

MAKING OF A MUSLIM WOMAN: DIFFERENT PATHWAYS TO RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

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Abstract

This paper is a descriptive analysis of different pathways of religious practice taken by the Muslim women respondents of the present study in their everyday lives. The analysis is based on how the respondents interpret, manifest and embody the concept of Muslim woman and how their daily lives define their religious practices and their corresponding routines. The study has been contextualized in the Islamic reformist theological discourse and the emerging notions of piety. The Islamic reformist movements started in India around the British colonial period and were a response to Islam's encounter with modernity. The resultant democratisation of Islamic theological discourse led to the redefining of piety. Contemporary Islam is to be expressed in people's daily lives, in mundane activities that lie outside the boundaries of formal Islamic schools. Islam has become more than a code of moral conduct and is a set of rules and regulations that guide the followers in all situations of their lives. This study was conducted to explore the religious practices of Muslim women in their day-to-day lives, given the backdrop of reformist notions of piety. The study was conducted across two different income groups and various activity spheres. Forty-five respondents of two income groups were interviewed. The pathways to religious practice have been identified based on what the respondents considered to be appropriate Islamic practices. The pathways that women took varied from expressing their religious identity in the public and private spheres, to celebrating just the cultural aspects of their religion. The experiences of the respondents also varied across income groups, geographies, and activity spheres.

Introduction

Muslim women in India are a heterogeneous category. Factors such as caste, socio-economic status, and geography, along with religion form a part of their everyday experiences. Islam is an integral part of the people who profess this religion. It governs their behaviour, their thoughts, social interactions, inter-personal relationships, and much more. Islam is present in so many aspects of their lives, and even among the Muslims who do not formally practice it. It is difficult to demarcate the existence of Islam in any one aspect of life of those born into the religion, and as Schielke & Orient (2010, p. 2) state, it could be "a moral idiom, a practice of self-care, a discursive tradition, an aesthetic sensibility, a political ideology, a mystical quest, a source of hope, a source of anxiety, an identity, an enemy— you name it".

Talal Asad (2009) describes Islam as a discursive tradition wherein for the practitioners, tradition guides their day-to-day practices, based on a conception of an Islamic past and an Islamic future. Accordingly, the historical past and the future of traditions define how current practices are to be shaped. For a practitioner, a practice becomes Islamic when it emerges from a discursive tradition and it is taught by a figure of authority like an *Alima*¹, *Alim*², *Khatib*³, *Maulana*⁴ or a parent (Asad,

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¹ *Alima* is a female scholar, who is regarded as the one who protects and explains religious knowledge of Islam.

² *Alim* is a male scholar, who is regarded as the one who protects and explains religious knowledge of Islam.

³ *Khatib* is a person who delivers the sermon during Friday prayer and Eid prayer.

⁴ *Maulana* is a term commonly used in India for a person who is a scholar in Islam and is proficient in Arabic.

2009, p. 21). Since practices emerging out of the discursive tradition are also part of everyday life, it is difficult to demarcate what practice emerges out of the discursive tradition and which one is an assimilation of other factors such as gender, class, or caste, which one experiences every day.

Based on this existential approach of experiencing religious practices in the everyday lives of Muslim women, this paper is a descriptive analysis of how the Muslim women respondents of this study conceptualise the idea of a good Muslim woman that emerges from the reformist Islamic theological discourse, and how this concept is manifested. These observations have been made across the two income groups. Based on how women experience religion in their everyday lives and how they organise their Islamic practice, four broad pathways have been identified among the respondents of this study⁵. In the context of this study, the concept of religious practice derives from the 'five pillars' of Islam. The concept of the five pillars of Islam has been taken from Schielke's note (2018) and it also corresponds with the respondents' understanding of the core beliefs of Islam as encapsulated in the five pillars. The five pillars of Islam are—declaration of faith in God, and Muhammad as His Prophet; fasting from food and drink, and avoiding sex during the daytime, in the month of *Ramadan*; pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime; ritual prayer (5 times a day for *Sunni* and three times a day for *Shia* Muslims), and almsgiving.

Since this is a qualitative study with a relatively small sample size, the observations are based on the patterns observed within this group of respondents and are not meant to be extrapolated to the Muslim group or community as a whole. Further, the construction of an ideal of a good Muslim woman is very contextual i.e., norms and practices are shaped based on the socio-economic status of the respondents. This was also observed in the interviews with the respondents who described an ideal or a good Muslim woman was based on their own social situation: their role in the family, and functions within society, which were largely shaped by their familial, social, religious, cultural, economic, and political sphere.

Islamic Reformism and the Good Muslim Woman Narrative

Muslim womanhood is an intersection of multifarious identities which are being constantly defined and redefined. The narrative of a Good Muslim woman is an interplay of not just vibrant Islamic public sphere discourse but also the caste, class, socio-economic status, and local contexts that the women are situated in. The identity of the Muslim woman is fluid, such that it is difficult to demarcate where religious identity starts and where class, caste or gender identity ends. An identity for an individual is an interplay of many factors. In the case of Muslim women in India, there are several factors that may be involved, including the Islamic reformist movements that lay considerable stress on the revivalism of Islam, and redefined notions of piety for both Muslim men and women.

Islamic reformist movements in India can be dated back to the British colonial period. These reformist movements are many and difficult to categorise, since there are regional reformist groups, and there are some that started out as regional groups but have spread over globally, and there are some that are offshoots or influenced by global revivalist movements or groups. Reetz (2006), who

⁵ This paper is a part of a Ph.D. study on religious practices of Muslim women in the public and private sphere, and the construction of the Muslim woman.

studied Islamic religious groups in India during the period 1900-1947, grouped some of them into two categories—educational or *madrassa* movements, and faith or revival movements. The former included the *Deobandis*, *Barelwis* and *Aligarh school*, while the latter included *Tablighi Jamaat*, *Ahl-i-Hadith*, and the reformist sect of *Ahmadiya* and some others. Reetz observed that the groups represent different schools of Islamic thought. However, with respect to their discourse in the public domain, some convergence of views can be seen. All the Islamic schools are vying for the same Islamic public sphere, but the audience that they cater to belongs to different socio-economic conditions. Islamic religious groups operating in India are impacted by the diverse cultural traditions and local contexts in which they operate. As a discursive tradition, Islam has always had a tradition of *Ijtihad* (the independent or original interpretation of problems not precisely covered by the *Quran*, *Hadith*, and *Ijma* (scholarly consensus)). The theological debates in Islam have been a response to the historical circumstances that Islam has been situated in. In the case of India, the reform movements were a response to European modernity, which led to several reformist schools in Islamic theology talking about true Islam (Santhosh, 2009). Across the world too, Muslim societies have been experiencing the process of renewal. In response to the challenges of the West, there have been varying reactions with respect to reshaping Islamic knowledge and institutions, the response has been in the form of the reorganisation of communities or reform of individual behaviour in congruence with fundamental religious principles. As Robinson (2008) stated, this development known as reformism was a result of challenges that Islam's past faced, and it has taken the form of movements as in the case of the Iranian constitutional revolution, jihads in West Africa, and several movements to spread reformed Islamic knowledge in India and Indonesia. The old knowledge was confronted by change in the economic and social sphere as a result of industrialisation driven by capitalism and new market forces. Industrialisation led to the spread of education, urbanisation, technology, and print technology, with the gradual democratisation of religion. Religious knowledge in the form of printed texts was easily accessible to the masses (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1996). It is in this context of a changing material world that Islamic reform emerged as an opposition to Western cultural and political hegemony, while at the same time making use of Western technology to spread its message (Robinson, 2008). Robinson lists five changes that Islam experienced as a result of its encounter with modernity emerging from Western cultural and political thought. These were:

- a) the ending of the total authority of the past as Muslims sought new ways of making revelation and tradition relevant to the present;
- b) the new emphasis on human will as Muslims realised that in a world without political power, it is only through their will that they could create an Islamic society on earth;
- c) the transformation of the self, achieved through willed activity, leading to self-reflectiveness, self-affirmation, and growing individualism;
- d) the rationalisation of Islam from scripturalism through to its formation into an ideology;
- e) and finally a process of secularisation involving a disenchantment of the world, which arguably has been followed by a 're-enchantment' (Robinson, 2008, p.261).

There has been a democratisation of Islamic knowledge that leaves space for *Ijtihad*, leaving the onus of understanding and practicing "true Islam" obligatory for all Muslims. Islam is then

expressed in the daily lives of people in small mundane activities that lie outside the boundaries of formal Islamic schools. Contemporary Islam has become more than a code of moral conduct, and is a set of rules and regulations that guide the followers in all situations of everyday lives (Santhosh, 2009, p.83). Symbolism and its embodiment by its followers then becomes an important part of how Islamic practice is carried out by its followers.

In Eickelman and Piscatoris' view (1996) politics is closely connected with symbolic production. Symbols are more ambiguous than specific, they provide a link and a continuity between the past and the present, and also accommodate change. These symbols are an important part of traditions that give a sense of continuity to one's belief system. Even though traditions are created through shared practice, they can be modified and manipulated to match legitimate earlier practices. The changing economic and political conditions can alter ideas, identities, practices and their meanings without the proponents of these ideas being aware of the nature of these changes. Hence, there is a sense of continuity of traditions and there are shared tales and myths while values are undergoing transformation, thereby modifying traditions.

"The effects of what might be called 'post modernisation' can be mitigated by both this rootedness and flexibility. Since values take on symbolic form, the parameters of the culture appear to remain intact while the renewal and transformation of values are in fact taking place" (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1996, p. 28).

In this context, the identity creation of a Muslim woman is also rooted in the discourse of reformist piety. A good Muslim woman is defined by the parameters of reformist piety, and is one whose piety is described as an inner disposition where mundane chores are to be performed as acts of piety. According to Darakhshan Haroon Khan (2016), who studied middle-class religiosity in colonial India, the redefinition of a pious Muslim woman in the colonial era was a person who was not recognised for her holiness, but for her efficiency and ability to work tirelessly and structure her day around the five-prayer routine in Islamic practice. She notes that in the countless reformist novels and short stories like the *Beheshti Zavar* or the short story *Roznamcha*, published in women's monthly magazine *Asmat*, emphasized the need for middle class Muslim women to prioritise their responsibilities towards the household over anything else. *Beheshti Zavar* is a text meant to teach correct religious rituals to women, and it also instructs them regarding cleanliness, recipes, and fabric painting etc. The idea is to improve every domain of a woman's life, be it sacred or mundane. In themselves, Khan states these are not acts of worship, but become one when the performer attaches the right intention to them, which is of a wife who is trying to serve her husband. Khan also says the message of the text is that a husband cannot stop the wife from fulfilling her mandatory rituals, but at the same time she needs her husband's permission to undertake any non-obligatory religious rituals, especially if they come in the way of serving him (Khan, 2016, p. xxxiv). Piety was seen to be directed towards domestic labour for a middle-class good Muslim woman. Similar to Robinson's (2008) observation was Khan's observation of how at the turn of the 20th century, there was a simultaneous change taking place in the boundaries and meanings attached to public and private spheres. Several studies focused on the demarcation of public and private space. The change in economic activity, now being conducted outside the household, led to the rise of the middle class. The household became the sphere of "constrained virtuous

femininity” (Khan, 2016, p. xl) of the woman, while the public sphere was the space of economic activity, rationality, and reasoning and was dominated by men. Khan further argues that:

“...the reformed household, modelled on similar modes of scrutiny, was yet another novel and public space that came into being during high colonialism. While it is widely acknowledged that with the rise of nationalism and reformism, the private (the household, the family, the *zenana*) became the political, it would not be incorrect to say that the household also became public in the twentieth century. And by this I mean it was the topic of intense scrutiny and reprimand from people and institutions that were not, in any measure, a part of the household. In yet another paradox of social reform, a movement that sought to seclude women was also keen to bring into public every detail of the household” (Khan, 2016, p. xlvi).

The history and the current discourse of reformist piety have to be understood in the context of changes taking place in the household. In the current discourse, the accountability of piety rests on the individual, be it male or female; the believer has to establish a direct relationship with *Allah*. However, when it comes to the symbolism of this piety, the embodiment is a very public act and is impacted by the social status and the local environment of the believer. Kabita Chakraborty (2016) explored a similar issue, on how young Muslim women are contributing to and are impacted by the changing youth culture in India. Muslim girls living in slum communities in Kolkata were her focus of study, and she observed that young women in the slum communities (*bustees*), irrespective of their religion, were expected to behave in a certain way in public. The rules of behaviour and performance of a ‘good girl’ are not uniform, and are constantly written and rewritten by the state and society. There is no singular identity as caste, class and religion, which add different dimensions to the concept of an ideal girl. The normative expectations of femininity in India are intersected by not just the local context but also religious norms. In the *bustees*, it is optically important to be seen as a good girl. Irrespective of one’s normative religious behaviour, for women residing in lower income areas, the notion of *izzat* (honour) drives the daily discourse. Some of the common expressions used in everyday interactions with young women, as observed by Chakraborty are— ‘good reputation’, ‘good family’, ‘protecting honour’, ‘good girl’. These expressions are commonly used in interactions by all families for their young girls. The actions of young girls are scrutinised as against this discourse of honour, which is an inherent part of their upbringing and their daily lives. The symbolic way in which this discourse is operationalised is by practice of the *hijab* or *burkha*, wearing modest clothing, especially outside their homes, restricting socialising with the opposite sex, being family oriented (Chakraborty, 2016, p. 21). Women use the *burkha* or *hijab* while in a public space. In the private sphere, it may be practiced by women occupying different rooms, but in one-room houses as in the *bustees* it is difficult to follow. Hence, when men want to meet, they choose public spaces like tea stalls, or the streets, and leave the home as a predominantly female domain. Puberty is a critical milestone in the lives of young women, and their lives are altered with respect to their clothing and access to the public space. Chakraborty reveals that young Muslim girls from the *bustees* describe a ‘good Muslim girl’ as feminine, and this femininity is symbolically expressed in the way they dress, their behaviour, their duty towards family, and access to public spaces. Some of the characteristics that Chakraborty’s respondents described of a good Muslim

girl were - one who prays five times a day, marries a man chosen by her parents, lives in a joint family, does not have pre-marital romantic relationships, wears a *burkha/niqab* or *hijab* in public, and is good in household chores. The construction of the image of a good Muslim girl image was a linear one. Even though all these normative expectations including the *hijab* restricted their mobility, and consequently their educational and employment opportunities, Chakraborty observed that despite the inequality faced by Muslims in India, the stereotypical image of an agency-less Muslim woman that has been created in and by political discourse, or by popular culture like cinema, is not entirely true. She concludes that through the private sphere, Muslim women are challenging normative expectations. She states:

".....young Muslim women are, through the private sphere, challenging the dominant constructions and expectations of their lives and finding ways to fulfill personal transgressive desires in different public spaces" (Chakraborty, 2016, p. 24).

Methodology for the Study

For this study⁶, in-depth interviews were conducted with 45 Muslim women across Bengaluru city. Some of these interviews were conducted in two to three visits to the respondents' homes or places of work. Themes were identified based on the objectives of the study, and respondents were asked various questions based on those themes. Twenty-five women were from the upper middle class, and twenty were from the lower middle class, and the differences of their family incomes were not as between rich and poor, but between those lower in the middle class, and those higher in the middle class.

The average annual household income of the upper middle-class respondents was Rs 25-40 lakh per annum. However, many respondents were not willing to give any specific information regarding their family income. The average family size was 2-4 members per family. Some of the respondents who were not married at the time of the interview, but were employed, and were living alone were taking financial help from their parents as and when it was needed. Hence, other criteria such as education of the respondent, education of the spouse, occupation of the respondent, occupation of spouse, education, and occupation of parents, and area of residence were considered to classify respondents with respect to their socio-economic profiling⁷.

The average annual household income of the twenty respondents from the lower middle class was Rs 2-4 lakh per annum. As in the case of the upper middle class, many respondents from the lower middle class too did not give accurate information regarding their family income. They gave an income range since some of the family members were working in the unorganised sector and their per-day earnings varied. The average size of the family was 2-5 members per family. In the case of the lower middle class as well, criteria such as education of the respondent, education of spouse, occupation of

⁶ Ethical Consideration for the Study: The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of the Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC), Bengaluru, in a meeting held on 24th July 2020. (Ref: DPA/Ethic.com/2020/). The consent of the respondents to voluntarily take part in the study was obtained using a verbal acknowledgement that has been captured in a voice recording. The consent for voice recording the interview was taken from the respondents, and that has also been recorded as part of the interview. The study did not include any minor as a participant. The data were anonymised in order to keep the identities of the respondents who participated in the study confidential.

⁷ (Market Research Users Council, 2011)

the respondent, occupation of spouse, education, and occupation of parents, and area of residence were considered to classify respondents with respect to their socio-economic profile⁸.

We did not have anyone in the sample who was poor. Of two of the women respondents in the upper middle class, one of them is an activist, and another is a feminist writer working in the field of women's rights. They have been included to give a broader view of lived experiences of Muslim women in India. They are actively engaged in highlighting the rights-based issues of women on various public platforms, and especially that of Muslim women, to initiate affirmative action. The economic groups were identified mainly through their area of residence in Bengaluru, as well as their educational qualifications and occupations. The interviews were conducted in a conversational manner. Follow-up questions were asked on what the respondents stated during the interviews, as these questions were deemed relevant. The respondents were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. The interviews were conducted in either English or Hindi. Later on, all the Hindi interviews were translated and transcribed in English. All interviews were transcribed into the MS word format. Subsequently, these Word files were analysed using a combination of Atlas Ti software for Qualitative analysis and MS-Excel.

The upper income respondents were found working in white collar jobs, living in high-end condominiums, or home makers whose husbands were working in white collar jobs, and in multinational organisations. Another set of women were mostly those working in lower paying jobs, in the organised and unorganised sectors as cooks, house helps, salespersons in shopping malls, data entry operators in NGOs, or their husbands were working in the unorganised sector, and all of them lived in low-income areas of the city. The inclusion of respondents from these two income groups in the study was to understand the different paths that women took to express and exercise their desires and make their decisions. For the broader study, information was sought on various aspects of the respondents' lives such as: Bodily practices that women undertake as part of their daily religious practices, their social networks, their intimate relationships, how they perceived religion and its practices, and how they negotiated with all the experiences that they encountered. The intention was to observe which paths the respondents took, whether they surrendered to, negotiated with, or reinterpreted religion according to their practical needs and the differences in the experiences based on the income group to which they belonged.

One of the main points of discussion with the respondents was about who is an ideal or a good Muslim woman for them, and where do they stand vis-à-vis this concept. Based on their answers, four pathways have been created to understand how Muslim women respondents embody religious practices. These pathways have been created based on the current religious practices of the respondents, how the respondents defined an ideal Muslim woman, and how they embody this concept in their daily lives. Religious practice here has been defined based on the "Five Pillars" of Islam as mentioned by Schielke (2018) which has also been discussed above. These pathways are—first, the women seeking to express their religious identity in both the public and private sphere, and creating

⁸ (Market Research Users Council, 2011)- The New Sec (Socio-Economic Classification) system is used to classify households in India based on education of the chief earner and the number of consumer durables (from a predefined list) owned by the family. The list has 11 items ranging from electricity connection and agricultural land to cars and air conditioners.

legitimate spaces in the public sphere to express religious agency. The second pathway followed by respondents was in confining their religious practice only to the private sphere. They choose the occasion or spaces where they wanted to express their religious identity as the predominant identity. The third set of respondents were those who followed all symbolic practices but were irregular with their prayers. There was a fourth pathway, which is owning one's Muslim identity in the public sphere, but focusing more on the social and cultural aspects of religion, for instance celebrating *Eid* with their family and friends, but they carried out little or no regular practice of religion.

The above pathways were also seen to be related to the income levels of the respondents. Economic class is a significant factor with respect to how women experience and manifest their religious beliefs and practices.

Respondents' Understanding of a Good Muslim Woman

Conversations with the respondents revealed that religious norms permeate all aspects of the believers' lives. There is a certain way of doing even daily chores and there is a *Sunnah*⁹ attached to them. For instance, there is a certain way that a daily bath should be taken, food should be eaten, when one steps out of the home which foot goes out of the threshold first etc. The *Quran* and *Hadith*¹⁰ provide a set of guidelines for believers to negotiate through everyday life. To benchmark one's self as against these guidelines while taking into consideration the practicalities of life, is something that the respondents experienced on a daily basis. The knowledge of these norms is common among all respondents across different income groups and activity spheres.

Who is a Muslim Woman?

The ideal Muslim woman is always a work in progress. Our respondents indicated that they were far from the goal of being an ideal Muslim woman, but they were trying to be better Muslim women. There are several aspects to this concept of ideal woman. Respondents of the upper middle class were working towards this concept of an ideal woman. Those of the lower middle class were also working towards it, but for them, factors such as mobility, access to public space, and financial constraints impacted their attempts towards piety. For both sections of women, symbolism played a significant role in defining a pious Muslim woman.

Market forces and social media have played an important role in furthering the norms and expected behaviour of a Muslim woman in the public space. By means of constant visual images, the social media has left an impact on the consumers of this information, with respect to reinforcing piety that lies at the centre of the image of an ideal Muslim woman. Social media, especially Instagram with its increasing penetration and the rise in the number of religious influencers, enabled women to negotiate piety with fashion and reconstruct their identity (Beta, 2019).

⁹ *Sunnah* (Arabic: "habitual practice") also spelled *Sunna*, the body of traditional social and legal custom and practice of the Islamic community. Along with the *Quran* (the holy book of Islam) and *Hadith* (recorded sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), it is a major source of *Shariah* or Islamic law. Source: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ibn-Taymiyyah>

¹⁰ *Hadith* is a record of traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, revered and received as the major source of religious law and moral guidance, second only to the authority of the *Quran*.

The exercise of defining an ideal Muslim woman is a difficult task. However, the women in this study articulated various views. Both groups of women—the lower and upper middle class— had slightly different views on the ideal woman because of different worldviews. For respondents of the upper middle class, the internal journey and connect with the Almighty was as important and sometimes more important than the symbolic presentation. For women of the lower middle class, both inward and outward piety were important. Being pious on the outside essentially meant how one behaves, carries oneself, and dresses in the public space. Prayer and some form of veiling¹¹ were two practices that were closely related to the concept of an ideal woman for women of both income groups.

A good Muslim woman should be a believer in *Allah*, educated, confident, benevolent, empowered yet rooted in faith, someone who is also a good support to her spouse and close family members. Some of the respondents cited Khadija and Ayesha (Prophet Mohammad's wives) as ideal woman characters whom they looked up to. Khadija was revered for her strong and empowered character—she was a businesswoman at that time and proposed for marriage to the Prophet who was younger to her in age, and Ayesha for her memory and sincerity towards the Prophet. The respondents were, however, clear that there have been many strong women in Islamic history whom they could look up to, but they do not idealise them that way; that they are their only benchmarks.

There were various sources of information regarding Islamic practice that the respondents spoke about during the interviews. Some of the key sources were parents, a religious authoritative figure like an *Alim* or *Alima*, both formal and informal religious congregations, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Snapchat. Social media emerged as a significant factor in not just providing information regarding Islamic practice, but also as a facilitator for arranging religious congregations, gathering information about faith-based organisations, and through them connecting with like-minded women. The easy access to information is available to both income groups—most respondents owned a personal smart phone, or at least one smart phone was available within the household. All respondents of both class groups have undergone formal classes to learn to read the *Quran*. Almost all the respondents have read the *Quran* from cover to cover at least once in their lifetime. Self-reading of the *Quran* is done in Arabic, the original language in which it was written, along with the translation in *Urdu* or English depending on linguistic preference of the respondents. Apart from this, there were YouTube videos explaining the teachings of the *Quran*, YouTube videos of *Muftis*¹², most famous among them being *Mufti Menk*¹³ who seemed to be popular with the younger

¹¹ The different forms of veiling that have been referred to, based on respondents' responses, are:

Burkha- a two-piece garment- one single piece of garment is worn from neck down; the other accompaniment is a headscarf- usually black in colour. The headscarf can be worn in different styles. Sometimes it covers the entire face with just a mesh around the eyes, and sometimes the lower garment is worn with a *Hijab* or *Niqab*.

Hijab- used to describe the headscarves that are worn, and they come in different styles and colours. This head covering leaves the face clear. In India, many women wear *Burkha* with the *hijab*.

Niqab- a veil for the face that leaves the area around the eyes clear. It may be worn with a separate eye veil. It is worn with an accompanying headscarf.

The manifestation and definition of these forms of dressing change with the kind of society one lives in. In Saudi Arabia for instance, the lower garment of the *Burkha* is called the *Abaya*.

¹² A *Mufti* is a Muslim legal expert who is empowered to give rulings on religious matters. (<https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/mufti>)

generation. Respondents also referred to religious literature available in the form of books and online sources that they accessed. Association with an Islamic study institute was also common with the respondents who identified themselves as practicing Muslims. *Ijtemas*¹⁴ in the case of lower middle class and *Halaqas*¹⁵ in the case of upper middle class were formal and informal gatherings of women to deliberate over religious texts and teachings. The religious books that the respondents referred to were the *Hadith* and the *Quran*. The *Hadith* were collected and narrated orally for two centuries after the Prophet's death. Later, they were written and codified. They serve as a source of biographical material of Prophet Muhammad, contextualizing *Quranic* revelations and Islamic law. Since the *Hadith* was codified much later after the Prophet's death, the question of authority and authenticity of *Hadith* is very critical when one chooses to follow it. Chains of authority and transmission with respect to *Hadith* are traced as far back as possible, often to Prophet Muhammad himself. Two of the most authoritative collections that were also mentioned by one of the respondents were that of Al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim. There are four others that are considered pure and authoritative (Islam, 2020).

Some of the key factors affecting the source and usage of public discourse are time, space, access to resources and mobility, which in turn are related to the income group to which they belong.

Respondents' Descriptions and their Income Groups

In the upper middle class, we had 25 respondents, who were in the age group of 21-62 years. Of these 25, three respondents were homemakers, and the rest were engaged in some kind of professional work, full-time or part-time. The lowest level of education among these respondents was Grade 12 and the highest level of education was MPhil. There were two medical doctors with an MBBS, and MBBS, OBG degree respectively. Apart from this, there were three respondents who were pursuing their PhD, and had finished the PhD Coursework at the time of the interview. There was one respondent who was an *Alima*. Another respondent was managing the administration of a hospital run by a faith-based organisation and was also managing a *madrassa* exclusively for girl students. Two activists who were working for women's rights were among the respondents. The average family size of the higher-income respondents was four members per family. The average income of the respondents' family was over Rs 1.5lakh per month. Apart from three respondents for whom religious practice was only an occasional activity during *Eid* or any other special religious festival, all the others were associated either with a faith-based organisation or were reading/ viewing Islam related content online or reading it in books.

For the upper middle class women, there was the ease of mobility, each household had at least one vehicle, and most often the transport for all the respondents was with their own vehicle. The use of public transport was limited to occasional taxis, or sometimes autorickshaws. The respondents also had easy availability of private space. Most of the respondents lived in gated communities. The access to transport and space made religious practices for the respondents easily manageable. At

¹³ Mufti Menk is a Zimbabwean Islamic Scholar with millions of followers across his social media platforms, Source: www.muftimenk.com

¹⁴ Congregation of people especially Muslims throwing light on the Holy *Quran* and its significance for achieving salvation. Source: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/submission/3148/Istema%28N%29+or+Ijtema%28n%29>

¹⁵ A *halaqa* in Islamic terminology is a religious gathering or meeting for the study of Islam and the *Quran*.

home, they had private space to do their prayers, and could safely wear their *hijab* or *burka* at the workplace, or any place outside their homes. One of the most significant observations in the interviews was that awareness about actions and expression of agency was high among respondents of the upper middle class. Their choice to wear a *hijab*, or to keep their religious practices private, came from a space of awareness and choice. At no time in any of the interviews with upper middleclass women did a respondent mention societal pressure as the reason to wear a *burkha/hijab*, or to practice religion.

In the lower middle class, 20 respondents were interviewed. The respondents were in the age category of 18-52. Of the 20 respondents, five were currently not employed anywhere, but three of these five were actively looking for work. There was one respondent who is an *Alima*, four respondents were working as house helps in gated communities near their place of residence, and the rest were employed in low-paying jobs. The average size of the lower middle class families was five members per family. The average income of the family was about Rs 20,000-30,000 per month. The respondents resided in low-income areas of Bangalore—Rajendar Nagar, opposite National Games Village in Koramangala, Neelasandra and Vivek Nagar. They lived in *pucca* houses with not more than two rooms for a family of 4 to 6 people. All respondents from the lower middle class wore a *burkha* or *hijab* or both. However, respondents' who worked as house helps did not wear a *burkha* or *hijab* to their place of work, but wore it everywhere else they went to outside their homes. The *burkha* was largely worn while travelling from one place to another, and most of them took it off at their place of work, while some continued to wear a *hijab*, or took it off with the *burkha* depending on the nature of their work. For instance, a respondent who worked in a retail apparel store as a sales person, took off her *burkha* when she reached her place of work, but continued to wear the *hijab*. Another respondent took off her *burkha* and *hijab* at her place of work as there were only women working in her office.

For respondents of the lower middle class, the reason for wearing a *burkha/hijab* was more a matter of safety and a norm because of the area in which they were residing. Narrow by-lanes, populated largely by males standing in groups in the lanes or nearby tea stalls, are how some respondents described the areas where they lived. Also, people of one religious community (in this case, Muslims) live in close proximity to each other. One lane or adjoining lanes of the locality are occupied by people of the same religious group. A *burkha* helped them in hiding their bodies and identity, thereby giving them anonymity, and keeping eve teasers at bay. It also gave the respondents the liberty to dress as they like under the *burkha*, without the neighbours prying into how they dress when they step out of their home. The *burkha/hijab* was also linked to the concept of honour and modesty apart from safety. One significant reason why respondents of the lower middle class wear a *burkha* is that it is considered mandatory in Islam, and people treated them with respect and maintained their distance if they moved around in a *burkha* when they were outside their homes. None of the respondents of the lower middle class indicated that they were forced to wear a *burkha*, in the sense of someone explicitly telling them to wear a *burkha* or a *hijab*. However, living in such neighbourhoods, which may be unsafe for young women, and also the fact of social pressure from others of their own religion who live in the same neighbourhood, have their own way of impinging on the women and their practices.

The relevance of analysing the experiences of women across different income groups was to establish the differences in the symbolic expressions of religion across these groups. The access, consumption, and expression of religion varied across different income groups. The local context and life experiences defined the relevance of religion in respondents' lives. In the upper middle class, access to religious knowledge was through English-speaking preachers on social media, Instagram influencers, and Islamic schools where women of similar socio-economic backgrounds were attending classes. Hence, their lived experiences were different from those belonging to the lower middleclass women. The religious gatherings that the respondents from the upper middle class attended such as the *halakas*, had women from a similar class background. They discussed issues such as their children's Islamic and non-Islamic studies, family issues and their careers. The lower income group of respondents lived in ghettos, where mobility and access to public spaces were restricted. The social pressure to look like a good Muslim girl was more in terms of outward behaviour— interaction with the opposite sex, and modest dressing. The issues discussed in religious gatherings such as *Ijtemas* were relevant to their daily lives, hygiene, how to be a good daughter-in-law, how to be a good wife, daily practice, and importance of arranged marriages. The respondents from different income groups experienced religion differently, and this brought about non-singularity of the identity of Muslim women, which is impacted by several factors including socio-economic conditions, local contexts, and religious norms.

The Four Pathways

Based on the women's responses, there were certain commonalities that emerged with respect to how they expressed their Islamic beliefs and practices. These experiences were then broadly divided into the different pathways that the respondents were seen to be taking. These pathways are a reflection of the belief systems and symbolic practices of the respondents at that particular stage of their lives.

Creating Legitimate Spaces in the Public Sphere to Express Religious Agency

This pathway was that of respondents who identified themselves as practicing Muslims, wore a *burkha* or *hijab* outside their homes, and prayed at least two to three times a day out of the five which are mandatory for a practicing Muslim. Nine of the 25 respondents of the upper middle class and 14 of 20 from the lower middle class broadly followed these practices.

In the upper middle class, the respondents who chose to follow this pathway were closely associated with a faith based organisation and were studying the *Quran* and *Hadith*. These women were believers, expressing their religious identity in both the public and private sphere, and creating legitimate spaces in the public areas to express religious agency. They were confident about their choices, and some of the working women made space for their practices at the workplace.

Mahira (name changed) age 38, is an IT engineer by profession, and works in a multinational IT company. For the afternoon prayers which are to be done between 12:30-3:30 pm, she prays in any of the vacant conference rooms in the office. She further added that if there are people outside, it is not an issue because it does not take her more than 5-10 minutes for her prayers. Mahira wears her *hijab* to office. She started to wear one when she began going to college. According to her, a transition point

is always easy when someone is making a significant change to her appearance. So, when she started college, the transition to wearing a *hijab* was easier. When she was asked about her religious practice and what piety means to her, Mahira stated,

"Piety and faith and all that is very internal to me like you might be praying. It could even be a physical thing that you're doing, but even when we are praying, I'll tell you- the 5 rakats that is the 5 times we are praying is like meditation to get the khushu we say in salah. The khushu, is the actual connection with Allah. You'll feel you're standing in front of God and praying, that would come on and off..... It's a very difficult thing to achieve like to pray 5 times with khushu in your prayer is really difficult..... That's something we all aspire to be connected to your creator like you're seeing him or at least the way he sees us and you stand and pray and speak to him."

Sumbul (name changed), 42 years old, started wearing a *hijab* at the age of 33, which became a defining moment of her life. She did her Masters in Computer Applications, and was teaching in a college from 2011 until 2017. In 2005, when she moved to Bangalore after her marriage, she joined an Islamic study institute and started going for their weekend classes to read and better understand the *Quran* and *Hadith*. She said that it was after her deeper study of Islam that she realised that as a practicing Muslim, she should cover her head. In 2015, she started wearing a *hijab*. She stated that initially, she was apprehensive about how her colleagues would react to her wearing the *hijab* all of a sudden. She spoke to her colleague and close friend, a Bengali Brahmin, about her desire to wear a *hijab*. This friend encouraged her to go ahead and wear it with confidence.

Both Sumbul and Mahira, who belong to the upper middle class, were confident about their identity and religion, and had no inhibitions to express that in the public space either. Their financial and educational status made it easier for them to make this transition from practicing in private to practicing their religion in a public space. Mahira has been wearing the *burkha* for the past 15 years, and for the past 5 years after her father's death she has deepened her practice i.e., according to her she has started regularly praying five times a day. Both Mahira and Sumbul have been going for weekend classes, and have also enrolled their children for classes on the *Quran* in a faith-based organisation in Koramangala.

Tara (name changed), is a 30-year-old respondent from a lower middle class family, who works as a life-skills trainer in an NGO, and was till recently the sole earning member of her family of seven. Now, her sister who works as a Montessori teacher also contributes to the family income. Tara started wearing the *burkha* at the age of 26. It was the change of residence that led to her transition. In her case, this transition was the result of several factors, one of which was that the area where her family had shifted to has many shops and considerable commercial activity. Also, around the same time, her work pressure increased, and she was leaving her office premises at around 7 -7:30 pm, and by then the crowds near her office and near her residence were not safe. She stated that there are many men lurking around in these areas, a number of them under the influence of alcohol. She had felt unsafe, so she started wearing the *burkha*. According to her, it is anyway a requirement in her religion, and at the same time, she feels safer when she wears a *burkha*, and people look at her with a sense of respect. She was also troubled by her extended family's comments on her job, which led her to wear

the *burkha*. She was 18 years old when her father passed away and being the eldest child, she had to start earning to support the family. However, her mother's brothers were not happy with this decision, and constantly complained to her mother that she was sending her girl child out to work, and girls of their family are not supposed to go out of their home to earn. All these factors led her to deepen her religious practice by praying regularly. She took solace in religion and started wearing the *burkha*. She also added that she used to go for *Ijtemas* during or after office hours and was learning more about her religion. She feels that women should cover themselves if they want to be close to Allah. Since she does not have a father, if she wears fashionable clothes, people will question her character. Hence, the *burkha* and *hijab*, which she feels are also religious requirements, make it easier when she goes out of her home. Over the years, her *Ijtema* classes and social media have been her sources of information in improving her Islamic practice. Her concept of a good Muslim woman also comes from her everyday experiences. A good Muslim woman, according to her, should not be wearing very tight clothes, she should be praying five times (she does an additional prayer called *Tahajjud* at 3:30 am). Her workplace was in LR Nagar near Koramangala, where she was managing a community welfare project with another lady who worked as an office assistant looking after the administration of the office. The office assistant was also a Muslim woman. Most days of the week, they had the office space to themselves, which they kept clean, and could do their afternoon and evening prayers without any hindrance. Tara had the privilege of having access to space at her workplace for her prayers. On several occasions during her interview, she said even though she has faced occasional discrimination because of her religion, she is not scared to wear the *burkha* in public. She feels she is still far from her desired goal of being a good Muslim woman as she defined it above, the reason being that due to her job, she does not get enough time for her prayers and to read the *Quran*. Even though her decision to deepen her religious practice was the consequence of the above factors, she was very comfortable in expressing her religious agency in the public space.

Confining Religious Practice to the Private Sphere

The respondents who followed this pathway identified themselves as believers. Of the 45 respondents, ten respondents were broadly following this pathway. All the ten respondents were from the upper middle class, with none from the lower middle class.

None of the higher income respondents who followed this pathway wore a *burkha* except when they went to a mosque or were engaged in a religious function. They prayed at least once a day. Of the ten respondents, eight were employed in part time or full-time work, while two were home makers. These respondents stated that religion and its related practices are very private for them, and they also consider what they do in their private space as very sacred. Some of these respondents wore a *burkha* when they went for any religious celebration to the mosque or the *Jamaat Khana*. They could choose the occasions or spaces where they wanted to express their religious identity as the predominant identity. Occasions such as celebrating *Eid* with friends and family and wearing the *burkha/hijab* were only on special occasions. The respondents grouped under this pathway did not want their colleagues or friends to know how and when they carried out their religious practices. For instance, Farida, 43 years old, (name changed) who works as an apparel brand consultant, is busy with

client meetings the entire week, though she fasts every Thursday. She stated that no one comes to know about her fasting at her place of work, and she wants to keep it that way. Also, during *Ramadan*, she keeps a few dates in her bag and breaks her fast in the evening, wherever she is. It works well for her, considering that she is always on the go—attending client meetings or working out of her workshop cum warehouse in Koramangala:

“What do I have to prove to anyone? I know myself well. You know who you are, your God knows. What is there to show anyone? They know that. Whoever has to know, they know me, I'm a Muslim, and that I'm a working woman. And I have a certain position in society. I don't have to show off to anyone. I don't have to show anyone anything. I don't want anyone to speak about it also. They know I am this, I am this.”

The respondents who followed this pathway stressed the intent and desire that should come from within. Amna (name changed), who is 48years old, and is working as a senior professional in a real estate company, states that religion is something that should come from within. One should practice it only if they want to, and it should not be imposed from outside by anyone.

The respondents in this pathway were comfortable confining their religious practice to the private sphere i.e., to their homes, and did not want others to know what their relationship with their God is, which was something very private to them. With all these respondents, the relationship with God or any higher power was of prime significance, and that was something they stated during their interviews. Some of the respondents who identified themselves as practicing Muslims even stated that during their prayers they talked to *Allah*, and felt a close connect to Him. That was something which was private to all respondents.

Selective Expression of Religious Identity in the Public Space and Irregular Practice

The respondents following this pathway were mostly from the lower middle class, and eight respondents stated that they are not regular with their religious practices. Two respondents from the upper middle class also followed this pathway. In the latter case, the respondents were students and were in the age group of 21-22 years. They had early morning lectures and were in college till evening. One of them went to her father's office after college to help him in his business. Both stated that they did not get time to carry out all prayers on a daily basis, though they wore a *hijab* when they stepped outside their home. In the case of the lower income respondents, the nature of their work and limitation of time were the primary factors for not praying regularly. Also, the choice of wearing a *burkha* was dependent on the occasion and place they were visiting. All the house helps stated that they did not wear the *burkha* to their place of work as it impacted on their chances of getting jobs. Two respondents working as house helps had experienced bias against hiring Muslim house helps, especially if they were wearing a *burkha*. Also, they felt that wearing a *burkha* at the time of cleaning was not comfortable, and was an obstruction, so they avoided wearing it. Whenever they went outside their locality or to their village, they wore a *burkha*. Regarding the *burkha*, Vatuk (1982) stated that it is usually worn

before males who are outside the trusted circle of kinsmen. Hence, women wear it when they are outside their home, especially when they are going to their village from the city.

In the case of Sabeena (name changed), 37 years old, who works as a house help in a gated community in Koramangala, the day starts at 7 am. She finishes cooking, and cleaning her house, and then goes to work. She has studied up to grade five and she had no interest in studying further. She stressed that praying five times a day is the ideal situation for her as a Muslim. However, she is not regular with her prayers because of her working hours, and after- work fatigue. She tries to pray at least once every Friday. She wears the *burkha* and covers her head when she goes to her village, but does not wear one when she goes to work. She shared her thoughts about how praying everyday creates a positivity at home and relieves a person of her/his tensions, but she and her husband do not pray every day. She does it sometimes once a day, in the evening. She now wants to improve her religious practice by spending more time in her prayers, and that is her intention. She does not know how to read the *Quran* though she had learnt it from the *Ustaad* (teacher) in her village in Andhra Pradesh, when she was about seven or eight years old. She got married when she was very young. She did not know her exact age at the time of her marriage, but said she was about 12 years old, and had just started menstruating when she got married. Her first child was born about a year later. At the time of the interview, she stated that her age was about 37 years. Since she did not know how to read the *Quran*, she made sure both her children did so. Her son goes to the local mosque regularly for his prayers and has also gone with the *Tablighi Jamaat*¹⁶ to other villages and cities as part of the group that goes and gives religious sermons. Her daughter goes to a local *Quran* teacher who takes group classes for children. She expressed a sense of pride while talking about the religious knowledge of her children, how both were regular with their prayers and knew more about their religion than she and her husband. Her daughter wears a *hijab* and a *burkha*. Her daughter does not wear a *niqab* as she wears spectacles, and it is practically not possible to wear a *niqab* with the spectacles. Sabeena further stated that as a Muslim she should pray more often, and read the *Quran*, but due to her working hours and fatigue after a full day's physical labour, she gets no time. During our conversation, she did not say anything about working on her religious practice to get better at it anytime in the future, one of the very few of the respondents who did not say she could strive to become a good Muslim woman.

Hazra (name changed), a 35-year-old housewife, wants to work outside her home and help her husband financially. However, her husband wants her to stay at home. Very recently, she has been able to convince her husband to allow her to join a vocational training institute to learn pattern making and stitching of clothes. Educated up to SSLC, she was married at the age of 20, and has been restricted to her home since then. If she has to go somewhere, her husband either drops her or helps her to find an autorickshaw. At the time of the interview, she did not possess a mobile phone. Her phone had gone for repair. When asked if she goes for *Ijtema*¹⁷, she stated that for the past two years, she has been attending this programme. When she is at home, her entire day is spent in doing household chores. Her husband is more religious than she. She often quoted the *Tablighi Jamaat's* way

¹⁶ A Transnational *Deobandi* Islamic Missionary Movement

¹⁷ Congregation of people, especially Muslims, throwing light on the *Holy Quran* and its significance for achieving salvation. Source: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/submission/3148/Istema%28N%29+or+Ijtema%28n%29>

of praying, and their lifestyle. She asserted that the *Tablighi Jamaat* manner of praying, and the way of life they talk about, is the right way of doing things. A good Muslim woman, according to her, should be covered, should not talk too much, and should talk only if they have knowledge. She feels that she is nowhere close to being that, as she does not wear a *niqab* and also talks a lot.

The respondents following this pathway were constrained because of their nature of work and time, but intended to deepen their practice and awareness, which they are presently not doing.

Expressing Religious Identity through Culture

There was a fourth pathway that respondents take, which is owning one's Muslim identity in the public space, by focusing more on the social and cultural aspects of religion. For instance, they celebrate *Eid* with their family and friends, but there is otherwise little or no regular practice of religion. A majority of the respondents following this pathway belonged to the upper middle class. Seven respondents from the upper middle class stated that they prayed sometimes during *Eid*, *Ramadan* or on special occasions like birthdays, weddings, or deaths. They celebrated *Eid* with their family and friends, greeted each other, dressed up for the occasion, and some even called their Muslim and non-Muslim friends to their houses for a meal. One of the factors keeping them associated with this norm of celebration was the family, who kept them close to their religion by praying together at home during special occasions, or going to community gatherings. Raahat (name changed), a 23-year-old *Dawoodi Bohra* Muslim, recounts how on every special occasion, her mother took her to the *Jamaat Khana*¹⁸ in Mumbai, where her mother's maternal family lives. Her mother belongs to a well-known business family of Mumbai and for every occasion like *Eid*, *Muharram*, birth, marriage, or death they visited the local *Jamaat Khana*, and sought the blessings of the religious head. That was the only time she wore a *burkha*. She completed her graduation from the US and is now working in a marketing firm in the US. She narrated an experience from her college in the US, where for the first six months, she did not tell anyone that she is a Muslim, and not even her close friends knew about her religion. The debates around immigrants to the US during the 2016-17 presidential elections of the United States made her think about her own identity. Even though she is a US citizen by birth, the debates affected her. She decided to tell her classmates about her being a Muslim, and she did that by sticking a poster on the notice board stating her name and her religion. She further stated that being a Muslim is not her only identity, and that is not the only mark of identity that she wants. Raahat does not identify herself as a practicing Muslim. She stopped her prayers and fasting during *Ramadan* as soon as she left home for her graduate studies.

Adeeba (name changed), 27-year-old, moved from Mumbai to Bengaluru just about a year before the interview for this study, and stated that she had studied in a girls' convent school for most of her school years. She had an exposure to a very cosmopolitan life, having stayed in Bandra, Mumbai, throughout her growing years. Even though the residents in her apartment building were all Muslims, except for one family, her school and college had a mix of students from all religions. Like almost all Muslim families, in her family too, reading the *Quran* was a must. She started learning the *Quran* at an

¹⁸ A place where members of certain Shia and Sunni communities come together for prayers and communal gatherings.

early age. She used to ask a lot of questions to her mother about practices such as 'why can't women lead prayers in the mosque?.' When women are taking the lead in workplaces, why not in the mosque too. She stated that as a child she was told to do a lot of things without being given any logic behind those practices. Even the reading of the *Quran* was more like a task for her as she did not understand the meaning of anything that she learnt. One thing that she did against her parents' wishes was to wear jeans. However, her parents came around to this change of dress from *salwar kameez*¹⁹ to jeans as long she restricted herself to certain places and occasions. Once she turned eighteen, she wanted to break free from some of the strict regulations such as wearing only a *salwar kameez*. She now prays only to mark special occasions, when she is with her family, and wears a *burkha* only when she is going to the mosque.

The respondents following this pathway were well aware of their religious identity and made an informed choice of not praying regularly, but celebrating the cultural aspects of their religion, which was more of an occasion for socializing with friends and family than for any specific religious significance.

Balancing *Deen* & *Duniya*—some observations across income groups

For all the respondents, the most significant aspect of religion was intent. Without the right intent, even if one prays and does all that is required to be a good Muslim, their prayers will not be counted. Also, it was essential for all respondents to balance *Deen* (God) and *Duniya* (worldly matters). None of the respondents talked about giving up family life to deepen their practice. All of them spoke about a fine balance of religion and practical life. Jaya (name changed), 38 years old, who works as a gynecologist in a city hospital run by the *Tablighi Jamaat*, states:

"a pious woman should balance both the worldly things and the religious thing. Both have to be there. The religion also says that you must take care of the world and the religion as well. It shouldn't be like just lock yourself in religion and just do namaz and prayers and not meet anyone. You have to face the worldly challenge in the context of your religion. You have to practice your religion and practice the worldly challenges that come your way like taking care of family, going to the market. Follow your religion while facing the challenges. So, both have to be balanced. Just following worldly things and not following religion isn't correct and the other way also like for example not talking or interacting with your neighbours who are non-Muslims, our religion says that neighbours have equal rights. And just staying in your house, praying, teaching your children but not giving rights to your neighbours is also against religion. That's not correct so you have to balance worldly things and religion."

¹⁹ traditional outfit worn by women and in some regions by men in South Asia and Central Asia

In her in-laws' side of the family, Jaya is seen to be an ideal for young girls of the family.

"They respect me a lot and like me a lot because I follow the religion better than them and they tell their kids, "You've to become like her, like maami"²⁰ I am their maami now, so they say, "you've to read like maami and dress like how maami does". I follow the hijab, yeah, so to the young kids, they tell, "see she studied so much, and she is still following religion and still she is working so try to become like her" so the girls don't like it that they're repeatedly asked to become like me (laughs) even if I don't tell them anything."

However, according to her, when it comes to socialising with her husband's male friends, she talks to them and greets them but is not comfortable to "chill and gossip" with them.

The ideal Muslim woman is always seen as a work in progress. For all respondents, however religious they were with respect to their prayers or their dressing, they never found it enough. There was always a need or desire for them to improve their practice or spend more time in improving their religious journey. They reasoned that in their current state of affairs they are not able to do as much due to the practicalities of life. Taking care of their jobs and their home took most of their time. This was the case for both higher and lower middle class respondents. In most cases, women of the lower middle class stated that they find it difficult to wake up early morning to pray. Due to physical labour the entire day, at home and also at work, their body is tired, and this is the only time that they get some rest (i.e., early morning). Hence, they do not make that extra effort to get up for the *Fajr namaaz* which is to be done early morning between 5:30 am till sunrise. For both sets of women— housewives and working women from the lower middle class, there was much physical labour that they had to do the entire day. Whether it was working outside the home or doing household chores, there was no support. Especially for women working as house helps, a typical day comprised doing the basic cleaning and cooking in their own house, and then rushing to their place of work to do the same chores in other houses. With just a few hours of rest in the afternoon, that too not on all days of the week, and the two days of monthly leave, for women working as house help, prayers and any kind of religious learning were less feasible, whatever be their inclination.

For all respondents, intention was one of the key factors defining their practice. Whether they chose to wear a *hijab* or *burkha* or neither of these, for all of them being a good human being and being true to oneself and *Allah* was very important. In the conception of a Good Muslim, the concept of *halal* and *haram* played an important role in deciding what is right and wrong. The concept of *haram* and *halal* was extended to how one viewed their relationship with the men within their family and outside. In this context, the concept of *mahram*²¹ and *non-mahram* was so important that some believe

²⁰ *Maami* is a Hindi word used to describe mother's brother's wife.

²¹ *Mahrams* are people with whom one can safely interact with but cannot marry. *Mahrams* (by blood) are (grand) parents and further ancestor's siblings, (grand) children, and further descendants' siblings, further ancestor's children and further descendants of siblings. There are also *Mahrams* by marriage such as spouse, father and mother-in-law, son and daughter-in-law, stepfather, mother and stepchildren. *Mahrams* are those from whom purdah, or concealment of the body with hijab, is not obligatory; and who may serve as a legal escort of a woman during journeys longer than three days.

in the *purdah* of voice too in the presence of *non-mahram*. For respondents, the whole concept of an ideal Muslim woman is one who follows Islamic ideals not just through bodily performance, which comprises rituals of *Salat*²², maintaining distance from *non-mahrams*, wearing a *burkha*, doing *Haj* or *Umrah*, but also morally. The moral aspect of being a Muslim consists of following Islam in its spirit, which essentially meant, as described by the respondents, to be honest, not to harm others, have good intentions and perform *Zakat*²³. The respondents felt that this moral intention should come voluntarily and cannot be forced. The lived experiences of the respondents and the practicalities of everyday life made their journey towards being an ideal Muslim slow and challenging. All respondents who identified themselves as practicing were dissatisfied with their current state of religious practice and stated that they wanted to be better at it. They justified their existing day-to-day experiences regarding their practice, and how far they are from their projected ideals. For instance, both Mahira and Maya (names changed) worked as software engineers in multinational companies, where their job profiles required that they handle teams which included both men and women. Apart from that, they must sometimes be part of official team meetings and parties. Maya, 44 years old, with a Master's in Digital Electronics, stated that she sometimes avoids team outings, and sometimes she attends them after informing her husband. Both perform their afternoon *salat* (prayer) in the office. Their colleagues are now used to their way of life and do not insist that they should join the office parties every time.

One of the significant Islamic principles is to maintain sex segregation. However, for a working woman, it is difficult to completely avoid interaction with males at their workplace. So they maintain a very professional relationship at work with minimal social interaction. Shaking hands with males is something that they avoid. Rati (name changed), 24 years old, works with her father in his apparel business. She goes out with her cousins, both male and female, and there is no restriction. All her cousins also take trips outside Bengaluru. Ayesha (name changed) 46 years old, who manages the administration of one of the hotels owned by her father in Bengaluru, became strict with her practice of Islam about 9 years ago. She has gradually lost touch with her male friends from before her marriage. Earlier, her male friends used to call her and chat on the phone, something to which her husband did not object, but her mother-in-law did. Now she interacts with her husband's male friends as a couple, along with her husband but not alone. However, at her workplace, she has to interact with males. Sumbul and Maya do not interact freely with their husbands' male friends whenever they come home. Both stated that they serve tea and snacks to their husbands' male friends, talk to them for some time, and then go inside their rooms. They do not sit and chat with them. While growing up, Aamna had no restrictions when it came to interacting with or going out with men or bringing male friends home. After marriage, Aamna travels for work and fun trips with female friends. She goes out with her husband and his friends to parties and pubs almost every fortnight. Mahira also stated that she has male friends who do come home sometimes with their families, and there is no constraint on meeting them as a family.

Non-Mahram are the people whom one cannot interact with outside of sanctioned guidelines, but whom one can marry (Rahbari, 2020).

²² Prayer

²³ *Zakat* is a religious obligation ordering all Muslims to donate a certain portion of wealth each year to charitable causes.

In some cases, when the male friend is known to the family, and the interaction is taking place along with their respective spouses, there are not as many constraints with respect to sharing the space with other males. During one of our conversations with Maya, she stated that they go out as a family for picnics during weekends, with other families whom they meet regularly at the Islamic Study Institute. The respondents who identified themselves as practicing were comfortable meeting their female friends all by themselves. Sania stated that in the gated community where she lives, she did not have many friends. She was reluctant to meet people, as the non-Muslim acquaintances questioned her on her prayer routine when she refused to meet them at the time of her prayer.

Among respondents of the upper middle class, the awareness about their religious practice and why they do it, the rationale behind it, was clear. Why they practice and how they practice their religion was explained. That they were practicing of their own free will was also clear. Some of them even questioned certain norms that are followed in practice. Farida (name changed) for instance, a 41-year-old entrepreneur, wants to go on the *Haj* pilgrimage alone. She is not married, and according to the Islamic norm, she cannot do the *Haj* pilgrimage without a male relative, a mahram. She often raised this with some of the people she is close to, like her mother and a *Maulvi* of a mosque where she goes regularly. She goes to these two people for advice and spiritual guidance. She stated that she would often ask her mother about why *Allah*, who decides everyone's fate including her fate of being unmarried, would be unhappy about her doing *Haj* all by herself. She further stated that if her intentions are pure and she is not doing any unacceptable (*Haram*) actions in Mecca, she should be allowed to go alone. She indicated that just a few days before our meeting, a new ruling had come from *Haj* authorities that women will be allowed to do *Haj* without a male companion. She was very happy with the news and said that she will plan her travel soon.

The intent and will to improve practice and be a better Muslim was approached differently by the two income groups. For women from the upper middle class, the will to be a good Muslim came from a space of awareness and knowledge. There was an internal quest for learning more about Islam and choosing to wear a *hijab* came from a space of awareness. In the case of women from the lower middle class, it came from a space that was more of societal pressure, socialisation, and "what will people think", especially their extended family and neighbours. This phrase came up many times during our conversations with various women. The deciding factor in the latter case was the area where the women were staying impacted not only their mobility but also how they access spaces outside their homes.

Conclusion

Symbolism and the related value attached to it are important for a group to become a community, and one that includes those who profess Islam. Even though Muslims across the world do not have a unified experience because of differences in socio-economic status, geography and many other factors at the local level, the dominant Islamic discourse always describes it as an *Ummah*²⁴. For any such group to become a community, defining a symbol and then sharing it across the entire group generates a sense

²⁴ The community, historically formed in response to the Divine revelation granted to the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century C.E.

of bonding and togetherness. This sense of identity is shared by members and leaders of the religious community. These symbols are expressed sometimes in language and sometimes in images and sometimes both. "Jointly shared symbolic expressions which are articulated through languages are the means of socialisation and create a social bond between individuals and groups, since the roles and social relations available in society are transmitted through languages" (Pekonen, 1989:132, as cited in Eickelman & Piscatori, 1996). Symbols then can be used as instruments of persuasion as well as coercion by the leaders and other authoritative figures of the community. Once the use of symbols is established, and linking it to the sense of belonging to the particular religious group, the use of these symbols then becomes an important part of identity formation for the believers. The respondents' definition of an ideal Muslim woman draws heavily from the normative symbols that have become part of being a Muslim. Prayer, dress, greeting, social relationships are some of the factors that form parts of being a Muslim. Through the easy accessibility of Islamic literature and discourses available through social media, during community gatherings or through structured classes which they attend in faith-based organisations or at classes in neighbourhood *Aalimas'* houses —there is a readily available guide on Islamic lifestyle and values. Islam cannot be treated as a separate subject but must be understood on its own account. It is an inseparable part of being in this world and in the afterlife. There is no clear demarcation between the public and private aspects of Islam. And the nature of authority in Islam is quite complex despite the existence of the *Quran* as the final authority, and *Hadith* as the moral guide for everyday living. The history of Islam has created theological diversity with its several theological schools and their reformist movements from the early eighteenth century. Hence, there is diversity also in the way respondents experience and express their religion. Added to this theological diversity is the fact that there is no one singular identity that defines the respondents' identity. One's religious life often intertwines with other aspects of life, where it shapes them or is shaped by them. Hence, when the respondents speak about the ideal Muslim woman, they also speak about the various spheres where the Muslim identity is evoked. There was a possibility that the respondents change their pathway and chose a completely different trajectory for expressing their belief system. To be an ideal Muslim woman is a difficult goal to achieve, but most of our study participants averred that they were trying, and at the least, they were becoming better Muslims.

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