Atmospheric Agency in the Lives of Bangladeshi Madrasa Women:
A Study of Moral Reasoning as Agency

Ammena Tarannum Boobly

A Thesis

In the Department

of

Religions and Cultures

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

Master of Arts (Religions and Cultures) at

Concordia University

Montréal, Québec, Canada

April 2026

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: **Ammena Tarannum Boobly**

Entitled: **Atmospheric Agency in the Lives of Bangladeshi Madrasa Women: A Study of Moral Reasoning as Agency**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Religions and Cultures)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

_____ Chair
Dr. Naftali Cohn

_____ Examiner
Dr. Sowparnika Balaswaminathan

_____ Supervisor
Dr. Lynda Clarke

Approved by _____
Dr. Naftali Cohn

04/01/2026 _____
Dr. Pascale Sicotte

Abstract

Atmospheric Agency in the Lives of Bangladeshi Madrasa Women:
A Study of Moral Reasoning as Agency
Ammena Tarannum Boobly

This thesis examines the lives of women in the madrasa world of Bangladesh by focusing on moral reasoning as the process through which agency is exercised. The thesis develops the concept of atmospheric agency, a term I use to describe how women reason within intersecting institutional, familial, economic, digital, psychological, and affective conditions, which together I term "atmosphere." Drawing on digital ethnographic research across Qawmi, Aliya, and madrasa-school settings, as well as digital religious spaces, the study traces how women reason within distinct yet overlapping moral worlds. In conservative Qawmi madrasas, life unfolds within a segregated atmosphere structured by a cycle of constraints that shapes women's engagement with study, work, and aspirations, while reformist Aliya and madrasa-school contexts involve more flexible forms of segregation. Digital religious spaces further illustrate these dynamics as they enable new forms of learning, authority, regulation, and critique. The thesis shows that both action and non-action can be agentive outcomes of moral reasoning within the particular atmosphere of a woman's life. It demonstrates how movement toward stricter religiosity is itself agentive, and that within conservative settings, women can push against dominant norms. In doing so, women's moral reasoning becomes a means through which they shape and transform the atmospheres in which they live. The thesis thus offers a new framework for understanding the actions of religiously practicing women.

Acknowledgments

I am deeply indebted to two people: my spouse, Yusuf Zubayer, and my supervisor, Professor Lynda Clarke. Without their faith in me, I would not be where I am today, submitting this thesis.

The professors at Concordia University and McGill University whose classes I have attended over the last two years have all contributed to shaping my concepts, perspectives, and knowledge. The Department of Religions and Cultures at Concordia University has offered a welcoming and accessible atmosphere throughout my studies. I would also like to thank Munit Merid for her assistance in the department.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Introduction

> Patriarchy makes women less trustworthy to men, and men create rules to belittle them, such as not allowing an unmarried female teacher to have a mobile phone inside a madrasa, while an unmarried male teacher can.
> — Participant 46, former teacher, Qawmi Madrasa

This study begins with the voice of a madrasa woman in Bangladesh who is now a housewife but was once a student and teacher in a madrasa, an Islamic educational institution. She has stepped away from formal work to raise her child yet hopes to return to teaching in the future. Her voice is striking because it unsettles the common assumption in Bangladesh that madrasa-educated women, and especially those who are stay-at-home caregivers, remain quiet, compliant, and adaptive to male authority. It also counters the popular Western media discourse that casts Muslim women as uniformly oppressed, submissive, and lacking agency (Terman 2017). I have also frequently encountered women while conducting this study who steadfastly endorse traditional gender roles as God-ordained and lash out against liberal ideals while at the same time critiquing rigid conservatism and the madrasa system as it currently operates.

To situate these dynamics, it is important to recognize how Bangladesh's madrasa system has evolved. The country maintains three streams of Islamic education. Aliya madrasas are state-regulated institutions that combine religious instruction with secular subjects prescribed under the national curriculum and administered through government examinations. Qawmi madrasas, by contrast, are community-run and more conservative in orientation, with secular subjects remaining marginal to a curriculum centered on religious learning; they were only formally recognized by the government in 2017 (Prothom Alo 2017). A third category consists of hybrid madrasa-schools or Islamic schools, which combine religious instruction with secular education but do not have the same degree of curricular specialization in religious subjects as the Aliya and Qawmi madrasa systems. Together, the Aliya and Qawmi systems enroll millions of students, and over the past three decades women's participation in both streams has risen sharply. Hybrid madrasa-schools have also expanded in recent years and increasingly enroll students of both genders (Daily Sun 2026).

While female madrasas were relatively rare in the 1980s and 1990s, they have since multiplied, and in many districts, girls now make up the majority of entrants. This expansion reflects broader educational transformations in Bangladesh, shaped by development programs promoting girls' schooling, the affordability of madrasas compared to secular institutions, and the growing appeal of Islamic education to parents (Asadullah and Chaudhury 2010; Badrunnesha and Kwauk 2015; BANBEIS 2022; Rao and Hossain 2011). Engagement with religion by Bangladeshi women has also deepened in recent years through exposure to global Islamic knowledge, which was not

readily accessible in the country before. For many participants in this study, this takes place primarily through the internet, as digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Telegram have become a part of their religious engagement. These online spaces have made women increasingly aware of global Islamic debates, ideas, and teachers, which they interpret through their own understandings of the world. This heightened awareness does not necessarily liberalize or homogenize their views. Rather, it enables new combinations of piety, critique, and self-reflection that transcend boundaries of class, education, and institutional identity, whether secular or madrasa based.

Despite this rapid growth, Bangladeshi women's lives in these institutions remain largely absent from scholarship. No scholarly attention has been paid to how their socioeconomic positions, intellectual trajectories, and everyday lifestyles, grounded in Islamic conceptions of modern life, shape their choices and worldviews. There is, in fact, no published ethnographic work on Bangladeshi women who study, teach, own, or manage madrasas—women who have been educated in these institutions, who currently work within them, and who often navigate mixed educational backgrounds spanning both madrasa and secular schooling. This gap is partly attributable to the difficulty of accessing madrasa communities, which tend to maintain close-knit internal relationships.

The study of Bangladeshi madrasa women is essential not only for understanding the current trend of rising enrollment in the country's madrasas (Akter and Faruque 2024; bdnews24.com 2024) but also for recognizing a growing segment of the labor force emerging from these institutions. What was a marginal presence two decades ago has become a significant force as large cohorts of women are today graduating and taking up teaching positions to join their male counterparts in shaping madrasa education (UNESCO 2024). Additionally, secularly educated women are increasingly joining madrasa-educated women in teaching or administrative roles within madrasas and madrasa-schools that primarily serve upper-middle and higher-income families.

As several scholars (Bano 2017; Borker 2018; Sanyal 2020; Sanyal and Farah 2019; Terman 2017) have shown, women's engagement with Islamic education in India and Pakistan produces realities that defy simplistic stereotypes. However, these works, besides not taking account of Bangladesh, are focused primarily either on reformist, urban, middle-class women or on traditional madrasa environments. By contrast, this research captures a more socially diverse field, encompassing women from both secular and madrasa educational backgrounds across rural and urban contexts. While the communities in which they dwell are often portrayed as the most conservative in a country shaped broadly by secular education and politics, this study shows that women's lives within them encompass a far wider spectrum of thought and practice. This study thus highlights a vital site where religion, work, and livelihood intersect, and where new ways of thinking are being forged through women's participation. The inspirations that guide these women, the opinions they voice, their orientations, and their perceptions of inequality and

equality both in religious communities and the broader society, as well as their own suggestions for improving conditions, remain entirely absent from the scholarly record. This research seeks to fill that gap by tracing women's lives as interwoven with religious commitment, study, and work across different ages, rural and urban locations, socio-economic positions, and educational backgrounds.

Background

In the background of this study is a country that is small in geography but vast in its human resources, one of the most densely populated in the world. Within this crowded landscape, the madrasa sector has emerged as both an enduring religious institution and a dynamic part of the national education system. The Aliya madrasa system originated in the colonial period with the founding of the Calcutta Alia Madrasa in 1780. Developed as a state-regulated model combining Islamic and secular education, it later shaped the Aliya madrasa stream in Bangladesh after independence in 1971. The system parallels the general education track, with *Ebtedayee* (primary), *Dakhil* (secondary), *Alim* (higher secondary), *Fazil* (undergraduate), and *Kamil* (postgraduate) levels. The Qawmi system follows the classical *Dars-e-Nizami*, a syllabus developed in 18th-century Lucknow. This combines Qur'anic exegesis, hadith, jurisprudence, and theology with Arabic grammar, logic, and philosophy. At its peak, the Qawmi track culminates in the *Dawra-e-Hadith* (specialized study of hadith), considered in the country equivalent to a master's degree in Islamic sciences. After this, graduates may pursue *Ifta* (advanced legal training leading to qualification in issuing legal opinions) to become a *mufti* (male jurist) or *muftiya* (female jurist) or continue into other forms of advanced religious scholarship. The majority of Qawmi madrasas are organized under the *Befaqul Madarisil Arabia* Bangladesh, commonly known as *Befaq*, established in 1978. This functions as the largest Qawmi education board in the country and oversees examinations, certification, and curricular regulation. From the late 1970s onward, Islamic schools, or madrasa-schools, began to emerge that combined secular education with Islamic subjects, placing greater emphasis than Aliya madrasas on the modernization of curriculum and of the integration of secular and religious streams.

Qawmi madrasas have historically been more conservative and skeptical of state involvement in religious education. They also regard Aliya madrasas, with their government affiliation and blended curricula in which secular subjects occupy a larger portion, as compromised in their Islamic authenticity. This distrust has colonial roots (Bano 2014). Under British rule, colonial educational reforms increasingly privileged Western and vernacular schooling over Islamic learning, pushing many Muslims toward new forms of secular education connected to state service (Metcalf 1982). In Bengal, many Islamic scholars resisted these reforms, maintaining madrasas outside state oversight as a way to preserve religious autonomy and resist both colonial

modernity and, later, nationalist secularism. After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the new secular state continued to prioritize general and Aliya education. In the meantime, Qawmi-affiliated scholars have positioned themselves as guardians of authentic Islam, negotiating with governments they have long distrusted. This dynamic has made madrasas a persistent site of political negotiation in Bangladesh: indispensable for millions of families seeking affordable education and religious prestige, yet controversial and objectionable within the state's broader project of secular education and politics (Riaz 2008; Uddin 2006).

Amid this socio-political context, madrasa education has continued to gain weight, and it is now the fastest-growing educational stream in the country (Banik Barta 2025). The following chart presents key statistics that illustrate both the overall expansion of madrasa education and the increasing participation of women in this sector.

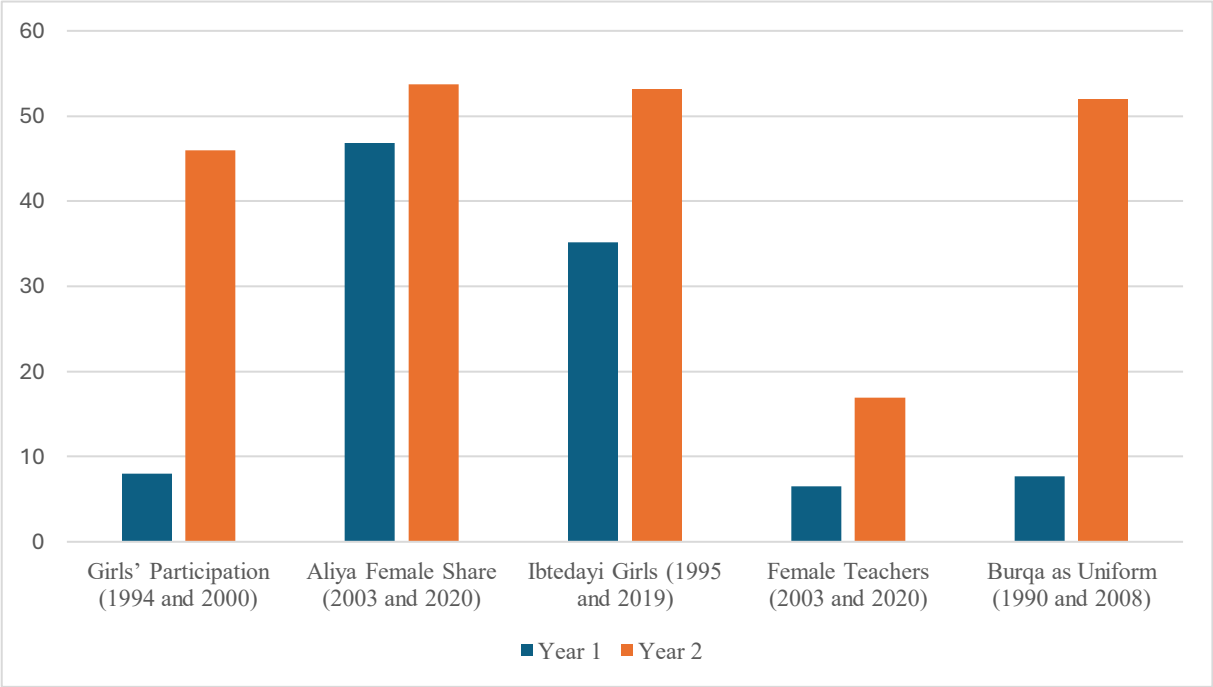

Figure 1- Female Participation & Madrasa Trends

Source: (Akter and Faruque 2024; BANBEIS 2022; bdnews24.com 2024; UNESCO 2024; Banik Barta 2025)

The chart above demonstrates the steady rise of female participation across different aspects of the madrasa system in Bangladesh. Girls' participation overall jumped from 8% in 1994 to 46% in 2000**,** marking a rapid gender shift. In Aliya madrasas, women moved from near parity to a majority, increasing from 46.8% in 2003 to 53.7% in 2020. At the Ebtedayee level, girls' share rose from 35.2% in 1995 to 53.2% in 2019, reversing earlier patterns of male dominance. Female teachers, though still a minority, more than doubled, from 6.5% in 2003 to 16.9% in 2020.

Finally, the adoption of burqa as a uniform in Aliya institutions coincided with a dramatic surge in girls' enrollment, from 7.7% in 1990 to 52% in 2008.

Collectively, these figures are the result of cultural, social, and institutional changes that made madrasa education increasingly accessible to women. Cultural adaptation, such as the adoption of burqa as a uniform (Asadullah and Wahhaj 2012), combined with parental concerns for modesty, safety, and social acceptability (Akter and Faruque 2024), created conditions for girls' participation in madrasa education. These were further reinforced by institutional changes, most notably government incentives like the Female Secondary School Assistance Program, which reduced costs and encouraged families to send their daughters to school (Asadullah and Chaudhury 2008). As a result, female enrollment rose to about 1.48 million**,** constituting 53.5 percent of the total 2.76 million madrasa students in 2022 (BANBEIS 2022). It is within this educational landscape that I situate my study.

Atmospheric Agency and Moral Reasoning

Before turning to existing scholarship, it is important to note that this conceptual shift did not emerge solely from theoretical engagement, but from observations developed through both my earlier familiarity with madrasa communities and my fieldwork for this study. Across these engagements, I encountered a recurring lack of uniformity in women's views and decisions that could not be explained through categories such as resistance, conformity, or empowerment. What appeared more consistent across these differences was a process: women reasoning about their lives in moral terms. This empirical puzzle led me to shift attention from what agency looks like to how it operates.

My concept of atmospheric agency also emerges from scholarship that proposes different explanations of the agency of religious and particularly Muslim women. These works have unsettled liberal assumptions about autonomy, resistance, and freedom as the primary markers of agency. By reframing agency as inhabiting norms, responding to forces beyond the self, and examining diverse ways in which action and ethical life are constituted, they provide the conceptual foundation from which I extend the argument.

My contention is that these explanations, while valuable for widening the lens on the *forms* such agency can take, do not address the crucial question of *how* agency is exercised. Nor do they pay sufficient attention to context – what I term "atmosphere". I begin here by outlining several explanations of the forms of agency that are useful for this study, before defining my own concept of how Muslim women's agency in the madrasa world of Bangladesh is exercised through moral reasoning within their own particular atmospheres.

Saba Mahmood's work, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005) argues that agency can take the form of inhabiting existing norms. She contends that the liberal

political subject assumed in feminist scholarship "elides dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance" (19). Drawing on her ethnography of the women's mosque movement in Cairo, she conceptualizes agency not only as the capacity to resist but also as the capacity to inhabit norms by engaging in the cultivation of a pious self. For Mahmood, agency cannot be assumed to lie in a universal desire for freedom such that agency is located in resistance to or subversion of norms but must rather be understood in relation to the historically and culturally specific conditions through which forms of responsibility and action take shape. Mahmood also emphasizes the bodily dimensions of ethical practice. In her account, virtues such as modesty are not simply internal qualities that are subsequently expressed through outward conduct. Rather, bodily practices themselves play a central role in cultivating these virtues. As she explains, a modest bodily form, particularly the veiled body, did not, among the women in her study, "simply express the self's interiority" but was "the means by which it was acquired" (Mahmood 2005, 161).

My study is located in the post-feminist scholarship that is largely a result of the turn initiated by Mahmood's seminal work. I do indeed consider that the women I studied possess agency in their inhabiting of madrasa norms. I also take away from Mahmood the idea of bodily practices as evidence of agency. I contend, however, that agency is made in moral reasoning. This, I believe, is to some degree implicit in Mahmood's work; but her analysis focuses primarily on bodily discipline rather than on reasoning itself. Mahmood also pays little attention to the context of the women's lives she studies, leaving open, as scholars have noted (e.g. Chapman 2016), questions about how agency is exercised within wider social relations, including, crucially, class position and practices beyond the mosque (Bangstad 2011). It is precisely this relationship between context and reasoning that this study seeks to examine.

I will now present several recent examples from the large body of scholarship built on Mahmood's insights that are useful for highlighting different forms of agency, even if they do not directly address the key question, in my view, of how agency operates.

Mittermaier (2012) extends the critique of liberal notions of agency by arguing that ethical life cannot be understood solely through the idea of self-cultivation, as Mahmood does. She emphasizes instead modes of subjectivity partly shaped by being acted upon, that is by receptivity to what comes from beyond the self. She shows how ethical orientation emerges through responsiveness to what "comes to" the subject—such as dreams, encounters, or divine intervention—rather than through intentional self-fashioning alone. Agency, in her view, lies in how people make meaning out of what touches or moves them as they reorient their lives in response. Thus, she points to the importance of context, albeit in a particular sense. The women in my study likewise come to religion through experiences beyond the self, including encounters with transcendent meaning.

Faith as a form or source of agency, especially in the face of difficulties in life, has also been highlighted. For instance, Culcasi (2024), working with Syrian Muslim women refugees in Jordan, shows how women draw on religious faith to navigate experiences of displacement and hardship. In their narratives, women often describe themselves as strong and capable, attributing their endurance and resilience in difficult circumstances to religion. In my study, I similarly found that women who faced difficult circumstances such as challenges related to study and work often navigated these experiences through faith, drawing on it as a source of strength and guidance.

A number of studies have highlighted how women's agency is exercised while negotiating with modernity. Chaoui (2023) shows that practices like veiling can be deliberate and meaningful choices. In this sense, agency does not have to mean independence from tradition; it can also mean acting through faith within a secular society. Similarly, Deeb (2006) in her ethnography of pious Shia women in Lebanon shows how women pursue what she calls an "enchanted modern," combining commitments to modern life with religious devotion. This demonstrates that religious practice can form part of women's agentic engagement with modernity rather than stand in opposition to it. My study reflects a similar dynamic, as the women I worked with negotiated modern life through the interpretive frameworks of their religious traditions.

Agency has also been examined in the context of politics. To examine how Muslim women articulate political agency through public speech and moral claims, Hussain (2024), for instance, examines Muslim girls' voices and the contexts in which they spoke following the *hijab* (Islamic head covering) ban in colleges in Karnataka. The author shows how political agency emerges through public assertion and the making of moral claims, requiring a recalibration of what counts as politics and political agency. Similarly, Jamal (2013), in her study of women in the political party Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan, shows how Islamist women use religion as a way to act politically and shape modern society. Rather than separating faith from politics, these women mobilize religious discourse and institutions to participate in public life and influence social and political debates. Some of the women in my study similarly exercise agency in political form by being active in the political arena through their support for Islamically aligned movements. It may also be argued that they exercise political agency by presenting themselves as a different kind of religious woman than those often portrayed in the dominantly secular public discourse of Bangladesh.

Sehlikoglu (2018) approaches agency as an epistemological question. She reframes Muslim women's agency not as a stable attribute or oppositional capacity, but as a problem shaped by how subjectivity is rendered visible in scholarship. She shows how repeated attempts to locate agency, whether through resistance, piety, or ethical self-making, have often narrowed analytic attention to recognizable forms of action, obscuring imagination, aspiration, desire, ambivalence, and the unevenness of everyday life. In this account, agency emerges through shifting relations between social structures and subjective life rather than as a property lodged in autonomous

subjects. This move redirects analytic focus from what women do to how scholarly frameworks shape what can count as action, intention, and ethical life. Several women's stories in my study similarly reflect this form of agency, emerging through shifting relations between aspirations, social structures, and subjective life.

Bucar goes beyond focus on the forms agency can take to examine, in a move that anticipates the approach of my study, how religious women receive and negotiate with clerical discourse. In *Creative Conformity* (2011), she develops the concept of "dianomy" to explain how women think and act when religious authority already defines what is "right." Women receiving such rhetoric, she finds, neither simply rebel nor simply conform. Instead, through what she calls "creative conformity," they work within authoritative teachings, adjusting and redirecting them from inside the tradition so that "multiple heteronomous norms are realigned" (ibid., 7). For example, she discusses how women in the Islamic Republic of Iran follow clerical statements concerning women and their roles while redirecting them in ways that support their public roles. Similarly, in *Pious Fashion*, Bucar (2017) shows how women achieve creative conformity by subtly altering while also following established judgments about modesty. Her work has a narrow focus, dealing with the rhetoric of clerical discourse and examining, at a granular level, how women change the logics of that discourse. Nevertheless, one could conclude that, although she does not explicitly state this, agency in Bucar's view lies in how women interpret religious norms.

In shifting the question from the various forms agency may take (particularly those exercised while inhabiting a religious tradition) to where it is located and how it works, I place moral reasoning at the center of my analysis. This thesis understands agency as that through which something takes effect, as in the agency of divine will through which existence unfolds. I contend that agency lies in the moral reasoning through which Bangladeshi madrasa women orient and direct their lives. Agency, therefore, is not simply what women do, but how they reason. By moral reasoning, I refer to the ways women think through, interpret, and orient their lives in relation to religious commitments and ethical concerns. Such reasoning unfolds within the atmospheres of their lives, through which moral worlds are inhabited and sometimes reoriented.

Atmosphere in this study is a composite of education, socio-economic conditions, cultural orientation, family life, and intellectual and psychological exposure. Women act within these conditions through reflection and interpretive reasoning, rather than through passive accommodation. It is this process of reflective reasoning shaped within these educational, socio-economic, familial, cultural, intellectual, and psychological conditions that best explains how madrasa women in Bangladesh make sense of and act within their worlds. The experiences and lives of the women in this study thus show how agency can take shape through moral reasoning. Agency here is not merely a question of "Did she act?" but also, and more fundamentally, "How did she reason?" Actions (which include apparent non-actions, that is accepting present

conditions and restrictions) are read as agentival outcomes of ethical reasoning. Agency is therefore not measured by observable action but by the moral reasoning through which action (or non-action) becomes meaningful.

As for atmosphere, it does not refer simply to an environment, setting, or background condition within which action takes place. Nor is it limited to mood, affect, or everyday experience. Rather, these are all elements of atmosphere, not discrete or self-contained but interconnected and situated within the broader contexts in which moral reasoning unfolds. When speaking of such an element, I often use the word "atmosphere" to avoid repeating the awkward phrase "element of atmosphere". Thus, when I introduce phrases such as "atmosphere of segregation" or "virtual atmosphere," I am specifying the particular institutional or digital setting under discussion. This does not imply that it is the only setting a given participant inhabits, but rather that it represents one dimension or subset of the broader atmosphere within which the reasoning of a woman unfolds.

To take an example, the atmospheres of madrasas and families inclined many of the women in this study to believe that they must maintain Islamic dress and gender boundaries. Some worked in mixed-gender workplaces, while others did not, decisions that reflected the influence of their familial and institutional atmospheres. In many cases, these choices were in conformity with the environments they inhabited. However, not all of the women came from families that strictly practiced or enforced Islamic dress codes. For some, the influence of a circle of friends or a deepened engagement with global, online religious discussions reshaped their moral reasoning. This led them to move beyond their family's more relaxed approach to Islamic dress and gender interaction, as well as the family's emphasis on secular educational and professional aspirations. This, in turn, led the women to adopt stricter understandings of Islamic dress and, in some cases, to reject or discontinue employment in mixed-gender settings. In each case, women's decisions emerged through moral reasoning within overlapping contexts, including institutional settings, family life, socio-economic conditions, peer networks, and transnational religious influences. Importantly, when a woman declined employment, whether in accordance with or departing from familial expectations, this did not indicate a lack of agency. Each decision, even when it had the appearance of conformity, resulted from moral reasoning, the process in which agency fundamentally lies. All of the women, including those who apparently conformed, had reflected on what kinds of futures seemed morally desirable and practically attainable, and acted accordingly.

Unpacking these cases would lead to consideration of additional elements of an atmosphere. For instance, one woman experienced a feeling of moral unease or inner tension as she reflected on whether her work aligned with her religious commitments. That unease, the lingering discomfort that something was not fully aligned, formed part of the atmosphere in which she reasoned and acted. Such affects are not fleeting emotions. They are decisive in shaping the agentival moral reasoning that precedes action.

Atmosphere as defined in this study also includes psychological orientation and sensorial engagement. For instance, a few women experienced a sudden shift in religious commitment following a significant life event. This psychological turning point led them to engage more deeply with religious texts, which had not previously characterized their lives. Similarly, finding peace through practices such as praying, reciting the Qur'an, or engaging with devotional songs can constitute part of an atmosphere that strengthens faith and ethical orientation. As elements of an atmosphere, such practices can, in some cases, redirect women's life trajectories, motivating them to reason toward religious education or religiously oriented work rather than secular paths. In other cases, the process may unfold in the opposite direction, where engagement with religious life provides the moral grounding through which women reason toward pursuing secular education or professional aspirations.

Thus, atmosphere refers to the complex and interdependent dynamics through which women's moral reasoning is formed and oriented. It is constituted by the convergence of social relations, economic conditions, institutional positioning, spatial location, religious instruction, digital exposure, familial expectations, emotion or affect, and psychological and intellectual engagement. The term atmosphere is analytically necessary because none of the single concepts mentioned above can capture how these multiple forces intersect and exert influence together. And agency, as understood here, refers to the process of moral reasoning as it unfolds within one's own atmosphere and becomes persuasive in orienting a particular way of life. I therefore propose "atmospheric agency" as a process of moral reasoning unfolding within the atmospheres of women's lives, which differ from person to person. Within these atmospheres, agency may take the form of self-cultivation, inhabitation, receptivity, deliberate choice, or even resistance, depending on how women reason within them.

The dynamics of atmosphere can be illustrated through the case of Participant 3 of this study. Participant 3 completed her honors degree, enjoyed working with computers, and had taken computer coding courses with the intention of pursuing a secular master's program that would lead to a stable career. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, her atmosphere shifted due to exposure to online religious materials, new emotional uncertainties, and intensified reflection, all of which together made a different path feel compelling. She abandoned her expected academic and professional trajectory, surprising her family, and began studying in an online madrasa without knowing whether it would lead to work or material security. In economic understandings of agency, where agency is tied to expanding one's opportunities, material stability, and future prospects, such a decision might appear as a retreat from agency. But in the framework of atmospheric agency, the reasoning itself is a site of agency. For Participant 3, agency lay in the interpretive reasoning through which she came to see a morally resonant path as right, even without predictable worldly benefit. The administrative job she later received in an online madrasa was not the aim that motivated her shift, since that became available only after. What

mattered was the reasoning that guided her into uncertainty, revealing agency in this particular case not as resistance, inhabiting of norms or material progress, but as moral orientation.

Methodology

Research Question

How do women educated in or working in madrasas in Bangladesh agentively employ moral reasoning within the atmospheres of their lives as they inhabit religious norms or depart from social conventions to deepen their religious commitments and reshape those atmospheres? This question directs attention away from external judgments of empowerment or oppression and from the view that women's agency lies only in inhabiting established norms. It seeks to understand how religious knowledge and feeling are integrated through moral reasoning within the particular atmospheres of women's lives.

Positionality

I fully recognize the importance of balancing insider knowledge with outsider perspectives in research (Merton 1972). My positionality as a visible Muslim Bangladeshi woman whose interpretation of Islam often differs from that of many within the madrasa community places me in a distinctive space between familiarity and distance. Trained in economics and finance and now pursuing graduate research in religions and cultures in Canada, I occupy a complex and shifting position. My background allows me to move between the domains of work and religious education, both of which shape how women's roles in society are imagined, practiced, and debated. I also came to this research with prior connections to the community, developed through donation-related volunteer work and research interest. A case study I conducted on a madrasa-orphanage and its struggle to survive during and after the COVID-19 pandemic helped me build trust and understand local institutional dynamics (Tarannum 2022). This earlier engagement provided a foundation for participant recruitment through existing relationships, which proved to be an effective and culturally appropriate point of entry into the field. The intimate religious worlds of madrasa women, with whom I share linguistic and social familiarity, added strength to this dynamic and positioned me as an insider in the research process. This connection facilitated trust and access, particularly in conservative circles where external researchers, especially those affiliated with Western institutions, are often met with skepticism. Yet my academic trajectory, shaped by studying outside the madrasa system in Bangladesh and later abroad, simultaneously marked me as an outsider. This dual positionality required continual reflection: to listen attentively without assuming shared understanding, and to interpret participants' narratives in

ways that remained faithful to their moral and intellectual frameworks rather than conforming to prevailing or pre-conceived notions. My background enabled me to approach madrasa women with cultural familiarity and sensitivity, while my scholarly training encouraged me to critically examine assumptions about agency, empowerment, and piety. I believe this positionality was conducive to developing a fuller understanding of the women. However, given that the madrasa community is typically gender-segregated and that members of opposite genders generally have limited interactions, my identity as a woman also influenced the dynamics of interaction at times. Most female participants were very open with me, discussing a wide range of topics, whereas most of the male participants tended to be more reserved.

Ethics

Working with women in religious institutions required particular care. I guaranteed confidentiality through assigning numbers, secured informed consent, and prioritized participants' comfort in all digital exchanges. Interestingly, the university ethics review process itself revealed certain cultural assumptions. Reviewers expressed concern that the women I interviewed might be vulnerable or exposed to risk if their views were perceived as critical of madrasa education. However, my field experience with these women was strikingly different from such assumptions. They were articulate, confident in both their studies and lives—sometimes defiant, and often self-assured in framing their choices on their own terms.

Institutional ethics guidelines considered other communication tools to be more secure for data protection than WhatsApp. However, WhatsApp was chosen as the sole medium for conducting interviews, as it is the most widely accessible and comfortable platform in Bangladesh, even among participants with higher levels of formal education. The application is inexpensive, familiar, and widely used across the country—along with platforms such as Imo and Telegram—even in remote areas. Other long-distance communication tools, such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, were not used, as they were unfamiliar to many participants. I myself use WhatsApp to call home, since regular international calls from Canada to Bangladesh are very expensive. For this reason, I contacted all participants through WhatsApp. While several participants could have used alternative platforms had I insisted, most simply shared their phone numbers and, as is customary in Bangladesh, said something like: "Call me on that day." I chose not to lengthen the process by introducing another platform that is more common in academic settings but did not seem necessary in this context.

To ensure data protection, I registered a new phone number specifically for this research. The WhatsApp account will be permanently deleted upon completion of this study, in accordance with the university's privacy and security protocols. Consent of participants was obtained verbally rather than through written forms. In this community, and more broadly in Bangladesh,

signing papers is often regarded with suspicion, and it would have been culturally inappropriate to request it from participants. Such a request might have made most of them hesitant to speak freely or to participate at all. Verbal consent, by contrast, was readily given, and participants often shared contacts of others they thought might contribute. None refused to participate, and many welcomed the project, noting that their voices are rarely sought in research and that they valued the opportunity to contribute.

I have chosen not to include any photographs obtained through digital ethnography of madrasas, classrooms, or religious events in this paper, as all the photos included persons below the age of consent. It thus would be ethically inappropriate to use images of children without the explicit consent of both the children and their parents. Obtaining such permission was not feasible. In Bangladesh, it is a common practice among madrasas to use children's photographs for donation campaigns and to share them on social media platforms. However, the academic use of such images without consent is ethically problematic, particularly when the children themselves or their guardians have not been consulted. One participant also confidentially shared photographs and videos depicting girls studying in the madrasa, their living spaces, and their surroundings. The madrasa community generally refrains from sharing girls' images or videos on social media. This participant, therefore, gave strict instructions that images and videos of the girls should not be shown to anyone, including other women. I am thus bound to respect her request and uphold these ethical boundaries.

Digital ethnography

As Khan's (2024) work on voice-only WhatsApp interviews demonstrates, audio calls can be a culturally appropriate and embodied mode of interaction, especially in contexts where participants are more comfortable speaking than appearing on video. In a similar way, all interviews in this study were conducted through WhatsApp across transnational distance—from Canada to Bangladesh—as part of a broader digital ethnography. Most interviews took place as voice-only calls, which aligned with participants' preferences and made the interaction feel easier and less formal when speaking to someone they did not know personally. Video calls occurred only when participants themselves requested them, usually for brief informal conversation before or after the interview. One rural female participant, for example, used video to show me her surroundings and her students without ever revealing her own face, despite my being a woman. Two male participants also chose to use video. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and conducted over approximately four months (June–September 2025).

This digital interview format facilitated a conversational mode that felt accessible and attentive to participants' comfort. The absence of video allowed participants to focus on speech, tone, and reflection rather than visual self-presentation or managing visible reactions. This supported more

extended and thoughtful narration of their lives, experiences, reasoning, and aspirations. Follow-up exchanges through text messages further allowed participants to elaborate on ideas and reasoning over time, giving the research a longitudinal quality. Through these exchanges, participants also shared photographs of their work, workplaces, students, classrooms, and aspirations, such as calligraphy, culinary projects, or paintings. These visual materials offered glimpses into participants' everyday atmospheres, revealing how moral reasoning, aspiration, and practice were situated within the spaces they inhabited. Therefore, digital ethnography did not limit the scope of the research, but instead enabled forms of privacy, closeness, and attunement that might have been difficult to achieve through video-based interviews and even more so through on-site, face-to-face interaction, which the kinds of subjects I was interviewing would likely have found conspicuous and intrusive. Conducting interviews through voice calls also allowed conversations to take place flexibly within the rhythms of participants' everyday lives. At times, I could hear children playing, talking, or singing nearby who might interrupt the discussion while I was speaking with their father or mother. Participants spoke while cooking, teaching their children, or managing household tasks in the early morning, evening, or late at night. This flexibility allowed interviews to unfold at times that were most accessible to participants and embedded within their domestic and working environments. Such moments offered presence and ease that might have been constrained, formalized, or missed altogether in face-to-face or video interviews.

The interviews were complemented by digital ethnographic observation of WhatsApp and Facebook pages, groups or channels. These groups serve as key spaces of religious and social participation, where women engage in *dua* (prayer) and *istighfar* (seeking forgiveness) sessions, share Qur'anic recitations, discuss religious questions, and organize acts of *sadaqa* (charity). Alongside these devotional exchanges, another set of online activities centered on the circulation of photographs and posts to collect donations for madrasas, which are largely sustained through community contributions. The digital fieldwork, therefore, included the analysis of publicly shared images and donation appeals—collected from social media platforms as well as received directly from participants—revealing how religious devotion and economic support intertwine within the everyday digital practices of the madrasa community. In addition, I followed and analyzed one public Facebook page for a couple of months during the interview period; the page was followed and suggested to me for inclusion in the study by a small number of my participants. Maintained by a former madrasa student now working as an academic overseas, it was examined to trace peripheral contemporary Islamic discourses circulating at the margins of the madrasa community.

To understand the madrasa community under study, it was essential to know it digitally. Rifat et al. (2022) document how Islamic sermons have shifted to social media, creating new digital publics of pious engagement. This accords with my own observation that madrasa participants in Bangladesh are increasingly active online. Through my long-term interactions with the

community, I observed that teachers, students, and graduates engage actively on platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Likewise, Pink et al. (2016) position digital ethnography as an approach to studying life that situates research within environments where the digital, material, and sensory are inseparable. They stress that such environments, what they describe as *compositions* of interwoven digital, material, sensory, and affective strands, are not static but continually shifting, requiring ethnographers to adapt their methods as these worlds develop and change. As they explain:

Each different medium, technology, and material, sensory, or affective strand of these compositions became entangled to create a series of statements about or sensations of the local, while as a whole they created a composition of locality. The task of the digital ethnographer is to unravel such compositions and to recompose them through their ethnographic practice, this time with their interpretive notes and framing ideas woven in (Pink et al. 2016, 171).

This framing proved especially suitable to my study given my longstanding familiarity with the people and their lifeworlds. Having lived side by side with this community all my life, I was able to understand their 'compositions' easily, including their households, food, clothing, weather, and everyday routines, which created a context of ease and openness in gaining knowledge. Consequently, the combination of digital ethnography and interviews proved deeply connected, enabling a fuller understanding of how people inhabit religious ideas and how the ideas of the participants I interviewed relate to their lives.

This study also builds on Stewart's (2011) concept of atmospheric attunements. The concept is useful for understanding how digital environments function not only as spaces of interaction but also as affective fields where emotions, moods, and ethical sensibilities circulate among participants. This perspective informed my observation of the madrasa community's digital life. The online practices I observed generated a lively atmosphere that expanded the lens of the study beyond the physical madrasas. They helped to reveal how ethical traditions and social norms are interpreted, circulated, and reasoned through by women in contemporary contexts—dimensions not easily captured through interviews or in-person visits alone.

Sample and Participants

I employed a snowball sampling method, beginning with a small group of contacts who then referred me to others. As mentioned earlier, I was already familiar with this community through my previous work. Even so, contacting women in madrasa environments is culturally sensitive and must follow accepted social pathways. Access was mediated by personal introductions and trust within close-knit networks, as women are unlikely to engage with outsiders who do not come through someone they already know and trust.

In total, I interviewed 56 participants through WhatsApp calls, texts, and voice messages—mostly women, but also a few men. The considerable number of interviewees allowed me to develop a more complete understanding of women's position in madrasa education and its everyday socio-economic dynamics in the two different systems. Although this study centers women's experiences, a small number of male participants were included because men often occupy decisive positions within the madrasa community as family heads, guardians, teachers, institutional leaders, or owners, through which women's access to education, work, and mobility is shaped. Men's perspectives therefore help illuminate the authority structures and moral expectations within which women reason and act. Participants were drawn from multiple districts of Bangladesh, namely: Dhaka, Rajshahi, Narayanganj, Mymensingh, Narshingdi, Moulvibazar, Noakhali, Sylhet, Bogura, Dinajpur, and Thakurgaon. The sample encompassed a wide range of roles, including teachers, students, madrasa owners, guardians, and other jobholders. One participant worked as a volunteer coordinating and managing donations across several madrasas, highlighting the diverse forms of engagement that sustain these educational institutions.

Both male and female Qawmi teachers are normally employed at an early age, often immediately after completing Dawra-e-Hadith (sometimes when they are 15–16 years old), while others pursue higher education, generally within the Aliya system. Qawmi-educated male teachers often have the opportunity to pursue further study either abroad or within Bangladesh. For instance, one Qawmi madrasa owner and principal I interviewed had completed a PhD in *Tafsir al-Qur'an* (exegesis or interpretation of the Qur'an) from a *Jamea* (higher Islamic seminary) madrasa in Dhaka. Such pathways, however, were absent among the Qawmi female teachers in my sample, none of whom reported comparable opportunities for advanced study. My participant pool also included secular-educated women who now teach general subjects in both the Aliya and Qawmi madrasas. Some had transitioned between secular and madrasa education at different points in their lives. For example, one participant, formerly a PhD candidate in the U.K., left her program after three years of study and later joined a madrasa-school as a vice principal. This shows the diversity of educational and professional trajectories represented in the sample. I also interviewed current students from both madrasa and secular backgrounds. All participants were connected to madrasa education in some capacity, either as current or former students or teachers, or as madrasa owners. One donor also participated, offering additional insight into institutional dynamics. Below is a table summarizing the demographic characteristics of the participants:

Demographic Tables

Table 1- Participants by Work Role, Gender, and Area

Role in society	**Female rural**	**Female urban**	**Male rural**	**Male urban**
Aliya student	2	1	0	0
Aliya teacher	3	0	2	0
Aliya tuition teacher	0	1	0	0
Aliya unemployed	0	1	0	0
Madrasa-school student	0	3	0	0
Madrasa-school teacher	0	8	0	1
Owner qawmi	0	1	2	2
Qawmi student	1	1	0	0
Qawmi teacher	4	5	5	0
Qawmi tuition teacher	2	1	0	0
Qawmi unemployed	0	2	0	0
Secular student	2	0	0	0
Other	0	4	0	2

*Category 'Other' includes 1 police officer, 1 private service holder, 2 entrepreneurs, a madrasa-school administrator, and an online madrasa administrator.

‘Qawmi teacher’ includes online madrasa teachers affiliated with or rooted in Qawmi institutions.
Secular students attended Aliya madrasas and later transitioned to higher secular studies.

Table 2- Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	**Value**
Age (years)	Range: 18–61, Mean: 31.1
Most represented age group	18–25 (n = 23)
Gender	Female: 42, Male: 14
Socioeconomic background	Higher income: 24, Middle income: 22, Lower-middle income: 10
Area	Urban: 33, Rural: 23

The interviews were semi-structured, typically lasting 45–50 minutes, and some went beyond one hour. The language of communication was Bangla. None of the participants used *ancholik* (regional or dialectal) Bangla; they all spoke in standard Bangla. This is standard practice in the country, as educated people, regardless of whether they come from Bangla or English-medium public, private, or madrasa backgrounds, are familiar with the official form of the language. However, for participants from Sylhet, the interviews were conducted in Sylheti. As someone from Sylhet myself, it was culturally expected that our conversation would take place in the dialect, and participants naturally spoke in Sylheti without any need to discuss or decide on a language in advance. Throughout the study, Arabic terms are transliterated as they are commonly used in Bangladesh and by the participants themselves such as *majlish* rather than *majlis*.

After the interview, participants often continued conversations via text messaging. When clarifications were needed, I followed up by text, and most participants replied generously and without hesitation. One sent me photographs of her creative works. One did not sit for an interview and answered through texts over a month-long exchange. She said she was not good at talking but felt more comfortable writing, and she eventually became very friendly, talking a lot through text. One participant, the lone young police officer, did not want to share many details and did not want to be recorded. She reasoned that her department forbade them from being recorded for anything. She also talked via messages for over three months. One male participant

did not take part in a formal interview but granted permission for his story and views to be included, based on long-term personal familiarity and contextual understanding developed through prior interactions.

Some women also invited me into digital religious communities (additional to the platforms observed over one year referred to above). These included women-only WhatsApp or Facebook groups dedicated to Qur'an recitation, *na't* (religious poetry in praise of the Prophet, often sung in the South Asian context), *nasheed* (devotional songs), or *masla-masayel* (practical legal matters) question-and-answer sessions. While the majority of these groups were gender-specific, a very small number included both men and women.

Contrary to the widespread assumption in secular Bangladeshi society that madrasa-educated women are shy and reluctant to speak to outsiders, I found most participants frank, articulate, and willing to discuss even personal aspects of their lives. Only a small number were more reserved, speaking primarily in response to direct questions. A handful of participants expressed suspicion about my purpose. Two or three participants asked probing questions before agreeing to take part, and one woman insisted on consulting her *ustad* (male teacher) before speaking with me, explaining that "given the current situation, American institutions are not trustworthy." These interactions showed that access was not automatic but required careful navigation of community expectations and sensitivities. They also pointed to a community-wide skepticism toward Western academic research. This skepticism is shaped by geopolitical histories and by stereotypical ideas about religious communities in popular Western culture (Oztig 2023).

Approach to Data Analysis

All interviews and digital materials were documented and processed using Excel and SPSS. After transcribing the recorded WhatsApp audio calls and organizing the semi-structured conversations, I developed a coding framework that combined descriptive variables, such as gender, socioeconomic background, rural–urban location, and institutional affiliation, with thematically organized categories drawn from the interview data. These categories included pathways into madrasa education, aspirations, women's financial contribution to the household, reform concerns, women's public participation, and dress practices. Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations were used to trace patterns across these categories, which were then read alongside interview narratives to illuminate how women's moral and socioeconomic reasoning takes shape within different institutional and social contexts. In addition, a brief linear regression analysis was conducted to examine earnings differences across institutional affiliation, location, gender, and work experience. This was done to situate women's experiences of learning and teaching within the material conditions that shape educational atmospheres.

Institutional Classification Used in This Study

With specific attention to women's education, the institutional distinctions employed in this study are outlined in the figure below.

Table 3- Types of institutions in the study

Orientation	***Institutions***	
Conservative	Traditional Qawmi	Online Qawmi
Reformist	Aliya	Madrasa-school

Two clarifications are necessary in this context: First, while *madrasa* literally means "school" or "a place of learning," the term has a more specific meaning in Bangladesh. In everyday usage, madrasa does not simply refer to a school; it specifically denotes an Islamic educational institution, which may be at the school, college, or university level. For this reason, the phrase "madrasa-school" may appear redundant or confusing in a literal sense, but it reflects the practical use of the term in Bangladesh. In this paper, the term madrasa-school refers to institutions that combine the academic structure of secular schools with the religious curriculum and practices of Islamic madrasas. These are not merely schools with an Islamic ethos, but privately run institutions that integrate secular and religious education.

Second, state-regulated Aliya is placed under the reformist category in this analysis because its approach to women's education and everyday gender practices more closely resembles that of the madrasa-schools than that of the Qawmi system. Although madrasa-schools are a relatively recent development, having grown rapidly only over the last two decades, both Qawmi and Aliya have long historical lineages. Qawmi madrasas have earlier historical precedence, but Aliya is also an older institutional form, as mentioned in the Background section. By contrast, madrasa-schools or Islamic schools are comparatively recent institutions, with a history of roughly five decades.

Finally, the reformist category is referred to as the modern setting throughout the paper because these institutions combine Islamic learning with modern curricula and forms of instruction. While Qawmi madrasas also incorporate some modern subjects to a limited extent, the modern setting makes more extensive use of modern educational instruction.

Overview

This thesis is organized around institutional worlds of learning rather than spatial or demographic divisions. While I initially expected women's experiences to vary primarily along rural–urban lines, the analysis revealed that differences were shaped more decisively by institutional affiliation and educational orientation. Across regions, women's lives were structured less by geography than by the moral, affective, and pedagogical atmospheres of the institutions in which they studied, taught, or worked. These atmospheres produced two broad worlds of learning, conservative and reformist, within which women's moral reasonings unfolded. Throughout the first three chapters, I begin by describing these atmospheres and then move to instances of moral reasoning and the agency contained therein. However, because aspects of atmosphere are particular to each woman depending on her personal circumstances, they are, at times, presented alongside women's reasoning rather than as a separate background.

Chapter One focuses on conservative Qawmi madrasa environments, examining how women reason within the atmosphere of classical pedagogical traditions. Chapter Two turns to reformist Aliya and madrasa-school settings, where the integration of religious and general education produces a different atmosphere giving rise to different gendered possibilities and moral reasoning. Chapter Three focuses on technology, including online madrasas, social media, and mobile phone use. It shows how digital mediation reshapes access to religious knowledge through new forms of global and local connectivity, while also functioning as a site of moral regulation. Chapter Four brings these ethnographic insights into dialogue with quantitative patterns, mapping how socioeconomic background, institutional affiliation, and spatial location structure the atmospheres within which women's reasoning about work, contribution, aspiration, and reform takes shape.

Through these chapters, this thesis argues that the agency of Bangladeshi madrasa women is best understood through the atmospheric conditions in which moral reasoning unfolds, which ultimately give form to their religious life, work, and aspirations.

Chapter One
Conservative Worlds of Learning: Making Moral Subjects through Segregation

> While men and women are ontologically equal as human creations, they are not meant to be socially equal in the life of this world.
>
> —Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam* (2006, 116)

In Qawmi madrasas, the belief that men and women are spiritually equal yet socially part of a hierarchy shapes every dimension of life—economic, familial, and institutional. This understanding of gender is not seen as cultural convention but rather as religious obligation. Qawmi madrasas in Bangladesh, whether rural or urban and residential or non-residential, operate in this same moral atmosphere. In this chapter focused on Qawmi madrasas, I examine this segregated world, one in which my female participants understand segregation and gendered hierarchy as guiding principles in their daily lives.

Qawmi curricula follow the Dars-e-Nizami framework, emphasizing Qur'anic recitation, memorization, Arabic instruction, and moral education, alongside a limited inclusion of secular subjects such as mathematics, English, and Bangla. These are taught under the guidance of senior male scholars. Although most Qawmi institutions are affiliated with the Befaq al-Madaris al-Arabia Bangladesh, the largest Qawmi board, which standardizes the Dars-e-Nizami syllabus and oversees examinations and certification, the madrasas remain outside direct government regulation. The balance between secular and religious subjects varies across individual institutions, depending on the preferences of madrasa authorities or managing committees. Across these settings, which include both residential and day institutions, a shared ethical and pedagogical logic shapes educational and work life. By linking learning with religious service and centering work within the madrasa, particularly in teaching and administration, these institutions configure the atmospheres in which women's reasoning takes shape. In the following sections, I describe these rural–urban, high- or low-income, and institutional or affective atmospheres in which women live and act. Following this, I analyze women's reasoning within their particular contexts. In some cases, the analysis moves between atmosphere and reasoning, as each helps make the other intelligible.

Atmospheres of Segregation

The atmosphere of segregation within traditional madrasas is not limited to physical separation between men and women. It extends into the moral, spatial, and affective organization of life. Segregation determines how knowledge, discipline, and authority are distributed and how piety is felt and expressed. In the following two subsections, I describe how this atmosphere takes shape in spaces of learning and how women reason and act within it.

Segregated Worlds of Learning

Qawmi tradition draws upon long-standing Islamic scholarship, interpreting it through its own historical and social contexts. It shapes moral discourse through repeated emphases on women's piety and moral conduct. For instance, it teaches canonical texts such as *Beheshti Zewar* (Heavenly Ornaments) to women. It is a hadith-based work of moral literature composed by the Indian scholar Ashraf Ali Thanwi (d. 1943) that delineates an ideal of womanhood centered on domestic virtue. The book situates women's moral duty within the home and apart from the world of men. These texts and teachings provide an intellectual and moral vocabulary that these institutions engage with, often reading them as evidence of an enduring ethical order. Qawmi tradition also engages with classical Islamic concepts, regarding them as fixed for all time. For example, Al-Ghazali (d. 1111), citing another scholar, writes: "Her contribution to freeing [the man] is by both taking care of the house and satisfying sexual desire" (al-Ghazali 1984, 66–67). In the context of his time, such a statement reflected a socially accepted hierarchy of care and responsibility. In my study, the Qawmi world today largely appears to preserve such moral tones that understand women as divinely designated as having responsibilities within the family and being separated from the male world. This was evident in my observations of sermons and in the audio and video recordings of talks by Qawmi i*mams* (leaders of prayer in the mosque) and ustads shared within religious social media groups. Similar patterns have been noted in studies of madrasa ethics and gender in South Asia, which show that female madrasa education deepens women's religious consciousness and participation while leaving patriarchal ideas about gender largely unchanged (Begum and Kabir 2012). To understand this segregated world, where men and women, girls and boys inhabit distinct social and moral environments within Qawmi madrasas, I turn to my digital ethnography. In what follows, I present the digital materials I collected to describe the institutional atmosphere. Where necessary, I draw on participants' interviews to contextualize and interpret these materials.

A few participants shared various photos and videos of their madrasas via WhatsApp, and I also collected additional materials from their institutions' social media posts and donation pages. The boys' classrooms in these videos and photos were marked by zeal and noise showing rhythmic rocking while studying, recitations echoing through the sunlit halls, and bursts of competitive, enthusiastic energy. In these images, students appeared deeply engaged in their studies, especially in Qur'an memorization, an enthusiasm that was strengthened by teachers' encouragement and by the spiritual momentum generated during *tabligh* gatherings. *Tablighi Jamaat* is a reformist preaching movement aimed at renewing Islamic faith through missionary travel and moral discipline. This movement is deeply rooted within the Qawmi environment of Bangladesh. It serves as a grassroots movement dedicated to spiritual renewal, guiding individuals toward a more religious way of life. The movement's primary focus is on internal faith-building and personal reform among Muslims. The movement consistently maintains a

segregated approach to religious practice. (see Metcalf 1993; Reetz 2006; Siddiqi 2012; Salam 2020; Sahib 2022).

I observed a video of a tabligh gathering at night where men and boys listening to Islamic speakers filled the madrasa courtyard. One of the speakers was from Europe. A translator relayed the speaker's Arabic words to the audience in Bangla as the madrasa students, seated on red carpets, absorbed the message and emotional energy of this particular form of global Islam. The students were sitting near their teachers and preachers and seemed very energized. Girl students were absent from this collective display of devotion as such events in madrasas remain primarily a male domain. However, as Bano (2017) notes, women's participation in tabligh has also been important for conservative *ulama* (Islamic scholars) within such institutions in South Asia. In her study, a prominent Pakistani scholar who supervises a large female madrasa explained:

> While the *ulama* deal with men who come to the mosque, these women could work like the Tablighis—an influential Deobandi Islamic propagation movement in South Asia—as they were embedded in the community and could reach out to those who themselves were not going to make an effort to attend the mosque. Further, he argued, women had one additional advantage that made them even more effective than the Tablighis: 'they could influence the future generation of men as well as women in their roles as mothers' (2017, 149).

In Bangladesh, this trend of female participation is also taking shape. As Participant 13 explained, women now participate in tabligh gatherings by accompanying their husbands, fathers, or brothers on *chilla*—traditionally a forty-day, all-male *dawah* (calling people to God's way) retreat. Women typically go for three, seven, or ten days, staying in the homes of hosts to preach to local women. In these settings, when male tablighis address the local community using a microphone, women listen from behind walls or curtains. They do not speak in mixed gatherings. Participant 51, a male participant and long-time donor to low-income madrasas and orphanages, described this as a "big change" for the movement in Bangladesh in recent years, an inclusion and recognition of women that was, in his words, "not even imaginable once." This observation is consistent with recent studies documenting women's growing yet segregated participation in the Tablighi Jama'at in Bangladesh (Begum 2016; Siddiqi 2012). However, women's participation occurs in a separate and more private form of event, distinct from the large public assemblies that are common across the country, such as the male-only event I mentioned above.

I observed the study and living settings and environments of both the boys' and girls' sections of one madrasa through photographs and video materials. Digital materials of the boys' section were readily available on Facebook and WhatsApp groups. In contrast, visual materials of the girls' section were accessible only when shared confidentially by a female teacher, as images of girls are generally not circulated publicly by these institutions. The atmosphere in the girls' section was markedly different from that of the boys'. It was quieter, and its environment could

be described as “homely”. The sense of enthusiasm and liveliness that animated the boys’ section was largely absent. Guest speakers regularly visited the boys’ section to deliver sermons, teach Qur’anic recitation, and offer moral instruction. Boys stood at the gates to welcome the guests, and the videos and photos vividly captured the bustling atmosphere of the lush, serene rural campus. The girls, however, did not participate in such events. Moreover, one female teacher, Participant 50, noted that girl students of the madrasa often lose interest in their studies by the age of fifteen or sixteen, skipping classes or dropping out. She mentioned that she visits their homes and tries to encourage them to continue studying. This pattern reflects broader social expectations: since girls are not anticipated to become leaders, preachers, or imams, but only teachers if they are both capable and permitted by their families, they tend to internalize these gendered boundaries early on. The physical environment of Qawmi madrasas further reinforces this divide between female and male sections. The girls’ classrooms are small and dimly lit, with windows covered by heavy curtains to maintain *purdah* (female seclusion and protection from men’s view). Air and light are limited, unlike in the boys’ section, which occupies a more spacious and well-ventilated building. Participant 49 mentioned that she was seeking donor assistance to purchase several ceiling and stand fans, as the heat inside the girls’ section during the summer months was often unbearable due to inadequate ventilation. She explained during a phone call that installing air conditioning would be too costly for the madrasa to maintain. These glimpses reveal two coexisting modes of piety: the public zeal that characterizes boys’ learning and the quiet devotion that marks the learning of the girls. Boys learn in environments charged with sound, spectacle, and aspiration to labor in God’s way, while girls inhabit more constrained and even inadequate spaces.

Furthermore, women’s and girls’ education in the community is often seen as acceptable only when there is little to no interaction with men, including even male teachers. Because many women lack the qualifications to teach higher classes (a point discussed later), male teachers instruct female students from behind a curtain. Women who aspire to pursue non-madrasa education also frequently face family resistance. An example comes from Participant 54. He did not allow his daughter to sit for the university admission examination, believing that being in a mixed environment was religiously impermissible. Although he agreed in principle to a women-only college, he explained that even if she were admitted, he would have to accompany her every day since his daughter, Islamically, could not travel alone between home and the college. Yet within the same family, his sisters had quietly pursued higher education more than two decades earlier. With their mother’s tacit support, two sisters secretly completed master’s degrees, one in Political Science and the other in Philosophy, while a third pursued education up to the secondary level. All three concealed their education from their father, who regarded such learning as un-Islamic. In this family, the next generation reflects a striking shift: all three sisters now have children who are either studying in or have completed secular education. One of the sisters now lives in the United Kingdom, and her daughter studied psychology there. Yet, when my participant’s own daughter expressed interest in studying psychology as her cousin did, he

dismissed the idea. He said that this was not something a person "should want to study." In my experience, such examples are not uncommon within the madrasa community, while boys, in contrast, generally do not face comparable constraints in pursuing education or work. These contrasting atmospheres compose the living rhythm of traditional madrasa education in which knowledge, gender, and morality are shaped not only by what is taught, but by the atmosphere in which learning unfolds. What is the texture of agency available to women within these segregated worlds and atmospheres of unequal opportunity? How is that agency exercised through moral reasoning? The next section turns to these questions.

Reasoning in Segregation

The moral weight attached to maintaining segregation between female and male worlds becomes especially clear in the example of Participant 27, an urban madrasa-educated *alima* (female Qawmi madrasa graduate) in my study. Providing private tuition is her sole source of income. Since the age of 13, she has been an earning member of her family by teaching children secular subjects such as Bangla, English, and mathematics, as well as Qur'an reading and recitation, both online and offline. She is very proud to help her father with her income. She is 30 years old and not married yet, and she said that she would only want to marry someone who could provide her with financial security. This would allow her to teach religious knowledge without taking money from her students for the rest of her life. During the interview, she told me that if I knew anyone who wanted their child to learn Qur'an, I should contact her so that she could provide online Qur'an tuition. In Bangladesh, "tuition" commonly refers to private instruction, whether offered online or in person. When I later found such a family and reached out to her, I asked whether she could send an audio recording of her Qur'an recitation so that the child's father could assess whether her pronunciation and recitation were correct for teaching. She politely declined, explaining that allowing a man to hear her voice would hurt her *ghayrat* (a deeply felt sense of honor and moral propriety). Although she was from a lower-middle-income family, had recently lost a tuition position, and was actively seeking work, she still declined the opportunity. Working within the segregated Qawmi atmosphere described above, Participant 27 exercised her agency to make what might have been a difficult decision of not sharing a recording of her voice through reasoning, in conformity with the tradition, that it was not proper for her voice to be heard by unrelated men. In her conformity to tradition, she reasoned through her sense of ghayrat. Thus, she embodied an ethical disposition cultivated through the faith into which she was born and raised.

The moral outlook seen in the case of Participant 27 is supported by all of my participants to varying degrees. Yet most of them also complicate the long-standing ideal of women limiting their education and remaining primarily within the domestic sphere. They do not always completely embody tradition or social norms, nor do they remain entirely within the boundaries of family rules and conservative religious opinions and views. Mahmood argues that "agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which

one inhabits norms*"* (2005, 15). Participant 27 above inhabits norms in precisely this sense. However, for a few women in my fieldwork, inhabiting norms is not always the only goal. At times, one must also resist. At the same time, such resistance moves not against religion but toward it. Whether toward moral and spiritual ideals they regard as more authentic than secular and socially inherited conventions in their atmospheres, or by accommodating to "modernity" through a reasoning they nevertheless consider to be religiously legitimate. In this sense, resistance becomes a form of return rather than rejection: a movement oriented toward ethical refinement and spiritual reorientation rather than transgression.

Participant 11 is an example of reasoning away from secular elements in her atmosphere. She did not conform to family tradition but rather broke away from the prescribed path of secular education. A capable student who had performed well in both high school and higher secondary levels and for whom teachers held high expectations, she chose instead to join a madrasa to memorize the Qur'an. Although her family did not oppose this decision, she nonetheless defied family tradition, which had no prior connection to madrasa education. Despite her hesitation about taking money from her lower-middle-income father to cover the high madrasa fees, she felt compelled to pursue what she saw as her moral path. Her secular teachers were dismayed by her transformation, by her decision to wear the *niqab* (face veil) and to abandon further secular studies after completing her Higher Secondary Certificate. Participant 11 aspires to become a *hafiza* (female Qur'an memorizer). She finds memorization difficult yet remains determined: "If I have decided to finish it, I will," she told me. Her turn toward Islam began with Islamic Facebook pages and through a friend who had suddenly become practicing. She described finding a sense of peace in wearing the *burkha* (full-body covering) and in reciting the Qur'an. She also emphasized maintaining distance from what she referred to as *fitna*[1], understood here as free mixing, friendships, or intimate relationships between men and women outside marriage. Although returning to secular education remains somewhat a possibility, she regards gender segregation as an ethical principle.

Participant 11 does not know what future awaits her. For now, she concentrates solely on her present commitment. Her family wants her to marry soon, as is customary in rural areas, yet she is postponing marriage until the completion of her *hifz* (memorization of Qur'an). She hopes to marry someone who will not object to her lifelong dedication to hifz*,* which, as she explained, "will take a significant part of my life". This is because the memorization process demands constant revision and effort, since students may forget what they have memorized if it is not regularly maintained. At present, she also manages a WhatsApp group of 145 women where Qur'anic *tafsir* (interpretation of the Qur'an) is shared twice daily (This digital element of the

[1] Participants used the word fitna in different senses; the pertinent meaning is indicated in each case.

atmosphere of many of the women is discussed in Chapter Three.) She removes members if it becomes evident that a participant is male, as the group's name clearly specifies that it is for women only. In addition, she has launched a WhatsApp channel dedicated to tafsir that currently has almost 15,000 members, open to both men and women. As these channels do not permit access to phone numbers or personal contact, the principle of gender segregation is not required.

An additional factor worth mentioning in the case of Participant 11 is that she acknowledges that secular education has become increasingly expensive and was finally intellectually exhausting for her. Her higher secondary result was good but fell short of her expectations— "that broke my heart," she said. At the same time, rather than a direct response to this disappointment, her turn toward hifz unfolded within a broader atmosphere. The decision was shaped by the newfound piety of a close friend, the influence of religious social media networks, and her own growing frustration with secular study. All these acted upon her to reorient her life in a different direction. At the end of our nearly three months of communication, during one conversation after debating several Qur'anic texts with me, Participant 11 concluded firmly, "You are a reformist, and your Islamic knowledge is not so deep." Her conviction is firm and unbending, sustained by a sense of moral assurance that leaves little room for doubt. As she puts it:

> I wanted to study at [public university name]. I was good at studying, and I was the first girl (in Bangladesh, students who rank first in class are often called the 'first girl' or 'first boy') in my school… After HSC (higher secondary certificate), I was getting ready to do coaching for the admission exam—my family agreed as well. But then, all of a sudden, I changed my mind. My mind just veered off it.

Such atmospheric agency, exercised through moral reasoning and oriented toward religious commitment rather than resistance to it, takes shape in the experience of the next participant as well. Participant 13, also from a rural, lower-middle-income family, grew up under strong family expectations to excel academically, pursue higher studies abroad, and secure a professional career. She had hoped to gain admission to medical school, but when she missed that opportunity, she became deeply upset. In the following year, she found herself without any close friends from her own academic cohort. The few friends she maintained from her college days had moved on to medical college or other university programs, leaving her increasingly isolated from her earlier social circle. And on one of those days, she said:

> When I went to Dhaka for medical coaching, one day I felt very strange—really unwell, as if I were about to die. That day, I decided to dedicate myself to Allah's cause. Even now, at times, I still get that same feeling—as if I am dying… When I did not get admission to medical college, I went back to university and became connected to *ta'lim* [religious study or instruction] classes and the dawah movement. The *kitab* [a religious book], hadith, the *majlish* [discussion circle], and the lectures by our teachers and madams inspired me. Some teachers and madams would arrange lectures and *mahfils* [religious gatherings] in their homes. An *ustada*

> [female teacher] used to teach the Qur'an right beside our university, so I started learning the Qur'an with her.

And thus, going to Tablighi circles for students and teachers was a turning point that reoriented her life toward religion. Through these gatherings, she "found Islam," as she put it. Such accounts resonate with relational and receptive understandings of ethical life, in which religious orientation emerges through encounters, circumstances, and environments rather than through deliberate projects of self-cultivation (Mittermaier 2012). The participant here was not religiously practicing before, and her family was not either. Yet her disappointment at not gaining admission to medical school, combined with the unsettling feeling that she was "about to die," redirected her attention from worldly achievement toward a transcendental religious purpose. In this sense, her turn toward religion emerged receptively and relationally through the circumstances she encountered. What she described as having "found Islam" was a form of moral reasoning in which career aspirations were reframed as secondary to divine commitment. During the COVID-19 pandemic she began studying in an online madrasa to learn further about Islam while she was still a university student. She now holds a master's degree in Fisheries Management. At the same time, she is also enrolled in a rigorous *Qawmi* online Dawra-e-Hadith program that will take seven to eight years to complete. This path, however, has strained her relationship with her natal family, who regard her choices as a "betrayal" of their dreams for upward mobility and modern success:

> My family wanted me to work. I promised them and gave them hope that I would do it or go abroad. But later, they saw that I was not even trying for a government job, nor was I studying for one. In the end, my brothers completely stopped supporting me—they did not even want to talk to me.

Participant 13 finally married a man who shares her religious commitments, a marriage she arranged herself without family support. She did not seek employment in mixed-gender workplaces and deliberately avoided settings that required regular interaction with men. For her, having a separate, women-only space for work is an essential condition for a *Muslimah* (Muslim woman) if she chooses to work. She texted me about it after the interview:

> One important thing I forgot to mention is that later on, Alhamdulillah (praise be to God), the financial situation of my brothers improved. Because of that, I did not pursue a job. If I had seen that my family needed financial support, then I would have had to work—because in Islam, it is said that if there is a real need in the family and there is no male person to provide support, then women can work outside while maintaining purdah. After much thought, I realized that my family does not have such a need, and I personally, at present, do not have such a financial need either. So why would I go out, break purdah, and commit sin by working unnecessarily?

Having reasoned thus, Participant 13, although she is not financially well-off, teaches online classes exclusively for women and donates all of her earnings as sadaqa. The couple relies primarily on her husband's income, and together they travel whenever possible for tabligh outreach activities. She hopes one day to establish her own madrasa where she can teach women and children about religion, aspiring to spend the rest of her life in study and dawah. Participant 13's narrative illustrates a movement from receptivity to deliberation. Her initial turn toward religious life emerged through encounters, disappointments, and unsettling experiences that acted upon her. Yet this shift did not leave her passive; rather, it opened a path along which she actively reasoned about work, study, and family responsibility.

An important point to note in relation to participants 11 and 13 is that certain secular and liberal feminist perspectives in Bangladesh have regarded women's religious devotion as a sign of ideological submission that leaves no space for agency and renders women meek and compliant. This view is expressed most prominently in the writings of feminist authors such as Taslima Nasrin, one of the most internationally visible Bangladeshi voices on women and religion. In Nasrin's works, such as *Amar Meyebela* (My Girlhood), we encounter pious Muslim women portrayed as subjugated and blinded by faith (Nasrin 2020). In *Lajja* (Shame), she envisions a Bangladesh overtaken by religion. In this imagined future, "women would be wearing burqas, the number of mosques and madrasas would increase," and the secular republic would ultimately collapse under *sharia* (Islamic law) (Nasrin 2014). In many ways, Nasrin's prediction of a visibly Islamized public sphere has materialized. Yet the social consequences she anticipated, especially for women, have not seemingly unfolded in the singularly oppressive manner she imagined. As my participants demonstrate, the expansion of female madrasa education has produced new ethical and intellectual horizons opening alternative routes to learning, authority, and spiritual agency. I therefore understand these women's pious practices not as the outcome of blind faith or subjugation, as Nasrin suggests, but as expressions of atmospheric agency—a form of agency grounded in their reasoning within the moral, social, and affective environments that shape their crucial life decisions.

All of my Qawmi participants, though drawn from diverse regions and economic backgrounds, understand women as having roles beyond that of a housewife confined to household work. Only two of them did not express plans to work or pursue further study in the future: one is currently working, and the other is studying. Even those two explicitly stated that women can always work if they want. This stands in sharp contrast to Qawmi teachings such as those found in *Beheshti Zewar*, mentioned earlier. Women do not see themselves as bound exclusively to household responsibilities in the way such texts and institutional teachings often prescribe. Rather, they inhabit the faith they have received from family or institutional atmospheres, while interpreting and enacting it through their own reasoning and moral reflection.

Among these Qawmi participants, not everyone resisted secular lifestyle and embraced religious life as we saw in the two examples above. Participant 23, a 21-year-old female madrasa teacher

from the capital city of Dhaka, is one example, as well as a fine example of how reasoning in faith takes shape in practice. She attended an English-medium school in her early years before moving into madrasa education at her parents' insistence, a shift for which she remains deeply grateful, describing it as having transformed her orientation. Before speaking with me, she asked, "What good does all this knowledge—your education, I mean—do to you, benefit-wise?" The question reflected the sense of moral assurance common among madrasa students, who take deep pride in pursuing knowledge purely for the sake of God. For her, secular education seemed secondary, even irrelevant, to the moral and spiritual purpose of learning. She believed that worldly knowledge when divorced from Islamic guidance does not truly benefit a person. When I told her that people often know little about the thoughts and lives of madrasa women like her and that my work might help others understand them better, she seemed pleased. It felt as though my answer to her question had to align with her moral expectations before the conversation could proceed.

Participant 23 comes from a high-income family, is unmarried, and aspires to become a good mother and wife in the future. At the same time, she is deeply committed to dawah work and teaches in both offline and online madrasas. She also teaches children the Qur'an and Islamic ethics online. We spoke several times, though briefly, and also exchanged text and voice messages, as she was very busy with her work. She speaks with great enthusiasm about continuing dawah work after marriage and hopes to marry a man who shares her dedication. For her, guiding influential people toward religion is a major moral achievement: "If I can convert such people in my way, that would be a great contribution to God's path," she said. Drawing from the *seerah* (biography of Prophet Muhammad), she reflected, "I read how the Prophet called people to faith, and when a tribal leader converted, all the people of his tribe would follow. So, if I could guide an influential person, I could then, through that person, guide many."

In discussing the current world through a segregated moral lens, she expressed confidence that the Afghan government would eventually support women's education and work once a safe and fully segregated environment was established. In her view, Afghanistan under Taliban rule is currently a secure Islamic country. When I raised the issue of corruption and the unequal treatment of women by the Taliban, she withdrew from the conversation, a gesture that underscored her conviction in the moral coherence of her worldview and her unwillingness to subject it to debate.

Across my interviews, women in these traditional institutions, all within a traditionally gender-segregated social world, reasoned about their lives in different ways. For some, like Participant 23, this meant engaging in dawah work, which they understood as a significant form of religious service and a means of spreading Islamic teachings. For others, like Participant 39, it meant pursuing education and mobility for herself and her family. These women sometimes inhabit norms, and at other times they go against socially and morally established norms. Even in

inhabiting norms, their moral reasoning leads them to act decisively in their lives. The next two examples illustrate this.

At the age of twenty-four, Participant 35 still carried visible burn scars on her face from a childhood accident. When she first began attending school, people in her neighbourhood advised her mother to send her to a girls' madrasa instead. They argued that in such a setting she could remain covered and feel protected from unwanted attention. Her mother accepted this advice. Over time, Participant 35 herself began to find the madrasa environment more comfortable. The girls-only setting and the everyday practice of purdah made her feel at ease in ways she did not experience in mixed institutions. She attempted twice to shift to mainstream education—primarily because, at the time, the Dawra-e-Hadith degree was not widely recognized as an equivalent graduation certificate. In order to secure a formal, state-recognized credential, she tried moving first to an Aliya madrasa and later to a regular school. Yet on both occasions she found that she could not adjust: the mixed-gender classrooms felt uncomfortable and unfamiliar, and she missed the moral atmosphere of the Qawmi madrasa. In her words:

> I could not find peace in mixed-gender environments. I could not continue. I wear a niqab, and teachers talked about it; they harassed me in many ways… Even in the Aliya madrasas, teachers stand in front of you, and boys are right beside you. Teachers ask questions while standing in front of you… Their lifestyle and social interactions are different—very different.

When Dawra was finally recognized by the government with limited mainstream equivalence, Participant 35 was delighted and no longer felt compelled to leave the madrasa. She says that while she does hope to marry, she wishes to remain committed to study and dawah throughout her life. She also finds meaning in being, effectively, a guardian to her family in the absence of her deceased father. She manages the family's financial decisions, talks decisively about the educational path her younger brother and sister should take, and expresses concern about their educational future. She is now a teacher in a madrasa in Dhaka and also hopes to establish her own madrasa someday. She is so busy serving as the guardian of her family, managing her work and providing tuition in Qur'an and Arabic, that she thinks and acts like a responsible elder of the household. She wrote to me about her burn treatment, mentioning that some of her acquaintances had offered to support her financially:

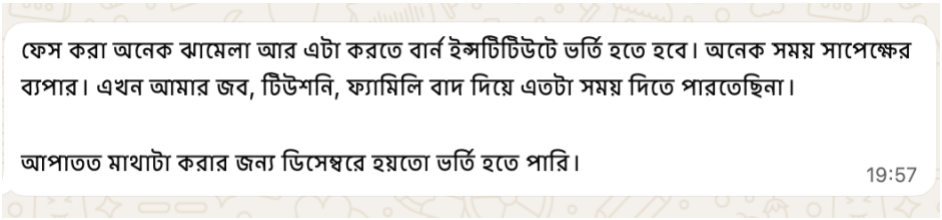

Figure 2- WhatsApp text from Participant 35

She explains in the Bangla text message above that she remains too busy to be admitted to the hospital for an extended period. She said she would only undergo reconstructive surgery on her head in December 2025 for the burn-related injuries, as it would require less time. She does not want her treatment to jeopardize her responsibilities. When I asked whether she would consider going abroad for treatment if given the opportunity, she declined, saying, “Not now.”

Participant 35’s attachment to gender-segregated space might be explained through the visible scars on her face, and one might assume that covering and avoiding mixed-gender environments offered protection from scrutiny. Yet her own account resists such a reduction. She explicitly stated that what anchored her in the Qawmi segregated world was not concealment or bodily insecurity, but the “serenity” she found in its teachings. “I do not think if I had a perfect face, I would have liked Aliya or secular school,” she insisted. In other words, while bodily vulnerability may be one element of her atmosphere, her preference cannot be reduced to physical vulnerability or social stigma. This is atmospheric agency at work. Her actions are shaped by reasoned commitment, emerging within a moral and affective atmosphere that she experiences as a source of serenity.

The case of Participant 39 further illustrates how such reasoning operates within moral boundaries while generating decisive action in matters of education, family, and mobility. Participant 39 comes from a rural, middle-income family and continued her education well after marriage, maintaining a deep commitment to learning in both secular and madrasa-based forms. She completed her higher secondary education in the secular stream after marrying at the age of sixteen, passing both secondary and higher secondary examinations post-marriage. She then spent five years completing a *qariana* course, which is an advanced program in Qur’anic recitation, followed by six years of Islamic studies, culminating in her qualification as an alima. Although Participant 39 has long worked as a teacher in both online and offline madrasas, her three children are all enrolled in secular higher education at the university or college level. To support their studies, she currently lives with them in a semi-urban area, while her husband remains in their rural village. This arrangement is notable in a context, following traditional Islamic mores, where decisions involving residential separation and children’s education are often initiated or sanctioned by husbands. In this case, her husband was not particularly enthusiastic about maintaining two households, especially given the family’s modest economic means. It was Participant 39’s decision regarding the importance of education that made this rural–urban split possible and enabled her children to continue their studies. At the same time, Participant 39 declined a stable government primary school teaching position despite having been appointed, explaining that “women should not work in mixed-gender environments.” Her husband strongly insisted on this segregation principle, and she agreed with him. This does not signal any contradiction; rather this decision reflects the internal coherence of her reasoning. Her educational aspirations, for herself and her children, operate within moral boundaries, where piety, gendered propriety, and sense of responsibility are not obstacles to action but the very

terms through which action becomes legitimate. Her agency is thus exercised not by transgressing religious limits, but by actively reasoning within them, producing a life shaped by commitment to both education and religious norms.

Thus, all the Qawmi women I spoke with strongly upheld segregationist ideas and gendered roles in which women are expected to prioritize childcare and family responsibilities. But they did not regard these expectations as barriers to meaningful action outside the home. Rather, they viewed such boundaries as rational frameworks within which women pursue their divine purpose both inside and outside the home. However, complex this may sound in a world where ensuring equal access to work and education for men and women within a fully segregated system seems nearly impossible, this is how these women reason. They even argue with others in defense of their faith, as Participants 11 and 23 did with me. Another participant rejected the use of logic in religion altogether, stating that religion does not follow logic and that what God says must be accepted as it is. The prevailing sentiment among my participants was that women's pious labor, such as teaching, preaching, caring, and studying, is a form of *ibadah* (worship). Thus, their gendered roles in society are understood as acts that will be rewarded by God. Such moral reasoning constitutes a site of power for them, as it allows them to inhabit their world with reflection, ethical awareness, self-knowledge, and dignity.

Atmospheres of Hifz

Hifz and Qir'at events

Hifz has become a growing trend across Bangladesh, among both rural and urban families, especially for parents who want their children to learn not only about *dunya* (worldly matters) but also *deen* (religion). Several participants noted that families increasingly view hifz as offering both divine and worldly benefits. Qur'an memorization competitions have expanded, both nationally and internationally. The competitions are formal events in which participants are asked by judges to recite certain portions of the Qur'an from memory. These events can also be in the form of *qir'at* (melodic Qur'anic recitation) assessments, where pronunciation, rhythm, tone, and adherence to established recitational styles are tested. As my participants explained, these competitions began gaining nationwide popularity about a decade ago through social media, television programs, and corporate-sponsored Islamic events. Inspired by this momentum, many madrasas, especially traditional Qawmi ones, strengthened their emphasis on *sahih* (correct) Qur'an recitation. As a result, teachers and students increasingly prepare and send boys to compete abroad. Participation in competitions can lead to significant prize money, educational sponsorship, and global recognition, particularly in Middle Eastern competitions. This has introduced a new economic dimension to hifz education. For boys, this visibility is especially strong. Social media is filled with their recitation clips, and their achievements appear in the news regularly. People even gather at airports to welcome successful international competitors,

which itself becomes a news event. Girls and women, however, are barely visible in these competitions. Participants noted that girls from traditional institutions do not attend such competitions. One Qawmi principal (male) in Dhaka, participant 8, explained:

> The competitions are all for boys. Our girls do not go. It is not *munasib* [appropriate] to send girls to such events; we have the concept of purdah to consider. We keep them away from these. The Befaq board has examinations in Qur'an recitation, and girls do take those. Inside the madrasa, we also organize competitions, but only internally—girls compete among themselves.

Thus, the traditional Qawmi setting is largely supportive only of exclusively female-only formats for hifz or qir'at events, both nationally and internationally. This preference cuts across gender, rural and urban contexts and social class. (Rural–urban variation and socioeconomic gradients are discussed in Chapter 4.) None of my female Qawmi participants, however, had ever participated in such events. Many of them, from both urban and rural areas, articulated concerns related to *konther purdah*—the Bangla term for the expectation that a woman's voice should not be publicly audible—which they viewed as incompatible with participating in such competitions. They thus regarded public hifz events for girls as inappropriate. One urban ex-Qawmi teacher, participant 43, wrote in a text message: [13/8/25, 22:12:33] "If girls take part in a hifz competition, their purdah—especially their voice-purdah—will be compromised. I feel it is better if they do not participate." Participant 35, another urban Qawmi woman whose madrasa serves well-off families and offers hifz instruction alongside general Islamic education, wrote: [16/8/25, 21:45:39] Girls may participate if they are not yet *baligh* (someone who has reached puberty).

Qawmi women's online groups also often caution against girls' and women's public participation in hifz events. These are closed, women-only Facebook or WhatsApp groups, or channels that I observed as a member, having been added by my participants. Within these groups, members also frequently cautioned one another against using personal photographs as profile images or in any publicly accessible space, even when the women were fully covered in a burqa or niqab. Such appearances were described as potentially attracting the gaze of unrelated men and thereby contributing to 'online fitna*'* (temptation of sexual desire). One such WhatsApp channel post said:

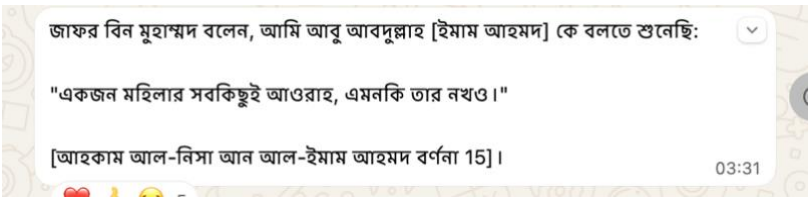

Figure 3-WhatsApp group post

The text states: Ja'far ibn Muhammad said: "I heard Abu Abdullah [Imam Ahmad] say: 'Everything about a woman is 'awrah, even her fingernails'" (reference given in the message: Ahkam an-Nisa by Imam Ahmad, section 15, Ahmad Ibn Hanbal [d. 855] being a hadith authority and scholar revered especially in more conservative circles). The same page also notes that women in the early Islamic period spoke to men and participated in public life, indicating that a woman's voice is not regarded as being a part of *satr* (obligatory bodily covering). Taken together, however, these points lead many conservatives to reason that, although a woman's ordinary speaking voice does not require concealment, public hifz and qirʾat demand a melodious and ornamented voice, which may draw men's attention and thus create fitna (temptation of sexual desire). For this reason, women should not be both seen and heard in such highly visible religious competitions, even if their everyday voice is not treated as satr.

Girls, typically between the ages of 5 and 16, take part in Qur'an recitation events organized through Bangladesh Shishu Academy (the national children's cultural academy) and Jatiyo Shikkha Shoptaho (National Education Week), both of which follow gender-inclusive participation formats. However, these programs do not carry the visibility or prestige associated with the media-driven, nationally celebrated competitions broadcast on television. Participant 28, owner of an online madrasa, informed me that one of the most popular televised hifz programs offers substantial prize money and attracts wide national viewership. However, when I searched for the program online, I found that its contestants, winners, and on-screen audience members were exclusively boys and men. Girls have never appeared in any of the broadcasts. One female participant, 20, noted that events and competitions for girls are often organized quietly, with either male and female judges or only female judges. No other men are present at these events apart from the judges, and then only if their presence is deemed necessary. In a contrasting view, a few women participants from Qawmi settings said that women should participate in such events. Also, participant 52, a male rural Qawmi madrasa principal, expressed strong enthusiasm for women's participation in public. He noted that girls from cities and from Aliya or hybrid madrasa-school backgrounds now join both online and offline programs. However, he added that participation from rural and Qawmi settings remains limited. I also found that a very small number of madrasas dedicated specifically to girls prepare their students for national and international competitions, and these students perform remarkably well (Facebook n.d.). Their promotional materials highlight girls participating in various competitions both within Bangladesh and abroad, and they regularly publish photographs of these students on their madrasa's social-media pages. Additionally, media reports occasionally highlight cases of women's success in such events, and public responses to them are often positive. For instance, a young hafiza from the rural district of Chandpur recently received national attention after securing first place in an international hifz competition. She completed her hifz in Bangladesh and is currently studying at Al-Azhar University in Egypt. She has earned similar distinctions in the Middle East in previous years. One Instagram post announcing her achievement shows her receiving the certificate while wearing a full black burqa and niqab (Instagram 2025). In another

such competition held in Dubai, a Bangladeshi girl placed eighth; the program was not women-only, and she performed in the presence of male judges and a mixed audience (meem TV 2024). Another newspaper article highlights a similar development, reporting on a corporate-sponsored hifz competition in Bangladesh and noting: “This time, our event will be different. Women will also be able to take part in the competition… ” (Dhaka Tribune 2024).

Reasoning in crafting memory

The atmosphere of the hifz sections of any madrasa is very different from the regular day sections. This atmosphere is therefore explained in this section, along with the ways women come to inhabit and embody it, in order to provide an understanding of the forms of reasoning that take place within it. Within this setting, women learn hifz within what I call an epistemic trap, an environment where access to knowledge, practice, and correction is shaped and limited by systematic constraints. Many women described that even after approaching Qur’an memorization with seriousness, hifz remains difficult for girls and women. This difficulty was understood largely as part of a religiously sanctioned gender order, articulated through particular interpretations of the Qur’an and hadith in Qawmi institutions. Within this order, women are expected to stay at home and give their full attention to household work. For many participants, women struggle to memorize and retain what they learn while also being fully attentive to household responsibilities. Participant 27 explained this also in terms of exposure: women have far fewer opportunities than men to go out (for the reasons mentioned above) and to sit with the ulama, to ask questions, or to gain knowledge. Since they cannot access those spaces, she said, women “have no opportunity” and therefore appear “less clever” or “less knowledgeable” than men. And it is indeed true that missing the opportunity, as women do, to practise Qur’anic knowledge within the rich, affective environments that men are regularly immersed in matters for how memory develops. In men’s madrasas, this happens naturally: students move between hadith, *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), tafsir, recitation, discussion circles, and seminars with the ulama, creating a dense, mixed learning environment that reinforces memory. Women, by contrast, have limited access to these interleaved settings and therefore cannot benefit from this crucial mechanism of retention. Their limited exposure is then interpreted as natural intellectual difference rather than being recognized as an epistemic trap produced by structured exclusion.

In traditional madrasas, hifz programs are typically residential. To ensure both speed and rigor, children are required to stay at the madrasa full-time. Participant 28 explained in detail why the hifz process in Bangladesh and South Asia is particularly effective, especially because of the residential system:

> The madrasa environment for hifz, especially in Qawmi institutions in Bangladesh, is excellent. The system is similar in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Students are very disciplined, and it becomes easy to maintain a fixed schedule. There are certain times of the day when memory works best, and the hifz programs are structured around that. This method has been followed in madrasas since ancient

> times… After *maghrib* [evening prayer], children memorize new portions, but they are not tested on this material before sleeping. The brain functions at its best at dawn, during the time of *tahajjud* [night prayer]; that is when the children wake up, revise what they learned, and are tested. It is scientific: after memorizing, they have a full night's sleep because they go to bed early, and when they wake up, the best chance to retain the memorization is to revise immediately. Then they are tested again. The schedule is very well designed. Throughout the day, their tasks are spaced in this way, and that is why they learn effectively and quickly.

Students share their living space. Often, fifty to sixty or more children sleep and study together in a single large room, on the floor with mattresses or individual bedding. They sleep where they study, a practical arrangement to accommodate limited space. One participant explained that this practice is seen as both spiritually and cognitively beneficial, since sleeping in the same place where one memorizes the Qur'an is believed to strengthen memory. Another participant, however, stated that such arrangements are primarily driven by financial and spatial constraints. Because most institutions operate with limited resources, housing students in their study rooms helps reduce costs and make efficient use of space. This effectiveness applies to the girls' residential sections as well, but the atmosphere there is not institutional; rather, it is homely and informal, as discussed earlier in relation to the wider madrasa system. Participant 50, a hafiza teacher in a rural Qawmi madrasa, explained that in her institution, the head teacher of the female section cooks for the students herself to reduce expenses. One video she shared with me captured this intimate setting: a toddler wandered around the room as the girls memorized verses of the Qur'an. The child, I later learned, was the head teacher's own.

Publicly shared videos and photos of the same madrasa's residential boys' section show that they have access to digital tools. They often practice recitation through videos or social media platforms projected on large classroom screens. For girls, however, no such devices are available. A male teacher visits the girls' section once a week to teach *moksho*—a local term referring to *mashq,* the melodic and incantatory style of Qur'anic recitation. This form of recitation is traditionally emphasized more than understanding the meanings of the Arabic words themselves. I asked if this instruction could be provided by an existing female teacher of the madrasa. The participant replied that male teachers are considered better at teaching incantation, as they are more experienced than female teachers. Why men are more experienced in this domain will be discussed later in the chapter. This was the situation of not only one rural hifz residential madrasa, but also in a city madrasa, and a relatively affluent one. This indicates that the situation prevails in many cases. Answering my question as to why this is so, one female teacher, Participant 22, from the city madrasa explained,

> We (females) teach the kids (Qur'an), one hujur ["respected person", referring to a teacher] comes to do the mashq class. Hujurs have, mashaAllah, strong voices, and their pronunciation is very good. For that, they are hired to teach mashq. We can,

> but we have a niqab on. So, it is hard even to hear us when we teach mashq. Moreover, students need to see our faces during the mashq to know how the facial structure works to pronounce words. They can understand us though…just for mashq, we need voice and pronunciation to be clearer, which is hard with a niqab on.

She also explained that in classes where women do not remove their niqab, Qur'an recitation becomes less effective, as the cloth muffles their voices, though mashq requires clarity and audibility for students to learn properly. When asked why women do not take off their niqab even in female-only schools, she noted that in well-off city madrasas like hers, closed-circuit cameras are installed in the classrooms: "…at times the CCTV cameras have to be checked. Any mistreatment [of students] does not occur in our madrasa, but in other madrasas, you know, a madrasa teacher might behave badly with students. They may beat them, or the *khalamonis* [assistants responsible for cleaning, childcare, and food] may behave badly. So, for transparency, we use it." As a result, female teachers often keep their niqab on even in all-girls' institutions. CCTV footage is sometimes reviewed by male teachers if any issue arises, since no female teachers are sufficiently trained to manage the system. Since the women reason that no one of the opposite gender should see their face, this use of technology creates a hurdle to their professional growth and limits their ability to teach effectively without male assistance. The authority could have women teachers trained to operate CCTV systems so that classes could function more freely to the students' benefit and without relying on male staff for technical tasks, thereby easing women's professional work. This situation exemplifies one of the structural constraints women face within the madrasa system that shape their professional experiences and opportunities in the best interest of the students. As Bano (2017, 150) observes, culturally conservative ulama have indeed opened spaces for women's Islamic learning, but these spaces remain heavily regulated and closely supervised by male authorities. The dynamics surrounding CCTV use offer a contemporary example of this broader pattern.

Thus, the number of girl students in hifz programs is noticeably lower than that of boys. The reasons, as I observed, were framed in social, cultural, and religious terms, echoing the sociocultural explanations discussed earlier in the section on segregation. Participants also explained that retaining hifz requires sustained practice with a qualified teacher. For girls, this process is shaped by structural constraints. Boys, they argued, are able to dedicate themselves fully to memorization and revision, often under the close supervision of male teachers. As girls grow older, however, they can no longer study with male teachers (due to purdah restrictions) and must rely entirely on female instructors. Participants emphasised that female students face competing domestic responsibilities which limit the time and focus they devote to memorizing, retaining, and teaching. As a result, maintaining the same level of rigor and quality in girls' hifz training becomes challenging and is "not at the level of boys… their *tajwid* [rules of Qur'anic recitation] might be weak, *yaad* [memory] might be weak," as Participant 27 puts it. She stated

that Qawmi institutions need to improve their use of technology for girls' hifz, as they are doing for boys, and provide girls with more opportunities and training. She is a proud woman who embodies her faith deeply, as mentioned earlier, yet she also speaks about the prevailing problems within the madrasa system. For her, these are not deficiencies in the faith upon which Qawmi institutions are founded, which she considers far better than Aliya and secular education, but rather areas that require adjustment in order to better align with the true values of religion. This reasoning allows her to remain fully committed to the atmosphere she inhabits while also recognising the need for change within it.

However, some male participants regard women as cognitively inferior, arguing that this is why they do not pursue hifz as boys do. This reasoning is also expressed by some of the women. Several invoked a hadith stating that women possess "less knowledge" than men. There is also a view that women are physiologically inferior to men. An urban madrasa teacher, Participant 9, herself a hafiza, explained what she understood as a physiological barrier to women's learning: "We lose ten days every month; memory fades then, and we have to start again." Here she was referring to the widespread juristic view that prohibits women from touching the *mushaf* (physical Qur'an) during menstruation, which interrupts the memorization cycle. A number of other female participants similarly commented that girls cannot retain memorized portions as effectively and are physically and mentally weaker than boys. However, it is notable that none of the women believed that the limitations on girls' hifz, no matter how they explained them, should prevent the girls from pursuing hifz. Rather, their moral reasoning positioned hifz as a spiritual achievement that transcends physical or intellectual limitation. For both hafizas and non-hafizas, memorizing the Qur'an was regarded as one of the most prestigious and honorable endeavors available to a Muslim woman, bringing her honor before God and within her family and community. This affective dimension of the atmosphere shapes their reasoning, enabling them to interpret bodily interruption or perceived weakness not as disqualification but as a challenge to be endured in pursuit of spiritual merit.

The question that follows, then, is whether these conservative views, held by the women themselves, undermine their ability to experience their lives as meaningful. More specifically, does inhabiting a gendered role within a moral atmosphere that regards women as unequal to men and, in certain respects, inferior to them preclude practical action? Or can such inhabitation also involve moral reasoning that guides action, enabling women to affirm that framework while working to improve their surroundings? My findings suggest that meaningfulness is not foreclosed by such unequal or self-limiting understandings of the self. Participant 50, a hafiza who "could not even imagine girls performing in a public hifz competition," illustrates this complexity clearly. I communicated with her more extensively than with any other participant through text messages, voice notes, and three interviews conducted over four to five months. She demonstrates how moral reasoning within a conservative religious atmosphere gives shape to practical action, allowing her to strengthen it and improve the world around her. This 18-year-old

teacher never showed her face to me out of modesty, even though I am a woman. Yet this commitment to "remaining unseen" did not impede our relationship. She quickly formed a warm, sisterly bond, writing to me often about her daily life, family, and work. Following the interviews, she continued the conversation by sending voice messages and texts, gradually creating an ongoing relationship of care and learning. She shared her thoughts, not only about her students and madrasa, but also about community matters, social issues, and world news. For example, she invoked a recent rape case in India involving a non-Muslim doctor. Reflecting on the incident she said, "You know, sister, this Indian sister was raped and killed... the people who did this must be punished… in this world, and then God will punish them in the next." She reasoned through the incident using ideas of divine justice while also affirming the necessity of worldly punishment, revealing an orientation toward social realities beyond the madrasa and her immediate surroundings. That the victim was a non-Muslim is significant. Her response complicates simplistic assumptions prevailing in Bangladesh that women formed within conservative madrasa environments are concerned only with their own religious community and are indifferent to the suffering of non-Muslims. By invoking justice for a non-Muslim woman, she demonstrates how her moral reasoning, shaped within a madrasa atmosphere, is not confined to it. Rather, it incorporates events beyond her immediate community into the moral framework she inhabits.

She also valued madrasa education deeply. Yet she did not reject secular schooling; instead, she understood both as meaningful when pursued with pious intention. She once told me proudly that her young son would one day become *boro hujur* (the principal) of the madrasa. This aspiration, expressed with both maternal affection and professional pride, captured her faith in the impact of her work. Her worries about the girls' madrasa were constant. "Sister, see the video," she wrote in Bangla, sending a recording of her classroom:

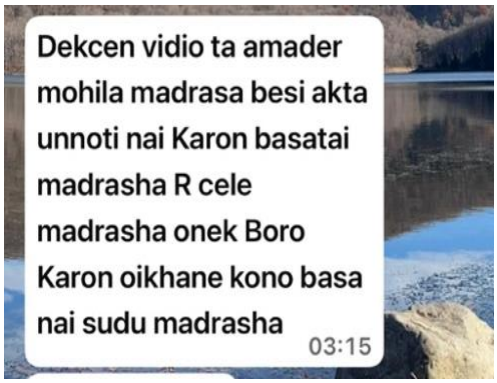

Figure 4- WhatsApp text from Participant 50

"Did you see the video? Our female section is not in good condition… it is in a house, that is why. But the boys' one is very big; it is not in a house, a full-fledged madrasa." The frustration in her message reflected both her love for her work and her awareness of structural disparities.

Despite these constraints, she remains deeply committed to teaching and to the female students' futures. She described buying clothes for poor girls under her care in the hifz section, helping families in need, and financially supporting women who were being neglected or mistreated by their husbands. "They do not have anyone to help them," she said. "So, I try what I can. Even if a little, it counts." When I offered to contribute towards Eid clothing for one such girl—after she had asked if I could help, since her own budget had already been stretched—she added a careful request: "When you send it to the principal so we can buy her the clothes, please do not tell him that I told you about her. He will not like me bothering you, but I would love for you to help her." Her request reflected her tact, sincerity, and the quiet moral reasoning that allowed her to act to support those around her, even when it meant acting discreetly. She also asked me to find donors who could help purchase large stand fans for the students, explaining that it had become unbearably hot in the girls' section. At the same time, she cautiously asked me to let her know the amount donors would be sending when the money was transferred through the usual channel to the madrasa principal. She wanted to ensure that the full amount donors would be sending reached the intended place and was used specifically for "her girls," rather than diverted elsewhere or to the boys' section. Her request reflected the careful, thoughtful way she tried to look after the students under her care, protecting their interests through diligence and practical reasoning while fully inhabiting the gendered atmosphere of the madrasa.

Participant 50's husband, a 23-year-old teacher in the boys' section of the madrasa (Participant 54), was also interviewed. She arranged the interview herself, and I spoke with him in her presence at their house attached to the madrasa. The young man spoke proudly about the madrasa system and how rapidly it is expanding in the country. Yet his wife spontaneously guided the conversation at times, interjecting, clarifying, and correcting his points. The traditional Qawmi ideal, reinforced in moral texts such as *Beheshti Zewar*, emphasizes women's quietness, obedience, and restraint in speech, particularly in the presence of men. As the text advises:

> When two persons are engaged in a conversation, the woman will try to enter their conversation without being asked to do so. Furthermore, she will give her own advice and opinions regarding the matter under discussion (without being asked to do so). As long as anyone does not ask you for any advice or for your opinion, you should be silent and remain as if you are absolutely dumb (Thanvi 2005, 831).

Nevertheless, the wife's participation was assertive, lively, and confident. In her voice, one could hear the vibrancy of a young woman deeply engaged with her religious world, her community, and the responsibilities she had taken on.

The trajectory of Participant 50's life as a hafiza and a hifz teacher becomes clearer when placed alongside other atmospheres described in madrasa scholarship. One such atmosphere appears in Gent's (2016) study, where *huffaz* (plural of hafiz, a memorizer of the Qur'an) in the context of a

Deobandi community (Deobandism being a revival movement that emerged in the late nineteenth century in India, which heavily influences the Qawmi madrasa tradition in Bangladesh) in England are portrayed as "hidden." Their achievement is not publicly visible; they do not hold formal authority, and their daily revision of the Qur'an (necessary to retain memory) takes place quietly in ordinary spaces, on buses, at work, or while traveling. This hiddenness Gent mentions is also gendered. He writes that male huffaz become visible only during Ramadan (the fasting month for Muslims), when they lead *tarawih* (night prayers in Ramadan) and recite in front of large congregations. However, female huffaz in his study have no comparable public role in the conservative Islamic context he studied. They recite only in private settings, which makes their hifz even more invisible than that of men. A similar pattern is evident for female huffaz such as Participant 50 in Bangladesh. They remain largely absent from the public enthusiasm surrounding hifz, as discussed earlier in this section. None of the female huffaz in my traditional-setting sample reported leading tarawih or any other prayer, even in women-only spaces. This is because, in many Qawmi circles, mimicking the authority of men is considered impermissible; therefore, women cannot lead women's prayers either. Instead, they may only pray behind men in any setting, such as a mosque or the home. It is also important to note that women's attendance at mosques, for daily prayers or for tarawih, remains relatively uncommon in Bangladesh, except in a small number of urban mosques. Taken together, these dynamics reveal the structural limitations shaping women's religious visibility in Bangladesh, closely paralleling the constraints identified in Gent's UK-based study.

A different atmosphere emerges in Borker's (2018) ethnography of Indian girls' madrasas. Early in her study, she introduces Nikhat (2), a shy student. After completing her studies, she was appointed as a teacher, and this new role gradually expanded her confidence. By the time Borker met her again, Nikhat had entered her second year of a BA at an Islamic university, showing how aspiration and confidence can emerge from within the madrasa atmosphere. Also, Borker's account of a Republic Day skit on the Delhi gang-rape case (182) shows how madrasa girls actively interpret public events through their own ethical vocabulary. As Borker describes it, "the message conveyed at the end of the skit was the importance of not being a silent bystander and that women should actively resist such violence. The first step towards such resistance… was to follow the rules of attire suggested in the Qur'an and practice the dress code prescribed by the madrasa." The girls were not merely absorbing doctrine; they were reasoning within their atmosphere, thinking about the practicality of life and protection through the categories made meaningful by their environment. Their negotiation emerges from their own interpretive labor. Thus, their agency is a form of reasoning grounded in the moral atmosphere.

Both scenarios described above resonate with broader patterns across South Asian female madrasas identified in other scholarship (Winkelmann 2005; Bano 2017; Sanyal 2020). Participant 50's life reflects these trajectories. Like the girls in Borker's (2018) study, she inhabits a world of limited public visibility. Yet this hiddenness, highlighted by Gent (2016), is

not something she experiences as a loss. Rather, it is the moral atmosphere she affirms as her own, the setting in which her sense of purpose takes shape. In this world, she teaches younger girls, offers advice, assists others, and sustains the everyday ethical life of her community. Such practices emerge from atmospheric agency, in which piety consists of discerning obligations and positioning oneself in the atmosphere in which one finds oneself. Her agency is thus carried by her reasoning, quiet, consistent, and attuned to the rhythms of her world.

Women's Life Trajectories in the Qawmi Setting

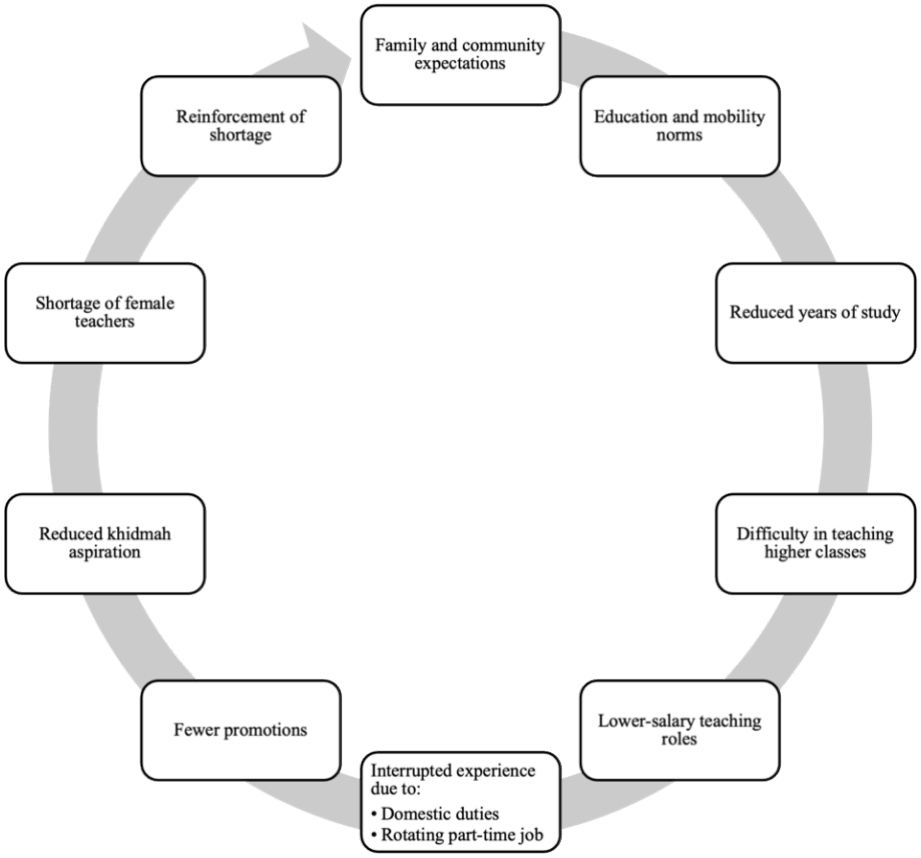

Figure 5- Cyclical Constraints Shaping Women's Trajectories in Bangladeshi Qawmi Madrasas

An Atmosphere of Cyclical Inequality

Having examined how women reason through their pious lives, we now turn to the structural conditions in which this reasoning takes place, conditions that are effectively the basis of the madrasa atmosphere. These conditions shape women's decisions and the moral horizons within

which their life unfolds. Research in Bangladesh has shown that traditional madrasas do not treat genders equally in terms of access, progression, or work opportunities (Asadullah and Chaudhury 2013; Badrunnesha and Kwauk 2015; Asadullah et al. 2019). When viewed together, these dynamics form a reinforcing cycle of inequality in relation to work and advancement in the madrasa, shaping women's experiences within these settings, as illustrated here.

As shown in the above figure, the cycle of constraints begins with family and community expectations that shape education and mobility norms for women. These norms reduce years of study and limit access to advanced training, making it difficult for women to teach higher classes. As a result, they are confined to lower-salary teaching roles. Domestic responsibilities and rotating or part-time work interrupt the accumulation of experience, leading to fewer promotions and limiting aspirations for *khidmah* (service to religion). This contributes to a shortage of experienced female teachers, which reinforces perceptions of limited quality and capacity, ultimately justifying and reproducing the very restrictions that initiated the cycle. This cycle does not negate women's actions or their individual choices, whether to prioritize family life or pursue work. Rather, it illustrates the structural conditions that are an integral part of the atmosphere and often limit their possibilities, such that even women who wish to study or work, as I have said, almost all the women in this study, may find their options constrained. The figure demonstrates how women's educational and professional trajectories can, though not necessarily, be shaped by a sequence of constraints within this system. As these constraints are interlinked, the following discussion does not address the elements in the figure one after the other in linear fashion.

Understandings of religion and cultural expectations within families and communities create restrictions on women's mobility and make participation in public work difficult. Common ideas include the belief that a woman's main duty, as per God's decree, is to stay at home and look after the family and that she should not go out without a *mahram* (a male relative so closely related that they cannot marry). The inequality in women's education and work is also reflected in the attitudes of those who shape madrasa policies. For example, Participant 53, the owner and principal of his institution, was strictly opposed to keeping residential girls after a certain age in his madrasa, citing religious reasons. He follows the Qawmi scholars who prohibit girls who have reached puberty (i.e., after the onset of menstruation) from staying overnight anywhere other than their father's or husband's house without a mahram accompanying them. He also told me, "Women are not able to, and are not supposed to, take care of themselves." Similarly, Participant 12, a male principal, remarked that if women today were "good Muslimahs," their husbands would never divorce them, implying that divorce occurs only when women fail to be 'good wives'.

A few male participants, such as the two cited above, interacted with me in ways that conveyed a marked sense of male authority. Such forms of gendered authority have been widely documented across diverse social, religious, and institutional settings worldwide. Although these dynamics

are global, the analysis in this paper is limited to Muslim-majority contexts. In the Bangladeshi madrasa system, Asadullah et al. (2019) show that students, particularly in madrasas unrecognized by the government, which are often part of the Qawmi system, express more stereotypical attitudes about women's roles and abilities. Such findings situate the forms of male authority observed in my fieldwork within wider institutional patterns rather than treating them as individual dispositions. This dynamic also echoes Bellagamba's (2006; 2013) analysis of Fula men in Gambia, where male authority rests on an embodied awareness of social position. Recent research on the Middle East shows how male guardianship continues to structure women's mobility, access to work, and participation in public life, normalising such authority through legal and social arrangements (Human Rights Watch 2023). This authority is often expressed without entering into direct discussions about gender with my male participants. The attitude or worldview is, in other words, assumed or naturalised. As Emerson et al. (2011) note, gender can be studied through everyday interactions that reveal 'member meaning' in a community even when gender is not explicitly discussed. In the Bangladeshi madrasa context, this naturalised authority shapes institutional decisions, from pay scales to the organization of gendered spaces. These gendered norms, embedded within a broader patriarchal structure, determine how women's labor is valued in the madrasa system. As Participant 47, a male madrasa owner from Dhaka, explained, women are consistently paid less than men in the Qawmi system because they are not considered family maintainers. Since their financial contribution is viewed as non-mandatory, their work is not treated as equal in value to men's, upon whom the responsibility of family maintenance is believed to rest. As a result, men receive higher salaries. This is a practice that the participant personally disagrees with as the owner of his madrasa, although the committee insists on maintaining lower salaries for women. He also emphasized that women's limited availability for madrasa work is itself a structural problem, even in institutions that might prefer to pay them equally. Family responsibilities and expectations often restrict women's time for work outside home, leading them to leave positions more frequently. While men tend to remain in the same madrasa for many years, gaining experience, seniority, and promotions, women often relocate after marriage, follow their husbands' transfers, or withdraw from paid work from time to time. As a result, their tenure remains short, and when they join new institutions, they start again at lower salary levels.

However, Participant 47 also reflected on his own reasoning, noting that he intentionally married "a rural woman who is less educated" and made it clear before marriage that she would not pursue a career. This is not uncommon in the country, as many people prefer to marry 'housewives' in a time when women often speak about pursuing a career. These conditions diminish women's aspiration to engage in khidmah which exacerbates the shortage of qualified female teachers. The shortage then reinforces the very restrictions that initiated the cycle, producing a self-sustaining pattern that constrains women's opportunities while shaping the moral horizons within which they reason about their lives. The result of these various constraints is that female instructors remain fewer in number and have less experience than men. Thus

Participant 28, a male owner of an online madrasa, finds that the women teachers in his madrasa are "of lower quality" compared to the men:

> Good teachers are hard to find. They have to maintain family, raise children, get married—so the good ones become busy. The ones who can give you more time are not always strong in quality, especially in tajwid and related areas. If you have ten teachers, maybe two are very good and the others are average. Also, women are not connected to the mosque—they do not lead prayers or serve as imams the way madrasa men do or can do. So, their aspiration is different, and that affects the process of having quality teachers.

Participant 28 added that, in his madrasa, he pays based on hours and experience, not on gender. But as explained earlier, experience-based pay does not benefit women.

Social and familial expectations around women's marriage, good behavior, and mobility also add an important dimension to this atmosphere. Participant 8, another male owner and principal who also holds a PhD in Qur'anic exegesis from an Islamic university in Bangladesh, says proudly that madrasa girls are married off early. He stated that many people prefer them for their modesty, soft-spoken nature, and reputation as "good girls," unlike non-madrasa girls who are more outgoing. He added that madrasa girls have fewer problems with in-laws because they are patient and "God blesses their families for that." As he put it, they know "how to be quiet," they "do *bardasht* (endure)." Their *adab-akhlaq* (behavior and character) is better, they are well-behaved, and they give importance to their families and guardians. School and college girls, he argued, do not give that importance to guardians, go anywhere they want, and "have no discipline." Illustrating this, he recalled a journalist from North Bengal who admitted his daughter to his madrasa, saying, "If nothing else, she can get married sooner," laughing while he recounted the story. He offered another example from his teaching staff: many of the female teachers who taught Bangla, English, or math had completed master's degrees, were tutoring and working, and were trying for marriage, "but it was not really happening," he said, laughing again. After giving these examples, he noted that madrasa girls have more *barakah* (blessings) in their marriages and are more aware of their rights than schoolgirls, such as knowing that dowry is *haram* (forbidden) in Islam. They normally marry hujurs (religiously practicing men often involved in Islamic teaching), so, he claimed, their husbands are also aware of 'women's rights' in ways that non-madrasa people often are not.

This perspective from Participant 8 points to a broader structural pattern in madrasa education: women are expected to marry early. As several participants explained, the ulama long ago determined that for women to be marriage-eligible, their studies should be shorter in duration. This shortening of women's educational trajectories was framed as being "in women's best interest." Thus, women study fewer years, follow a more limited syllabus, and do not cover the texts as extensively as boys. When it comes to studying beyond Dawra-e-Hadith, such as pursuing ifta or becoming a muftiya qualified to issue *fatwa* (Islamic legal rulings), some women

said they could not do so or that there was no tradition of women taking this path. Others stated that it was possible in principle but clarified that women rarely pursue it and do not independently originate fatwa; instead, they relay rulings established by male scholars. Nevertheless, Participant 8 described the practical side of this: "Girls do study to become a muftiya. If the husband wants, they can study further after marriage—if he allows and gives the opportunity."

However, one Qawmi madrasa participant, an urban businessman and *da'i* (caller to Islam), Participant 57, argued that existing gendered inequalities should be understood as historically and culturally inherited rather than religiously mandated. He mentioned inequalities such as unequal pay, unequal curricula, and women's exclusion from mosques. He explained that "things are changing, but it will take time," attributing inequalities affecting women to what he described as a lingering "Hindustani" (Indian) cultural influence. By this, he referred to Bangladesh's historical inclusion within India prior to Partition and the continued presence of practices shaped by a predominantly Hindu-majority cultural context. According to him, these practices are cultural rather than Islamic and are gradually being reformed: some madrasas, he noted, have already begun implementing equal salaries and unified curricula. He framed these efforts as part of an ongoing *jihad* (understood here as a moral and social struggle toward Islamic reform), driven by increasing exposure to broader Islamic scholarship and transnational religious knowledge. At the same time, tensions around gender segregation in education and work remain unresolved within his reformist framing. Although his daughter currently lives in the UK with her mother, he stated that she would never study there; instead, she would attend a madrasa in Bangladesh, possibly the one he is in the process of establishing himself. Mixed-gender education and employment were described by this participant as categorically unacceptable for women in Islam, who, in his view, must remain strictly segregated in both educational and professional settings. He also emphasized that a woman should not leave the house without a mahram, whether for attending a madrasa or for shopping.

Additionally, while Participant 57 expressed strong enthusiasm for gradual reform, this framing does not address broader patterns of gendered inequality across Muslim-majority contexts. Similar disparities persist in other regions. Existing scholarship, such as Sonbol's work on Jordan, documents ongoing inequalities in women's access to employment and other economic opportunities (Sonbol 2003). It is therefore important to note that gendered gaps in opportunities are not unique to the Bangladeshi context described here as influenced by Hindu cultural legacies. Comparable disparities appear in other Muslim-majority contexts as well. Conversations with my relatives and friends working in Deobandi madrasa systems in Western countries also suggest similar patterns. One experienced female Islamic school teacher currently living in Canada, for example, has repeatedly described experiencing pay discrimination throughout her teaching career. Although these accounts fall outside the formal dataset of this study, they resonate with broader patterns documented across madrasa contexts. Taken together,

these dynamics contribute to the wider moral and institutional atmosphere that frames the life course of women within the Qawmi madrasa system.

Moral Reasoning within Unequal Opportunity

This section examines women's actions within this environment of inequality. As noted earlier, describing the atmosphere is sometimes necessary when presenting their reasoning, since women's moral reasoning and actions are inseparable from the atmosphere in which they take place.

Although education and work in the madrasa system do not treat male and female community members equally, there is one positive outcome in the context of a developing country like Bangladesh: Qawmi women begin earning much earlier than most women in the secular education stream. Because secular schooling requires more years before graduation, it is uncommon for girls to become earning members of the family during adolescence. In contrast, the Qawmi education system enables girls to complete their Dawra studies by the age of 15 or 16, as they follow a shorter syllabus, and to begin working immediately thereafter. Some begin working even earlier in practice, as they can teach Arabic and Qur'an recitation either online or in person. There has always been a strong demand in the country for such teachers, particularly in families where parents are not themselves proficient in Qur'an recitation or Arabic. This is especially important for lower-income families, for whom a respectable income at a young age can provide crucial support. Participant 37, for example, a 23-year-old from a low-income household, gives all of her small earnings to her elderly parents to help with medicine or household needs. Participant 27, as discussed earlier, had been earning since the age of eleven because of her proficiency in teaching Qur'an. Some, only 18-20 at the time of the interview, had already been working for 2-3 years. As many explained, the sooner you finish Dawrah, the sooner you can start earning. However, this early entry into work is also tied to the limited opportunities for higher study, which leaves them practically no pathways for further education or professional advancement. As one rural teacher explained, she wished to pursue further study in ifta, but doing so would require moving to Sylhet, a regional city, an option not all families permit for their daughters. She explained that without family support, women's options remain limited in education and work.

In this view, family support may allow women to pursue higher studies or work after graduation, but usually only if they themselves are eager to continue studying or working. In cases where such support is present, however, different possibilities emerge. Participant 9, a 26-year-old woman from a higher-income background, offers one example. She runs a female madrasa in the capital city that her husband set up for her. A hafiza, whom her husband describes as "very bright and meritorious," she teaches in a madrasa attached to their house so that she does not have to go outside. She is deeply committed to her work and hopes that her 2.5-year-old daughter will also become a hafiza. She explained that women should avoid going outside the home to

earn money for as long as possible because, in her view, this is not permissible, and "God will provide for us." At the same time, she reasoned that women may work both by going out within purdah and by working from home adding that "God makes things easier if you have faith in Him." Speaking about her daughter's future, she said she hopes to marry her "into an environment like the one we are raising her in." Such arrangements and the level of spousal support on which she relies are not always available across the community or the wider society. Interestingly, while she discourages women's employment outside the home, she employs other women teachers in her madrasa to teach both secular and Islamic subjects. In this way, her moral reasoning both sets limits and makes action possible. It enables her to work from home, which she considers the proper boundary for women. Yet this same boundary also generates employment for other women as a spillover effect, even though they do not necessarily follow her understanding of women's work. Her reasoning is grounded in her atmosphere, yet its application in practice is complex.

There are others who maintain that if girls and women wish to study and work, they can succeed through individual focus and commitment, regardless of structural barriers. Several participants mentioned colleagues or teachers who instruct higher classes because of their demonstrated capability, although such cases remain exceptions within the Qawmi environment. One hardworking young female teacher, Participant 22, from a well-off madrasa in Dhaka stated, "If a girl wants, she can study anything. Of course, they can give a fatwa and be a muftiya." She cited a senior colleague in her madrasa who is highly competent in masla-masayel. However, she placed responsibility on female students themselves for their limited presence in higher classes, both as students and as teachers. She suggested that girls and young women do not genuinely pursue advanced learning and "do not want to use their brains." The participant was critical of what she perceived as girls' inattentiveness compared to boys. One explanation she offered concerned classroom arrangement: In higher classes, where male teachers predominate, girls sit behind a curtain such that the male teacher cannot see them. Lectures are delivered from behind this partition. As a result, she argued, students become relaxed and less focused. In boys' madrasas, by contrast, students remain alert because the hujur stands before them and commands their attention. In her view, women may have weaker memory and tend to perform at a lower level than men; however, if they are determined, they can excel. She pointed to her own academic trajectory as evidence, describing herself as a "good student." and expressed her desire to teach higher classes as she gains more experience. She further stated that young women must be less distracted, particularly by mobile phones, and concentrate more seriously on their studies if they wish to succeed. In her view, if the syllabus for girls were identical to that of men, most girls would struggle to pass. For this reason, she regarded the shorter syllabus for girls as justified.

The participant thus reflects a worldview shaped by the everyday institutional conditions she observes. She did not, in her reasoning, attribute inequality to the system itself. Instead, she

framed it as a matter of personal responsibility, urging female students to succeed through discipline and focus within the existing system. At first glance, her observations may appear reductive, particularly in attributing women's limited presence in higher classes to individual shortcomings rather than institutional and socio-cultural arrangements. However, her reasoning is coherent within the moral framework she draws upon. Structural differences such as classroom partition and curricular disparity are acknowledged without further elaboration, but more importantly, they are not treated as determinative. Instead, she interprets them through a lens of discipline and self-cultivation. The classroom partition, the shorter syllabus, and the lower representation of women in advanced study are not, for her, evidence of systemic inequality; rather, they become conditions within which women's effort must be intensified. Responsibility is individualized, as educational success is evaluated as a matter of personal striving. The participant's emphasis on female students' mobile distraction, inattentiveness, lack of focus and seriousness, and insufficient effort, makes clear that, for her, the core issue lies in habits of discipline rather than external limitation. In this sense, her moral reasoning situates educational success within a framework of character formation.

Within this system of unequal opportunity in education and employment as described in the cycle outlined in the previous subsection, how do women perceive disparities in pay once they enter the workforce? How do they reason through this inequality, and what forms of moral reasoning emerge as they continue to participate in such a system? The discussion that follows explores these questions through examples drawn from participants' lives.

When I asked both women and men about the payment structure in madrasa education and employment, the explanation was consistent: Qawmi madrasas generally pay poorly because most students come from financially strained families, and institutions rely heavily on donations. Yet even within this overall scarcity, women's salaries remain lower than men's. All the female teachers I spoke to, from both rural and urban Qawmi settings, acknowledged this disparity. What stood out was how they reasoned while inhabiting the norms of this environment. Despite limited opportunities, unequal pay, and some dissatisfaction, the women described their work with a sense of moral satisfaction. As one participant put it, "…however it is, we are happy with this deeni khidmah. We are satisfied with it, thinking it is for God."

This does not mean that all women are fully reconciled to the system; they also push back at times. Their reflections reveal another dimension of moral reasoning: they may consider the system to fall short of Islamic standards of justice yet still find value in their own moral commitment within it. Participant 39, a 45-year-old rural Qawmi madrasa teacher, offers one such example. She spoke eloquently and critically about how women teachers are underpaid in Qawmi institutions. Despite having many years of experience, she earns only 3,000 taka (35 CAD) a month from her madrasa. "Every year, you might have 200 takas added," she said. "My experience does not matter." Her working day runs from 8:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., but recently the authorities instructed teachers to stay until 4:00 p.m. "We said we could not," she recalled. "So,

they said, then you stay alternately, each of you one day a week till 4." She also works for an online madrasa, which pays her significantly better than the physical institution, 8,000 taka (approximately 92 CAD) per month.

This participant's criticisms were direct. She framed the gendered pay gap as a deviation from the Islamic ideal of justice and fairness: "I believe madrasa is in fitna (corruption) now. Many take it as a business, which is a fitna. The less they pay, the more they profit." She explained that even in large, well-funded madrasas, women teachers receive meager salaries. "I went to an invitation to a big four-storey madrasa a few days ago, lots of students they have. But then I asked one woman teacher what she was being paid. She said, "3,000." I was surprised. Such a big madrasa should pay based on student numbers." At the same time, while laying blame for low salaries on madrasah owners, Participant 39 is reluctant to ask for pay raises because of her moral commitment: "They give the women tons of work and say they are doing deeni khidmah. But as we are doing khidmah, we say we will be satisfied with whatever they give us. The same is with me. I have never asked anyone to increase my pay; whatever they pay me, I take it." Participant 39 also spoke of harsh treatment of women teachers in her madrasa:

> One of our teachers was sick… She was hospitalized for four days. They told her, since you are sick, leave the job… But her family is very poor, and she is newly married… Then, when she became pregnant, she said, 'I can't stay till 4 p.m.; let me work till 1 like the others.' But they said that if she did not stay until 4, they did not need her. We—the rest of the teachers—were very sad about it. We held a meeting yesterday about her and our concerns [with the madrasah authorities]. Alhamdulillah (praise be to God), they said she can, for now, attend classes until 1 p.m. We were all very happy she did not have to leave.

Participant 39's reflections reveal the layered inequalities women face in Qawmi settings such as low and irregular pay, loss of work during sickness and pregnancy, and lack of written contracts or job security. "These need changing," she said. "If the girls were paid well, it would have helped their families. Goods are expensive now. My income is low, but the food price is not. The women are very patient, but they suffer."

Participant 18 offers another example. Her reflections and actions emerge from her own particular atmosphere and take a different form of engagement with the system. A 49-year-old madrasa owner, the principal of her own institution, and an experienced teacher in a major urban city, she described the pay gap through her long career in Qawmi madrasa. This is despite teaching at one of the city's oldest and most well-known girls' madrasas. She explained: "After working for 18 years, I get 7,500 taka as salary… Alhamdulillah… God helps us [in getting by] … Qawmi women are paid very low." In speaking about her work, she highlighted the qualities and achievements of her students. She described her Qawmi girls as "very gentle," intelligent, and quick learners, noting with pride that they study English in ways many people do not expect from madrasa girls. She explained that some of them go abroad through marriage, as diasporic

families seek “a good, virtuous girl” from her madrasa as a suitable bride for their male relatives. Her students also frequently secure top positions in Befaq’s qariana examinations.

In Participant 18’s residential madrasa, all staff members are women, except for two male teachers who teach the higher classes. Even the security guards are women, which is unusual in Bangladesh, where security guards are rarely female. The two male teachers are a necessary addition that she could not avoid, as women are rarely equipped to teach higher classes. She described the all-female staff as a decision she took to demonstrate that “women do not need help; they can do it all.” She also shared that she has sent her own daughter abroad to study in a secular field, adding that her daughter, like herself, has excelled in qariana. Although her daughter is married, she has traveled alone, lives abroad without her husband, and is pursuing her higher studies in a secular field. This is not typically considered “Islamic” within Qawmi circles, where women are generally not expected to travel alone, especially over long distances. Yet for this participant, such exceptions signal that the Qawmi world is beginning to change in many ways; as she put it, “new ways of thinking are budding as people are being connected online with the world outside”. We can see that Participant 18’s actions and words reveal a spatially bound form of agency. Within domains of her personal or institutional authority, such as hiring practices within her own residential madrasa or decisions regarding her daughter’s education abroad, she is willing to bend prevailing gender norms to demonstrate women’s self-sufficiency and competence. These interventions rework the everyday moral and institutional atmosphere of her madrasa and family. However, when it comes to more entrenched structural inequalities, such as the persistently lower salaries of women teachers or the presence of male instructors for senior girls due to gendered distributions of expertise in certain madrasa subjects, she does not offer thoughts about how these situations might be changed. Rather, they are treated as given constraints. Thus, her reasoning does not include a generalized critique or an attempt to bring about broader changes in gender hierarchy, such as reforms to syllabi or payment structures in madrasas. Instead, she accepts the conditions of the broader atmosphere while applying a different reasoning (“women do not need help”) within her own sphere of control, thereby reshaping local possibilities. In her account, a direct connection between broader structural inequalities and her localized interventions did not emerge. Rather, her reasoning and actions reveal a differentiation between domains she understands as open to intervention and those she accepts as structurally fixed.

Both participants 39 and 18 belong to the same generation and share a mixed educational background: they began in secular schooling and later completed madrasa degrees. Yet their reflections on pay discrimination emerge from very different atmospheres, leading them to reason and find their agency differently. Participant 18 is highly educated and comes from a higher-income urban family. She does not frame low pay as a point of contestation, describing her ability to endure it through faith: “God helps us in getting by.” Participant 39, by contrast, completed higher secondary education and comes from a rural family with modest income. She

speaks with a sharper awareness of economic strain: “My pay does not pay for food.” Her concern is not limited to her own situation; she repeatedly emphasized the difficulties faced by women within the current pay structure, drawing attention to patterns of discrimination against women and the conditions that produce it. This recalls Abisaab's (2010) discussion of women in Lebanon, where different groups of women concentrated on distinct arenas of activism—some focusing on moral and domestic reform, others on economic struggle and political mobilization. The upper-class women’s feminism took patriotic and maternalist forms, imagining the home as the site where the nation’s moral fabric should be cultivated. By contrast, women from working-class backgrounds, whose lives were shaped by poverty and precarity, mobilized around wages, labor conditions, and survival. They led protests, took to the streets, faced police violence, and risked their lives in ways that elite women did not. This contrast provides a good illustration of atmospheric agency, of the ways women’s orientations, judgments, and priorities take shape through moral reasoning formed in negotiation with elements of the atmosphere such as class, educational background, institutional environment, familial position, and life experience, the particular composition of one’s life.

Does the example of Participants 39 and 18 imply that economic position is the primary factor structuring these women’s reasoning? The following examples suggest otherwise. They show that, regardless of economic position, such an atmosphere is not always perceived as having imperfections that require correction. We saw that Participant 39, from a middle-income background, was vocal in her criticism of low pay and the treatment of women in the Qawmi system, while Participant 18 sought to transform her immediate surroundings from her well-off position rather than addressing the broader atmosphere of unequal pay. At times, however, the atmosphere is not regarded as requiring reform or intervention. Rather than being determined by income level, women’s orientations are shaped through their own evaluative practices; being from an upper- or lower-income background does not automatically dictate how one interprets or inhabits an atmosphere. Turning to another pair of participants, the following vignette illustrates how moral reasoning takes shape within the atmospheres they both choose and inhabit without questioning its internal arrangements. Neither participant sought changes to the existing pay structure; instead, both supported the tradition with vigor.

Participant 23, introduced earlier, works as a teacher at a madrasa for affluent children in Dhaka and comes from a well-off background. She explained the pay gap through her view that men possess superior knowledge and that women’s primary responsibilities lie in maintaining the home. She also remarked that wanting “equal rights” like men is not an intelligent or sensible aspiration:

> Say, schoolgirls want equal rights. But a girl in her right mind cannot want to have equal rights. This is God’s bound. So, it is better to remain at home and look after the household and kids. If everyone is going out, who will take care of the home? Now, if someone can maintain purdah well and go out to work, then she very well can; it is

> best, I think. They should look after both sides, then, home and outside. And if she can't, she finds it difficult, if it is a burden for her, she can stay home. Allah has created women as *rabbatul Bait*, the queen of the home.

She also says: "…The man is expected to look after the family, so he is given a higher salary. If a woman can prove herself to be highly qualified, if she is able to teach the more difficult books at the upper level, then she can also receive a higher salary. Women often teach with some limitations, as their knowledge is considered to be less than men's. Men are seen as having more knowledge, so they teach very well and are assigned the more difficult books. If I am highly skilled and can teach at the same level as a man, then my salary can be equal. But if I am teaching lower classes, then my salary is lower. Men usually receive more pay because they are seen as responsible for supporting the family, even when men and women are working at the same level." Thus, this participant is committed to the idea that a woman can receive an equal salary only if she proves herself to be equal or superior in calibre to a man, an expectation that, in her framing, applies to specific women rather than setting a universal standard for all. She is not concerned with salary levels or the daily income needed to sustain a family. Instead, her priorities revolve around dawah, which she describes as her lifelong calling, while also wanting to remain at home, as family is central to her aspirations. The atmosphere she inhabits enables her to feel content with this arrangement, and even to defend the existing pay gap. For her, the low pay in madrasas aligns with the very meaning of khidmah, service performed for the sake of God, not for material gain:

> It is still as it was before: people in a madrasa try to do khidmah, so they do not expect to get much from it. They are paid very little, and the children who come here do not pay much either. Still, teachers feel that they are doing a good deed for their *akhirah* and for Allah's pleasure. The idea of khidmah is that you will not receive your due in full, but whatever you are given, you should accept it and continue. So, I don't get much according to my labor and effort, but the satisfaction comes from knowing that, because of me, many children are learning the faith and learning to lead a good life.

This participant wants to prioritise education, dawah, and marriage, and hopes that girls would have greater opportunities in study, dawah, and even work, such as business or entrepreneurship, so long as they could do so "after managing their family." At the same time, she defended traditional patriarchal inequalities in the treatment of women, grounding her position in religious explanation.

Participant 35, who is of a similar age and works in the same type of affluent children's madrasa, shares many of the same core commitments of Participant 23: a strong attachment to an Islamic way of life, the importance of marriage, the value of khidmah for both men and women within a segregated framework, and the belief that family should be prioritized above all else. Yet reasons about the pay difference differently. The atmosphere of her life is shaped more by responsibility

than by the relative comfort that characterized Participant 23's. With her father and elder brother both deceased, she and her mother jointly sustain the household, although she effectively serves as the guardian because her mother is now elderly. Much of her daily thinking revolves around how her younger siblings will continue their studies. Although she believes that men are superior to women, she is not satisfied with her salary. Her concern, however, is expressed as a gentle and sorrowful observation rather than a critique: "This is the painful part, apu [sister]… I work as much as a man, but I am paid less… Our salary is less than men's. This is really bad… A man is getting 15,000 takas, a woman is getting 7–8,000 taka," she said. But she does not question the legitimacy of the system itself, as Participant 39 does, and continues to regard it with deep respect. Her dissatisfaction does not translate into broader claims about equality of opportunity. When asked about curriculum differences between boys and girls, she rejected the idea that there should be any change: "I will never change anything from the syllabus. The *alems* and *fuqahas* (scholars) made the syllabus after thinking a lot, after doing *istikhara* (special prayer of guidance) and all necessary deliberation, so I will not change a thing… What they have in the syllabus is sufficient for girls." Thus, she defers to male knowledge and expertise, reasoning, despite her plaint, that this hierarchy is both practically necessary and divinely sanctioned and treating it as a given condition rather than a site of intervention.

The four cases addressed in this section might suggest that economic vulnerability shapes women's orientations. Yet this is not the only force at play. What matters first and foremost is how women reason within the atmospheres they inhabit. Taken together, this chapter has shown that women in Qawmi madrasas reason about their lives within deeply gendered moral and institutional atmospheres. These atmospheres are not always those into which they are born and raised. At times, women enter them from secular educational backgrounds, through moral reasoning shaped by different and particular atmospheric elements in their lives. Nevertheless, the atmosphere of the Qawmi madrasas described in this chapter also shapes access to education, work, and authority. We have seen how women interpret and at times push back against inequality within this atmosphere, justify endurance through moral reasoning, or sometimes envision and even pursue change. Broader atmospheres differ across women, shaped by distinct orientations in life that emerge from variations in social and economic backgrounds, psychological dispositions, and specific moral understandings. Through the women's reasoning, they craft lives that are meaningful to them, even as structural inequalities remain. The following chapter turns to a different institutional atmosphere, where reasoning takes on new configurations.

Chapter Two
Modernity in Godly Learning

> Islam, even in its most restrictive interpretations, appears to be more empowering and protective of women's interests than the social norms that prevail in many culturally conservative societies. For the educated women, on the other hand, mixing Islamic knowledge with the realities of their everyday lives enables them to realise that Islamic rulings, if properly understood and applied to the modern context, can allow them to retain all the essential liberties shaping their very modern lives, yet without violating the core of Islamic ethics. These women's efforts to blend Islamic knowledge and everyday realities, however, remain distinctly different from those of the modernists or Islamic feminists.
>
> —Masooda Bano, *Female Islamic Education Movements: The Re-Democratisation of Islamic Knowledge* (2017, 24).

Masooda Bano's reflection encapsulates a reality in the lives of many contemporary Muslim women: the reconciliation of Islam and modern conditions of living. Her observation underscores how empowerment within Islamic frameworks is grounded not only in socio-economic advancement but also in interpretive reasoning, the capacity to make religious knowledge meaningful within changing social worlds. The previous chapter examined how women reason within the atmospheres of continuity of tradition and moral discipline that characterize Qawmi madrasas. This chapter turns to those who inhabit atmospheres of change and reform, asking how education that includes a greater proportion of secular learning, reformist thought, and the circulation of global Islamic ideas reshapes the reasoning that sustains pious life. As Bano (2017) observes, these women are not Islamic feminists. Rather, they reinterpret and extend Islamic tradition within modern life. Their reflections show how change unfolds as an inward and intellectual process, how women think differently about duty, gender, and moral responsibility while remaining grounded in religious conviction rather than in liberal or Western notions of autonomy. In the reformist Aliya and madrasa-school settings featured in this chapter, women's agency continues to be realized in the context of their particular atmospheres, expressed through moral reasoning. Throughout this chapter, I refer to these reformist institutions collectively as the modern setting, because they combine Islamic learning with modern educational curricula, including state-recognized programs and other contemporary academic frameworks.

Flexibility and Diversity in Segregation

Recent data indicate that enrollment in madrasa education has steadily increased, while participation in general education has gradually declined (The Financial Express 2024). Religious education is increasingly combined with modern academic subjects such as science

and mathematics, and many institutions now function as hybrid schools that reflect parental aspirations for both moral formation and global competitiveness. One early example of such institutions emerged under the Manarat Trust, which began offering English-medium education in 1979 and gradually expanded from school to university level, helping popularize this model of private religious schooling in Bangladesh. One Aliya madrasa in the capital, according to my participants, has also become prominent over the past two decades and now attracts students from both middle- and upper-class families. The institution has many branches across the country, and its reputation for offering a mixed curriculum has, as Participant 1 noted, "opened the path" for the growing acceptance of hybrid instruction. Some institutions offer both Bangla- and English-medium streams. One participant, the owner of two such madrasas and principal of the Bangla-medium branch, explained that this dual model reflects parents' financial realities. English-medium schools are costly, and middle-income families often cannot afford to enroll more than one child. For families with two or three children, she noted, "Bangla-medium madrasas that follow the government school curriculum blended with strong Islamic subjects provide an affordable alternative." Across interviews, participants also confirmed that increased exposure to global Islamic scholarship and digitally connected religious spaces have encouraged many families to place their children in such institutions. These schools are most commonly English-medium religious schools in large cities, while Aliya madrasas operate in both urban and rural settings.

Aliya madrasas and the mixed-education model that has recently attracted increasing public attention (both categorized under reformist settings in the introductory chapter) maintain generally similar atmospheres with regard to segregation. The practice of purdah is relatively flexible and diverse in such madrasa-schools. For example, Manarat institutions remain mixed-gender across their school, college, and university levels. Participants from an Aliya madrasa also explained that their institution operates both separate and mixed-gender branches. Some of its higher-level sections are female-only, while several junior sections are mixed-gender. Some high-end madrasa-schools also maintain gender separation through internal spatial organization within the same building. Participant 24's madrasa-school, for instance, places the boys' and girls' sections on different floors. Up to grades 3 or 4, both male and female teachers teach all students, though most teachers at this stage are women. As Participant 24 noted, in the lower grades, male teachers are generally few, and children are largely cared for by female teachers. From grades 4 and 5 upward, teachers are assigned according to the gender-specific sections. Nevertheless, segregation in this context is loosely practiced and not enforced in the strict manner observed in Qawmi madrasas.

Across Bangladesh, more broadly, Aliya madrasas generally do not separate boys and girls within the classroom, although the degree of this "non-segregation" varies regionally. In some rural areas, such as those described by Participants 6 and 26, girls in grades 9 and 10 attend lessons in the presence of teachers but leave the classroom immediately after the teacher departs.

They spend the remaining time in a designated common room for older girls. As one participant explained, this arrangement ensures that boys and girls are not "left alone" during unsupervised periods. Notably, this practice is not unique to madrasas; similar arrangements are found in many government-affiliated rural schools, where older girls often spend free periods in a common room and re-enter class accompanied by teachers. Participant 10, who completed her education entirely within the Aliya system and recently finished a master's degree from a higher-studies madrasa, noted that while women at the honors and master's levels have separate common rooms, washrooms, and examination halls, classes themselves remain co-educational. As she described it, male students typically sit on one side of the classroom and female students on the other, an arrangement commonly observed in Aliya institutions across the country. Taken together, these practices illustrate a moderate and flexible approach to gender segregation, in sharp contrast to the stricter norms typical of Qawmi settings, where segregation is understood as an obligation, women are to avoid interacting with and even seeing unrelated men, and travel far for study or work without a mahram is not permitted. In the Qawmi madrasas, only limited movement is permissible, when unavoidable. By contrast, in the Aliya and madrasa–school settings, segregation is often seen as preferable rather than compulsory. Most participants from these institutions described it as a boundary of respectful distance in educational and work environments, an awareness that relations between men and women should be subject to restraint and propriety.

To see how the flexibility in the idea of segregation and purdah varies in these institutions, we can take the examples of Participant 38 and 48. Participant 38, for example, a rural madrasa teacher who teaches secular subjects at an Aliya madrasa, explains her moral reasoning in this regard: "I am from a secular educational background, and I do not wear a niqab… But I do not ask students not to wear it or take it off in my class. I feel a bit scared too, of the religious consequences from God… I understand it is *taqwa* [fear and awareness of God], and it is good that they do it from their perspective. So, I let them do it." Her response reflects how segregation can be reasoned as a matter of individual piety, comfort, and mutual respect rather than a compulsory institutional norm. Although she comes from a secular educational background and does not wear the niqab herself, she does not want that to determine what her students should do. She does not adopt their practice, yet she does not challenge it. Her decision to "let them do it" reflects not liberal neutrality but moral restraint. She makes this decision through an awareness of religious consequences and a fear of being accountable before God. Her position is neither opposition nor full identification. Her response reflects respect for her students' pious intentions and a willingness to cohabit the same institution while reasoning according to a different mode of piety. In her moral reasoning, segregation becomes a shared understanding of propriety shaped by individual conscience and mutual respect, and she acts accordingly.

However, not all participants in the reformist setting shared this more flexible view. Some preferred much stricter boundaries. Participant 48 expressed dissatisfaction with the institution

where she worked: “I have a complaint about this madrasa-school—they do not really follow the segregation rules, and I do not feel comfortable in a mixed-gender work environment.” Notably, Participant 48 inhabits a different atmosphere than that of Participant 38. She does not come from a madrasa background; she is an MBA graduate from an affluent family in a wealthy neighbourhood of the capital, and her family is not particularly conservative. She describes her own gradual shift in practices of segregation: “I wear burkha now… I didn’t before. Gradually I upgraded—I used to wear only a hijab in school because my father wanted us sisters to wear it. These days I wear a mask too; in front of male teachers I feel uncomfortable, so I use it to cover more.” For her, the idea of segregation should be implemented more deeply than what is currently practiced in her madrasa-school:

> The institution is famous… but I do not want my daughter here. My daughter has been wearing hijab since she was one—now she is six—but the environment here is not Islamic. Many teachers do not observe purdah outside school; they treat it like just a uniform. Not everyone wears abaya. Their dresses are colorful—skirts and coatis. The dress code is not very strict. Pants just have to be loose, not tight. Hijab is mandatory, but niqab is not mandatory. Around 60–70% of the women do not maintain purdah properly. And the male madrasa teachers who are hired to teach Arabic or Qur’an—they come in and out of our office room very freely, without observing purdah. They have their own separate sitting room, but still, they come and go like that. I do not like it. The women teachers laugh and talk with them; there is no restriction…

For this participant, improving segregation required increasing the number of women teachers. She illustrated this with an example: “A girl who is menstruating may be sitting in class and not touching the *mus’haf* (Qur’an). Then a male teacher comes in, and he immediately knows she is on her period. This is awkward. There should be purdah for this as well—God has set boundaries for these matters…for this reason, you need more female teachers.” Thus, women who hold moderate views on segregation are not the only ones found in such settings. As Sehlikoglu (2018, 73) observes that there are “aspects of selfhood that escape from the structures, rules, systems, and discursive limits of life but capture imaginations, aspirations, desires, yearnings, and longings.” Participant 48’s moral reasoning reflects this dimension of selfhood, as her stricter stance on segregation does not derive from inherited conservatism but from an internally cultivated moral sensibility through which she evaluates and judges her institutional atmosphere.

Participant 44 provides another example of moral reasoning in which agency unfolds through a reflective reorientation of the self, illustrating how forms of selfhood can move beyond established social environments as individuals recalibrate their lives in the atmospheres they seek to inhabit. Although she is currently enrolled in an online madrasa with a Qawmi affiliation, she has not been nurtured in the traditional atmosphere of a Qawmi institution. Instead, her Islamic learning has developed primarily through online religious content. She comes from a high-income urban background, completed her schooling at one of Dhaka’s leading elite schools, and later attended the country’s most selective public business institutes. Her family is not

conservative, and her "Islamic journey," as she describes it, did not begin at home. It emerged gradually through her own search for guidance. She first began wearing hijab and later adopted niqab. She worked in the corporate sector for several years but eventually quit, explaining that the environment conflicted with her aspiration to become, in her words, "a Muslim." Financially, she is stable: she has savings and lives with her parents and younger sister in their own house in Dhaka.

Participant 44 is currently a social-media-based boutique entrepreneur and has recently enrolled in an online madrasa course specifically to study Islamic business ethics. She hopes to expand her business further. She no longer appears without a veil in front of male cousins and has deleted the contact information of all former male colleagues from her phone. Now in her thirties, she emphasizes that marriage should not be rushed and that any future partner must respect the gender-segregated boundaries she has set for herself. Thus, she asserts authority over how segregation is practiced in her life. The participant wants to marry someone who will respect the boundaries she has defined. This complicates the idea of merely inhabiting norms: although she adopts segregation as a principle, she does not follow it according to general expectations, such as submitting to the conservative ideal of early marriage as a prophetic tradition. Rather, she sets her own expectations for marriage and chooses to delay it while waiting for a partner who aligns with her boundaries. Participant 44's resignation from her corporate job also illustrates how moral orientations can structure practical decisions. She recounted the moment she left: "I submitted my resignation and told my family coming from the office that I have resigned. They were like, 'It's ok, she is like that' [laughs]." For her, the office environment was not merely professionally challenging but ethically incompatible with the form of gender-segregated and religious life she sought to cultivate. The shift away from corporate work was therefore part of a broader pattern of self-directed moral recalibration visible across her other practices: adopting niqab, avoiding mixed-gender interactions, deleting the contact information of former male colleagues, and limiting her physical presence before male relatives. These adjustments reflect an ongoing evaluative process through which she aligns ordinary life with her religious commitments. Rather than emerging from institutional discipline or familial pressure, her orientation is shaped through ethical reflection and the aspirations she associates with living as "a Muslim" on her own terms. This is what I define as atmospheric agency: agency understood as reasoning shaped within the surrounding atmosphere. The atmosphere can also be produced through the person's own actions, as in this case. It unfolds through her attunement to the moral world she seeks to inhabit, through incremental adjustments in her surroundings, such as working from home, and through a sustained effort to align her life with a divinely oriented ideal.

To analyze the forms of agency enacted by Participants 44 and 48, I situate their reasoning in relation to Bano's (2017) discussion of women who are neither Islamic feminists nor reformist interpreters of scripture. These two participants demonstrate a similar configuration. Their

religious commitments shape how they think, decide, and organize their conduct. They do not seek to reform or reinterpret religious texts, yet they actively determine how existing norms should guide their choices. Their practices may be conservative, but they reflect a self-directed effort to make their lives consistent with the religious standards they regard as authoritative, even as they move through modern educational and professional settings. Their atmospheric agency becomes visible in the way they reason morally as they engage aspects of modern life and integrate them into an atmosphere structured by religious practice.

Work life:

> The police is a respected profession in our society. A woman police officer becomes an inspiration for other women; when women are in the police, victims can seek help more easily. By working in the police as a woman, you can be self-reliant through your own earnings and also support your family.
> —Participant 5, Police Constable

In the modern settings of Aliya madrasas and madrasa-schools, women articulate diverse orientations toward work. The epigraph above presents one example of a woman who aspires to work. Some women express a clear desire to pursue employment, at times with the support of their families. At other times, they negotiate within the family as they work or plan for future employment. Others prefer flexible arrangements that accommodate domestic life, particularly when they experience pressure balancing work and household responsibilities. A few women reason that work in the Islamic tradition is neither prohibited nor strictly required. Some reject paid work altogether in favor of household duties. Their moral reasoning within their particular atmospheres shapes how they understand their life trajectories in relation to work. The following examples demonstrate how women in modern madrasa settings situate their aspirations within the institutional, familial, and social conditions that shape their possibilities.

Participant 5 is a 21-year-old woman from a lower-middle-income family who completed her Alim (college-level) studies in an Aliya madrasa and is now in the second year of pursuing a secular honors degree alongside her work as a police constable. She moved directly from madrasa education into public service, continuing her studies while managing a demanding and inflexible work schedule. Due to police protocol, she did not want her name used or her voice recorded. She communicated exclusively through text messages over two to three months. Early in the conversation she said, “You ask the questions; I will reply when I can,” and her responses often came after long gaps, shaped by the unpredictable rhythm of her shifts. From Participant 5’s account, police life is relentless. She works between 10 and 16 hours a day, often without weekly breaks. She can travel from Dhaka to her home district for only one *Eid* per year, never both (Muslims celebrate two major annual Eids, i.e. religious festivals). The work is physically

and emotionally exhausting, and her family regularly urges her to resign because they see how hard the job is on her. Yet she remains deeply committed. Earlier in life, her first aspiration was the army, the career she prepared for. However, when that opportunity did not materialize, she applied to the police and was accepted immediately. She still sees the police as a meaningful alternative to military service and speaks with a sense of pride about the work she does. Her dedication is reflected in the epigraph included earlier. Participant 5's views on modesty and family expectations within this atmosphere appear alongside her views on marriage and long-term life plans. She has retained her madrasa and family dress code within the police force. Because religious coverings require formal approval in uniformed service, she explained that she needed permission from the authorities to wear her hijab and mask with the police uniform. She did not feel it was urgent to get married and did not treat marriage as a central concern. For her, marriage is acceptable as long as it does not interrupt her honors degree or her police career. She also noted that her family is focused less on arranging her marriage and more on the physical strain of her job. She described clear professional aspirations. "In the future, I will try to get promoted," she said. She then outlined the police promotion ladder, from constable to SI (Sub-Inspector), Inspector, ASP (Assistant Superintendent of Police), DIG (Deputy Inspector General), and eventually IGP (Inspector General of Police), indicating that she imagines a long-term trajectory within the force. Participant 5's narrative shows a determined blend of piety, discipline, and ambition, where devotion coexists with modern-day achievement. She is holding onto a vision of who she wants to become, maintaining her own dress code, supporting her family, and aiming to move upward within the force. Participant 5 does not frame her ambitions as a break from piety. Instead, she carries her ethical formations from madrasa life into the institutional world of the state. Her decision to retain her dress code through formal approval, her willingness to condition marriage rather than reject it, and her endurance of professional strain reflect a confident moral reasoning through which her aspirations take shape within her particular atmosphere.

Participant 2, a 24-year-old high-income urban woman and madrasa-school teacher, is also unmarried. Raised in Saudi Arabia, she returned to Bangladesh for her studies. She is currently completing a biotechnology degree at a renowned private university, also providing Arabic, Qur'an and Islamic etiquette tuition to English-medium school students. A very active person, she is also involved in an Islamist political party, working in its women's wing. This party's women's wing focuses on dawah-oriented activities—reaching out to women, teaching what they describe as the *sahih* (right) way of reciting the Qur'an and promoting an Islamic lifestyle in a modern context. The participant is determined to go abroad for further study:

> I already applied to the USA, and I got a scholarship too. But before marriage, my parents did not want me to move there. So, I aim to finish my bachelor's, and maybe get married—I don't know, it is in God's plan… but even if I am not married, I plan to move somewhere I can study biology and biotechnology. I love research ideas, and this is where I want my future to be.

This shows another form of aspiration to work while remaining a Muslim woman. She is determined to go abroad and is in a phase of negotiation with her family to allow her to do so. If that negotiation involves marriage, she will not necessarily reject it, but she does not consider it a barrier to her dream of becoming a researcher in the future. She draws on this reasoning while working toward the possibility of going abroad. A black-burqa-loving niqabi who finds colorful burqas "unsmart," her embodiment of religion, like Participant 5's, reflects a strong and confident religious attunement, with no perceived tension between her aspirations and her piety.

The versatility of Participant 41 reflected in her dedication to diverse forms of work, is striking. She is an Aliya madrasa Islamic Culture teacher and a calligrapher who has won international awards. She is also a writer with several published books—novels, stories, and poetry. She composes poetry in the traditional form of the *ghazal* (a lyrical poetic form in Urdu and Bangla literary traditions). She is the founder of an online women's university and a Calligraphy and Art Academy, and she sells calligraphic artworks as an entrepreneur, with pieces ranging from 500 to 100,000 BDT. Participant 41 holds an MSc degree and a computer graphics diploma and has taught cultural subjects, mathematics, English, drawing, and calligraphy in the madrasa. An exceptionally enthusiastic participant in this study, she is now pursuing further professional credentials—a B.Ed followed by a planned MPhil and PhD. She also hopes to restart her earlier homeopathy training, which she left midway for health concerns. At the age of 38, she manages all of this while raising two children and sustaining a long-term vision of expanding Islamic calligraphy as both an art form and a cultural movement. This participant's trajectory demonstrates how religion becomes a medium through which diverse forms of work can be organized and sustained. Coming from a high-income background, she does not work out of financial necessity. Rather, she frames her engagements as a commitment to "remaining active throughout her life" while dedicating herself to culturally aligned Islamic teaching. Drawing, painting, calligraphy, poetry, novel and ghazal writing are not typical activities associated with madrasa teachers in Bangladesh. Yet in her case, these practices are integrated into a broader Islamic aesthetic and pedagogical vision. Her versatility thus reflects a moral reasoning oriented toward serving Islam, through which her capacities extend beyond conventional expectations. This expansion unfolds within her particular atmosphere of socio-economic privilege and familial support, but above all through her moral reasoning that life should remain actively dedicated to Islamic work.

A few participants who wanted to work framed women's work through the language of dawah. Participant 10, for example, spoke about how women should be active outside the home because religious knowledge itself mandates engagement. Participant 4 similarly cited a hadith, "Rasul [the Prophet] bolechen — 'Ilm grohon kora prottek Muslim narir o purusher opor farz,'" explaining that seeking knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim woman and man. She also wrote to me: "I work not only for income, but because I want to share my knowledge,

experience, and education with others. If the work is *halal* [Islamically permissible], my family supports it, and it remains within shariah, then I believe work itself can become a form of worship." Her moral reasoning brings secular work into the fold of religion and widens the forms of work one can seek.

Similarly, Participant 30, a higher-middle-income urban woman active in dawah and involved in Islamist politics, drew on Qur'anic verses to state that all Muslims, including women, have a responsibility to carry God's message into the world: "Allah has sent us into the world as *da'i ila Allah* [caller to God] … 'And who is better in speech than one who calls to Allah, does righteousness, and says, "Indeed, I am of the Muslims" [Qur'an 41:33]?'" For her, women's public participation is not only permissible but a religious duty. Participant 14 expressed a related view, giving examples of how female doctors can contribute more effectively to dawah than women who remain at home, because they encounter and help diverse people. She added that a niqabi or hijabi doctor creates a positive impression of Islam and people are more likely to follow someone they deeply respect, especially a person who saves lives. For these participants, work carries religious significance. Within an atmosphere shaped by contesting views on women's work, their reasoning offers a counterpoint to the claim that religion constrains women's public engagement.

There were also a few women who maintained that Islamic tradition provides flexibility regarding women's work. Participant 40, for example, comes from an affluent family and is a nineteen-year-old Alim student at an Aliya madrasa. She remarked:

> Nijer paye darano [literally, standing on your own feet — meaning to be self-reliant]— I do not like that idea many of my friends have. I may work, I may not work; it is not very necessary for a woman to work. God does not say so… so, it is not that important.

At first glance, her statement appears to downplay the importance of employment. Yet her position is not aligned with a strictly conservative stance. Notably, coming from an economically secure background did not make her incline toward the Qawmi view that women must remain at home. Instead, she articulated a position grounded in both circumstance and choice. Whether a woman works, in her view, depends on her situation, personal inclination, and religious understanding. She suggested that Qawmi understandings on this issue require change, yet she did not replace those views with a universal demand that women must work. She resists the liberal framing that equates self-reliance through paid work with strength. For her, staying at home does not signify weakness, and having a career is not a measure of worth or a moral loss. As she puts it: "If a woman wishes to work, no one should prevent her; if she does not, this too remains legitimate within Islam." Her moral reasoning thus balances the competing pressures surrounding women's work in the contemporary madrasa world, pressures that, together with that world itself, form elements of the atmosphere within which her reasoning operates.

Some participants spoke about having familial support being conducive to pursuing work. Participant 38, an Aliya madrasa teacher from a rural high-income background, described support shaped by her joint family structure. She explained, “It is not hard for me to maintain my family. We are a joint family; we all still live together. I do not have to work a lot. On weekends I might cut a fish; my elder sisters-in-law cook. I help with cutting in the morning before they start cooking, and that is all. I do not do anything else. Having everyone together is helpful for me.” Another participant, Participant 25, a male Aliya teacher from a rural middle-income background, explained his support for his spouse. His wife aspires to become a government schoolteacher, and he fully supports her goal. He also encourages his young daughter to pursue any path she desires, emphasizing that women in his family should have the freedom to aspire and to study as they wish.

However, while the stories of some participants in this chapter create a meaningful space in which women can imagine their work and career, others described complex constraints around pursuing employment or maintaining work-life balance. Unlike participants 5, 2, and 41, whose aspirations extend toward broad and varied futures, some participants spoke of domestic and moral atmospheres that restrict their horizons. These atmospheres shape what is possible for them and what is not. Their moral reasoning faces constant negotiation within these atmospheres between what they truly want and how far they are willing to reach in order to achieve it.

Participant 26, for example, comes from a middle-income family and transitioned from madrasa education to secular higher study. She is very enthusiastic about women’s work and observes that families increasingly support girls and women, particularly as they encounter examples through digital media and television that inspire them to believe their daughters can also succeed. She explained, “Your family has to support you if you want to work or study. It is not possible to become anything if your husband or family does not support you. In Islam, as you know…he has to make the decision on your behalf.” Her reasoning here arises from her own story. She had once hoped to pursue small entrepreneurial work, in which she is very skilled, but her husband did not approve. However, she did not become a housewife after that; instead, she reoriented her goal. She is now completing a secular master’s degree in political science, following her honors degree and earlier Aliya madrasa studies, with the aim of becoming a schoolteacher. She thus accommodates prevailing norms by agreeing to her husband’s decision and adjusting her earlier aspirations. At first glance, this negotiation may not appear as religious reasoning. Yet it is shaped by moral expectations embedded in marital relations and family authority within traditional Islamic understandings of gender dynamics, which are often regarded as divinely ordained. As Mir-Hosseini (2006, 630) shows, many Muslims continue to associate such hierarchical gender norms with Islam itself, illustrating how these are widely understood as fixed divine categories in various Muslim contexts. Nevertheless, rather than rejecting her aspirations altogether, she reorients them, seeking forms of work that remain possible within her

atmosphere. Her agency thus unfolds through negotiation within her familial dynamics, where aspiration and hierarchy coexist.

These family-maintaining dynamics can also become difficult, sometimes leading women to quit their work. This reflects moral reasoning as women assess employment in light of traditional religious beliefs about spousal hierarchy, as seen in the case of Participant 26. It also reflects the religiously grounded prioritization of family in women's lives. Participant 49 illustrates this prioritization of family and explains that she modified her aspirations for her family. The participant comes from an upper-income urban background and was in the third year of her PhD studies in the U.K. several years ago. She had been living there with two of her children while her husband, a businessman, remained in Bangladesh. He remained in Bangladesh to continue overseeing his business and joined her and the children periodically. After the birth of her third child, she could no longer manage her studies and childcare alone without extended family support. Therefore, she withdrew from the PhD program and returned to Bangladesh. For her, it was a decision to prioritize family life over academic aspiration, a choice she understood through a religious framework as the most appropriate course of action. Although her primary academic ambition was interrupted, she did not retreat from public engagement. Instead, she reoriented her goals in light of what was morally and practically possible within her circumstances. In the absence of extended family support abroad, she recalibrated her commitments while remaining with her family. She went on to establish a madrasa-school, where she now serves as vice principal. Her agency is evident in this moral reasoning: she weighed competing obligations—doctoral study, childcare, and marital commitments—and reordered them according to what she understood to be her primary responsibilities. The institution she now leads does not operate for profit; its income is directed toward charitable purposes, further expressing a moral orientation shaped by religious commitments to service rather than personal advancement.

However, the modern madrasa setting is not divided simply between those who want to work and can, and those who want to work but cannot or must negotiate various conditions. Some of my participants study for "rainy days," preparing themselves for a future in which they might need to earn. Participant 6 explained, "I do not want to work, just be prepared if ever I need to. I do not need to work now." A former Aliya madrasa student from a lower-middle-income rural family, she has a young daughter and supportive in-laws who would welcome her decision to work if she wished. Yet she prefers to prioritize family care while continuing her education, pursuing a master's degree after completing her honours degree. In her moral reasoning, she understands that her husband and his family are responsible for providing for her needs, as they are already doing. She interprets Islam as assigning the duty of provision to her husband and orienting her role toward family care. The atmosphere in which she lives, a quiet village life within what she describes as a "lovely and religious" family, makes such reasoning both intelligible and sufficient. She does not experience her position as self-deprivation, but as alignment with a moral world in which work becomes an option in times of need rather than a present obligation.

All Aliya and madrasa-school participants stated that there should be no obstacle to a woman's employment if she is committed to her work. Even Participant 10, the only participant who is currently not working due to childcare responsibilities, expressed a desire to begin working as soon as possible. However, Participant 44, a former corporate professional discussed earlier, articulated a markedly different position from most of my interviewees. She was critical of women in modern professional environments. She argued that women take long maternity leave, that "women are good with colors but not finance," and that in her four to five years of corporate experience she had encountered only "bad bosses" among women. She added that women's "maternal instinct" can interfere with sound judgement at work, making them less suited for certain roles. For her, women are better suited to self-employment, doing business on a flexible schedule or working from home while maintaining segregation. She thus positions women within the home, not as non-working or inactive, but as active within an atmosphere distinct from that of men. Within her own atmosphere, which she inhabits and shapes because of her affluent background and relative decision-making authority, this moral reasoning emerges as natural.

Finally, there was one participant who differed from all the others when it came to work. Participant 36, a nineteen-year-old Aliya madrasa student from a middle-income rural family, expressed no interest in pursuing any type of career. She is in a relationship with a young man she intends to marry, and she does not wish to seek employment. Yet her friend, the Participant 20, from the same Kamil madrasa, presents a striking contrast. She is a nationally recognized qir'at and nasheed competition winner who aspires to establish her own madrasa and create both online and offline platforms through which women can learn about religion and seek fatwa from her. The contrast between the two friends is striking. Both belong to the same institution, yet their moral reasoning in relation to work could not be more different: one is active, ambitious, and purposeful, the other disengaged from any motivation toward work. In the country, there is a common stereotype that a girl or woman who is not good at other forms of work will naturally be suited to chores and domestic duties, as these tasks are often considered "non-brain" work. One might assume, based on such stereotypes, that Participant 36 would be good at household work, yet she expressed minimal interest in such tasks as well. As she explained: "I do not like doing much work… do not know much about cooking also… I have lived in a joint family, and *Ammu* [mother] and *Chachi* [paternal uncle's wife] used to cook. So, my sister and I never really cooked… *Chacchu* [paternal uncle] cooks too… My *Abbu* [father], Chacchu—they cook very well." However, she offers a thoughtful reflection on how a family should function even when a woman does not work outside the home:

> Is cooking only a woman's job? No! Big restaurants are run by male chefs…. Every husband must help his wife in all kinds of work—cooking and everything else. She will be bored if she has to do everything at home alone and will be annoyed. Women have a role to support their husbands—God has made them for that—but a family works well when everyone participates at home, in chores.

Her lack of interest in work does not translate into a belief that all women should remain at home. She encourages her friend's busy life and aspirations. For herself, however, she is equally determined about what she wants. Her aspiration is grounded in what she understands as a God-ordained duty of women: to support and assist her husband. Yet this does not mean, in her moral reasoning, that women alone should cook and perform household labor. Rather, she imagines creating her own atmosphere at home, one that is comfortable and unburdened, where domestic responsibilities are shared and she is supported rather than overwhelmed.

All these cases show that women's work is not reducible to simple categories of working and not working. Rather, the complex and diverse moral reasoning within the particular atmosphere of each woman gives rise to different orientations toward work. One point to be made here is that the difficulties women face and the adjustments they make in pursuing their work-life aspirations are not unique to madrasa settings (note again that although similar patterns are documented globally, comparisons here are limited to Muslim-majority contexts). Across Bangladesh more broadly, women encounter similar gendered tensions around work, mobility, and acceptable forms of labor. Nawaz (2019) demonstrates that when lower-income women enter income-generating work, their autonomy remains tightly constrained, particularly in the absence of domestic support from husbands. Women in her study interpreted obedience— "My husband is my Lord (provu)"—as a moral hierarchy that structures financial decisions (2019, 68). Studies of Bangladeshi women across managerial, academic, and industrial sectors similarly show that women face persistent work–family conflict, gendered domestic expectations, and limited opportunities for advancement (Alam et al. 2011; Shahjahan et al. 2023; Macchiavello et al. 2020). Importantly, these constraints are not unique to Bangladesh. Beyond Bangladesh, Sonbol (2003) in the Jordanian context documents similar forms of control over women's work, including cases where male relatives appropriate women's income (2003, 154). Other research likewise demonstrates that women's economic participation is shaped primarily by domestic responsibilities and gendered expectations (Sakai and Fauzia 2022; Abdelhadi 2017).

The emphasis in this study on women's own moral reasoning aligns with Pande's (2014) argument that decisions about labor arise not from economic conditions alone but also moral interpretations. Pande's study of Indian women shows how they ground their choices in ideas of duty, care, responsibility, fulfilment, and future hopes. Although the context of India differs from those of Bangladeshi madrasa women, a similar interpretive process is visible. Additionally, across my participants' different atmospheres, what they share is not a single religious outlook but the habit of reasoning with moral and religious considerations, which leads them to very different conclusions. This pattern recalls what (Haeri 2020) describes as the interpretive diversity of contemporary Iranian Muslim women, who draw on shared religious traditions yet arrive at differing understandings of how to live a pious life. Atmospheric agency, then, names this ongoing process of evaluating, prioritising, and deciding through which women, each in their

particular set of circumstances, orient themselves toward futures they understand as ethically appropriate.

The various perspectives presented in this section of the chapter show that atmospheric agency is not about environments automatically determining women's choices but rather about how women themselves evaluate their circumstances and decide their priorities. Family norms, institutional expectations, and religious ideas may shape what appears possible or appropriate, but women's decisions ultimately reflect how they order their moral commitments concerning career, domestic life, modesty, religious practice, comfort, or independence. Thus, we see that Participant 5 places career and public service at the center of her aspirations, whereas Participant 44 has left corporate work in favor of a gender-segregated life structured around flexible home-based entrepreneurship. Participants 20 and 36, though close friends, diverge sharply: one pursues expansive scholarly and religious ambitions, while the other is oriented toward marriage and shows little interest in any form of work. Participant 41 sustains an unusually wide range of professional and creative commitments while also bringing up two children. Participants 26 and 49 sacrifice dream work for family and then redirect their paths in different ways. Taken together, this section shows that women's preferences are shaped by how moral reasoning guides the assessment and ordering of priorities within their particular atmospheres.

Women's Life Trajectories in a Modern Setting

Having seen how women actively shape their working lives through their own reasoning and moral priorities, we now turn to how the madrasa life influences these trajectories. This section examines the modern madrasa atmosphere and how women within it engage in moral reasoning. In the first chapter, we saw that Qawmi girls and women study for fewer years and follow shorter syllabi, while female teachers receive lower wages than men. These conditions, however, do not apply in the context examined in this chapter, according to my participants' accounts. The syllabus is the same for both genders, and payment is not based on gender. However, in this context, inequalities nevertheless arise, through social expectations, cultural norms, and gendered interpretations of religious life. This dynamic reflects what Ridgeway (2011, 28) describes as the tendency for people to bring "trailing cultural beliefs about gender" into new contexts, thus "reinscribing the status assumptions embedded in these cultural meanings into the new setting". In these modern madrasa settings, gendered status assumptions are reinscribed when socio-cultural expectations about women's domestic roles and modest conduct organize how institutional equality is understood and practiced.

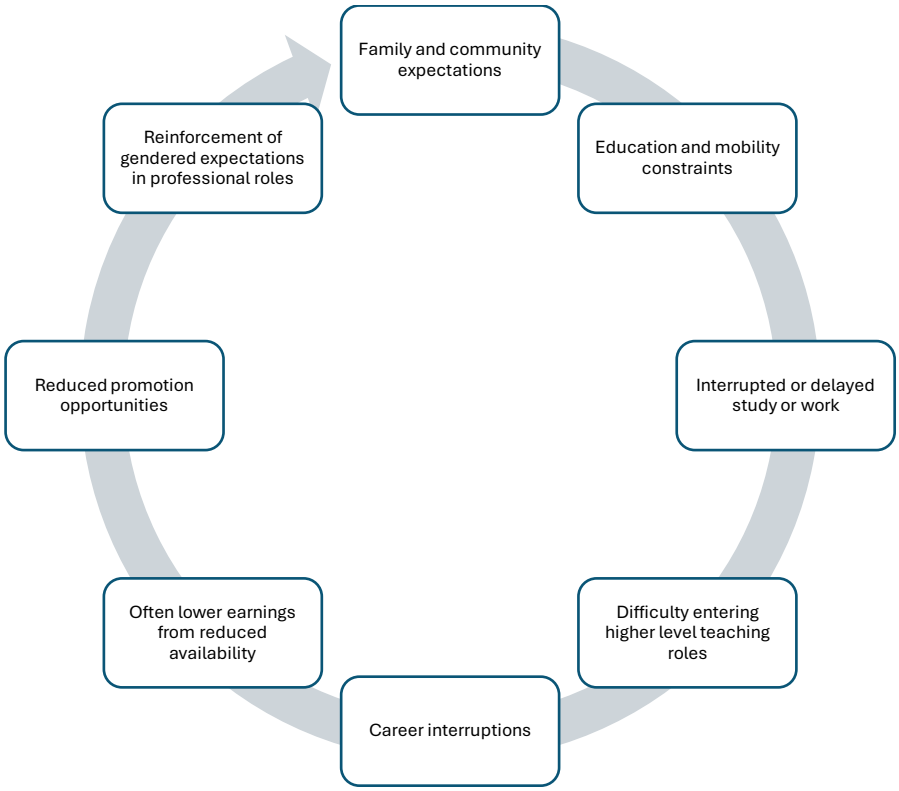

Figure 6- Cyclical Constraints Shaping Women's Trajectories in the Modern Setting

The first stage of the cycle illustrated in Figure 6 becomes visible early in girls' educational experiences, where family and community expectations begin to shape what is considered appropriate for them. As Participant 15 noted, madrasa girls "do little play, debate, extracurricular activity… everything stops gradually as they grow up," and by the Alim level, "there is nothing." Participant 15's male principal criticized this pattern, emphasizing that girls need opportunities to play and flourish: "Girls should enjoy games; they should develop their body and mind in a girls-only setting." His comment shows that even in gender-segregated environments, educators themselves sometimes recognize the developmental limits set by prevailing norms.

Women's educational and working pathways also unfold within community norms around propriety, mobility, and the visibility of women's learning. Within these atmospheres, women weigh their responsibilities and aspirations, often choosing to delay studies, adjust their progression to accommodate family needs, or limit their working hours in ways they regard as ethically appropriate. Over time, these negotiations result in reduced availability of women for work, which lowers overall earnings in hourly wage systems, limits accumulated experience and slows career advancement. Although in the government Aliya system payment is based on a formal grade structure for teachers, in madrasa-schools compensation often depends on experience and hours worked, and women frequently receive lower pay under this system. Even

in Aliya madrasas, women tend to receive lower salaries, as participants reported that women are rarely promoted to senior positions, such as principal. In terms of accumulated experience, women often serve for shorter durations than men, which further affects their earnings and opportunities for advancement. Over time, this pattern normalizes the gendered expectation that women, in general, occupy shorter or less authoritative professional trajectories. These outcomes do not reflect a lack of ability; rather, they emerge as women orient their choices within the social and moral atmospheres in which they dwell. This dynamic is reflected in the cyclical constraints illustrated in Figure 6.

The following example illustrates how this cycle begins to work and how women reason morally within it. Participant 15 offers a clear starting point. Participant 15, an 18-year-old Alim student from an upper-class, religiously conservative family, is not permitted by her parents and elder brother to go outside alone or to study in secular institutions, especially those with mixed-gender environments. Although she considers herself somewhat weak in Arabic and Islamic subjects, she excels in secular ones and once hoped to pursue higher education at a public university. "I want to sit for the public university admission exam… but it will not happen. I don't want to dream and then get broken-hearted. I once told my parents, but they immediately said no and told me to get the thought out of my head." Her voice was sad as she recounted this moment. She added, however, that she did not believe it was an Islamic prerogative not to go out alone or not to study in secular mixed-gender environments. She explained: "My family is overprotective of me; they love me and no, I do not think this is for religious reasons on their part." She articulated with clarity and confidence her belief that her family's restrictions were neither religious in nature nor based on Islamic rulings. She, however, does not let the restrictions placed upon her bring her possibilities to an end. Aligning her aspirations with her family's expectations, Participant 15 now aims to pursue a degree at a secular university close to her home, an option that does not challenge the mobility boundaries set for her and one for which she secured her family's approval. This shift illustrates the first two stages in the cycle schematically represented in Figure 6: family expectations shape mobility constraints, which in turn redirect educational choices and narrow earlier ambitions.

But how does Participant 15 operate within these structural constraints? After her initial aspiration was refused, she reorients her ambitions and, within the limits imposed upon her, engages in moral reflection about what remains possible. Rather than abandoning her educational goals altogether, she reframes them in ways that align with familial authority and preserve relational harmony. As she explains: "I will seek a path that is acceptable to my family so that I have their support to achieve it. They are my guardians and I am supposed to obey them." Her reasoning does not reflect passive resignation but an active recalibration of desire in relation to authority. This experience demonstrates how familial expectations shape girls' and women's mobility, educational goals, and future working lives, while also revealing how they maneuver within these horizons to sustain action meaningful to them. As suggested in the introduction of

this paper, such atmospheric elements enter women's reasoning by orienting and shaping their sense of possibility, even as women actively negotiate how to live within them. As Bourdieu (1977, 80) argues, "The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment… produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures." This implies that people internalize the social environments around them, and these internalized dispositions subsequently guide how they interpret and act in the world. In this sense, women's reasoning is not separate from the atmospheres in which they live. Religious interpretations, social expectations, and familial ideas become part of the interpretive frameworks—elements of the atmosphere—through which women assess what is right, feasible, or desirable.

When these internalized orientations become embedded in institutional life, they shape not only aspirations but also the allocation of authority and responsibility. Participant 24, a female principal in a modern madrasa-school, mentioned that in her school the lower grades are taught exclusively by women, while male teachers appear mainly in the upper classes once boys' and girls' sections are separated. Thus, women are concentrated in the early years of instruction, with men entering in the higher grades. Participant 10 also confirmed this pattern. In the honours and master's levels of a well-known higher-study madrasa, she noted that there were no female teachers at all. "All males," she said. "I don't know why female teachers are not there. My friends, two of them, became teachers in schools after doing the master's... I don't see women becoming honours or master's level teachers. Mainly, they teach at the school level." This reflects the Figure-6 stage of 'difficulty entering higher-level teaching roles'.[2] However, several participants from an urban Aliya madrasa reported that they had more female teachers than males.

The Figure 6 stage of "often lower earnings from reduced availability" was reflected in two madrasa settings, both Aliya madrasas and madrasa-schools. In a well-known Aliya madrasa in Dhaka, multiple teachers said that male staff, after finishing the day session, return after maghrib to take hifz memorization sessions with students, while women return home after the morning or afternoon sessions and therefore work fewer hours. Women tend to choose fewer or more flexible hours to accommodate their domestic responsibilities, which further limits the time they can devote to paid teaching. A similar system operates in Participant 24's madrasa-school, where teachers are paid hourly. As a result, men, who are able to stay for extra hours, accumulate more paid time and therefore earn more overall. Women, however, because of household

[2] This local pattern also reflects a broader international trend: UNESCO (2024: 60) reports that teaching at lower levels is widely perceived as a women's profession. Women comprise 94 per cent of pre-primary teachers and a strong majority in primary education, but declining sharply in secondary, tertiary, and leadership roles. The staffing structure of the madrasa therefore aligns with global gendered patterns in teaching.

responsibilities, work fewer hours. This does not indicate an intentional unequal system; it reflects the reality of women's "second shift," in which paid employment is carried alongside responsibilities at home (Hochschild and Machung 2012).

I now turn to two further examples that show how agency takes shape within the atmosphere of modern madrasa setting. Participant 38 says that her father withdrew her from a distant school because of concerns about being *ekla meyemanush*, i.e. traveling some distance on her own (this despite the family enjoying quite a high income and having a secular educational background). *Ekla meyemanush* is a widely used expression in Bangla that signals a woman's vulnerability when alone, and it is often accepted as a reasonable parental concern. This is often framed as religious reasoning about women's mobility, drawing on an oft-cited hadith. She presently works as a rural Aliya teacher and is very committed to her work as a Girl Guides teacher. For her, working as a madrasa teacher is a "respectable religious work in society". Speaking about her own daughter, Participant 38 says: "She is 19 now, and she got married recently. The bridegroom was really great, so we gave her away." Pressure to marry girls off quickly when a suitable groom appears is also very common in the country. Yet she simultaneously expresses a strong commitment to her daughter's education, noting that she is willing to finance her future studies and adding, "We made it a condition of the marriage that she must be allowed to continue her studies afterwards." Her position on women's education is thus remarkably different from that of her father. Like her colleague Participant 38, Participant 45 is also deeply committed to her work as a teacher. Like her colleague, she had to manoeuvre and negotiate within a limited horizon, set in this case by family responsibilities. She had to postpone her studies and career until her children were older. The result was that, after passing the written exam for a government primary-school position but failing the viva, she accepted an opportunity at an Aliya madrasa. Over time, she developed a profound attachment to the institution:

> We two-three teachers have been here from the beginning; others come and go. We served for many years almost without any money. But we felt that anyone can earn money—attachment is different. Maybe for my akhirah [life in the next world] it will be a *sadaqah jariyah* [act of charity that continues to yield benefit] … That is what kept me here. Many told me, 'Your results are good—try [secular] schools. Why a madrasa?' I said, 'No, I was with it from the beginning, and I will remain with it.'

At the same time, she was vocal about the limits on women's advancement. She recalled visiting a madrasa and seeing a Hindu principal, which she found striking: "In one madrasa, I saw a Hindu principal… it was strange. Women are not allowed to be principals, but Hindus can! Corruption is high in this country. Politics run high…Principal is quite a high-salaried position, so… there is politics." This reflects stages 5 and 6 in Figure 6: "reduced promotion opportunities" and "reinforcement of gendered expectations in professional roles."

Despite both participants' deep commitment to the madrasa, their aspirations for their daughters lie in secular education. Participant 45's daughter, for example, completed an undergraduate

degree in Genetic Engineering. However, like her colleague, she married her daughter off during her studies. She echoed the same protective logic as Participant 38, explaining: "*Ekla meye* [a single young woman] was traveling alone to the city university's residency hall every now and then from our village, so for security concerns we married her off." Yet Participant 45 also hopes her daughter will continue her studies and even go abroad to study. Both participants are deeply dedicated to their own work, yet both married off their daughters before they could complete their studies. Crucially, however, neither mother sees marriage as the end of their daughters' educational or professional futures. They remain strongly committed to supporting their daughters' continued study and work, even as they reproduce gendered ideas about women's vulnerability and the belief that a husband's presence offers necessary protection, especially during travel. Both women's agency is particularly remarkable in this vignette, especially in rural settings where early marriage often narrows educational trajectories and sustained professional dedication is not widely expected of women. Their long-term commitment to their madrasas, even when these do not offer any financial reward for extended periods, also exceeds what is socially expected of women in rural settings. Thus, moral reasoning here sustains both change and continuity. The women justify early marriage as an act of protection and responsibility, drawing on social and cultural interpretations of gender norms that are frequently understood as religiously significant. At the same time, they expand educational possibilities for their daughters and remain deeply committed to their own work.

Not all women caught in the cycle diagrammed above decide in favor of work. There are instances in which women move in the opposite direction. Such decisions are a result of different elements of women's atmospheres colliding and interacting in complex ways. How, then, can a woman in a modern madrasa setting reason morally toward departure from a path she had once anticipated? Participant 48, with her difficulties achieving work-life balance, provides an example, as she explains:

> My mother-in-law went to Canada to her daughter, and at that time I almost left my job because I could not travel to my former school—the distance was too much. So I joined the current madrasa-school where I work as an English teacher, closer to our home. I could not bargain over my salary for fear of losing the opportunity; if I did not take it, I would become unemployed…I used to love cooking, but after marriage I do not like it anymore. I have asthma, so I find it hard—choosing the menu, cooking in the heat. My husband comes from a background where only women cook and do everything at home. So, I suffer even if he is supportive; he did not learn to cook or do chores. I find it hard to balance: work at home, then school, then taking care of my child. I have to teach her as well…But I want to extend my family…I will have to decide what to do—extend my family, quit work, or not…The pressure at the workplace—I do not like it.

Participant 48 interpreted these pressures through a moral logic that made reducing her professional horizon and eventually quitting seem like the appropriate path. "Women's main

duty is at home", she said. "Taking care of the family is the priority. I do not agree with any other logic in this matter. The Creator has given us the best. When people outside the home are sometimes rude to me, I feel that maybe God is telling us to stay at home because of this. Women are soft, and they should remain so—not become hard. That is why, perhaps, God wants us at home." Participant 48's case illustrates how accumulated pressures such as long commutes, unequal domestic expectations, and physical exhaustion reshaped her sense of what was possible. Wanting to shorten the travel time between home and work, she did not bargain for a better salary when she joined a madrasa-school closer to home. After seven to eight years of work experience, she began to reinterpret withdrawal not as failure but as morally appropriate. Through religious language about women's "main duty" and divine intention, she translated structural constraint into a meaningful justification for stepping back from professional life.

Reasoning in the Modern Atmosphere of Hifz, Qir'at and Nasheed

If women's life trajectories in madrasa settings show how they navigate educational and moral expectations across different institutional types, the practices of hifz, qir'at, and nasheed reveal how these expectations are also lived through aesthetic and affective engagements with religion. Hifz has already been discussed in the traditional setting, but qir'at and nasheed were not mentioned by traditional participants and were discussed only by three Aliya madrasa students who practise them. All three fields, however, remain important parts of Islamic practice in Bangladesh. Hifz, as has been explained, involves memorizing the Qur'an. Qir'at refers to the different canonical modes of reciting the Qur'an, each with its own rules of pronunciation and melody that shape how the Qur'an is beautifully articulated. Nasheed is a devotional song expressing praise of God and the Prophet Muhammad or touching on other Islamic moral themes. These practices are widely used as elements in competitions, events, and religious programs across the country.

Hifz continues to generate enthusiasm in Bangladesh, as discussed in the previous chapter. Participant 51 referred to the Qawmi setting as experiencing a "hifz frenzy" in the country. However, its place in modern madrasa-school and Aliya settings is more limited. Traditional madrasas can finish the teaching of hifz in two to three years. Most modern institutions, however, balance religious studies with a broader academic curriculum, making it difficult to dedicate the same amount of time to memorization as traditional Qawmi environments do. Although some Aliya madrasas do provide separate infrastructure (residential buildings and facilities) for hifz students, most principals and teachers in rural Aliya madrasas said that they lacked the facilities and budget to offer residential programs where children could devote themselves fully to memorizing the Qur'an. Within day-school arrangements, they also cannot allocate sufficient time for Qur'anic learning because students already navigate a heavy curriculum that combines Islamic studies and the full set of government-mandated secular

subjects. Typically, the modern setting integrates memorization gradually into the daily study routine. Participant 25 noted that the English-medium madrasa she owns, led by a well-known figure in the country's madrasa modernization movement, follows this approach. Students are encouraged to learn and memorize a small portion each day so that Qur'an study becomes part of everyday life rather than a rushed or pressured task. Even so, some guardians and participants said that both parents and teachers sometimes desire faster progress. This prompts many families to hire private home tutors. This is so despite, as Participant 2 explained, madrasa-schools being somewhat willing to expand provision for hifz if a majority of parents request it and some institutions holding supplementary evening, dawn, or afternoon hifz sessions for dedicated students.

When it comes to female hifz, there appeared to be a shortage of hafizas. Participant 48 highlighted a persistent institutional limitation in her madrasa-school, which is one of the top institutions serving the affluent class in the capital city: "There is no female teacher to teach Arabic, Islamic studies, or Qur'an at my institution; all are left to male teachers." In her experience, core religious subjects continue to be dominated by male teachers. The reasons behind the absence of hafizas in madrasa-schools, as the participant suggests here, could not be verified in this study. Future research would be necessary to clarify the underlying factors. It may be that qualified hafizas willing to teach these subjects are not comfortable working in more gender-flexible madrasa-school settings. Their own training in Qawmi madrasas might also be a factor, as the institutional environment of English-medium madrasa-schools may feel unfamiliar to them. Participant 28, from a Qawmi context, offered a related observation discussed in the previous chapter: good hafizas are hard to find, suggesting a structural issue that may cut across institutional types. They may therefore simply be fewer in number and less available for recruitment. A few Aliya participants remarked that women undertake hifz less than men, which may help explain this relative scarcity. In this regard, the general Qawmi belief that hifz is more difficult for girls appears to persist in some form within the Aliya setting as well. Regarding memory differences between genders in hifz, a few participants from the Aliya system said that girls struggle more to retain memorization. None of the madrasa-school participants made this claim. For example, Participant 10, a recent master's graduate from a higher-education Aliya madrasa, said that her son would definitely pursue hifz. She would also like her daughter to do so, although she acknowledged that girls "normally find it tough." She added that only those with exceptional ability or strong family support are able to continue. Across these conversations, it became clear that differing expectations for boys and girls extend beyond traditional madrasas into modern settings when it comes to memorizing God's Book. In hifz

practice, such expectations generate a gendered atmosphere that shapes who receives support and opportunities to continue devoting time and effort to the memorization process.[3]

Yet, as Participant 26 noted, interest in hifz is strong across the country, including in modern settings. Aliya students also participate in hifz competitions, and recent high-profile events have energized local communities. In many rural areas, it is often returnees from the Gulf, migrants temporarily visiting home, or families with relatives working abroad who organize competitions, offer prizes, and encourage students to pursue memorization. Girls participate in these events as well. However, while few opportunities exist to travel abroad and compete internationally, "going overseas is often not possible for girls like it is for boys," as she put it. Local competitions remain more accessible. Participant 26 explained that travel abroad is socially and culturally acceptable for boys, whereas for girls it is often restricted because families view overseas travel without close supervision as incompatible with expectations of modesty and protection. In contemporary hifz culture, high-profile Qur'an recitation competitions on television also highlight a noticeable gendered disparity: boys often earn substantial rewards and become famous, while girls receive more modest recognition. When I asked participants why TV programs sponsored by corporates are only featuring male participants, most agreed that the issue was konther purdah, discussed in the earlier chapter. The expectation that girls should not publicly project their voices limits female participation even in urban settings. Participant 51, from a secular background, employed in the corporate sector and a donor to madrasas, added a new dimension here:

> The corporate world is still a man's world, and for Qur'anic competitions it is even more so…gender plays the role. Corporate sponsors will not want to create controversy around female participation in religious events.

Participant 51's observation that corporate sponsors prefer boys in televised Qur'anic competitions reflects broader patterns in how corporate institutions make decisions about visibility, representation, and perceived risk. In Muslim-majority contexts, norms around modesty, voice, and women's public presence can heighten concerns about female participation in religious events (Ilo and Seltzer 2015). Moreover, Bangladesh-specific labor research shows that "being female" itself operates as a structural disadvantage in the labor market, independent of skill or experience (Anjum and Daly 2019). Other studies similarly find that women remain concentrated in lower-paid, less prestigious forms of work, with limited access to formal or high-status positions (Bidisha et al. 2020). Globally as well, organizations remain male-dominated at

[3] While this study is based on madrasa-linked contexts, the pattern observed here resonates with widely documented gender disparities in educational opportunity across Bangladesh, suggesting that these dynamics are not confined to madrasas alone (Blunch and Das 2015).

senior levels and consistently underinvest in women in public-facing roles, a trend highlighted by McKinsey & Company (2024). The Labyrinth Model similarly notes that institutions are often simply afraid to take an unnecessary risk by selecting a woman in a leadership role (Eagly and Carli 2007). Taken together, these intersecting insights contextualize why corporate sponsors may frame boys as the "safer" and more institutionally uncomplicated choice for public religious competitions in Bangladesh. However, the specific claim the participant made cannot be verified, as no published research has examined corporate sponsorship patterns in hifz or qir'at events in the Bangladeshi context.

Within this atmosphere of restricted female public presence, women do not respond uniformly; rather, they reason differently and reach two different conclusions. The larger group of participants insisted that girls "should go to open-to-everyone contests offline and online as well—why not?" By contrast, other participants maintained that women should participate only in quiet, women-only environments, an attitude also expressed by most Qawmi participants. Those who supported women's participation in public hifz, qir'at, or nasheed events were either male participants or female participants who were not personally involved in such performances. Among those who opposed it, only three are skilled in qir'at or nasheed, and one of them is a hafiza. Among them, Participant 17 no longer takes part in such competitions, although she did so when she was younger. Another young participant, Participant 36, explained that while her parents hold conservative views, she herself is even stricter regarding women's public participation. Despite being skilled in qir'at and nasheed, she has stopped performing because she believes that women have become overly conspicuous nowadays, even when wearing the burkha. Her heightened concern with modesty now affects her willingness to appear publicly, and she feels uncomfortable performing in any setting where men might see her. Yet she continues advanced qir'at training through an international institute based in Bangladesh and has reached Level 6, a relatively high standard. Both participants appear to be no longer interested in participating in either mixed-gender or even female-only events, despite their skill. Their withdrawal reflects not family pressure but a form of self-directed moral reasoning; as Participant 17 remarked, "It does not feel religiously appropriate anymore."

Even in competitions that are not as glorified as those for boys, one participant described long-standing involvement and notable regional and national success in qir'at and nasheed. This involvement also brought her financial benefits since her childhood in terms of gifts and money. Participant 20 explained that she had competed five times and won both qir'at and nasheed competitions at the highest levels. These included *Jatiyo Shikkha Shoptaho* (National Education Week) and events organized by the *Shishu Academy*—the state-run national children's academy—both of which are prestigious government platforms. She also performed on other local and regional stages until she was around fifteen. Reflecting now, she believes that such performances should be held before a panel of judges, whether male or female, rather than open public audiences, and that maintaining separate systems for boys and girls would better preserve

propriety for both. She therefore no longer attends open-for-all events and participates only in girls-only programs. Now eighteen, she highlights the economic dimensions of devotional performance. She has been earning money not only through winning qir'at and nasheed competitions and performing at events, but also by coaching children and even older learners in Qur'an recitation and nasheed, both online and offline. Her fame as a champion in nasheed and qir'at has also earned her a position with a government religious institution, where she now teaches qir'at. In addition to her work within the country, she also teaches students beyond national borders, offering online instruction to learners abroad. When teaching, she works freely with female students, teaches male students who are her mahram, and limits instruction for non-mahram males to young boys. She also continues to refine her own recitation under the guidance of a female Qur'an teacher based in the United States. Participant 20's parents were so confident in her academic abilities and cultural talents that they relocated from their village to a semi-urban area solely to support her continued studies. She now uses her earnings to fund her own education, including purchasing resources like a computer, making religious performance both a devotional practice and a meaningful source of financial independence.

The contrasting trajectories of Participants 20, 17, and 36 require careful consideration. Although all three share a background in devotional performance, their subsequent paths diverge significantly. Participant 20 remains highly active in qir'at and nasheed, continues advanced Qur'anic training, teaches nationally and transnationally, and earns income through performance and instruction. Her moral reasoning permits continued public religious engagement, shaped within an atmosphere of parental confidence, institutional recognition, and professional opportunity. By contrast, Participant 17 redirected her aspirations toward becoming an economics scholar, Arabic expert, and religious scholar, encouraged by a family environment that values academic excellence and serious scholarship. Participant 36, meanwhile, oriented her future toward marriage, expressing comfort in a more conservative vision of family life without pursuing additional professional work. In each case, moral reasoning ordered commitments differently. The divergence lies in how each woman evaluates what is appropriate and desirable within her particular moral and social context.

The atmosphere of hifz is also, at times, shaped by women themselves, particularly in how they organize and participate in tarawih prayers during Ramadan. In many cases, women and girls enthusiastically arrange these gatherings, calling relatives, friends, and neighbours to join and circulating announcements through social media groups so that wider networks can participate. Through such collective efforts, they create opportunities to practice hifz with an intensity comparable to that of boys, though within small-scale, gender-specific settings. An interesting contrast emerges here when comparing gendered hifz practices across contexts. While the women in the UK studied by Gent (2016) did not lead tarawih prayer, girls in a popular Alim madrasa in Dhaka regularly do so, which allows them to practice and strengthen their hifz. They lead prayer within their own circles at the madrasa and at home. Crucially, this reduced visibility

is not experienced as a constraint but as a preference. As Participant 17, a hafiza and a student of that institution, explained: "our own environment for ourselves is the best for us." She elaborated on how these internal practices support girls' religious development: "Hifz is hard to retain. Our madrasa has a way for girls. Girls have their jamaat/halaqa (gathering/religious sessions) in Ramadan and lead tarawih. That makes them able to practice in Ramadan, like boys." Participant 17 acknowledged that "many do say that women can't lead prayers even among themselves," but she did not interpret this debate as divisive. Instead, she framed it as part of the richness of Islamic reasoning: "I think this difference is a beauty, it is not a bad thing (laughs)." Participant 17's moral reasoning reveals that gendered separation is not understood by her as marginalization but as an enriching arrangement that creates a "secure and focused" environment. Within an atmosphere where opportunities are often limited, women like her lead prayer and practice hifz, illustrating how they carve out their own spaces in contexts where such opportunities are generally restricted in the country. They are also aware of the tensions surrounding women's leadership; they understand the religious context and the counterarguments. They confidently welcome differences of opinion while remaining firm in their own moral reasoning.

Moral Reasoning in the Fault Lines of the Twenty-First Century

This final section introduces two major fault lines that run through the lives of the women in modern madrasa settings. The first emerges from their ideological distance from the Qawmi/Deobandi tradition, whose interpretations of gender, modesty, and women's public roles they openly contest. The second comes from the opposite direction: the pressures of 21st-century modernity, which shape their education, work, political participation, and aspirations, and which they must sift through while striving to remain pious. The women are situated, in effect, between two fault lines: that of Qawmi conservatism on one side, and the moral contradictions (as they see it) of modernity on the other. It is in this territory that they craft their own models of Islamic life.

Women in my study from modern madrasa settings did not agree with the Qawmi ideology of women studying fewer years and following a different syllabus than men or getting less salary. Women like Participant 4 and Participant 21, both raised in Qawmi environments and now working in madrasa-schools, spoke with clear distance from Qawmi norms and articulated a desire for reform. This reflects a broader divide between reformist-modernist Islamists—who, as Riaz (2024) notes, are often actively involved in the country's reformist Islamist political party—and the orthodox Deobandi/Qawmi tradition. Many of my modern-setting participants, including students, teachers, madrasa administrators, and guardians, were themselves active in this reformist-modernist political sphere, which strongly shaped their rejection of Qawmi interpretations of women's roles and religious authority. Participant 25 insisted, "The way the

Deobandi tradition defines women is not supported by the Qur'an–Hadith." Participant 40 similarly remarked, "They are too strict about women's clothes—some even want women to cover their eyes." A student from one of the oldest Aliya madrasas in the country explained that Qawmis "put too much importance on *sunnah* (prophetic lifestyle: the actions and words of the Prophet Muhammad) without proper interpretation," whereas Aliya schooling emphasizes *fard* (obligatory acts) as the primary ethical foundation.

Interestingly, these reformist madrasa women are themselves highly conservative. Most support some form of gender segregation and hold that men are guardians of women. Several contended that men excel over women in certain domains, such as leadership. They also reasoned that women's roles as mothers shape their emotional and psychological dispositions, which is why, in their view, women cannot serve in certain roles or issue fatwa. They believed that working outside the home should not be pursued aggressively and that prioritizing career over family is not an Islamic ideal for women. However, unlike the Qawmi perspective, participants from the modern setting do not believe that religious institutions should be controlled exclusively by men. Crucially, they maintain that women should be able to undertake most of the activities men do, provided these occur within women-only spaces. Yet at the same time, they reject the view, common among staunch Qawmi proponents such as Participant 56 and Participant 8 (both males featured in the previous chapter), that women should neither study nor work in any context involving men, nor move outside the home without a male escort. Many of the Aliya and madrasa-school women also come from secular educational backgrounds. Thus, unlike Qawmi women, they do not view women-only segregation as strictly applicable in every situation, especially when it comes to education and work. A significant point to note here is that, apart from Participant 9, even Qawmi-affiliated women in my study did not endorse these extreme restrictions.

Most of the women discussed along this first fault line, who position themselves at an ideological distance from the Qawmi setting, are politically active and involved in the country's largest Islamist political party. These women imagine futures in which women remain pious, disciplined, and modest, yet also study, organize, lead, and work, so long as gender segregation and purdah are preserved with care. In this way, their orientation resembles forms of pious discipline found in movements such as the Qubaysiat in Syria. As Pierret (2013) notes, Munira al-Qubaysi founded Syria's influential women's religious movement in the early 1960s by teaching Islamic sciences to women in home-based study circles and cultivating disciplined female subjectivities rooted in modesty, devotion, and obedience to religious hierarchy. Like my participants, the Qubaysiat embrace segregation, modesty, and moral training while critiquing what they see as patriarchal or socially excessive restrictions. Sayed (2020) shows that Qubaysiat training aims not only at personal piety but also at shaping the moral atmosphere of the household: women are taught how to influence the religious conduct of husbands, fathers, and brothers through their own disciplined comportment. The movement is also known for drawing

support from women of high social status, daughters, wives, and sisters of politically or financially prominent men, giving them unusual influence within elite networks. Their authority extends inward as well. As Sayed (2020, 110) explains, members are encouraged to report personal matters to their *Shaykha* (woman religious scholar), and marriages and divorces are often undertaken at the Shaykha's suggestion. As Bano also notes in her study of elite Islamic women's movements, Munira al-Qubaysi was "very strategic… she knew that elites have the resources and the networks to influence change in society" (Bano 2017, 95).

A similar dynamic operated among my participants, though in a more explicitly political sphere. The women in this political organization sought to strengthen their families' religious life not by challenging men or abandoning modesty, but by positioning themselves as moral guides. They are socially and politically aware women who encourage their families to cultivate Islamic practices. Many are connected to elites in society, and some are themselves part of those elite networks. In their *halaqat* (religious sessions), they regularly discuss the Qur'an, hadith, and the conduct of a morally congruent life. Members have to study hard and demonstrate strong textual knowledge in order to lead these groups and move upward within the organization. The membership hierarchy is highly structured, and progression depends on sustained commitment and the accumulation of knowledge of Islam, Qur'an, and hadith. Questions related to daily life, such as marriage and divorce, are often shared and discussed, with the session leader offering Islamic examples and guidance accordingly. These women, therefore, do not see themselves as subordinates within a patriarchal structure, nor as liberal autonomous subjects. Rather, they believe they serve God by shaping their families and communities from within religious frameworks. In this sense, their disagreements with Qawmi madrasas are not a departure from conservatism but a conflict within conservatism itself.

What emerges here is a collective form of moral reasoning. These women argue against specific Qawmi interpretations of women's education, authority, and public presence. Their critique is framed through reference to the Qur'an and Hadith, historical precedent, and disciplined religious study. As Participant 24 wrote in a text: "Qawmi people… most of the times cannot defend their position with reference to the Qur'an and Hadith." In this way, their disagreement with traditional Qawmi positions is a contest over what proper Islamic conduct requires. The moral reasoning that takes shape within this atmosphere of friction is, therefore, a struggle between competing interpretations of conservatism itself.

Having examined the internal conflict within the atmosphere of conservatism, I now turn to a second fault line: the point where modern life and religious principles meet in tension. This tension is especially visible in the experiences of Participants 48 and 44, both from secular backgrounds, later drawn to Islam, not politically affiliated, and coming from stable, upper-income households. In their lives, religion and modernity meet in tension within their particular atmospheres. This tension does not lead to a rejection of modern life; rather, it generates efforts to inhabit and reshape it through religious commitment. Participant 48 is a good example of this

kind of moral reasoning. Questions of halal and haram employment shape major family decisions in her life. She refused a bank job on the grounds that working in a bank is un-Islamic, while her husband, who works in training and development, recently turned down a promising opportunity once they learned that the nature of the work might not be halal. "We did not know it at first," she explained, "but once we understood, he rejected it. Now he is unemployed, waiting for something he can take as a consultant or in HR [Human Resource]." This choice reflects an ethical vigilance that extends beyond gender norms, permeating economic, professional, and familial domains. The participant also described tensions within her madrasa-school workplace. Some senior teachers, whom she viewed as less religiously observant, behaved dismissively toward newer staff. "They bring music to the office and play it loudly while working," she noted. "This is not Islamic." She recounted being asked by colleagues to wear perfume at work—another moment in which institutional expectations conflicted with her own ethical commitments. "A Muslimah can't use it; it is haram, as I know it," she said. "I did not like being told to." The fault line between modernity and piety also shapes aspirations for mobility. Participant 48 had long hoped to study abroad and had pursued several opportunities to do so. But she ultimately abandoned this plan. "I thought, God does not want it," she told me. "Maybe I would not remain too practicing if I go… and my child might not be in an Islamic environment. So, I gave up, thinking this is best for me." Across these moments, employment decisions, workplace moral conflicts, and long-term aspirations, Participant 48's narrative shows that neither modernity nor religious life simply overrides the other. Instead, her life is shaped by ongoing moral reasoning through which she seeks to inhabit her modern atmosphere in a religiously meaningful way.

Participant 44, lying on a similar fault line between modernity and piety, applies moral reasoning within her particular atmosphere. She left her corporate job because, as she put it, "it was kind of like not going with the idea of Islam." The demands of corporate life magnified this discomfort. "In Ramadan, you are even writing reports at night. It did not seem Muslim-friendly," she explained. As she began wearing what she described as "proper purdah," she noticed a shift in how colleagues perceived her. "People started calling me *khalamma*," she laughed—a term meaning "maternal aunt," often used to mark women as old-fashioned or lacking modern polish. The strain of her work habits intensified these tensions. "I was a workaholic, loved to work, which was putting pressure on my health and religious beliefs," she said. A series of illnesses—"my leg got broken, and then I was down with COVID-19"—turned this tension into burnout. "So, I decided to quit." Participant 44's account throws light on the dynamics of facial visibility in secular workplaces. In Bangladesh, visible religious dress often becomes a point of tension in secular contexts, as seen in incidents in which women were reportedly harassed for wearing the burqa in educational institutions (The Daily Star 2022). Participant 44 remarks that "COVID-19 briefly created a permissive environment for face-covering… Muslim women experienced masking as a form of emotional and moral safety… Women since then have taken the opportunity to cover their faces with a mask… I used to wear it in the office often." She

described the advantage of the situation, in a playful tone: “If my face is covered, it is like a peace… you can’t see my expression, you can’t bother me! You have bothered me, and I am angry, but you cannot see that (laughs).” She offered this as an illustrative example, using a hypothetical situation to show how masking allowed her to hide reactions when she wanted to. However, the tension between women who use face-covering and those who oppose or discourage it is also very real for her: “But yeah, people do make you take it off—like forcefully—‘take off the mask, apu (sister), for a while… alright?’” she added, the final word delivered with noticeable sarcasm in imitation of the request. Participant 44 gradually came to her decisions in the context of her workaholism, illness, the COVID environment, and the religious boundaries she came to embrace. These conditions created an atmosphere in which, through moral reasoning, she slowly reoriented her life from a largely secular orientation toward a more conservatively religious one. Both participants altered key elements of their lives they understood to be religiously and morally right for their wellbeing. In both cases, the fault line between modernity and piety was navigated through moral reasoning shaped by each woman’s particular circumstances.

This chapter has examined how women in modern Aliya madrasa and madrasa-school settings inhabit different atmospheres. Beginning with the flexibility and diversity of segregation practices, it showed how gender boundaries are not uniformly enforced but instead vary across institutional contexts. The discussion of work life and educational trajectories traced how women reason morally through aspirations, family expectations, institutional constraints, and professional opportunities, producing varied life paths within shared settings. The section on hifz, qir’at, and nasheed revealed how devotional and aesthetic practices generate gendered forms of participation, visibility, and withdrawal. Finally, the chapter identified two fault lines that structure women’s lives: ideological distance from Qawmi conservatism on one side and the pressures of contemporary modern life on the other. It is within these tensions that the women’s atmospheric agency becomes visible.

Chapter Three
Reasoning in the Atmosphere of Virtual Space

The three parts of this chapter examine different virtual atmospheres in madrasa women's lives. I describe these atmospheres alongside participants' moral reasoning as they engage with them. The first part examines virtual learning spaces such as online madrasas and social media platforms to show how women encounter religious knowledge, authority, and community beyond the physical boundaries of the madrasa and reason within those spaces. The second part turns to offline madrasa settings to focus on restrictions on women's use of mobile phones. Here I trace how access to communication technologies is governed and limited in institutional life, highlighting how women employ moral reasoning to critique, adjust to, or conform to such restrictions. Taken together, these two parts show how madrasa women reason while engaging in these atmospheres with contemporary technologies. The third part examines a single Facebook page run by a former madrasa student that challenges patriarchal and misogynistic practices within the madrasa system and in Bangladesh overall. This section analyzes how the writer, in her public intervention, grounds her reasoning explicitly and extensively in Islamic history and tradition, an interesting and uncommon case in Bangladeshi online spaces.

Virtual Spaces of Learning

> I argue that online students' mastery of Arabic and intensive study of Islamic history and theology simultaneously gives them voice and a sense of empowerment, thereby challenging both traditional Islamic authority structures and Western representations of Muslim women.
> —Usha Sanyal, *Scholars of Faith: South Asian Muslim Women and the Embodiment of Religious Knowledge*, (2020, 48).

In what follows, I examine four interrelated dimensions of online learning spaces. First, I consider how online formal study reorients educational trajectories and reshapes aspirations. Second, drawing on digital ethnographic materials, I examine how participation is regulated within digital classrooms, particularly through norms governing voice and presence. Third, I analyze how institutional hierarchies of gendered authority and compensation take shape within technologically mediated religious education. These three dimensions serve to describe and analyze the atmospheres of formal virtual learning spaces, while showing how women reason

morally within them. The final dimension turns to other informal online learning spaces for women, which likewise reveal the learning atmospheres within which women engage in religious reasoning.

Aspirational reorientation

The online groups, pages, and channels I observed were accessed primarily through some of my participants who were themselves members and either suggested them to me or added me directly. Prior to their suggestions, I had independently followed several pages and joined open groups over the course of more than a year. Although primarily oriented toward Bangladesh, the digital communities I joined or followed extended beyond national boundaries, including Bangladeshi and Bengali communities in India, the Middle East, the United Kingdom, and North America. The groups and pages I followed, mainly hosted on Facebook and WhatsApp, fell into two broad categories: formal institutions offering structured online instruction, and informal groups oriented toward the circulation of Islamic knowledge, guidance on *ibadah* (worship), and question and answer exchanges. Informal groups regularly circulated links to formal courses on Arabic language, Islamic etiquette, and religious knowledge on platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram. Participants from diverse socio-economic backgrounds selected courses according to their intellectual interests and financial capacity.

From the evidence of my study, participation in online religious spaces in Bangladesh appears to be expanding. Sanyal (2020) argues that online religious education in South Asia can give women voice and a sense of empowerment and enable them to assume responsibility within their communities. She situates these developments within the broader expansion of female-centered Islamic education in South Asia, including transnational Qur'anic movements such as Al-Huda, a Pakistan-based women's Qur'anic study movement.[4] However, the broader digital religious environment in Bangladesh is complex. Religious content circulates widely on social media. In my study, efforts aimed at religious learning and moral formation circulated alongside more troubling content. Some groups maintained by male religious figures articulated rigid and derogatory views about women's roles, justified through Islamic references. As these were predominantly male-dominated spaces to which I did not have direct access, my observations draw on material shared by male participants who were members. Pages and channels that some of my participants appeared to believe provided an 'authentic' version of Islam sometimes also expressed intolerant views toward other religions (for instance, Hinduism) and sects (non-

[4] Al-Huda refers to the Al-Huda International Welfare Foundation, founded in Pakistan in the 1990s by Farhat Hashmi. The movement promotes women's engagement with Qur'anic study through structured classes, study circles, and transnational networks that extend across South Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and North America.

Sunnis, the majority of people on these platforms being Sunni, reflecting the broader Sunni majority in the country). Such misinformation or disinformation is often believed and emotionally amplified, sometimes spilling into offline violence (Al-Zaman 2024; Haque et al. 2020). The online religious atmosphere in Bangladesh is therefore uneven in its moral direction, and women reason within this complex atmosphere as they seek religious guidance and develop their worldviews.

Within this expanding and uneven digital atmosphere, Participant 17's trajectory illustrates how aspiration can be reoriented through attachment to virtual learning. Participant 17 is a higher-income urban Aliya madrasa student who engaged in advanced Arabic study and developed a deep attachment to the language. She could write, speak, and even compose poetry in Arabic and expressed a desire to pursue further advanced study abroad while also aspiring to become an expert in economics. For her, Arabic was not merely a tool of religious literacy but something she "loved so much" that it directed her ambitions. This attachment informed a significant educational decision; she left the science stream and moved to the arts stream at the higher secondary level in order to pursue Arabic more intensively. In the Bangladeshi context, where the science stream carries prestige and promises of upward mobility, this move represents a striking instance of reasoning grounded in an affective relationship with religious language. Participant 17 attributed this transformation largely to the online institute where she studied, stating, "I believe this institute is the best institute for Arabic in Bangladesh. I did both the basic and advanced courses here." The institute she mentioned offers structured online programs in Arabic and Islamic studies for the general public and is widely followed on social media, testifying to its visibility within expanding digital religious educational networks. Participant 17's experience reflects the enabling dimensions of online religious education identified by Sanyal (2020), particularly its capacity to cultivate new educational commitments and aspirations. Rather than rejecting secular aspirations, she integrates it with religious scholarship, imagining a future in which economic expertise and mastery of Arabic coexist. Agency here operates through reasoning leading to realignment, with the online institute functioning as an atmospheric element reshaping Participant 17's aspirations.

Regulated participation and voice restriction

Some of my participants were involved in online madrasa education as owners, students, teachers, or administrative workers. For example, Participant 42, an upper-middle-income economics graduate and businesswoman, turned to an online madrasa as a way to cope with depression. Reflecting on the experience, she said, "I became a child again, studying after a long time." For her and others, online learning made it easier to join "God's way," as one participant phrased it. Several participants described online religious education as a significant opportunity within the country that had emerged only recently. As Participant 42 explained, online madrasa

programs, which she joined at age 54, made religious learning accessible to secularly educated individuals such as herself who "could never imagine such religious learning if there was not this opportunity." She described emerging from a "depressing stage" in her life to encounter an "amazing" experience with online learning, suggesting not merely satisfaction but renewal. She remembers that her decision to continue the online journey did not emerge in a single decisive moment, but rather from gradual sensory and psychological immersion in religious learning. The scheduled classes, Qur'anic recitation, disciplined Arabic grammar, and steady presence of other women pursuing knowledge infused the online atmosphere with a moral ambiance that reshaped her daily routine. She did not view her completion of a rigorous three-year online madrasa Alim course as an endpoint. Despite being a businesswoman with significant responsibilities and a demanding schedule, she enrolled in additional courses in order to "learn more."

At the same time, the Qawmi institutional norms with which the madrasa was affiliated remained intact. In mixed-gender Zoom classes, women were not permitted to speak, as Participant 42 explained. Instead, they submitted questions through the chat function or sought clarification from female teachers or administrators after class. This ruling was rooted in the principle of voice purdah, the understanding that women should not speak in mixed-gender settings, even if their cameras were turned off and only voices, without any visual presence, were heard. Participant 3 also confirmed that online madrasas permitted only men to speak and ask questions during class. I did, however, come across one exception. Participant 23 described how both male and female students who needed to ask questions during class discussions were allowed to speak and the microphones of students undergoing oral examinations, including females, were turned on while the others remained muted.

Participant 42 did not interpret the restriction in her online madrasa on women speaking in mixed-gender Zoom classes and on asking questions directly of male instructors in or after class, whether in chat or over the phone, as a hindrance or as discriminatory. She never felt excluded, and the absence of vocal as well as visual presence did not, she felt, diminish her learning process. She reasoned that spoken classroom participation was not central to what learning required. For her, learning meant attentive listening, careful notetaking, reflection, and disciplined study rather than public verbal exchange. She also described how fellow students organized Zoom sessions prior to examinations to assist weaker students in preparing, which further sustained her sense of academic continuity and collective support. In this sense, the digital learning environment was defined not by the regulation of voice or visibility but by access to knowledge, structured instruction, and the moral discipline of study. The absence of a "silencing" narrative in her account reflects the moral reasoning through which she understood her experience. Oriented toward late-life religious study as a divinely meaningful opportunity, she reasoned about the setting in terms of learning, discipline, and moral renewal. Within the particular atmosphere of the online madrasa, her agency lay in her moral reasoning, in the way she interpreted and thus was able to inhabit its institutional norms while forming new aspirations.

Her reasoning took place at the intersection of her online engagement in religious learning and her offline life as a woman of relatively advanced age emerging from depression whose pursuits had not previously been centered on religion. All these elements together form her atmosphere in the global sense, the overall context in which agentival reasoning took place.

Institutional structure, gendered authority, and the moral economy of *hadiya*

Participant 03 described the functioning of a Bangladesh-based international online madrasa that illustrates how digital religious education operates in practice. The madrasa delivers its programs primarily through platforms such as Zoom and Facebook and is accessible to students abroad as well as in Bangladesh. Teaching is structured along gendered lines: combined classes are taught by male ustads, while women-only courses, such as tajwid and hifz are taught by ustadas. A small number of female alimas (women with advanced Islamic training) teach specialized fiqh courses for women, but most female instructors teach Qur'an memorization without advanced jurisprudential credentials. As in Qawmi and Aliya settings discussed earlier, women generally do not have the same levels of formal qualification as men or enjoy the same institutional authority.

Compensation in online teaching is framed, for both women and men, through religious notions of khidmah (service) and *hadiya* (gift). When Participant 3 began teaching, she did not receive a formal salary but was given hadiya on a per-class basis, with additional standardized payments for responsibilities such as conducting vivas. These rates were uniform across instructors and were not differentiated by gender in her madrasa. After moving into an administrative role, Participant 3 was compensated by a modest fixed monthly salary. Ustads teaching core courses were typically also salaried teachers in the offline madrasa with which the online institution was affiliated; online teaching therefore functioned as supplementary income layered onto their stable positions. Female instructors, by contrast, were engaged in non-permanent, per-class online roles and relied primarily on hadiya-based compensation. Participant 23, who first joined as a student and later began teaching part-time, stated that female instructors generally earn between 5,000 and 6,000 BDT per month in her madrasa. She emphasized that pay is linked to qualifications rather than gender, but other accounts suggest a different reality. Participant 28, a male owner of an online madrasa, did explain that some institutions compensate teachers on an hourly basis, valuing experience and rewarding it with higher pay. However, as discussed in the Qawmi chapter, men are usually more experienced than women due to structural and institutional factors. And most participants stated that male teachers are generally paid more. Taken together, these accounts suggest that overall remuneration remains modest, is often lower for women, and that women are more frequently situated in less secure, per-class roles.

Gendered authority structures also persist in advanced religious training. One participant noted that her offline madrasa had introduced an online ifta program for male students. None of the

female or male participants knew of any comparable effort to develop equivalent programs for women. At the same time, no one, neither women nor men, described such unequal access to advanced study, unequal opportunity to participate in class, or differences in pay as discriminatory (with the exception of Participant 39, whose views on pay disparity were discussed earlier in Chapter One in relation to the Qawmi madrasa). Regarding remuneration for teaching in online madrasas, Participant 39 offered another relevant reflection: "Apu [sister], when you say hadiya, we understand it as God's service. This term softens the need for money and justifies giving women less." She also states that she is waiting for her own online madrasa to increase her salary and that she would raise the issue if they do not. In addition, she emphasizes the need for greater educational opportunities for women, which she considers insufficient in Qawmi settings. She believes that many women are fully capable of pursuing advanced studies. In the context of her atmosphere as a middle-income woman who contributes financially to her family, concerns about economic inequality and limits on women's access to advanced study enter into her moral reasoning. Her agency lies in the way she reasons within these intersecting atmospheric elements, which bring together factors of material need and educational and pedagogical aspirations. The result of her reasoning is a critical, albeit not negative, moral evaluation of the institution.

Next, I turn to participants' reasoning about advanced study, such as ifta, which none of the participants mentioned as available to women online. Participant 24 will serve as an example. Although she was neither a student nor an instructor in an online madrasa, her reflections are relevant to the question of advanced study in ifta because they articulate more explicitly the reasoning that others left implicit. I found her comments compelling because the other participants in online madrasas were less direct in explaining why women do not pursue or issue fatwa; they tended to limit themselves to description, as if saying 'this is the reality'. Participant 24 comes from a high-income, secularly educated background and owns two madrasa-schools. Remarking that women "give birth, have menstruation, and go through menopause," she explained that these experiences affect their mental steadiness. For her, this made restrictions on women's independent legal authority reasonable and explained why women do not often pursue ifta. Her understanding is consistent with religious rulings commonly associated with Qawmi scholarship. In Participant 24's account, gender hierarchy was reasoned as divinely and naturally ordered rather than as discrimination.

Overall, these accounts indicate that the shift to digital platforms does not eliminate gendered hierarchy. At the same time, the near absence of narratives of discrimination among those affiliated with online madrasas does not imply the absence of agency. Rather, agency is visible in the moral reasoning through which participants interpret and justify these hierarchies within a madrasa atmosphere that prioritizes hierarchy and moral regulation over educational or economic parity. Within this atmosphere, hierarchy was often reasoned not as deprivation but as part of a divinely structured moral order.

Other Virtual Religious Spaces

Atmosphere

This section concerns online spaces in which women seek religious knowledge through pages, groups, and channels based on social media. These spaces included WhatsApp and Facebook groups run by madrasa students and graduates, including trained muftis, as well as occasional use of Telegram or Imo. Through posted messages, short excerpts of *nasiha* (religious advice), and question-and-answer exchanges on masla masayel, members receive guidance on everyday religious life, including worship, fard, and sunnah. Although specific rulings vary by scholar, most groups share common gender norms: maintaining gender segregation, limiting interaction with *non-mahrams* (those one is permitted to marry), and evaluating daily practices in the light of religious permissibility.

Two examples of typical posts are presented below to give an impression of the atmosphere of knowledge gathering and sharing that contributes to shaping the religious understanding and reasoning of female participants.

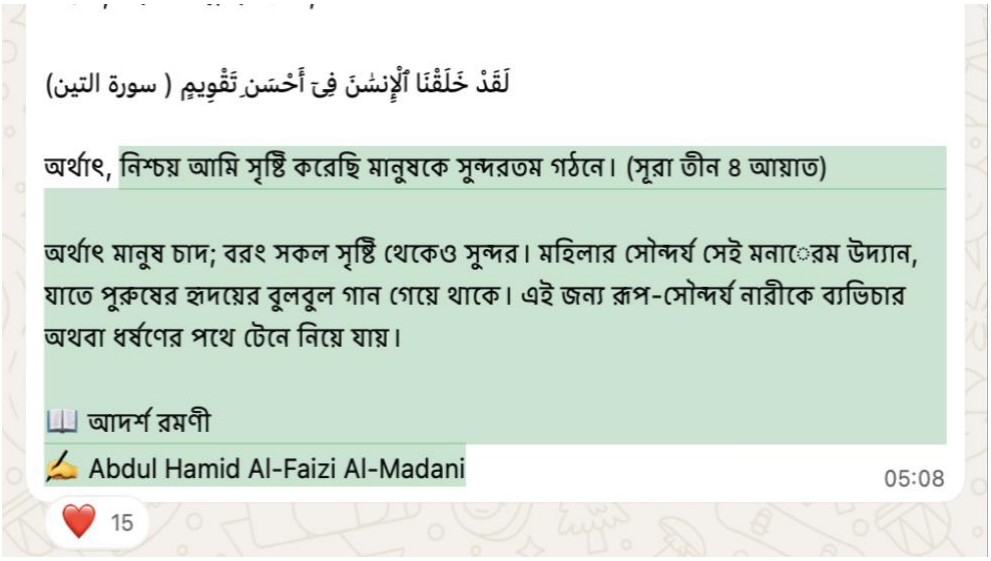

Figure 7- Example of a post shared in a WhatsApp group

This post, as often happens, begins with a quotation from the Qur'an: "We have indeed created human beings in the best of forms" (Qur'an, Surah At-Tin, verse 4). The post goes on to provide this exegesis: "This means that human beings are more beautiful than the moon, indeed more beautiful than all other creations. A woman's beauty is that of a beautiful garden in which the nightingale of a man's heart keeps singing. For this reason, physical beauty draws women toward the path of *zina* (adultery) or rape. The book icon references the *Adorsho Romoni* ("Ideal

Woman"), a work by Abdul Hamid Al-Faizi Al-Madani, whose works circulate within Bangladeshi Qawmi institutions and conservative religious circles. Although the cited verse refers broadly to human creation, the exegesis shifts the focus specifically to women's beauty. In this reading, women's beauty is treated as something that must be carefully managed through practices such as veiling or marriage. The book itself extends this discussion by emphasising that women's beauty should be revealed exclusively to the husband (Al-Faizi Al-Madani 2021, 37). In both the post and the book, the relationship between the cited Qur'anic verse and the gendered moral claims that follow is not elaborated through close textual analysis but is instead assumed through familiar moral frameworks. Such interpretations reflect a wider religious atmosphere in which women's conduct and appearance are serious concerns closely tied to moral responsibility. Alongside such restrictive readings, women are also celebrated within a moral frame that highlights modesty, sacrifice, and their roles as supporters and helpers of men in the making of Islamic civilisation, as reflected in posts such as the following:

> A mother is a great institution of learning; if you nurture her properly, you nurture a noble and dignified nation. Looking at the golden pages of Islamic civilisation, it becomes clear that the role of mothers was not confined to the boundaries of the household, but that they were the primary architects of a magnificent civilisation.

Together, these restrictive and celebratory readings form part of a shared moral atmosphere circulating within these digital spaces. While the first post frames women's beauty as something that must be carefully regulated to prevent moral danger, the second elevates women as mothers whose role in nurturing future generations is central to the making of Islamic civilisation. The two themes appear frequently across these spaces, often circulating side by side in posts, messages, and shared reflections. Through their repeated circulation, such posts provide a moral vocabulary through which women encounter and interpret expectations about their conduct, appearance, and responsibilities. This shapes how they reason about their place within a moral order that links personal behavior to the broader future of the Islamic community.

Reasoning, Responsibility, and Moral Evaluation

Within the atmosphere illustrated above, questions of permissibility, fault, and self-accountability often become central to how women reason about difficult situations. For example, one question posted in a WhatsApp question-and-answer group maintained by *a sheikh* (a male religious scholar) was*:*

> Assalamu Alaikum. If someone becomes a victim of circumstances and experiences 'bad touch,' does this also count as zina [illicit sexual

> relations] for this victim? This is not the first time; the same problem has happened multiple times before. What should be done now?

The response from the male sheikh, delivered as a voice message, did not suggest reporting the incident or condemn the perpetrator. Nor did it indicate that the questioner was not to be blamed or that there was no zina on her part. Instead, it advised avoiding places and situations where the questioner could be exposed to bad touch and warned that if the woman continued to go to such places or put herself in such situations, she would be considered a sharer in the sin of zina. I later reached out to the woman privately. This was not uncommon in these groups; when questions were posted publicly, other members often contacted one another privately, offering what they knew from prior advice, lectures, or shared religious knowledge. Such interactions were typically framed as offering tentative suggestions rather than authoritative answers and were understood as a way of helping one another navigate uncertainty. In this context, I asked whether reporting the abuse might be an option. She responded, “The blame is almost always placed on women, and not everything women experience can be spoken about openly.” She therefore decided not to seek redress and to remain silent.

This example shows how moral rulings, interactions among group members, and women’s own reasoning intersect in moments of uncertainty and anxiety. It also highlights how women’s reasoning takes place within intersecting personal, social and virtual atmospheres, in the context of which the participant concerned had concluded that it was better not to speak since “blame is placed on women”. Her agency was exercised through reasoning in her particular global atmosphere. The response from the sheikh aligned with her initial inclination, as she later told me, to remain silent. By stating that she would be considered a sharer in the sin, he reinforced a certain sense of moral responsibility. Ultimately, such discourse helps cultivate a moral environment in which women may align themselves with restrictive norms while experiencing that alignment as coherent and self-chosen. Silence (apparent conformity) in this case, as I have argued throughout the thesis, involves agency, which lies in reasoning. The woman who asked the question (which was intended to elicit a fatwa, that is a legal opinion) had to reason her way to silence.

I encountered other instances in my digital ethnography that illustrate the principle that conformity involves reasoning and thus agency. The exclusion of men from female-only spaces is one example. The online spaces examined in this chapter involve a commitment to strict gender segregation, as noted earlier. Women administrators take this commitment seriously and regulate participation accordingly. Membership is actively monitored, and verification procedures are used to confirm that participants are women. Individuals may be asked to send a voice message, and if doubts remain, administrators may call directly to verify identity. When I received such a call, the administrator’s tone was firm. Such firmness aligns with Qawmi rulings that emphasize strict boundaries in communication with male outsiders. Once she was certain

that I was female, her tone became noticeably kinder and friendlier. Administrators also frequently post warnings instructing non-women to leave the group, often using religious language such as “fear God and leave if you are a man.” Men occasionally do remain in groups by presenting themselves as women. When identified, they are removed and, at times, reported. I observed several such incidents, including one case in which a man contacted me privately and stated that he liked talking to women. When I reported it to the administrators, they asked me to block him and removed him from the group by reporting his account. Administrators thus go to great lengths to maintain segregation, which they consider essential to maintaining a morally appropriate space for women’s learning. They conform, but their actions point to agency (perhaps more evidently than the silence in the previous example). That agency lies in their reasoning, through which they come to see themselves as stalwart guardians of Islamic norms. This includes the responsibility of living a modest and carefully regulated life in relation to men, as well as the responsibility of motherhood and nurturing Islamic civilisation, as illustrated in the two examples of frequently shared posts discussed above.

Women administrators are also attentive to participation in ta'lim (religious study sessions), sending individual messages to encourage members to join. If someone leaves the group, administrators will often contact her personally to ask why and whether the tafsir, or religious rulings they provided were insufficient. These follow-ups reflect not control but a vigilant sense of responsibility. Administrators present their efforts as a serious commitment to guiding others in God’s path and ensuring that members remain connected to religious learning and moral cultivation. Participant 7, who was especially active in such groups as an administrator and at times as a participant, wrote to me, “Amer mone hoy, ei je amra ta’lim kori, apu… Amader kaj holo Allaher dawat pouse deya shobar kache” (I feel that here we conduct taʿlim, sister…to deliver Allah’s call to everyone). She understood her participation not as passive attendance but as religious work. Several women in these groups similarly described in posts and comments how they shared responsibility with men, drawing on the idea (Qur’an 2:30) that all humans, regardless of gender, are representatives of God on earth. Within this reasoning, their vigilance, reminders, and efforts to sustain participation were understood not as simple group management but as forms of religious accountability. They saw their work as conveying God’s message and did not consider their efforts to be any less binding than those of men. Their vigilance was thus reasoned as an obligation placed upon them by God.

At the same time, public appearance is also a significant concern in these groups, closely related to the principle of segregation discussed earlier. The following incident illustrates this aspect of the atmosphere of online madrasas. When administrators temporarily opened one group for general discussion, the tone shifted from serious religious instruction to everyday conversation, and the environment became lively with humor and informal exchanges among peers. Women greeted one another in affectionate language and spoke about daily concerns. Yet even in these

relaxed moments, moral boundaries and nasiha remained active. Members debated whether certain practices, such as using profile pictures or emojis, were halal or haram. During one such discussion, a woman addressed me regarding my profile image. I was using what I considered a cartoon-style representation of myself, and she insisted that it was impermissible because it resembled a woman wearing makeup and could create fitna (sexual desire or temptation). Her messages repeatedly urged me to acknowledge that this display was wrong. Over time, her tone became firmer and more insistent. In the end, she told me, "Please do not be angry with me. I am only trying to help you in your *dunya* (worldly life) and *akhirat* (hereafter)." For her, the issue was the moral risk attached to my visibility, which she believed could jeopardize both my worldly well-being and my standing in the hereafter, rendering me sinful.

Thus, the atmosphere of such groups encourages vigilance toward forms of self-presentation that might disrupt norms of modesty. The exchange reveals how interpersonal correction within these spaces operates through a moral reasoning in which women, as seen above, feel they are valorised for their vigilance in relation to a norm that seeks to protect men from fitna (temptation of sexual desire) and women from the dire consequences of rape and zina. The agency gained through this reasoning is evidently very strong. Small acts such as selecting a profile image become morally charged, and women do not simply receive guidance from male teachers but actively enforce moral boundaries among themselves.

Use of Mobile Phones by Women

> Cultural and sexual norms constitute the everyday contexts for the exercise of patriarchal power… the grids that define and determine patriarchy are transformed into living, breathing structures, which form the very stuff of 'life'.
>
> —V. Geetha, *Patriarchy*, (2007, 2)

Everyday practices surrounding mobile phone use in the madrasa community offer a revealing window into the ways power and gender are negotiated through communication technologies. I began this thesis with the account of a former madrasa teacher, a woman trained within a traditional Qawmi madrasa, who reflected on gendered inequality through what appears, at first glance, to be a simple issue: the use of mobile phones within the institution. As she explained, while men are permitted to carry and use mobile phones in madrasa settings, particularly in residential institutions, women are often prohibited from doing so, a pattern that some of my participants identified as characteristic of Qawmi madrasa environments. It is important to note, however, that not all Qawmi madrasas enforce such restrictions, and not all participants were aware of this practice. Overall, 23.2 percent of participants reported that they had experienced or were aware of restrictions on mobile phone use for women teachers. When institutional

background is considered rather than current workplace alone, all participants reporting experiences of phone bans were connected to Qawmi institutions, while no Aliya or madrasa-school respondents reported such restrictions.

It is interesting that most male participants stated that they were not aware of such practices. Only two, both principals of Qawmi institutions, acknowledged the existence of phone restrictions for women teachers. They offered a different perspective, reasoning that phone bans were necessary for maintaining moral order. One principal of a long-established women's madrasa said:

> If you need to speak with our residential women teachers, I can give you the phone number of one married teacher who is permitted to keep a phone; she will speak once she returns after the Eid (the Islamic festival) vacation. The others do not have mobile phones. If she agrees to speak, I will let you know. Both unmarried and married women are prohibited from keeping them. It is problematic to give women phones.

Another male principal explained that his madrasa was not residential so that, in his women's madrasa, such restrictions were not in place. However, he stated that speaking with women teachers in another madrasa would be possible through a designated female teacher. This woman was permitted to keep a phone, which other women used to contact their families. The principal explained that her number could be obtained through her husband, who would then convey messages to her. This contact ultimately never materialized. A similar pattern of mediated communication emerged in my attempts to contact the principal's wife, who described women's phone use as "not decent." He did not indicate whether she had her own phone, stating instead that I could speak to her through his. When I later spoke with her in his presence, she told me that any further communication should be routed through her husband. However, after the interview, despite sending follow-up messages to him to relay additional questions to his wife, I received no response.

This dynamic thus is not confined to institutional settings but extends into personal life. Another participant who had stated that he was not aware of phone restrictions in madrasas also mentioned that his wife does not have a phone. He explained that she does not need to keep a phone herself, as his mother has one and she can communicate through it. He also remarked that his in-laws have phones and that when his wife is staying with them, she can call him, if needed, using their phones. When I expressed interest in speaking with her, he said that she would be able to talk to me once he returned home to the village from the district town where he worked. In follow-up exchanges, he explained that he was away and later said that his wife was staying at her parents' house. As a result, the interview with this participant's wife did not take place.

Situating these observations within broader debates on gender and technology allows restrictions on mobile phone use for women teachers in Qawmi madrasas to be understood as more than

purely the result of religious norms. Feminist scholarship on gender and technology has shown that the exclusion of women from technology often persists even where access formally exists, as a result of norms of regulation, legitimacy, and appropriate use rather than outright denial (Faulkner and Lie 2007). As Wajcman (2004: 107) argues, "technology is both a source and a consequence of gender relations", such that women's access to, use of, and authority over everyday technologies are systematically shaped by social norms and institutional controls. Gurumurthy similarly observes that "existing power relations in society determine the enjoyment of benefits from ICTs; hence these technologies are not gender neutral" (2004: 1). These dynamics resonate with broader feminist analyses of gendered power that trace how authority is exercised across institutions and everyday interactions at macro, meso, and micro levels (Segal and Demos 2025). Therefore, mobile phone bans in madrasa settings can be read as an intensified and institutionalized expression of wider gendered anxieties surrounding women's independent communication, rather than as an exceptional case. Nonetheless, as noted at the beginning of the chapter, within my sample, reported incidents of phone restrictions for women teachers are only associated with Qawmi institutions, even though most participants did not report experiencing or being aware of such bans. Thus, while some Qawmi madrasas continue to frame mobile use as a threat to modesty and discipline for women teachers, particularly for residential teachers, others allow it, recognizing the increasing need for connectivity in teaching, coordination, and daily communication.

How do women reason about this atmosphere of mobile phone bans? Participant 4, who was trained in a Qawmi madrasa but is currently working as a hifz teacher in a madrasa–school, communicated with me exclusively through text messages, explaining that she felt more comfortable writing than speaking. In these written exchanges, she reflected on the mobile ban with remarkable clarity. Because of the thoughtfulness and depth of her account, I have chosen not to omit or condense any part of her statement:

> What you are pointing out is extremely important and socially significant. This rule, where unmarried female teachers are prohibited from using mobile phones while male teachers are not, reveals a clear gender-based double standard. It is rooted in concerns about honour and modesty, through which women's bodies, movements, and social interactions are more tightly controlled. There is an underlying assumption that mobile phone use may lead women astray, and so restrictions are imposed in advance, denying women the capacity to make their own decisions. Unmarried women teachers, in particular, are closely tied to notions of family honour, which makes their access to independent communication especially suspect. Men, by contrast, are assumed to be mature and responsible, and therefore not in need of similar restrictions. Since institutional decision-makers are mostly men, rules tend to be less strict for them, and those who create these regulations are rarely subject to them. At the core of this difference lies an unequal distribution of trust: men are treated as independent, while women are viewed as requiring guidance and supervision.

Participant 4 is a deeply religious woman from a middle-income background who is raising her young daughter as a single mother while continuing her work in the capital city of Dhaka. Although returning to her parents' village would have offered greater security, she chose instead to remain and continue her employment despite the challenges of caring for a toddler on her own. The atmosphere of her personal life is that of someone who manages the responsibilities of life without male mediation. At the same time, as a wearer of the niqab who deeply admires Islamic history and tradition, she is also deeply attached to the norm of modesty that structures madrasa life. At the intersection of these atmospheric elements, she unsettles the assumption common in the madrasas that women require supervision to remain morally disciplined. She does this by seeking the reason behind the ban and thus focusing on the unequal distribution of trust, framing that inequality as inconsistent with Islamic principles. Thus, she situates women as capable moral subjects within the religious order in which she herself was trained. She finds her agency, and insists upon it, through moral reasoning.

However, Participant 33, a teacher in a rural Qawmi madrasa, did not speak of rules around mobile phones as unequal but described it as part of the institutional order. She explained that non-residential women teachers are permitted to keep mobile phones in her madrasa, while unmarried residential teachers are not. This account was confirmed by her colleague, Participant 37, who added that even non-residential women teachers (both married and unmarried) are not permitted to keep phones with them in class. She noted that in the early years of the madrasa, it was entirely impermissible for women to carry phones inside the institution, but that phones were later allowed to be kept in the office to address emergencies. While male teachers carry phones on silent in their pockets during class, female teachers are not allowed to bring them into class. Non-residential women teachers therefore leave their phones in the office before entering the classroom. Among residential teachers, unmarried women are not permitted to keep phones at all. Both participants explained that unmarried residential women teachers and students are allowed to contact their families only at designated times each day, using an office phone that is not a smartphone. They can also borrow the phone of a married female teacher, if need be. Both women described these regulations without framing them as unequal, presenting them as established features of madrasa discipline rather than as contested practices. As non-residential teachers, they were not subject to the complete prohibition on personal phone possession imposed on unmarried residential teachers. Their reasoning, evident in the way they describe the organization of phone use across marital and residential status, frames such differentiation as a normalized component of madrasa discipline rather than as an exceptional restriction.

In another madrasa, restrictions appeared even more severe. Participant 31 described how neither residential women teachers nor female students are permitted to have mobile phones. In cases of emergency, they must use a hujur's phone. She explained that one hujur is designated to oversee the madrasa and is allowed to keep a phone for this purpose. According to the participant, mobile phones had been permitted previously, but the rules had recently changed. As she put it, allowing

phones was seen as a distraction: “If you have a mobile, you will not be attentive in class. You will use your mobile in class. Your family will call too.” In her account, not having a phone was therefore not framed as discrimination but as a reasonable measure to protect attentiveness and discipline in studying and teaching. Her reasoning presents the restriction as necessary for maintaining focus within the madrasa rather than as a gendered inequality. Thus, different women reasoned differently about this ban, suggesting that their reasoning emerges from the particular atmospheres they inhabit, shaping whether such restrictions are interpreted as unjust or as ordinary regulation.

Virtual Discourse beyond the Madrasa: A Case of Atmospheric Agency

This section examines a single Facebook page in order to show how the reasoning and agency of a madrasa graduate can also take shape in atmospheres beyond regulated madrasa settings. The woman who maintains the page both lives abroad and operates in an independent virtual space. The discourse seen here cannot be described, in relation to Bangladesh madrasas, as mainstream. Yet it is a visible strand within the online world of Islamic discourse, expressed by a committed madrasa graduate. This example shows that the regulations we have seen in institutional and virtual madrasas do not account for all the atmospheres through which madrasa women may encounter debates about gender, authority, and religious life. Thus, the material presented here does not undo existing institutional constraints; but it is an example of a satellite atmosphere in which questions of gender, education, and religious authority are increasingly debated in the wider contemporary Muslim world.

The Facebook profile concerned, known to a very small number of my participants, belongs to a woman who wears a hijab and is a former Aliya madrasa student. She now works in academia overseas after completing two PhDs in Western universities. The writer’s self-positioning is germane. She describes herself as a “madrasa-made” woman. Thus, she can speak about the madrasa system from her long-time experience in it, even as she has transcended that world. Although only a few of my participants follow this page, it circulates quite widely among Bangladeshi and diasporic Muslim publics, where it remains secondary and overshadowed by dominant religious authority despite its substantial reach of 67,000 followers. The writer draws on Islamic history, legal reasoning, and ethical argument to address issues concerning women. I analyze her page as part of the wider virtual atmosphere through which madrasa women encounter, absorb, ignore, or contest moral arguments about gender and authority.

The writer’s critical engagement across her Facebook posts with patriarchy and misogyny exemplifies atmospheric agency as I conceptualize it. Her agency does not lie in the fact that she is outspoken, that she openly criticizes patriarchy, or that she has a large following, but rather in her reasoning justified through Islamic teachings. It is her moral reasoning, which might in this case be called interpretation, that allows her to resist patriarchy and misogyny in the virtual space

she inhabits and to extend her scholarship to a wider public. Her reasoning takes place at the conjunction of her madrasa atmosphere and the atmosphere of a secular academic training in the subject of women and religion. In this space, she is able to offer critique without immediate institutional constraint, naming injustices and questioning unequal treatment and gendered authority. In what follows, I analyze several of the writer's Facebook posts in order to examine her reasoning.

In her writing, this academic engages with issues within Bangladeshi Islamic discourse that most online religious circles avoid addressing. For example, she reflects in this Bangla language post on an incident involving girls' extracurricular activities at an Islamic school (the paragraphing here, which is part of the writer's style of communication, is conserved):

> A very highly prestigious English-medium Islamic school in Dhaka. A school whose fees are far beyond the reach of the middle class. That school has removed debate from girls' extracurricular activities.
>
> The reason given: if girls learn to debate, they will later go into married life and create conflict by arguing with husbands and mothers-in-law.
>
> Forget teachers protesting—not a single parent objected.

This post questions not only male authority in the form of husbands, but also the authority of in-laws, which in Qawmi and other conservative settings in Bangladesh women are expected to obey and quietly follow. The writer, as seen here, speaks forthrightly about discrimination against women and about how women's intellectual capacities are treated. In particular, the ability to argue, question, and reason publicly is regarded as a moral threat even within elite Islamic institutions, such as the one mentioned above, that present themselves as modern and globally oriented. Her critique further shows how such framings discipline women's intellectual formation and become normalized through silence and institutional and social consent. The academic's act of posting against this decision constitutes a form of resistance to entrenched institutional and social norms. Her public criticism of this decision by a religious institution is the outcome of moral reasoning shaped within her particular atmosphere, through which she seeks to raise awareness about persistent injustices against women.

In another Facebook post, the writer responds to statements by certain religious figures who defend polygamy and secret marriages in which a woman is kept hidden from family and society, by stating that they are legally permissible in Islam. She questions how moral responsibility is evacuated when debates are reduced to whether something is haram or not haram. In one part of this post, she questions polygamy and criticizes the social silence surrounding it:

> No matter how brave a journalist in Bangladesh may be, they would not dare to write about the extent of so-called 'halal womanizing' that takes place within religious circles. No one would. Because when womanizing

> operates under the cover of religion, touching that burning fire means having one's hand cut off in the name of religion itself.

She goes further by likening such practices to a "meat market," arguing that women in such arrangements are reduced to commodities to be traded. Similarly, in another post, the writer responds to a popular preacher's claim that women are sexually assaulted because they move in public without a mahram. She revisits an early Islamic incident involving the Prophet to question this claim: In this account, a woman who was sexually assaulted during the Prophet's time was not blamed for the attack; instead, the perpetrator was punished, illustrating that the responsibility for such violence lies with the offender rather than the woman. She also argues that women's dignity was defended in early Islamic contexts without blaming them for moving in public space.

Her reasoning here depends on shifting the debate from what is legally permissible to what is morally right and ethically responsible. By referring to Islamic history and prophetic precedent (particularly powerful since the sunnah, or practice of the Prophet, is one of the scriptures of Islam), she rejects the claim that contemporary gendered practices are divinely mandated. Her agency lies in her reasoning—her interpretive labor—that she exercises within the virtual atmosphere she inhabits.

Online reasoning of the kind seen in this Facebook page remains marginal in relation to dominant religious authority in digital discourse circulating in Bangladesh, and certainly in Bangladeshi madrasas. It does not advance a unified reform agenda or command broad consensus, and it is frequently criticized and contested by those who follow such sites. Its significance thus lies not in affecting madrasa institutions directly, but rather in circulating alternative modes of religious reasoning in a satellite atmosphere. For women who encounter such debates, this atmosphere expands the range of arguments and ethical possibilities available to them, even alongside institutional discipline.

Across all three sections of this chapter, moral regulation emerges as a common thread shaping women's virtual participation, learning, and reasoning. Whether through online certification in formal religious education, informal religious groups, mobile phone restrictions, or alternative religious discourse online, moral regulation forms part of the atmosphere within which women reason about and interpret authority, modesty, and responsibility. Some women find aspiration and new beginnings in inhabiting such atmospheres. Others find reinforcement for decisions they were already inclined toward, while some become vigilant participants in sustaining and reproducing moral regulations. At the same time, some criticize such regulations, or resist the underlying assumptions that give rise to them. The reasoning behind these different responses to regulations becomes the source of women's action or non-action. The digital sphere thus becomes another element of the atmosphere through which women's agency unfolds.

Chapter Four
Patterns of Moral Reasoning Across Madrasa Settings

In this chapter, analysis of women's atmospheres and moral reasoning is supplemented by a quantitative examination of reasoning across different madrasa settings. Before turning to these patterns, it is important to reiterate how this thesis understands agency. Agency here refers to the reasoning that unfolds within a person's atmosphere, which is constituted by multiple intersecting elements such as education, socio-economic conditions, digital and global exposure, affect, sensory, and psychological dispositions. These elements together constitute a woman's atmosphere and make certain moral interpretations of life feel persuasive or compelling. Note that the demographic patterns described or illustrated below throw light on overall tendencies rather than individual trajectories, which, as seen in the previous chapters, are not very predictable on the basis of women's atmospheres since their reasoning can proceed in different directions. The tables that follow should therefore be read as patterns of inclination or glimpses into how participants reason about specific matters.

Additionally, the distribution of participants across gender, institutional, residential, and socioeconomic categories is uneven. There are only a few male participants, and some socioeconomic categories are absent within particular institutional settings (for example, no lower-middle-income respondents appear in madrasa–school settings). For the analysis presented in this section, results are reported as within-group percentages, which facilitate comparison across categories with unequal sample sizes.

With these disclaimers in place, the following sections present thematically organized patterns drawn from the interview data and illustrated through tables. The dimensions examined here, such as socioeconomic background, institutional affiliation, and rural–urban location, are central to this thesis because they structure the atmospheres within which women's moral and practical reasoning (which, as we have seen, can work in tandem, or at times involve moral reasoning overtaking material considerations, such as economic ones) take shape. These dimensions allow the chapter to trace, in a general way, how reasoning varies across different material circumstances, moral expectations, and educational settings. The thematic sections that follow are key sites through which women's reasoning becomes visible: how they enter religious institutions, imagine futures through aspirations, negotiate economic obligations, evaluate institutional arrangements, manage bodily visibility, and assess the limits of their public participation, such as participating in hifz events.

At the end of the chapter, a brief regression analysis is conducted to show material inequalities, illustrating how institutional affiliation, spatial location, and gender structure the economic atmospheres in which women's reasoning takes shape.

Why madrasa?

Women participants were asked about their pathways into madrasa education and about the reasons they came to study or work in madrasas. Male participants, by contrast, were asked why they believe women's participation in madrasa education has increased in recent years. The table below reflects these two perspectives and reports within-group percentages separately for women and men.

Table 4- Reason for studying/working in madrasa

Category	***Women: Why did you come to madrasa education? (%) (n = 42)***	***Men: Why do you think girls' participation is increasing? (%) (n = 14)***
Family decision	33.3	-
Religious exposure	35.7	57.1
Religious and worldly gain	31.0	42.9
Total	100.0	100.0

Three categories emerged to capture women's reported reasons for entering madrasa education: family decision, religious exposure, and religious and worldly gain. For women, religious exposure refers to heightened engagement with Islamic knowledge shaped by online platforms, digital sermons, and transnational religious networks, which participants described as encouraging them to actively seek religious learning. Religious influence beyond digital or transnational learning also emerged as a factor, albeit a lesser one than online contact. For example, Participant 16 explained how her desire to undertake formal religious study emerged through everyday observation: "When I was in class seven, I switched to a madrasa nearby. I wanted to study there. Everyone there used to pray, fast… seeing them, I was so eager that I told my parents, and they got me admitted to the madrasa."

Among female participants (n = 42), family decision is the most common pathway into madrasa education (33.3 percent), underscoring the continued importance of the familial atmosphere in shaping women's educational pathways. Religious exposure accounts for a slightly larger share of women's pathways (35.7 percent), reflecting the growing influence of both digitally mediated and socially embedded forms of religious learning. A further 31.0 percent of women cited a

combination of religious and worldly considerations, such as the pursuit of moral formation alongside secular education or employment.

Men's responses reflect their interpretations of why girls are increasingly attending madrasas. A majority of men pointed to heightened religious exposure at the family level (57.1 percent) as a key factor shaping women's entry into madrasa education, while framing religious exposure as a broader social condition affecting families in an increasingly connected world. This suggests that exposure to global Islamic knowledge has led families to send their children, especially girls, to madrasas in order to ensure a religious education that supports modest conduct and moral discipline. Another 42.9 percent emphasized a combination of religious and worldly considerations associated with contemporary life. Read together, women's accounts and men's interpretations suggest that while family influence remains important to women's entry into madrasa education, broader shifts in religious exposure, particularly through digital, social, and transnational channels, are widely perceived as contributing to the growing visibility of women in madrasa spaces.

Table 5- Women's Pathways into Madrasa Education

Category	***Upper income (%)***	***Middle income (%)***	***Lower-middle income (%)***	***Urban (%)***	***Rural (%)***	***Aliya (%)***	***Madrasa-school (%)***	***Qawmi (%)***
Family decision	12.5	30.4	44.4	27.3	21.7	23.1	20.0	28.6
Religious exposure	54.2	34.8	22.2	48.5	30.4	38.5	33.3	46.4
Religious & worldly gain	33.3	34.8	33.3	24.2	47.8	38.5	46.7	25.0
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

The most striking pattern in Table 5 is the contrast between religious exposure and family decision across social locations. Religious exposure is particularly prominent among upper-income women (54.2 percent) and urban women (48.5 percent). This suggests that greater economic security and wider social, digital, and transnational exposure are associated with more individually cultivated engagements with religious learning. By contrast, family decision is most pronounced among lower-middle-income women (44.4 percent), indicating that entry into madrasa education in more economically constrained settings is more often shaped through household mediation than individual choice. Notably, among women affiliated with Qawmi institutions, religious exposure is the most frequently cited reason for entering madrasa education

(46.4 percent), compared to family decision (28.6 percent). This complicates common assumptions that conservative institutional settings necessarily correspond to stronger familial control over women's educational decisions.

Women's aspirations

Among women participants (n = 42), aspirations cluster into three broad categories: teaching and education (self, others, and family), religious service (dawah / religiously framed political engagement), and professional aspirations outside the education sector. Just over half of the women (52.4 percent, n = 22) articulated aspirations oriented toward teaching and education (self, others, and family). These include pursuing further study, teaching in religious or any other institutions, establishing madrasas or hifz programs, and educating their children in religious and moral ways. A substantial minority (33.3 percent, n = 14) expressed aspirations oriented toward religious service, emphasizing dawah such as preaching, moral guidance, and service to the Muslim community. For many, this also refers to religiously framed political engagement.

Table 6- Women's Career and Life Aspirations

Aspiration category	***Count (n)***	***Percent (%)***
Teaching and education (self, others, and family)	22	52.4
Religious service (dawah/religiously framed political activism)	14	33.3
Non-education professions	6	14.3
Total	42	100.0

By contrast, professional aspirations outside the education sector, such as careers in science, business, policing, or other fields not centered on teaching, were least common, reported by 14.3 percent (n = 6) of women. When examined by location, pronounced differences emerge. Among rural women, 85.7 percent articulated aspirations centered on teaching and education, while 14.3 percent were oriented toward religious service, and none expressed professional aspirations outside the education sector. In contrast, urban women displayed a more diversified profile: 35.7 percent expressed teaching- and education-oriented aspirations, 42.9 percent articulated aspirations toward religious service, and 21.4 percent expressed aspirations outside the education sector. These figures indicate that rural women's imagined futures are overwhelmingly concentrated in educational and formative roles, whereas urban women imagine a wider range of aspirational futures.

A similar gradient appears across socioeconomic backgrounds. Among lower-middle-income women, aspirations are almost entirely concentrated in teaching and education (87.5 percent), with the remaining 12.5 percent expressing aspirations outside the education sector and none oriented toward religious service. Among middle-income women, teaching and education remains the most common orientation (53.3 percent), followed closely by religious service (40.0 percent), while non-educational aspirations are rare (6.7 percent). By contrast, upper-income women show a more even distribution across categories: 36.8 percent oriented toward teaching and education, 42.1 percent toward religious service, and 21.1 percent toward non-education professions.

Taken together, these distributions suggest that as economic security increases and residence shifts from rural to urban settings, the range of futures women imagine expands beyond educational roles to include religious service and aspirations outside the education sector. Conversely, in rural and lower-income contexts, aspirations are more tightly clustered around teaching and education. This clustering reflects not only moral orientation but also practical considerations: teaching is widely regarded as a socially respectable, attainable, and lower-risk form of work for women, one that can often be pursued locally and negotiated alongside family responsibilities. Other professional careers may involve higher demands on time and a greater requirement of mobility, which are less feasible for women in village settings. Such constraints are often linked to more limited employment opportunities and the lower availability of basic infrastructure in rural areas. Basic infrastructure, such as opportunities for higher study and access to better institutions, is often concentrated in cities. Pursuing these opportunities may require women to travel to urban areas and arrange residence away from home, which, given cultural and religious concerns surrounding women's mobility and independent residence, is often considered difficult or impractical. Aspirations for dawah are also less commonly articulated by rural women, as the idea of dawah appears more closely aligned with urban institutional settings. Additionally, the two women in the sample who are both rural and upper-income articulated aspirations centered on teaching and education, aligning with the broader rural pattern rather than the diversified aspirational profile observed among urban upper-income women. As such, these patterns reflect how women reason about futures that are not only religiously appropriate but also practically possible within the constraints and opportunities of their atmospheres.

Financial contribution to the household

In traditional Bangladeshi Islamic understanding, shaped partly by classical Islamic jurisprudence that requires only men to contribute *nafaqa* (maintenance), women are not generally expected to contribute financially to household expenses. However, one Qawmi male participant (08) explained: "We manage the family from my income… In some families, wives

also contribute when required; if the husband needs money, she [the wife] gives it from her earnings. They [the couple] save as well. So, in a family, it is a combined fund; nothing is solo."

In this regard, a class-based dynamic is evident in the participant pool. Most upper-income women who reported contributing to their families described this as voluntary and occasional, often stating that they contribute if they wish or if a particular need arises, but that they generally spend their earnings on their own needs. By contrast, middle- and lower-middle-income women more commonly described spending their earnings on family-related expenses, including parents' medical bills, daily transport costs (*rickshaw*—local three-wheeled transport—or bus fares), computers and courses, and support for siblings, including the everyday practice, common across the country, of older siblings buying small treats for younger ones. Several women in these groups also described themselves as contributing substantially to household income, in some cases acting as breadwinners alongside husbands or parents.

Table 7- Women's Financial Contribution to the Household

Socioeconomic Group	***Yes – Contribute (%)***	***No – Do Not Contribute (%)***	***Total (n)***
Upper income	15.8	84.2	19
Middle income	38.5	61.5	13
Lower-middle income	85.7	14.3	7
Total	35.9	64.1	39

*Note: All respondents included in this table are earning women.

Among the women represented in Table 7 (n = 39), just over one-third (35.9 percent, n = 14) reported contributing to their family, while a majority (64.1 percent, n = 25) reported that they do not. As remarked above, clear class-based differences emerge. Contribution is most common among lower-middle-income women, with 85.7 percent (6 of 7) reporting contributing from their earnings. This proportion declines among middle-income women (38.5 percent, 5 of 13) and is lowest among upper-income women (15.8 percent, 3 of 19), the majority of whom reported not contributing. Read descriptively, these patterns suggest that women's financial contributions are more prevalent under conditions of economic necessity, while women in more economically secure households may be better positioned to act in accordance with the principle that they are not required to contribute their earnings to family expenses.

Concerns about reform

Across the sample, participants described reform as a set of interventions aimed at improving how madrasa education is organized, taught, and sustained. These concerns cluster into three broad areas: curriculum and pedagogical reform; reforming employment conditions and creating opportunities (especially for women and girls); and improving resources, infrastructure, and funding.

Table 8- Overall Reform Priorities

Reform Category	***Count (n)***	***Percent (%)***
Curriculum & Pedagogical Reform	30	53.6
Reforming Employment Conditions and Creating Opportunities	16	28.6
Resources, Infrastructure & Funding Reform	10	17.9
Total	56	100.0

Curriculum and pedagogical reform concerns focus on what is taught and how it is taught, including disciplinary practices, teacher training, and sustained investment in girls' learning environments, such as opportunities for play and extracurricular activities. More interactive forms of instruction were also mentioned. Many participants in this category emphasized the need for a stronger integration of secular and religious education within madrasa curricula. Additional concerns were also raised, such as disciplinary practices and everyday pedagogical authority. Several participants described the introduction of CCTV systems in some madrasa and madrasa-school settings as a way to establish transparency and reassure guardians about how children are treated. Participants linked these measures to wider public concerns—frequently reported in the media—about corporal punishment in madrasas (The Financial Express 2021; Khondkar 2022). Such concerns and proposed measures articulated by participants have been coded in Table 8 under the category of Curriculum and Pedagogical Reform.

A substantial minority, as seen in Table 8, emphasized reforming employment conditions and creating opportunities; this category was focused particularly on women and girls. Women's access to teaching positions, professional training, diverse employment options beyond teaching, and improved salaries and working conditions were mentioned as needing improvement or

reform. Resources, infrastructure, and funding, for instance for buildings, facilities, and institutional financing, were mentioned less frequently, indicating that participants prioritized structural and pedagogical change over material expansion alone.

Gendered differences in reform priorities are reflected in Table 9. Women prioritized curriculum and pedagogical reform. Among women affiliated with Qawmi institutions, this involved greater access to science, mathematics, and English, as well as concerns about the reduced scope of women's syllabi, fewer years of study, and a narrower range of texts compared to men. Women in Aliya and madrasa-school settings, in contrast, emphasized curriculum quality, improvements in teaching methods and teacher training. This pattern suggests that women's reform priorities are shaped by the institutional constraints they encounter in their respective settings: in Qawmi contexts, where women's curricula are structurally narrower, reform demands focus on expanding access and scope, whereas in Aliya and madrasa-school settings, where curricular breadth is not restricted, attention shifts toward improving quality.

Table 9- Reform Priorities by Gender

Reform Category	***Female (%)***	***Male (%)***
Curriculum & Pedagogical Reform	59.5	35.7
Reforming Employment Conditions & Opportunities	31.0	21.4
Resources, Infrastructure & Funding Reform	9.5	42.9

Women also account for the majority of calls to reform employment conditions and opportunities, framing these demands around women's access to teaching roles, training, promotion, and fair pay. Men, by contrast, are more likely to emphasize resources and funding, suggesting a stronger orientation toward institutional infrastructure rather than pedagogical or gendered workplace concerns. Only one male participant (Participant 51) explicitly raised the issue of changing social mindsets around women's education, employment, and access to opportunities. This suggests that reform priorities are shaped by each gender's experience within the institutional atmosphere.

Table 10- Reform Priorities by Location

Reform Category	***Urban (%)***	***Rural (%)***
Curriculum & Pedagogical Reform	51.5	56.5
Reforming Employment Conditions & Opportunities	33.3	21.7
Resources, Infrastructure & Funding Reform	15.2	21.7

Curriculum and pedagogical reform is the dominant concern in both urban and rural settings as seen in Table 10. However, employment-related reforms are more frequently raised by urban participants, where professional opportunities and institutional mobility are more visible and attainable. Rural participants place relatively greater emphasis on infrastructure and funding**,** reflecting persistent material constraints and limited institutional capacity in non-urban settings.

As seen in Table 11, Institutional affiliation also shaped participants' reform priorities. Madrasa-school and Qawmi participants emphasize curriculum and pedagogy. By contrast, Aliya participants are most likely to stress reforms to employment conditions and opportunities.

Table 11- Reform Priorities by Institutional Settings

Reform Category	***Aliya (%)***	***Madrasa-School (%)***	***Qawmi (%)***
Curriculum & Pedagogical Reform	30.8	73.3	53.6
Reforming Employment Conditions & Opportunities	53.8	20.0	21.4
Resources, Infrastructure & Funding Reform	15.4	6.7	25.0

In the above table, Qawmi respondents also show comparatively higher concern for funding and infrastructure, which may reflect the more limited institutional resources available in most Qawmi settings.

Table 12- Reform Priorities by Socioeconomic Background

Reform Category	***Upper Income (%)***	***Middle Income (%)***	***Lower-Middle Income (%)***
Curriculum & Pedagogical Reform	54.2	47.8	66.7
Reforming Employment Conditions & Opportunities	33.3	30.4	11.1
Resources, Infrastructure & Funding Reform	12.5	21.7	22.2

Socioeconomic background seems to further differentiate reform priorities. Lower-middle-income participants are most strongly oriented toward curriculum and pedagogy, reflecting the centrality of education as a pathway for moral formation and social mobility. Concerns about employment conditions and opportunity creation are more prominent among upper- and middle-income respondents, for whom professional advancement appears more feasible. Funding and infrastructure concerns are more evenly distributed but slightly more salient among middle- and lower-middle-income participants.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that reform demands are shaped by participants' gendered positions, institutional affiliations, and material conditions. Women consistently prioritize reforms that reshape learning environments and employment possibilities**,** while men more often emphasize institutional resources. Across contexts, curriculum and pedagogy emerge as the central site through which participants reason about improving madrasa education, moral formation, and future possibilities.

Women's public participation (hifz, qir'at, and nasheed)

In this section, the "negative" position in the patterns does not indicate opposition to participation in hifz, qir'at, or nasheed themselves. Rather, it reflects conditional support: respondents in the negative category consider girls' and women's participation acceptable only under specific conditions. These conditions include gender-segregated settings, women-only audiences, and public participation only prior to puberty. Tables 13 through 17 provide an overview of different attitudes toward women's participation.

Table 13- Attitude by Gender

Gender	***Negative (%)***	***Positive (%)***	***Total (n)***
Female	54.8%	45.2%	42
Male	64.3%	35.7%	14

Table 14- Urban and Rural Attitudes

Location	***Negative (%)***	***Positive (%)***	***Total (n)***
Urban	57.6%	42.4%	33
Rural	56.5%	43.5%	23

Table 15- Attitude by Type of Institution

Institution	***Negative (%)***	***Positive (%)***	***Total (n)***
Aliya	46.2%	53.8%	13
Madrasa-school	33.3%	66.7%	15
Qawmi	75.0%	25.0%	28

Table 16- Attitude by Class

Socioeconomic group	***Negative (%)***	***Positive (%)***	***Total (n)***
Upper income	50.0%	50.0%	24
Middle income	60.9%	39.1%	23
Lower-middle income	66.7%	33.3%	9

Table 17- Overall Attitude

Category	*Negative (%)*	*Positive (%)*
Entire Sample (n = 56)	57.1	42.9
Traditional (Qawmi)	75.0	25.0
Non-Traditional (Aliya + Madrasa-School)	39.3	60.7

Several participants emphasized that participation in hifz, qir'at, and nasheed is permissible prior to girls reaching puberty, which they described (in accord with Islamic law) as a point after which expectations of modesty, gender segregation, and seclusion apply. Across groups, performances conducted "among [women or girls] themselves" were widely described as appropriate, whereas public or mixed-gender participation was viewed as highly problematic. By contrast, the "positive" position reflects openness to women's participation in public and other mixed-gender settings. Across the sample, a majority (57.1 percent) expressed this conditional, negative position, indicating that restricted participation represents the modal view. Gender differences are modest: 54.8 percent of women and 64.3 percent of men expressed the negative position. Differences are clearer across institutional lines. Three-quarters of Qawmi respondents (75.0 percent) supported women's participation only under women-only conditions, compared to just under half of Aliya respondents (46.2 percent) and one-third of madrasa-school respondents (33.3 percent). Socioeconomic position also shows a graded pattern: 66.7 percent of lower-middle-income respondents expressed conditional support, compared to 60.9 percent of middle-income respondents, while upper-income respondents were evenly divided between negative and positive positions. Taken together, these findings show that while conditional support remains widespread, openness to girls' and women's participation increases most clearly outside Qawmi institutions and among more economically secure respondents. As seen in Table 18, below, when urban–rural differences are examined within institutional categories, clearer contrasts emerge.

Table 18- Urban–Rural Variation across Institutional Settings

Group	*Negative (%)*	*Positive (%)*	*Total (N)*
Qawmi Rural	80.0%	20.0%	15
Qawmi Urban	73.3%	26.7%	15
Non-Traditional Rural (Aliya + Mad-School)	40.0%	60.0%	10
Non-Traditional Urban (Aliya + Mad-School)	25.0%	75.0%	16

Within the Qawmi sector, both rural and urban respondents are overwhelmingly restrictive. Rural Qawmi participants are the most conservative, with four out of five supporting women's participation only under fully segregated, women-only conditions. Urban Qawmi respondents show slightly greater openness, yet nearly three-quarters still express the conditional-support position. This indicates that institutional orientation outweighs location in shaping attitudes toward women's public participation.

A different pattern appears within non-traditional institutions (Aliya and madrasa-schools). Rural non-traditional respondents are more supportive than their Qawmi counterparts, with a majority expressing the positive position. This tendency increases in urban non-traditional settings, where three-quarters of respondents support women's participation beyond women-only environments.

Dress code

Dress code emerged as a constant and highly elaborated topic across conversations. Women spoke at length about clothing as a careful and meticulous practice of covering, involving attention to the feet, hands, face, and even gaze (all concerns found in the classical Islamic tradition). Many described wearing socks to cover the feet, gloves for the hands, and glasses for the eyes, along with face coverings such as masks or niqabs, and a scarf. Several mentioned being labeled with joking or dismissive terms such as "ninja" or being mocked for wearing *abaya* or *burqa* (outer Islamic garments for women). One woman recounted: "I wear burqa, niqab, scarf; people call me grandma… [laughs]." The same participant explained how her dress practices shifted in response to physical injury and bodily comfort: "I used to wear socks, but after I broke my legs, I shifted to comfortable shoes, sneakers, so I don't need socks now—sneakers cover my feet. Gloves, I cannot wear; my hands are small and I am clumsy… I fear that if I wear gloves, I will drop them here and there. But my burqa has pockets, so I put my hands in them." She further reflected on wearing glasses not for vision but to manage how her bodily appearance is perceived: "I do not cover my eyes. But I wear glasses now. I do not need them, but I do. My eyes are really protruding…very fierce eyes, so I wear glasses to tone that down, so the intensity is softened."

Other participants expressed similar attention to covering their bodies. One female participant said: "We know if a man is not attracted to a woman, he is sick… The criteria here is that, if women are in purdah properly, in general a man will not be attracted to them." At the same time, she questioned the idea that women's dress alone can prevent sexual violence, drawing on a book she had read: "I read a book…that talked about how dress is not an issue for some men to rape a woman or girl or even a child. It helped me understand a lot. I came to understand that it actually depends on many factors."

One male participant explained: “There is eve-teasing. But it does not mean if you wear burqa you will not be teased…God has made attraction that way. But burqa has a security. A deer is a very beautiful animal—it is meant to stay in the jungle. When it comes out, people want to see it; everyone wants to catch it. In the same way, women are God’s most beautiful creatures. When a woman goes out, she can become a victim of men’s desire. So to protect herself, she should wear a burqa. God has taught us this through the ruling of purdah.” Five dress categories emerged in the participants’ talk, as seen below in Table 19.

Table 19- Dress Practices

Dress category (Women, n = 42)	**n (%)**	**Dress category (Men, n = 14)**	**n (%)**
Face cover–Burqa	18 (42.9%)	**Jobba–Tupi–Payjama**	13 (92.9%)
Face cover–Burqa–Beyond	17 (40.5%)	**Non-traditional dress**	1 (7.1%)
Head cover–Burqa	7 (16.7%)		
Total	42 (100%)	Total	14 (100%)

Among female participants (n = 42), all were categorized within burqa-based forms of covering. Specifically, 42.9 percent wore face-covering and burqa, 40.5 percent wore face-covering and burqa with additional forms of covering (such as gloves, socks, or glasses), and 16.7 percent wore burqa with head covering only. Male participants (n = 14) were concentrated almost entirely in *jobba–tupi–payjama* (92.9%), with only one participant (7.1%) wearing non-traditional dress. No women were categorized under non-traditional dress. Jobba–tupi–payjama (traditional male religious attire consisting of a long robe, prayer cap, and loose trousers) refers to a form of dress commonly worn by men affiliated with madrasa education. The one male participant who did not wear this form of dress came from a secular background and participated in the community only as a donor to impoverished madrasas. Thus, overwhelmingly, male participants who were taught in madrasas or were otherwise connected to madrasa education, as teachers, owners, or *daʿi* (Islamic preachers), wore traditional religious dress.

This pattern suggests that strict forms of modest dress are widely practiced across madrasa settings, with most female participants adhering to similar forms of covering. However, participants from Aliya and madrasa-school backgrounds were critical of the stricter regulatory approach associated with Qawmi institutions, where particular forms of dress are treated as mandatory. Women in these modern settings who themselves followed strict personal dress practices were nonetheless more flexible in their views regarding the dress of others. For them, modesty was understood primarily as a matter of personal interpretation rather than a fixed or uniformly enforced requirement.

A Regression Analysis of Earnings:

Earnings Across Institutional and Spatial Contexts

The economic inequalities presented in this section are not merely material differences. They form part of the atmospheres within which women reason about work, obligation, and possible futures. This final analysis examines how earnings vary across gender, rural and urban locations, and institutional affiliation, as well as the impact of length of work experience on salary differences. A linear regression analysis has been conducted with monthly earnings as the outcome variable and gender, location, institutional affiliation, and work experience included as explanatory factors. The analysis is restricted to madrasa teachers only (n = 36 out of 56 participants). Monthly earnings are measured in BDT. Categorical variables were entered as dummy variables. Reference categories are female gender, rural location, and non-Qawmi institutional affiliation.

The regression model explains approximately 31–39 percent of the variation in earnings, which represents a relatively strong proportion of explained variation for a small, cross-sectional sample. The findings indicate that income disparities are structured primarily by institutional affiliation, spatial location, and gender, with Qawmi institutions positioned at a clear economic disadvantage relative to non-Qawmi (i.e. Aliya and madrasa-school) settings. On average, respondents affiliated with Qawmi institutions earn around 13,500 less per month than those working in non-Qawmi settings. Earnings also vary sharply by location: respondents based in urban areas earn approximately 15,000 more per month than those in rural areas. Gender differences are evident as well, with male respondents earning about 14,800 more per month than female respondents across comparable institutional and spatial contexts. Given the generally low levels of monthly income reported by many respondents, particularly women, a difference of around 14,000–15,000 represents a substantial shift in everyday economic conditions. In general, earnings at such a low level are insufficient for an earner to sustain a household on their own, even in rural settings. Accordingly, most such participants are not the sole earners in their families; in rural contexts, household livelihoods are often supported through additional income sources, while in urban settings, they are typically supplemented by other working family members or parallel income streams.

By contrast, while the length of work experience shows a weak positive association with earnings when considered on its own, this association is not robust and disappears once institutional affiliation, location, and gender are taken into account. Unlike many employment contexts where experience is expected to be rewarded with higher pay, length of work experience does not consistently translate into higher earnings in madrasa settings, particularly within Qawmi institutions. As a result, individuals with long tenures may earn salaries comparable to those with substantially fewer years of experience.

To examine whether work experience translates into earnings differently for men and women, a second regression model introduced an interaction between gender and experience. This model confirms that experience does not significantly shape earnings for *either* group. Neither experience itself nor its interaction with gender emerges as a meaningful predictor of salary, indicating that longer tenure does not yield higher pay either for women or men. Read alongside participants' accounts of madrasa teaching as khidmah, this pattern suggests that work in these settings does not operate through conventional wage-progression logics tied to experience. Rather than functioning as leverage for salary negotiation, commitment over time appears to be morally valued more than it is economically compensated. The patterns seen here overall suggest that madrasa teaching is often sustained through a combination of moral reasoning and household-level income arrangements. Low earnings are rendered viable not because they are sufficient, but because they are supplemented by other sources of livelihood and understood within a moral framework that values khidmah over material reward.

Taken together, the findings of this chapter show patterns of moral reasoning about work, learning, piety, and possibility. As noted at the beginning of the chapter, these patterns indicate tendencies rather than fixed outcomes and do not collapse differences across women's lives or institutional settings.

Conclusion

The theoretical frame for this study was initially sparked by a puzzle encountered during engagement with madrasa women in Bangladesh. While I had long been familiar with madrasa communities, closer interaction over the past few years through interviews and extended conversations revealed a striking absence of uniformity in women's views. Women within the same institutional settings did not articulate similar positions. A woman from a rural background might express what could be read as relatively progressive views, while another from an urban and secular background, now engaged in madrasa education, articulated more conservative positions regarding purdah, work, and ambitions. I also observed that women who chose not to pursue paid work did not come to their decisions through simple conformity to conservative norms. Rather, they articulated their own understandings of marriage, appropriate aspirations, and a good life in ways that were at variance with usual conservative understandings. I accepted that, as per Saba Mahmood, the women were "inhabiting" their traditions—but how could this diversity be explained within that category? The clue to this difficulty lay, I realized, in the fact that the women engaged in reflection and evaluation, which led me to a shift in analytic focus to how agency is exercised. What emerged across these differences was a shared process: women reasoned about their lives, in moral terms. This observation constitutes the crux of this thesis.

This thesis therefore contributes to post-Mahmood scholarship by shifting the analytic focus from describing, as much of the literature does, the forms that agency takes to examining how agency operates through moral reasoning. Behind the different forms in which agency manifests, women exercise agency through moral reasoning that allows them to inhabit a tradition in various ways. Crucially, when agency is recognized to lie in reasoning, not only action but also the apparent non-action (conformity) sometimes involved in inhabiting a norm can be understood as an agentic outcome of reasoning.

The thesis also introduces the concept of "atmosphere" to take into account how women reason within intersecting institutional, familial, economic, digital, psychological, and affective conditions. These together constitute a woman's atmosphere. I am not asserting simply that context matters; rather, my argument is that reasoning is formed not just in relation to the tradition but within particular conditions. Considering women's atmospheres gives closer attention to their lives and allows us to understand the different and complex aspects of their experiences. The thesis thus adds atmosphere as an analytic category, partly in response to critiques of Mahmood that she does not pay enough attention to the circumstances of the lives of the women she studies. At the same time, women do not merely inhabit these atmospheres; through their decisions and interpretations they may also reshape elements of the environments in which they live—for instance, by moving toward strict religiosity from a more secular orientation. In sum, the thesis suggests that agency among religious women is best understood

through the interpretive processes by which they orient their lives within their particular atmospheres.

A further implication of the thesis concerns how we understand religion and modernity. The material presented suggests that movement toward religion does not necessarily involve movement away from reflection, aspiration, modernity, or even professional planning. Rather, women reason through modern conditions in religious terms.

Another finding is that inhabiting a tradition and conservative institution such as the Bangladeshi madrasa does not eliminate critique or resistance. Even where women do not directly name structures and norms as discriminatory, they interpret, justify, negotiate, and sometimes change their surroundings in ways that do not conform to institutional norms. Such actions—for example, a Qawmi teacher sending her daughter abroad to study alone or keeping a female security guard in her own madrasa—take place even while women continue to inhabit conservative institutional atmospheres. Some of the women featured in this study placed conditions on marriage or delayed marriage, which is not a traditional understanding of Islamic norms. One woman even moved away from her husband to relocate from their village to a city even though he did not support the endeavor, which certainly contrasts with traditional hierarchical norms in relation to male authority. At other times, women contest norms even more directly, such as when a woman lives alone with her child without male guardianship. The strong critique of patriarchy by this participant is not easily accommodated within conservative expectations. Yet she remains within the madrasa system, is highly appreciative of conservative Islamic tradition, and dresses very conservatively. This shows that critique, resistance to norms, or efforts to change them do not always appear in secular or explicitly feminist language.

Another implication of the study concerns the diversity of women's life trajectories. A woman wearing a face covering from a madrasa and lower-income village background may aspire to become a high-level official in the police force, while another from an urban, affluent, secular family and professional background may decide to leave her job, delete all male colleagues' contacts from her phone, and remain at home. Moreover, women sharing substantially the same atmosphere may reason very differently. Even when they share the same institutional setting and familial and socioeconomic backgrounds, their interpretations and decisions are not identical. For example, friends studying in the same madrasa may interpret norms, aspirations, and expectations in different ways that orient their lives in different ways and alter particular elements of their atmospheres. The diversity of life trajectories and of reasoning within substantially similar atmospheres underlines the agentic nature of moral reasoning.

Scholarship on Muslim women and Islamic institutions in South Asia has so far focused on India and Pakistan. This thesis shows that Bangladesh presents its own configurations of madrasa expansion, female participation, digital religiosity, and institutional variation that deserve attention in their own right.

The study draws on a sample of 56 participants from urban, rural, and virtual madrasa settings in Bangladesh. Analysis is focused on two institutional settings: the conservative Qawmi environment and the reformist Aliya and madrasa-school environment, which I refer to collectively as the modern setting. Within these contexts, women confront a range of decisions, including whether to study or teach, to continue working or withdraw from employment, to reject or embrace secular education, to accept traditional marital expectations or delay marriage, to donate or share income with family, and to adopt or move away from forms of gender segregation. Their reasoning shapes aspirations and approaches to work, whether understood as a profession or as dawah, as well as their approaches to family life and education. The thesis examines these dynamics across four chapters addressing Qawmi madrasa settings, reformist Aliya and madrasa-school environments, digital religious spaces, and quantitative patterns in participants' reasoning.

The study relied on digital ethnographic engagement, including observation of WhatsApp and Facebook spaces, analysis of publicly shared posts, channels, images, and videos, and extended interaction with participants through audio interviews. It also involved WhatsApp text-based interaction and follow-up over a period of a few months, as well as photographs and videos shared directly by participants. This opened the data collection to a short-term longitudinal analysis as participants often clarified their views over time, revisiting or elaborating upon points they had reflected upon. Such a study is advantageous for paying attention to details that are not always possible through one-time or face-to-face conversations or interviews.

While digital ethnography favored participants being comfortable sharing details of their lives without face-to-face interaction at flexible times they preferred, it was not complemented by physical immersion within madrasa institutions. Although this was substantially compensated for by my familiarity with Bangladesh as my home country and with the community under study, it nonetheless remains a dimension that was unexplored. Future studies can involve on-site immersion, which can give direct access to teachers, students, their families, husbands, children, and the community—in the terms of this thesis, a fuller view of women's particular atmospheres. More participants could also be included to gain a better understanding of women's reasoning and of the patterns of reasoning addressed in Chapter 4.

As madrasa-schools continue to increase in number, they represent a relatively new institutional form that has yet to receive scholarly attention in Bangladesh. While Aliya and Qawmi madrasas have been widely studied in different aspects, exploring their histories, curricula, and social roles, madrasa-schools have yet to receive scholarly attention as a distinct institutional form. Focused research on these institutions is therefore necessary to better understand the experiences of contemporary students, teachers, and administrative staff within this emerging educational environment.

Lastly, it should be kept in mind that the thesis presents a snapshot. A longitudinal study of selected members of the current participants to see where they are in the future, whether their views have changed, and how their lives unfold over time would present a more holistic view of where their moral reasoning ultimately leads them. The participant presented in Chapter Three who expressed her own, distinctive views through online platforms may be an example of such a person. Similarly, one wonders if the women in this study who rejected or stepped away from secular educational and professional paths to actively embrace religious forms of life remained on that path.

In the end, the thesis returns to the central question raised in the introduction: rather than asking "Did she act?", we should ask "How did she reason?" This way of understanding agency can shift perspectives and further challenge stereotypes about women who inhabit their religious traditions as having little or no agency. By examining agency through atmospheres, the study draws attention to two dimensions: how decisions take shape through engagement with one's atmosphere, and how women also redirect or reshape their atmosphere through their own choices and commitments. Understanding how people reason about their lives allows us to better grasp their orientations and interpretations of the world. Such an approach allows us to see their lives not only through what they do, but through the reasoning that gives their actions or non-actions meaning.

References

Abdelhadi, Eman. 2017. "Religiosity and Muslim Women's Employment in the United States." *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 3 (January): 2378023117729969. https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023117729969.

Abisaab, Malek. 2010. *Militant Women of a Fragile Nation*. Syracuse University Press.

Akter, Marjahan, and Omar Faruque. 2024. "Increasing Participation of Female Students in Madrasa Education System of Bangladesh: An Investigation of Madrasa Students." *Vegueta* 24 (1): 157–66. https://vegueta.org/index.php/VEG/article/view/12.

Alam, M. Sayeed, Abdus Sattar, and S. I. Nusrat Chaudhury. 2011. "Work Family Conflict of Women Managers in Dhaka." *Asian Social Science* 7 (7): 108. https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v7n7p108.

Al-Faizi Al-Madani, Shaykh Abdul Hamid. 2021. *Adorsho Romoni (Ideal Woman)*. 3rd ed. Wahidiya Islamia Library. http://archive.org/details/0030-pdf-islam-translation-bengali-language-adorsho-romoni.

Ali, Kecia. 2006. *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Ḥadith, and Jurisprudence*. Oneworld Publications.

Al-Zaman, Md. Sayeed. 2024. "Social Media Users' Engagement with Religious Misinformation: An Exploratory Sequential Mixed-Methods Analysis." *Emerging Media* 2 (2): 181–209. https://doi.org/10.1177/27523543241257715

Anjum, Nafisa, and Anne Daly. 2019. "The Gender Wage Gap in Bangladesh: An Application of Olsen and Walby Simulation Method." *The Australian Journal of Labour Economics* 22 (1).

Asadullah, M. Niaz, Sajeda Amin, and Nazmul Chaudhury. 2019. "Support for Gender Stereotypes: Does Madrasah Education Matter?" *The Journal of Development Studies* 55 (1): 39–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2017.1414190.

Asadullah, Mohammad Niaz, and Nazmul Chaudhury. 2008. *Madrasas and NGOs: Complements or Substitutes? Non-State Providers and Growth in Female Education in Bangladesh*. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 4511. World Bank, South Asia Human Development Unit.

Asadullah, Mohammad Niaz, and Nazmul Chaudhury. 2010. "Religious Schools, Social Values, and Economic Attitudes: Evidence from Bangladesh." *World Development* 38 (2): 205–17. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2009.10.014

Asadullah, Mohammad Niaz, and Nazmul Chaudhury. 2013. "Peaceful Coexistence? The Role of Religious Schools and NGOs in the Growth of Female Secondary Schooling in Bangladesh." *Journal of Development Studies* 49 (2): 223–37. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2012.733369

Asadullah, Niaz Mohammad, and Zaki Wahhaj. 2012. *Going to School in Purdah: Female Schooling, Mobility Norms and Madrasas in Bangladesh*. IZA Discussion Paper No. 7059. Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA). http://hdl.handle.net/10419/69373

Badrunnesha, Musammat, and Christina Kwauk. 2015. *Improving the Quality of Girls' Education in Madrasas in Bangladesh*. Brookings Institution, Center for Universal Education. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-

content/uploads/2016/07/improving_quality_of_girls_education_in_madrasas_in_bangladesh_badrunnesha.pdf

BANBEIS. 2022. *Bangladesh Education Statistics 2022*. Dhaka. https://banbeis.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/banbeis.portal.gov.bd/page/6d10c6e9_d26c_4b9b_9c7f_770f9c68df7c/Bangladesh%20Education%20Statistics%202022%20%281%29_compressed.pdf

Bangstad, Sindre. 2011. "Saba Mahmood and Anthropological Feminism After Virtue." *Theory, Culture & Society* 28 (3): 28–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276410396914

Banik Barta. 2025. "Qawmi Now Country's Fastest-Growing Education System." *Banik Barta*, May 9. https://en.bonikbarta.com/bangladesh/9If40CMiEHRe0Rkr

Bano, Masooda. 2014. "Madrasa Reforms and Islamic Modernism in Bangladesh." *Modern Asian Studies* 48 (4): 911–39. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X12000790

Bano, Masooda. 2017. *Female Islamic Education Movements: The Re-Democratisation of Islamic Knowledge*. Cambridge University Press.

bdnews24.com. 2024. "Why Are Madrasas Gaining More Pupils amid a Fall in Number of School Students." *bdnews24.com*, April 1. https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2hw767j4pg

Begum, Momotaj, and Humayun Kabir. 2012. "Reflections on the Deobandi Reformist Agenda in a Female Quomi Madrasah in Bangladesh." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 35 (2): 353–80. https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2012.659650

Begum, Momotaz. 2016. "Reconfiguring Boundary and Gender Relation in Religious Sphere: The Women in an Alternative Group of Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh." *International Journal of South Asian Studies* 8: 49–67. https://www.academia.edu/34518154/Reconfiguring_Boundary_and_Gender_Relation_in_Religious_Sphere_The_Women_in_an_Alternative_Group_of_Tablighi_Jamaat_in_Bangladesh_In_International_Journal_of_South_Asian_Studies_Vol_8_Japanese_Association_for_South_Asian_Studies_Japan

Bellagamba, Alice. 2006. "Personal Recollections, Historical Memories and Political Activism in Contemporary Gambia." *Anthropological Yearbook of European Cultures* 15: 93–115. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43234947

Bellagamba, Alice. 2013. "My Elderly Friends of The Gambia: Masculinity and Social Presence in the Later Part of Life." *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 53 (209/210): 345–66. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24475027

Bidisha, Sayema Haque, Avinno Faruk, and Tanveer Mahmood. 2020. *How Women Are Faring in Bangladeshi Labour Market?: Evidences from Labour Force Survey Data*. MPRA Paper No. 99590

Blunch, Niels-Hugo, and Maitreyi Bordia Das. 2015. "Changing Norms about Gender Inequality in Education: Evidence from Bangladesh." *Demographic Research* 32 (January): 183–218. https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2015.32.6

Borker, Hem. 2018. *Madrasas and the Making of Islamic Womanhood*. Oxford University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press.

Bucar, Elizabeth M. 2011. *Creative Conformity: The Feminist Politics of U.S. Catholic and Iranian Shi'i Women*. Georgetown University Press.

Bucar, Elizabeth M. 2017. *Pious Fashion: How Muslim Women Dress*. Harvard University Press.

Chaoui, Saleh. 2023. "Embodied Faith and the Limits of Female Agency in Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?*" *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, ahead of print, January 2. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-022-00359-5

Chapman, Madeleine. 2016. "Feminist Dilemmas and the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women: Analysing Identities and Social Representations." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 23 (3): 237–50. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506815605346

Culcasi, Karen. 2024. "Gendered Orientalism and Syrian Women Refugees." *Fennia - International Journal of Geography*, ahead of print, April 25. https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.129457

Daily Sun. 2026. "Islamic Curriculum-Based English Medium School Proliferating." *Daily Sun*, August 1. http://www.daily-sun.com/opinion/850465

Deeb, Lara. 2006. *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*. Princeton University Press.

Dhaka Tribune. 2024. "TK Group Announces Hifzul Quran Competition to Inspire Young Hafez across Bangladesh." *Dhaka Tribune*, November 23. https://www.dhakatribune.com/business/366033/tk-group-announces-hifzul-quran-competition-to

Eagly, Alice Hendrickson, and Linda Lorene Carli. 2007. *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth about How Women Become Leaders*. Harvard Business Press.

Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 2011. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. 2nd ed. University of Chicago Press.

Facebook. n.d. "Sauda Binte Zam'ah International Girls Hifz Madrasa." Accessed November 13, 2025. https://www.facebook.com/saudabintezamah/

Faulkner, Wendy, and Merete Lie. 2007. "Gender in the Information Society: Strategies of Inclusion." *Gender, Technology and Development* 11 (2): 157–77. https://doi.org/10.1177/097185240701100202

Geetha, V. 2007. *Patriarchy*. Bhatkal & Sen.

Gent, Bill. 2016. "The Hidden Olympians: The Role of Huffaz in the English Muslim Community." *Contemporary Islam* 10 (1): 17–34. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-014-0321-z

Ghazali, Abū Ḥāmid al-. 1984. *Marriage and Sexuality in Islam*. Edited by Madelain Farah. Islamic Book Trust.

Gurumurthy, Anita. 2004. *Gender and ICTs: Overview Report*. BRIDGE Programme. Institute of Development Studies. https://archive.ids.ac.uk/bridge/bridge-publications/reports/document/A52909.html

Haeri, Niloofar. 2020. *Say What Your Longing Heart Desires: Women, Prayer, and Poetry in Iran*. Stanford University Press.

Haque, Md Mahfuzul, Mohammad Yousuf, Ahmed Shatil Alam, Pratyasha Saha, Syed Ishtiaque Ahmed, and Naeemul Hassan. 2020. "Combating Misinformation in Bangladesh: Roles and Responsibilities as

Perceived by Journalists, Fact-Checkers, and Users." *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 4 (CSCW2): 1–32. https://doi.org/10.1145/3415201

Hochschild, Arlie, and Anne Machung. 2012. *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home*. Penguin Books.

Human Rights Watch. 2023. "Trapped." Human Rights Watch, July 18. https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/07/18/trapped/how-male-guardianship-policies-restrict-womens-travel-and-mobility-middle.

Hussain, Saba. 2024. "Feminist Counter-Authoritarian Political Agency: Muslim Girls Re-Generating Politics in India." *Women's Studies International Forum* 102 (January): 102850. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102850.

Ilo, Saidat, and Richard Seltzer. 2015. "Gender in the Midst of Change: Examining the Rights of Muslim Women in Predominately Muslim Countries." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 16 (2): 49–69. https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol16/iss2/4.

Instagram. 2025. "Bangladesh's Humayra Wins First Place." November 13. https://www.instagram.com/nutshell_today/p/DQ_RNpclHcA/

Jamal, Amina. 2013. *Jamaat-e-Islami Women in Pakistan: Vanguard of a New Modernity?* Syracuse University Press.

Khan, Muhammad Salman. 2024. "Embodied Reflexivity in Voice-Only Interviewing: Navigating Gender in Difficult-to-Access Contexts." *Qualitative Research* 24 (6): 1404–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941241264672.

Khondkar, Laila. 2022. "Not Just Law, We Need Social Change to End Corporal Punishment." *The Daily Star,* January 13. https://www.thedailystar.net/views/opinion/news/not-just-law-we-need-social-change-end-corporal-punishment-2937951

Macchiavello, Rocco, Andreas Menzel, Atonu Rabbani, and Christopher Woodruff. 2020. *Challenges of Change: An Experiment Promoting Women to Managerial Roles in the Bangladeshi Garment Sector*. No. W27606. National Bureau of Economic Research. https://doi.org/10.3386/w27606

Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton University Press.

McKinsey & Company. 2024. *Women in the Workplace 2024*. https://womenintheworkplace.com/

meem TV. 2024. *Bangladesh Maimoona Moniruzzaman Dubai International Girls Quran Competition 2024*. Video, 23:30. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l0_3eYc_CYs

Merton, Robert K. 1972. "Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge." *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (1): 9–47. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2776569

Metcalf, Barbara D. 1982. *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900*. Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400856107

Metcalf, Barbara D. 1993. "Living Hadīth in the Tablīghī Jama'āt." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52 (3): 584–608. https://doi.org/10.2307/2058855

Mir-Hosseini, Ziba. 2006. “Muslim Women’s Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism.” *Critical Inquiry* 32 (4): 629–45. https://doi.org/10.1086/508085

Mittermaier, Amira. 2012. “Dreams from Elsewhere: Muslim Subjectivities beyond the Trope of Self-Cultivation.” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18 (2): 247–65. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41507959

Nasrin, Taslima. 2014. *Lajja*. Penguin.

Nasrin, Taslima. 2020. *My Girlhood*. Hamish Hamilton.

Nawaz, Faraha. 2019. *Microfinance and Women’s Empowerment in Bangladesh: Unpacking the Untold Narratives*. Palgrave Pivot.

Oztig, Lacin Idil. 2023. “Islamophobic Discourse of European Right-Wing Parties: A Narrative Policy Analysis.” *Social Currents* 10 (3): 225–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/23294965221139852

Pande, Amrita. 2014. *Wombs in Labor: Transnational Commercial Surrogacy in India*. Columbia University Press.

Pierret, Thomas. 2013. *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*. Cambridge University Press.

Pink, Sarah, Heather A. Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, and Jo Tacchi. 2016. *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. SAGE.

Prothom Alo. 2017. “Qawmi Madrasa ‘Dawrae Hadith’ Gets Recognition.” *Prothom Alo*, April 11. https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/Qawmi-madrasa-Dawrae-Hadith-gets-recognition

Rao, Nitya, and Munshi Israil Hossain. 2011. “Confronting Poverty and Educational Inequalities: Madrasas as a Strategy for Contesting Dominant Literacy in Rural Bangladesh.” *International Journal of Educational Development* 31 (6): 623–33. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2011.01.012

Reetz, Dietrich. 2006. “Sûfî Spirituality Fires Reformist Zeal: The Tablîghî Jamâ‘at in Today’s India and Pakistan.” *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 135. https://doi.org/10.4000/assr.3715

Riaz, Ali. 2008. *Faithful Education: Madrassahs in South Asia*. Rutgers University Press.

Riaz, Ali. 2024. “Religion as a Tool for Authoritarian Legitimation: The Case of Bangladesh.” *World Affairs* 187 (2): 172–86. https://doi.org/10.1002/waf2.12016

Ridgeway, Cecilia L. 2011. *Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World*. Oxford University Press.

Rifat, Mohammad Rashidujjaman, Hasan Mahmud Prottoy, and Syed Ishtiaque Ahmed. 2022. “Putting the Waz on Social Media: Infrastructuring Online Islamic Counterpublic through Digital Sermons in Bangladesh.” *CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, April 29, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1145/3491102.3502006

Sahib, Rizwan. 2022. “Emotion Work in Tabligh Jama’at Texts.” *Religions* 13 (7): 632. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070632

Sakai, Minako, and Amelia Fauzia. 2022. *Women Entrepreneurs and Business Empowerment in Muslim Countries*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Salam, Ziya Us. 2020. *Inside the Tablighi Jamaat*. HarperCollins India.

Sanyal, Usha. 2020. *Scholars of Faith: South Asian Muslim Women and the Embodiment of Religious Knowledge*. Oxford University Press.

Sanyal, Usha, and Sumbul Farah. 2019. "Discipline and Nurture: Living in a Girls' Madrasa, Living in Community." *Modern Asian Studies* 53 (2): 411–50. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17000166

Sayed, Sana. 2020. "Hidden Voices, Hidden Agendas: Qubaysiat Women's Group in Syria." In *Women Rising*, edited by Rita Stephan and Mounira M. Charrad, *In and Beyond the Arab Spring*. NYU Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1n6ptkm.18

Segal, Marcia Texler, and Vasilikie Demos, eds. 2025. *Gender, Power, and Society: Persistence and Change*. Emerald Publishing Limited.

Sehlikoglu, Sertaç. 2018. "Revisited: Muslim Women's Agency and Feminist Anthropology of the Middle East." *Contemporary Islam* 12 (1): 73–92. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-017-0404-8

Shahjahan, Riyad A., Naseeb K. Bhangal, and Tasnim A. Ema. 2023. "A Temporal Gaze on Work-Life Balance in Academia: Time, Gender, and Transitional Episodes in Bangladeshi Women Faculty Narratives." *Higher Education* 86 (1): 209–24. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00909-6

Siddiqi, Bulbul. 2012. "Reconfiguring the Gender Relation: The Case of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh." *Culture and Religion* 13 (2): 177–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2012.674956

Sonbol, Amira El-Azhary. 2003. *Women of Jordan, Islam, Labor, & The Law*. Syracuse University Press.

Stewart, Kathleen. 2011. "Atmospheric Attunements." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (3): 445–53. https://doi.org/10.1068/d9109

Tarannum, Ammena. 2022. "Navigating Through Poverty and Pandemic: A Case Study on a Destitute Religious Institution in Bangladesh." *Bangladesh Journal of Integrated Thoughts* 18 (1): 43–67. https://doi.org/10.52805/bjit.v18i1.271

Terman, Rochelle. 2017. "Islamophobia and Media Portrayals of Muslim Women: A Computational Text Analysis of US News Coverage." *International Studies Quarterly* 61 (3): 489–502. https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx051

Thanvi, Maulana Ashraf Ali. 2005. *Bahishti Zewar (English)*. 2nd ed. http://archive.org/details/BahishtiZewar_201307

The Daily Star. 2022. "HC Directs Probe into Allegation of Students 'Harassed for Wearing Burqa.'" *The Daily Star*, June 2. https://online-d11.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/hc-directs-probe-allegation-students-harassed-wearing-burqa

The Financial Express. 2021. "Implementing Law against Corporal Punishment in Schools." *The Financial Express*, March 14. https://today.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/editorial/implementing-law-against-corporal-punishment-in-schools-1615644211

The Financial Express. 2024. "Growing Preference for Religious Education." *The Financial Express*, January 26. https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/opinions/growing-preference-for-religious-education

Uddin, Sufia M. 2006. *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity and Language in an Islamic Nation*. Islamic Civilization and Muslims Networks. The University of North Carolina Press.

UNESCO. 2024a. *Global Report on Teachers: Addressing Teacher Shortages and Transforming the Profession*. United Nations.

UNESCO. 2024b. *Key Elements of Madrasa Education in Selected Countries: What Lessons Can Be Drawn for Afghanistan*. Policy Discussion Brief. UNESCO. https://articles.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2024/09/02.Madrasa_Education_in_selected_countries.PDF

Wajcman, Judy. 2004. *TechnoFeminism*. Repr. Polity.

Winkelmann, Mareike J. 2005. *From Behind the Curtain: A Study of a Girls' Madrasa in India*. Amsterdam University Press. https://doi.org/10.5117/9789053569078

Appendix: Regression Analyses of Monthly Earnings

Monthly earnings by gender, location, institutional affiliation, and work experience

This model estimates the independent association of gender, rural–urban location, institutional affiliation, and years of work experience with monthly earnings. Each variable is entered separately, assuming its effect on earnings does not depend on the others.

Regression

Variables Entered/Removed[a]

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	Experience, Urban, Qawmi, Male[b]	.	Enter

a. Dependent Variable: Salary

b. All requested variables entered.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.623[a]	.388	.309	15085.27488

a. Predictors: (Constant), Experience, Urban, Qawmi, Male

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4478211995.199	4	1119552998.800	4.920	.003[b]
	Residual	7054531060.357	31	227565518.076		
	Total	11532743055.556	35			

a. Dependent Variable: Salary

b. Predictors: (Constant), Experience, Urban, Qawmi, Male

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	13450.318	7698.269		1.747	.091
	Qawmi	-13495.441	6099.759	-.355	-2.212	.034
	Urban	14925.250	5629.698	.417	2.651	.013
	Male	14878.814	7209.056	.383	2.064	.047
	Experience	288.165	417.807	.123	.690	.496

a. Dependent Variable: Salary

Experience-only model: Association between work experience and monthly earnings

This model examines the relationship between years of work experience and monthly earnings without controlling for gender, location, or institutional affiliation. It shows whether experience alone is associated with higher income prior to accounting for broader structural differences.

Regression

Variables Entered/Removed[a]

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	Experience[b]	.	Enter

a. Dependent Variable: Salary

b. All requested variables entered.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.323[a]	.105	.078	17428.10960

a. Predictors: (Constant), Experience

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1205616914.214	1	1205616914.214	3.969	.054[b]
	Residual	10327126141.342	34	303739004.157		
	Total	11532743055.556	35			

a. Dependent Variable: Salary

b. Predictors: (Constant), Experience

Coefficients[a]

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	11906.542	4698.368		2.534	.016
	Experience	756.756	379.841	.323	1.992	.054

a. Dependent Variable: Salary

Interaction model: Monthly earnings by gender and work experience

This model includes an interaction term between gender and work experience (gender × experience) to assess whether additional years of experience translate into higher earnings differently for men and women. A non-significant interaction indicates that experience does not yield differential economic returns by gender.

Variables Entered/Removed[a]

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	exp_male, Qawmi, Urban, Experience, Male[b]	.	Enter

a. Dependent Variable: Salary

b. All requested variables entered.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.626[a]	.392	.290	15290.13305

a. Predictors: (Constant), exp_male, Qawmi, Urban, Experience, Male

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4519097995.901	5	903819599.180	3.866	.008[b]
	Residual	7013645059.654	30	233788168.655		
	Total	11532743055.556	35			

a. Dependent Variable: Salary

b. Predictors: (Constant), exp_male, Qawmi, Urban, Experience, Male

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	14980.326	8617.969		1.738	.092
	Experience	104.651	609.840	.045	.172	.865
	Male	11302.107	11249.074	.291	1.005	.323
	Qawmi	-13613.504	6189.036	-.359	-2.200	.036
	Urban	14709.826	5729.354	.411	2.567	.015
	exp_male	324.732	776.514	.157	.418	.679

a. Dependent Variable: Salary

Note: Monthly earnings are measured in BDT. Categorical variables were entered as dummy variables. Reference categories are female gender, rural location, and non-Qawmi institutional affiliation.