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**Dhaka Women - Negotiators for Gender
Equality and Change**

**A Critical Discourse Analysis about women, family and society in
Bangladesh**

**Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences,
Faculty of Social Sciences**

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Thesis submitted for the Master's Degree in International Social Welfare and Health Policy
Oslo and Akershus University College, Faculty of Social Sciences

2016

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Abstract

The situation of women in different societies and cultures is a much debated and contested field. Scholars, politicians and others have throughout history upheld different beliefs about women, female agency and what position they should have in society. Much attention has been given to the issue of lacking female participation in the public sphere and in important arenas like politics, leadership and business. This project aims to contribute to the understanding of women in urban Bangladesh and views about gender equality in this context. I use the field of politics to explore discourses about female participation in the public sphere.

This is a qualitative study exploring the discourses about gender equality, female public participation and the representations of women in the context of Dhaka, Bangladesh. The study builds on 17 semi-structured interviews with women from the capital of Bangladesh, Dhaka. The women are of different ages and from different socio-economic groups.

The hypothesis is that one reason for gender inequality could be the discourses in the Bangladeshi society about women, gender roles and important values. I use Norman Fairclough's framework *Critical Discourse Analysis* to analyze the data material. CDA creates a meaningful framework for finding links between individuals' meaning-making and use of discourses and the broader social practices. It also shows how we use discourses both to constitute existing beliefs, and how we use them to change social practices and structures.

To gain an understanding of gender discourses that influence the Bangladeshi context, this project gives an introduction to relevant sides of the dominant religion, Islam, and the patriarchal culture that exists in the region. Gender inequality, both in general and in terms of political participation, is often explained in terms of religion or culture, but I also point out other possible explanations. However, to get deeper insight in this complex field it is necessary to listen to the women themselves. This project contributes to this insight and shows how urban Bangladeshi women in some areas feel suppressed, but on the other hand contribute to creating new discourses and understandings of what a woman is and can do. This study shows the women's strategies to create change, and how they negotiate between and within discourses and ideologies to create change and gain more freedom.

Acknowledgments

There are many persons that should be thanked for helping me to conduct my research and complete this project.

First of all, this project would not have been possible without the participation of my informants. I am grateful for their time and willingness to share their story and their thoughts. The women of Bangladesh, which my informants represent, are strong, smart and brave. Even if their surroundings don't always cheer them on, they fight, in various ways, to create change and help build a good society.

I would also like to thank friends and contacts who helped me to get in touch with my informants, especially The Salvation Army Bangladesh Command. Their network and their help in organizing interviews and providing translators was crucial for the project. The discussions and time spent together with their local staff also gave helpful insight into the Bangladeshi context.

I will also use this opportunity to thank my supervisor Cathrine Egeland for her support and advice, and for helping me in the right direction when the project was only a set of loose thoughts and ideas.

The great fellowship, fun and discussions with classmates (you know who you are) have also been of great importance and support in this work. Thank you!

My husband, Bo Christoffer, also needs to be thanked for his support, inside knowledge about Bangladesh, and help with organizing. I am also thankful for his help in bargaining with rickshaw wallahs and joining me traveling around in Dhaka for some of the interviews. And of course, for his endless hours of proof reading of this thesis.

Oslo, 17th of May 2016

Ingvild Ofte Arntsen

1 Introduction

The situation of women in different societies and cultures is a much debated and contested field. Scholars, politicians and other actors have throughout history upheld different beliefs about women, female agency and what position they should have in society. Much attention has been given to the issue of lacking female participation in the public sphere and in important arenas like politics, leadership and business. In varying degrees this is a universal challenge, and it is therefore tempting to also provide universal explanations. Over the last few decades, more culturally sensitive and specific approaches have been developed. However, women in the West are still perceived to have more freedom while women in developing countries like Bangladesh are perceived as victims of suppression. But how do these women themselves understand their own situation? Do they agree with Western scholars that they are suppressed and denied access to power? If so, what strategies do they use to change the society and find meaning in their own life? This project aims to contribute to the understanding of women in urban Bangladesh and views about gender equality in this context. I use the field of politics to explore discourses about female participation in the public sphere. Objective facts like statistics show a high degree of gender inequality in Bangladesh, and tell us about gender inequality and few women in e.g. politics. The reasons for this could be found through existing scientific theories, but to really understand we need to try to grasp the understanding of the people involved.

My hypothesis is that one reason for gender inequality could be the discourse in Bangladeshi society about women, gender roles and important values. The representations of women in media, political debates and everyday communication seem to emphasize the family and private sphere, while references to women's role in the public sphere and the need to change social structures is less evident.

The study builds on 17 semi-structured interviews with women from the capital of Bangladesh, Dhaka. The women are of varying ages and from different socio-economic groups. To provide some insight into the context for the project, I start with an introduction to Bangladesh and its culture, history and gender equality in the country. As will be discussed,

Bangladesh has been a target country for many development agencies, and gender equality has been a priority, especially through expansion of education.¹

I then move on to discuss what common explanations existing research literature can provide to why women in Bangladesh have a low position and are perceived to be suppressed. Here the most influential explanations are the patriarchal culture and structures, and the influence of the religion of Islam. Other explanations are related to socio-economic status, economic resources and safety concerns. As mentioned, gender issues have been debated in the development world for a long time. The debates have resulted in different explanations for gender inequality and a number of approaches regarding how to work towards equality. At various stages these approaches have been a part of both government and NGO policies and have influenced women's lives in Bangladesh. I therefore give an introduction to them, before we move on to discuss discourse theory and how Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a meaningful framework for finding connections between the interviewees' understandings and the broader social relations and structures.

Combining the context of Bangladesh, common explanations for gender inequality in this context and the framework of CDA raises some interesting questions, which lead to two research questions for this project. The methods chapter shows how the project has been carried out and what limitations and challenges have been encountered in the process.

In chapter 7 I introduce the findings from the interviews of the women in the study. Here I give an account of five important discourses that I found in the analysis of the interviews. These contribute to the understanding of how the women themselves understand their lives and the society, and why they do or don't participate in different arenas. Through the chapter and the ensuing discussion in chapter 8 we see complex meaning-making taking place. The discourses they draw on sometimes enforce existing beliefs, but here we also see how they show resistance to dominant and suppressing ideologies by negotiate with the existing beliefs and in this way create new discourses that give meaning to their situation. Here we arrive at

¹ The country is also well known for its garments industry which employs mainly women. This industry has been a key contributor to recent economic growth – and, many would argue, women's empowerment. On the other hand, the industry is criticized for exploitation and poor working conditions for (female) workers, and for using child labor. Although this forms part of the backdrop, it is not within the scope of this thesis to deal with the impact of the garments industry as a separate issue.

the main contribution of this thesis to the literature in the field of gender equality in the Bangladeshi context. Women are not passive victims of suppressive ideologies or structures. They recognize that this is a part of their social world, but they also contribute to changing it through negotiation. In clever ways they create new discourses and meaningful ways of understanding their positions that are acceptable in the culture, but also give them more freedom and higher status. In the discussion I also point out how they create meaning and find different ways of understanding gender equality and gender roles than most Western women might do.

2 Setting the scene

In this chapter I will set the scene for the project by giving an introduction to the country of Bangladesh, its history and culture. It is not within the scope of this thesis to cover all aspects of culture or events in the country's history. I will touch upon the most important features, and especially the features that are relevant for the topic of the thesis: women and gender equality. I will also point out important reasons for why Bangladesh is an interesting country in which to conduct this project.

2.1 Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a small country by size, bordering on the Bengal Bay and located between India and Myanmar. Despite its small geographical size, the country is the ninth most populated country in the world with a population of 156 594 962. The two main religions are Islam (90%) and Hinduism (10%) (Haugan 2015). The main industries are fishing and agriculture, where 65 % of the working population are employed, and the most important products are jute, tea, rice, shrimps and fish. The textile industry, which produces and exports clothes to the rest of the world, is the main contributor to the GDP and the most important reason for recent economic growth (Filseth 2014).

The Bangladeshi economy has shown a remarkable and unique performance over the last 15-20 years, but the per capita income still remains low. The per capita GDP has nearly doubled since 1980, but it still remains a small fraction of the average amongst developed countries as well as other Asian developing countries (Asadullah, Savoia, and Mahmud 2014, 138-139). Despite this, in many ways, slow progress in people's income growth, the 2011 UN Human Development Report places Bangladesh third out of 178 countries in terms of improvements

in education, health and inequality over the last 20 years (UNDP 2011). The country particularly stands out when it comes to progress on important gender equality indicators such as female secondary schooling and fertility decline, as well as important health indicators such as infant mortality and child immunization (Asadullah, Savoia, and Mahmud 2014, 139). Asadullah et.al state that this has been achieved through a combination of social awareness campaigns and easy access to contraception (2014,143).

2.1.1 Brief history of Bangladesh

As a former part of India, Bangladesh is also a former British colony and a young democracy. After British colonial rule over India ended in 1947, a largely Muslim state existing of East and West Pakistan on either side of India was established (Haugan 2015). After a devastating civil war, Bangladesh gained its independence from Pakistan in 1971. Since 1971 Bangladesh has shifted between electoral democracy and military rule, and between a parliamentary and a presidential system of government. In 1972 the Bangladeshi constitution was adopted, providing for a parliamentary system. However, already in 1975 this was changed to a one-party presidential system. Later the same year the military intervened, subsequently ruling the country both directly and indirectly for the next 15 years. In 1990 the military government was overthrown by a people's movement and electoral democracy and the parliamentary system was restored (Jahan 2015,250).

There are two main political parties which have alternated being in power, Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh National Party (BNP). In 1975, the founder of AL and Bangladesh's first Prime Minister, Sheikh Mujib, was assassinated in a military coup, and the country was governed by martial law for the following four years (Huque and Akther 1987,207). His opponents in BNP are accused by some of orchestrating the murder. In 1979, martial law was lifted, and General Ziaur Rahman (Zia), who also ruled during the period of martial law, won the second election in Bangladesh's history. In 1981 he was assassinated during a failed military coup, for which some accuse AL of being responsible. Today the daughter of Sheikh Mujib, Sheikh Hasina, is the Prime Minister of Bangladesh and leader of AL, and the widow of General Zia, Khaleda Zia, is the leader of BNP and leads the opposition in Bangladesh. In recent years both of the parties have been in government and the conflict between the two parties and families permeates the politics and governing of Bangladesh (BBC 2016). Jahan writes that the toxic confrontational culture between the two major political parties also has its roots in contested visions of history and national identity, and especially over the issue of

secular and religious identity. The ruling party today, AL, is committed to secularism while the BNP highlights an Islamic identity (2015,265).

2.1.2 Why Bangladesh?

Bangladesh has been called “the test case for development” in the development literature (Asadullah, Savoia, and Mahmud 2014, 138) because of the many NGOs and development agencies that have initiated programs since Bangladesh became independent in 1971. Since then, the country and the population has been targeted for development programs and interventions, and gender equality has over the last decades been a priority for most development agencies. This makes Bangladesh an interesting country to study when it comes to examining what effect development programs have had on the target population. For my research, it will be interesting to examine what effects the focus on gender equality and the targeting of women have had on women and society’s understanding of their opportunities and role. Female agency and participation in development programs is often pointed out as one of the reasons for progress on social indicators, such as education and health, which again leads to important changes in gender norms (Asadullah, Savoia, and Mahmud 2014).

As mentioned, Bangladesh has a female Prime Minister, and the leaders of both of the biggest political parties are women. Despite this, there are few women following in their footsteps and becoming politicians or leaders in the civil society. The strong position of these women and the weak position of other women in the public sphere would appear contradictory, and will be interesting to explore when trying to understand the discourse about women and gender roles in this particular country.

2.1.2.1 Expansion of education

Another interesting feature of Bangladesh is the commitment of both the government and NGOs to achieving an educated population. The government, regardless of which party has been in power, has viewed education as important for the country’s development, and has given expansion of education top priority. According to the Ministry of Education, Bangladesh has had great success in improving access to education. In 2014, the gross

enrollment rate² in primary education reached 108 % and the net enrollment rate³ 97.7 %. For secondary education the gross enrollment rate was 55.84 % while net enrollment was 50.27 %. The Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) states that Bangladesh has achieved gender parity for educational access in both primary and secondary education (BANBEIS 2015, 17). In primary education the gender parity index (GPI)⁴ was 1.03, which tells us that in 2014 there were actually more girls than boys enrolled in primary education. The same tendency can be found in secondary education where the GPI was 1.14 (BANBEIS 2015,18).

However, both the enrollment rates and GPI scores decrease when you go up the ladder of education. In colleges, 47.57 % of the students were girls and the GPI was 0.89 in 2014. The difference is greater in universities. BANBEIS states that among all students in university 30.23 % were girls. The percentage of girls in public universities was 37 %, while it was only 27 % in private universities. The average GPI for higher education on the university level was 0.47, with 0.59 in public and 0.36 in private universities (BANBEIS 2015, 20 and 24). There are also other categories of tertiary education, such as technical and vocational training or teacher education. Here, the tendency of fewer girls than boys also is visible, but with variations in the GPI (BANBEIS 2015, 20-23).

2.1.2.2 Women's participation in Bangladeshi politics

Women's rights in all spheres of national life are upheld in the constitution of Bangladesh from 1971 (UN Women 2012,3). Jahan writes in the article "*The parliament of Bangladesh: Representation and accountability*" that "though women constitute nearly 50 percent of the population and the two major political parties have been headed by two exceptionally

² Gross enrollment rate: Refers to the total enrolment of students in a grade or level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the corresponding eligible official age-group population in a given school year. (BANBEIS 2015, 16)

³ Net enrollment rate: Refers to the number of students enrolled in the official specific-age group expressed as a percentage of the total population in that age group. (BANBEIS 2015, 16)

⁴ Gender Parity Index (GPI): Ratio of female gross enrolment ratio for primary to male gross enrolment ratio. It is calculated by dividing the female value for the indicator by the male value for the indicator. A GPI equal to 1 indicates parity between females and males. In general, a value less than 1 indicates disparity in favor of males and a value greater than 1 indicates disparity in favor of females (UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

<http://www.uis.unesco.org/Pages/Glossary.aspx>. Accessed 18th of March 2016)

powerful women leaders for the last 32 years, the number of women directly elected to parliament has been painfully low” (2015, 256).

The constitution recognizes the need for affirmative action and provided for quotas for women in the parliament. These were introduced already in 1972 and, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), today the number of reserved seats for women are 50 of the 350 seats in total (2015). In the last parliamentary election on 5th of January 2014, 69 women were elected. This constitutes 19,71 % of total seats. The speaker of parliament is a woman, Ms. Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury (AL). But as Jahan argues, the number of directly elected women is still low, and as the numbers from IPU tell us, in the 2015 election, 19 of the 350 elected members of parliament were women (2015,256). The election in 2014 was boycotted by BNP and 18 other parties (IPU 2015).

With the support of government quotas and the advocacy of NGOs, more women are now holding political office at local and regional level (White 2010,337). As shown above, there are in general an increasing number of women active in politics, but as in the case of the two female leaders, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, many of these are elected on a family ticket. Chowdhury states that since the 1960s, a large number of women have gained the highest leadership positions in the government in South Asia. She argues that this is only due to family connections, which make it possible for them to overcome problems that other women face in politics. Chowdhury includes the two female leaders of Bangladesh in this description, since both of them got their positions due to the death of a male leader and lack of male heirs to take over (2009,555). The question of why few women participate in politics has been the subject of research, and in the next chapter I will outline some different explanations provided by this research.

2.1.3 Islam and Bangladesh

When discussing religion’s effect on society and gender equality, Bangladesh is a particularly interesting and complicated country. After the end of colonial rule in British India, the country of Pakistan was established as a result of a demand for a separate homeland for the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent. The country we today know as Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan from 1947 to 1971. The two countries are geographically far from each other, but their peoples’ mutual commitment to Islam was used as rationale for being one country (Huque and Akhter 1987,200). Huque and Akhter write that the idea of religious nationalism

was discarded when Bangladesh was born out of a movement based on secular principles. After independence in 1971, Islam was relegated to a position of minimal importance and religiously oriented political parties were banned (1987,200). The independence war and Pakistan's use of Islamic religion to gather support and justify their brutal actions in Bangladesh resulted in public opinion becoming more inclined towards adopting secularism as a state principle in the newborn country of Bangladesh (Huque and Akhter 1987,200).

As mentioned, the two leading political parties disagree about the role of religion in politics and society, and about whether the identity of Bangladesh should be secular or Islamic. Bangladesh was in 1971 founded on secular principles, but already in 1977 General Zia removed secularism from the Preamble to the constitution and replaced it with "faith in the Almighty Allah." The country has increasingly identified itself with Islam, and in 1988 Islam became Bangladesh's official religion (White 2010,336). Chowdhury writes that Islam plays a very important role in society and politics in Bangladesh, and that the people want to see religious symbols at the state level too. This is reflected for example in the fact that the top leaders of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, have both chosen to follow Islamic dress code by covering their heads in public (2009,557).

According to Rozario, Bengali Islam in the past often has been characterized as "syncretic," which implies a willingness both to accommodate and co-exist with local non-Islamic folk practices and also assimilate them. She also argues that the core values of Bengali Muslims haven't differed greatly from those of Bengali Hindus, and the practices, rituals and beliefs regarding birth, life, marriage and gender are similar for Hindus, Muslims and Christians in Bangladesh (2006,369). Until recently you could argue that the subordinate status of women and gender inequality should be understood by reference to local patriarchal Bengali gender values, which were common to all Bengalis independent of religion (Rozario 2006,369). But as Rozario and much of the literature about gender and equality in Bangladesh show, there has been an emergence of a separate political identity for Bengali Muslims, which highly influences women's lives and position in Bangladesh (2006,369). White calls this a "paradoxical modernity" which is characterized by both advancing globalized capitalism and increased visibility of Islam in society and politics. This paradoxical modernity is in contrast to the dominant narrative of modernity which entails the decline of religion, or at least restricts religion within the private and personal space (2010,336).

Studies of religion and gender in the Bangladeshi context have often focused on modernization and development (e.g. women becoming a part of the work force), with main emphasis on women's work "outside" the labor market and control of their income and fertility. Religion's role in this is typically linked to the *purdah*, with religion portrayed as an obstacle and constraint when it comes to women and gender equality (White 2010,337). *Purdah* is the ideology behind religious and social practice of sexual segregation and emphasis of female modesty propriety. Rozario defines *purdah* as the whole complex of normative principles regulating women's modesty and mobility and restricting their interactions with unrelated men (2001,162). Through the 1990s, the attention was turned more directly to the politics of religion within the society, and today most studies try to get beyond historical prejudice and explore different ways women live their lives as both modern and religious (White 2010,343).

The politics of Islam have different faces in the Bangladeshi society. From the 1990s up to today, the reaction to the development in women's rights and increased employment have sometimes taken the form of violent and repressive measures, for example in the form of *fatwas* (an Islamic legal announcement⁵) against "immorality" among vulnerable women. There have also been attacks against NGOs which are perceived as facilitating women's independence (Rozario 2006,370 and White 2010,337).

Hussain argues that there seems to be an Islamic modernity developing, as an alternative to Westernization and indigenous tradition. This Islamic modernity accepts some aspects of modernization, but criticizes the Western way of life for being polluted by consumerism, materialism and self-indulgence, and advocates lifestyles characterized by morality and faith. Hussain writes that on the issue of women, this new form of Islam on the one side advocates that women should acquire the same level of Islamic knowledge as men, in some cases also accepting leadership of women, and on the other side claims that women should subordinate to her husband and guardian (2010,329). The influence of new Islamic forces is growing through madrasas, Islamic religious schools, and informal religious schools gather children once a week in their neighborhoods and teach them religion, but also to reject Western food and dress, wear head scarves and respect family values. In Bangladesh madrasas also offer

⁵ <http://www.islamicsupremecouncil.org/understanding-islam/legal-rulings/44-what-is-a-fatwa.html> (Accessed 28th of January 2016)

other subjects (e.g. mathematics and science) and are therefore given equivalent status as the secular educational institutions. However, the influence of Islamic forces is also evident through religious education among students of secular and/or modern English-speaking schools in urban areas (Hussain 2010,330).

2.1.4 Impact on gender equality

The growth of a separate Muslim identity and emphasis on religion becomes visible in society in many ways, for example through an increasing number of mosques and madrasas. In the context of gender equality, a marked increase in women wearing veils, burqas and shawls over their saris is visible also in the streets of bigger cities (White 2010,337).

White argues that the increased visibility of religion in public life is matched by narrowing indicators of gender inequality in Bangladesh. In a society where women normally “don’t go out” the rise of the garments industry has had a major impact in social, political and economic terms, since women are recruited to most of the jobs within this industry (2010,337).

Increased need for money and greater employment opportunities have also forced a shift in the traditional purdah prohibitions, now allowing women to work outside the household.

Some would still maintain that women should not work outside the home, but White argues that for most people the major issues today are what kind of work, what and where it is done and how women conduct themselves within it (White 2010,337)

Many scholars have been puzzled by the increasing numbers of women starting to cover their head, and in that way signaling support to the gender values of a more conservative Islam than traditionally practiced in Bangladesh. Seen with Western eyes this new Islamist movement would appear incompatible with increasing gender equality, and raises a lot of questions. Why would they want to adopt the veil and accept women’s subjugation to men? Or could their involvement in Islamist movements give new opportunities to exercise agency and achieve material gains? (Rozario 2006,371 and Hussain 2010,326). It is especially the apparent contradiction between the fact that more women are getting education and starting to work, and at the same time an increasing number of women are adopting the veil that puzzles scholars. It is also interesting to note that most of the women adopting this practice belong to exactly the groups that also get education and participate in the labor market (Hussain 2010,362). The question of using or not using head scarves or veils is in focus in much of the recent literature about gender roles and religion in Bangladesh, and in the following I will

look closer at some of the findings and debates. Veiling has not been a distinct topic in my study, but this example of how both Islamic views and women's own perceptions change, influence each other and lead to changing views about women could help us understand what influences the representations women draw upon when talking to me.

2.1.4.1 The example of veiling

Purdah has a long history in Bangladesh, and the practice of sexual segregation, female modesty and purity has always been valued in the society. So the ideology behind veiling women has been present, even if few women traditionally have chosen to cover their heads (Hussain 2010,326). As mentioned above, this is changing in contemporary Bangladesh. Hussain argues that today the use of hijab or other forms of veiling seems to be a key symbol of a return to purer forms of Islamic observance. Her observation is that hijab reflects changing perceptions of modernity for women. Previously, hijab was a sign of absence of modernity mostly practiced by rural middle class and illiterate women, but today educated, urban, middle class, young women use the veil. In modern Islam they can do so without losing modernity. In Hussain's study, women argued that the Western modernized women adopted Western styles like jeans and shirts, while modern Muslim women accept hijab as fashion from the Middle Eastern countries (2010,326). On the other hand, the women in Rozario's study described a feeling of being discriminated against because they veiled themselves, and were worried about their future work opportunities since they couldn't wear the veil to work, and due to the lack of companies run by only women (2006,372).

New Islamic movements still advocate purdah and a traditional view of women and gender roles, with some variation and different strength. Despite this, women join these movements and find them attractive. Rozario and Hussain point to different explanations for why women adopt veiling, even if they are at the same time signaling an association to traditional and conservative views about women. I will briefly outline these explanations. One of the reasons women adopt veiling could be strategic, for example to persuade their families to allow them to attend university or to avoid harassment by men in the streets (Rozario 2006,376). One example of this might be the top political leaders who cover their heads, which ensures their participation and visibility in politics by showing that they follow the religious dress-code (Chowdhury 2009,557). In Rozario's study, some of the women also used the veil mainly due to family pressure, or did so to get "be left alone" by complying nominally with their parent's demands. She also points to the notion that wearing the veil signals to male students that they

are good Muslim women, which make them suitable marriage partners. Islamic groups could also be a good place to find a good, Muslim man (2006,376). Hussain finds that some women adopt the veil because it is cost-effective, since they don't have to buy new clothes and follow trends. Or, as mentioned above, wearing a veil could be a fashion statement (2010,332). Another explanation that often emerges is that commitment to Islam is a part of the status concerns of middle-class women that often face a dilemma of protecting their status and honor and at the same time embracing the new opportunities offered by development. Women from lower classes have always been more visible in society because the family needs their income, and this has led to them more easily gaining from the economic development. So adopting a more conservative Islam provides upper-class women with the ideology and value system to justify their position, and makes them "better Muslims" than the lower-class women that work (Rozario 2006,377). According to Shelley Feldman, these explanations or choices made by women show how social practices operate within religious and cultural expressions, where women negotiate gendered expectations and follow, adapt, resist and construct normativity. These strategies could expose the insufficiency of explanations of e.g. purdah as simply obligations of religious or traditional beliefs or as a mark of "social backwardness" (2010,306).

Both Rozario and Hussain state that these strategic or instrumental explanations only partly explain why women choose to wear the veil, and that for many of these women the choice reflects a genuine commitment to Islam and a wish to live a pious life. Islam gives them a meaningful framework they can live their lives within, and some women use Islam to empower themselves and find a role in society (Rozario 2006,376-337 and Hussain 2010, 331). Rozario argues that for the majority of newly veiled women, Islam becomes a counter-culture to both the immoral, decadent, destructive West and the corruption and violence of contemporary Bangladesh. So adopting the veil is a part of the search of a national identity, and a statement of commitment to a different kind of society (Rozario 2006,337).

None of these explanations will fit one individual woman completely, and in most cases veiling is probably the result of a combination of different reasons. It is also important to remember that this group of women is still a minority in Bangladesh. A closer look into what might be the reasons or dynamics behind this choice gives a useful insight into how religion influences personal choices and the situation of women in Bangladesh. Religion provides an opportunity to negotiate with existing values in society by adopting some traditions/symbols

that make it easier to participate in new arenas, like education or work. Some women also find the religion empowering, especially since more and more women learn how to read and study the scriptures themselves. At the same time, Islam, even in its new forms, still seems to advocate values and beliefs that don't strengthen women's position, like for example the view of female sexuality that leads to purdah and segregation.

3 Common explanations for gender inequality

The field of gender research and gender inequality is a field with a long history and with many theories, explanations and concepts. It is not within the scope of this project to give a full account of this field. In this section I will point out and explain the most common explanations for gender inequality in Bangladesh.

I will focus on the explanations most commonly used to explain gender inequality in Bangladesh: patriarchy and religion. I will also outline other possible explanations, like socio-economic position and family responsibility. In Western countries there is often a focus on other explanations, such as the "glass ceiling" or division of the labor market in male and female sectors. I have chosen to focus on theories that are used in the research literature about this specific context. That does not mean that other explanations are not useful, but as we have seen in the introduction, Bangladesh has a different culture and religious background than the Western countries and is in many ways not comparable.

3.1 Patriarchy

The concept of patriarchy has a long history of usage among social scientists, such as Weber, but it was first systematically delineated by radical feminists in the early 1970s (Walby 1989,214 and Bryson 1999,312). Valerie Bryson writes that the first systematic approach to patriarchy was by the white American feminist Kate Millett in her book "*Sexual Politics*" (Bryson 1999,311). Patriarchy has had a variety of definitions, but today a common definition is the one Sylvia Walby uses in "*Theorising Patriarchy*," where she defines it as "a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women." Walby argues that the use of the term social structure is important because it clearly implies rejection of both biological determinism and the notion that every individual man is in a dominant position and every individual woman in a subordinate one (1989,214). But the definition also makes it clear that oppression of women doesn't happen as a consequence of the economical

system, like Marxist theory would suggest, but through the relation between man and woman. Women are oppressed because they are women (Solbrække and Aarseth 2006,68). The literature on patriarchy in Asia differentiates between classic patriarchy and neopatriarchy (Hapke 2013,12). I will give a short account of both of these. As we will see, classic patriarchy is often used to explain the culture in South Asia where Bangladesh is located, and I will therefore go deeper into this system than neopatriarchy.

3.1.1 Classic patriarchy

Classic patriarchy is predicated on the patrilocal/patrilineal extended family household in which property, residence and descent proceed through the male line. Women are considered as property, and the honor of the family and the woman depend on their sexual piety (Hapke 2013,12). Deniz Kandiyoti argues that classic patriarchy is most common in South and East Asia, besides North Africa and the Muslim Middle East (1988,278). In this form of patriarchy, girls are married away at a very young age and have to move into the household of their husband's family, which is headed by their father-in-law. The girls are then not only subordinate to all the men in the household, but also to the more senior women, and especially their mother-in-law (Kandiyoti 1988,279). Kandiyoti argues that the woman's life cycle in the patriarchal extended family is such that the suppression and hardship she experiences as a young bride eventually is superseded by the control and authority she will have over her own subservient daughter-in-law. This cyclical nature of women's power in the household and their anticipation of inheriting the authority of older women leads to a thorough internalization of classical patriarchy by the women themselves (1988,279). Hapke states that there is a clear distinction between private and public patriarchy in this form of patriarchy. Her definition of private patriarchy is when a senior male exerts arbitrary power over junior members of the household, and public patriarchy is when patriarchs collectively share power according to whatever stratification system exist among them (2013,12).

As agrarian societies transition into modern societies, changes in employment, education and the development of modern states makes the material base of classical patriarchy crumble and weaken (Hapke 2013,12 and Kandiyoti 1988,281). Kandiyoti argues that there is no single path leading to the breakdown of this system, but its consequences are fairly uniform (1988,282). The weakening of classical patriarchy could be perceived as unequivocally positive for women since they escape the control of men and their mothers-in-law, but as both Hapke and Kandiyoti show us, women become experts in maximizing their own life chances

and power within the patriarchal structure. Therefore, they also fear what will happen if they no longer can use these kinds of strategies to get protection from men (Hapke 2013,12 and Kandiyoti 1988,280-283). The women see their economic and emotional security weaken, and often resist the process of transition because they see the old normative order changing without any empowering alternatives (Kandiyoti 1988,282). In other words, we could say that the women negotiate with the patriarchal structures holding them down. They accept some restrictions to gain protection, and they use the rules within the system to create freedom. One example of this is using the veil as we saw earlier. Kandiyoti calls the changes in society due to development the starting point for the crisis phase in classic patriarchy structures, and argues that when this happens many women may continue to use all the pressure they can to make men live up to their obligations and refuse to step out of line, which leads to losing their respectability (1988,281-283). This might explain why we, as Hapke states, can observe around the world that a patriarchal form of organization has persisted in family, society, law and the workplace despite changes in society and economic development (2013,12).

3.1.2 Neopatriarchy

Neopatriarchy is a result of efforts within feminist studies to explain the persistence of patriarchal cultures and institutions in the wake of economic and political transformation (Hapke 2013,13). It could be defined as the product of the encounter between modernity and tradition in the context of dependent capitalism in which modern forms of family, society or state remain rooted in patriarchal values and social relations. Political factors can either modernize, weaken or further establish patriarchy and a neopatriarchal state's practices build upon and reinforce normative views of women and the family, often to legitimize its own power (Hapke 2013,13).

3.1.3 Criticism

The concept of patriarchy is much contested and criticized. According to Kandiyoti it is very under-theorized. The concept is also used very differently in different feminist perspectives (Kandiyoti 1988,274). The concepts and theories used above try to meet the criticism, but there are still some important aspects to discuss when we use the concept of patriarchy.

The criticism has its origins in four interconnected accusations. These four are: 1) the concept of patriarchy involves ahistorical, transnational generalizations which conceal more than

reveal, 2) its universalistic claims are based on the experience of white middle-class, Western women, 3) it rests upon a false dichotomy that treats all men as the enemy and all women as passive victims, and 4) its focus on the politics of personal life strengthen an inward-looking and apolitical view of the world (Bryson 1999,316).

This criticism should be taken seriously and taken into account when using the concept of patriarchy, especially as a Western, middle-class woman that might claim to have the answer for other women in other contexts. It is therefore important to remember that patriarchy has taken a variety of forms throughout history and in different locations (Bryson 1999,317).

Bryson argues that the criticism to some extent is justified and that Western feminists at times have ignored the existence of other forms of oppression, like for example racism and socio-economic class. At the same time, she argues that patriarchy is a useful concept as long as we emphasize that the experience of being a “woman” or “man” is qualitatively different for people in different social groups, locations or cultures, and that the meaning of race or socio-economic class interacts with other forms of socially produced group identities. The analysis of gender cannot be isolated from the analysis of race and socio-economic class (1999,318).

Bryson’s and Walby’s responses to the criticism indicate that patriarchy might be an easily misunderstood concept that could be used in a variety of ways, but that is still useful. The concept of patriarchy is often used to explain women’s situation and lack of gender equality in the literature about Bangladesh and is therefore important to include (UN Women 2012, Panday 2013, Chowdhury 2009, Halder 2004, Rozario 2006). I will however once again emphasize Bryson’s conclusion in the article “*Patriarchy: a concept too useful to lose*”: the concept of patriarchy can only be useful and contribute to our understanding if we remember that even if all women and men live in a patriarchal society, they experience its effects in a range of very different ways (1999,319).

Some might argue that religion and traditional values and views on gender roles are a part of a patriarchal society and therefore should be included in this section. Religion and tradition are important pieces of the puzzle that determines culture and structures in society. In a patriarchal society, religion and tradition can enforce the existing beliefs and discourses, but it can also alter and challenge them. In my opinion, religion plays a role on its own, but it is also a part of the patriarchal structures in society. It can be both a negative and positive force when it comes to gender equality and should be discussed more in depth than just as a part of

patriarchy. In the next section I will look closer at the role of religion, which in the Bangladeshi context is Islam, and try to point out some important beliefs in this religion that might influence the lives of and views about women.

3.2 Religion

The topic of Islam and women has long been debated within Islam and within the countries where Islam is the main religion, but has also been in greater focus in Western countries in recent times. In particular, the issue of women's clothes and whether or not they cover their head – and why they do this – has been a topic of much interest (Sky 2007,85). There is an understanding, particularly amongst many in the Western world, that women in Islam are subordinate and oppressed by men. It is not within the scope of this thesis to delve deeply into different theological positions, or review every debate about this topic both within and outside the Islamic communities. So I will start by stating that what is mentioned here is not true for all Muslims or all women, neither inside nor outside Bangladesh. Religion is practiced in many different ways and different people emphasize different things.

3.2.1 Women in Islam

Early Islam is often described as a reform of the existing society and gender relations. In the first “constitution,” women are given the right to inheritance, property, divorce and to testify in court. Women and men were equally bound by the law and could be punished for not living according to it. Both genders were also equally liable for the reward of coming to Paradise after life on earth (Lovat 2012, 1-2). Terrence Lovat also argues that there is considerable evidence of women being conceived as active participants and leaders in the earliest Muslim communities, and the two wives of Mohammed (the prophet who received the revelation of the religion from Allah) were prominent in advocacy and juridical advisory roles (2012,2). Some also claim that the first Muslim was a woman, Hagar (Abraham's Arabic wife), and that she is the matriarch of Islam itself (Lovat 2012,3).

Somewhere down the road the impression of Islam as a reformist religion led by women crumbled away. Today many will argue that the interpretations of holy scriptures and Islamic law are not in favor of women and gender equality. There are many factors, both religious and cultural, that influence views about women and their position, but I will in the following focus on important assumptions in Islam that influence women and their lives especially.

3.2.2 Sexuality

Female sexuality is in Islam perceived as something that need to be controlled. In the West, the woman has traditionally been perceived as the passive party being hunted by the active man, but the Islamic view is the opposite. This view could be traced back to one of the most influential Muslim theologians and philosophers, Imam Gahazali. Gahazali belongs to the denomination of Sunni Muslims, which is the largest Muslim denomination in the world and in Bangladesh (Vogt 2015). Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan Islamic feminist and sociologist, describes his work as forming a substantial part of the Muslim subconsciousness, influencing the way of thinking and acting today. Gahazali's works convey the female as the active sexual party, and men as passive (1985,32-33). From this point of view, the women represent a potential disorder in society because of the potential temptation they present to men. Women's and men's sexual desires are of equal significance, but the consequence of the potential disorder is still that the female sexuality has to be controlled (through e.g. clothing) (Sky 2007,89).

Mernissi argues that the fear of female self-determination is basic to the Muslim order, and is closely linked to the fear of *fitna* (which means 'disorder and chaos,' but could also mean 'beautiful woman,' a connotation of a femme fatale who makes men lose their self-control). If women are not constrained, men will be faced with an irresistible sexual temptation that will lead to *fitna* and *zina* (unlawful sexual relations) (Mernissi 1985, 31 and 53-54). Women should be understood as dangerous distractions that should only be used for specific purposes, like providing the Muslim nation with offspring and lessening the tensions of sexual instincts (Mernissi 1985, 45 and 58-60). Sexuality is viewed as something good and important, but because of its threats to the social order it needs to be organized. The result is what we today can see in some Islamic cultures: a comprehensive and closely regulated segregation of the two sexes, in the area of intersection between the complementarity and the hierarchy of the sexes (Dahl 1997, 95). Dahl states that few Muslim scholars have doubted that it is men's religious, social and legal duty to exercise control of both male and female sexuality, and that this affects the social order in Muslim societies. The woman has to be prevented from distracting the man from his religious duties or from bringing him shame (1997,102-104).

3.2.3 Expectations towards women

The emphasis on family highly impacts women's lives as their world in many Muslim cultures mainly is centered on the family. Accordingly, the success of a woman's life is often judged by whether she is married, how good her husband is and if she has children or not (Dahl 1997,53). Dahl points out that Islam is built on the three interconnected institutions – religion, law and family. Religion is comprehensive and of high significance in Muslims' lives, and the law (*Sharia*) is embedded in the very heart of Islam. The most comprehensive and important part of Sharia is family law, which has led to most Muslim countries applying Sharia mainly in family law (Dahl 1997,49 and Sky 2007,96). Dahl argues that both in the Qur'an, Sharia and in everyday life, women's identity is linked to the role of wife and mother (1997,55).

Within the family, the male members traditionally are treated better and prioritized over the female members. The Bangladeshi professor in Women's Studies Habiba Zaman argues, based on her studies and own childhood in Bangladesh, that a birth of a son creates joy and optimism for the family, while a daughter receives a half-hearted welcome. She gives the example of her own paternal grandfather who refused to see her youngest sister when she was born, because she was the fourth girl in the family (1999,41). From childhood the girls are expected to have two important virtues, patience and modesty, to comply with the sociocultural values and practices that favor boys. For example, boys traditionally are served food before girls. This is often explained by how boys are considered an asset who will remain in the family and carry out responsibilities later, while girls are often regarded as a burden to her own family (Zaman 1999,41). When a girl reaches adolescence, Zaman argues, a girl in Bangladesh spends much time participating in housework and caretaking. During this time, she learns how to sacrifice her individual identity for the religious and social values that make up an ideal wife and a good mother (Zaman 1999,41). Rozario states that a woman's most important roles in the Bangladeshi society are as wife and mother, and this is what gives her social status. Thus, mature unmarried women pose great threats to their family's honor (2001,164). The status and future of a marriage depend upon the wife bearing children, and the more sons she gives birth to, the more status she gets in the house of her in-laws (Zaman 1999,41).

Rozario argues that the central components of the Islamic ideological framework defining appropriate female behavior in Bangladesh are *pardah*, *purity*, *shame* and *honor*. Rozario

argues that purdah not only is an Islamic institution but also derived from fundamental organizing principles in Bangladesh, and can be seen as a byproduct of the principles of purity or pollution, and honor or shame. A man and family's honor depend upon the honor of the women in the household, and purdah is intended to protect male honor (2001,162).

The culture of patriarchy and religion are two ways of explaining gender inequality and the gender gap we see in different areas in Bangladesh. In this thesis they are divided into two separate explanations, but as discussed they might be interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Culture and religion over time get mixed and it could be hard to separate what comes from culture and what comes from religion. For example, the ideology of Islam is reinforced by cultural context and manifested in the institution of women's seclusion through purdah. The concept of purdah first appears in religion, but over time we see that female chastity and morality is much more emphasized in everyday gender relations in Bangladesh and not only in form of the purdah (Halder 2004,36). At the same time, we should not devaluate the impact religion could have on peoples' lives and what choices they make. Both a patriarchal culture and religion are structural explanations that find reasons for gender inequality in the structures of society and culture. In the literature about gender inequality in Bangladesh these often appear, but there are also other explanations that point to features related to the individual woman or her material conditions.

3.3 Other explanations

According to UN Women's country report from 2012, various socio-economic factors can contribute to explaining the low rate of women engaged in politics and decision-making. UN Women points to Bangladeshi women's lack of economic resources, lack of education and requisite training, and lack of political experience, besides the patriarchal structures and attitudes (2012,5). These, and other explanations, are outlined briefly below.

3.3.1 Family and household responsibility

Another reason for women not to come forward, both in highly and less developed countries, is their reproductive role, which often creates constraints that inhibit public activities.

Women's significant reproductive role creates the expectation that they should be at home and take care of the children, while the man is out working or engaging in e.g. politics (Halder 2004,29). Today there might be more acceptance for women choosing to combine having

children with work or engagement outside the home, but Halder still argues that reproductive and child-rearing tasks seem to impose specific negative consequences, and that this is a universal challenge (2004,29).

Women's responsibilities for family and children lead to less leisure time, which again can be another explanation for why especially lower-class women are not politically active (Halder 2004,40). Engaging in politics is time-consuming, and if you want to reach higher levels of leadership and positions you will have to invest time to get experience and create networks that could help you move towards the top. According to Chowdhury, women in Bangladesh generally do all household activities in accordance with tradition, as discussed above. Also women that have paid work outside the house do all household chores (2009,562). In her study, women describe both pride in and a feeling of obligation to take care of their children, and indicate that this is a task that should and does require all their attention (Chowdhury 2009,563).

3.3.2 Economic resources

Economic resources and status are in many countries considered necessary to win political nominations, so also in Bangladesh. For example, Halder point out that the general failure of elected women in the general election in 2001 was explained in terms of their inability to confront the monetary demands required for success. Economic resources are not only necessary for women, but for all candidates running for political office in Bangladesh (Halder 2004,41). Halder argues that money is more important than political experience for getting selected by the party and winning the election. The Bangladeshi parliament has been labelled by the BBC as a 'millionaire's club', because most persons in political positions in Bangladesh are from higher economic classes (2004,41).

Money is important in politics everywhere. You need money to campaign and to hire staff, but as Transparency International (TI) shows Bangladesh's public sector is perceived to be highly corrupt. Bangladesh ranks as number 139 out of 168 countries in total in TI's Corruption Perceptions Index (TI 2015). Some would allege that many candidates buy votes, making the richest persons the winners of both party endorsements and elections (Chowdhury 2009,559). Chowdhury writes that in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, women generally don't have control over business where corruption or opportunities for corruption exist, and

therefore also don't have the money or the opportunity to run for office in the Bangladeshi political culture (2009,559).

More and more women in Bangladesh take up paid work and earn their own money, and this could be expected to lead to a change in female representation in politics and views about women. But studies show that when women in Bangladesh earn money they more often than not use all their money on financing their household, which was typically the reason for their taking up work in the first place. Furthermore, many women don't have any control over their income. In some families the father or the family in-law take the money the woman earns, or the husband stops working because he doesn't need to now that his wife earns money (Chowdhury 2009,561). Chowdhury also finds this among female parliamentarians, despite their belonging to the upper class. This lack of control of own money makes it harder to use money on political purposes, and in some cases blocks women's empowerment (2009,561).

3.3.3 Qualifications and education

Education is important for gaining knowledge about society and politics. Education increases political awareness, and provides knowledge on which to build potential policy choices. Getting an education can also make both women and men more self-confident, and capable of conducting the tasks a politician have to do (Halder 2004,41 and Panday 2008, 502). As shown in chapter 2 female enrollment in education has exceeded male enrollment, but this is a recent development. Older generations of both men and women could not be expected to have education, and especially women did not get the opportunity before. This might have led to few women being perceived as qualified to take up political work.

3.3.4 Safety concerns

UN Women also identifies security concerns as one of the barriers that hinders women from participating in politics in Bangladesh (2012,6). This should be seen in connection with the culture of Islamic views about women and their role, and the patriarchal culture in Bangladesh. Women are supposed to stay in the private sphere, and by crossing the line to the public sphere a woman is viewed as 'bad' and risks becoming victim to violence, sexual harassment and threats. Chowdhury especially points to sexual harassment as a serious factor that may prevent women from taking up politics. Politics involves being on duty 24/7, travelling and being around strangers, all of which increases the risk of being harassed by

male colleagues. And in cases of sexual harassment, or even rape, the consequences are often that the woman's political career is damaged, while the man does not receive a punishment (2009,560). Another safety concern, closely linked to the views about women, is police violence and brutality. Halder states that assaulting women is one popular trick to discourage them from political involvement (2004,45).

Chowdhury argues that the most serious barrier to women's participation in politics in Bangladesh is the culture of *mastans* and illegal arms. Mastans are gang members/thugs that can be hired to hurt or kill political opponents (2009,558). The use of mastans is widespread, with mastans for example being employed by both of the two big parties to hurt the other. Chowdhury's respondents told her they never would win the election because of this, since women aren't involved in this culture and don't want to be. Some of them are also afraid of being killed if they try to run for a seat in the parliament (2009,559).

Up to this point in this thesis I have tried to set the scene and give an introduction to the country of Bangladesh and the situation of Bangladeshi women. I have also discussed different reasons for why we don't find many women in leadership positions in the society in general or in politics specifically, despite rapid economic development and social changes. Bangladesh as a developing country has been under influence from development agencies for a long time, and it is therefore interesting also to examine how development theories explain gender inequality. There have been different approaches to the issue and I will give a short introduction to the main approaches.

3.4 Women and the field of development

Bangladesh's history is short and the timing of the country's independence coincides with an increasing focus on the link between development and women. As mentioned, Bangladesh is often described as a "test case of development," after many NGOs entered the country shortly after independence and started to implement their various programs. Since the early 1970s, women have been in the focus of development work, and there have been different theoretical approaches to the field and to finding solutions. Today, women and girls are the public faces of global development, and are heavily featured in policy literature and policy documents across a range of institutions. Girls' and women's situation and role in development are central in development initiatives like the Millennium Development Goals and in financial

policy agendas like the World Bank's argument about gender equality as "smart economics" (Calkin 2015,295). Since Bangladeshi women have been a target group for different development theories and agencies since independence in 1971, these different approaches have been a part of the creation of representations of women in developing countries.

I will give a brief introduction to the main theoretical paths in the field: Women in Development (WID, early 1970s), Woman and Development (WAD, late 1970s) and Gender and Development (GAD, 1980s) and the different approaches and policy discourses emerged within these (Visvanathan 1997,17-18).

3.4.1 Women in Development

WID is the oldest and most dominant perspective, which has had much influence on the course of the field. Central to the WID perspective are the assumptions of modernization theory, and how it generally stresses Western values about gender equality and targets individuals as the catalysts for social change. Modernization theory describes traditional societies as authoritarian and male-dominant, while modern ones are democratic and egalitarian and therefore show sensitivity to the oppression faced by women. At the same time, WID is based on the realization that benefits of modernization somehow had not reached women, and in some sectors actually undermined their position (Visvanathan 1997,17-18).

The focus of WID is the need to integrate women in economic systems through necessary legal and administrative changes, and the approach is highly inspired by Ester Boserup's book "*Woman's role in Economic Development*" (Tinker 1997,34). The concept of WID intended to ensure that women get a fair stake in economic development, but also entailed earlier ideas like legal equality, education as a prerequisite for improvement in women's status, employment and empowerment (Tinker 1997,36-37). WID advocates that integration of women into development policy would benefit women and promote more efficient development processes (Calkin 2015,297). Calkin argues that this "win-win" narrative characterizes much of the development policy discourse today (2015,297).

WID is criticized for its emphasis on traditional modernization theory, which assumed that women not were integrated in the process of development. It is also criticized for accepting existing social structures and not questioning why women are subordinated and oppressed.

Some also point to the fact that the non-conferential approach led to no questioning of why women don't benefit from development strategies. Others criticize that the approach treats women as an undifferentiated category overlooking the influence of class, race and culture (Visvanathan 1997,19).

3.4.1.1 Smart economics

In 1995, the same year as the fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, the World Bank launched the concept of "smart economics" which argues that:

Investing in women is critical for poverty reduction. It speeds economic development by raising productivity and promoting the more efficient use of resources; it produces significant social returns, improving child survival and reducing fertility, and it has considerable inter-generational pay-offs (World Bank 1995, 22).

This approach is a descendant of WID and has contributed to strengthening the notion that empowering women is good in terms of economic development. Enabling women to challenge structural discrimination often seems to be downplayed in these approaches. Chant and Sweetman state that it might seem like the goal of female investment is to facilitate development in a "cheap" way and to promote further economic liberalization, instead of promoting gender equality and women's empowerment because it is important in itself (2012, 520-521). They conclude that the lack of essentially political critique in smart economics results in programming which focuses solely on the agency of individual women and girls to deliver development goals, and not encouraging development agencies to challenge the structural inequalities which constrain the rights, choices, aspirations and dreams of women and girls (Chant and Sweetman 2012,526).

Roberts and Soederberg also criticize the World Bank and smart economics approach for ignorance of structural challenges. They write that the World Bank argues that by concentrating policy on their definition of determinants of inequality (e.g. lack of market access) and outcomes, optimal conditions will be present to achieve equal opportunities in the global South (2012, 950). This overlaps with the framework of "womenomics," which assumes that women are driven by rational self-interest to enter the workforce and therefore will raise the productivity and consumption rates of a country. The assumption is that this will lead to that women, when they become workers and entrepreneurs, are able to lift both themselves and their children out of poverty, because of their "inherent nurturing qualities" (Roberts and Soederberg 2012, 950-951).

3.4.2 Women and Development

WAD emerged from the criticism of WID and its emphasis on the modernization theory. The theoretical basis for WAD is dependency theory and challenging the capitalist model of development. WAD also draws upon Marxist views. The general assumption is that structures of production determine women's inferior status, and that women's unpaid work not should be forgotten and is important also for capitalist employers (Visvanathan 1997, 21-23).

WAD argues that women always have been a part of the development process, and therefore the focus on integrating women into development is a myth. Instead we should focus on the relationship between women and development processes (Visvanathan 1997,18). Visvanathan writes that the contribution of WAD is to get acceptance for women as important economic actors in the society, and that the work they do in the public and private domain is central to maintenance of their social structures. She also points out that the notion of integration of women in development sustains existing international structures of inequality without challenging them (1997,18-19).

Critics of the WAD approach argue that this position fails to analyze the relationship between patriarchy, differing modes of production, women's subordination and oppression. WAD also discourages a strict analytical focus on the problems of women independently from the problems of men, since both sexes are seen to be disadvantaged and oppressed by global structures based on class and capital. Critics also point out that WAD assumes that once international structures become more equitable, women's positions will improve. At the same time, they don't question gender roles and gender relations. WAD also has a focus on women's productive role which could be at the expense of women's reproductive role and lives (Visvanathan 1997,19).

3.4.3 Gender and Development

This approach was developed in the 1980s and is influenced by socialist feminist thinking (Visvanathan 1997,18). GAD also emerged from the criticism of WID, and the advocates of GAD sought to shift focus from the category of "women" to the concept of "gender," and from issues of women's access to the labor market to an analysis of gendered power relations (Calkin 2015,297). GAD's main focus is to have a holistic perspective looking at all aspects

of women's lives, and to question the basis of assigning specific gender roles (Visvanathan 1997,18-19). The holistic perspective entails that this approach looks at the totality of social organization, economic and political life in order to understand the shaping of particular aspects of society (Young 1997,53).

This approach views women as active agents rather than passive receivers of "development," but at the same it does not assume that women have perfect knowledge about their situation or that they have an understanding of the structural roots of discrimination and subordination. At the same time, GAD argues that men in turn are not aware of their role in this and the social base of their dominance. On the other hand, the approach does assume that the male privilege makes most men unlikely to fight for the cause of women's advancement without powerful persuasion (Young 1997, 51-52).

GAD argues that welfare and anti-poverty approaches often are necessary preconditions for equity, and do not consider these three approaches as opposed to each other (Young 1997,52). Young also points out the need for organization, particularly in terms of women's self-organization to increase their political power within the economic system. At the same time, Young writes that GAD places equal emphasis on the necessary role of the state in promoting women's emancipation, and underlines the state's duty to provide social capital for the care and maintenance of future generations (e.g education and health) (1997,53). In this way GAD underlines the need for strategies that go beyond concerns with economic self-sufficiency to the need for political self-reliance (Young 1997,54).

3.4.3.1 Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming was established as a major global strategy for promotion of gender equality during the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 and in the Beijing Platform for Action. The UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) defines gender mainstreaming as:

(...) the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality (UN 2002, v).

Gender mainstreaming argues that the perceptions, experience, knowledge and interests of women as well as men have to be included in all policy-making, planning and decision-making, and gender equality should be situated at the center of analyses and policy decisions (UN 2002, v). This approach entails that the concern for gender equality is brought into the “mainstream” of activities rather than being an “add-on” (UN 2002,2).

In this chapter I have given an introduction to different ways of explaining gender inequality in the Bangladeshi context and in development approaches. The various explanations either point to structural barriers like culture, economics and a corrupt political system, or features related to the individual woman, such as lacking qualifications. Neither of these ways of viewing women and/or gender inequality give attention to the life and everyday practices of people, or how these understandings are in constant change through negotiation of beliefs, understandings, social practices and discourses. To understand how these processes, take place and how understandings about women, gender roles and gender inequality are made, we need to look into how life is lived by the persons of interest. We have to try to look through their eyes and try to grasp their understandings.

4 Theoretical framework

The explanations above are valid and important, but they arguably tend to forget the role of human agency. This project aims to contribute to nuance the tendency in these explanations to create a picture of women being hold back and suppressed by structures and ideologies. The term human agency is often contrasted to human action being forced by structures. Schwandt defines human agency as the capacity of individuals to perceive their situation, reason about it, consciously monitor their action, form motives, make choices and so on. He refers to structure as enduring, patterned social arrangements that influence or limit individual choice (2015,4). By exploring the agency of the women in this study we will get closer to understanding and finding explanations for why gender inequality in Bangladesh persists, and how they create meaning and create change through resistance. The understandings of the women themselves will provide us with explanations for why things are like they are. I don't reject the notion of structures that influence human agency, but by exploring women's own understanding of and beliefs about their situation we can find out how they relate to these structures and maneuvers within them. We, as humans, are not mere victims of structures and suppressing ideologies. We are influenced by more than one way of viewing the world, and in

our daily life and communication we negotiate with these ideologies, and between them. To grasp the women's own understandings and explore how they negotiate with the broader social structures about their role, I will apply a discursive approach.

In this chapter I will provide an introduction to the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). I will use this framework to find the women's understandings, and to explore how they negotiate with the broader social structures to create change. In the following I will start with a short introduction to what high-level theory I build on. Then I will give a more thorough introduction to CDA and how this theory would explain the relationship between individuals and structures, and the role of discourses in this relationship.

4.1 High-level theory

I have chosen critical theory as the theoretical perspective for my study. I find this perspective compatible with the design and aim of my thesis. The interest of this project is to explore the relationship between individuals and their broader structural and social environment.

Ontology answers the questions: what is the form and nature of reality? Critical theory has historical realism as its ontological framework and states that reality has over time been shaped by a variety of social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender factors. These factors have reified into structures that now are taken as real and natural. (Guba and Lincoln 2004, 21 and 26). Guba and Lincoln link critical theory to a transactional and subjectivist epistemology, and write that the investigator and the investigated object are assumed to be interactively linked, and that the values of the investigator influence the inquiry (2004,26). It is not within the scope of this thesis to go deeply into the different ontological or epistemological debates linked to critical theory or discourse theory.

The aim of my study is to look at structures and discourses about gender equality and point to values, attitudes and discourses that influence gender equality and how women contribute to change these. This fits well with the aim of a critical inquiry: to criticize and transform the social, political, economic, ethnic and gender structures that constrain humankind (Guba and Lincoln 2004, 30).

4.2 Critical discourse analysis

The term critical discourse analysis is used in two different ways. It is used as a broad term that encompasses a number of different theories and thinkers in the field of discourse analysis. The other way it is used is when talking about Norman Fairclough's theory and method of analysis (Jørgensen and Phillips 1999, 72). Fairclough has developed an analytical framework for studying connections between language, power and ideology. In this thesis I have chosen to use Fairclough's thinking as my methodological framework for analyzing my data material.

The overall aim of CDA is to find connections between how we speak (language) and social practice. CDA focuses on how discursive practices maintain a social order and how they can be a part of social changes (Jørgensen and Phillips 1999,82). This makes CDA a good tool for exploring what discourses about women and gender roles in Bangladesh people and society draw on, and how they are a part of maintaining or changing the society's views on women and gender equality. It also helps me explore how people contribute to strengthening or changing existing discourses, through for example negotiating with them.

CDA is transdisciplinary and crosses conventional boundaries between disciplines (e.g. linguistics, political science and sociology), and the "dialogue" between disciplines, theories and framework is needed to do a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2010, 3-4). Jørgensen and Phillips writes that Fairclough tries to unite three traditions: detailed textual analysis within the field of linguistics, macro-sociological analysis of social practice and the micro-sociological, interpretative tradition within sociology, where everyday life is treated as the product of people's actions in which they follow a set of shared "common-sense" rules and procedures (2002,65-66).

4.2.1 Discourse

The term discourse can be used in different ways. In the book "*Critical Discourse Analysis*" Fairclough shows the three most common ways of using the word discourse. In the sense of 1) meaning-making as an element of the social process. 2) A way of speaking which gives meaning to experience from a particular perspective, like the language associated with a particular social field or practice (e.g. politics) or 3) a way of construing aspects of the world associated with a particular social perspective and in the most abstract ways refers to language use as social practice (Fairclough 2010,230-231, Jørgensen and Phillips 2002,66-67). For a

critical discourse analyst, discourse is a form of social practice which both constitutes the social world and is constituted by other social practices (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002,61). Jørgensen and Phillips write that discourses contribute to the construction of social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and meaning (2002,67).

Discourse, as a social practice, is in a dialectical relationship with other social dimensions (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002,61). Fairclough argues that elements are dialectical in the sense of being different but not discrete from each other. They internalize each other without being reducible to them. The question of what relationship exists between semiotic (meaning-making in the social process) and other elements is one important focus of CDA (2010,230-231).

4.2.2 Discourses contribute to producing and reproducing the social world

Discourse analysis emphasizes the way versions of the world, society and inner psychological worlds are produced in discourse. Language is understood as something that contributes to constituting or producing the social world (Bryman 2012, 528). Social reality is produced through discourses, and to understand social interactions we must understand the discourse that gives them meaning. My task as a critical discourse analyst is to explore the relationship between discourse (about gender roles/equality) and the reality (gender roles/equality) (Bryman 2012, 536).

There is a debate about definitions of language and what role it plays in the social world. One position states that language is an instrument or tool at human's disposal to gain objective knowledge about the world. This theory is called "the picture theory," and assumes that the mind contains concepts and ideas that presumably represent an external reality. The way things are shapes the way we (perceive and) conceive them, and this is expressed in the language we use (Schwandt 2015,181). Schwandt states that the other theories, pragmatic or expressive-constitutive views of language, define language as a range of activities in which we express and make sense of being in the world. These theories assume that our language shapes what we see and how we see it, and that those things shaped by our language constitute reality (2015,181-182). The term *constitute* is also debated, and in this thesis I adapt a moderate interpretation of it. This means that there is a language-independent reality but that our awareness and understanding of that reality is mediated by interpretation and language (Schwandt 2015,182).

In CDA, social and cultural processes and structures are partly produced through *discursive practices*. Discursive practices are defined as the process from producing or creating a text to consuming and interpreting the text (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002,61). Discursive practices are found within an *order of discourse*. An order of discourse is a social structuring of semiotic differences and a particular social ordering of relationships between different ways of meaning-making (Fairclough 2010,233). For example, the network of social practices which make up the field of gender, or a particular organization such as a hospital, are constituted as an order of discourse. Jørgensen and Phillips give the example of a hospital when explaining the connection between order of discourse and discursive practices:

(...) within a hospital's order of discourse, the discursive practices which take place include doctor-patient consultations, the scientific staff's technical language (both written and spoken) and the public relations officer's spoken and written promotional language" (2002,67).

A hospital and its order of discourse may be experienced as being in a complementary and non-overlapping relationship with other domains, like e.g. the media or economics. On the other hand, perceived contradictions between these domains can become the basis for struggles to redefine their boundaries and relationships. The outcomes of such struggles are re-articulations of orders of discourse (Fairclough 1992,69).

Discursive practices are viewed as an important form of social practice that contributes to constituting the social world, social identities and relations. One of the goals of CDA is to study the linguistic-discursive dimension of social and cultural phenomena and how they change (Jørgensen and Phillips 1999, 73). In CDA, discourses are an important form of social practice and constitute the social world, but at the same time discourses are constituted by other social practices. Discourses don't only form and change social structures and processes, but also reflect and reproduce the existing discourses in the social structure (Jørgensen and Phillips 1999,74). Discourses, for example about gender roles, project certain social values and then contribute to the reproduction of social life (Machin and Mayr 2012,20). Discourse contributes to the construction of social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and meaning (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002,67)

Jørgensen and Phillips write that language is both an action that people can take to change the world, and an action that is already socially and historically placed, and therefore in a

dialectic relationship to other parts of the social world. The social world is therefore only partly linguistic-discursive (1999,73-74). Fairclough states that discourse as a social practice is dialectic in the sense that it reflects relations between objects that are different from each other, but not “discrete” (2010, 3-4). In my study it is the dialectical relation between discourse and gender roles that is interesting.

4.2.3 Social relations

Fairclough argues that social relations are layered and include “relations between relations.” He sees discourse as a complex set of relations, including relations of communication between people who talk, write and in other ways communicate with each other. But it could also describe relations between concrete communicative events and more abstract and enduring complex “objects” like language and discourses. Fairclough writes:

We can say what it is in particular that discourse brings into the complex relations which constitute social life: meaning, and making meaning (Fairclough 2010, 3).

Fairclough describes the social process as the interplay between three levels of social reality: social structures, practices and events. Social practices mediate the relationship between social structures (as the most general and abstract level) and the concrete social events. A social field is defined as a network of social practices (2010,232).

4.2.4 Power and ideology

The concept of power is an important concept in the CDA project. Power comes from privileged access to social resources, knowledge and wealth that gives authority, status and influence to dominate, coerce and control subordinate groups. As shown above, language can produce and reproduce social life and it is in the interest of CDA to explore what kind of world is being created by texts, and whose interests’ texts seek to perpetuate, generate or legitimate. Language is means of social construction and domination (Machin and Mayr 2012,24). Machin and Mayr also point out that power can be more than single domination from above. It can also be jointly produced by people who believe or are led to believe that this dominance is legitimate in some way. The process of making power legitimate is generally expressed through language and other communicative systems (2012,24).

Another important concept is ideology. Above we saw how discursive practices contribute to creating and reproducing power relations between different groups, e.g. between women and

men or minorities and the majority. This is the effect of ideologies in CDA (Jørgensen and Phillips 1999, 75). The term ideology is mainly associated with Karl Marx, referring to how dominant forces in society can exercise power over subordinate groups. But over time the concept has developed a broader meaning to refer to the belief systems individuals and collectives hold (Machin and Mayr 2012,24). Machin and Mayr write that ideology has been used in CDA to describe the way ideas, and values that the ideas consist of, reflect particular interests on the part of the powerful. They use the example of a discourse that promotes being tougher on crime, which identifies crime as relatively minor actions of the least powerful members of society, rather than actions of banks and corporations who seek to reorganize the whole society with the goal of making more money. In this example a reasonable question is whose interests these definitions serve (2012,25).

Ideology characterizes the way some discourses become accepted in this way and obscures the way they help to sustain power relations. Fairclough understands ideologies to be significations/constructions of reality (the physical world, social relations, social identities), which are built into various dimensions of the forms or meanings of discursive practices. Ideologies contribute to the production, reproduction or transformation of relations of power (1992,87). Such ideologies are most effective when they become naturalized in discursive practices and achieve the status of “common sense.” However, Fairclough once again stresses that humans are able to change ideologies through struggles or negotiation between orders of discourse or creative discursive practices (Fairclough 1992,87 and 91). Fairclough and Jørgensen and Phillips use different terms to describe the concept of how humans contribute to changing discourses and social structures, writing about “struggles” or “creative discursive practices.” This concept is one of the main concepts in this thesis and to make it more clear what kind of action this is I choose to call this *negotiation*. This is in my opinion a more self-explanatory word which describes the same concept as the aforementioned two terms.

One aim of CDA is to find the ideologies in texts, in the comprehensive way Fairclough defines text. Language is a common social behavior where we can share our views of how the world works, what’s natural and common sense. Through language we for example share ideas about gender and gender roles (Machin and Mayr 2012,25). Fairclough writes that CDA swings between a focus on structures (especially the intermediate level of structuring of social practices) and a focus on the strategies social agents use to achieve outcomes or objectives within existing structures and practices, or to change them in particular ways (2010,233).

As humans we are meaning-makers, and women in Bangladesh are no exception. It is therefore interesting to look closer at how they give meaning and describe their own situation. Do they agree with the description of themselves as a marginalized group? How do they assess their own opportunities, and what gives meaning to their choices and situation? How do they make meaning and what discourses influence their view of life? By looking closer at what discourses and representations of women the women in Bangladesh use to describe their situation, we will get a deeper understanding of how they view their situation today. It could also give us insight into the connections between structural challenges (the macro level) and the way women chose to live their lives today (the micro level).

5 Research questions and aim

The various explanations, theories and background information discussed above lead to a number of questions. Below, I will present two research questions, through which I will aim to examine some specific issues related to gender inequality, development and female public participation in Bangladesh. I will also give an account of why this topic is interesting and relevant to the subject of International Social Welfare and Health Policy.

5.1 Research question 1

My hypothesis is that one factor contributing to continued gender inequality could be the discourse in Bangladeshi society about women, gender roles and important values. The representations of women in media, politics and everyday communication appear to emphasize the family and private sphere, while references to women's role in the public sphere and the need to change social structures seem less evident. This leads us to the first research question:

Can aspects of gender inequality in Bangladesh be traced in and thus partly be explained by specific representations of women in different discourses about women, family and society?

5.2 Research question 2

The way the women draw on different discourses could also show how they resist the dominant structures and discourses and create change through their agency. This leads us to the second question:

Is it possible to trace strategies for change in the way the women draw on different discourses?

5.3 Relevance to Master's Program in International Social Welfare and Health Policy

As described in section 3.4, gender equality is a much debated and highly prioritized issue in the development sector. Over the last decades, women's rights and empowerment have been on the top of the agenda for most NGOs and governmental aid institutions, and the achievements in Bangladesh on important indicators owe much to this work. However, as mentioned before, the achievements have mainly been in the areas of social welfare, health and economic opportunities, and not so much in women's opportunity to use their voice and obtain positions in the public sphere of society. If you follow the debates and newspapers you will see some women raising their voice, and there might be some generational differences, but the general impression is still that most women are restricted (or restrict themselves?) to the sphere of the family and some areas of the economic sphere (especially the textile industry).

It is relevant and important for development workers, not least when working within a context with a different culture and religion than their own, to have knowledge about how the target population understands their world and opportunities. An understanding of discourse and culture is necessary in order to develop good programs and policy suggestions. The debate about gender, development and equality is not over, and this is an issue that will be important for the development sector for many years to come. Studying the experience and discourse about gender equality in a country such as Bangladesh is important to understand how policy, programs and views about gender equality are adapted by those they are directed towards.

However, the most important contribution from this thesis will be a deeper insight into how women negotiate with the ruling ideologies in society to create change in their own situation. This gives valuable knowledge that it is useful for both foreign and domestic agencies and policy makers. Knowledge about how they think, make meaning and construct new meaning through negotiation is important to understand the people you work for and with. They might agree or not with the view of them being suppressed and dominated, but how to they act to

create the change they want? Without this understanding we will not get the full picture of why gender inequality on some parameters is declining while other indicators don't change at all. This thesis will contribute to a broader platform of knowledge, and at the same time point out fields where more research could be done.

6 Methods

In this chapter I will give an account of how I conducted my research and what methods I used. I will in the different sections describe the process and discuss possible weaknesses or challenges with the various methods. At the end of the chapter I will discuss some limitations and challenges with this project in general and my role as researcher.

6.1 Study design

This study is a qualitative study based on 17 interviews with women living in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The age of the women varies between 20 and 60 years old. In addition to interviews I will use newspaper articles and other relevant sources to add additional perspectives to my findings.

The aim of the study is to explore how urban women in Bangladesh experience their freedom and opportunities to participate in different areas in society. I will do this by looking for what discourses they draw upon when they themselves talk about their role. I will also look for how they relate to these discourses through negotiation of discourses.

6.2 Sampling

I used purposive sampling in this study. Purposive sampling is a non-probability form of sampling, and it will give me the opportunity to sample participants in a strategic way so that the participants are relevant to the research questions (Bryman 2012, 418).

The inclusion criteria for informants were females over 18 years old living in Dhaka and that have started or completed some kind of education. The group with the lowest level of education included is women that have learned how to read and write, and the highest level represented is education at a Master's degree level. There is a large gap between the lowest and highest level of education. By including women from this specter the study gets a broader scope of data material and insight in women's lives. Today most children, both girls and boys,

get education in Bangladesh, but this wasn't the case for previous generations. To be able to include women from this generation and from a lower socio-economic status I chose to include women that started their education as adults and at the moment still have a low level of education.

I conducted 20 interviews, but because of changes in my inclusion criteria to only include Dhaka as geographical location I will use 17 of these. This gives me a rich data material including women in different age groups, socio-economic status and in different life situations. However, it is important to note that the situation for urban women probably are very different from the situation of rural women. By excluding rural women, I will not be able to make any comparison and my findings relevance are limited to urban women living in Dhaka. The reason for focus on Dhaka women is mainly practical because of the limited time I had to conduct my interviews. But the situation of urban women in Bangladesh is also particularly interesting since the cities are growing rapidly and because of the change and development taking place in the urban areas. The age of the women in the data material varies between 20 and 60 years old. 14 informants are between 24 to 35 years old. An anonymized list of informants with the most important information is attached.

6.3 Recruiting

I used a few different channels to recruit informants. I got help from the international NGO The Salvation Army in Bangladesh. The Salvation Army has been working in the area now called Bangladesh since the beginning of the last century, and after the War of Liberation the organization was invited in to take part in the relief and rehabilitation work. In 1980 the Government of Bangladesh officially registered The Salvation Army. The organization runs a number of different development projects, for example in the areas of combating human trafficking, HIV/AIDS, health care, schools and centers for children with disabilities, as well as disaster training and risk management. The head office is located in the capital Dhaka, but the projects are spread out in the country (The Salvation Army Bangladesh Command 2015). Through their network, projects and staff I came into contact with 11 of my informants. This was very helpful and important because the women I met through this channel more easily trusted me and felt comfortable since they knew the staff or persons who contacted them and asked them to participate. The Salvation Army was also important to get a broader scope of informants in the study through their contacts and different projects.

The 6 other informants were recruited through my personal network in Bangladesh and friends of friends. I did not know any of the informants before the interview. This way of recruiting put me in contact with women in higher socio-economic groups, that had started or completed higher education.

6.3.1 Limitations and challenges using a NGO

There could be some limitations and ethical challenges related to using an NGO to help recruiting. For example, informants could feel pressured to participate because of the help they receive from the NGO. This is impossible to completely safeguard against, but as the interviews and informant overview show, the inclusion criteria for this project lead to a selection of informants that mostly aren't highly dependent on the organization. They might get support or help to get work, but at the same time they have skills and/or education that they have achieved through the organization, which at this point also helps them to be more and more independent. I also made it clear, both when asking for help to recruit and when introducing the project to the informants, that the aim of this project was to talk about their lives and how to be a woman, and not about The Salvation Army or their projects. Most people in lower socio-economic groups are in contact with NGOs, and for many of them The Salvation Army is only one of many organizations helping them develop. However, there might be strings or aspects in the relationship between the informants and the NGO that influence their answers, that I don't realize or know about. One way of trying to protect the project against this is as mentioned through good information about the aim of the project and through an interview guide that doesn't have The Salvation Army, NGOs or topics related to them as a theme. Some of the informants brought this subject up by themselves, and this gives insight into how NGOs influence the field I am exploring, but I did not ask them about their relationship to NGOs explicitly.

Some might also question the religious aspect of this NGO. The Salvation Army is a Christian international organization working all over the world. They do have a missional aspect of their aim for the organization, but in the Bangladeshi context this is much downplayed because of strict regulations for evangelism and conversion. They do have churches and are allowed to evangelize, but their social and development work is as important. Christians are a religious minority in Bangladesh and the Muslim informants in the study therefore represent a majority. Me being helped by a Christian organization therefore doesn't represent a "threat"

to them. There was also Muslim staff helping in the recruitment and present at some of the interviews. At the same time, it is important to remember that Bangladesh is a very different cultural and religious context than secular Western countries. Their long history of a diverse religious environment and living side by side with people that despite different religious beliefs share much of the same culture and worldview, has made the people more relaxed about religion than many Western people.

To reach the lower socio-economic groups, NGOs are very helpful. In many cases, using a NGO instead of e.g. a government official/service to reach them secures more reliable answers, since these groups often trust these organizations more than the government. This also became clear in my interviews with women from the lower groups. Without the help from The Salvation Army I would probably not have gotten in contact with so many women in this group since my other contacts mainly belong to the middle and upper classes of Dhaka. Their cultural insight and language support was also crucial in conducting the research, since the staff members helping me were locals, not Western aid workers.

6.4 Interview as method

I chose interviews because this method of research helps me explore how the women experience their role as women and their freedom to participate in all spheres of society. By using interviews, I need to talk to them and listen to their stories and how they describe their situation. I did semi-structured life history interviews. Semi-structured means that I made an interview guide with questions and important topics to touch upon, but the process was flexible and the interviewees were free to frame their answers as they liked. I chose semi-structured since I had a fairly clear picture of my topics of interest, and with this method I would be able to ensure that I addressed these topics in the interviews (Bryman 2012, 471-472). During the interviews I drew upon the principles of the life history interview. By asking questions that invited the participants to look back on their life course and important events, I hoped to find out how they experience, interpret, understand and define the world around them (Bryman 2012, 488).

6.5 Data collection

All of the interviews took place between 23 August and 14 September, 2015. Most of the interviews were conducted in the home or workplace of the respondent, one of the interviews

was conducted in the office of The Salvation Army, and three took place in a coffee shop. The location for each of the interviews was decided by the person helping me recruit, in collaboration with the informant.

At the beginning of every interview I informed them about myself, my study and why I wanted to talk to them. I also informed about how the data material would be used and that they would be anonymized through the whole process, from transcription to completed thesis. All informants were also informed that they could withdraw whenever they wanted, and that they could say no to answering any question if they didn't want to or didn't feel comfortable answering. This did not happen at any time. I got verbal consent from all participants, but because of cultural differences and challenges with literacy for some of the women, I did not ask for written consent. The information letter I used in the introduction of every interview is attached. This letter and my study is ethically approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD).

During the interviews I used my prepared interview guide to start the conversation. My use of the interview guide after this depended on the flow of the conversation. In some interviews the women talked freely, and by doing this touched upon the topics I was interested in. If the women did not talk as freely, I used the guide in a more schematic way to lead the conversation. During all of the interviews I made sure that I had touched upon all of the topics I wanted, and if something was missing I asked these questions before ending the interview. The interview guide had five sections of questions. Each of the sections represented an important topic to get the women's own perspectives on. The first section was an introduction of myself and the project, and here I let the women ask me questions or give a response to the project. Most of the women did not have much input to this section. The following section was about their childhood. This helped me get the conversation started without asking too difficult or intimate questions, but it also gave me an impression of the respondent's background and important factors like her parent's view of gender equality and organizing of the family. The third section contained questions about the respondent's life today. I asked about a normal day in their life, about family and dreams or goals. The next section, fourth, was named "Education and Work." Here I asked questions about why they got the education or work they had, whether they had good or bad experiences with participating in these arenas, and how they experienced taking the choice (was it voluntary or forced? Did she have to fight?) to get an education or job. The last section contained questions about development

in Bangladesh, the role of education, and female public participation by using the example of politics. Education was chosen because it has been a major focus of the government and development agencies, so it was interesting to hear how the women perceived this and to see if they shared the same enthusiasm. I chose the example of politics when I asked about women participating in the public sphere because it is a part of the interesting puzzle (female leaders on the top, but few women in the lower levels) and because this is something they all, independent of class, education and age, could be expected to have an opinion about. The interview guide is attached.

6.6 Transcription

After conducting the interviews, I transcribed them. I transcribed all answers of the woman exactly the way they said it, or the interpreter translated it. As will be apparent when I introduce the findings and citations from the interviews, this leads to some grammatical errors and sometimes unfamiliar ways of saying things, seen with Western eyes. Of course I always make sure that the quotes are understandable for the reader. I chose this way of doing it to be sure that I don't miss any important nuances or information by translating the responses to "correct" English. By correcting errors, I also might do some interpretations while correcting, and the quote might then not be an accurate representation of what the women says. So to avoid these errors and give the reader as correct a representation as possible, I have chosen to let all quotes from the informants remain in their original form.

6.7 Ethical and scientific limitations and challenges

In carrying out this project there are many limitations and scientific challenges that I need to be aware of when conducting the research and analyzing my data. In the following I will give an account of the most important limitations and scientific challenges.

6.7.1 Generalization and validity

Because of limitations in resources and time, the study will only describe the experience of a non-representative selection of women in Dhaka, and generalization based on my findings is not possible. The aim of the study is to get more knowledge about *why* women in Dhaka make the life choices they do, and how they negotiate with their surroundings. I want to explore *why* and *how* gender inequality in some spheres is more persistent than in others. A quantitative study with a sample that is representative and generalizable might give some

interesting causal connections and statistics about the field, but it will not give good information about the rationale behind the answers or why the women chose to answer in this way.

Humans are different from other things in the natural world and human behavior is impossible to explain by using methods of the natural sciences (Howe 1992, 243). Kenneth R. Howe writes that human beings are intentional, and it is intentions that cause human actions. He gives the example of a student raising her hand in the classroom, and further investigation shows that she did this to be recognized by the teacher and answer the question. This shows that the cause and meaning of the action is to be recognized by the teacher. In quantitative research, within a positivistic tradition, this interpretation would not be sufficient, because they search for contingent regularities. In qualitative research, observed regularities don't explain anything, they call for explanation (1992,241). For example, if many students raise their hand in the classroom regularly this act doesn't explain what's happening. The cause of raising one's hand can be only found by investigating and interpreting culture, beliefs and norms in the classroom. My study cannot be representative for all women of Bangladesh and the findings here cannot be generalized to all women in the country, region or world. However, the findings in this project will give insight that can help us to understand how urban women in Bangladesh understand their role, and how they negotiate by drawing on different discourses to create new meaning and change.

6.7.2 Grasping other people's experience

In my first research question I aim to grasp the experience of urban Bangladeshi women. To grasp another person's experience is difficult and might not even be possible. However, one underlying assumption in much of qualitative research is that the subject matter of the social sciences (people and their social world) is different from the natural sciences, and that the meaning that people lay into their environment can not be found by using natural sciences. Therefore, many qualitative researchers argue that the social world must be interpreted from the perspective of the people being studied (Bryman 2012,399).

The women in the study live in a very different culture and country than me, and these differences make it even harder to see the world through their eyes and to grasp their experience. My way of looking at the world is different, and my experience of being a woman in Norway is different from their experience of being a woman in Bangladesh. The design of

the interview guide is important in securing that my potential prejudices and assumptions don't influence the communication and understanding. Bryman writes that not asking leading questions is important in order to avoid making your own understanding color the informants' answers (2012,473). When making the interview guide I formulated open questions that gave the informants room to describe their lives, stories and experiences. But I also discovered that some of the questions were too open, and therefore difficult for the respondents to answer, and I therefore had to alter the question or explain it more thoroughly.

6.7.3 Use of translator

The use of a translator also makes the interviews more complicated and could lead to me misunderstanding or not totally grasping a respondent's description of their experience. To try to avoid this I talked through the aim of the study with the translators before conducting the interviews. Throughout the interviews I asked the translators to repeat themselves, or asked follow-up questions to make sure I understood what they said. At the same time most of the women I talked to actually understood English, but some of them were not comfortable with speaking English and therefore preferred to have a translator. But since they understood much of what the translator said, they sometimes directed the translator and reminded him/her if something got lost in the translation. There is probably still information that got lost in translation, but the women's limited English skills made it necessary to use a translator. However, their limited English skills also functioned as a security mechanism since they could help the translator.

6.7.4 My own experience as a woman

In conducting the study, it was important for me as a researcher to reflect upon what my own experience is and how this could effect my work. I spent time before going to Bangladesh to get knowledge about the culture and women in Bangladesh so that I had some basic understanding of their situation. I also used the first week in Dhaka to talk more informally with people I met, discuss these topics with locals and read newspapers to get more understanding. This prepared me for the interviews and gave me more insight into the lives of women in Bangladesh, but at the same time it became clear to me after a couple of interviews that my initial assumptions and expectations of what they would say and answer didn't always match the actual answer. This shows how my own experience and preconceptions could color the study, but since this became so clear at an early point in in the process I could adjust my

approach. This experience also made me more interested in their stories and more curious to see how they actually would describe their situation.

6.7.5 My understanding of politics

A key aim of this study is to explore what reasons the women have for not engaging in politics, or other public arenas. I have for the last 11 years been engaged in politics myself in Norway (in the Christian Democratic Party and their youth branch), and I therefore carry with me an understanding of how politics and policy making “should be.” In Norway it is, in my opinion, easy to get access to political parties and to engage with politics if you want to. We don’t have a big corruption problem, and even though we certainly can find that personal characteristics of politicians are dragged into political debates also in Norway, I would argue that debates in Norway generally concentrate on policy. When starting in a youth party we are taught how to debate and develop policy, and most mother parties welcome the involvement from the youth, and/or women’s organizations. My personal experience with both the good and bad sides of Norwegian politics, from youth politics to the Parliament, could influence my understanding of how things are – mostly in a positive way, I would argue, since it gives me an understanding of how politics and engagement work. But it is important for me to keep in mind how different Bangladesh is and what context the women are in when doing the meaning-making about politics and women in politics.

6.8 Analyzing

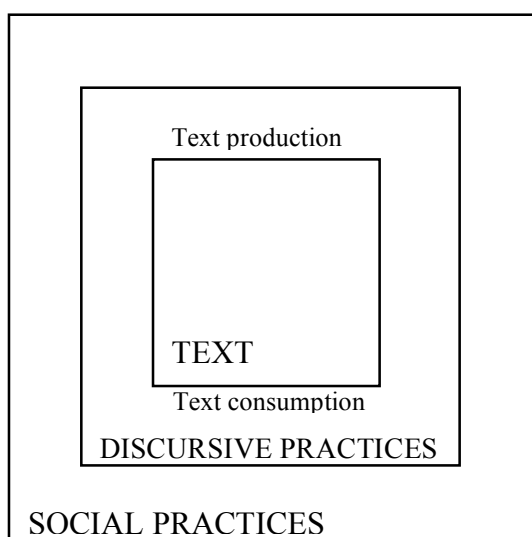
When analyzing my data material, I will use the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), in the version of Norman Fairclough. When doing the analysis, I chose to start with finding the most obvious themes in the interviews, and then sorting the data material into the different themes. After doing this I organized each theme into more detailed sub-themes. In chapter 7 and 8 I give an account for these themes and how I interpret them, in light of background knowledge and theory. This way of analyzing helps me find the link between how the women understand their situation and the broader social practices, and how they negotiate between them, which is one of the main goals of CDA.

In the next section I will give an introduction to some analytical concepts from CDA, which will be used in the analysis later in the thesis. These concepts are all drawn from Fairclough’s theory and are useful tools for finding answers to my research questions.

6.8.1 Analytical concepts

CDA is a framework that opens up for a lot of different research designs and methods. Fairclough suggests methods for the analysis of discourses as text, discursive practice and social practice, but he also emphasizes that it is not necessary to use all of the methods or use them in the same way in all research projects. The selection and application of tools depend on the focus and scope of the project. There is no fixed procedure for the production of material or for the analysis (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002,76).

Every instance of language use is a communicative event consisting of three dimensions: a text (in this project research interviews), a discursive practice which involves the production and consumption of texts, and a social practice. Jørgensen and Phillips visualize Fairclough's three-dimensional model like this (2002,68):



Jørgensen and Phillips write that text and discursive practice represent two different dimensions in this model and that they can be separated analytically. The analysis of discursive practice focuses on how authors of text draw on already existing discourses and genre to create a text, and on how receivers of text also apply available discourses and genres in the interpretation of the text (2002,69). The text analysis concentrates on the formal features of the text, like vocabulary, grammar and syntax, to find how the discourses and genres are realized linguistically (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002,69). The relationship between text and social practice is mediated by discursive practice. It is only through discursive

practice, where people use language to produce and consume texts, that texts shape and are shaped by social practice (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002,69).

This model is based on and promotes the principle that texts never can be understood or analyzed in isolation. Texts can only be understood in relation to webs of other texts and in relation to the social context (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002,70). Fairclough uses the concept of *interdiscursivity* when different discourses and genres are articulated together in a communicative event. Through new articulations of discourses, change happens, both within the order of discourse and between different orders of discourse. Interdiscursivity is a form of *intertextuality*, which refers to the condition whereby all communicative events draw on earlier events (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002,73). A genre is a particular usage of language which participates in, and constitutes, part of a particular social practice. For example, interviews and news articles represent genres (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002,67).

Jørgensen and Phillips use the concept of *creative discursive practices* when they describe the way discourse types are combined in new and complex ways, creating new interdiscursive mixes. We could also use the concept of struggles within orders of discourse to describe this. As stated above, I will use the term negotiation about this concept. These negotiations are both a sign of and a driving force in discursive and thereby social-cultural change (2002,73). On the other hand, we have discursive practices in which discourses are mixed in *conventional ways*. These are indications of, and work towards, the stability of dominant orders of discourse and thereby the dominant social order (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002,73).

6.8.2 Plan for analyzing the data

In this project the texts are 17 in-depth interviews and the goal of the project is to find what discourses these women draw upon when they talk about their lives and situation and how these are connected to broader social practices. The genre is research interviews. It is not within the scope of my project, due to both time and the focus of the thesis, to do a thorough linguistic textual analysis of all 17 interviews. I will use the concept of discursive and social practice to do an analysis of what discourses the women draw on and how they create meaning by drawing on these different discourses, and the connection between these two levels of practices. To do this I will, after identifying the discursive practice in the interviews (what kind of discourses they draw on and how they use them), discuss relations to different orders of discourses to identify what kind of network of discourses the discursive practice that I find in the material belongs to. Is it a part of the religious discourse? Or maybe she draws on

development discourses about women? Or do the women make meaning by using a mix or completely different discourses than I expected? Then I will discuss how different discourses are represented in the broader social structures, and how the women contribute to change through negotiation between and within these.

In chapter two I have mapped the social and cultural relations and structures that constitute the wider context of the discursive practice. I have done this by looking into Bangladesh's economic, social and cultural conditions. After that I have outlined what existing research says about reasons for there being few women in leadership positions in Bangladesh. All of this will enlighten the social practice. This way of including different theories and perspectives is an important part of doing a critical discourse analysis and important for fulfilling the goal of the project: to find what discourses women draw on to make meaning in their situation (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002,86).

Jørgensen and Phillips argue that it is in the analysis of the relationship between discursive practice and the broader social practice that a study arrives at its conclusions, and that it is by doing this that the questions related to change and consequences are addressed. This analysis could give us the answers to questions like: does the discursive practice reproduce the order of discourse and in that way contribute to maintaining status quo in the social practice? Does the discursive practice conceal or strengthen unequal power relations in society, or does it challenge them by representing reality and social relations in a new way? By doing this I will fulfill the aim of critical discourse analysis, to explore links between language use and social practices (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002,69 and 87).

In the next chapter I will present the results of the analysis of the data material. As explained above this analysis has resulted in five discourses which I will give a thorough introduction to by presenting the women's own words from the interviews.

7 Discourses about women and gender roles

So what do women in the capital of Bangladesh say about their position in society today? In this section we will dive into the interviews of 17 women living in Dhaka. Earlier I have given a presentation of who they are. In the data material there are many different points of view and interesting reflections about their own lives and the position of women in Dhaka. However, as mentioned, some themes emerge as more important by being repeated by all or

almost all of the women. These themes will be the framework in the search for what discourses are drawn on by the women themselves. The themes are intertwined in complex ways, and a lot of the women draw on more than one when answering a question, but in an attempt to make it easier to follow I will present the themes separately. The themes presented are the discourses the women draw on to make meaning about their role, family life and society, and as such they are foundational to answering both of my research questions. In the next chapter I will look into what discursive practices we can find through focusing on how the women draw on already existing discourses and practice in the broader social structures (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002,69). As explained in chapter 4, discourses contribute to producing and reproducing the social world. Accordingly, I will discuss whether the discourses and discursive practices and strategies we find are a part of maintaining existing social practices, or are a part of changing social practices about women, gender roles and gender relations.

7.1 The motherly manager

In my first interview, sitting in a small room in one of the poorest areas of Dhaka, I talked to a 26-year old woman who was studying to get a Master's degree in political science. During the interview she talked freely and in a very engaged manner about women's rights and how women in Bangladesh face discrimination. We talked about how her marriage one day in the future would be, and whether she expected her husband to give her a say in decisions about their lives and family. When I asked her whether she would work after being married she answered yes, but quickly added this: *"I would like to quote Napoleon Bonaparte. He said 'Give me a good mother and it will give you a great nation.' The mother will teach the children that is needed for great nation. So I want to be a good mother and teach my children well. And when people see my children they will see who their mother is. That I am a good mother."* Coming from a woman who was amongst the most engaged and impatient when it comes to gender equality in the group that I talked to, I found this particularly interesting. The women in this study emphasize that the role of being a mother is one, if not the most, important role a woman should have. They talk with pride about the responsibility of taking care of children and family, and as the above quote shows, this is not only because they are caring but also because they believe that a good mother is crucial for bringing up good citizens. The same attitude is evident in many of the other interviews.

Another woman answered this when I asked her to describe a “good woman”: *“A good woman for me is very careful for every person – for her family, her work. A mother, wife, daughter in law. For me a girl who will be a good daughter, a good wife and a good daughter-in-law. Everything. This varies from country to country, but I think right now women has some power to develop the whole world. As a woman, as a human being, I am so proud that I am a woman. I just want to see a woman that take care of all the things.”* Again we can sense pride over the significant role a woman has in the family. Furthermore, here the link to development, and the important role of the caregiver in the family in development, is also evidently important for the informant. It is also interesting to note the combination of what many, with Western eyes, would assess as an old fashioned way of viewing family and women (caring, mother, wife) with a more modern and progressive view of women (power to develop the world). From the perspective of the women behind the two quotes above, there is no conflict between these two views. Being a good mother and caregiver is not the opposite of engaging in society and contributing to development. The two go hand in hand, and the former is actually an instrument for the latter.

7.1.1 The manager

“A good woman is someone who can manage everything. From my point of view. Because a woman should have the quality to manage her family, and at the same time her office. And she should have good education, it is not necessary to have a master, but at least a bachelor degree. I think.” The woman’s manager role is very clear in my data material, and most of the informants describe how it is the woman/wife/mother’s responsibility to maintain both family, house, work and extended family. Again it is not something only described from a negative point of view, but something they take pride in and view as an important role. As one of the women said: *“We can do a lot of things at the same time. We look after the house and work at the same time. And Bangladeshi women are more family oriented. We have to maintain both our father and mothers house and the in-laws house. Respecting and caring for them.”* The tasks a woman has to carry out are multifold, and don’t only include her own nuclear family, but also her in-laws and sometimes also her own parents and extended family. And they all expect that she does this, besides her paid-work which they all also depend on. One woman describes it like this: *“You have to balance also because you have to maintain a family and your workplace if you work. You have to have balance between your workplace and your family. Because you cannot compromise your family with your workplace or the workplace with your family.”* Here she shows us the high expectations that the family, society and

herself have when it comes to the effort of women. They have to take care of the family, but if they have to work they should also do a good job at the same time, and not compromise either of the tasks.

The women in my study seem to view this as their responsibility, and consider this an important task of every woman. At the same time, some of them point out the unfairness and hardship of this division of labor. One of them put it like this: *“As for Bangladesh the woman has all the responsibility. We have to take care in home and in working place. All place.”* Or like the young, middle-class woman said: *“(…) for a married girl it sometimes is difficult to manage her family and her work equally. Because a married girl has responsibility for her husband, children, mother and father-in-law, and of total family members. So sometimes it becomes difficult for her to manage everything.”* And even if they might find their role in the family meaningful and important, some of them also point to the restrictions this lays upon them, which I will discuss more fully later, and that this is something expected from the outside and not always driven by an inner motivation. Like one young woman said: *“I had a talk with my father the other day actually, and he said that ‘It is a female soles responsibility to stay at home, look after the kids and the house, look after the husband or the parents.’”* She wanted to work and tried to convince him that she could handle both work and family, but he didn’t think she should work at all since the very important role of taking care of the family should be her only focus.

The husband and father’s role in maintaining the family is not touched upon by most of the women, but when asked directly his role is mostly assessed as being the provider for the family. One of the women I talked to worked as a doctor, and she told me her story of struggle to get there and how she had to fight against her parents’ wish to get her married, her in-laws views about family life, and the society’s views about female doctors to get where she is today. She talked eagerly about her own struggles, but at the same time it is interesting to note how she accepted that it is she that should have responsibility for the family. For example, when telling me that they have servants she said: *“So he arranged for servants for me and still now they are staying in my house.”* Her husband hired servants for her to lighten her burden of housework. She was thankful for his show of support by doing this, and doesn’t seem to expect him to get more involved himself in the chores. Even if she is working fulltime as a doctor and studying on the side, she excuses her husband’s lack of involvement in house chores and caregiving with him being too busy: *“And he also a busy person, a*

business man with no time to do extra things in the family so I have to maintain as well as my studies and services, my family. I keep everything.” She also describes the sacrifices he has to make because she’s not the wife others expect of her, and is thankful for this: “Yes, he is doing to. Because sometimes he has to suffer and face the problems ‘Your wife don’t do this. My wife do this.’ So he have to motivate them and say that all are not same. So he is also sacrificing and cooperative.”

Another interesting theme that emerged in many of the interviews was how they contrasted their emphasis on taking care of the family with how it is done in other countries, like Europe and other Western countries. Their perception of women in Western parts of the world is not solely positive, which is interesting in terms of the relation between gender equality and development work. Like one of the older women that has had jobs taking her around the world answered when I asked her about what women in my country can learn from Bangladeshi women: *“We are working and we have a good family also, and we are maintaining friends, family, colleagues. In European culture I feel that not can do this. If career is there they can only focus on the career. So maybe they can see that it can be done. You can have a good family, maintain the family life, and your work as well. Simultaneously.”* One of the younger women, also with a job that also allows her to travel a bit, says: *“I think. Nobody told me this before, but I think form our perspective – the Asian perspective – a woman should manage both. In foreign country you will find women that can sacrifice either their personal life for office, but in our country people have high expectation for a woman. If you are a girl your office and your family will have high expectations and they always expect you to do all these things properly. That’s why I think it is. Being a woman I should be able to manage both.”* Later in the interview she states *“They [women in other foreign countries] tend to distribute the housework with their husband. Like I have one relative, she is a working woman living in Adelaide, and she already told her husband ‘Listen, we have five working days. I will cook in three days and you will cook in two days.’ But in Bangladesh we don’t do that. We try to manage, or we always manage seven days a week, whether we are at work or not. But we can manage. In that sense I will say that we are, in Bangladesh, women are strong, at the same time very emotional, but we have one good quality that we can make everyone happy.”* The point of view of both of these women seems to be that women of Bangladesh are better at combining work and family, and are willing to work harder to make it work. It is possible to have it all. The high expectations placed on women are perceived as a good thing and women should answer to these expectations, and should not do like the

relative of the youngest woman: divide housework between herself and the husband. She assesses the quality of “managing everything” and “making everyone happy” as more important than equality in responsibility or work in the household, because this means that women in Bangladesh are strong and smart since they manage to do it all without the help of the husband.

7.2 A good (working) woman

During the interviews with the women, the society’s view of women often emerged as a topic they wanted to talk about. Many of them described how the value of the baby girl is still perceived as much lower than the boy, as has traditionally been the case in Bangladesh. They express frustration over how this not only affects the welcoming of a newborn, but also constitutes a way of viewing gender relations and legitimizing discrimination. One of the women put it like this: *“The social norm and culture in our society is that when we have an asset the son gets everything and the girls get nothing. This is still common in our community.”* Another said it like this: *“People like to give priority to the boys and don’t the girls. In decision making, education, jobs, everywhere. Everywhere the boys get priority.”* Another young woman describes it like this: *“A girl should have a dignity, but the male persons keep thinking that girls don’t have any dignity. Dignity is reserved the boys. There is a big difference in how they look at male and female in society.”* This leads to discrimination within the family when priorities are made, like in the story of one of the women interviewed who experienced that her brothers always were given more food than her. It seems to still be a common perception that investment in a son is smarter than investing in a daughter. This is not only about economic return on an investment, but could also be explained by the roles we discussed above. A woman doesn’t need higher education because she is supposed to get married, and investing in a woman’s higher education therefore seems pointless.

The increase in the proportion of girls getting education, a ban on dowry and changes in the social structures that make it more common for girls to take care of both families might lead to changes, and some of the women point to these factors as important for change. But, at the same time, they highlight that the most important changes needed have to do with how men perceive women. One of the women says: *“The male person treats their women as their furniture. They think that women are for their enjoyment. So that is way they don’t respect the woman. Men use women as instruments.”* Some of them point to the family as the place

where change has to start, because that's where both girls and boys learn what's expected of them and what roles they play in society. Like one of the women describes when she says: *"From our very childhood our parents are telling us that we should do this or not do this. Your brother will have the priority to do this and you should not do it. So from the very beginning our brothers find that my sister, whether she is elder or not, she is doomed to be a servant in my home. What ever I am ordering her she is bound to do that. So he got married and will also ordering his wife and his daughter."*

Despite these traditional views about gender roles and relations, there is no doubt that economic development has led to more women taking up work and therefore becoming more visible in the society. But do the women feel as free as they perceive their male counterparts to be? Many of the women describe a narrow scope of how to behave and how to avoid being marked as "bad". They describe how women are expected to dress properly in traditional dresses, be very polite and not argue, regardless of whether or not they are right. Women should keep on smiling no matter what, and have a lot of respect for her colleagues and the people she meets in her job. A woman should be caring and helping. One of the women summarized it like this: *"Yes, we need to be very conservative. We need to be very polite. We need to be very introvert in a sense. If we want to keep a good image. If a woman is open to all, speaks something that is very controversial, in that case sometimes people think that 'she is a woman and should not speak like that.' So they judge people by if they are woman or man."*

Some of the women also touch upon biological explanations for why women shouldn't or can't do different jobs. One of them put it like this: *"Yes, in our country people think if a job requires a lot of brain or hard work men should get priority. If the job only requires good energy and just a little more smartness the woman can do it. This is very strange, but this is true. They think biologically we are weak."* Like we saw above when discussing the role of mother and wife, the women don't necessarily view the expectations placed on a working woman as wrong or discriminating. Some of them point to how this makes them more attractive for some kinds of jobs, especially jobs that require people skills. Others show pride in being a woman that has these skills and is perceived as caring and nice, as opposed to men, who are not perceived this way.

7.2.1 Restricted to the home

“Most of the men don’t like that woman will get out from the house and talk with other people and go here and there.” All of the women I talked to had experience with restrictions laid upon them because of their gender. With restrictions they mean, besides all the expectations discussed above, their family or family in-law refusing them to go out after dark, or not letting them continue education or work because they should stay in the house. The younger women still in school describe how they are allowed to go to school, but have to come right back home after class.

One of the younger women told me this about a normal day in her life *“Normally I wake up very early, maybe 7 or 8, to go to class or coaching. When I have nothing to do I wake up maybe at 10am and have my breakfast. I stay at home and have nothing to do. To go out from the house I need a reason and get permission, and then I have to go with a close friend that my parents know. And this friend has to be female.”* And when talking about how to be a good woman she said this: *“Being disciplined and follow a specific schedule, like I am staying at home. You should not talk to boys, be at home before six. You should pray and dress up proper clothes like salwar kameez.”* The night I met her she had lied to her mother about why she had to go out, and who she was going out with. I met her through her boyfriend, which also had picked her up outside her home. So the restrictions by her parents did not keep her from doing what she wanted, but she knew she was taking a big risk going out with her boyfriend in the evening. She also tells me how she has to fight for the opportunity to get a Master’s degree, since her parents don’t see the point of this as she should be getting married very soon. She has decided to get an education, but as she said *“now I am on my own in this”* and could not expect much support from her family.

At the same time as this woman describes her restrictions and how she defies and fights against them, she accepts that this will define her future. When talking about her future she says: *“I want to have a bank job. And this is because I am not allowed to have job very far from my house or that I have to roam around a lot in the city. My parents, I also think like this, don’t think it is safe for me to travel around much. (...) So I prefer a bank job because it will have normal daytime hours. It is a fixed place at a fixed time everyday and my parents don’t have to worry about me. They will take me there and pick me up after work.”* She agrees with her parents, and most likely her future family-in-law, that she should decide her future based on what is most proper for a good woman, in an environment where they don’t need to

worry about her. We find the same thing in the answers from another young woman, who tells me that she chose to study in the field of computer engineering because it gave her the opportunity to work from home. She says: *“I think freelancing is best for me. Because I can earn money. Actually my family don’t allow me to work outside so I love to work from home.”* Both of them tell me that their choices are free and that they agree with their parents about staying at home, but both also tell me that they would have chosen different educations or work if they had a choice. And both of them sneak out to meet me and don’t believe that boys are as bad as their parents think.

In this section we have looked into how the women talk about their role as a woman, mother and wife, and how the changes in society are influencing these views. Even though many of the women talk with pride about their important role as mother and manager of everything in the family, they also point to how the discourses about this role, family life and the female gender lead to discrimination and restrictions. Most of the women don’t agree with society’s narrow understanding of women and their role, but at the same time most of them also choose to behave according to this understanding of women.

7.3 The struggle

“A good woman should have a fighting spirit because the women of Bangladesh are struggling a lot. But often they fail because they lack spirit. A woman should have a good spirit so she would fight for everything.” Early in my stay in Bangladesh and in conducting my study it became clear that women often tend to describe their life as a struggle. They feel unfairly treated in the family and society, as discussed above, but they also feel insecure on their own streets and often in their workplace or school as well. As discussed above, this is often the reason they give to justify the restrictions they live under, but they also point to the understanding of the public sphere as insecure for women as something that hampers their opportunities and mobility.

7.3.1 Unsafe

When talking about their lives in Bangladesh, women are quick to point out how they don’t feel safe when going out from their home. During the daytime it is easier, as long as you behave and dress in a proper manner. Going out after dark is associated with a high risk. A woman risks mugging, rape, or harassment, and she is also risking her own and her family’s

honor by being perceived as indecent. The latter notion we will come back to, but in this section I will look closer at what the women in my study say about feeling unsafe.

The women I talked to described different situations and experiences where they didn't feel safe, or where they had been victims of unwanted attention from or actions by men. One of the informants described it like this: *"And I am very angry because women and girls in Bangladesh is not secure out in the community. Even in the bus or transport I don't feel safe. If I am the only girl going on a bus with just men I will go out of the bus, because I don't feel safe."* The example of the bus often emerged, and this is probably because, as everyone else in their socio-economic class, the poor or lower-middle class women have to use public transport to move around and get to school or work. Buses in Dhaka are overcrowded, and harassment or sexual assaults commonly occur. The government is trying to increase women's safety by reserving seats for women on the bus, and in some areas setting up buses only for women. The women I talked to welcomed these initiatives, but they didn't think there were enough seats or buses. Most of the women in the study did not have access to the reserved buses, and the reserved seats were too few. However, they did not think that reserved seats would make them safer and the fear of what fellow male passengers could say or do made them afraid of taking public transport, often forcing them to use more expensive modes of transport. They also have to take various safety precautions, such as never travelling alone, as this could increase the risk of becoming the victim of something. Like one of the women said: *"And then it is also the fact that if I travel around alone I might get mugged or kidnapped, you know."*

Also when finally arriving at work or school the women feel the need to protect themselves, like the woman above who wanted a bank job because her parents thought that was suitable and gave her the opportunity to work fixed hours in safe environment. One of the young women gave me a personal example of how this can play out in a work place: *"The last place where I used to work in I got harassed for being a girl. And that to sexually. You know my boss was not a very good person. So he hit on me. And I was like 'What the hell are you doing? This is not right.' And you know, I had to stay there for a few more months cause I needed the money. But then I left. But yes, you have to face a lot of problem. If you want to go out."* This woman had the attitude to stand up for herself, and came from a family in the upper middle-class, so she found a way to put an end to the harassment. But many of the other women in my study didn't feel they had the power or resources to do anything to address this

challenge, besides not taking the risk of going out and meeting men in buses, schools or work places. Some of them also described how they felt that society was not aware of this problem or was always taking the side of the man in these situations and blaming the woman if something happened. One of the women said: *“When I walk on the road the boys are teasing me saying ‘Oh, you are very pretty!’ or some bad thing. But as a girl I am not making any teasing to boys. So why can the boy tease me? Always the community support the male person, and always blame girl and say ‘Why did you go out in the evening? You are a girl you shouldn’t be out.’ So that is how it is.”*

As a Western woman I soon started wondering about the government, police and legal protection – where was it? Why did none of the women talk about measures taken, beside the buses, to put an end to this? The women in this study show no signs of expecting or trusting the police or government do to something. Instead they often seem to think these institutions could make the situation worse. One of them said this: *“From before if you feel any kind of problem you can go to police station to get help. But today if we go there it is no help. In spite of helping they will misuse you. So because of this we girls don’t go to the station when all the bad things happen.”* And another stated *“Things like that are happening all over Bangladesh, but the politicians do not care about that”* after telling me about her struggle in public transportation and the public sphere.

So how, then, do they protect themselves? As mentioned above, various restrictions, often also set by their parents, husband or family-in-law, are justified to their surroundings and themselves by the understanding of an insecure society. Besides this, there seems to be a common understanding amongst the women that a woman just has to be “strong and bitter minded,” “have a fighting spirit,” “have a strong mentality,” and “be dedicated.” The women seem to adapt to their environment, and try to maneuver within in. They express feelings of being unfairly treated, and I didn’t find any women agreeing that this is “ok” or “right,” but to various degrees they accept that they have to do the adapting because of the lacking protection and/or support. One of the woman answers this when I asked her about what she thought about gender equality: *“It is both positive and negative things about this. I believe that both are equal, but in our society it is not safe for girls. So we cannot judge equally. If I treat my children in the same way and let both son and daughter go out after six, then one day my daughter comes home and tells about harassment or something from a boy and get problems because of this. So it is hard for a parent to judge equal. There have to be some*

discrimination.” The unsafe public sphere forces them to accept and also treat boys and girls differently themselves. The risk of not doing this is too high. One of the other women, the one who told me about being sexually harassed at work and meeting a lot of resistance from her father when taking up paid work, was still willing to fight, but she also expressed understanding for her friends who chose differently. She explained it like this: *“You know, I think, it is a lot easier just to get married, have kids and look after them. It is very monogamous, yet boring, but very monogamous and routine that keeps on going and going. And you have a husband that look after you, if he is a good husband, and you have all the family drama that you have to take care of. It is a lot simpler life than studying, graduate, finding a good job, properly going to the job, and going up the ladder. It is so hard here. It is unbelievable hard. So you know, I think, that’s why people think ‘Never mind that. I’ll take the easier route.’”*

The women in this study feel they face a lot of hardship in different aspects of life, and as shown above they seem to adapt and find meaning in their situation in different ways. At the same time, we know that Bangladesh is a country and society in development, and from an outside perspective it looks like things are changing. In the next section I will examine if and how the women see change.

7.4 Change

“What happened to me should not happen to my daughter.” The woman behind this quote was from the poorer segment of my informants, and she had just told me how she grew up learning that *“men was upper and women lower.”* In her own childhood her parents had given more food to her brother, and she did not get any education. When starting her own family, she also practiced unequal distribution of food, but she didn’t do this anymore and didn’t want her daughter to be treated this way. The change, she says, happened because: *“(…) of this (her personal) experience and discussion in different social forum we have learned that nobody is higher than others, everyone is equal.”* The personal experience of being unfairly treated or seeing someone close to her being badly treated is used also by other informants to explain why they think differently today. One of the younger women says: *“My realization is that I saw my mother. She had capacity. Like she was taking care of us and had a lot of capacity to build up. But my father did not respect her. So this is why I think different – because I saw my mother having capacity and my father not respecting that.”*

On the other hand, some of the women aren't unconditionally optimistic about change happening. One of them said: *"(...) basic teaching should be given to the boys. Because if they cannot think equal, that women can also do anything like them, then our society cannot change. If I am starting thinking that 'Yes, I am equal to them,' but if they don't think like this also it will be problems. This is the major problem in gender equality."* Others talk about male friends or persons they know that have shown changes in their attitude towards women, but express that they are not sure that this change will remain when these boys/men get married and are expected to act as the head of a family.

The women want to be a part of the change and don't want their children to experience the same as themselves, and they sense a change also in boy's/men's attitudes towards women and gender equality. As mentioned some of the women explain the change with reference to personal experience or seeing someone else being treated unfairly. Development agencies and the government have for many years pushed an education agenda which they believe will lead to increased gender equality. In the interviews, the women often emphasized the importance of education for themselves, but I also asked them some questions about their thoughts about education and what this mean for them as women and for the development of the country and society as a whole.

7.4.1 Education

As discussed above, education has been the subject of a major policy reform in Bangladesh overt the last decades. The target has especially been to get more girls to take education and, as shown, this target has been successfully met, at least up to a certain level. In my study one of the inclusion criteria was that the informant should have some level of education, and as detailed above most of the women had, or had started, higher education.

The women in my study seem to believe in education as an important measure to create development and gender equality. They all believed that education was important for all people, both men and women, but that it was especially important for women to get education so that they could become "established" in the society. One of the women explained it like this: *"Actually an educated girl can handle everything properly. If she is not work outside, that's not a problem, but she can give her opinion in family decision and even in our politics*

she can also take part. Education is very important for all. If a girl is uneducated she even can't manage her children well and she cannot give opinion to an important decision."

It was also a common understanding that getting an education would lead to independence and give women the opportunity to take care of themselves if they had to. Education is perceived as a resource that would give women independence and an asset that no one could take from them. One of the young women told me this: *"I am encouraged from my mother that is semi-literate. She said that if you have an asset, like a house, it will be divided between brothers and sisters. But if you have an education no one can take it from you. That's my mother's advice and is the reason that I will take education. If I take education somehow I will win. It can not be lost."* Another told me about how her father encouraged her to get an education so that *"If I ever face problem or get divorced, if I am an educated person I can get a job and survive. If I don't have a good education, I cannot survive. Always dependent to someone."* A third, young woman also emphasized the independence aspect of education and said: *"A good woman would be someone that can empathize, understand, accept things. And a good woman would be someone who can, if not excel in their education, but at least be able to stand on her own feet when something happen. So it is basically an overall thing."*

When it comes to the more overall, societal changes that education may lead to, the women seem to have a firm belief that education is an important part of the solution. One of the poorest and least educated women in my study described education as the *"backbone of the nation."* I also heard this same phrase from other Bangladeshis and read it repeatedly in newspapers. Some also pointed to the decline in child marriage and use of dowry as something that has happened because people get education. One of the women put it like this: *"We have child marriage and this can only be removed if people have good education. If the people have knowledge and if they know about what is the perfect age to get married. This they only can learn by getting education. So to remove this problem our Prime Minister is using education and a lot of field work, program, workshops. Just to let people understand what is good and what is not good."* Another pointed out that education would give people a better foundation for taking choices, for example in the context of corruption. She said *"If you have like a 98 % literacy of all of your population they will have a better idea of what is good and what is bad. After your education, if you choose to go to the bad side it is your fault."* It seemed to be a common belief amongst the women that education would mean that women and/or poor people would be harder to mislead or cheat. One of the women summed it up like

this: *“Education is important for Bangladesh. Without education people will not respect you. And many times people give me false information about things so it is very important to have education. And if I have education I can give it to my children and then they can get a good job. Everyone need education.”* This woman was a former sex worker and victim of trafficking, who through support from an NGO had received training in different handicrafts, as well as literacy training. At this point she was working as a teacher in an adult literacy class and wanted to take more education. When telling me her story she emphasized that getting an education was crucial for her development as a human being, and also to protect herself. When asked about the future of Bangladesh, most of the women were optimistic and included education in their explanation of why. One of them said this: *“Through education minds will development and we will have a different mindset in Bangladesh.”*

One of the women pointed to the importance of education in order to know about “your rights” and so that girls can learn that they also have rights: *“Without education no one, no man or no woman, can realize themselves. And without education they would not know that they have rights in the society. So that is why it is important – to know that they have rights. To know that yes the man has access, but also woman.”* This quote leads us over to the theme of development and gender equality. What do the women in this study think about gender equality in Bangladesh?

7.4.2 Gender equality for development

“One hand can not make clap. We need two hands to make a clap. Every development should have two hands. We need both men and women to create development. Yes, there is progress in Bangladesh, but still there are many things lacking. Mainly in the job sector. In some of the jobs the women are not welcome. Women should have right to get job everywhere.” After doing a few interviews I noted that there was some difference between the women in terms of the emphasis on the importance of gender equality, and the vocabulary used to discuss this issue. The topic more often emerged in the interviews with women from the lower socio-economic groups, and when talking about it there was no doubt that the topic engaged these women more than the women from the middle-class or higher. When coding the interviews, I found that the quotes under the theme of gender equality, women’s rights and development mainly came from the poorer women in my study. It’s not that the other women don’t care about these issues, but they seem to be more accepting of the inequality, saying that it’s just “the way it is,” as discussed above. When I asked the women in the poorer segment how they

came to the realization about the importance of gender equality, they often mentioned personal stories and education, as discussed above, but they also pointed to different social programs facilitated by NGOs. As will be discussed more deeply later, it is interesting to note this difference between socio-economic groups and what words or emphasis they place on this topic.

Among the women in my study, from all socio-economic groups, an impatience was obvious. Some also expressed discouragement when talking about gender equality. All of the women seem to have an understanding of what gender equality means in Western/development terms, especially when talking about how this was lacking in their own society. One of the women from the poorer section expressed this in this way: *“Most of the women in Bangladesh don’t know what gender equality is. You can ask them and they will say ‘yes, yes,’ but at home her husband don’t even tell her how much he earn. That means that the husband doesn’t honor his wife properly and that he doesn’t trust his wife. This is one example from our society. Many things the male person, husband, father, don’t allow woman to know about the family things. We are always saying that we should have gender equality, but no one allows it. This is the situation.”* Or like another woman, and friend of the woman saying the quote above said: *“Gender equality is only stated in the books and on the posters. When we speak to the people everyone says that we should have gender equality, but the reality is totally different. It’s a theoretical concept, but practically it is totally different.”*

The terms women’s rights and empowerment were not a part of my interview guide, but the topics and concepts emerged nevertheless. One of them said this when I asked her why she wanted to be an entrepreneur, as she had just told me: *“I have realized that women have less power in the economical and social area. So if women become entrepreneurs the power will be in their hands. And then they will be respected and dignified.”* Another woman said this about the development of Bangladesh: *“The development is growing in Bangladesh, but still there is a lot that is lacking. There are many weaknesses in the society, and woman empowerment is not really recognized. Like for example when fathers share assets, many rights and the Bangladeshi people don’t give their women the proper rights. Politicians, like Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, don’t care about this.”*

In this section we have looked closer at what the Dhaka women in my study think about the future of Bangladesh. They believe change is happening, but at the same time feel

discouraged and show impatience. We have seen how they perceive education as an important measure for creating development and gender equality, and we have seen how especially the poorer women talk about lacking rights and experiencing a slow development. Earlier we have seen what the women think about legal measures taken to protect them from harm, and as we can see in the last quote in this section, also when it comes to gender equality and women's rights the women seem to have little faith in the government to do something. In the next section we will dive deeper into their views about politics and politicians to see how they understand this area of public life.

7.5 Politics in Bangladesh are bad

“The people perception of politics in Bangladesh is politics means bad, politics means corruption and politics means rubbish. That is why, mainly the parents, don't like that girls or women involve in politics.” During the interviews I asked all of the women if they liked or were engaged in politics. The response was, with only a couple of exceptions, the same: the women started to giggle or laugh, and if there were more people present (e.g. interpreter) they all laughed with her. I quickly understood that politics for some reason seemed unattractive and/or out of reach for the women. This reaction initially puzzled me a bit, but the reason for this approach towards politics soon became clear. As with the other issues discussed in this chapter, their understanding about politics was complex, but there were some topics that emerged in all of the interviews.

Two of the women told me that they wanted to participate more in politics, if they got the opportunity. But even if they wanted, and although one of them even studied political science, they couldn't give me a straight-forward answer about how they could become politicians in Bangladesh. During the interviews it became clear that the women in my study shared a view of politics in Bangladesh as something bad, something they did not want to be affiliated with, and even if they wanted to they didn't see any chance of actually becoming involved in politics. In the following we will take a closer look at why. There were especially three characteristics of politics that repeatedly emerged in the interviews: money, corruption and family.

“People often think that most of the politicians in Bangladesh get elected through local and general elections. But in the present situation those who are rich and have many money they

become politicians.” As this woman says, the first characteristic was the belief that politics in Bangladesh requires money. If you are not rich you don’t have a chance. Another, middle-class woman, answered this when I asked her how she could get involved in politics if she, hypothetically, wanted to: *“I had to get into a party. Either the government party or the opposition party. And for us it is not possible. You need money, you need lot of like... you have to be in that post. So for me it is not possible.”* Or as one of the other young informants from the higher socio-economic group in the study explained it: *“So if you have money you will have power. Without money you will have no power. The more money the more power. This is basically the primary, or the main, equation: Money = power.”*

The poorer women in my study felt that politics was something for the higher classes in society, and not for “a simple person like me.” They didn’t seem to think that the existing politicians would allow them to get involved in politics. To do that they needed money and they had to accept being part of what they perceived as a corrupt system. One of the women answered this when I asked her why she didn’t want to engage with politics: *“People are more greedy here. They need only money. Nothing else.”* Corruption is the second characteristic regarding politics that emerges in the data. A woman told me that it was not only about being one of the rich people, you had to spend your money on buying votes also: *“Rich people yes. Of course you need money to spend also. Because I have seen that those who won the vote they spend money and give money if you give them a vote. So I can’t do that. I can’t afford that. I am not getting my own salary (laughing). How can I give to others to vote to me?”* Another woman explained the same characteristic, corruption, and how the power of the politicians was built on buying support through cash or other kinds of favors and services: *“And they work in such a way that they even, you never gonna understand. When someone is nice to you you are always going to remember that person, and they work in such a way. They target these needy people, they give them houses or buy them a shop so that they can earn a living, or they buy you a cow so they can have food. And when the political time get tough they ask all this people to come and help them.”* Later in the interview she summed it up like this: *“This is basically the entire system. And every person that are affiliated with this system are to an extent corrupted. Because unless you keep some money in you pocket you are not able to keep the power.”*

The third characteristic of politics is the belief that you need to be in a strong political family to get somewhere. One of the women explained it like this: *“Politics in Bangladesh is not*

good. It is fully corrupted. People get in a good position and most of them are inherited. Like from Sheik Mujib comes Sheik Hasina, and after her her son will take over. There is not place or scope for a newcomer to come and change things. So it is not room for me to contribute something to the country. Even if I want to do some changes and make thing better, and wanted to enter politics they would not let me in with good intentions.” One of the other women said the same when I asked her why she didn't take an interest in politics: “*(...) but if I was born in a family of a politician I would possibly like to join in politics.”* Belonging to a family with political power is for some of the women considered crucial for gaining political positions, and since they don't belong to such a family and/or have the network needed, they perceive it as impossible.

The importance of family also affects the policy and governing of the country, according to some of the women in the study. One of them said this: “*And the present politicians are very much occupied with their family matters, but politics is not for individual family matters. It is for the people. Politicians is always in conflict with each other, mainly about family matters. Some our leaders are always demanding justice for the killings of her father or her husband. And it happened 30-40 years ago, but still they are demanding justice and making new conflicts. But lot of raping is happening in Bangladesh and there is no punishment, no justice. But they are not talking anything about that, only demanding justice for what happened 40 years ago. It should not be like that.”* The conflict between the two main political parties, and their leaders' respective families, is in her eyes overshadowing everything in the politics and policy-making in Bangladesh. Another woman gave an example of a decision the present Prime Minister Sheik Hasina had made based on the long-lasting conflict between the two families: “*Something she does is good, but sometimes she does things like the name changing of the airport. She had to spend huge money to change this name. Before it was Zia International Airport, she changed it to Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport and she had to spend huge amount of money. And our people are starving and country being flood. It was not necessary to do this. It wasn't important.”*

7.5.1 Women in politics

The aim of this study is to search for explanations for why so few women in Bangladesh are participating in in the public sphere and especially in politics. Therefore, I included some questions about the importance of including women in politics. The conversation took different turns in the interviews. Some of the women focused on the progress that has been

made, and the fact that today there are women in many important political positions. Others agreed that there were women in important positions but didn't believe that this would lead to change, since the women either were too occupied with the big family conflict or because in reality there are men controlling the women. One of them described it like this: *"Yes, women can change many things, but as I already said we need support from the men. But they always try to use women and to show that she is holding the position, but behind that men are controlling that woman. So they don't give hundred percent power to the woman, they hold some back."*

As mentioned, most of the women believed it was important to have more women engaged in politics, because they have knowledge about women's issues and can contribute to making the lives of women better. On the other hand, some of the informants said that women (with reference particularly to Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia) have had their chance to change things over the last 25 years without achieving much. Now they wanted a man to take power. In the words of one of the women, when answering a question about the present Prime Minister as a role model: *"Yes, she is a woman. But in Bangladesh we think that she is not doing very good. If we had a man he can do good, but she as a woman is not doing good. ... I think that man is good, and woman can also do good, but women's brain or mind is not very strong. A man can do better than a woman."* Another woman argued for a change in power. Bangladesh need a new person taking over, and she concluded that it should be a man: *"For the last, I don't know how many years, we can see this two women doing politics but we don't see any change. If a different person, a man comes in, it will be better."*

The different understandings outlined above also became evident when talking about the specific concept of women in politics. One of the women pointed out the restrictions women have as the reason for why so few women engaged in politics, besides the negative view of politics described above: *"The main reason is that family members, the male, don't allow women to go out from house even to do politics. They think that if the woman goes out of house and involve in politics maybe they will be more clever, smarter and maybe when the woman get smarter maybe the man will be pushed down."* Others explained it with reference to features of the women themselves, and how they understood gender relations in society: *"Maybe people with education don't prefer to join politics because it involves a lot of things that woman usually don't enjoy. Like you need to stay outside, you need to work after office, you need to meet a lot people. And because we are biologically weaker than men sometimes*

we feel scared to deal with men that are strong. We meet a lot of people that are politically strong, and a man can deal with a man. But a woman feels very insecure to deal with a man, if the man is politically strong or behave badly. Sometimes we don't know how react, how would he reply. We think politics is not a very safe place for women."

Through this section we have discovered some, seen with my Norwegian eyes, surprising and interesting discourses about politics and women in politics. The women explain how money and corruption are the most important resources if you want to engage in politics. Politics is for the rich upper-classes, and besides money you will need a powerful family or connections to help you get there. It is also interesting to see how the arena which should be highly engaged in creating safer societies for all and working for gender equality is itself perceived as unsafe for women. The fact that the country has been led by women over the last two decades makes this even more interesting and puzzling.

In this chapter I have presented the findings in my data material. Each section in this chapter represents a discourse about women that either hinders them or empowers them to participate in society. These discourses are interconnected and work together in complex ways. In the next chapter I will discuss where the different discourses might be rooted and how the broader culture and social practices influence how the women represent themselves. I will also discuss whether one could trace strategies in the way the women draw on and mix discourses, and whether these contribute to maintaining or changing existing social practices.

8 Discussion

In the section above I have presented the main discourses that I found in my data material, and which I would argue are the key representations the Dhaka women in my study draw upon when describing their own life and situation. These discourses show us how they make meaning in the situation they are in. As we have seen, their way of drawing on discourses is not completely unison, and they draw on different discourses to describe their situation.

The material presented in chapter 7 provides a basis upon which we now can discuss more directly the research questions presented in chapter 5. In this section I will discuss the discourses that the women draw on themselves in light of common explanations for gender inequality, including explanations for why women don't participate in politics. The aim of

this part of the analysis is to find relationships between the discursive practices outlined above and the broader social practices and structures, which are outlined in chapter 3. I will also point to other relevant elements from e.g. the public debate and newspapers regarding these topics. Let me once again point to Jørgensen and Phillips' understanding that it is at this point in the analysis questions about the function of the discourses could be answered. Are they contributing to reproducing the status quo or is it a part of a change? How do the women negotiate with the discourses? Does this strengthen unequal power relations between women and men in Bangladesh, or do the women challenge these relations? (2002,87)

8.1 The ideology of women as caregivers

The first strong discourse that appeared in the data was the emphasis on the woman as crucial to the family and home. This is for some of the women viewed as empowering, but it could also represent a trace of the patriarchal culture they live in. The same could be said about the women's experience of having to manage everything in the family and home, despite social changes happening rapidly in other areas. In the lives of the women in my study, the woman is still viewed as the caregiver and the man is the provider in the family.

Even though the family and the role of the mother are important, economic development and changing social structures have led to more women taking up paid work. The high costs of living, combined with low and irregular incomes, make it hard for households to survive on only one income (Banks 2013,96). Allowing women to work is not something all husbands do with a light heart, but the daily pressure of income security makes it impossible to turn down the opportunities women get in today's Bangladesh. But social and cultural changes don't happen as fast as economic development, and women taking up work is a challenge for both the self-esteem of the husbands – linked to their being the main provider – and to the household's status and honor. As discussed above, despite increased economic opportunities, the maintaining of house and family remains the woman's responsibility. This leads to women having to manage and balance between the household, employment and the marital relationship (Banks 2013, 99).

The still strong emphasis on women as the caregivers gives women a heavy burden, and if they want to, or the family needs them to work, this burden gets heavier. Instead of dividing the household work between family members, the women view it as their responsibility to

manage everything. This corresponds with the findings in Banks' study about female employment in Dhaka. Even if the women work longer hours than their husband, they still have to make sure food is ready for the family when it is expected, and if it's not ready they can expect punishment or quarrels with the husband (2013,104).

The expectations on a woman to manage everything is also a part of the public debate about women and gender equality. Elita Karim, a famous singer, actress and journalist, writes in a commentary in the Daily Star newspaper in Bangladesh: *“The lives of women today are far more challenging than they were during my mother's or grandmother's time. Yes, they were educated and probably even encouraged to go out and work. However, most women had one focus in life – their children and their homes. Today however, a modern woman needs to balance a career, a home, cook, look after children, get promotions at home, go to the gym, look beautiful and fresh and always be happy – quite a difficult feat.”* She continues to describe how education, development and social change have given modern women more opportunities, but the home responsibility has not changed. Still women are expected to take the full responsibility and do so in a proper manner. Karim argues that *“This is the woman of today, or rather the superwoman that every man yearns to be related to and which every woman should become”* (Karim 2016).

The women in my study also talk straight-forward about this themselves when they say that they live in a male dominated society, or when they point to the inequality in different sectors, which they believe is caused by men not accepting women in these arenas. There may appear to be a generational difference in how much emphasis they place on this issue and how troubling they find it. The younger women seem to find this more frustrating, but at the same time it is interesting to see how most of them still don't question the division of labor in the family, and are planning to manage the family in the same way as previous generations. As we saw above, Kandiyoti's definition of classic patriarchy, which is most common in South Asia, includes not only dominance of the man, but also his family. A married woman doesn't answer to her husband alone, but also to his father or, sometimes even more importantly, to his mother. This way of understanding social relations and the power relations within the family is evident also in my study. The younger women might have a heavier emphasis on how important it is for the man to respect her and that they have to have a “common understanding” about how to manage their family than the older women. But this is talked about in terms of *him giving her* more freedom, *him giving her* opportunity to work or *him*

giving her understanding, or whether or not her family-in-law accepts this. On the one hand, the power still seems to be in the hands of the husband and his family. On the other hand, this could be viewed as the women negotiating with the classical patriarchy discourse by demanding more rights and freedom, while still remaining within the prevailing discourse about patriarchy where the man is the family's head and holds the power to give her more rights and freedom.

In the interviews we also find the persistent understanding of females as less worth than males, and despite the economic and social development that has taken place, many families still believe that investing in their girl child is waste of money. This way of assessing the worth of a human based on gender could be viewed as a consequence of patriarchy. It also leads to women being less educated, particularly when it comes to higher education, and getting fewer opportunities to excel in education and work. This again could lead to fewer women "having what it takes," in terms of socio-economic resources, to engage in politics or take on leading positions. We have seen in chapter 3 that some possible explanations offered for the lack of female participation in politics are the lack of education, money and social network. It could be argued that also these factors themselves are a consequence of patriarchy, and not independent explanations of gender inequality in Bangladesh. In a society where classic patriarchy seems to be so fundamental to the way people think and act, its ideological effects influence the organizing of society and structures that again influence people's choices and opportunities in favor of the powerful groups.

The understanding of women as first and foremost mothers and wives with responsibilities in the private sphere is a good example of an ideology. It is a belief system that both individuals and the society hold and keep on reproducing through discursive practices, and as the interviews show, the women seem to think that this is "just the way it is and should be." This discourse about women is accepted by both men and women and in this way it helps to sustain the unequal power relation between men and women in the society, and works in the interest of those already most powerful in the society – men. But when we include the way the women use the concept of "managing," and talk about how they are the only ones that are strong enough to handle this task, we see how they negotiate with the ideology. Or, in other words, we can say there is a struggle to change the ideology in the interest of the women. They don't only see themselves as caregivers and wives anymore. They view this as their duty, which is in line with existing ideology in the society, but they are proud and emphasize

that this requires qualifications and competence that only women have.

On the other hand, one of the features of classic patriarchy, according to Kandiyoti, is that girls tend to marry very young. If we look at the women in my study this is no longer the case. Among the ten women under 30 years old in my study, only two were married. A couple of them talked about marriage happening in the near future, but this depended on their family and the family of the man in question. Arranged marriage is, among the women in this study, still a common way of finding a future partner. But the younger women explain that they have the choice to say no to someone their family finds. They can also find someone themselves, but then their families have to agree to it before marriage. One of the women under 30 told me that she was planning her wedding at this point, and she met her future husband through her parents arranging their first meeting. But after the introduction the young couple themselves chose to spend more time together, and finally decided that they wanted to marry. As she said it herself *“So I believe in love marriage more than arranged marriage, but I will say that this would not be an arranged marriage. Yes, he comes from my relatives, but then we met, we talked and we tried to understand each other. So the arranged marriage turned to love marriage so it will not be arranged marriage anymore. I think it is important to get to know someone before you marry them.”* They divide between “love marriage” and “arranged marriage,” the former describing marriages based on “romantic love” and own choice. This is how they perceive that Western marriages take place. But as we can see from the quote, the patriarchal concept of arranged marriage doesn’t necessarily entail force anymore, and it doesn’t need to happen at a very young age. This change in social practices could also be a consequence of negotiation between ideologies, and an example of how women through this negotiation contribute to constituting new social practices.

When discussing patriarchal structures and concepts like arranged marriage, it is important to note that this study only includes 17 urban Bangladeshi women in Dhaka. It is not possible to generalize from this. The difference between rural and urban contexts, and women from various socio-economic groups and religious backgrounds is not a part of this study, and would need to be explored in greater depth in order to draw firm conclusions about change and a loosening patriarchal grip over women’s choice of husband or when to marry.

8.2 Influence of religion

Religion or religious concepts were seldom used by the women when they talked about their lives or gender equality. As discussed above, it can sometimes be difficult to separate religion from culture and vice versa. In a society like Bangladesh where religion influences politics, history, families and culture heavily, and has done so for many years, this is particularly difficult. In some of the interviews I asked the women about what role they thought Islam played in gender equality and social relations. It was interesting to see how the Muslim women I asked answered that religion did not play any part in this. It was only the society and culture that could be blamed for inequality. As one of them explained *“No, religion did not make this. But the society somehow made it like this. The religion says ‘Do not do adultery.’ This is not said to the female. It is not said to the man. It is said to both, to the whole society. The religion did not do this, but the culture and society made it like this.”* On the other hand, the Christian women that I talked to seemed to emphasize religion, and especially the influence of Islam, more when they talked about gender inequality. This was often mixed with understandings of discrimination against Christians as a religious minority, and not exclusively discrimination based on gender. But both Christians and Muslims seem to believe that Christians give their girls more freedom. Like one of the young Muslim women answered when I asked her about what role religion played in this: *“Religion do not affect gender equality. For example, in a Muslim family a daughter is not allowed to go outside after sunset, but this also happen in a Hindu family. It is the same. So religion do not affect gender equality. But I think Christian people are more broadminded and allow their girls to go out, to work and to make boyfriend. In Muslim or Hindu religion girls are not allowed to make friends that are boys or to go outside, to go for night parties. So Christian people allow girls to communicate with all people. In this sector a little bit difference.”* So at the same time as she doesn't want to emphasize religion in the meaning-making, this informant does exactly this when pointing out that Christians are more “broadminded,” which is something that she seems to think is a good thing. Nevertheless, the main understanding among most of the women, independent of their own religious affiliation, seems to be that religion is not something holding them down.

That being said, one of the women who grew up in a Muslim family, but now said about herself that she is agnostic, did not agree when I asked her if she believed that gender inequality is only caused by society and culture, and not religion: *“Of course it is religion. Religion is big, big factor. I completely disagree with that statement. (...) Because most of the*

population is Muslim here. But how it is portrayed is in a very negative, a very taboo kind of way, like if you talk to men or if girls are having premarital sex or premarital affair that is against religion. A lot of people do say that. (...) But whenever if anyone, everywhere, we walk down the road and we see something going on. Saying if a girl and a guy is going somewhere in a rickshaw people are going to comment. Ok, fine that's may be the society. Lets just think that that's the society, but what they are saying you know, they might be talking about your back and passing mean comments, that is all fine that's the society. But what brings in religion is what they are all saying. They are not saying 'Oh look that girl is bad because she is going somewhere in a rickshaw sitting so close to a boy,' but they are going to say 'Oh look what this girl is doing. She is definitely going to hell for doing this.' So that is definitely bringing in religion. (...) Here in Dhaka, when I am travelling, lets say a boy drops me off at night, just for the sake of security, my mom knows who that person is. That person might be my best friend or be like a brother to me, and my mom knows all my friends. But the people in our apartment will be like 'Whoo.. who is she coming home with? Is that her boyfriend? Oh my God, no one's going to marry her. No good guy.' Or 'She is going to hell' or 'God is going to punish her for this.' This is basically the religion and society intertwined, and.. so I will completely disagree with that statement if someone says that religion has nothing to do with this."

Looking closer at this statement (from a non-religious woman) and the discourses outlined above, it is possible to find some traces of beliefs about women and gender relations influenced by Islam. For example, we have seen how the women experience restrictions laid upon them by parents, husband or family-in-law. These restrictions could be understood as a part of the patriarchal structure of society, but as argued in chapter three, segregation between the sexes and restricting women to the home could also be traced back to understandings in Islam about female sexuality. Sexual contact before marriage is perceived as something sinful, and would bring shame on the woman's family. The family's honor and respectability is closely linked to proper behavior, and especially how the women and girls in the family behave. So as mentioned above, a woman participating in the public sphere is a potential threat to the societal order because of the temptation she represents to men, and she also risks bringing shame and dishonor to her family. Views on sexuality were not a topic in my interviews, but in the quote above we can see how the informant explains what reactions she expects if she, or others, were seen together with a boy she's not married to. Her understanding is that people will draw upon religious concepts like "hell." She also points to

the importance of being pure and pious for getting married, which is important for the family's honor. This is pointed out by more of the women when they talk about their restrictions and the segregation of the sexes, and they emphasize what other people will think and say if they don't follow the rules. The examples they give are similar to the ones used in the quote above. So to prevent bringing shame on the family, the women in my study often apply the "right" behavior, like staying at home and dressing properly. Or, as Halder argues, female chastity and morality get top priority in everyday gender relations in Bangladesh. The more a woman remains in the private sphere, the more this is seen as an indication of that woman's purity (2004,36).

In chapter 2 we reviewed the development of Islam and its influence on society in Bangladesh. We also saw how some scholars argue that more and more women in Bangladesh are choosing to take up conservative religious practices such as wearing a veil. To veil or not to veil was not a topic in this study, and only two of the women interviewed were wearing a hijab during the interview. This is not enough data to draw any conclusions, but it is interesting to note that both of the women choosing to wear hijab were from the middle-class. One was working and the other was working from home. One of them explained how wearing a veil gave her freedom to work outside of home: *"But the Muslim religion do not tell do not go here, do not go there. But there has some limit. If you follow purdah like this (pointing to her hijab) then you can go anywhere. But don't do against your Islam. They have some limits so don't cross the limits, but inside your limits you can do anything."* This corresponds with Rozario's (2006) findings about women choosing to take up veiling for strategic reasons, to gain more freedom to move and participate in society.

Another interesting finding in Rozario's study shows how there are socio-economic differences when it comes to wearing a veil. She writes that it is mainly the lower-class women that are taking advantage of the economic development and social changes, and argues that this is because they have always been forced to compromise their purity and honor in order to survive (2006,370). At the same time, middle-class women seem to continue to live out the roles the Bangladeshi culture has assigned them, and she explains this with the status concern of middle-class women. She argues that one reason for taking up the veil is to guard their honor and status, and create distance to the lower-class women participating in the public sphere. As discussed earlier, the conservative interpretation of religion gives them a way of still being superior to the lower-class women. They can't contest them in the labor

market, but they can be better Muslims (Rozario 2006,377). Rozario uses Kandiyoti's concept of patriarchal bargain to explain why the middle-class women choose to take up conservative religious symbols instead of e.g. work. In this way they adhere to the persistent patriarchal culture and religious beliefs, and at the same time strengthen their position (2006,370). Again we see how women negotiate with the existing ideologies to construct new discourses and create change.

I cannot draw conclusions in the same way as Rozario based on my scarce data on this particular topic, but it is interesting to note that the only women in my study that wear a veil are middle-class women. As shown in the previous chapter, the women from the lower-classes tended to draw on more Western concepts in the gender equality debate, such as rights and empowerment, than the women from the middle or upper-class. I have also shown how the women from the higher classes seem to have more acceptance for the culture and structures defining the relationship between men and woman than the lower-class women. These findings correspond with Rozario's findings in her study (2006). This could also be interpreted as a way of negotiating with existing beliefs and discourses; by applying a symbol of purity, they achieve freedom. The women are creative in changing discourses and participate in changing the social world.

In the section above I discussed the emphasis on family and how the women draw on a discourse which describes the mother as the most crucial person in the family and home. In this discourse, they might draw upon old religious beliefs about the family and social relations within it. As we saw in the chapter about Islam, the family is the cornerstone of an Islamic society and is much emphasized in the Qur'an. As Dahl argued, the female identity in Islam is closely linked to the roles of wife and mother, and the success of her life is judged by her marriage and family. There is an emphasis on the importance of this role also in the Islamic religion (1997,53-55).

In sum, restrictions and an emphasis on honor could be traced back to patriarchal culture, but could also be closely linked to the the influence of Islam in society. Most likely, both of these two ways of organizing the society have influenced the way the women find meaning in their situation, as we have seen in the discussion so far. Islamic discourses contribute to the constitution of social practices and relations. But the women in the study don't point to religion when they explain how they understand their situation. They talk about male

dominance and point to different consequences of this, but at the same time they point to other explanations for lacking gender equality. It is hard to separate what comes from religion and what comes from culture. As Halder argues, the ideology of Islam is reinforced by cultural context and manifested in institutions like female seclusion through purdah. In this way, religious customs get incorporated into a culture which legitimates the exclusion of women from public spheres (Halder 2004,36).

One of the discourses that emerged most frequently was the understanding of the public sphere as something dangerous, and how the women have to struggle to survive in their country. In the next section I will discuss the discourses outlined about safety and struggle and see if they appear to be linked to a broader social practice.

8.3 Justifiable sense of insecurity

So far I have discussed the material presented in chapter 7 in light of the most common explanations or theories regarding gender inequality and why women in Bangladesh don't participate in politics or other important arenas in the public sphere. One of the strongest discourses the women in the study draw on about their lives is that the public sphere is not a safe place for women, and that their life both in the public and private sphere is full of struggles and hardship. This understanding seems to create a meaningful explanation for why women tend to stay away from the public sphere, or at least seems to be a key to the overall understanding of this issue. This construction of reality of their surroundings is built into the women's meaning-making and naturalized into their discourse and way of organizing life. That the public sphere is unsafe for women seems to be something everybody knows, and to protect women from this is "common sense." Again we might be discussing an ideology in the Bangladeshi society.

8.3.1 Women need protection

When spending time in the country, or just by following Bangladeshi news, you can quickly find evidence that what the women talk about appears to be true, and as a woman you soon understand how to behave to not provoke or put yourself in danger. During my stay in Bangladesh I read one of the newspapers everyday, and highlighted articles that in some way or another talked about women. With the exception of a few articles about e.g. female leaders in different sectors, or how different NGOs worked to empower women, all the highlighted articles were about violence against women.

To exemplify this, I will give a short introduction to some of the crimes reported about. On the 19th of August 2016, the Independent Bangladesh (The Independent Bangladesh 2015) wrote about a woman being hacked to death by her husband over a family feud, and the same paper reported about the same crime happening only days later in another place in the country (The Independent Bangladesh 2015). Violence against women, often resulting in death, appears to almost be perceived as normal, or at least not surprising. One of the most common crimes to be reported is rape, often extremely violent rape. To exemplify, I will list some of the headlines from the period I monitored the newspaper: *“Teenager gang raped, family confined for 5 days”* (The Independent Bangladesh 2015), *“Two charged for Garo women rape”* (The Independent Bangladesh 2015), *“3 remanded for rape, murder of 2 schoolgirls”* (The Independent Bangladesh 2015) and *“Man held for attempting to rape minor girl”* (The Independent Bangladesh 2015). According to Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), a legal aid and human rights organization in Bangladesh, 846 incidents of rape were reported in 2015. 60 of these had resulted in death, 163 of the victims were aged between 7-12 years, and 53 were under six years old. In 2015, 212 murders were reported as husband killing his wife (ASK 2016). These statistics show the incidents ASK have been able to find through different sources (e.g. media, own reports). I have not been able to locate any national data on violence against women, so even if the validity of the data above is problematic, it is at the moment the only available data. Because of the lacking trust in the legal system, it’s not unlikely that there are more cases not being reported than there are that are reported.

During my stay in Bangladesh there were several demonstrations against violence against women, and in the local newspapers both editors, journalists and other writers (e.g. commentators, reader’s letters) raised their voices about the issue to demand justice. One of the major demonstrations marked the 20th anniversary of the death of Yasmin Akther, a 20-year-old maid who was raped and violently killed by three policemen. This event in 1995 mobilized people all over Bangladesh in the demand for justice, and seems to have started a dialogue addressing the issue of violence against women. It also brought attention to the failing legal system, as it took two years to arrest the men and almost nine years to get them sentenced and execute their punishment. One of the main English language newspapers in Bangladesh, The Daily Star, devoted four pages to this story on the day of the anniversary. In the article, Upashana Salam argues that even though this marked a change, at this point in history the people and society of Bangladesh seem to have forgotten about Yasmin and their

fight for her justice. Salam argues that there is a rape culture in Bangladesh. She defines rape culture as a culture “(...)in which sexual violence is common, accepted, normalized, tolerated and even pardoned in a society.” She continues to argue that rape is so common in Bangladesh that many only feel a slight annoyance or, even worse, indifference when they hear or read about rape incidents. She also states that rape jokes are common, and songs that glorify violence against women are a consequence of rape being normalized and accepted in the culture. Salam argues that society in Bangladesh in most cases blames the victim for the incident, since the man only is a man with “natural urges” and that the sexual morality of women is given more importance. Like in the story about Yasmin, many people, also within the police force, assert that Yasmin was only an “unchaste” prostitute whose life was of no importance. When women try to file a complaint about a rape, they are forced to answer intrusive questions about the incident and context, which leads to more humiliation and blaming of the victim (Salam 2015, 10-12).

These examples of headings of articles in newspapers, and the more thorough outline of Salam Upashana’s article in *The Daily Star*, show how women both in fact *are* victims of different kind of violence, and also how women are *portrayed* in media as victims. Women are portrayed (with exceptions, of course,) as victims of a society that doesn’t respect or value them. They are not safe in their own country, or in their own home, and have to be protected. The society has to change for this to change.

This way of understanding women’s situation is easy to recognize in the interviews in this study. All the women, across both age and socio-economic status, tell us a story of feeling unsafe and how this leads them or their parents to restrict them from participating in arenas in the public sphere. They represent themselves, and are by media often represented, as powerless in these situations. When reading commentators and others that write about this issue, there is no doubt about their good intentions, or that their focus on the issue is important to raise awareness. But in combination with lacking media coverage about other, more positive, stories about women and how they are empowered in Bangladesh, this seems to enforce a representation about women as weak, or as victims that need to be protected. It strengthens the understanding of the public sphere as something dangerous, and a dysfunctional legal system leaves the women with a feeling of being powerless. Of course, this is not an argument for the newspapers to stop writing about these incidents. It is often media coverage and public mobilization that has brought forth change, like in the case of

Yasmin, but the scarce examples of other discourses about women in the media at the moment arguably only leads to a stronger understanding of the need for protection.

Again, it is not possible to generalize based on my study. But the fact that all the women in this study draw on a discourse about women being unsafe and having to struggle to survive gives us a strong indication of why women aren't as visible in the public sphere as one might expect in light of both economic development and social change.

8.3.2 Underlying discourses

Above we have seen how women both feel, and in many situations actually are, unsafe in Bangladeshi society. The women in my study draw upon an overall discourse about women as victims, or potential victims, that need to be protected. The women do not necessarily believe that they actually are weak, but they blame society for not being safe and not offering them the protection they need. So: there is a discourse about women not being safe. But what kinds of underlying discourses or beliefs have led to this? Why are women not safe in the society?

Zaman argues that the issues of exploitation and violence against women in Bangladesh are largely structural and systemic problems. The economic deprivation of women and the patrilineal nature of e.g. property relations, like inheritance and ownership, leaves women exploited and susceptible to male domination (1999,38). Zaman also argues that this exploitation furthermore is enforced in the name of cultural values and beliefs, and by the laws and practices of the state that, in the name of Islam, continue to legitimize unequal rights and discriminatory treatment of women in the country (1999,38). I have discussed traces of patriarchy and religion previously, but to follow Zaman's argument these two might also explain why men (who in most incidents are the perpetrators) seem to think that violence and exploitation of women is acceptable.

As discussed above, women, from birth to death, are dominated by men. Within the family, boys are given priority over girls, and girls have to obey their male relatives. When getting married, Islamic law states that the woman becomes the property of the man. This patriarchal way of organizing family life and society gives a woman's life, productivity, voice and body less value and importance than a man's. If we combine this with the Islamic understandings of women as a sexual temptation to all men, which have to be hidden so that men don't do something they would regret, we could see an underlying rationale for how men and the legal system justify their actions. It also shows how women tend to get the blame. As Rozario states

about the burqa, and I will argue that this goes for all restrictions and elements of purdah, women that don't apply to this are on their own. The state does not take any responsibility for women that don't behave themselves and obey the rules (2006,378). This is also a part of the meaning-making when it comes to women choosing to follow the rules and obey restrictions. They know it is unsafe for them to not do so.

The importance of getting married and not bringing shame on your family also gives the women an incentive to “keep out of harm's way” and follow the rules. At the same time, it gives men that exploit or rape unmarried girls a way of keeping them quiet. Firstly, the girl should “not have been out so late” or “should not dressed/behaved in such a manner” that she tempted the boy – these actions in themselves bring shame to the family. Secondly, no one will marry a woman who is not a virgin, and not to get married again brings shame to your family. Thus, the strong discourse of female purity and modesty and the discourse about honor and shame give many “tools” to someone who wants to exploit a woman to get their way without being punished. This also contributes to keeping women out of the public sphere and prevents them from participating in e.g. politics, since this would mean they would have to work with men, be out in public and work late evenings – as was also described by women in the study, which corresponds with Chowdhury's findings (2009). The ideology about women as victims works in the interest of a male dominant society and portrays women as something that has to be protected. Women's need of protection is accepted by all groups, which e.g. the women's statements about the need for separate buses show.

At this point I would like to stress the findings in my study about change happening. As we saw among the discourses above, the women see change happening, and they themselves have decided to act differently within their own family. One example is the woman deciding not to give priority to the boys when it comes to food, or how they all think that a girl should get the same education as boys. In this study I have not included any men, and the greater part of my informants are below 40 years old, so I can't say much about how much of a change is happening in the male population or in the older generations. But the women in my study do indicate that the change is happening more slowly amongst the male population, and that men still hold on to their power.

When addressing change, the women often on their own initiative pointed out education as an important influence, and as the topic of education was part of my interview guide, we used some time in every interview to talk about the women's thoughts about education.

8.4 Education for development and independence

There is a strong positive education discourse found in the interviews. The women in this study believe education is important in order to change the society, but also to secure their own future and independence. Over the last decades there has been a major focus on the importance of education within development policy. The Bangladeshi government has since the early 1990s implemented a lot of schemes and policies for mass education, and as we have seen earlier these have been successful in terms of enrollment. Based on this study, the policies also seem to have succeeded in terms of getting the population to understand the value of education, and especially the value of girls getting education. However, it is important to note that this project only includes urban women and that the situation for rural girls might be different.

For the women I talked to, there seems to be a close connection between an educated population and development, good governance, gender equality and personal growth. Education is perceived as the “backbone of the nation” and essential in creating development, both economic and social. In a five year (2011-2105) plan for accelerating growth and reducing poverty, the Bangladeshi government states:

The role of education in facilitating social and economic progress is well recognized. It opens up opportunities leading to both individual and group entitlements. Education, in its broadest sense of development of youth, is the most crucial input for empowering people with skills and knowledge and giving them access to productive employment in future. Improvements in education are not only expected to enhance efficiency but also augment the overall quality of life. Education acts as the engine of growth for economic and social development of a nation. Human resources development is at the core of Bangladesh's development efforts and access to quality education is critical to poverty reduction and economic development (Ministry of Planning 2011,112).

This message seems to have gotten through to the the population. It is also communicated through mass media. In a comment about the International Women's Day, a Daily Star journalist writes:

In order to make huge strides overseas for any movement, we must start at home. UNICEF has recognized key areas in terms of gender parity that, once addressed and achieved, will ensure that more women in Bangladesh have the chance to strive for greatness. By improving the quality of basic education, ensuring that, from childhood throughout adolescence, girls have access to an adequate education system that will consistently provide them with academic qualifications and life skills, they will gain the confidence needed to be active members of the community. They will have the confidence needed to seek jobs in sectors that don't involve domestic work. They will be inspired to aim higher and reach their full potential (Haider 2016).

She finishes her article with: “It all starts with education – to teach our girls that they are always worth something.” (Haider 2016).

The rapid economic development in Bangladesh could also be argued to be a consequence, or a proof, of smart-economics and the women in development strategies. Mobilizing women into the labor market through the garments industry has been an important part of both economic, human and social development. In the project I find less traces of this way of describing why women should be allowed to get an education and to work. They do believe female labor is crucial for the work force, and appear to feel proud to be a part of a growing economy. However, they seem to draw more upon discourses about women’s rights and gender equality as important because “men and women have the same value and capacities.”

These discourses could also be traced back to development discourse about gender inequality, which again has influenced the policy-making in Bangladesh. As discussed in the section about change earlier, these discourses are more often drawn on by the poorer women, which have in different ways been in contact with NGOs working with issues connected to gender inequality. This could imply that gender equality and women’s empowerment programs implemented by NGOs in Bangladesh reach poor women, which often also are the target groups, but don’t have that much influence on the upper-classes. Here, tradition and what’s appropriate for a (Muslim) woman seem to be more emphasized in the meaning-making than discourses we often link to a Western feminist discourse about gender equality. It also implies that NGOs reach one of their most important target groups and are influencing women in Bangladesh. But again, these findings cannot be generalized based on this study alone.

8.5 The unattractive and unreachable life of politics

In the presentations of which discourses I found in the material related to women’s participation in the public sphere, one of the strongest and most consistent discourses is the understanding of politics as unattractive and unreachable for women like them. Politics is

synonymous with corruption, conflict, money and family heritage. The different women emphasized these in various ways, but none of them believed they had a chance of having a political career, even if they wanted to. Only a couple of informants expressed that they would have wanted to, if they could. Based on these interviews it could be argued that the political discourse in Bangladesh does not attract the engagement of women, and the discourse about politics is mainly negative. Politics is associated with the game and with the fight for power, rather than with policy-making that can create positive changes.

This attitude is also evident in the broader society, and the same way of understanding politics is easy to trace in media, as well as in other studies about politics in Bangladesh. Stories about corrupt politicians, policemen or government officials are everyday news. Faith in the institutions and systems which are supposed to hinder corruption and abuse of power is low, and the belief in change appears to be crumbling for every new scandal and political fight over personal matters. People often seem to have given up on the politicians and system. Some have called this state of mind for political apathy, or that Bangladeshi people suffer from political illiteracy (Hashmi 2016).

In the Spring of 2016 there will be local government elections in Bangladesh, and newspapers have during the time-frame of my research had numerous reports about activities connected to the upcoming election. In this context, one can also find more general debate about the nature of politics in Bangladesh. It is, in the English language newspapers at least, not easy to find articles about policy or policy demands. However, what's more obvious is the people's lacking belief in the system and lack of incentives for getting involved. One example is this reader's letter from a reader in one of the bigger cities in Southern Bangladesh:

Political parties are busy campaigning, but to us it seems pointless because we can easily predict the result of the election. We do not expect a free and fair election from this Election Commission as we have seen enough of their performances. If they were capable of holding a credible election, then the country would not have been in such a mess. So, we are waiting to see another flawed election, a blow to democracy (Jahan 2016).

The conflict between the two major parties and their leaders is also widely covered by the media. The personal conflict about who is responsible for killing who is most visible around national holidays and celebrations, for example connected to the liberation from Pakistan. But there is a continuing flow of allegations towards the other party and leader from both sides. It

is not uncommon that the opposition leader has to answer to a court for something she has said or done. However, she often fails to appear in court due to health issues. The discourse about family matters dominating politics is thus not only drawn on by the women in the study, but it seems to be a widely held understanding.

The violent political history of Bangladesh might also influence the women's views, especially since this seems not to have ended and there still is a lot of politically motivated violence. During the preparations for elections, stories about party leaders, members or supporters being harassed or becoming victims of violent incidents are common, and often the supporters of the other political side gets the blame. Sometimes also the police or other government institutions are allegedly used by the ruling party to send a message (The Independent Bangladesh 2016a). As described in chapter three, for a person that engages in politics this is to be expected, and women have to expect being harassed by both colleges, police and other entities they come in contact with through their position (Halder 2004, 45).

8.6 Bangladeshi women are strong and smart

We have now seen what discourses the urban Dhaka women in this study draw on when they describe their own life and situation. As discussed, the women draw on different discourses and often mix them to describe their life, and this shows how they make meaning in their situation. I have also discussed some overall societal discourses, to see if the discourses the women draw on could also be found in broader social practices, structures and discourses.

When analyzing the interviews and findings, and the discourses outlined in the previous chapter, I find that the women in my study draw on a lot of different, and sometimes conflicting, discourses about women's situation. If you had the opportunity to read through the interviews as a whole, you would see that most of the women draw upon all or many of these different discourses when talking about their own life. To use Fairclough's framework we could say that there is a high degree of *interdiscursivity*. We find not only what we could call a traditional discourse about women limiting them to the home, but we can also see a more progressive discourse with elements from a feminist discourse about gender equality (e.g. women's rights).

The different sections in chapter 7 point out different discourses about women and their role. The women draw on discourses about the importance of family and how the family is the woman's responsibility to manage. They describe how a woman should behave. We can find religious discourses about gender relations and we can see how a discourse about the public sphere as something dangerous for women influences their actions. At the same time, they tend to draw upon an educational discourse, which emphasizes the importance of education for a woman and for development. They also draw on Western feminist discourses when they talk about women's rights and the lack of them in their country. We can also see how they don't necessarily draw on these discourses when talking about the shortage of women in politics in Bangladesh, but rather that they draw on understandings about politics as something bad and inaccessible in itself.

This way of mixing discourses contributes to constituting different understandings of women and their roles than for example Western feminism or the traditional patriarchal way. By negotiating with the discourses, the women show resistance against the structures of suppression that they see in society. They contribute to changing the interdiscursive mix and the social practices, as Jørgensen and Phillips write about. For example, the women talk about how they believe women belong in the family and home and should take responsibility for this, and in the same answer they could point out how this is because women are strong, smart and can handle it. Yes, a woman has to carry the burden of the home and family duties alone, but this does not simply mean that she is being taken advantage of and is subordinate to her husband. According to the women in this study, it could just as well mean that she is the only person in the household that is strong enough to have this task, because of the discourse about the role of mother and wife as crucial for the family to survive and develop. By negotiating with the discourses they create new discourses, but they also contribute to changing the society and creating development.

Another perspective could be to view these as conventional discursive practices which uphold the traditional view of women and family, which again could be traced back to a patriarchal discourse about women's position, or the religious and Islamic view of the family as the most important institution in society. The religious discourse could explain both the traditional view and the emphasis on the importance of this role, and how this makes women important and not subordinate. However, the women themselves give a representation that points in

favor of the first explanation, and shows us how they create new discourses within the existing culture to contribute to change.

It is also interesting to note how the discourse about the importance of gender equality, mixed with the perception of the public sphere as something dangerous and with traditional and religious understandings of what's decent or indecent for a woman, seems to create a meaningful reason for making choices that restrict women to the home or "safe places." This mix could with Western eyes be understood as an indication that the women "don't know what's best for them" or "that they don't understand gender equality." But if we see what they say themselves, the opportunity to get an education or being allowed to work are signs of development and increased gender equality, regardless of whether or not they choose to use these opportunities. Again they seem to find meaning in something Western feminists would find unacceptable, and in this way constitute a discourse about women as not only victims in a society that doesn't respect them, but smart because they find ways to do what they want.

On the other hand, the women in this study draw on some of the same discourses as Western women. In the West it is crucial for feminists and gender equality advocates to not be portrayed or portray women as victims. The suppressing structures in society are a consequence of history, but they don't make women *victims*. The Bangladeshi women also draw on this discourse when they explain how they *choose* to stay at home because they are the only one capable to manage everything or because the society in general is unsafe. They are not victims, they do get to take an education and could choose to work, but they don't want to.

This is interesting to note when discussing the different development approaches to improving gender equality. The focus on economics and women's role in economic development is important, but as long as there are discourses about women being dominated and below the man in society, gender equality will not be achieved. Creating jobs for women might give them leverage and a higher position in the family, but as the findings in this thesis show, the structures and practices influencing gender relations don't automatically change due to this. Women are not only a target group for development approaches – they contribute to development through their resistance to the structures and by negotiating within them to create change in the discourses, and in society. It is important to have gender as a focus in development, and the findings in this study show how women participate in the development

process from within the structures even if they from the outside seem to be, and even accept being suppressed. Women are not a homogenous group that only can be freed from suppression through economic development or other specific tools. They use their agency within their context, relate to discourses about them and the society, and by constituting new discourses and meaning-making they contribute to creating change.

8.6.1 Negotiating with patriarchy and religion

This way of making new discourses or representations of women, without challenging what seems to be the broader social understanding in a patriarchal society, could be a way of what Kandiyoti calls bargaining with patriarchy. Kandiyoti describes the patriarchal bargain as something that emerges when the basis of patriarchy crumbles under the impact of new market forces. Even though this means that women get more freedom and opportunities, women living in a classic patriarchy tend to resist the transition because they see the old normative order slipping away from them without any empowering alternatives (1988,282). After the increase in work opportunities for women in Bangladesh, women have taken up work and education. But at the same time more women apply more conservative religious practices, and the women that have the economic opportunity to stay at home choose to do so. This could be an indication that at the same time as they in some areas embrace change, they also fear what would happen if they don't have the protection of a good husband and support from family or family-in-law. Economic empowerment and freedom is not perceived as enough to "survive." The public sphere is still dangerous and the discourse about a good woman still constitutes an expectation of marriage and children to have protection, honor and insurance for life.

Another way of understanding this discursive practice is when linking it to the religious discourse about women's honor and decency. As I pointed out above, White argues that the major issue when it comes to purdah and to sustaining the segregation between the sexes in Bangladesh today is not about whether or not women should work outside; rather, the issue is what kind of work, where it is done and how the women behave within it (White 2010,337). This supports the findings in my study that most of the women planned to work also after marriage, if their family-in-law allowed it, but they wanted jobs that were suitable for a good, Muslim, Bangladeshi woman (e.g. a bank job, which has fixed hours and doesn't demand a lot of travelling around). This could also be a way of widening their opportunities and freedom by using the expectations that religion and tradition place on women in a strategic

way, as Hussain argues is one of the reasons why more women have started using veils in Bangladesh today. By to some extent adopting these restrictions or expectations, they get a little bit more freedom. For example, by agreeing to always come straight back home after school or work if they are allowed to go there, they negotiate with their parents' discourses about what's right for a woman.

This also shows how a solitary focus on either social, religious or cultural practices can mask how these different legal and moral regimes are combined to frame women's meaning-making, decisions and behavior (Feldman 2010,311-312). In some situations, women are victims of violence or gender based crimes, but at the same time as they are victims they also contribute to constituting some of the discourses that make violence happen. This being so, it should be recognized that women live in contradictions and intersections between different discourses and social practices, and together this creates an environment where they reasonably can interpret their life and choices (Feldman 2010,312).

9 Final remarks

Topics like gender equality, female participation in politics, empowerment and suppression are much debated and targeted for change. This project has aimed to go behind the debates, and behind scholars' and other professionals' theories, concepts and opinions, and talk to the people being discussed and targeted in order to get more insight into their experience and understanding of the issues. As we have seen, the explanations that are most commonly used in research literature and among development agencies for low female participation in politics in a country like Bangladesh are still valid. A patriarchal culture and religion are still contributing to keeping women away from the public sphere, and these factors also contribute to women lacking various important resources and qualifications needed to progress.

However, this is not the full picture. By looking closer at the discourses about women and how these influence both society's view and the understanding of the women themselves of their own lives, we find new knowledge and explanations for gender inequality. The women in this study don't exclusively blame patriarchy or men for not including them in the life of politics. Instead, they show us how society's and their own view of politics, their fear of an unsafe public sphere, and the big and important responsibility a woman has in the home together create a meaningful understanding of why they *don't want to* engage in politics.

They don't reject the understanding of women in Bangladesh being suppressed and male dominated, but they do not believe that this is the reason for all types of gender inequality, and they have gained a lot of experience in maneuvering within this system to gain more freedom and opportunities. By doing this, they show a form of resistance against the structures, and by negotiating within the different discourses they create change.

The framework of CDA provides an important contribution to the knowledge in this field by showing how people make meaning in their situation by adapting existing discourses, but also create change in social practices and structures by negotiating with the discourses from the inside. The women in this study don't reject all traditional beliefs about women, gender roles or the organizing of family and society, but they resist some of them by negotiating and constituting new meaning in old discourses. This shows us how important it is to not only lean on popular theories and statistics when discussing gender inequality. Of course, these theories still have an important role and have been developed on the basis of years of research. But it is also crucial, in order to gain a deeper understanding, to explore the meaning of concepts like gender equality and participation in politics amongst the people of interest themselves. This is especially important when working in the field of development where various approaches have gained popularity the last decades. These approaches give some tools and play a part in development, but economic development alone, for example, cannot change every aspect of gender inequality. The findings in this study contribute to the understanding of the field of women, gender and development, and show how women in their daily life use different tools to create change. One of these tools is negotiating with discourses about women, gender relations and gender equality. More knowledge about the dominant discourses about gender roles and the strategies used by women to change these is important when creating new development approaches in this field. Valuing the women's own strategies is crucial in ensuring more targeted approaches that increase gender equality.

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11 Appendix

11.1 Information letter to informants

Requests to participate in research project

Information about the study

Bangladesh shows improvement in gender equality when it comes to human development and economic opportunities, but it seems that less improvement can be found in the areas of political and civic participation. In this research project I want to explore how women understand their role as women in the Bangladeshi society and how they view their freedom to participate in the public (e.g. politics, labor market, civic society).

This project is for a Master's degree at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences.

Practical information about the study

The study will include between 10 and 20 women that will be asked to participate in a personal interview. There will be a translator in all interviews. The questions in the interview will be about your daily life and important events in your life. I will for example ask you to tell me about your childhood, education and important events in your family life.

To make sure I get the information right I will record the interviews, but only the sound. There will be no pictures or other elements that might lead someone to recognize you. The interview will take around one hour.

All information will be anonymous

All participants will be anonymous from the start. I will not need to use your name in the interview, but if I need to get in contact with you after the interview I will have a list over all names. This list will not be possible to link to specific interviews and will be kept safe and away from records and transcribed interviews.

You will be completely anonymous in the study and report. The report is due to 15th of May 2016.

Voluntary participation

It is voluntary to participate in the study, and you may at any time withdraw your consent without giving any reason. If you withdraw, all information about you be deleted.

If you want to participate or have any questions about the study , contact Ingvild Ofte Arntsen at +4792813861 or [REDACTED] or Cathrine Egeland at +47 [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

The study is reported to the Norwegian Social Science Data Services.

11.2 Interview guide

Interview guide

1. Introduction

- Myself
- The project – information from information letter
- Questions from informants?

2. Childhood - Questions to use to get the conversation started:

- a. Let's start with you telling me about yourself?
 - a. Age?
 - b. What you do?
 - c. Family?
- b. Where did you grow up?
- c. Tell me about your parents. What were your parents like?
- d. Can you tell me about an ordinary day in your childhood?
- e. What responsibilities did you have at home when you were young?
 - a. Do you have siblings? Did they also have the same responsibilities?

3. Present

- a. Could you describe a typical day in your life for me?
- b. What things are most important to you now? Why?
- c. Do you feel that you can do the things you want to do?
- d. Have your dreams and goals changed through your life?
- e. What do you think about the future? Do you have any concerns/worries?
- f. Do you have children?
 - a. Gender?
 - b. What are your dreams for your children?
 - c. If no – if you in the future get a daughter: what do you want for her?
 - d. And a son?
- g. How would you describe a “good woman”?
 - a. How did you come to that conclusion?
 - b. Do you think people around you would describe a “good woman” in the same way?

4. Education and work

- a. What did you want to be when you grew up?
- b. Did/do you go to university or college?
 - Why did/do you want to get an education?
 - How did you decide what you wanted to study?
 - Education to everyone, and specially girls, has been an important policy for Bangladesh the last decades. What do you think about this priority?
 - Do you think education is important for women empowerment in the society?
- c. What was your first paid job (if you have had one)?
- d. Do you work today?
 - Why or why not?
 - How did you make the choice (working or not)?
- e. How does your family feel about you working/going to school?

5. Development, gender equality, participation

- a. What do you think when you hear the words “gender equality”?
- b. Development agencies and policy advocates gender equality and the importance of it for development in a country. What do you think about this?
 - a. Is it important for Bangladesh?
- c. There has been a focus on giving girls education in Bangladesh. Do you think education will lead to gender equality and women empowerment?
- d. If a friend (woman) of yours wanted to become a politician. What would you say to her?
 - a. What do you think her family would say?
- e. Do you think it is important with women voices in for example politics? Why/why not?
- f. It is not that many women that engage in politics. Do you have any thoughts about why?
- g. What do you think women in Norway/the West can learn from women in Bangladesh?

11.3 Overview of informants

Nr	Age	Education level	Working	Religion
1	24	BA Computer Engineering, freelancer	x	Muslim
2	24	BA Service holder - Garment	x	Muslim
3	ca30	BA Social Studies, worked NGO	x	Muslim
4	ca24	Soon bachelor in management		Muslim
5	27	BBA, starting MDG in Development	x	Christian
6	Ca50	HR Head University	x	Muslim
7	26	1st year MDG in political science		Muslim
8	24	BBA, starting MDG		Muslim
9	29	BA+MDG, working consultant	x	Hindu/Christian
10	20	Adult literacy teacher	x	Christian
11	32	Semi-literate	HW	Muslim
12	ca35	Semi-literate	HW	Muslim
13	32-35	Semi-literate, in training for tailor	x	Christian
14	35	Doctor	x	Christian
15	60	Senior nurse	x	Christian
16	Ca55	Teacher	x	Muslim
17	23	BA in Bio-chemistry and bio-technology. Working in a TV production company,	x	No religion

HW = House wife

HR = Human Resources

BA = Bachelor degree

MDG = Master's degree

BBA = Bachelor of Business Administration