk for participating greater than that experienced by everyday life.

### **Benefits**

This study will showcase the voices of Muslim women. Shedding light into the lived experiences of South Asian Muslim women provides insight into their understanding of women's rights, differences between their expectation and reality of how society treats women and their version of the current religious atmosphere of the region. By examining the experiences of Muslim women's experiences this study will start a much-needed dialogue about the violation of women's rights in the name of Islam in South Asian Muslim cultures. You may receive a benefit in discussing your perspectives, but there is no other anticipated personal benefit to you. The results of the study—themes developed across all interviews—will be shared in conference papers and possible publications.

### **Confidentiality**

All information provided will remain confidential and will only be reported as coded data with no identifying information.



## **Compensation**

There will be no compensation offered to participants.

## **Participation**

Participating in this study is voluntary. Refusal to participate involves no penalty or loss of benefits. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. You can also skip questions you do not feel like answering.

## **Questions about the Research**

For questions about this research, contact Tamanna Tasmin ([ttasmin@ilstu.edu](mailto:ttasmin@ilstu.edu))  
Please save a copy of this consent form for your records.

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Research Ethics & Compliance Office at Illinois State University at (309) 438-5527 or via email at [rec@ilstu.edu](mailto:rec@ilstu.edu).

## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Have you read the informed consent? Are at least 18 years of age, and do you agree to participate in this study?

May I audio record the interview?

### Demographic Questions

- What country are you from?
- How long have you lived in this country?
- What is your occupation?
- How old are you?

### Experiences as a girl/woman in your country

- How was it growing up as a woman in Bangladesh/India/Pakistan/etc.?
- How was your experience different than a man? Can you think of some examples?
- What do you think are the issues related to treatment of women in you culture?
  - a. Do other people feel the same way or report other issues?
  - b. How about x? [insert other probes]

### Religion and gender

- As a woman (if) you were stopped from doing what your male counterpart was doing, were any of those restrictions referred back to religion?
- How were religious lessons communicated to you?
  - a. Did you learn about female role models of Islam during your education? If no, why? If yes, do you remember what you were taught about them?
  - b. If no, how would you think those teachings would have impacted the way women are treated in your society today?
- What religious scripture(s) do you follow? If there are multiple, what is the rank of these scriptures as they relate to your everyday life?
- To your understanding, how does the religious scripture that you follow prescribe gender roles in family and society? And do you think those prescriptions are followed in your culture?
  - a. Let's talk about specific issues and your take on them i.e Authority, Polygamy, Divorce, Domestic Violence, hijab, family roles.
  - b. Are men taught similarly regarding the issues we just discussed?

### Negotiating gender

- If you believe the religious prescriptions are not followed, how do you communicate about this feeling with other members of the society?
  - a. Where do you think these differences come from?
- If you can communicate, how does the receiver respond to the challenges you're facing?