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Deconstructing Cardboard Muslim Man: Masculinity Continuum and Women's Economic Empowerment in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper analyses the construction of Muslim masculinities and their positioning towards women's economic empowerment through a life history method applied to examine the lives of twelve purposely selected Bangladeshi Muslim men. The analysis of the men's accounts positioned the narrators on a masculinity continuum, which incorporates three fluid masculinity markers – Antagonists, Allies and Advocates. The paper challenges the notion of one specific hegemonic masculinity, although some common features were identified, such as dominance of the male breadwinner and situatedness within heteronormativity. The narrators demonstrated a strong inter-generational shift towards rejection of violence and preference for peaceful intrahousehold relationships, even among Antagonists. The proximity of Ally masculinities to Advocates and their relational interests create strong potential for strategic engagement and guiding Ally men to adopt more progressive masculinities.

Key words: masculinities, women's economic empowerment, Muslims, Bangladesh, life histories

Introduction

This paper explores the construction of Muslim masculinities and their positioning towards women's economic empowerment (WEE) in the lives of Bangladeshi Muslim men. It draws on the discourse of twelve Muslim men, following the life histories methodology (Kouritzin, 2000), which created an opportunity to examine men's memories from early childhood up to adulthood, interpretations of events that influenced their lives and formation of relationships within certain normative frameworks.

This examination was part of a wider research project on masculinities in Bangladesh carried out between 2017 and 2021, analysing three fluid masculinity categories: Antagonists, Allies and Advocates with the aim of understanding how nuanced knowledge of masculinities could potentially inform feminist strategies on promoting WEE in Muslim majority countries.

The inquiry into masculinities rejected static and reductive representations of 'cardboard' Muslim men. This rationale stems from one of the goals of the feminist project of perceiving men as gender entities liberated from "the self-assumed status of generic human beings" (Poudyal, 2000, p.77). Instead, men are perceived as complex real human beings grappling with their own contradictions and conflicting positions (Kouritzin, 2000, p.17).

Turning a gaze on men does not diminish women's agency in the struggle against women's inequality with men. On the contrary, it supports feminist efforts to advocate for gender equality by understanding the dynamics of men's resistance to WEE and creating spaces for harnessing men's positive roles in the struggle for gender equality, offering men alternatives to domination over women.

With respect to the context of the research, it is crucial to underscore that religion was considered one of several critical influences on men's positioning towards WEE. From the outset of the analysis, Muslim men were not perceived as being inherently against women's equality with men. The masculinity continuum, as the key theoretical framework through which Muslim masculinities were explored, gave recognition to a range of influences in the construction of Muslim masculinities that is beyond strictly religious sources (Ouzgane, 2006; Hughes, 2017; Kabasakal Arat and Hasan, 2017; Hopkins and Gorman-Murray, 2019; Imtiaz, 2022).

Finally, the study drew on a wide variety of research from South Asia to counterbalance hegemony of the Western scholarship in social research. However, the research was informed by global human rights frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (Hossein, 2021). From policy and political perspectives, the study was located within a specific context of national policies on poverty reduction and promoting women's employment as an economic growth strategy.

Masculinity continuum and masculinity markers

The three masculinity markers encapsulated within the spectrum of explored masculinities, or the masculinity continuum adopted for this research project – Antagonists, Allies and Advocates – are borrowed from Jackson (2015) for their conceptual clarity to distinguish three broad categories of social positioning. Unlike Jackson, who applies these markers to discuss white privilege within feminism, in this research, the markers are constructed as pointers on men's prevalent attitudes, behaviours, practices, and adherence to certain gender norms with respect to WEE. The reference

to a masculinity continuum denotes fluidity of these three unstable categories located within a broader spectrum of masculinities.

Defining WEE

Before summarising key characteristics constituting the theoretical basis of each masculinity marker, it is crucial to outline the definition of WEE applied in the research. Principally, empowerment implies recognition of existing inequalities in power between women and men, and an acknowledgement that women are entitled to equal rights as men. Addressing these power disparities focuses on structural changes in society resulting in greater equality between women and men (Molyneux, 1985; Moser, 1989), both at the level of the individual and the social group (Phillips, 2004, p.17). Accordingly, the conceptualisation of *transformative* empowerment emphasises collective actions at the societal level (Cornwall, 2016, p.343), although changes at the individual level are a prerequisite for mobilisation of larger-scale transformative political action (Rowlands, 1995; Sen, 1999; Molyneux, 2007).

The ambit of inclusive economic rights implicit in WEE incorporates the discourses on economic models that integrate decent employment, cooperative economy, sustainable growth, and humane economics, prioritising the interests of people, not markets. Within these approaches, gender equality is not an afterthought but an integral goal that is pursued within public strategies and institutions.

Antagonist masculinities

Antagonist masculinities incorporate positions that oppose women's equality with men in private and public spheres, justified by cultural, religious or social stereotypical arguments about masculine and feminine roles (Mac Cormack and Strathern, 1980; Kandiyoti, 1988; Butler, 2007). Men's resistance is manifested within specific viewpoints, as part of structures and institutions these men identify with, and in their everyday lived experience (Pease, 2014; Ratele, 2015). Antagonist men lean towards immature 'traditional' masculinity (Kimmel, 1996), and can demonstrate some toxic and/or hypermasculinity traits, including homophobia (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Jewkes at al., 2015), political and/or religious fundamentalism (Ahmed, 2006) and heightened sexualised perception of the private and public spheres based on men's virility and mistrust of women (Bartky, 1988). In Antagonists' perspectives, women should be confined to the household, their chastity and mobility controlled by their husband or another (primarily male) relative, and a relationship with male and other, usually senior, relatives (male and female) should be based on obedience (Kandiyoti, 1988; Kamruzzaman, 2015; Hughes, 2017; Musawah, 2018). Such men exercise control over women's bodies and physical and/or psychological violence can be employed to maintain domination over women (Anwary, 2015). Positive emotional connections of care and love between husband and wife are crippled (Ahmed, 2008, 2014). Women's engagement in economic activities, especially outside of the household, is discouraged or opposed, while women's control over productive resources is also limited (Asadullah and Wahhaj, 2016; Kabeer, Mahmud and Tasneem, 2017). Adherence to the notion of men's superiority over women in both private and public life includes men's avoidance of care work (Barker and Pawlak, 2011). Antagonist Muslim men perceive themselves as women's

guardians, this belief being grounded in protectionist Islamic interpretations of relationships between men and women (Hughes, 2017; Musawah, 2018).

Ally masculinities

Men demonstrating Ally masculinities are aware of various barriers and challenges women face individually and as a social group and may speak of solidarity with women (hooks, 1984; Holter, 2003; Pease, 2014). They may oppose violence against women, severe restrictions on women's mobility and exclusion of women from asset ownership (Agarwal, 1994; Ahmed, 2008, 2014). However, in their views, man is the primary breadwinner; and while women may engage in some economic activities, these should not interfere with women's reproductive responsibilities along the lines of gender stereotypical division of labour (Kabeer, Mahmud and Tasneem; 2017; Hasan, Aggleton and Persson, 2018). Ally men tend to lean towards a liberal understanding of societal gender regime but might not be aware of their own patriarchal privilege (Connell, 2005; Pease, 2006, 2014), and as such may miss opportunities to help women overcome obstacles in increasing their economic freedoms. Their complicit masculinity contributes to the maintenance of patriarchal gender order at household and societal levels (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Unlike Antagonist men, however, husbands in the Allies category can demonstrate care and love for their spouse and children (Ahmed, 2008, 2014; hooks, 1998).

Advocate masculinities

Men embodying Advocate masculinities are acutely aware of inequalities experienced by women and negative impacts on women's and men's private lives as well as society at large (hooks, 1998; Pease, 2014; Flood, 2015; Jewkes et al., 2015). Their viewpoints are less grounded in religious

norms; even if they are, these men tend to adhere to the egalitarian understanding of Islamic/Muslim masculinities (Badran, 2009; Kabasakal Arat and Hasan, 2017; Musawah, 2018). They actively oppose women's economic and social exclusion by acting if demonstrations of gender injustice are encountered (Kimmel, 1996; Flood, 2015; Pease, 2014). Fathers have a keen interest in children's wellbeing and share household work with their wives (Johansson, 2011; Hanlon, 2012). They hold egalitarian views on women's capabilities and show trust and affection towards women (hooks, 1998; Ahmed, 2008, 2014). These men strive for democratic manhood (Kimmel, 1996) and position themselves as women's partners in working towards gender equality (hooks, 1998; Pease, 2014). Their liberal stance on gender relations may include openness with respect to same-sex relationships (Jewkes et al., 2015; Hossain, 2017). These men aspire towards the consolidation of positive hegemonic masculinity as the societal (non-static) mainstream masculinity norm (Pease, 2014).

Methodology

The paper is based on data collected in 2019 through an adapted life history method. According to Kouritzin (2000, p.22) "engaging life history research encourages reflexivity and a holistic concept of the self and others. … Life histories encourage the inclusion of marginalized voices, multiple never-ending data analyses, historically grounded records, and the chance to document inaudible, unobservable subjectivities". As a participatory research method, its approach makes a stand against positivist, ahistorical modernist methodologies (Hulme, 2007; Chambers, 2017). It does not require control for variables; in fact, a diversity of variables is part of the narration-interpretation process (Kouritzin, 2000, p.22).

The process involves trust-building with the narrator, avoiding a patient-expert relationship (Kouritzin, 2000, p.20). The process and the result of that process extend beyond a conventional method of interviewing the respondent which often happens in isolation from salient contextual information; instead, the method emphasises a grounded narration intertwined with wider socio-economic and historical developments (Kouritzin, 2000, p.15). Lewis (2008, p.562) highlights the role of the narrator's agency in interpreting wider structures impacting their lives. Contradictory and ambivalent statements by the narrator are a natural part of the research process. The conditions set for the narration should lead to the narrator's positive perception of having their story heard.

The practical application of the method involved the narrations of twelve purposely selected adult Muslim men to maintain a diversity of men's experiences. The men were identified through the lead author's social and professional networks in the country. All narrators participated on a voluntary basis. The group included rural and urban men from early 20s to late 50s, disabled men, men with primary to university education, married men with children, a single man, and a childless married man.

During the recruitment stage, the narrators received a detailed explanation on how the life history method worked, what it should lead to and how their personal story would be used in the research. The meetings with the lead author were organised in a location selected by each narrator and lasted around two to three hours. In several cases, further conversations with the narrators were required to clarify some information.

The meetings were conducted in English or Bengali, depending on the narrators' preference, and were audio-recorded. The four meetings conducted in Bengali were interpreted by a male interpreter during narration. All participants were offered an opportunity to review the transcript with the help of an interpreter; four provided amendments to the draft texts. All narrators were

literate and signed a consent form. The approach to the data collection was approved by the Social Research Ethics Committee at University College Cork (Log 2019-141) in August 2019. The interpretation of the men's narrations was anonymised.

The narrations explored men's experience with maleness and normative masculinities, men's role models as social agents of masculinity, impactful events, processes and experiences that shaped, strengthened, or affected men's experience of masculinities across domains of childhood, marriage, sex/sexuality, parenting, work, faith, and social networks. The themes explored during narrations included men's experience of gender inequalities; mixed workplaces; attitudes and beliefs about relations between women and men; experience of various forms of violence; and rationale and motivations for adopting a particular lifestyle.

Table 1 summarises the key characteristics of the narrators. The number of children and their gender (female=♀; male=♂) is included in brackets in the column on marital status and children.

Table 1: Twelve life history narrators

Age	*Marital status and children*	*Education level*	*Occupation*	*Wealth status*	*Disability*	*Religious affiliation*	*Origin and current residence*
20s	single (0)	university	student	upper	no	moderate	Dhaka (urban)
20s	married (1♂)	secondary	teacher	low	yes	strong	Dhaka (urban)
30s	married (1♂)	university	manager/ NGO	upper	no	weak	Barisal (urban)
40s	married (3♀)	primary	driver	low	no	moderate	Khulna (rural)
40s	married (2♀)	university	manager/ NGO	middle	no	weak	Rajshahi (urban)
40s	married (1♀, 1♂)	primary	waiter	low	no	moderate	Rangpur (rural)
40s	married (1♀, 1♂)	university	manager/ NGO	middle	no	weak	Chattogram (urban)
40s	married (1♀, 1♂)	secondary	electrician	low	yes	strong	Rangpur (rural)
40s	married (1♀, 2♂)	university	manager/ NGO	middle	no	moderate	Dhaka (urban)
50s	married (1♀, 1♂)	university	manager/ NGO	middle	no	weak	Dhaka (urban)

50s	married (3♂)	university	manager/ NGO	middle	no	strong	Dhaka (urban)
50s	married (0)	university	manager/ NGO	middle	no	moderate	Dhaka (urban)

Interpreting the men's narrations

Relating the narrations to normative frameworks

Virtually all men, regardless of age and social status, narrated their experience within a heteronormative framework structured around marriage between woman and man and family as the central unit of society. Some deviation from the centrality of family was observed in the narrations of the three men with deeper faith, for whom the need to be a good Muslim appeared at least as equal a responsibility as their responsibility to provide for their family. The youngest respondent (student) and two of the NGO workers with weak religious affiliation also highlighted knowledge, education, and professional fulfilment as other central components in their lives. With respect to homosexuality, the young student commented that the society's openness towards acknowledging gender inequalities was rather new and the acceptance of other gender identities by the Bangladeshis was, in his view, '*a very far-fetched idea*'.

Eight out of twelve narrators demonstrated awareness of their patriarchal privilege. This was evident when the men compared their own life with the lives of their sisters, wives, and other women around them. The differences were noted with regards to lower access to education; limitations in mobility; threats to physical safety; property ownership; responsibility for household work; and social and economic opportunities. Two poorer men from rural areas appeared unaware of their patriarchal privilege. The *madrassa* teacher used his patriarchal religious views to justify discrimination against women.

Most narrators noted that they were not acutely aware of differences between women and men in their early childhood; some specifically pointed to puberty as the point in time when they started noting restrictions applied to girls' lives and the separation of boys' and girls' worlds. The narrators pointed out that the practice of segregating boys and girls was not always consistent.

The gender separation was later reduced for those men who went to university and for the two older men who, as students, joined a leftist political party where interactions between women and men were encouraged as part of political ideology. One of the men who only had brothers noted that limited contact with girls in his early life made him rather insecure when interacting with women as an adult. Another man, in contrast, commented that his openness towards women was related to years of co-education and interactions with fellow female students.

The father figure was singled out by all narrators as a highly impactful influence in their lives. All men, even those with more conservative views, were aware of and did not approve of violent or strict behaviour by their fathers or other men in their childhood. At the same time, most men demonstrated deep respect for their father, except for the two men that had experienced an absentee father and one who had lost his father in his early childhood. Most men highlighted very close ties with their mothers throughout their lives. One of the narrators expressed frustration with his mother's submissiveness and inability to stand up to her abusive husband. One of the men was abandoned by his mother due to extreme poverty and was raised by his sister.

The verbally expressed attitudes corresponded with men's non-verbal communication – the men smiled warmly when talking about their mothers (or mother's substitutes) recalling various happy moments. Talking about troubled households of the men's childhood and their fathers, on the other hand, was accompanied by apparent sadness and struggle to describe their emotions, particularly

when referring to violence. The men talked about their father being ‘hard’, ‘strict’, or having ‘his personality’, rather than directly describing violence inflicted on them and other family members.

Other influential figures in the men’s lives included female relatives, specifically older sisters, aunts, stepmothers and grandmothers, whom the men described as ‘kind’, ‘caring’, ‘loving’, ‘giving shelter from beatings’, and ‘open to feelings’. One of the men narrated at length about his admiration for his brave aunt who was a stark contrast to his submissive mother.

Amongst male figures, the narrators mentioned teachers, friends, brothers, work colleagues, male community members, political leaders, and the Prophet. They were admired for ‘teaching about values’, ‘motivating to do things in life’, ‘sharing common memories’; ‘positive thinking’, and ‘helping with studies’. Social spaces such as schools, political parties, tea stalls and social media were also mentioned as spaces forming the narrators’ opinions.

Positioning on WEE within the private sphere

The responsibility of man as provider for his family and his close family ties appeared as critical aspects of the men’s identities in all but two narrations. Some difference was noted in the narration of one NGO worker who lived with his wife away from the rest of his extended family and who commented on his weaker ties to his parents, in comparison to his wife; and the young unmarried student. The student’s life was closely linked with his family at present, but his future family arrangement was discussed, not in terms of his duty to provide materially for family, but as the goal to build a loving partnership with his future wife, who he would choose himself based on his emotions, not his parents’ wishes.

Regarding other men, although not directly asked due to the sensitivity of the question, there was some indication of possibly arranged marriage experienced by the men with strong religious affiliation, the oldest men, and two rural men with lowest education. The third man from a rural area, a contract driver, was a notable exception for eloping with his young girlfriend from a higher-class family. His parents were also known for their so-called 'love marriage' which indicates that parents did not arrange the couple's marriage. The marriage was never accepted by the relatives, and this led the driver's mother to eventually commit suicide. The account of this experience was a deeply emotional point in his narration, accompanied by prolonged weeping.

The narrators' quality of marriage contrasted sharply with the men's parents' generation, where, in most cases, the marriage between a dominant and controlling husband and a submissive wife appeared to be the norm. In general, all twelve men stated that they strove, at least to some degree, to establish a respectful relationship with their wives. This included the poorer rural men with less education as well as the most conservative man in the group with a strong patriarchal religious background.

The most progressive men did not just highlight respecting their wives but talked about their loving and collaborative relationships. One of the older narrators notably saddened when talking about his behaviour that might have hurt his wife, such as keeping their house ownership under his name. The men, most noticeably the NGO workers, referred to frequent discussions on various social issues with their wives. Some men smiled when recalling moments from family life or joked jovially about a wife's personal traits indicating a more tranquil environment in these men's families in contrast to the households of their childhood.

This positive dynamic was further confirmed when discussing attitudes about women's opportunities in life, including employment, although in practice only three out of the eleven men's

wives had a job; one of those women worked in a gender-segregated female-only environment, another did clerical work in a private bank and one earned marginal income as a dressmaker in her village. As in other aspects, the youngest unmarried student appeared ahead of other narrators in his openness to his future wife's life opportunities. According to him, his future partner (the term he used) would have total freedom to decide about her employment and career path.

According to the husbands, the wives' employment ambitions were curtailed by their responsibility for household and childcare; in two cases the men also mentioned that their wives could not deal with discrimination in the labour market and gave up searching for work early on. According to the childless middle-aged NGO worker, the fact that his wife did not work was the reason why they led a peaceful and happy life, unlike the families where both husband and wife worked, and which contributed to conflict between spouses. The driver, who married young, talked about his wife's regret about not completing her studies and not having a job, unlike her educated female relatives. The upper-class NGO worker described his dream to establish his own NGO combating violence against women, where he wished to involve his wife and sister, both of whom had never had a job.

Similar to spouses, all men demonstrated rather different attitudes towards their children, including daughters, than the men's parents. Some gender stereotypes, however, were revealed in the narrations of the two rural poorer men, for whom 'good' marriage of their daughters with a socially acceptable husband with material means was an important social goal to achieve. The driver described an ideal husband for his three daughters in the following words: to be educated; have a government job; be honest; and behave respectfully with his daughter and other people. When asked what he would do if the future husbands were mistreating his daughters, the driver was saddened by the thought and expressed his powerlessness under such circumstances.

The second rural man, who worked as a waiter in a distant town, wanted his daughter to have at least some level of education, allowing her to find good employment. He also noted that couples had more freedom to decide for themselves about their marriage. The *madrassa* teacher, who had a daughter of two months, despite his otherwise conservative views about women's freedoms, also aspired that his daughter would get a good education to become a doctor.

While only one of the twelve narrators recalled his father spending time with him and playing, eight out of the ten fathers said that they were involved in their children's upbringing in various ways, including play. Lack of such involvement was noted in the narration of one of the older religious disabled men and the waiter who spent most of his time away from his family due to his job. The eight fathers highlighted a number of changes in their parenting style in comparison with their own fathers; including close emotional interactions with children ('*My boys talk to me as if I were their friend')*; egalitarian relations and openness in upbringing ('*My son...tells me how to behave based on what he learns at school');* and love of and opportunities for daughters ('*My daughters will get every possibility they can get, compared to my sisters*'). Several men commented that their wives and some female relatives may sometimes hold less progressive attitudes than their husbands.

The adoption of an equal share in care and household work, however, appeared to be slower, including in the lives of the progressive narrators. The most involvement was noted by the student and seven NGO workers, who also talked about their commitment to expand their share in future. Two older religious men – an NGO worker and the disabled man from a rural area – described how their involvement in the household work improved their relationship with their wife. One of the two upper class narrators pointed to the impossibility of spending more time with his young

son due to difficulties his wife would face in finding adequately paid employment, while also noting lack of paternal leave in Bangladesh.

One of the seven NGO workers who was childless and favoured a gender-stereotypical family model, where he would be the primary breadwinner and his wife the homemaker, repeatedly justified this arrangement as the correct model to achieve family happiness. The young student revealed the most progressive attitudes to household work, highlighting co-responsibility for the work to be done. With regard his future wife, he added: '*As I have told you, whether she* [future wife] *is good at household things or all those things that society expects from her, these things are secondary to my priorities'.*

Positioning on WEE in the workplace

All narrators other than the student were employed at the time of the research; one of the men was underemployed due to his disability. The most interactions with women in the workplace were experienced by seven men working for NGOs and the driver. The *madrassa* teacher deliberately limited his interaction with women in the workplace due to his religious convictions. The rural disabled underemployed man with strong religious views expressed concerns that women were taking jobs away from men and proposed gender-based employment quotas as a solution. The waiter interacted with some female employees in a hotel where he worked. He called them sisters or aunts, depending on their age. He noted that all women working in his hotel were 'good' but highlighted that these women lived near the hotel as travelling long distances for employment, as he did himself, would not be appropriate for a woman.

The remaining eight men contemplated their experience across a range of aspects related to women's abilities and workplace relationships between women and men, including hierarchical and sexual relations. The narrators noted positive experience of having female colleagues in the workplace and the responsibility of male managers in building an inclusive work environment, but also noted the challenges women experienced, including sexual harassment and discrimination. The older NGO worker with strong religious affiliation described his views on how crucial female workers were for the development of the country and economic growth. This opinion differed starkly from the young *madrassa* teacher's perspective, who remarked that the threat of sexual harassment by men was a strong justification why women should not leave their homes for work. Once again, the student expressed the most progressive views on women's employment and offered the following rationale for the existence of stereotypes:

'Women were long excluded from [economic] *activities. I believe that from these suppressions and practices, my father and my grandfather, and his father seemed to have developed perceptions how women should be and how their partners should behave, and that they are superior to women in terms of these financial aspects'.*

Regarding violence against women, the student added:

'*These violent acts are not done by men all the time. Women themselves, women from previous generations, believe that women should be doing this and not that. They also contribute to various forms of violence that exist in the society. It's more about society than men committing violence against women'.*

Positioning on WEE within Islamic practice

While the narrators differed in their religious views, the issue of Islam and gender relations emerged rather powerfully in most narrations – seven out of twelve men discussed it directly and another two men mentioned it in relation to another issue. Predictably, the three men with strong religious affiliation framed their views and their own lives by their faith. However, they also differed significantly in their opinions on how to apply their faith in their lives and interpret the world around them.

The older disabled man strove to be a '*good Muslim'* following the tradition of his father, reinforced by his father-in-law, who was also a deeply religious man. This narrator described a good Muslim man as: '[Someone that] *behaves good with his wife. If wife faces difficulties, he helps her. He needs to take care of his wife, her clothing, children and the house. This is Islamic teaching*.' This man did not object to his wife's economic activities, as long as there was sufficient 'protection' and the people in her workplace were 'good'.

Similarly, according to the young *madrassa* teacher, a Muslim man should respect and behave well with his wife and other people. He also rejected violence against women: '*Islam does not support violence. If any injustice occurs, Islam has specific rules of punishment…Islam has given importance to women three time more than to men*'. Despite this claim, the *madrassa* teacher revealed the most conservative stance regarding women's mobility, employment, interactions between women and men, and women's dress code. For instance, he claimed: '*Personally, I think a Muslim woman should not work outside [her home]. If there is no way and a woman's job is important for maintaining a family, then [she] can work. If there is no alternative, a woman can work because Islam supports saving lives'*.

His views on the differences between women and men were strongly influenced by gender stereotypes: '*Men and women are not the same from the biological point. Man is stronger than woman. Both can be healthy, but man is always stronger. Man can go everywhere, woman cannot*.' In his view, the segregation of workspaces was imperative as men were not able to control their sexual urges around women: '*By nature, men are attracted to women, so women should follow strictly the Islamic rules, like wearing an Islamic dress and not work alongside men…It's a huge problem when women leave their houses'.*

For the third older narrator with strong religious affiliation that worked in an NGO, his faith gave fundamental guidance in his life and the life of his family, but he also stated: '*They [conservative religious persons] think that boys and girls should be kept separate. But once people start studying in town, they change – there is connection to the Internet, and they see*.' He further pointed to the importance of involving religious leaders in the transformation of relations between women and men: '*Our religious leaders do not want to keep women separate from men…This has been also changing – the attitudes of religious leaders…slowly and gradually. But it will take time to change the whole system'*.

Amongst the remaining nine men that demonstrated weaker to moderate religious affiliation, four narrators dedicated varying time to discussing the issue of religion and women's equality with men. These included the student and three NGO workers. The NGO worker, who distanced himself from religious practice, offered his criticism of conservative interpretation of Islam: *'The interpretation of Islam is done by people who are not well educated so there is a lot of misinterpretation'*.

In contrast to the *madrassa* teacher, who claimed that people who received religious education '*would not do anything bad'*, the two NGO workers alleged many crimes that had been occurring

in *madrassas* and noted that it had been only very recently that these issues were talked about publicly. Both noted the 2019 murder of a female *madrassa* student who was set on fire by a group of fanatics instructed by their *madrassa* teacher in an attempt to stop the female student from reporting sexual harassment.

One of the NGO workers further alleged another taboo subject – rape of boys by male teachers in rural areas. He noted: '*This kind of perversion and this interpretation of religious norms and rules…somehow…[is] dividing us into two group – I can do everything because I have the privilege to do all things, but we are suppressing women and preaching to them how to behave. This contradiction is prevailing in our society, in Muslim communities'.*

The young student, a practicing Muslim, rejected conservative interpretations of Islam and commented: *'Religion and the way we live should be about choice, not to be imposed. If you are religious and I am not, that's okay. This message should be out there. These are fundamental principles that every human being should hold.'*

Possible variables impacting the construction of the narrators' masculinities

Predictably, the youngest respondent, the affluent student from the capital city, consistently demonstrated progressive standpoints across all themes explored in his narration. Another young narrator, the Dhaka *madrassa* teacher, just three years older than the student, exemplified a very different contemporary youth – one that opposes progressive changes in Bangladesh, including women's economic empowerment. The adherence to progressive attitudes and their practice was not, however, exclusive to the young student. Out of the seven men in their thirties and forties,

five largely held anti-patriarchal views backed by examples of progressive practice. Out of three men in their fifties, two can be considered progressive according to the standpoints they expressed.

Out of twelve men, eight men who mostly resided in urban areas throughout their lifetime (Dhaka city and Chattogram), largely held progressive views on WEE. All three men from rural areas held stronger patriarchal views, with some variations in their responses. The young *madrassa* teacher who lived in a peripheral zone of Dhaka demonstrated the strongest patriarchal attitudes and practices.

Religious affiliation of the narrators was determined by the author during data analysis through personal accounts of the men's faith (Islam). Out of three men with strong religious affiliation, one narrator demonstrated an egalitarian understanding of gender relations; one leaned towards patriarchal standpoints; and the third one appeared the most conservative in the entire group of twelve narrators. Out of five men with moderate religious affiliation, three held egalitarian views, and all four men with weak religious affiliation consistently demonstrated progressiveness towards WEE.

The two upper income men with higher levels of education consistently held strong progressive views across all themes explored in the narrations. The six men from middle income strata had at least a university degree and were also largely progressive with some divergence indicated in the narration of one older NGO worker. Out of these eight men, seven worked for NGOs and one was a student. The membership of two NGO workers in a leftist political party was also correlated with their progressive views. These eight men assumed a proactive role in promoting women's equality with men, whether in their own families, in the workplace or in other public spaces. On the contrary, all four men with the lowest income and with either primary or secondary education, that

to a large extent involved religious education gained in a rural area, held much stronger patriarchal views.

With respect to the correlation between disability and viewpoints held by the narrators, the group of twelve men included two men with disability – one with a visual impairment and one with a hearing impairment. Both these men had lower education and demonstrated strong to somewhat strong conservative views on WEE.

Key conclusions from the analysis of the narrations and the men's positioning on the masculinity continuum

The twelve narrations challenged the adherence to one specific hegemonic masculinity model common to all narrators (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Jewkes et al., 2015; Hasan, Aggleton and Persson, 2018), however, some shared elements were identified. These included the situatedness of the narrations within compulsory heteronormativity (Irigaray, 1985; Whatling, 1997), with a male primary income earner responsible for providing for his family. The narrators' primary breadwinning role corresponded with the prominence of a husband's career over his wife's, including in the group of six university graduates, and in the case of three men whose wives also earned income.

Another common aspect in the narrations was a notable difference between the narrators' family arrangements and those of the men's parents. All men appeared to maintain (or planned to maintain) better quality relationships with their wives, including respect and care between spouses, even in those marriages that could have been arranged, and engaged to some extent in household work. The men with most progressive views appeared to have a higher quality marriage, seemed

happier than the men with more conservative views, and assumed a higher share of household work.

All narrators, including the most conservative men in the group, rejected the violent behaviour of their fathers that was apparently present in their birth families, and the notion of a father as an emotionally distant, strict, unkind, and violent person. The narrators themselves preferred a rather different parenting style that included closer relationships with children. However, some controlling behaviour was still evident in the narrations of the more conservative men. This concerned particularly restrictions on women's mobility and their social relations as well as life choices, including selecting daughters' employment, limiting daughters' education, and choosing daughters' life partners. Positive changes in parenting were most evident in the narrations of the most progressive men and involved a loving relationship with daughters and commitment to give daughters 'every opportunity'.

Contrary to the men's relationships with their fathers, all narrators had deep life-long positive relationships with their mothers or mothers' substitutes. Patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988) by the narrators' mothers as well as the men's wives was, however, a common feature. They appeared to comply with patriarchal gender division of labour and gender stereotypical behaviours of a culturally intelligible submissive female (Brickell and Chant, 2010). The older childless NGO worker, whose patriarchal male breadwinner family model was the strategy to achieve marital happiness, provided an example of Minow's paradox (Pease, 2006) – maintaining patriarchal privilege in the privacy of his home, while supporting the objectives of WEE within his employment at an NGO.

Although the narrators' families still largely followed a gender-stereotypical family model (a husband as the primary breadwinner and his wife as the homemaker), the more progressive

narrators appeared to approve of a more-egalitarian family model of two income earners in the future families of their children. To some extent, this was applicable to the less progressive narrators as well, including the most conservative *madrassa* teacher, who planned for their daughters' future employment, reflecting a stronger generational shift in family relations in Bangladesh.

The progressive men acknowledged challenging sexual relations at mixed workplaces, but they attributed the problem of sexual harassment to men's abuse of power; thus, the responsibility for stopping it lay with men. On the contrary, the most conservative man in the group, the *madrassa* teacher, justified his views on workplace restrictions by a patriarchal perception of human sexuality, in which women's sexualised bodies must be disciplined, as men, driven by their sexual urges, are unable to control their own bodies (Bartky, 1988; Anwary, 2015; Hughes, 2017).

With respect to the selected variables, there was no clear indication that being younger was correlated with progressiveness (Hasan, Aggleton and Persson, 2018) as liberal views were consistently present in the narrations of older men as well. The progressiveness of the young student appeared to be reinforced by his higher socio-economic status, urban residence and moderate religious affiliation. With regards to the second young man, the *madrassa* teacher, his patriarchal attitudes were correlated with his lower education, strong religious affiliation, and his disability which lowered his life opportunities. Still, not all the teacher's views were conservative, and some were consistent with progressive interpretation of Islamic norms (Kabasakal and Hasan, 2017; Musawah, 2018), for example, support of respectful marital relations.

It is, however, worth noting that the entire narration of the *madrassa* teacher was framed by his disability status and hardship that he had to endure in his life as a result. He repeatedly returned to the issue of his disability even while talking about different aspects of this life and appeared

particularly frustrated by challenges to obtaining a better education due to his disability, despite being a good student.

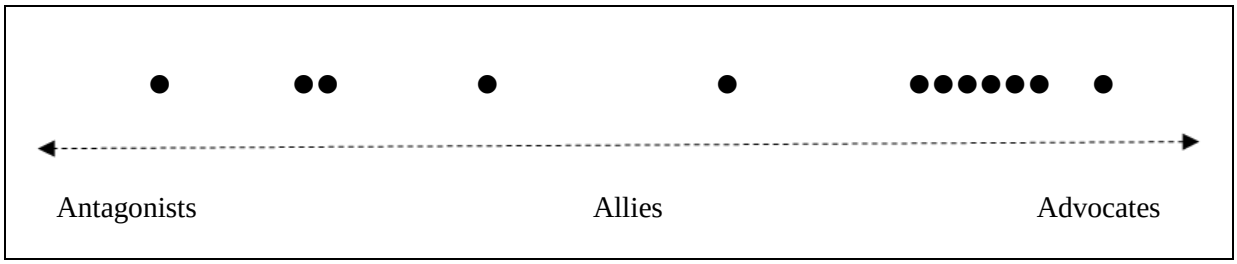
On the other hand, the older NGO worker with strong religious affiliation appeared to be one of the strongest advocates of women's equal opportunities. His stance was correlated with his higher education, middle income status and urban residence. His liberal views appeared to be strongly influenced by his childhood experience, in particular an absentee father figure and the hardship his mother had experienced. Progressive views were also held by those men who, as children, received extensive religious education but later in life were exposed to other experiences, particularly socially open-minded institutions, such as universities, a leftist political party and NGOs.

The patriarchal views of the rural disabled man with strong religious affiliation were correlated with his lower education, lower and insecure income, and rural residence. Similar to the disabled teacher, he too expressed that his life experience had been significantly altered by his disability, which, as he noted, resulted in the 'loss of joy in life'. His manhood appeared emasculated due to his inability to provide for his family, exacerbated by the expectations from his wealthier family-in-law. Disability thus may act as a hidden driver of men's conservativism, if it hinders opportunities in accessing better education, employment, and interactions within progressive institutions, which constrains men's upward mobility.

While all NGO workers, regardless of age and position, held rather progressive views with respect to public spheres, they also demonstrated some discrepancies with regards to their personal lives, for example, lower share in household work and the preference for the male breadwinner, most notably in the family of the childless older man. The men's adherence to gender stereotypes was also evident in the qualities for which they admired women in their lives, in contrast to those of men.

With respect to the masculinity markers (Antagonists, Allies, Advocates), it can be concluded that the twelve narrators were dispersed along the masculinity continuum with eight narrators concentrated along Ally-Advocate masculinities. This was likely caused by the positive bias towards university-educated non-governmental employees in the research sample.

Figure 1: Narrators on the masculinity continuum



The most progressive narrator in the group, the upper-class urban student presented consistent progressive views comparable to democratic manhood (Kimmel, 1996) of progressive young men from developed countries – a reflection of globalised standpoints on gender equality by elite youth. His embodiment of Advocate masculinities contrasted with the young *madrassa* teacher, at the opposite end of the continuum, followed by two low-income rural men, who largely embodied Antagonist masculinities, although they, too, revealed some progressive attitudes. All uncovered masculinities broadly conformed to the methodological definitions of Antagonist, Ally and Advocate masculinities outlined earlier.

The three narrators embodying Antagonist masculinities manifested controlling behaviour towards women rooted in essentialist biological, cultural and religious stereotypes. This included restricting women's mobility and their economic opportunities. The results also confirmed reduced quality of personal relationships maintained by Antagonists. However, the research suggests Antagonists were unlikely to engage in / support physical and sexual violence, although they may not actively

intervene to stop it. They were also likely to engage in psychological and economic violence against women, although they were not against women's paid employment and may relax some restrictions regarding women's behaviour when employment is justified by poverty, is home / community-based or is well rewarded. As anticipated, Antagonists opposed transformation of patriarchal relations between women and men, but they valued women's happiness and supported some practical needs women may have, such as education.

With respect to the two narrators leaning towards Ally masculinities, they appeared complicit in maintaining patriarchal relations, particularly in the private sphere. They asserted their role of the primary breadwinner and may inadvertently engage in psychological and economic violence against women and girls, favouring gender-stereotypical division of labour and conservative social norms regarding marriage. These narrators however demonstrated some positive progressive attitudes related to fatherhood, care about family members, and rejection of violence against women and girls.

The seven narrators embodying Advocate masculinities rejected patriarchal relations between women and men and aspired to a positive hegemonic masculinity as a societal masculinity norm achieved over time. Advocates were aware of positive personal and societal benefits of women's employment and other women's contributions to society. Their involved fatherhood, including strong emotional attachment to their daughters, and (some) engagement in the household manifested in supportive and joyful marital relationships. However, some Advocates also exhibited residual patriarchal privilege, including adherence to a primary breadwinner role supported by reproductive work carried out by their wife. The research also encountered Advocates with stronger religious beliefs, who can be potent social agents promoting progressive masculinities in a society valuing religious faith.

In comparison to Antagonists, men leaning towards Ally masculinities have a stronger potential to emulate Advocate masculinities, given the proximity of their positions to those adopted by Advocates. Their hybrid masculinity creates space for a potential shift towards undertaking gender transformative actions (Connell, 2005; Pease, 2014; Jewkes et al., 2015), if supported with appropriate interventions.

With respect to Antagonists, it is crucial to highlight that, given the selected methodological approach, it was highly unlikely the study sample would include men with severe misogynistic views, a likely sub-group of Antagonist men. To explore and address attitudes, behaviours and practices of such men would require specific strategies, largely beyond the capacities of mainstream development interventions.

Understanding nuances related to Antagonists and Allies' resistance to WEE can guide development actors in identifying better strategies on promoting WEE, including engagement with men, while at the same time capitalising on positive roles of Advocates in influencing the construction of masculinities of their peers. Such strategies highlight the need for men's empowerment within development processes and building their capacity to reflect on unequal power relations between women and men in public and private spheres and the negative impacts these may have on individual lives and society as a whole.

This by no means signifies that *all* men would be willing to adhere to progressive masculinities and take a pro-active role in dismantling structural gender inequalities related to WEE, but, over time, a critical mass of men might, if WEE planning engages Muslim men in gender transformative strategies. Development actors, adhering to values promoting gender equality, are uniquely positioned to support Muslim men in building progressive masculinities, targeting, in particular, men adhering to Ally masculinities.

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