


## **A History of Progressive *Doxa*:**

### **An Exploration of Bengali Women's Labour Power**

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#### **Abstract**

This discussion paper is presented to be read in three simultaneous and different modalities. At one level, it is a historiography of British Bengali women's labour power and hence an exploration of the historical constraints that vis-a- vis appear as a natural logical consequence but on closer examination performed as part of a broader structure of inequality. At another level, it intervenes, utilising the theoretical lens of Pierre Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' to inform an awareness that does not pathologize, but instead reads against the constructed layers of assumptions to foreground the social conditions that appear as social structures in diminishing Bengali women's labour power. Finally, the discussion expands the site of analysis, arguing under Sunni orthodoxy based upon the recitation, women have significant labour rights, moreover those rights have diminished in Bangladesh. At the same time, in Britain, social conditions have superseded religious limitations that has benefitted British Bengali women.

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**Keywords:** Agency, Gender, Labour, Patriarchy, Transnational, Seclusion

## **Introduction**

This discussion paper, under a social constructionist approach, aimed to explore the labour power history of the British Bangladeshi women of Tower Hamlets. The paper addresses the historical and religious context of ongoing transformations of gender and labour in a transnational context. The discussion, for the purpose of analytical clarity, is arranged around nine sections and partake with the purpose of understanding the complex history and development of Islam and work. The broad contour of the discussion explores historically situated experiences with present circumstances in creating spatial temporal entry points pertaining to Islamic coloured formations of cultural capital and work. Moreover, promote an understanding of how Islamic coloured observations of cultural capital migrated in meaning, namely *purdah* [the practice of seclusion/veiling] for Bengali women's labour power.

Through the collection of existing secondary statistical data, qualitative labour literature and statutory reports, two arguments are pursued: (1) Under Suni Islam, based upon the holy Qur'an, Muslim women ought to have significant labour rights in Bangladesh. Access to those prescribed rights have seldom been universal. Overtime, the intrusion of patriarchal systems of believe and actions have structurally subordinated Bengali labour fields. (2) In Britain, autonomous social fields have loosened the symbolic forces in religious understandings, inscribing new progressive interpretations favouring British Bengali women's cross generational access to equality in work and milieu.

## **The Framework: Capital, Field, Habitus & Practises**

The conceptual framework for the qualitative analysis is grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) three main concepts of 'capital', 'fields' and 'habitus' in both the background and foreground of the discussion. Bourdieu's body of work is vast, and this discussion does not attempt to summarise his oeuvre. Instead, utilise his thinking tools as a theoretical lens with the intention of rendering a new reading in exploring the labour power history and religious

reproductions of cultural capital formation embodied by the British Bengali women. The discussion, while academic in its orientation, is written to be readily comprehensible to a diverse (Muslim and non-Muslim) readership, both versed as well as wholly unfamiliar with the work of the French sociologist. Bourdieu's (1985;1986;1991) architecture of ideas forms the theoretic framework of the discussion and is presented with accessibility in mind with key terms explained upon introduction.

Bourdieu (1984) argued that every social sphere in which an individual or agent operated had its own social expectations and controls. Bourdieu (1984, p.170) argued that this 'structuring structure' of the systems of dispositions formed the cognitive 'habitus' ['a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class'], and all individuals operated within several different institutions (Bourdieu, 1977, p.86). Based on the theories of Karl Marx and Max Weber, Bourdieu (1993, p.30) argued these arenas of production, where 'the space of positions and the space of the position-takings' constituted as the 'field' [the system of social positions]. Bourdieu (1977, p.164) suggested the power relations both between and within these 'fields' gave form and structure to human behaviour and based on the composition of economic, social and cultural capitals embodied within the agent's 'habitus' when entering the 'field', could be transformed through 'symbolic capital' to ascribe social positions of the social actors according to what Bourdieu (1977, p.159) termed as the common '*doxa*' ['the natural and social world'] of the 'field' (see figure 1). As the discussion moves through time and space, Bourdieu's (1986) conceptual 'thinking toolbox' is applied, both in the background and foreground of the discussion in exploring the diverse social science history of Bengali Muslim women's labour power.

Figure 1: Simplified Bourdieusian theoretical model

$$[ (\text{Capital}) (\text{Habitus}) ] + \text{Field} = \text{Practice/Dispositions}$$

## **Background & Context of The Field**

Tower Hamlets, consisting of 17 wards in eight square miles, has historically been a transnational field of opportunities for generations of migrant labourers. Each succeeding immigrant communities' accumulated capitals and habitual practises have 'left their common mark upon the common heritage' in defining the contexts of both being and belonging in the social field of the east London borough of Tower Hamlets (Taylor, 2001, p.7). Beginning in 1687 with 13,050 Huguenot refugees and Protestants fleeing religious persecution after the French King Louis XIV reversed laws defending their constitutional rights, proceeded by 18,000 Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish jews that had settled up until the 1970s in Brick Lane (Palmer, 2000) that followed the current Sylheti speaking Bangladeshi population. From 1976 to 2002 more than 3 million Bangladeshis migrated overseas with large numbers migrating to the Middle East but more influential has been the diasporas that arrived in Britain (Siddiqui, 2003). More than 90 percent of the 451,529 British Bengalis originate from the northeast of Bangladesh located in the eleven of the twelve small sub districts of Sylhet (Census, 2011; Dench et al., 2006). Over 33 percent of the Bangladeshi population reside in Tower Hamlets (Office of National Statistics (ONS), 2014).

## **Religious Labour Law – A Review of Islamic Texts**

In order to rearticulate the significance of work and the relationship of faith within work it is important to examine the historical organisation of work for Bangladeshi women. The past configuration of work can disclose the present manifest in the analysis of the social world of British Bangladeshi women's labour power or what Bourdieu's (1977, p.159) sociology would have termed as the common '*doxa*' ['the natural and social world'] of the 'field'. Bourdieu adopted Husserl's concept of the Doxa and in his work referred to the Doxa as the set of beliefs and ideas accepted as the reality within a society. The geometry of belief is intimately involved as prologue in how the two genders are positioned and became positioned

within the economic, political, and social spheres of the region that is now Sylhet city in Bangladesh. Eaton (1993, p.297) argued although the holy Qur'an repeatedly placed 'the two sexes in a position of absolute equality before god', how the aggregates of Islam as a sacred cultural capital is both understood and operationalised by the embodying adherents differed. Hashmi (2016) argued these contending interpretations within the sub-community's practises have in social terms nearly always positioned women as the subordinate.

Beginning from around 1303, the doctrine of Sunni Islam [the largest branch of Islam], from the time of its early adoption by the Sylheti Bengali Muslims as a new framework of piety, has regulated the rural Sylheti gendered opportunity structures and gendered habitus at a macro, meso and micro context more than the comparatively 'liberal' and 'teeming metropolis' city of Dhaka (Seabrook, 2015, p.155). Eickelman (1982, p.1) argued while the core tenets of Sunni Islam remained parallel to a 'neo-*tawhid*' [oneness] in its extension of equal human rights, its inscription in practise continued piecemealed to localised pre-Islamic social arenas or fields of reproduction. Moreover, controlled symbolically by competing powers of agency i.e., the Sylheti social actors of the rural milieu. In what was then a pre agricultural jungle dwelling Bengali society, Eaton (1993, p.299) argued the gendered schisms of labour 'nor the seclusion of women had yet taken hold' in the rural Bengali Muslim geography and was only just beginning to appear around 1595.

More than a century later, labour relations changed within the rural labour fields along the north bank of the Surma river with the gradual domestication of Bengali women's labour power, a hegemonic production determined, in part, by an emerging literary field of religious agents. These small consecrated avantgardes, imbued with sufficient stored volumes of symbolic capital to be an authority, were led by all-male *matbars/mondols* [village leaders/elders] as well as *mullah* clergy [religious functionaries] (Eaton, 1993). Hashmi (2016, p.7-8) argued these domains, marked by the absence of women in south Asian

congregations, socially organised as ‘the intermediary between men and god’. As Sunni Islam reorganised rural Bengali communities’ mode of *madhhab* [way to act] under a *Hanafi* interpretation [one of four schools of jurisprudence], the espousal antiquity and symbolic activity of Sunni Islam practised by the delta’s preliterate Bengali adherents followed a pattern discernibly male in reading of the sacred text of Islam. The common organising principles of village community law or what Bourdieu’s (1990, p.210) sociology defined as ‘*nomos*’ [historically specific everyday social habits /customs of the field] became propounded by a mixture of pre-Islamic practises and Sunni orthodoxy (Eaton, 2002).

Through decades of trade and social interaction the habitual *purdah* practices of the Abbasid court in Baghdad, gradually became a prevalent habit of thought and behaviour in the Bengali landscape (Eaton, 1993). This repertoire of privilege, common to Islamic state fields Abdullah and Zeidenstein (1982) argued would have reduced women’s participation in the economic spheres of the Bengali rural labour economy. Hodgson (1977) pointed out under transforming social hierarchies the notion of manual labour within the prescriptions of *purdah* became the practise of women from the lowest socio-economic classes that naturalised divisions of labour. Foreman (2015) argued this symbolically weighted pre-Islamic cultural capital was once a distinction of civilisation through ancient Greece, Constantine’s Rome, and the Eastern Orthodox Church. Foreman (2015) argued the Muslim veil was originally an ancient Assyrian article; a piece of fabric cut and tailored to cover the head that some academics argue would go on to be adopted two thousand years later by Islam. The habitual practice of nuns, the social practice of veiling by women was once considered the reserved practice of medieval Europe, a cultural capital taste that expanded through south Asia. Eaton (1993) argued the practise of veiling became first a cultural capital of class in Middle Eastern social stratification before becoming one recognised today under the adoption of faith in the south Asian Islamic heartlands.

In Islam, the Qur'an marshals 1.907 billion adherents, almost a quarter of all humanity in all social fields and in all matters - in both the private and public spheres - from one generation to another throughout a Muslim adherents' complete spatial and temporal existence. The 6,236 verses revealed over a period of 23 years beginning from around 610 C.E. remains for Muslims a complete codex for Islamic heritage reproduction and transmission (Aziz, 2017). Barlas (2019, p.4) argued the textual analysis of the recitation has always inscribed gender equality in accessing all spheres of life, contending 'Muslims have yet to derive a theory of equality from the Qur'an', offering instructions to the public patriarchy that continues to remain unacknowledged. Bullock (2007, p.58) argued 'the Qur'an unequivocally states that men and women are equal in the eyes of God', and in this regard, doctrinally blameless. As a case in point, *Surah Ali 'Imran* of the recitation [the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the Qur'an] decrees 'I shall not lose sight of the labour of any of you who labours my way, be it a man or woman; each of you is equal to the other' (Qur'an 3:195). The *hadith* volumes [record of traditions and sayings of the prophet of Islam], second only to the Qur'an as a criterion of authenticity, both reports and narrates in detail the early socially ingrained Islamic habits, skills, and lasting dispositions [the *habitus*] and offers a glimpse of the second largest global faith disentangled from the current masculine logic of political, cultural, and patriarchal modes of de-privileging.

Both the Qur'an and the six major *hadith* collections [record of traditions], which form the approved canon of Sunni Islam, highlight the egalitarian spirit of the simple faith. Moreover, how timely early female fiscal stimulus in the commercial city of Makkah played an integral role in inscribing equality in the pertinent production of Islam. One of the most prominent agencies of socialisation asserted 46 times in 21 *hadiths* in *Sahih Al-Bukhari* (846CE/2020) [the most authentic corpus of teachings and sayings of the prophet of Islam] is Khadija bin Khuwaylid. Accepting Islam's divine human law and knowledge from

the prophet of Islam, Khadija was the first *mumin* [believer] to accept the new sacred revelation and to both identify its symbolic significance and habituation of practises produced throughout the newly emerging urban Islamic field. Alam (2021) argued in a pre-Islamic habitus, Islam provided a new world view for Muslim subjects to conceptualise a new agency that elevated the status of women. Hussaini (2018, p.98) argued the rights and responsibilities of women became 'equal to those of a man but not necessarily identical', women could equally 'engage in trade' and exercise 'economic liberty'. Within what Abdalati (1977, p.85) characterised as the 'field of eligible for every marriageable person', Khadija was a twice married, once widowed, mother of two sons and a daughter (Bearman, 2006). Moreover, she was a leader and a woman who embodied what Bourdieu's (1986) sociology would have characterised as significantly legitimised compositions of cultural, social, and economic capitals that preserved her social position and power which she put to productive practise. Khadija worked and was a businessperson. Under her hired senior supervision were male employees. Prominent among them was an unlettered but divinely inspirational subordinate. This singularly special talent had sterling qualities and would go on to emerge as the paragon of worship and work, the future 'Prophet of Islam, Muhammad ibn Abdullah, whose prophetic career began in the early decades of the seventh century' (Eaton, 2002, p.13). In 595 C.E. before the prophets call to Islam, Khadija hired Muhammad's labour power in supervising trade caravans to 'Bostra, the capital of the Roman province of Arabia Petraea' and present-day Syria and Palestine (Kamaly, 2020, p.12).

Recognising Muhammad's *al-amin* [honest] integrity as 'a trustworthy manager' and surplus value generated, Khadija dually remunerated her employee's labour time (Husain, 2019, p.21). Fifteen years senior, at the age of forty, Khadija married her twenty-five-year-old former employee, an endogamous union between an older and wealthier woman of

considerable social status with a younger man from a more modest means of subsistence (Guillaume,1955). Post marriage, Khadija did not withdraw from her merchant work nor after the Prophet's vocation as a divine messenger began ten years into their union.

Questioning the positioning of women as domestic labourers, Bullock (2007, p.59) referring to the *sunnah al-Fi'liya* of the Prophet [the everyday actions the Prophet undertook] highlighted the often-overlooked equality in domestic labour, notably - how the Prophet 'used to mend his clothes, sweep his house, and perform other chores'. Their work and worship arrangement gave way to a twenty-five-year monogamous nuptial arrangement that bore four daughters and two sons. Moreover, an enduring cultural and social reality in a new Islamic symbolic system that promoted a new economy of socially habituated practises and dispositions (Mernissi, 2003).

Viewed through a Bourdieusian lens, this production of a new Islamic 'structuring structure' promoted a social equality juxtaposed against the historically specific class and gender structure of the city of Makkah (Bourdieu, 1984, p.170). Unyielding in her belief, Khadija's Muslim mode of piety venerated her female agency (Kamaly, 2020). Khadija's accumulated resources, her durable links and institutionalised membership to the Quraysh tribe allowed her to accord protection. Moreover, shield the most venerated believer of Islam from the hostility of the 'Quraysh oligarchies' led by the potentate Umayyad merchants (Lamrabet, 2016, p.106). Muhammad's early proselytising was not popular among the polytheistic Meccans who's symbolic dominance was already waning in a flourishing mercantile economy (Kumar, 2012). The de facto holders of the spiritual monopoly felt threatened by the revelation of a 'one god' mode of belief and action in what was then a tribal pre-Islamic Makkan habitus, built then on the homogenous social conditions of polytheistic worship of more than 360 competing deities (Husain, 2019).

These historical examples of faith echo past centuries, moreover, conduce to a more universal point, evincing on *Surah An-Nahl* [the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Qur'an] to consolidate a broader cri-de-coeur of Muslim women's agency that relegates the primary predilection of seventh century patriarchal scholarship based on male authority to its correct place (Mernissi, 2003). The locus of gender equality within Islam begins from a spiritual base, that has neither ascribed gender labour roles nor social class. Moreover, extends to all spheres of the social world promoting a reality and divine discourse 'whoever performs pious works, man or women, provided he or she is a believer, we will surely let such as person live a life of purity.' (Qur'an 16:97). Barlas (2019, p.15) argued the Qur'an's textual polysemy does not theorise a patriarchal exegesis but in fact 'challenge patriarchy and sexual inequality in concrete ways' asserting equality.

Rodgers and Tanjeem (2021, p.570) argued for Muslim women, Islam and its key historical precepts gave form and functional meaning to the social norms and customs, and habits that formed 'an ever-present backdrop to the way women engage their daily lives'. This gender related set of customs of belief the authors argued prescribed the forms of work and behaviours that were considered correct for women as well as men and formed the basis from which the natural accepted ways the genders should operate in a family, community, and workforce setting.

### **Subordinated Labour fields in Bangladesh**

In pre-independence India, waged labour for Bengali women in the rural labour market was historically uncommon. Moreover, work within the Sylheti public sphere always low and informal in the delta region that already had a surplus supply of male labour power (Islam, 1978). Scarcely a corner of Bengal's eastern labour fields was untouched by the reality of imperial field formations. These captive fields of labour under colonial rule served only to extract the labour power of the poor in the service and supply of surplus goods from the

Bengal region to Britain for greater profits (Tharoor, 2018). Ahmed (2002, p.185) argued the long colonial period of plunder and control of subjugated labour lamentably ‘exaggerated’ the ‘sexual divisions of roles and labour’ with the labour power of women bypassed in favour of men that cheapened their labour. Gardner and Lewis (1996, p.64) argued ‘this process began with colonial administrators who imported ethnocentric notions of the place of women’ that permeated and reconfigured the gender habitus.

Tharoor (2018, p.108) argued under taxonomy and ethnocentric colonial policies ‘labels invented for entire communities’ displaced the humanity of people under colonial jurisdiction. Bourdieu (1998, p22) argued the habituation that colonialism produced insidiously reinforced ‘all the habits of thought and behaviour inherited from more than a century of colonialism’. Said (1978, p.54-55) argued this quasi-fictional manufacture of ‘imaginative knowledge’ infused the vocabulary of colonial history to an ‘imaginative geography’. This crude broad-brush European pedagogical intervention, Said (1981, p.114) argued, has structured a reductive reading of Muslims that has deeply ingrained ‘a barely concealed ideological hostility’ and irresponsible characterisation of Muslim communities. The outcome of this essentialised labelling, including indigenous masculinity and gender relations, amounted to a much broader rubric of political power, a mode of colonial racism that Said (1978) called ‘Orientalism’. Mc Alister (2005, p.11 ) argued these degrading presuppositions were based without foundation and encompassed entire state fields of colonised workers in ‘orientalism’s neat mapping of the “West” as masculine and the “East” as feminine’. Ahmed (2021) argued this outmoded and oppressive framework of meaning of womanhood obscured knowledge that replenishes the truth i.e., in Islam both men and women are equal.

Post-independence, as agrarian work reorganised, the prescribed social roles, functions and meaning of work became asymmetrical. The agricultural sector in Sylhet where over 40

percent of workers were in informal employment had already become saturated by the 1960s with rural workers and could no longer absorb additional workers (Osmani, 1990). The distribution of occupations within the transitioning labour market between 1961 and 1974 gradually became more uneven between men and women (International Institute for Labour Studies (IILS), 2013). Women's participation in the labour field became structured in relation to the hegemony of men. Access to the labour market became more controlled by the expanding labour market entrants from the surplus pool of inexpensive male labour that displaced and diminished the autonomy of women to the secluded subsistence economy. Around the same time, in the face of government neglect, rural communities relied heavily on Non-Governmental Organisations to provide services their government could not to its own people, including assistance to the rural population seeking fair wages. The visible presence of women in rural areas was facilitated by the heavy presence of NGOs (Karim, 2021). Four decades later, just over 30 percent of the Sylheti workforce were women. On average, women earned 20 percent less than men per hour do for the sale of their labour with 95 percent employed in the informal economy typified of permanent low skill intensive labour, sustained in a system of oppression that exploited their cheapened labour (UNdata, 2017).

Alam (2021, p.11) argued 'within south Asian historiography freedom has been predominantly understood as anticolonialism, a form of national liberation... and not adequately enough as a sexed virtue'. Despite having a 56 percent majority population in the Bengali dominated east wing of Pakistan, the manipulation of the economic mechanisms of power resulted in 70 percent of public expenditure and aid resources being invested in the west wing, ensuing in ever growing inequality in health, education, transport, and industry (Azad, 2012). Following a nine-month field conflict bloodier than Bosnia, freedom from a Punjabi/Pashtun dominated west Pakistani state field was re-established in December 1971 (Bass, 2014). Around the same time, Rashid (2019, p.2-6) argued the denied discourses of

‘differences between men and women were largely ignored’ in the dominant middle-class narratives of national discourse. This ‘gendered silencing in the sites of history’ opened lacunas where men occupied the public sphere creating unequal gender positions (Saikia, 2011, p.10). Sabur (2020, p.104) argued this construction of national narratives denied women of all ages from impoverished backgrounds ‘their active roles in all the mobilisations that led up to the Liberation war’. Their bravery marginalised but more importantly their suffering, sacrifices and violence inflicted upon their bodies silenced within the politics of nationalism and nation building (Ibrahim,1998). D’costa (2011, p.25) argued women’s contribution in the war effort was institutionally relegated in favour of a habituated exhibition of masculinity that relied on ‘power and heroic tales to sustain’ itself. Tripathi and Biswas (2023) argued within the habitus of war Bengali women applied their agency in a multitude of roles. In addition to cooking and providing care in camps and social work they engaged in fundraising, disseminated news and information, raised awareness of the war effort, trained in, and administered first aid, and provided medical support in the field of combat. Armed organisations recruited hundreds of women from all backgrounds, qualified them in paramilitary warfare, firearm operation, and enemy informant and infiltration work from training camps in Kolkata. Many fought alongside their fathers, brothers, and husbands as part of the *Mukti Bahini* (freedom fighters) movement and were instrumental in their efforts in securing freedom for substantial sections of the rural battlegrounds of Bangladesh (D’costa, 2011).

In Britain Bengali women from all backgrounds played a pivotal part in the Bangladesh liberation movement. As workers, young wives, and mothers they acted as volunteers at events, they attended public rallies to voice their condemnation of genocidal rape, torture, and mass murder carried out by General Yahya Khan’s military junta. British Bengali women even took lead in a procession in London on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1971 (Ahmed, 2013). The ‘Bangladesh

Women's Association (or *Mohila Samaty*) kept up a busy programme of activities' ( Glynn, 2014, p.65). They organised fund raising in support of the liberation effort and even assuaged safety concerns by arranging transport for Bengali women in east London attending demonstrations (Gwynn, 2020).

Free from the domination of West Pakistan and at around half the size of the UK the new sovereign state of Bangladesh that Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman inherited in 1971 was conceived as a pluralist state. By 1979 fraternal state religious interpretations legislated in the political field by General Ziaur Rahman removed secularism from the four core values (White, 1992). Replacing it with what Chakraborty (2014, p.25) argued was the generals 'own brand of Islamist nationalism'. A decade later, imbued with the power to influence the relative value of different capitals and fields within society, General Muhammad Ershad prioritised Islam as the state structured symbolic monopoly in the service of social life.

A Bourdieusian analysis of gender and post-colonial habitus of Bangladesh suggests asymmetrical gender constructions began to emerge in the social frameworks that give structure to national interpretations of religion. Producing a new division of labour domination in the Bengali state field where the embodied capitals and biological characteristics of women would become subverted and increasingly undervalued beside that of men. D'Costa (2011) argued this prevailing moral gender ideology, far removed from the Islamic ideal, was written into the feminine domain from primordial expressions of the nation state that engendered a distorted criterion for the displacement of women that White (1992, p.13) argued propounded 'seclusion to be the highest ideal for women'. Seabrook (2015, p.191) argued 'as part of the nationalist discourse' women's interests were collapsed through the tropes of faith, family, home, and domesticity, where home would become, for Bengali women both 'a sanctuary' and 'sacred space' encouraged symbolically by both the state and ruling rural patriarchy in what Bourdieu's sociology of gender relations would have termed

as the *doxic* [normalised and taken for granted] submission to a gendered social order (Bourdieu, 1977).

White (1992, p.14) argued within the rubric of national culture the recruitment of ‘gender imagery’ in state discourse, moreover, the gendered interpretation of Islam by past administrations, have conscripted women into a manipulated process not fully recognised in their unconscious submission to the structured mechanisms of the state. These mechanisms Chakraborty (2014, p.103) argued produced and imposed a new patriarchy yoked to the discourse of national imagery by restructuring women’s dispositions in the public sphere towards ‘the realm of the domestic/private life’ in opposition to the masculine space of the nation. This religious mode of governance has fashioned *purdah* prescriptions through what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p.248) would have characterised as a new ‘hegemonic masculinity’ that has seeped into societal characteristics. Similarly, carrying with it a new coded social implication. Creating a conflict of symbolic interests between privileged and subordinate gender relations, naturalising power differences for unrecognised symbolic violence (Shelley & McCarthy, 1983).

For Bengali women this overdetermining binary amounted to a state structured symbolic imposition: a reproduction of *purdah* that foregrounded the economic devaluation of women as waged workers with women’s role becoming more controlled and tied to the unwaged home economy. Abdalati (1977, p.56) argued according to three of the four schools of Sunni Islamic Jurisprudence women were ‘under no legal obligation’ to habitually carry out domestic labour. Substituting Islamic teaching with de facto rural rules of segregation, Abdullah and Zeidenstein (1982) argued women’s labour power became tied to a biological locus of identity with their participation spatially confined without agency. Moreover, relegated to the private habitus of the nuclear family, to motherhood and the transmission of a specific species of capitals to their children as a set of lasting dispositions conceptualised in

the form of Bengali folk stories, Islamic instruction, daily prayers, recitation of the Quran, as well the preservation of the Bengali mother tongue. Bourdieu (1996, p.22) argued 'the family always tends to function as a field, with its physical, economic and, above all, symbolic power relations'. Bourdieu (1984) argued that the family was central to the preservation of the social order where the operational value of cultural capital was twofold for women. 'Women make use of the capital for acquiring husbands, and women play the key role of transmitting the cultural capital to their children' as homemakers (Dumais, 2002, p.47). However, Bourdieu (2001) delineates social origin as deriving from the father as a product of western gender-based habitus resultant from masculine domination and feminine submission. Moreover, in order to understand masculine domination, Bourdieu argued the study of those institutions was central to understanding its reproduction.

### **A Shrinking State Field of Autonomy**

Starting with elections from February 1991 Bangladesh has had two alternating female prime ministers that have led the country for more than three decades. In 2018, Sheikh Hasina's coalition administration secured a third consecutive term in the country's national election garnering a 96 percent majority (Shehabuddin, 2021). A percentage margin Hasan (2019) argued was in scale to wins by the dynastic administrations of Bashar al-Assad and Kim Jong-un. Adding credence to formal modes of exclusion, having spent the past decade courting dozens of incumbent organisations the ruling party in plebiscite for positions already taken, refused to condemn its allied Hefazat-e-Islam (Protectorate of Islam) a madrassa-based organisation, when the group attacked the education of teenage girls (Sabur, 2021). In a highly authoritarian state field with more than 300,000 mosques the structuring of relations in religious fields remains a state centralised monopoly of symbolic interests, largely inaccessible to women (Chowdhury, 2021). The dominant sociological traditions and pre-Islamic customs deployed by the spiritual and social agents within the social field of Sylhet,

as well as the state field of Bangladesh as a whole, have historically subverted women's hopes of full membership in Bengali society. Broadening the discourse to a state field suggests the decoding, dispensation, and regulation of Islamic expressions of capital as cultural and ritual practices, have been a one-dimensional reproduction, dominantly male in transmission in both its privileged interpretation and monopolised spiritual positioning of gender relations (IILS, 2013).

In Bangladesh 20 million people live on just £1.72 a day (Cities Alliance, 2020). Inequality is structured through access to labour markets. Gardner and Lewis (1996, p.86) argued 'the cultural construction of women's work and their access to markets...are likely to be controlled by men'. The agricultural economy accounts for over 20 percent of the national gross domestic product accounting for over 63 percent of the employed workforces of which just over 15 percent are women, two thirds of total employment is informal (IILS, 2013). In Sylhet, the fourth largest economy of Bangladesh, around 371,000 people are of working age but less than half are in work. More than 212,000 are not in the labour market, the majority of which are women (Cities Alliance, 2020).

Overtime Sylheti society's allocation of womanpower has diminished under the capitulating pressures of male codes of morality and honour that reinforced cultural feelings of 'in built shame' as distancing devices (Gardner, 1991, p.51). Moreover, probed the modesty of women as workers operating in a masculine sphere that was no longer neo liberal, but a controlled monopoly of reason that Edholm et al. (1977, p.119) characterised as a 'reification of difference, of otherness' that reinforced the model of separate spheres. White (1992, p.23) argued the institution of *purdah* has played a significant part in the emergence of separate spheres, 'in *purdah*, the gender division of labour is grounded in values of honour'.

The meaning of work, moreover what constitutes to correct behavioural codes prescribed under a religious supervision of *purdah* had become privatised and circulated towards a

domestic sphere (Schuler, Lenzi, Badal & Nazneen, 2017). This Spivak (2000) argued was understood in a system of ideas symbolically prearranged by one gender as a site of state control for the rationalisation of the status quo, a pattern counter to exigencies of genuine Sunni orthodoxy. Mirroring national labour inequality within the complex Sylheti system of economic relations, the notion of women working in the public sphere as capital-accumulating subjects, has continually met with the vocabulary of polite Bengali disdain. Moreover, 'seen as unrespectable' by its resistant pastoral society (Gardner & Lewis, 1996, p.86). Rahman and Hussain (1995, p.211) argued on a national scale 'in Bangladesh there is a social stigma against women working in the field or performing manual labour'. Shaw et al. (2016) argued older generations in Bangladeshi families had clear-cut roles and accepted men principally as the breadwinners. Schuler, Lenzi, Badal & Nazneen (2018) argued to avoid loss of status, Bengali men preferred women to work from home. The preponderance of unpaid work carried out by women remained seldom acknowledged, continuing unchanged and unwaged. Skeggs (2004, p.23) argued that 'gendered dispositions are hidden behind the normal construction of categories, enabling the misrecognition of gender'. Sharma and Black (2001, p.928) argued that women's emotional labour was nearly always 'invisible or unacknowledged' and seen as an extension of their womanhood position in the home. Gardner (1995) argued Sylheti women were actively involved in the supervision of landless labourers within their local patronage networks and kinship ties, performing an instrumental role in reducing poverty. Many women exercised agency in supervising the *bari* [compacted enclave] labourers in the village economy in the absence and prolonged separation from their husbands in the UK.

The application of Bourdieu's conceptual framework suggests the organisation of the rural workforce along with public act of paid labour in male fields for women has become positioned crucially at the apex of social class and family honour. A complicitous framework

reinforced by a hierarchical system of encoded gender ideology, cloaked historically in the symbolic capital of *pardah*. As a stored class habitus reproduction, this has, to the detriment of the dominated, marginalised and exercised what Bourdieu's (1977, p.192) sociology characterised as 'symbolic violence', on women with unequal access to these repertoires. White (1992, p.47) argued, within rural *pardah* society, Bengali 'women's entry in major markets, particularly as labourers, [signified] their households' extreme poverty' signalling an unjustified social othering of non-privileged women on the lower rungs of Sylheti society, whilst simultaneously reinforcing the position of the privileged land holding classes.

Bourdieu (2001, p.3) considered the habitues to be gendered, arguing gender was a 'sexually characterised habitus'. Bourdieu (1984) suggested gender divisions of labour were less prominent according to positions within the social hierarchy and according to the habitus of the agent and structure of the field. The application of Bourdieu's primary thinking tools suggests that inside the Sylheti gendered class habitus, Bengali women of rural middle-class dispositions embodied considerable compositions of capitals at their disposal. Their practises of social distinction provided the existing mechanism of Bengali exceptionalism by which the labour power of land-owning women was sustainably fashioned as distinct, and could not be extracted at the lowest stratum of the paid rural labour market. As a marker of their family's continuing positional power, Sylheti women from the land holding classes were 'able to refine *pardah* to their advantage' and as positional power did not sell their labour power in the open rural labour market, despite the option to access *bhodro* [respectable] local government salaried jobs (Gardner, 1995, p.199). Their power of choice became a mark of their symbolic capital, instead, these women operated in an un-remunerated mode of petty commodity production of the family habitus in maintaining the status quo in the family and village economy, a practise that would tie many to a Sylheti system of customs on arrival in

the mid-1970s in Tower Hamlets (Gardner, 2009). These Bengali women in Tower Hamlets maintained *pardah* codes in the same homogeneous fashion as in Sylhet (Pollen, 2002).

### **Mobility Capital**

In Bangladesh, within systems of property relations 98 percent of all land is in the ownership of one gender (IILS, 2013). Hashmi (2016, p.6) argued ‘Orthodox Muslim villagers in Bangladesh do not acknowledge the right of women to inherit’. Restrained by the material impact of tradition, women seldom claimed their land inheritance. Landed Sylheti families were not direct labourers of their lands, considering the public act of labouring dishonourable as descendants of farmer aristocracy (Adams, 1987). The construction of compacted enclaves known as *bari* and group making of related kin and close family members into tightly knit clans known as *gushti* enabled control of the scarcest economic resource of all; land (Aziz, 2017; Islam 1978). Hartmann and Boyce (1983, p.205) argued villagers constantly competed for land as ‘land means the ability to profit from the labour of others’. Gardner (2002) pointed out that this competition was not common for all Bangladeshi workers but nurtured by a small entrepreneurial cadre. Spatially divided, the distinct accumulation strategy of this ‘atomistic rural society’ allowed the formation of higher economic and social status *gushti* [kin and family] members who could deploy their transnational capital for greater accumulation of wealth through the control of land and labour power (Greenhalgh et al., 1998, p.978). This created major land-owning groups engaged in a productive enterprise of what could be described as a macro Sylheti sphere of both material and non-material capital accumulation.

In a country where nearly two thirds of the populations live on just £1.54 a day, land owning Sylheti families with transnational ties were more affluent than most of the 672,000 Sylheti’s (IILS, 2013; Cities Alliance, 2020). Land owning Sylheti families strategically reproduced their hierarchically controlled culture by employing from their own surplus pool

of economically weaker close and fictive kin to work on their lands as long-term labourers (Gardner, 1995). Adams (1987, p.12) argued as ‘petty bourgeois in the village context’, their symbolic legitimation in venerating their social positions within the Sylheti social system came from genealogy claims to Arab saints through a Sunni Islamic prescription (Eaton, 2002).

In a process epitomised by Bourdieu’s (1984;1985;1986) model of cultural reproduction, the Bengalis that migrated to Britain shared rich and complex volumes of what Alexander et al. (2016, p.75) characterised as ‘Mobility capital’ to operationalise their economic capital and social capital networks to migrate from Sylhet to London for transnational consumption. The men sold their labour power anonymously without risking dishonour in a foreign expanding British labour market. Seeking greater capital acquisition, Sylheti men set up home in the working-class east end of London (Adams, 1987). The trend of regular remittances quickly followed to individual *bari*’s. At its peak, Sylhet received an estimated £769,165,000.00 per year from British Bengali workers pioneering the now familiar diaspora driven transnational networks that have fuelled the Sylheti labour fields allowing the fruition of localised rural micro economies (Aziz, 2022; Hussain, 2013).

In Tower Hamlets, within the borough’s 84 council housing estates 55 percent of British Bangladeshis live in purpose built social housing blocks with an average of five or more people in each flat in cramped and substandard conditions (Aziz, 2021; Peach, 2005). Between 2016 and 2018 one quarter of Bangladeshi households’ income came from welfare benefits and tax credits (ONS, 2020). Despite this, Saunders (2011, p.122) argued many British Bengali workers, as a marker of their normative social status, built in absentia palatial abodes in their native *bari* settlements, their earnings sufficient to shore up both their significance and rural power in the reproduction of symbolic capital ‘akin to feudal lords in Sylhet’. Most British Bangladeshi families in Tower Hamlets still have houses and land or

other venture investments. Today many of the large homes built by the British Bangladeshi diaspora remain largely idle, a forced choice wrought by both infrequent visits and economic realities. Riaz (2013, p.173) argued the British Bangladeshi youth did not subscribe to Bangladesh as the 'homeland' pointing out 'generational differences bring newer meanings to the concepts of space as well as homeland'. Smith and Eade (2017 p.148) argued British born Bengalis had 'hybrid identities' socially conditioned by western value systems and were less inclined to frequent visits to Bangladesh. Economically, post 2008 financial crises around 60 percent of British Bangladeshis live in income poverty (Kenway & Palmer, 2007; Local Economic Assessment (LEA), 2018).

Gardner (2009, p.10) argued that 'migration overseas has led to significant shifts in local power relations', throughout the 1980s and 1990s small cadres of British Bengali men well-endowed with capital made regular visits back to Sylhet. Through remittance they exercised unequal semi feudal powers over their close and fictive kin networks within their 'transnational habitus', solidifying their positional power within the rural social hierarchy (Gardner, 2012, p.84). This travel and remittances inflows improved access to health care, nutrition, education, stimulated farm labour production. Moreover, transformed their impoverished *bari*'s by establishing a disproportionately privileged rural workforce within their flourishing informal micro economies (Goldin et al., 2011).

### **Bearers of Culture and Tradition**

The Bengali women that emigrated as part of family reunification from Sylhet in the late 1970s to join their husbands, fathers and brothers in Tower Hamlets began their working lives early in Sylhet. The changing labour of these women is not easily placed into simple categories (Pasha, 2019). Many toiled ceaselessly in the subsistence economy within the restrictive confines of their villages on small-scale family centred production (Gardner, 2009). Growing up in their ancestral villages their work in the economic production of the

household was not tangible in equal masculine measures of waged labour, but an evolving value, determined by social position and stage of life (Gardner, 2002). In Sylhet, as young women, many embodied the role of unremunerated labourers in the agricultural and home economy (Ahmed, 2020). The degree to which Bengali women in Tower Hamlets could activate their agency became contingent on cultural injunctions and community perceptions of gender impropriety that mirrored Sylheti social codes of performing work in the presence of large numbers of Bengali males (Nesa, 2017). Hopkins (2007) argued hegemonic interpretations of gender roles served spatially as an index of one-sided Muslim masculinity, shaped through the structuring power of the diaspora in the mid-1970s. Male biases have controlled the very definition of what constituted as valued work and what did not for Bengali women (Sabur, 2020). Kabeer (2000, p.330) argued in Tower Hamlets, Bengali men's 'identity as breadwinner was at least partly protected by their monopoly of outside work' that women could do. Moreover, in doing so suppressed the agency of Bengali women, restricting the range of options and deterring many from pursuing work in factory-work through the structural 'confinement of women to inside work' (Kabeer, 2000, p.330).

Over time, positions were renegotiated in the family habitus for Bengali women's spousal relationship to that of the unpaid domestic worker required to allocate their time to the care of their often much older husbands, extended family members and young children in a new shared bodily disposition (Dench et al., 2006). Gardner (2002) argued for many it is the second stage in their lives as trans-situational actors of the home economy, more specifically as mothers and in their later years as grandmothers, that has had the greatest impact in habitus adjustment. Kabeer (2000) argued the shifting adjustments over time for many has meant sacrifice of any goal in seeking work. The ambitions of the Bengali women that arrived in the 70s have steadily altered over the past four decades since their arrival in Tower Hamlets to accommodate their shifting identities from wives and daughter in-laws within the family

network to mothers and grandmothers that maintained and preserved Bengali customs (Ahmed, 2020; Phillipson et al., 2003). Accorded deference and respect as influential matriarchs many now marshal what Bourdieu's (1977) sociology of social practices would have characterised without explicitly stating, as 'emotional capital' within the private sphere of the internal familial micro culture. Over time, many have learned to summon their internal embodied history of tradition bound experiences and resources in their bodily dispositions 'as central figures in the reproduction of traditional Bengali domestic customs' and Islamic cultural capital production mirroring Sylheti traditions (Pollen, 2002, p.87).

Applying Bourdieu's (1986) primary conceptual 'thinking tools' as a prism, it could be argued that this unfinished Sylheti *doxa* [the natural and taken for granted social order] chain migrated in meaning beyond its rural Sylheti social system. Reforming in a new urban geography of Tower Hamlets. The resultant reconfiguration of this macro environment, led to a habitus deposited with a set of lasting dispositions, conceptualised in the form of an 'Islamic cultural mode of communal organisation and Sylheti social conduct', that would become bound by the Bengali bonding capital of familial patrilineal village networks (Aziz, 2021, p.8). Inscribed within these given social structures, the men, predominantly from *Balaganj, Beanibazar, Bishwanath, and Golapganj* [subdivisions of Sylhet], conceptualised a subfield within the larger field of Tower Hamlets that would be subordinated to their accumulated experiences from their Sylheti fields, a premodern British Bengali patriarchy. This reproduction of community space became reinscribed and implicitly understood as legitimate through the organising logic of 'the *baradari* [patrilineal and extended kinship and village networks]' (Abbas & Reeves, 2007, p.131). These acquired Sylheti social practises, patterns of thought, conduct, and persisting vestiges, constituted a connection to what Baudrillard's (1994) sociology of cultural symbolism would have characterised as a thin 'simulacrum' [the copy without the original] conceptualised by the post-war British Bengali

men in the hegemonic projection of their pastoral religious habitus. Zeitlyn (2015, p.154) described the assemblage of these signs and symbols of Sylheti society constructed as a shared understanding as the 'British Bangladeshi field'. In a new mode of control, this transnational habitus distinct in its spatially specific conditions and endogamous rules of extended kinship and *bari* networks, normalised the *doxa* [taken for granted social order] in acquiescing of the arriving wives into habitual seclusion. Khan (2019, pp.7- 8) argued community within the system of patriarchy became 'synonymous with men...that 'socialises women to internalise the dictates of patriarchy and accept them as culture and community'. Bourdieu, (1998, p.57) argued the concept of the Doxa could explain how a particular view can dominate a field 'which presents and imposes itself as a universalist point of view'. Spivak (2000) argued within this reproduction of a heteronormative domestic field, migrant women often faced difficulty in shifting re-inscribed patriarchal tenets and resigned to conformity. These cultural codes of conformity coupled with the onset of racism Alexander et al. (2016, p.134) argued 'doubly othered' the marginalisation of the arriving Bengali women, a pattern of wider social pressures. In the 1970s and 1980s racial violence was prevalent in the borough, set against a background of daily spitting, racist verbal abuse, attempted arson, property damage that extended to 'chasing school children with knives and physical violence' (Glynn, 2014, p.20). Racist and Islamophobic graffiti was commonplace on some estates with pig trotters nailed to the doors of Bengali homes as calculated religious attacks against the Bengalis targeted by their faith as Muslims (Our Life, 2020).

### **The Changing Labour Field of Opportunities in Tower Hamlets**

Li (2021) argued between 1972-1999 three quarters of the Bengali women that arrived in the 1970s and around half of the subsequent British born generation were economically inactive. Demand for the embodied labour power of incoming workers declined from 1980-82, 'there were, at the time more than 16,000 unemployed and 1,300 people listed as homeless in Tower

Hamlets' (Palmer, 2000, p.174). Unemployment for Bangladeshi workers rose by 20 percent, compared to a rise of just two percent for white workers (Li, 2014). The changing orientation of local labour markets away from manufacturing and the steady decline of the rag trade displaced the embodied capitals of the thousands of Bengali women and men, devaluing their embodied labour power in a changing field of possibilities (Aziz, 2015). At the same time this pattern was being reciprocally reproduced by local pedagogical institutions in a new model of inequality that excluded manual knowledge and venerated professional knowledge as the correct production of capital in an emerging knowledge-based sub field that post-war immigrant Bengalis were ill equipped to effectively navigate (Aston et al., 2007).

Tower Hamlets with over 200,000 jobs has the fourth largest employment location, accounting for five percent of all the jobs in London. In 2017/18, around 47.4 percent of the boroughs' population was registered unemployed with 41 percent living in social housing and means tested benefits. Despite overall work rate rises in the borough from 56 percent to 68 percent from 2014 to 2018, participation rates for Bengali women continue to cede with demand for highly skilled and qualified workers (ONS, 2014; LEA, 2018). The Bengali population earn less than those who work in the borough; around 19 percent of the working population earns just £8.83 per hour, below the London living wage (Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES), 2019). Outdated modes of thinking as well as visual Islamic markers of difference have led to both 'direct and indirect forms of islamophobia discrimination' against Muslim women (Stevenson et al., 2017, p.23 -24). Bengali women 'have a very low female participation rate in the labour market' and face multiple barriers to work (Peach, 2005, p.23). More than 7000 Bengali women have no human capital qualifications of operable value in the labour market and challenges in balancing work and family care (LEA, 2018).

In Tower Hamlets social deprivation stems from underinvestment in pedagogical services such as English for speakers of other Language (ESOL) classes (Aziz, 2022). A lack of work training courses, growing waiting lists for courses and racially antagonistic employers have all constrained labour options seemingly available to Bengali women (Khattab, 2012). Modood (2004, p.101) argued these concealed structural elements embedded in a field of exclusion forced many to turn to their own 'ethnic capital'. Akter (2013) argued in Tower Hamlets this capital as bonding social capital empowered Bengali women positively in negotiating social structures laden with inequality. The Jagonari Women's Centre and The Kobi Nazrul Centre became two of several organisations set up to provide support for Bengali women dealing with racism, health, and employment concerns (Phillipson et al., 2011). In 2019 the boroughs constituents elected Apsana Begum and Rushanara Ali as their two Members of Parliament. Despite these public advances in gender equality, structural and symbolic struggles persist in the social, economic, and cultural spheres of the borough. The dominant signs, symbols, and actions which appropriate objective meaning in the religious supervision and social administration of the urban sub-Islamic field of Tower Hamlets retains its precepts as a patriarchal production. A gendered field of exclusion that Begum (2008, p.95) contended has been subtly reproduced as a 'masculine territoriality'. Bourdieu (1984, p.182) in his observances of the dominating discourses of society argued this heterodoxy of equally 'competing possibilities' was typical of a conventional product of the 'complicitous silence' of the communities in the reproduction of community.

### **Inroads in Equality: The British Born Generations**

Some feminist scholars contend that the pervasion of 'androcentric biases' and an absence of attention to feminist theory have narrowed the theoretical significance of cultural capital. As a consequence, feminist scholars have reformed cultural capital to feminist empirical analysis

(Adkins & Skeggs, 2004). Lovell (2000) argued that Bourdieu's assessment of women as capital bearers (objects) within the field of the family that enable the production of cultural capital, rather than capital accumulators (subjects) within the social field is unnatural.

Feminist scholars such as Skeggs (1997) argued that Bourdieu overlooked the possibility that women could be and are capital-accumulating subjects. According to Skeggs (1997) femininity is embodied, an inoculated capability that could be activated as a form of capital.

Today, more young women from the British born generations that came into maturity in the late 1990s and 2000s now wear the hijab (traditional head covering worn by Muslim women) in a new progressive *doxa* [taken for granted social order]. Modified to their reflexively plural habitus, the hijab as a symbol of newfound Muslim feminism and confidence is set apart from the *baradari* interpretations of the generation that arrived in the 1970s. Holshoe (2020) argued the hijab whilst appearing as a symbol of oppression resistant to the commercial imperative of Britain's neoliberal capitalist society has become a re-valued acquisition of Islamic femininity by a new cadre of British born Muslim consumers and social media tastemakers as a source of symbolic and cultural capital. For Muslim millennials, faith and modesty are companionly yoked. Consumer brands have become increasingly aware of the scriptural framework of Muslim modesty, providing clothing sensitively tailored to the growing estimated \$327 billion Muslim apparel market (Holshoe 2020). Corporate commodification aside, 'the inclusion of Muslims in the visual identity of advertising' in a country where Muslims are the minority has signalled some (if minor) recognition of their identity in mainstream media and culture (Janmohamed, 2016, p.152)

Bourdieu (1990, p135) argued 'the symbolic properties of the social have the same world making powers as have its material characteristics'. Similarly, the hijab is a symbol of pronounced female modesty and a marker of legitimised female Muslim identity (Bullock, 2007). The term 'Hijab' derived from the Arabic word for notions of separation and covering

appears just five times in the sacred text of Islam (Qur'an 7:46 ; 19:16-17; 33:53 ; 41:5 ; 42:51). *Surah An-Nur* [the 24<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Qur'an] and *Surah Al-Ahzab* [the 33<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the Qur'an] also add credence to the practice of modest clothing as empowerment (Qur'an 24:31 ; 33:59). The Hijab as an act of observance before a statement of taste diametrically opposes what Bourdieu's sociology described as the *doxa* ['the natural and social world'] of consumer driven fields that treat women as both commercial material commodity and public consumer (Bourdieu 1977, p.164). Underpinned by an unconscious adherence to Islam, for Muslim women the hijab emerges within the British religious field as a classification of legitimacy and liberate choice of Islamic orthopraxy for culturally conscious British born Muslim women. Khan (2019, p.66) argued the hijab allowed Muslim women to 'reassert their socio-political and cultural identities', by covering their bodies and taking control from their wider social capitalist consumer consumption habitus.

For neo liberal British born Bengali women the hijab represents an integral part of the social pathology of being both Bengali and Islamic in identity that both venerates and empowers women to assert their labour power and economic independence. Moreover, their social participation in the public sphere in accessing both education and employment. As instrumentally strategic social actors embodying significant volumes of social capital (Akter, 2013), cultural capital (Mahbub, 2019), and human capital (Nesa, 2017), they are equipped with an epistemological ability to discern their own social positioning within their often-recalcitrant habitus. Moreover, establish relational engagements with other British cultural capitals and fields in shaping trajectories beyond the sub-Islamic field of Tower Hamlets.

Pollen (2002, p.105) argued '*pardah* has in fact become more evident in both generations as women spend more time outside the home, engage with the labour market'. British born Bengali women's embodiment of *pardah* norms has migrated in meaning under a secular superstructure with new codes of legitimacy and bodily pedagogies that has physically and

psychologically inscribed what the application of Bourdieu's (1984, p.437) sociology would have characterised as an altered bodily '*hexis*' [bodily performance of habitus]. Male supervision of *pardah* codes has been reconciled towards a more progressive mode of Bengali gender equality. Saunders (2011, p.127) argued spatially attuned British born Bengalis are increasingly reinterpreting their diverse locality by severing ties to the construct of Sylhet as the 'homeland' with 'far less inclination to send money back to the village or to build their status' in Sylhet. Eade and Garbin (2006, pp. 181-193) argued, instead 'the third generation who constitute approximately half the community' preferred to build their own 'symbolic success' by suturing within their British habitus a wider social acceptance of their 'transnational social field'.

For the British born generations, the changing social structure of Tower Hamlets have shaped their agency to assert their symbolic power, 'a confidence rarely accessible to their mothers' (Glynn, 2014, p.22) . Moreover, a revaluation of the emancipatory potential of their cultural capital. This new agentic interpretation of their Sylheti *doxa* [the taken for granted social order] has led to the reversal of the regulated orthodoxy made possible by opening a new social and spiritual lacuna. This distinctly dynamic and inclusive British administration of Bengali Islam has been constructed by the growing third generation that Hoque (2015) termed as 'British Islam'. In this way, Kabeer (2000, p.150) argued 'an ideological space has been opened up for them to consider new strategies and opportunities'. For British born Bengali women, their ability to self-survey their own bodies away from the male gaze in a new association of power has allowed their practises to be no longer subject to strict Sylheti social codes. Imbued by lessons realised, within the discourse of empowerment there are marked progressive counterhegemonic shifts towards British born young women working outside of the family economy (Mahbub, 2019). Participation in paid employment for the third and growing fourth generation is slowly unmooring from negotiated consent with new

strategies deployed in restoring flexibility to institutionalised discourse on Bengali gender equality (Phillipson et al., 2003). National data shows more than 234,800 Bengali/Pakistani women are in paid employment, in Tower Hamlets over 55 percent of Bengali women of working age were in employment (LEA, 2018), 16 percent higher than the national average for women in work (Employment, 2021).

In Tower Hamlets Bengali families are increasingly deploying familial strategies to secure positional advantages in the space they occupy (Eade & Garbin, 2006). Changes in the attitudes appear marked by changes in the value ascribed to stratified distinctions of human capital conferring their symbolic capital (Strand & Winston, 2008). Educated British born Bengali women have significant cultural capital reflected as value within the family (Pollen, 2002). The geographic field a child was born was conventionally a strong indicator of achievement but against all odds British Bangladeshi children born in 1997/1998 were the highest achievers, outperforming their local white working-class counterparts in Tower Hamlets (Social Market Foundation (SMF) (2016). In 2017 British born Bengali girls outperformed Bengali boys and continue to have higher attainment levels in schools (LEA, 2018). Smart and Rahman (2009, p.54) argued as capital accumulating strategies, daughters were encouraged to seek an advanced education and employment. For Bangladeshi families, their 'main priority was for their daughters to be academically successful, to gain a degree if they had the interest and ability, and to find a 'decent' job, which led to financial security and personal development'. For a closed Bengali community that values sons over daughters this marked a progressive change in attitudes to women entering the labour market and the loosening of the conservative structures of male dependency and regulated liberties (Kabeer, 2000; Shah et al., 2010).

For British born Bengali women, their active agency and well-trained knowledge of the labour market has opened the door to wider social opportunities and professional fields

outside of the neo traditionalistic sphere. Over the past decade, a closer dialectical relationship between Muslim students' habitus and pedagogical field coupled with a broader acceptance of multicultural identities has led to significant inroads. Almost half of British Bangladeshis from the poorest quintile go to university with girls more likely than boys to succeed as 'Bangladeshi pupils and their performance has improved at a more rapid rate than other ethnic groups in recent years at almost every key stage of education' (Shaw et al., 2016. p.8).

Today, schools now accommodate the Islamic dispositions of their Muslim students and maintain strong collaborations to local faith groups (Rahman, 2010a). Aziz (2021, p.3) argued, 'Bangladeshi families have gradually attuned their children to the benefits of and the importance of an education and its potential in achieving cultural distinction as well as symbolic capital, and access to the growing professional and managerial occupations'. British born third generation Bengali Muslim women have successfully recalibrated their accumulated Islamic capital as symbolic capital to enter the professional field with careful exactitude. In 2018, British Bangladeshi workers on average were earning a median hourly wage of £9.60 per hour, 20.2 percent less per hour, less than their White British colleagues earning £12.03 per hour. The third generation has made significant inroads, closing the pay gap down to 3.1 percent among 16 - 30 year-olds compared to over 27.9 percent for workers over 30+ (ONS, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

Drawing the discussion to a close, there is a growing scholarship on Bengali women and gender in Bangladesh. Overtime British Bengali women's lives have undergone rapid changes in complex ways that would benefit future research. The internalisation of their Sylheti doxa has been a powerful organising force for the British Bangladeshi women that has over time shaped their beliefs, values and behaviours that has been mutually reinforced

within their habitus. British born Bengali women, under Islamic traditions have been able to stake a much greater claim in the secular British public arena than the generation that emigrated in the late 1970s. For British Bangladeshi women, the occupational sphere is socially organised and not a religiously sanctioned dominion discernable to one domineering gender. In a new mode of Islamic understanding, British Bengali women have been able cut across the silent Sylheti censorial barriers of their *purdah* communities that had blocked entry for the generation that arrived in the 1970s from work outside of their communities (Nesa, 2017; Ahmed, 2020).

Bengali women's decision to sell their labour power is underpinned by each woman's own cultural capital, their own networks and knowledge of the local labour market opportunities, the available training provision, their existing and future division of domestic responsibilities as well as human capital accumulation, capability, and ambition (Akter, 2013). British born Bangladeshi women have made significant improvements in fulfilling their parent's high expectations of upward social mobility (Shah et al., 2010).

The British Bengali women are more orientated towards employment. For British born Bengali women success did not appear measured against traditional masculine measures of pay and position. However, the successful accomplishment of a stable job allowed a balance between work and family life under Islamic principles. Work was not paramount but predicated on economic necessity and many worked part-time, devoting the bulk of their time to family and more to the care of other elderly members within the nuclear family (Shaw et al., 2016). The third-generation Bengali women's ability to self-identify and self-determine a certain way has allowed them to soften the controlling boundaries of Bengali masculine patriliney. Today the changing logic of the field has started to erode the value of the village networks model, a sign of assimilation into Britishness. Dismantling existing structures of gender relation, the new empowered agents, the third-generation Bengali

women have discarded their patriarchal mode of presentation with many second-generation mothers directing their daughters to new directions of investment in their future (Smart & Rahman, 2008).


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