



Graduate School of Development Studies

**Ideal Images of Womanhood and the Adolescent Girls:  
A Study of Female Students' Access to Sexual and  
Reproductive Health Information in Two Madrashas in  
Bangladesh**

A Research Paper presented by:

***Sharmin Islam***  
(Bangladesh)

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of  
MASTERS OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Specialisation:  
**WOMEN, GENDER, DEVELOPMENT  
(WGD)**

Members of the examining committee:

Drs. Loes Keyzers (supervisor)  
Dr. Nahda Younis Shehada (reader)

The Hague, The Netherlands  
Month, Year

***Disclaimer:***

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

Research papers are not made available for circulation outside of the Institute.

***Inquiries:***

Postal address: Institute of Social Studies  
P.O. Box 29776  
2502 LT The Hague  
The Netherlands

Location: Kortenaerkade 12  
2518 AX The Hague  
The Netherlands

Telephone: +31 70 426 0460

Fax: +31 70 426 0799

**DEDICATION:**

To My Little Daughter Rodoshi

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am really grateful to the participants of this research for their willingness to spend their time and talk openly about their experiences without whom I would not be able to conduct the research. My especial thanks go to the Madrasha authorities and the staffs and officers of FPAB who helped me to get access to the Madrasha premise.

I would like to express an immense gratitude to my supervisor Loes Keyzers for her knowledgeable guidance, advices, and critical comments. Her support and empathy during the whole process of producing the paper were invaluable. I am also grateful to my second reader Dr Nahda Shehada for her valuable comments and stimulating suggestions, which helped me to improve my paper further.

Without the support and encouragement of my wonderful husband Imtiaz, it would never have been possible to complete this research. I am especially grateful to him and my mother and sister for their support throughout my entire study period.

Finally, my thanks are due to all staffs and participants of WGD and my friends, especially Mokhles, Tania, Nebil, Trudy, Ranjana, Lima, Aurchi, for such a wonderful time we had together.

# Table of Contents

<b>DEDICATION:</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>List of Acronyms</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Introduction: Insights about the Research</b>	<b>10</b>
1.1 About the Study	10
1.2 Methodology and Analytical Framework	11
Epistemological Position: Feminist Standpoint and the ‘Girls Voice’	12
Methods of data collection	13
Research Area and Participants	13
Theoretical Framework	14
Practical Problems in Carrying out the Research	15
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Analytical Framework</b>	<b>17</b>
2.0 Introduction	17
2.1 Ideal Image of Womanhood as ‘Ideal Type’	17
2.3 Ecological Systems Theory	18
2.4 The Social Body Theory	19
2.5 Conceptualizing Agency	20
2.5 The Intersectionality Approach	21
2.6 Chapter Conclusion	22
<b>Chapter Three</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Introducing SRHE Project in Madrasahs: Assessing Controversies</b>	<b>24</b>
3.0 Introduction	24
3.1 Development of Madrasa as Academic Institution: A Historical Analysis	24
3.2 Introducing SRHE in Madrasahs: The Process	27
3.3 Controversies Surrounding Introduction of SRH in Madrasa	29

3.4 Chapter Conclusion:	32
<b>Chapter Four</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Ideal Image of Womanhood, Real Life Experiences and Construction of Social Body: Assessing Access to SRH Information</b>	<b>35</b>
4.0 Introduction	35
4.1 Students' Lives in the Madrasha: Differentiating the Contexts	35
4.2 Different Realities: Ideal Constructions and Real Life Experiences	36
4.3 Ideal Construction, Real Experiences and Accessing SRH Information: Formation of Madrasha Girls' Social Bodies	43
4.4 Chapter Conclusion	48
<b>Chapter Five</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Revisiting the Controversies: Intersection between Religious Interpretations and Social Bodies and Its impact on Accessing ARH Information</b>	<b>50</b>
5.0 Introduction	50
5.1 Intersection between Social Bodies and Religious Interpretations	51
5.2 Chapter Conclusion	55
<b>Chapter Six</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Concluding Thoughts</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>ANNEX 1: Background information of the interviewees</b>	<b>64</b>

## **List of Acronyms**

AIDS- Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome  
ARHE- Adolescent Reproductive Health Education  
BRAC- Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee  
DGHS- Directorate General of Health Services  
FPAB- Family Planning Association of Bangladesh  
HIV- Human Immunodeficiency Virus  
ICPD- International Conference on Population and Development  
ILO- International Labour Organization  
KK- Kishor Kishori  
MDG- Millennium Development Goal  
MOHFW- Ministry of Family and Health Welfare  
NGO- Non Governmental Organization  
SRH- Sexual and Reproductive Health  
STD- Sexually Transmitted Disease  
UN- United Nations  
UNAIDS- United States Agency for International Development  
UNFPA- United Nations Population Fund  
UNICEF- United Nations Children's Fund  
WHO- World Health Organization

## **Abstract**

Adolescent girls reading in Madrashes (Islamic religious schools) have largely been excluded from access to Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) information services in Bangladesh. In order understand reasons for such exclusions this study wants to explore how different actors involved in Madrasha interact with each other in relation to the adolescent girls' access to SRH information. Thus, the study has two objectives. First, it aims to analyze the construction of ideal image of womanhood among the Madrasha girls and second, to evaluate its influence in mediating adolescent girls' lived experiences in relation to access to sexual and reproductive health information. Using different theories and concepts like Bronfenbrenner's 'Ecological Systems Theory', Scheper-Hughes and Lock's 'Social Body theories' and 'Intersectional Approach' along with Weber's 'Ideal Type' and 'Agency' as concepts the research uncovers how different religious interpretations and social actions create opportunities as well as obstacles for adolescent girls' access to Sexual and Reproductive health (SRH) information whereas it also points out cautions for any generalizations regarding Madrasha contexts in the country.

## **Keywords**

Religious interpretations, Social body, Sexual and reproductive health, Ideal image of womanhood, Intersectionality



# Chapter 1

# Introduction: Insights about the Research

## 1.1 About the Study

This study is concerned about the adolescent<sup>1</sup> girls' access to sexual and reproductive health information in Madrasha context. According to the National Census of 2001, there are 36.3 million adolescents in Bangladesh who are between the age of 10-19, and constituted 23% of the total population. Among the adolescents around 17.5 million are girls (Snow, 2003), of whom 12,26,206 are studying in approximately 33,201 Madrashas (Aleya Madrasha and Quami Madrasha) across the country (Abdullah et al, 2004). Though the government and the NGOs had taken many programs involving in school and out of school adolescents, only a few had targeted Madrasha. For example, BRAC alone had targeted 249 secondary schools as part of a project which included only 5 Madrashas. Beside this in 2007 there was only one program running in Madrasha premises as part of a project that targeted ten Madrashas of which only two were female Madrashas.

Researches done on adolescents' access to SRH information in Bangladesh had overwhelmingly emphasized the need for special programs (Rani and Lule, 2004; Akhter et al, 1999; Snow, 2003; Bhuiya et al, 2006; Barkat and Majid 2003). Some studies had also projected adolescent girls' special vulnerability due to their specific sexual and reproductive health needs (Rob et al, 2001; Haseen et al, 2004). But unfortunately none of these studies have explained reasons behind Madrasha girls' exclusions more specifically, or exclusions of Madrashas as intervention sites in general.

On the basis of the fact that all the policy documents in Bangladesh have intensely emphasized on inclusion of all the adolescents irrespective of the type of educational institution few questions might be raised; what are the reasons behind this exclusion of Madrashas? Is it because the adolescents studying there don't need such education as they are already well informed or already have enough resources to be informed as part of their curriculum? Or, it's because these

---

<sup>1</sup> Adolescence has been defined by WHO as the period of life spanning the ages between 10 and 19 years (WHO, 1997).

institutions are considered as ‘orthodox Islamic contexts’ in which introducing such program is considered impossible? Or, it’s because of the resistances from Madrasha ‘gatekeepers’ who don’t want to allow such initiatives? Or, there exist a taken for granted perceptions regarding Madrasha for which these contexts are considered as ‘unfeasible’ by the NGOs and the government?

In order to unpack answers to the above questions this study wants to explore how different actors involved in Madrasha interact with each other in relation to the adolescent girls’ access to SRH information. Thus, the study has two objectives. First, it aims to analyze the construction of ideal image of womanhood among the Madrasha girls and second, to evaluate its influence in mediating adolescent girls’ lived experiences in relation to access to sexual and reproductive health information

## **1.2 Methodology and Analytical Framework**

The study has one broad research question; **how are the ideal images of womanhood constructed among the adolescent girls in the Madrasha context and influence their access to sexual and reproductive health information?**

Finding answers to this question required two different levels of abstractions. On the first level it required to analyze different social and institutional relations that influenced the girls’ image of ideal woman. Hence, the girl students were asked questions including how they define a ‘good’ girl or a ‘bad girl’, about the process through which they came to know about these ideas, their guardians and teachers expectations from them in this regard, their exposure to different aspects of social changes including media and technology, their idea regarding inappropriate behaviours which one should avoid, their previous educational background, family background, physical mobility, friends, curriculum in Madrasha etc. To get better understanding in this regard the guardians and teachers were also asked about their views regarding ‘good’ and ‘bad’ girls and the attributes that make a girl ‘good’ or ‘bad’. The second level of abstraction required to assess different aspects of the girls’ access to SRH information in relation to the images of ideal woman. Questions that were asked included the girls interaction with different social actors in relation to sexual and reproductive health issues, about their reaction to the SRH programs running in their Madrasha, guardians and teachers views about the program, their efforts to reflect all the ‘good’ images of ideal womanhood in their

day to day life including acquiring knowledge on SRH issues, their parents and teachers reactions about their participation in SRH project, treatment for any kind of SRH related problem, religious interpretations in this regard in the Madrasha premises etc.

### ***Epistemological Position: Feminist Standpoint and the 'Girls Voice'***

The underlying epistemological stance for this research has been taken from the feminist standpoint theory which argues for evaluating dominant institutional practices from the standpoint of most marginalized sub-groups (Hardin 2005:221). Thus, I engaged in this research by taking the standpoint of the marginalized sub-groups of girls. I listened to them and gave utmost importance to their 'subjective experiences' also because of my own lived experiences. In spite of studying in a 'modern' girls' school and coming from an 'educated' middle class family, I never had the chance to get any sorts of education regarding sexual and reproductive health as part of the curriculum during adolescence. I couldn't discuss with anyone about the bodily changes, and none of my parents or guardians had ever consulted me about this as well. It seemed that there existed a clear cut relationship between talking about sexuality and being 'bad girl'. It wasn't surprising for me when I came to know from the interviews that none of the girls was ever consulted about their SRH problem. Thus I took my own lived experience as a way to be part of the research process, to interact with the participants and even to evaluate my own knowledge. Though I interviewed the guardians and teachers, I placed utmost importance to what I listened from the girls and evaluated my own lived experiences. For some this might hamper the objective claims of my research but I think it also make my arguments strong as 'rational knowledge claims'. As Haraway argued:

I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims....I am arguing for a view from the body...versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity.

(Haraway, 1988:589)

### ***Methods of data collection***

I used qualitative data collection methods because of the nature of the research question and epistemological orientation. FGDs (Focus Group Discussions) and in-depth interview were the key data collection tools. Initially I conducted FGDs with the girls and recruited key informants for in-depth interviews. For the FGDs I used a check list which was further enhanced depending on the findings of the FGDs. This enhanced check list was used to interview the girls. After analyzing findings of these I prepared another check list for the guardians and teachers and used that to interview them.

I arranged four focus group discussions (two FGDs with female students in each Madrasha) with five to seven girls in each of the sessions. The long discussion during FGDs helped the participants to feel comfortable to share their experiences and thus allowed me to ask and know more from them. From the FGDs eight key informants were chosen for in-depth interviews. Though I got many interesting information from the FGDs, during the in-depth interviews, I found that the girls avoided many issues, which they perceived as very personal and not easy to share or discuss during FGDs before other girls. Besides the students, I also interviewed two teachers and two guardians (mothers of the girls) in each. Therefore, getting information both from the Madrasha girls and different actors of their environment such as mothers and teachers enabled me to have a better understanding of the girls' ideal images of womanhood and its influence on their access to SRH information.

Beside this I was also present in two of the regular counseling sessions for the girls as part of the project. Nevertheless, secondary data was gathered from the literature review of the existing works on sexual and reproductive health issues, the baseline study of the SRHE project by FPAB and from the national censuses.

### ***Research Area and Participants***

Considering the time limitation for fieldwork, I decided to conduct the research in two Alia Madrashas - one in Cox's Bazaar and the other in Dhaka - where SRH

project activities were running.<sup>2</sup> Coxsbazar is a small town where the SRH project was facing huge obstacles whereas Dhaka is a big Metropolis city with all ‘modern’ facilities for everyday life where the project was running successfully. Though initially I chose these two different locations because of the easy access to the Madrasha, it also allowed me to see how the ideal images varied from one social context to another depending on changes in social actors which further helped me to investigate whether there was any relationship between the ideal images of womanhood and young girls’ access to SRH information as part of project in a relatively successful and in a failed context.

The participants of the study were twenty five girls, four mothers (of four participants) and five teachers. Among the girl interviewees, thirteen were from the Cox’s Bazaar Madrasha and twelve were from Dhaka Madrasha. These girls were chosen randomly from the Dakhil (secondary) and Alim (higher secondary) levels of Madrasha education whose age was in between fourteen to nineteen. The four mothers (two from Cox’s Bazaar and two from Dhaka) and five teachers (three from Cox’s Bazaar Madrasha and two from Dhaka Madrasha) of the girls were also chosen randomly depending on their availability.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

In order to unpack different actors’ interactions in relation to Madrasha girls’ access to sexual and reproductive health, this research has used Bronfenbrenner’s ‘Ecological Systems theory’ and Scheper-Hughes and Lock’s (1987) ‘Social Body Theory’ along with intersectional approach. Using Weber’s concept of ‘ideal type’ to consider ideal image of womanhood created the entry point for assessing adolescent girls’ real life experiences whereas ‘Ecological Systems Theory’ particularly explained how out of these real life experiences through the interactions of different actors with the individual biological body ‘social bodies’ were formed. On the other hand ‘Social Body Theory’ allowed the space to assess adolescent girls’ reality in relation to their access to SRH information as it allowed

---

<sup>2</sup> Madrasha education system is divided into two in Bangladesh. Quami Madrasha system constitutes to represent ‘more fundamental Islamic identity’ in Bangladesh

seeing adolescent girls not as biological individuals rather as collective whole constructed by the society. Finally, it was the use of intersectional approach that allowed revealing the intersecting relations between religious interpretations and different ‘social bodies’ of the Madrasha girls and its influence on their access to SRH information. Nevertheless, the concept of ‘agency’ helped to understand the reasons behind variations in adolescent girls behavior in relation to the ideal image of womanhood as it enabled to see them not only as receptors of different social meanings but also as active agents of the society in producing meanings. This theoretical framework has been elaborated in chapter two.

### ***Practical Problems in Carrying out the Research***

Time limitation was the main problem for this research. It hindered every steps of data collection process. The distance between the two Madrashes, which is around 700 kilometres, was also a big problem. There is no doubt that getting more time would have been fruitful in accessing more in-depth data. Though, there was plan to interview both fathers as well as mothers of the Madrasha girls, it wasn’t possible to interview them due to time constrain as he couldn’t manage time.

---

whereas Alia Madrashes are viewed as comparatively secular form of religious education as they combine both religious and modern subjects.

## Chapter 2



# Analytical Framework

## 2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I have elaborated the theoretical framework to give clear idea about the use of different theories and concepts as analytical tools. While the chapter discusses the theories or concepts, it also elaborates how these concepts or theories were used in relation to this research. For a better understanding of the use of the analytical framework in relation to present study a linear model could be assumed in which in the first step 'ideal image of womanhood' was understood as Weber's 'ideal type' which helped to assess similarities and deviations in behaviour in relation to that ideal image whereas Bronfenbrenner's 'Ecological Systems Theory' was used to find out how such similarities and deviations occurred.

The concept of agency had also been used in this regard to explain why such similarities and deviations happened. In the second step, with the use of 'Social Body Theory' the outcome of the first step was conceived as social body which represented a collective whole of many of the biological girls' bodies, and was used in this phase with the help of intersectional approach to see how Madrasa girls' access to SRH information were influenced by religious interpretations in different contexts. It should be noted that in reality all these phases were very much overlapping, and the concepts as well as theories were used simultaneously and sequentially. The chapter begins with a discussion on the Weber's concept of '*Ideal Type*' and gradually moves on to discuss ecological systems theory, social body theory, agency as a concept and intersectional approach.

## 2.1 Ideal Image of Womanhood as 'Ideal Type'

As 'ideal' image of womanhood is one of the central themes of this research, it needs particular attention. Generally ideal means a principle or value which one actively pursues as a goal, in social science theorization it may entail some specific significance. Following Webers proposition of 'Ideal type' this research has tried to conceptualize it. Though, he argued that no scientific system is ever capable of reproducing all concrete reality, nor can any conceptual apparatus ever do full justice to the infinite diversity of particular phenomena, he proposed *ideal type* as

an analytical construct that serves the investigator as a measuring rod to ascertain similarities as well as deviations in concrete cases. It provides the basic method for comparative study and is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent *concrete individual* phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified *analytical* construct (Coser, 1977: 223).

According to this conceptualization an *ideal type* never corresponds to concrete reality but always moves at least one step away from it. It is constructed out of certain elements of reality and forms a logically precise and coherent whole, which can never be found as such in that reality. *Ideal types, thus*, enable one to construct hypotheses linking them with the conditions that brought the phenomenon or event into prominence, or with consequences that follow from its emergence (Coser, 1977:224). In relation to the present research identification of the ‘ideal image of womanhood’ as an *ideal type* enabled to find out expected social actions for the adolescent girls, though in reality such ideal image may always move ‘at least one step away’ from concrete reality as the concept entails.

### **2.3 Ecological Systems Theory**

Bronfenbrenner has defined the social ecology of human development as involving the study of mutual transactions between human beings and the actors of the environmental systems in which they interact, to understand the proximal and distal influences. The individuals are embedded within the proximal context of an environment, which is defined by their family, community, peers, educational institution etc and these proximal influences are embedded within the distal context of the society such as norms, traditions, media etc (DiClemente, et al 2007). The distal and proximal elements mutually influence each other as well as fuels and steers a child’s development (Maton, 2000).

If an adolescent Madrasha girl is placed in the middle of the structure of environment, it will be seen that there are also various complex layers around her, which may have strong influence on her development and the construction of the ideal image of womanhood. For instance, the parents (family member) and the teachers (actors of educational institution) of the Madrasha may have their own

views towards proper womanhood and they may expect the girl to achieve the ideal images of womanhood, as they perceive. They teach the girl about how to speak, behave, act and react to certain situation etc. Furthermore, these actors may have different perceptions towards sexuality and they may link such issues with the perception of a proper or improper womanhood, which also may have influence on the construction of the views of the girl. Thus, this theory enabled the researcher to understand how interactions of different institutional and societal relations with the individual body produced the social body whereas it also allowed spaces to critically assess why and how some Madrasha girls practiced their agency.

## **2.4 The Social Body Theory**

This research used particularly Scheper-Hughes and Lock's (1987) 'Social Body' theory to realize the Madrasha girls' bodies as social bodies to understand their ideals, their views and decisions regarding SRH information which is very much linked with their access to SRH information. Scheper-Hughes and Lock think that the body should be seen as a unitary integrated aspect of self and social relations- a social body, instead of viewing the body as bounded physical entity that serves as a basis for individuality- as western cultures have been claimed to do.

Over the course of western history, natural/ supernatural, real/ unreal, spirit/ matter, body/ mind have been dichotomized, which has highly been criticized by social scientists including anthropologists who stressed on the importance of the social contexts. Particularly, Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) have deconstructed the western assumption of a body/ mind, individual/ society dichotomy and argue for a more detailed analysis of the body and its relation with the surrounding contexts. They argue that critical interpretive medical anthropology should first describe the culturally constructed variety of metaphorical conceptions (conscious and unconscious) about the body and associated narratives and then the social, political and individual uses should be shown to which these conceptions are applied in practice. Therefore, a medical anthropologist attempts to explore the notion of "embodied personhood" (Turner 1986). To them the medical anthropology fails to consider the way in which the human body itself is culturally constructed. According to them social relations should be understood as a key contributor to individual health and illness or in short body need to be seen as unitary, integrated aspect of self and social relations. Hence, they argue that

medical anthropology can provide the key to the development of new epistemology and metaphysics of the body and of the emotional, social and political sources of illness and healing. Such an approach is not new or unique in social theory. Genealogies of this can be traced in the work of Bourdieu, Foucault, and Goffman's work.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.5 Conceptualizing Agency

Both Naila Kabeer (2001) and Saba Mahmood's (2003) views towards agency was used to interpret Madrasha girls' real life experiences in relation to ideal images of womanhood. According to Kabeer, conception of agency and empowerment are very much linked. She sees empowerment as ability to make choices. She associate agency with consciousness, which encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose, which individuals bring to their activities, their sense of agency on the power within. She also relate agency with decision-making. Kabeer states various ways of exercising agency such as bargaining, negotiation, deception, manipulation, subversion, resistance and protest as well as the more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis.

On the other hand, Saba Mahmood criticizes the feminist conception of agency and tries to challenge by her careful and powerful theoretical contribution. In the feminist conception, women's agency refers to realize one's interests against the weight of custom, tradition etc and desire for autonomy and for which resistance is needed when conditions permit- which has been highly criticized by Mahmood. She argued against the way in which women of the third world are portrayed as passive, submissive, dominated, lacking agency etc. By bringing the example of pious women in Egypt, she argues that docility and passivity in the eyes of progressive discourse is an exercise of agency in the eyes of pious women.

In relation to the present study both of this conceptualizations were important. For example, in many instances the Madrasha girls' were practicing their agency while confirming to the ideal image of womanhood living within the religious

---

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion on Bourdieu, Foucault, and Goffman's work in this regard see Shilling (2004), Brown and Adams, (1979), Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982), Goffman,

interpretations and accessing SRH information while in other cases they were creating distances from the religious interpretations and thus tried to renegotiate the ideal images.

## 2.5 The Intersectionality Approach

Because of the very specific nature of the research contexts as religious places, adopting intersectional approach was very much helpful in assessing how religious interpretations influence the construction of social body, and thus sway adolescent girls' access to SRH information. This allowed understanding the special situations for which the girls might have been excluded from having access to SRH information. The theory of intersectionality has become very important in feminist scholarship by acknowledging the differences among women. As an explicit social science concept, it was introduced by black (USA) and migrant (UK) feminists. Kimberle` Crenshaw, first brought the term to show the interaction between race and sex to identify the differences between the experiences and struggles of white and black women. Valeria Smith, also has argued that the categories race, gender class, sexuality don't work separately in a particular situation (cited in Devis, K. forthcoming). They are constitutive of each other. Intersectionality theory tends to analyze differences among people in the society based on multiple identities considering sex, race, ethnicity, caste, class, culture, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, language, age, status etc. So, intersectionality as a concept refers to the interaction between these differences in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements and cultural ideologies and the power relations.

It does not provide any fixed guidelines or monitoring system for feminist enquiry, it fits with all kind of feminist research, and gives more freedom to feminist researchers to engage critically with their own assumptions in doing a critical, reflexive and accountable feminist inquiry. It helps in looking from a new perspective and unorthodox ways of doing feminist analysis. Intersectional approach increases the possibility to understand the 'reality' in a particular context from a more holistic perspective as it explores the differences by exploring the

---

(1963).

power relations from a multiple perspectives. Thus it further suggests that we should analyze the whole situation of the community and have to understand the causes of behaviours of people in relation to that. It tries to make visible women's multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and power relations. It also addresses the exclusions that women experience because of their positions by an easy way of asking other questions.

In case of the present research, I found several religious interpretations on the same issues in two Madrashes and even in some cases different interpretations were found in the same Madrasha on the same issues. And these different interpretations intersect with the social bodies and produce different views or reactions towards various issues among different girls. Though there are different categories of the girls on the basis of their class, economic situation, access to media, introduction to different social context etc, which also intersect with the social bodies, because of the limited scope of the research, I decided to see particularly the intersecting relations between religious interpretations and the social bodies of the girls which I found very significant for the study. Therefore, I used the intersectional approach to investigate how different religious interpretations on sexuality and different reproductive health issues intersect with the social bodies and influence the Madrasha girls' SRH decisions as well as their access to SRH information.

## **2.6 Chapter Conclusion**

Though the 'Ecological Systems Theory' and the 'Social Body Theory' are overlapping, the key difference between them is academic tradition in which they were developed. The first one was developed basically in order to explain how different actors of the environment influence a child's development whereas the second one was particularly developed by the medical anthropologists to explain how the biological body should be looked at in relation to health and illness. Though relevance of all of the theories and concepts used in this study were tried to explain in this chapter, one should understand the research context in order to realize their significance properly.

## Chapter Three

# Introducing SRHE Project in Madrashas: Assessing Controversies

## 3.0 Introduction

This chapter will explore different controversies that arose after the introduction of SRH project in the Madrasha settings. In doing so it will try to understand how the construction of the girls' images of ideal woman was influenced by this process and how their access to sexual and reproductive health information had been perceived by different actors (who were parts of the girls' environment) involved with these settings. Thus, the chapter will first assess the historical overview of the emergence of Madrasha system as academic institution in Bangladesh very briefly to understand the specific nature of Madrasha education in relation to the 'general education'. It's expected that this will help to understand the importance of time and context specific nature of the construction of ideal image of womanhood in Madrasha premises. Then the chapter will reveal how the provision of providing SRH information had become a part of the complex setting of the Madrasha system and the last part will discuss how the girls' access to SRH information had been perceived or what were the controversies, which had arisen around the SRH information provided by a project in the studied Madrashas.

## 3.1 Development of Madrasha as Academic Institution: A Historical Analysis

As Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country, Madrashas bear great significance among the people in general. Madrashas are considered as Islamic places rather than educational institutions. People generally relate the functioning of Madrashas as promoting Islamic values and thus spreading 'the message of Allah'. There is a commonly held belief that if any of the son or daughter of a person becomes *Quran-e-Hafiz*<sup>4</sup>, both the parents and the *Hafiz* will be rewarded '*Behast*' (heaven) after death, which is one of the main reasons for parents behind sending children in the Madrashas.

---

<sup>4</sup> A Quran-e-Hafiz is someone who can recite the holy Quran



In South Asia the Madrasha system was conceived with the introduction of Islam preached by Muslim Sufis and saints, and the advent of Muslim rule. Madrashes were originally places for spiritual worship or '*Khanqas*'<sup>5</sup> that later developed into '*Maktabs*'<sup>6</sup> which taught Quran recitation and Islamic rituals; in time, Madrashes were formed as sites of Islamic theological education. From the 13th to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Muslim rulers of this region built *Maktabs* or Madrashes alongside mosques to teach both religion and science. However, with the fall or decline of Muslim empires Muslim education system began to crumble. Nonetheless, the Madrasha system was influenced by British colonization when the British took over the territory of Bengal in 1757. The British began to 'modernize' the system in 1826 by introducing English in the Madrasha curriculum and establishing numerous modern schools, and shaping them on a "parcellized' understanding of Islam."<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, the number of Madrashes was steadily reduced. The British also set up the Calcutta Aleya Madrasha in 1781, establishing a new direction in Madrasha education since it favoured instruction in Muslim law and jurisprudence instead of an all-round education of the Muslims. Subsequently, in 1910, the British divided the education system into two branches, the Old Scheme Madrasha and the New Scheme Madrasha. This dichotomy represented the separation of secular education for the elite and religious education for the poor; essentially the British sought to separate the state and religion by this new system (Tiffany 2007). This design, however, was not received favourably by Muslim leaders who perceived it as a threat and sought to replace it with what they saw as the true form of Islam. With the introduction of a new modern secular education system in the colonial period, the British fundamentally changed the Madrasha education system in Bengal. They not only displaced many Madrashes but also due to disrespect for the system, created a sense of backwardness about it as compared to the modern educational system conceived.

---

<sup>5</sup> *Khanqas* were traditional non-formal Islamic education centre which were relatively small in size.

<sup>6</sup> *Maktabs* were also non-formal Islamic education centre but bigger than *Khanqas*

<sup>7</sup> See *Imtiaz, 2005* for a brief discussion on the educational reforms in British period.

Following independence in 1971, the Madrasha education system in Bangladesh was significantly transformed and since then continuing to promote Islamic values by its two types (Alia Madrasha and Quami Madrasha) of Madrasha education systems. As Madrashas were developed to preserve the 'Islamic' traditions in opposition to the 'Modernization' efforts of British rulers, this over the years created a very specific image of Madrashas as religious places. Hence they make a clear distinction between modern and Islamic educational system and any kind of concept produced by western world or perceived as modern are discouraged by the Madrasha system. For instance, the Islamists of the country many of whom are involved with the management of Madrashas had continuously resisted introduction of various important strategies for population control (condom use, abortion, use of pill etc.) by giving different interpretations of religious resources. They even managed to influence the government to change the National Women Development Policy in 2006 that reduced women's enjoyment of some fundamental rights.

Though the government of the country became able to manage some of the Islamists to give liberal interpretations of religious resources on family planning and menstrual regulation and thus continued the campaign, many of the *Hujurs*<sup>8</sup> were actively engaged against issues like the use of condom and family planning as they considered these were prohibited in Islam. In the Madrashas where this study was done there were certain discourses regarding good and bad girls as we will see in the next chapters. This helped to create fixation of the image of an ideal woman which was strictly imposed upon the girl students to ensure that they conform to it. This particular image of ideal womanhood should be seen as an effort through which Madrasha authorities tried to maintain and reinforce the larger social understanding of these contexts as 'Islamic' in opposition to the 'modern' educational institutions. This indicates the importance to understand the existing ideal images of womanhood among the Madrasha girls that will be discussed in the next chapters and also various confusions and controversies that has been arisen around ARHE, as it is perceived as western concept, in the Madrasha premise. Before the discussion on the ongoing debates and contradictions around ARHE, in

the two Madrashes where the research has been conducted, the next section will give a brief picture on how SRHE suddenly has become part of Madrasha education system.

### **3.2 Introducing SRHE in Madrashes: The Process**

Sexual matters and the process of reproduction are generally learned by adolescents or young children in observing adult behaviour, from peers and older siblings, by media and in some families from parents (UNFPA, 2000). But in many cases they get wrong or very limited information from these sources. Therefore, they need formal instruction, which can be a very important source of accurate information. Though in some developed countries, formalized curriculum for sexuality education is common, the pictures of the developing countries are different (ibid).

Because of the fear that sexuality education will encourage sexual activity, there is often strong religious and political opposition to such education in many countries. In Bangladesh there was also a strong resistance from some religious leaders who are politically influential as well. However, considering the vulnerability of adolescents towards various complications of reproduction and increasing threat of STDs, and HIV/AIDS, the government of Bangladesh has taken many effective initiatives to promote adolescent reproductive health.

Various commitments on ARH have made by Bangladesh to the international community. The country has signed to International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), ICPD+5, Child Rights Convention, Beijing Platform of Action and the Millennium Development Goals (MGDs). These commitments have created pressure on the government to ensure adolescent reproductive health and therefore, the government of Bangladesh has incorporated the ARH issue in important national policies. There is provision of information, counselling and services for adolescents in the Population Policy of 2005. The ARH issue has been

---

<sup>8</sup> *Hujur* refers to teachers of Madrasha but sometime it may also be used to refer to any religious leader or pious man.

addressed not just from the population but also from a development perspective, which is a major breakthrough. In the policy, special emphasis has been given on providing vocational and non-vocational and non-formal education for adolescent boys and girls of both in-school and out-school. Moreover, Youth Policy of 2003 tries to ensure the involvement of youth in issues of preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS and drug abuse, and especially the policy mentions the importance of involving members of the society in imparting youth with knowledge about reproductive health. A huge campaign is also going on in both the print and electronic media to raise consciousness on these issues.

The health of adolescent girls is identified as a critical issue and the role of education, employment and empowerment is acknowledged as a necessity for improving their reproductive health by the 'Reproductive Health Strategy', which has been developed under the leadership of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW). The National HIV/AIDS Policy also has emphasized on providing easy access of adolescents to information about sexual health and safe sex practices and relevant services. The Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Local Government Rural Development and cooperatives, Ministry of Information, Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and some other ministries also have recently integrated ARH issues in some of their projects/programs (Adolescent Reproductive Health Strategy by MHFW, 2006: 6).

There is another significant intervention of School Health Program under the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), which works on the agenda of ARH. School Health Services, Healthy School Environment and Health Education are three components of this program. The program's infrastructure includes 23 clinics across the country, with a potential to cover more than 800 schools (ibid). Under the Ministry of Education, DGHS also using peer approach to educate in-school adolescent students on RH issues. The Ministry of Education has included ARH issues in the formal curricula of secondary and higher secondary schools of general educational system. There is also a course or book called '*Fikah Shashtra*'<sup>9</sup> which has discussions on sexual and reproductive health, is the part of Madrasha

---

<sup>9</sup> Fikah Sastra refers to Islamic laws and is a mandatory subject in Madrasha education from class six.

curricula and is taught from *Dakhil* to *Alim* level of Madrasha education. But it has been observed by different surveys (ibid) and also from the findings of this research that both in general and Madrasha education system, the teachers usually skip the chapters on SRH issues or ask the students to read them at home because of shyness of both teachers and students. Moreover, the texts written to teach these issues or the *Fikah* books were written near about 700 years ago and thus didn't contain any discussion on the recent pros and cons of sexual health.

However, the NGOs have played a very important role in this area by catalyzing the inclusion of this important topic in the national agenda (ibid). NGOs have taken various programs/projects to provide health education, awareness building, delivery health services for adolescents and peer education and life skills approach for enabling them to establish their rights. A large number of local, national and international NGOs are involved in planning and implementing such programs. The development partners, including the UN agencies and bilateral and multilateral donors also have involvement in the area of ARH. Various UN agencies like WHO, UNICEF, UNAIDS, IOM, ILO, UNFPA etc are working in the health sector in Bangladesh.

In line of these activities to ensure ARH, two NGOs (FPAB in 10 Madrashes] and BRAC [in 5 Madrashes]) have taken initiatives to provide ARHE in 15 Madrashes.

### **3.3 Controversies Surrounding Introduction of SRH in Madrasha**

Both in the two Madrashes of the research area, a project by FPAB started implementing programs to ensure young peoples' access to sexual and reproductive health information in 2007. Though the project took various initiatives such as peer education program, monthly interactive sessions SRH&R and skills building, student teacher forums, health posts to offer youth friendly services, parents meetings/ orientation, sensitization program for members of Madrasha governing bodies, local leaders and marriage registers etc to enhance the Madrasha students' access to SRH information, it failed to continue its all other activities except health care services in the Cox's Bazaar Madrasha. And after overcoming several barriers, it was able to manage to continue its activities for the last one and half year. In the

Cox's Bazaar Madrasha, after distributing a booklet with the discussion on the necessity of family planning for the girls' health and the use of contraceptive like condom in an interactive session on SRH issues, some of the teachers of the Madrasha became suspicious about the program activities. Both of the teachers of the Madrasha, who were interviewed for the research, complained about the project activities. As MD Abdullah (a teacher) stated,

“The program and its activities are making our girls bad. The program is providing some books where there are discussions on using condom, which is not permitted in Quran and there are some other very personal physical issues in the books, which should not be discussed so frankly. These free and frank discussions can be the cause of sexual arousal for the girls”.

Therefore, because of the resistance from the teachers, the project had to stop all of their activities except providing health care services by a female doctor and her assistant. The teachers except the principal *Hujur*, also expressed that the girls need not to know all these issues of sexual health and reproduction. They should know by themselves when they would grow up and get married. Some of the students of Alim level also had argued that SRHE should not be provided before Alim level of Madrasha education. The younger girls need not to know these issues. On the other hand the rest of the teachers (according to the principle, the number is higher than the teachers who were against the program) kept quiet because they thought that the students should learn the SRH issues though they also had complain on few activities of the project. As the principal of the Madrasha stated,

“All activities of the project are not bad. The project is providing health care services, which are benefiting the girls. I also believe that these girls should know some necessary sexual and reproductive health information for their future life. Acquiring knowledge on various sexual and reproductive health problems, which a woman can face in their reproductive life, has not discouraged by Islam. Hence, there is a book where SRH issues have been discussed called ‘Fikah Shastra’, is included in the curricular of class eight, nine and ten. But the book is

not discussed frankly because of shyness of both teachers and students.”

Though the principal supported SRHE of adolescent girls, he also had complains about some of the policies of the project like one booklet was distributed among the girls without the consent of the teachers, where the use of condom was explained. He informed that condom is not permitted in Islam. It was only permitted when anyone of the couple was sick or the wife had the risk on her life if she might get pregnant. Moreover, he had argued that the discussion on the use of condom would reduce the fear of sexual relationship before marriage among the girls, which was strictly forbidden in Islam.

Thus the setting of Cox’s Bazaar Madrasha was very complex regarding two different views towards the girls’ need of having access to SRH information among the teachers. But at the same time all of the teachers interviewed shared similar thoughts about the unacceptability of the project activities. At this point certain questions might be raised; what are the reasons behind these different views towards the need of SRH information? What are the impacts of these different views on the girls’ images of ideal woman and their access to SRH information? Why the project became unacceptable in this premise? The next two chapters will seek the answers of these questions.

However, when the project started to provide SRH information in the Madrasha of Dhaka, it also made many of its activities confusing. For instance, at the very beginning they used to arrange seminars to provide SRH information by organizing both male and female students together. The teachers and students especially female students started to complain because of feeling uncomfortable during the discussion of very personal SRH issues. Female students felt shy to ask any kind of question or query. They also couldn’t participate in the SRH discussion freely together with the male students. Though this Madrasha is a co-educational institution, boys and girls study here in separate time. So it was not usual for the students even to seat together and talk. Thus when the program counselors and the doctor discussed such issues like puberty, wet dream, contraceptive, maternal health, HIV/AIDS, STI etc both boys and girls felt uneasy and the teachers also couldn’t accept the joint discussion on such issues. As one of the respondents (a girl named Lili) has stated,

“First we felt shy while discussing SRH issues. It was not normal for us to talk on such matters openly with the friends and others. Moreover boys and girls students had sessions together. So we couldn’t ask anything about which we were curious to know and sometimes we tried to avoid the sessions and sometimes we kept quite and tried to seat in the last row of the classroom”.

Therefore, later on the program changed its strategy and started to arrange separate sessions for the boys and the girls. According to some girl respondents, some of their teachers still don’t perceive the girls’ access to SRH information as necessary though they don’t show their dissatisfaction strongly. According to all girl informants of Dhaka Madrasha except one, their parents also were suspicious about the project and forbade their daughters to attend the counseling sessions at the beginning. They believed that these types of activities would inspire the girls to do various unethical experiment and their daughters would become ‘bad girls’. Later on when they started to attend parent’s meetings arranged by the project, many of them had recognized the importance of knowing the SRH issues for the adolescent girls, though still now some of them didn’t perceive having SRH information as good for the girls. They thought that the girls would know naturally when they would grow up and get married.

The situation of the Madrasha in Dhaka was relatively less complex than the Madrasha of Cox’s Bazaar regarding the girls’ access to SRH information. Though many actors attached with the Madrasha were also confused about its necessity, and a few project activities at the beginning, made the path complex for SRH intervention, it became manageable. Nevertheless, difference in responses and complexities in introducing SRHE in these two Madrashas also raises few questions; what are the reasons behind such difference between these two Madrasha settings for SRH intervention? Why did the project welcomed later by the girls of Dhaka Madrasha and how is it linked with the girls’ ideals? The next chapters will explore the answers of these questions.

### **3.4 Chapter Conclusion:**

With a historical analysis of the Madrasha education system, the chapter elaborated that Madrashas were developed in opposition to ‘westernization’ and to preserve



'Islamic values', which can be explained as a reason behind the hindrance of the process of introducing SRHE in the Madrasha premise as SRHE was perceived as a western concept. Furthermore when a few Madrasha permitted a NGO to provide such education, various unplanned and unwise strategies of the program of the NGO created mist around its intention behind providing SRHE. Therefore, the purpose of the project was questioned by different actors of the Madrashes, but at the same time, by realizing the importance of acquiring knowledge on SRH issues for the girls to be safe and secured in their whole reproductive life, a positive view towards the program also emerged among different actors. Both the discussion on the historical evolution of the Madrasha system and different views towards the effort of the SRHE program as well as the complex settings of Madrashes had close link with the construction of the images of ideal womanhood among the Madrasha girls and their decision making process regarding SRHE as we will see in the next chapters.

## Chapter Four

# **Ideal Image of Womanhood, Real Life Experiences and Construction of Social Body: Assessing Access to SRH Information**

## **4.0 Introduction**

To serve the purpose of the research, it was needed to understand both the process and outcome of the construction of ideal images of womanhood among the Madrasha girls. Different social actors' perceptions and the Madrasha girls' interaction with them helped to understand the process of construction of ideal images whereas whether the girls conform to this ideal image in a particular context or kept distance from that, helped to understand the construction of social bodies in that context. It's expected that this chapter will reveal gradually, the girls lives of two Madrashes in relation to how the teachers and mothers of the girls and the girls themselves perceived the ideal image of a woman and how the girls acted in their real life in relation to their access to SRH information. Thus, the chapter will finally give idea about the formation of social bodies in two different contexts – in Cox's Bazaar and in Dhaka.

## **4.1 Students' Lives in the Madrasha: Differentiating the Contexts**

How the students of two Madrashes pass their lives is very important to understand the influences of different social relations properly. The girl students of Cox's-Bazaar Madrasha live within the strict control of their hujurs (teachers) as they live in the Madrasha hostel situated in the Madrasha campus. Nobody can go outside without the *Hujurs'* permission. They have various facilities inside the campus, which they need. Even the Madrasha has its' own dispensary inside the campus so that they don't need to go outside. The girls go to study in the school building in the early morning and stay there till afternoon. They maintain 'purdah' (veil) strictly. Though the principal hujur has informed that there is television in the hostel, all of the informants (girls) have stated that they don't watch television.

On the other hand, the girls of the Madrasha of Dhaka live in their home with their families. They usually go to Madrasha early in the morning and stay there till afternoon. During the class time in Madrasha, they wear veil but after returning home, many of them don't maintain purdah as they stay out of the strict control of

Hujurs after the class time. They have more communication with the other members and institutions of the society and have more exposure to the ongoing social changes than the girls of Cox's Bazar Madrasha. Though it is often assumed that Madrasha students have very little exposure to the outside world and some use this as argument to state the 'backwardness' of these students, all of the girl informants of Dhaka Madrasha have stated that they watch television regularly including Bengali as well as satellite Hindi and English channels. These girls want to prepare themselves both for the 'earthly world' and the 'world after death' and thus are well informed and have access to many of the 'modern' components of every day life which they consider important to be knowledgeable about the recent changes in society whereas the girls of Cox's Bazaar have less connection in this regard, and are more suspicious about being involved with such 'non-Islamic' acts.

#### **4.2 Different Realities: Ideal Constructions and Real Life Experiences**

The construction of the images of ideal womanhood among the girls had clear influence of their parents' and teachers' perceptions towards it, whose perceptions also might have been influenced by different social relations. Their perceived ideal woman should have some key characteristics that included that a proper or ideal woman have to say her prayers regularly, study seriously, respect and obey their parents and teachers, maintain *pardah* (veil), walk and speak properly, avoid talking with '*porpurush*' (any other male except blood relatives and husband), acquire good character and avoid friendship with 'bad girls' or in other words as the girl referred should 'lead her life in a proper Islamic way'. It was found from the interviews with the mothers and teachers of the girls that the images of a proper woman, which the girls stated were expected to them by their parents and teachers. Moreover, there were various different subjects in the Madrasha curriculum where the good qualities of both male and female had been discussed, which would guide the students to lead their life in a 'proper Islamic way' and thus influenced to develop their very idea of being ideal women. When the teachers were asked about the meaning of 'proper Islamic way', they explained that it meant the way, which had been suggested in Quran and Hadith. The teachers further elaborated that the girls should respect and keep faith on Quran and Hadith, do whatever the Quran and Hadith have suggested and avoid the forbidden activities, bear their duty

towards parents and other members of the society to lead their life in a proper Islamic way.

Therefore, different social relations as well as various institutions of the complex layers of the girls' environment, especially the closest layer (family, school) had great influence on the construction of their ideal image of a proper woman, though the actual behaviours of the girls were much more complex to understand. There were different issues about which their perceptions of ideal were not the same as they acted in their real day-to-day life. In many cases they didn't follow or reflect various good qualities, which were perceived as necessary to be a proper woman in their actual life. Because of the complexity of asking and understanding the girls' real life experiences about their reproductive health related decisions, the study explored very simple issues related to their everyday life like maintaining purdah, talking with any other male besides blood relatives etc as an easy entry point to reveal their ideals about these issues and their actual behaviours, which allowed to understand particularly their ideals and real life experiences of their reproductive life. Maintaining 'purdah' was a common tradition for the Madrasha girls by which their ideals and real life practices could be disclosed. Both the girls of Cox's Bazaar and Dhaka Madrasha perceived 'purdah' as the sign of a good woman. But four girls among twelve in Dhaka Madrasha argued that they didn't maintain purdah outside the Madrasha campus and the rest of the girls except one, had informed that they didn't cover their face while wearing *burkah*<sup>10</sup>. Only one girl *Sahana* said that she covered her whole body and face except the eyes, whereas all thirteen girls of Cox's Bazaar Madrasha maintained purdah by covering the whole body and face which corresponded with their perception of ideal image of woman regarding purdah. The girls of Cox's Bazaar Madrasha thought that purdah was their cultural identity as Muslim women and also from the Islamic perspective, exposing female body had been discouraged in Al-Quran and Hadith terming it as 'Zena'. As Busra, a girl from Cox's Bazaar Madrasha stated:

“When the girls need to go outside the home they have to cover their face and body properly. Now a days some women only cover their body but not

---

<sup>10</sup> Burkah is a special kind of clothing, which the girls wear to cover the whole body and face to maintain purdah or veil.

face....Face attracts people, so we can go everywhere by covering ourselves properly.”

May be as the girls of Cox’s bazaar Madrasha lived in such a social reality where most of the women wore ‘burkah’ and at the same time as the whole day they stayed in the Madrasha premise without any access to media or any other interaction outside the premise, they were not aware or interested about the larger social changes regarding women’s dress-up and perceived burkah as appropriate dress for them. Or the more valid reason behind their perception towards purdah might be their teachers advices with references from Quran and Hadith that women must need to wear burkah as they should not only think about the present life rather they have to prepare themselves for the world after death to be rewarded heaven. To the girls, there were different kinds of ‘Zena’ (sin) such as Zena of eyes, hair, hand etc (for instance, if portion of hair of a girl becomes visible to an unknown man, it would be the Zena of hair) for which they would be punished in the world after death. Thus the study found clear reflections of the religious resources and beliefs of their teachers and influence of various factors of the environment on the girls’ activities, which would help to understand the Cox’s Bazaar Madrasha girls’ access to SRH information that has been discussed later.

On the other hand, the girls of Dhaka Madrasha perceived wearing burkah as not essential for maintaining purdah. They wore loose salwar and camiz (one kind of dress) so that their body curves were not become visible to others. As wearing burkah was mandatory in Madrasha, many girls wore ‘burkah’ in spite of their unwillingness. As Fatina alleged:

“Purdah may mean not only purdah of body but also purdah of mind. The girls who maintain purdah but think ‘bad’ in their mind, for example who have affairs with boys or have sexual relations with someone are bad girls. Similarly those girls are good who maintain purdah and think ‘good’ in her mind..... Even if a girl do not maintain purdah but never entertain ‘bad thinking’, says prayer regularly and do ‘whatever suggested’ in Quran is a good girl. For instance, I never wear burkah after school time as I don’t like it, but I never ‘think bad’ or am not in any ‘bad relation’ with other boys. Will you call me a bad girl and those who wear burkah and are in bad relations or think bad as good girl only because they wear burkah?”

These girls of Dhaka Madrasha wore *burkah* without covering face or at least wore loose *salwar-camiz* and covered their hair with a long piece of cloth (scarf). Even though many of them were unwilling they did so to express their cultural identity as Muslim woman on the one hand, and on the other they regarded this as a way to position themselves as ‘modern’ in opposition to the larger social changes that regarded wearing ‘*burkah*’ as ‘backdated’. In Dhaka, most of the girls of their age wore traditional dresses of the country *shari* (a long cloth which is used along with few other small pieces of cloths) and some kind of westernized dresses to present themselves beautiful to others, which all of the madrasha girls didn’t consider at all as anything that could serve the purpose of *burkah*. It seemed that due to their exposure to the media many of them developed an aesthetics of beauty which rejected burkah as backdated whereas identified traditional dresses like shari or modern dresses as opposite to fundamental Islamic principal of maintaining *pardah* as they reveal body curves. Thus, they position themselves in between and wore dressed that neither expose their body nor reject their beauty. This allowed them to be engaged in appreciation of their bodily beauties like their cousins or other girls but in an ‘Islamic’ way. As lili said,

“I want to prepare myself both for the present world and the world after death.”

As it is often assumed that ‘Madrasha girls or boys are backdated, some of the Madrasha girls may want to come out from such discourse or assumption and want to prove them as smart and beautiful to compete with the girls who are studying in general educational system in the job market or in their future life to get a good husband (educated and smart defined by the existing social perceptions). However, when Fatina said that *pardah* meant the *pardah* of mind, she also used her agency by giving her own meaning to it, which was not similar with the line of thinking of her parents and teachers.

Similarly when all of the girls in Cox’s Bazaar wore *burkah* by covering whole body and face, it doesn’t necessarily mean that they were bound to do so only because of the strictly controlled Madrasha structure. Some of them might not have alternative rather than studying in Madrasha as many of them were orphans and from poor families who were not able to bear their expenses for reading in general schools. Nevertheless, there were many girls who were studying in Madrasha willingly to get proper religious education. So they might wear *burkah*

as they were 'pious'. For instance, there were many girls in the society who wore *burkah* and were studying in general school where there were no rules for wearing such dress. They wore *burkah* as they were pious or their family members might want them to do so. How many of these girls practiced their agency might become more understandable by the example of Ambia- who was a girl informant of Cox's Bazaar. Ambia said that her father didn't allow her to go to school after primary level, as her school was the only educational institution in the village, which was a co-educational institution. But she wanted to continue her study and therefore she took decision to study in Madrasha (that is far from her village) and managed her parents to allow her. She argued that in-spite of the long distance of the Madrasha from her village, her father allowed her because it was a religious institution for woman and which she used as a way of exercising her agency to continue her study. About wearing *burkah*, she argued that she wore *burkah* both because of her identity of a Madrasha student and identity of a Muslim woman, which prove her pious to her parents that convince her parents to allow her to continue her study.

Nevertheless, perceptions towards talking with a male rather than blood relatives might help to understand the relation and contradiction between ideal and the real life experience of the girls. According to the mothers of the girls of Cox's Bazaar and the teachers of both Cox's Bazaar and Dhaka Madrasha, talking with '*porpurush*' was a matter of sin for a woman and therefore the girl who talked with *porpurush* was treated as bad. Both of the mothers of the girls of Dhaka Madrasha argued that talking with *porpurush* by maintaining *purdah* for any necessary reason, was not bad, but the girls should always avoid any kind of unnecessary discussion or unsocial (any kind of affair or sexual relation before marriage was considered as unsocial as these were unaccepted by the society) work with boys. Interestingly, all of the girl informants of Cox's Bazaar had reported that to be a good girl, one must not talk with 'porpurush' and in their real lives, they maintain such regulation of Islam. But during individual interviews, some girls informed that they found many of their friends (studying in Madrasha) talking with *porpurush* like cousin or brother in law as Aysha stated,

“One day Julekha (who is another informant of the study) and I took permission to go to Julekha's sister in law's house as her sister was sick. We went there and Julekha was talking with her brother-in-law and his



cousins..... It is very common among the girls to talk with the male relatives who even are not blood relatives.”

From Aysha’s statement, it can be assumed that though all girl informants of this Madrasha said that talking with *porpurush* was prohibited in Islam and therefore they didn’t do so, it was very common among many Madrasha girls, which may contradict with their ideals in regard to this. While interviewing Julekha, she might not share her own experience with me regarding talking with *porpurush*, because of her pious, obedient, Madrasha student identity or because of the fear that I may share with her parents as I also interviewed her mother. Therefore, though the construction of the ideals of the girls of Cox’s Bazaar Madrasha regarding talking with *porpurush* was very much influenced by their mothers’ and teachers’ perceptions towards this, they may not always reflect these ideals in their real life.

On the other hand, all girl informants of Dhaka Madrasha thought that by maintaining *purdah*, woman could easily talk with any male if it was necessary, though unnecessary talking with *porpurush* was perceived to them as a sign of being ‘bad girl’. As Sadia stated,

“If father is not at home and some emergency arises what should a mother do? Will she stay at home and wait for father or she should try to solve that? My younger brother was seriously injured in a road accident. Then my mother took him to the hospital and if we were late it might not be possible to save his life. Is my mother a bad woman who had to talk with lots of unknown man on the same day?”

Though all girl informants of Dhaka reported that by maintaining *purdah* one can communicate with any male, in real life they may not strictly maintain so, as four of the girls have reported that they didn’t maintain *purdah* outside the Madrasha campus. There were also some girls who might already in affair and had boy friends as Fatima stated that she loved a boy who worked in Radio Center. Though the boy didn’t love Fatima, she talked with the boy every day for few minutes and had met him twice in a restaurant. However, though two of the mothers of the girl students of Dhaka Madrasha said that, while maintaining *purdah* the girls could talk with boys for any valid reason, the girls argued that their parents didn’t allow them to talk with outsiders, even with any boy who read

in the same class in the same Madrasha for academic purpose. As Lili a student of Dhaka Madrasha said:

“If our parents or teachers find us talking with a boy, they don’t want to know or understand the reasons, they blame us and consider it as a sin. Even few of our classmates also treat us so. But I don’t think that there is any relationship between being a bad girl and talking with a classmate as I may need help from my classmates for study need.”

Another informant stated that:

“We study in Madrasha, so when we talk with any boy, most of the people in our society think that how could a female Madrasha student talk with a boy as if there is a separate rule for the Madrasha girls. If anyone finds us to do so they blame us and complain to our family members. They should understand talking with a boy has nothing to do with being good or bad, and we are not different from the girls reading in general school system. They should change their views that Madrasha girls should not or can not talk with boys.”

Nevertheless, the girls of Dhaka Madrasha may practice their own agency in spite of having restriction to talk with unknown male or distant cousins. They are even trying to raise their voice against the discourse exists in the society that Madrasha girls have to be different from other girls and if one talks with any male who is not very close, she will be treated as bad while the others will not. It seems that Madrasha girls’ exposure to outside Madrasha, media, interaction with girls of general schools or their experience in studying general school at the primary level have influenced their perceptions of ideal regarding interaction with male.

Thus the study found various issues in which many of the girls’ ideals and real life experiences had similarities whereas there were also evidences of contradictions between ideal and real life experiences on the same issues among many other girls. Although all of the girl informants of the study believed that to be a good woman they must respect and obey their parents and teachers, in many cases many of them may respect but not obey. The example of maintaining *pardah* and talking with *porpurush* are evidences in this regard.

### **4.3 Ideal Construction, Real Experiences and Accessing SRH Information: Formation of Madrasha Girls' Social Bodies**

Though there was a course called 'Fikah Shashtra' in the Madrasha curriculum, which had discussions on some issues related to sexual and reproductive health and was taught from class six to Dakhil level of Madrasha education, the teachers usually skipped the chapters on SRH issues or asked the students to read themselves at home because of shyness of both teachers and students.

As one of the girls of Dhaka Madrasha named Maliha had complained about the way of teaching Fikah Shastra,

“We have 'Fikah Shastra' where there are discussions on physical cleanness during menstruation, what have to do during pregnancy, after giving child birth etc. But our teacher who is a male doesn't discuss them in class. Sometimes he discusses very briefly, which we can't understand. He tells us to read by ourselves. So we discuss the matters with friends but can't understand properly.”

As 'Fikah Sastra' was the only source of knowledge as part of the academic curriculum of Madrasha, many of the issues like modern process of care during pregnancy and after child birth etc. were completely unknown to the students. So when FPAB a local NGO offered the Madrashes to introduce sexual health information and service in Madrash as part of the project titled “Madrasha students initiative for adolescents health in Bangladesh”, the authorities accepted the proposal. But gradually the project also wanted to introduced information on various SRH related issues, like cleanness during menstruation, HIV/AIDS, STI, care during pregnancy and after child birth, family planning or contraceptive etc. to the girls. Though the NGO was able to manage the Madrasha authority of Dhaka to provide all information related to the girls' reproductive health, due to strong opposition from a segment of Cox's Bazaar Madrasha authority it could only provide information on a very few issues like the physical changes during puberty, necessity of mother's health care during pregnancy and the need to have Tetanus injection before marriage. A female doctor and her assistant were also allowed to provide health care services related with SRH.

Nevertheless, the perceptions of ideal and the real life experiences of the girls of Dhaka Madrasha were found as closely linked with each other regarding this newly established project. Both in the electronic and print media, there were different campaigns going on to raise consciousness on HIV/AIDS, STDs, mother's and baby's health care etc. Therefore, as the girls of Dhaka Madrasha had access to media and also as they knew little from the Fikah Shastra, they might feel curious to know more about these health issues before the starting of the SRHE project in their Madrasha. When the project started to provide SRH information, they might perceived the project as a chance for them to know more on such issues and thus might thought that there should be no contradiction between having knowledge on SRH issues and the image of a good girl and in their actual life they also tried to convince their parents to allow them regarding having access to SRH information, as they found such education useful from their own experiences.

Discussion on sexuality for people, especially for women before marriage is very much stigmatized in Bangladeshi society in general. So the mothers of the girls of Dhaka Madrasha didn't perceive SRHE positively and thought that their daughters would be treated as bad girls if they gather knowledge on SRH issues. Thus the SRHE contradicted with their image of a proper woman at the very beginning of the program. According to both the teachers and mothers of the girls of Dhaka Madrasha, the girls should not discuss sexuality or SRH issues with any other person except mother and sister. They thought that by open discussion on SRH issues under the SRHE program, the girls would be misguided and would become curious about sexual activity and try to experiment it. But as the girls perceived such education as useful, they tried to convince their parents to have permission from them regarding the girls' access to such information by arguing different logics in favour of having SRH information. According to the girls and their mothers, the perception towards SRHE had changed among the parents. In the ecological systems theory, Bronfenbrenner also stated that changes or conflict in any layer, will ripple throughout other layers, especially at the Microsystem level (closest level in the child's environment) and the relationship between the child and closest structures have impact in two directions- both away from the child and toward the child, which can help to explain the particular case that the perceptions of the parents towards SRHE regarding ideal had been changed by the influence of the perceptions of their daughters. And at the same time, the parents' exposure to

media and the on going social change helped them to change their perception as well.

At the very beginning of the introduction of the SRHE project, the girls of Dhaka Madrasha didn't consider the way, how the program started to provide SRH information as appropriate, however they accepted it as useful. These girls didn't like to have such information or open discussion jointly with the boy students of their Madrasha. Therefore, before the introduction of SRH information, which was perceived as a very sensitive issue, the program should have realized the societal context in which the girls were brought up. The program followed "western" trend in providing SRH related education in a completely different society without acknowledging the girls as social bodies not just as bodies, as perceived in the western culture. Rather it needed to first understand the girls in relation to the surrounding context, and after exploring how the girls perceive their need of SRH information, how they want to have such information etc, it could determine its strategy so that it can be accepted both by the girls, their parents and teachers. Moreover, they also needed to understand the different social contexts of Dhaka and Cox's Bazaar before the intervention. Because of its failure to understand the difference, it had to stop its all other activities in Cox's Bazaar, except providing health care service. After distributing a booklet without the consent of the teachers of the Madrsha, it made the teachers suspicious about its intention. The teachers started to believe that the intention of the program was to promote family planning and they resisted against it, as there were discussion on the use of condom as contraceptive and a way to keep safe from HIV/AIDS, which according to the teachers is not allowed in Islam.

It was found that the parents' and teachers' perceptions towards SRHE had great influence on the construction of the Cox's Bazaar girls' images of a proper woman regarding SRH information, which was different from the girls' of Dhaka. The mother of the girls of Cox's Bazaar Madrasha had heard a little about SRHE program, as their daughters had not discussed with them about it. When the mothers were asked about their views towards the necessity of SRHE, one of them (Fozilatunnisa) had argued that she didn't discuss such sexual and reproductive health matters with anybody except her sister-in-law, because it was a matter of shame to talk about such issues with any other member of the family or outside the family. As she said,

“I didn’t ask anybody except my sister-in-law. Whenever I felt anything wrong I asked for help to her. I didn’t go to the doctor because we had just one doctor in the village, who was male. How can I share such problem with a man? .....I suffered from some problem when I was pregnant but I was able to manage. My daughter is also a woman like me. Though it would be better if she know the matters before marriage, it is really a matter of shame to discuss them in front of everybody. Women learn by themselves when they get married.”

Both of the mothers believed that their daughters should not learn the sexual and reproductive health issues in school, as they had gone there to study not to learn such health issues. One of the teachers of the Madrasha MD Abdullah also stated in the same tone as Fozilatunnisa,

“A girl needs to feel shy in discussing some issues like sexual and reproductive health. Shyness is a beauty and keeps them safe from many non-Islamic activities and disease. So the girls should not and need not to learn SRH issues through the project. There is a subject called ‘Fikah Shastra’, which can solve their various problems related to sexuality and reproduction, which they can read and learn by themselves.”

Therefore, both the mothers and teachers of Cox’s Bazaar Madrasha didn’t perceive SRH information as necessary and appropriate in the age of adolescence before marriage and thought that the girls should not discuss such issues with others as they could learn about such issues from *Fikah Shastra* or by themselves after marriage. Both Fozilatunnisa’s and Abdullah’s perceptions corresponded with Julekha’s perception, as she also thought that SRHE should be provided by consulting with individuals not in a group. However, like her mother and teacher she didn’t feel that the SRH information was not necessary. At the same time, six of the thirteen girl informants had said that they might be treated as bad if their neighbours came to know that the girls knew information on sexual and reproduction related matters before marriage. Three of the girls couldn’t decide to say anything about whether there was any relation between SRHE and the image of ideal woman or not. They might become confused about how they would be treated by the society if they became knowledgeable about SRH, or might be they didn’t want to share their views as they had confusion about how their beliefs would be perceived by the researcher. The rest of the girls (four) thought that they need such

education and there was nothing wrong with it. Though six girls equated having SRH information as being bad girls, none of them resisted to attend the SRHE sessions arranged by the project at the beginning and they also informed that they were curious to know such issues and thought them as useful. So their real life activities in this particular case didn't match with their images of ideals.

There were also different perceptions among the girls of Cox's Bazaar and Dhaka Madrasha about the appropriate age of getting SRH knowledge. Nine of the twelve students of Dhaka Madrasha had argued that such education should be provided before puberty, two of them said that it should be at the age of twelve and the rest one thought that the appropriate age was ten for getting SRH information. But almost all girls of Cox's Bazaar Madrasha argued that before Alim level, SRH education should not be provided to the girls. Only three of them said that it would be better to have knowledge about menstruation before puberty. The girls of the Cox's Bazaar Madrasha might have fear like their parents, teachers and the other members of the society that if the girls had got such education at the very young age, they would become more curious and interested to experiment various sexual activities or they might think that as they were very younger by age, they might not need to know such information. But at the same time, they might feel the urge inside them to have SRH education because of their own life experience as they thought that Alim level students must get such education, which was different from their teachers' and mothers' perceptions towards SRHE.

On the other hand, as the SRHE project intervention by the NGO was going on for about one and half years, which added one more element to the environment of the girls of Dhaka Madrasha, with which they were interacting directly, it may have influence on the girls' perceptions of the proper age for SRHE. They might have been informed by the program activities about its perception of appropriate age of having SRHE or the girls might think such in this regard because of their bitter life experience, as Rudaba said,

“I knew nothing about menstruation before experiencing. I was in the class when for the first time I experienced it. I went back to my home with fear and shyness. My mother asked me about what happened. After listening me, she told that it is natural.”

The girls also informed that there were so many misconceptions around menstruation, which they believed. For instance, their relatives said that they

should not eat sour, sit to any other bed except their own, should not touch the pot of food etc. Afterwards they knew from the project that these conceptions were wrong. Thus regarding these misconceptions their ideals had changed by the influence of the project (an actor of their environment) and they reflected these changed ideals in their real life.

#### **4.4 Chapter Conclusion**

By exploring the perceptions of ideal image of womanhood among the madrasa girls and their real life experiences, this chapter have pointed out that the construction of the girls' perceptions towards ideal were very much influenced by their family and educational institution, which were the closest institutions of their environment. At the same time, the ongoing social changes, media exposure, past experiences of their exposure to general school, access to other institutions of the society etc. were also reflected in their perceptions towards ideal and in their interaction of day to day life, which were embedded in the distal level of the girls' environment. In many cases the girls acted accordingly and in various issues they acted opposite to their perceptions of ideal in their real life, which were also influenced by various actors of their environment as well. Thus to understand the girls' various decisions regarding sexual and reproductive health like whether they wanted to have access to SRH information or not, how they wanted to have such information, what they wanted to know, what should be the appropriate age for acquiring SRH knowledge, whether they would obey their parents and would not continue attending the SRH related sessions or would try to convince their parents to allow them etc, we must have to understand the girls' ideals on such issues and how such ideals were constructed by the influence of different social relations and how the girls acted in their real life. The girls should be understood as social bodies- as unitary, integrated aspect of self and social relations. Instead of perceiving the mind and body as separate from each other and assuming that SRH knowledge would be welcomed to the girls for its necessity for the bodies, we need to perceive them as the combination of both body and mind, which might not allow issues like SRH information just because of its physical relevance. Therefore, social relations should be understood as key contributors in the construction of the girls' social bodies and thus, to understand the girls' reproductive decision-making as well as their access to SRH information, they should be viewed as having social bodies.



## Chapter Five

## **Revisiting the Controversies: Intersection between Religious Interpretations and Social Bodies and Its impact on Accessing ARH Information**

### **5.0 Introduction**

Madrasha was found as a very important actor of a girl's environment from the discussion of chapter four, which had greater influence on her development. As had been briefly discussed in chapter three, these Madrashes had their own history of emergence in the country and people running such institutions had always tried to make a clear distinction between 'modern' general education and Madrasha education system by providing a special kind of religious education. However, as was observed there existed different interpretations of religious resources under this system of education regarding various issues including sexual and reproductive health issues, which vary from Madrasha to Madrasha, even in the same Madrasha from person to person.

From the interviews of the girls, their mothers and teachers it was found that these different interpretations intersect with the social bodies of the girls and fuelled or hindered their access to SRH knowledge. Though it had been understood from the previous discussions in chapter four, that there were various intersectional experiences of the girls, which intersected with their social bodies such as class, different societal settings where they brought up, access to media and interaction within the larger society etc. and influenced the girls' access to SRH information, its not possible to reveal or discuss in detail all these interactions separately in the scope of a single research. Rather considering the limit of the scope, I opted to use the intersectional lens to understand specifically the intersection between existing interpretations of various religious resources in the Madrasha premise and the social bodies of the girls, which was found as most influential regarding the girls' access to SRH information. Moreover, by exploring this intersecting reality, the chapter allowed me to revisit and reveal the causes behind various controversies, which were developed regarding the girls' access to SRH information in the complex setting of the Madrasha education system as discussed in chapter three.

#### 5.1

## 5.1 Intersection between Social Bodies and Religious Interpretations

In the Madrasha premise of Dhaka, there existed different religious interpretations on various SRH issues provided by the girls' teachers, parents and the SRH project. The girls were informed since they first experienced menstruation that when a girl would menstruate, she should not sit on any other bed except her own, touch the pot of food and keep the cloths they wear during the menstrual period with other cloths. If the girl had seat on others bed, it would be polluted and the people who would sit on the same bed, would also be so. As a result his or her prayer would not be accepted before taking bath. In the same way, if the girl touched the pot of food and kept her cloths with others, they would become polluted. The girls also believed such things. But for the last one and half year some books had been distributed by the FPAB project to the girls with interpretations of various religious resources regarding SRH issues, which had influenced the girls' beliefs a lot on the issues. The girl interviewees informed that they had so many misconceptions around menstruation, which they came to know from the project. When they were asked about how they came to believe that it was misconception, which they knew from their family, one of the girls Saleha stated,

“My grandmother told me that during menstruation, I should not sit on any other bed except mine. But there is a Hadith, where it has been stated that one day one of Hazrat Muhammad's wife slept on a separate bed during menstruation. Then Muhammad called her and told that she didn't need to sleep on separate bed and could sleep with him on the same bed.”

The girls might not like so many restrictions, which they had to maintain regarding menstruation, or as they thought that SRH was useful, they might accept the new interpretations provided by the project with reference from Quran or Hadith. Or they might think rationally that how a bed, cloth or a pot of food could become polluted just by touching or sitting on it during menstruation.

The girls also didn't believe that gathering knowledge on sexual and reproductive health issues or discussing them with friends and family members were wrong, which their guardians and teachers thought. There existed a taboo in the Madrasha premise and even in the larger societal context of the country regarding discussions on the issues of sexuality and reproduction before marriage.

So the parents of the girls didn't discuss any SRH issue with their daughters and also discouraged them to discuss such issues with others. Even in many cases the girls knew about menstruation from their relatives such as cousins, grandmother, aunt, sister or sister-in-law, but not from their mothers before or after experiencing it. Though *Fiqah Shastra* as part of Madrasha curriculum briefly touched SRH issues, both the girls and the teachers felt shy to discuss them in details. At the same time, some of the teachers strongly believed that the information on various SRH issues like HIV/AIDS, STDs etc, which were provided by the project could lead the girls to sexual arousal and could misguide them by reducing fear for sexual relationship before marriage. But the girls silently challenged such perception as they came to know from different other sources (in their case mainly from the project interventions) that gaining knowledge had been encouraged in Islam. They said that there was no sentence in *Al-Quran* and *Hadith*, where it had been forbidden to know about sexual and reproductive health matters. As Fatina stated,

“Everything about sexual and reproductive health has been discussed in Quran and Hadith. But as we don't understand Arabic, we can't understand the issues. The Arab girls of our age are reading SRH matters by reading Quran. So what is so wrong in gathering such knowledge?”

In this particular case, Fatina also used the reference of a book provided by the project. As most of these Madrasha girls already had exposure to media campaign on safe motherhood or HIV/AIDS and as many of these girls might relate their previous understanding of importance of knowledge gathering in Islam provided by their teachers and books, they linked that with SRH related knowledge by questioning why particularly SRH related knowledge would be forbidden. Moreover, they might not have specific religious reference by which they could believe that discussing or knowing SRH issues was bad or a matter of sin. Thus, they became interested to know about HIV/AIDS, STDs etc. in details. This might lead them to think that there were tendencies to be misguided at adolescent age because of the ignorance about various risky behaviors, as a result they considered the period of adolescence as the appropriate time for getting SRHE. Thus the religious interpretations on various health related issues provided by the project was found more acceptable to the girls of Dhaka Madrasha, which enhanced their access to SRH information.

According to the mothers of the girls of Dhaka Madrasha, the girls should go to female doctor for any kind of sexual or reproduction related disease. Though they also stated that in case of emergency or life threatening situation, the girls might go to male doctor if needed. The mothers argued that showing very sensitive parts of female body, such as vagina, breast to any male except husband, is forbidden in Islam and also discussion on them with a male doctor was not right. Seven of the girl informants of Dhaka Madrasha also thought that they would feel shy to discuss SRH matters with a male doctor and if they had the option to go to a female doctor, why they wouldn't pursue that. But the other five girls thought that there was no difference between male and female doctor and they also thought that the male doctors also knew everything about the health problems, which a woman could experience. Two of the girl informants also informed that they experienced problem related to irregular menstruation. Then their mother and other female relatives like grandmother, sister have told them that this might happen sometimes and they need not to go to doctor for that as it would cure by itself. Thus they had to suffer a lot for that and one of them had to consult with the doctor and go for an operation in uterus.

The reason behind such attitudes of the parents and relatives of these two girls might be a result of their economic situation or they might not preferred to spend money for that, which seemed to them very simple disease or they might experienced same problem in their life and observed that it cured by itself or they might not wanted the girls to discuss such issues with an outsider even with a doctor. Therefore open discussion on SRH issue was also a big factor regarding decision-making process on various SRH related problems of the girls, which was very much influenced by different religious interpretations.

On the other hand, the girls of the Madrasha of Cox's Bazaar didn't want to discuss sexual and reproductive issues even in front of the girls of different classes. Therefore it was unimaginable for them to discuss such issues with a male doctor. Even they didn't go to the doctor for very simple diseases like skin disease as the nearby doctor was a male to whom they would have to show their body parts which had been injured. During interview, I found several girls who had skin disease and

didn't go to any doctor to consult. The girls believed on *tabiz*<sup>11</sup> and *pani pora*<sup>12</sup> for getting cured from any kind of diseases, which were given by the *hujurs*. As Sayma said,

“Once I became very sick because of excessive bleeding during menstruation. I went to the doctor and took medicine, which failed to cure the problem. Then I took *pani pora* and *tabiz* from one of my *Hujurs* and got well.”

As under the SRHE program ran by FPAB, a female doctor was providing health care services, the girls were going to her to consult different problems. The mothers of the girls also thought that from Islamic perspective, women should not talk with any male. Therefore, it was beyond their imagination that they would go to a male doctor to discuss SRH related problems. According to Fozilatunnisa- one of the mothers, woman could share such problems just with very close female relatives, even not with a woman outside their family. The reason behind such behavior of girls and their mothers were very much influenced by different religious interpretations, which existed both in the Madrasha premise and in their society. The girls might really believed on various religious interpretations for instance on *tabiz* or *panipora*. Or they may not think of going to the doctor because of scarcity of monetary resources as maximum students of this Madrasha were from lower class family and among them, many were orphans. So having no other choices as was evident in case of Dhaka girls (like exposure to media, project interventions as evident in Dhaka for alternative religious interpretations etc.), they obeyed the strict control of Madrasha and they might believe on the existing religious interpretations.

But according to the principal *hujur* of Cox's Bazaar Madrasha, there was nothing wrong with going to a male doctor if necessary and he also thought that SRHE should be provided in the age of adolescence. But the other two *hujurs* strongly expressed their opinion against consulting with a male doctor even for any normal diseases and according to them the girls didn't need to get such information at very early age. These two types of interpretations of religious resources on the

---

<sup>11</sup> Some sentences, which is written by *hujur* on a paper from Al-Quran which is folded and covered by a metal and is generally bind by a ribbon around the neck or hand.

same issues were very confusing for the girls. Therefore, the girls might feel the need for having access to SRH information in the one hand, but on the other, they were confused about the age when, how and by whom it should be provided. Thus different religious interpretations provided by many *hujurs* of this Madrasha against the girls' access to SRH information intersected with the girls' social bodies and hindered their access to such knowledge.

## 5.2 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter argued that various religious interpretations in the Madrasha premise intersected with the social bodies of the Madrasha girls and influenced their sexual and reproductive decision-making. In the Madrasha of Dhaka, the intersectional relations between social bodies of the girls and interpretations of religious resources provided by the project regarding various restrictions during menstruation, gathering SRH knowledge, going to a doctor and consulting on SRH related problems etc. influenced the girls in determining their choices and in accepting SRH information. It becomes clear from the discussion of the chapter that there was a discourse constructed by various religious interpretations on the issue of sexuality in the Madrasha premise, which made any kind of discussion on sexuality as a taboo. But the project on SRH knowledge tried to challenge this by using different interpretations of religious resources. In the Madrasha of Dhaka, they were successful in doing so and the students' SRH related decisions told us that the interpretations provided by the project intersected with their social bodies, which made their reproductive behavior or decision-making different from the girls' of Cox's Bazaar. As the program failed to distribute the booklets with different religious interpretations to the girls of Cox's Bazaar which they distributed in Dhaka, and as unlike Dhaka girls these girls didn't have any exposure to different media campaigns running in the country, the girls believed on the existing interpretations in their Madrasha premise provided by different teachers, books and their parents, which intersected with their social bodies and influence

---

<sup>12</sup> A glass of water on which hujur recites some sentences from Quran and blow some breath on it.

their decisions regarding various SRH issues as well as their access to SRH information.



## Chapter Six

## Concluding Thoughts

The study was conducted only in two Madrashes among 25,201 Aleya Madrashes in Bangladesh and interviewed 25 girls among approximately 1,226,206 students read in different Madrashes across the country. Considering this small sample size I had no intention to go for any generalization regarding the Madrasha girls' ideals, real life experiences, existing religious interpretations in the Madrasha premises, the girls' access to SRH information etc from such a small sample size. Rather I wanted to bring up the discussion on the issue of Madrasha girls' exclusions from access to SRH information, which has generally been over looked both from programmatic and research perspective. By acknowledging the necessity for a huge research for any kind of generalization I believe that this research with a small sample size will provide some in-depth insights regarding the root causes of the exclusion of Madrasha girls in regard to access to SRH information. It will also help to open up the debates on whether these girls' inclusion regarding their access to SRH information is possible at all or not and if possible, how should be done.

Nevertheless, from the historical overview of Madrasha's emergence, it became clear that the system was developed to preserve the 'Islamic' traditions in opposition to the 'modernization' efforts of British rulers. To preserve 'Islamic' traditions, it tried to make a clear distinction between modern general education system and religious education system. Both from the historical background and the research findings on the teachers' views towards the ideal images of womanhood, it could be understood that there were certain discourses regarding 'good' and 'bad' girls in the Madrashes. And these images of 'good' and 'bad' were strictly imposed upon the girl students by Madrasha curriculum, different religious interpretations on various issues of the girls' day to day life practices etc. Through this particular image of ideal womanhood among others the Madrasha authorities tried to maintain and reinforce the larger social understanding of these contexts as 'Islamic' in opposition to the modern educational institutions. Imposing strict rules upon the girls' to maintain *purdah* by covering the whole body and face could be seen as an effort to ensure specific ideals in opposition to modern images of womanhood. Thus it was evident from the research findings that such initiatives to impose ideal images of womanhood had large impact on the girls' construction of ideals as well as their real life experiences, which was reflected in their reproductive decisions and their access to SRH information. But one should be

very cautious before interpreting this as oppressive and creating obstacles for adolescent girls' access to SRH information as there were clear evidences that some of the girls could manage to access SRH information through practicing such *pardah*.

However, the existing discourses around ideal image of womanhood were not only determinant of the construction of the girls' ideals. Though in two different Madrashes the teachers perceived and prescribed almost same ideal images of womanhood to the girls, the ideals among the girls vary from one Madrasha to another. Both the Ecological Systems and the Social body approaches were helpful in understanding these differences. The Madrasha girl interviewees were not only students of Madrashes but also were members of different families, communities, societies, audiences of media etc, which influenced the girls' ideals and real life experiences. Therefore, various institutions of the girls' environment had different impact on the girls' construction of ideals. Thus, there were significant differences in the construction of ideals between these two different settings. These differences among the two Madrasha girls regarding their ideal images indicated that the girls of Dhaka Madrasha had exposure to various institutions outside the Madrasha premise like media, modern general educational system, on going social changes in the larger society etc which the girls of Cox's Bazaar hadn't. Thus the construction of the bodies of the girls influenced by different social relations was very important to understand the girls' access to SRH information as well. Moreover, in many cases the girls of both Madrashes acted according to their ideals and also in various issues they acted in opposition to their ideals.

In understanding these kinds of attitudes of the girls, the paper explored the practice of agencies by the girls. When the girls of Dhaka Madrasha could manage to convince their parents to allow them for going outside except the Madrasha premise with somewhat modification of the very idea of maintaining *pardah* or having access to SRH information provided by the SRHE project, they were actually practicing their agencies. These girls were also practicing their agencies when they chose to keep faith on the religious interpretations of various SRH related issues provided by the project instead of the previous. When the girls of Cox's Bazaar Madrasha maintained *pardah* by covering the whole body, we should not perceive that they maintained it because they were dominated or bounded to do so or they couldn't practice agency, rather it may be perceived that they wore

*burkha* as they were pious and this was their way of practicing agency. It was evident from the study that the girls of two different contexts practiced their agencies differently because of the different construction process of the social bodies. However, the study revealed that different religious interpretations intersect with the social bodies some of which hinder the girl's access and some enhance their access to SRH information.

From the whole discussion it becomes clear that introduction of SRH education is very much needed in Madrasha and there is no room for thinking the 'Islamic educational institutions' in Bangladesh as impossible institutions for introducing SRH education programs. Rather it revealed that the Madrasha girls felt that they need to have access to such information and there exists every scope to introduce programs to ensure access to SRH programs in Madrashas. But at the same time it seemed that before introducing such 'sensitive programs', social bodies as constructed should be understood properly which are both time and context specific. This also suggests that any monolithic view to consider all the Madrasha contexts as same and thus introduce such efforts without being critically engaged with the larger social constructions of body would fail at the end as had happened in Coxsbazar Madrasha.

To influence the girls' access to SRH information first the views of different actors of the girls' environment should be sensitized. The SRHE project failed partially to provide SRHE information in Coxsbazar Madrasha because it intervened there in the same way as Dhaka Madrasha instead of acknowledging the differences between the two contexts. These girls of Coxsbazar Madrasha might be viewed as social bodies made up by and inherently interwoven with their social relationships. By understanding this, the project could decide to ensure its strategies to introduce SRHE in that particular Madrasha.

In general, this study suggests different possibilities that only open up new debates rather than contributing to close these debates. One of such important debates should be focused around whether Madrashas should be considered at all as monolithic institutions or should be considered as a time and context specific institutions which might have many similarities but which also have significant differences. Moreover, how the larger social actors are influencing different

practices among the Madrasha people can also be regarded as an important area of inquiry.

## References

- Abdalla, A., A. N. M. Raisuddin and S. Hussein (2004) Bangladesh Educational Assessment: Pre-primary and Primary Madrasha Education in Bangladesh. USAID.
- Akhter, H. H., F. Karim, M. E. E. K. Chowdhury and M. H. Rahman (1999) A Study to Identify the Risk Factors Affecting Nutritional Status of Adolescent Girls in Bangladesh. Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Research for Promotion of Essential and Reproductive Health Technologies (BIRPERHT).
- Barket, A. and M. Majid (2003) Adolescent and Youth Reproductive Health in Bangladesh: Status, Issues, Policies, and Programs. USAID.
- Bhuiya, I. et al. (2006) Improving Adolescent Reproductive Health in Bangladesh. USAID.
- Bhuiya, I., U. Rob, M. E. Khan and A. A. Kabir (n.d.) 'Reproductive Health Bangladesh' [http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/towards\\_adulthood/38.pdf](http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/towards_adulthood/38.pdf) (accessed 29th August 2008).
- Coser, L. A. (1977) 'Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context', New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Davis, K. (forthcoming) 'Intersectionality as a Buzzword: A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful' in *Feminist Theory*, pp. 1-15.
- DiClemente, R. J., L. F. Salazar and R. A. Crosby (2007) 'A Review of STD/HIV Preventive Interventions for Adolescents: Sustaining Effects Using an Ecological Approach' *Journal of Pediatric Psychology* 32(8): 888-906.
- Haraway, D. (1988) 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and Privilege of Partial Perspectives', *Feminist Studies* 14(3):575-99
- Haseen, F. et al. (2004) *Evaluation of a School-based Sexual and Reproductive Health Education Intervention among Adolescents in Rural Bangladesh*. Dhaka, Bangladesh: ICDDR.B.
- Maton, K. (2000) 'Making a Difference: The Social Ecology of Social Transformation', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 28(1): 25-57.
- Rani, M. and E. Lule (2004) 'Exploring the Socioeconomic Dimension of Adolescent Reproductive Health: A Multi Country Analysis', *International Family Planning Perspectives* 30(3): 110-117.
- Rob, U., M. Khan and M. Kabir (2001) 'Factors influencing adolescent sexual activity and contraception in Bangladesh'. Paper presented at the Population Association of America, Washington, DC, CA.
- Ryan J. (n.d.) 'Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory'. <http://pt3.nl.edu/paquetteryanwebquest.pdf> (accessed 28 July 2008).
- Sccheper-Hughes, N., and M. M. Lock (1987) 'The Mindful Body: a prolegomenon to future work in medical anthropology', *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 1(1): 6-41.
- Snow, J. (2003) Country Profile on Reproductive Health in Bangladesh. World Health Organization.
- Dreyfus, H. and P. Rabinow (1982) *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Brighton: Harvester.
- Brown, B. and P. Adams (1979) 'The feminine body and feminist politics', *m/f*. 3: 35-50.

- Goffman, E. (1963) *Behaviour in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings*. New York: The Free Press.
- Kabeer, N. (2001) 'Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment' in *Discussing Women's Empowerment- Theory and Practice*, no. 3, pp. 17-57. Sidastudies.
- Mahmood, S. (2003) 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival', *Cultural Anthropology*, 10(2): 202-236
- Tiffany, E. (2007) 'Madrasas in Bangladesh'. IPCS Special report. New Delhi: Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies.
- UNFPA (2000) *Women's Empowerment and Reproductive Health: Links Through the Life Cycle*. Los Angeles, USA: Pacific Institute for Women's Health.
- UNFPA (2006) *Adolescent Reproductive Health Strategy*. Ministry of Health & Family Welfare: Govt. of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
- Harding, S. (2005) 'Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is "Strong Objectivity"?' in A.E. Cudd and R.O. Anderson (eds) *Feminist Theory. A Philosophical Anthology*, pp. 218-236. Blackwell Publishing.
- Shilling, C. (2003) *The Body and Social Theory* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn). London: SAGE Publications.
- Ahmed, I. (2005) 'On the brink of the precipice: Contemporary terrorism and limits of the state', *The Independent*.  
<http://www.independentbangladesh.com/news/dec/04/04122005ed.htm>.  
 (accessed 12 September 2008).

## **ANNEX 1: Background information of the interviewees**

*Fatina, Lili, Maliha, Munni, Runa* and *Saleha* were Alim (Higher Secondary) level students of Dhaka Madrasha. They all lived with their parents in the capital city Dhaka. All of them were from middle-income class family except *Fatina*. *Fatina* was from upper income class family who had exposure to the English medium school. Her father decided to admit her in the Madrasha when she was studying in the six grade of school. She had four brothers and two sisters who studied in general education system and *Fatina* was the youngest daughter of her parents. *Fatina's* father shifted her to Madrasha because of his believe that if one of his child study in religious educational system, he and his wife might be rewarded heaven after death. *Maliha, munni* and *runa* also had exposure to general education system. These six Dhaka Madrasha girls' age were around 15 to 19.

*Farjana, Khadija, Noor, Rotna, Rudaba* and *Sadia* were Dakhil (Secondary) level of students of Dhaka Madrasha. They all lived with their parents in the capital city Dhaka. *Rotna* and *Noor* were from lower-income class family whereas *Farjana, Khadija, Rudaba* and *Sadia* were from middle-income class family and had exposure to general educational system. These six Dhaka Madrasha girls' age were around 14 to 17.

*Amina Khatun* was the mother of *Rudaba* and *Najma Begum* was the mother of *Khadija*. *Amina Khatun* was 46 years old who had four children among whom only *Rudaba* was studying in Madrasha education system whereas the rest were studying in general education system. *Najma Begum* was 52 years old who had nine children among whom three were studying in Madrasha including *Khadija*. *Amina Khatun* and *Najma Begum* both were from middle-income class family and both were housewives.

*Muhammad Bilaluddin* and *Muhammad Aminul Islam* were the teachers of Dhaka Madrasha. *Muhammad Bilaluddin* was 34 years old. He was from middle-income class family and his other family members were lived in Sylhet (another district of Bangladesh). He taught Mathematics in class six to Dakhil level. *Muhammad Aminul Islam* was 46 years old. He was from middle-income class family and his wife and children lived with him in Dhaka. He taught Physics both in the Dakhil and Alim level.

*Bushra, Hasina, Jui, Korimon, Nurin, Modina* and *Rohima* were Alim level of students of Cox's Bazaar Madrasha. They all live in the Madrasha hostel. *Jui, Korimon* and *Modina's* family lived in the Cox's Bazaar town. *Hasina* and *Nurin* were orphans and their relatives were lived in nearby villages of the town. *Rohima* and *Bushra's* parents were lived in villages of the same district. *Hasina, Jui, Modina* and *Bushra* were from lower-income class family and the rest were from middle-income class family. Their ages were around 16 to 19.

*Ambia, Aysha, Julekha, Mukta, Nadia*, and *Razia* were Dakhil level of students of Cox's Bazaar Madrasha. They all lived in the Madrasha hostel. *Aysha* and *Julekha's* families were lived in the Cox's Bazaar town and both of them were lower-income class family. *Razia* and *Mukta* were orphans and their



relatives were lived in villages of the district and were from middle-income class family. Nadia was from middle-income class family and Ambia was from upper-income class family. Both of their families were lived in villages in the district but far from the town.

**Fozilatunnisa Khanom** was Julekha's mother who was 40 years old. She was from lower-income class family and lived in the Cox's Bazaar town. She had three children and among them two were studying in Madrashes including Julekha and the rest one was a baby. **Layla Khatun** was Aysha's mother who was 44 years old. She was from lower-income class family and lived in the town. She had four children two of which were studying in madrashes and the rest two worked as day laborer.

**Muhammad Abdullah, Muhammad Abdu Khalek** and **Moulana Muhammad Kamaluddin** were the teachers of Cox's Bazaar Madrasha. All of the three teachers were from middle-income class family and their families were lived in the town. Muhammad Abdullah was 29 years old who taught Bengali both in the Dakhil and Alim level. Muhammad Abdul Khalek was 57 years old who taught Fikah Shastra and a few religious subjects from class six to Dakhil level. Moulana Muhammad Kamaluddin was the principal Hujur of the Madrasha who was 54 years old.