

Reconfiguring Boundaries and Gender Relations in the Religious Sphere: The Women in an Alternative Group of Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh

MOMOTAJ BEGUM

INTRODUCTION

Creating separate Islamic religious groups for women and by women is a recent phenomenon in Bangladesh that evolved mainly in the last two decades. Historically, Islamic religious groups or parties have always been men-centred, and women's participation, if at all in such groups, was often seen as supportive and complimentary to men's roles. However, modern social change has generated increasing visibility and physical mobility for women in wider Bangladeshi society as reflected in women's growing participation in the sectors of education, economics and politics (e.g. Asadullah & Chaudhury 2008; Shehabuddin 1999; Huq & Sabina 2007). Parallel to this change is the evolution of women-led religious groups and their increasing participation in various Islamic movements in Bangladeshi society. In the context of contemporary social and religious dynamics in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the Muslim world, Muslim women are also playing active roles in Islamic activities, and in some cases, they tend to resist men's domination over the Islamic movement by founding and leading new forms of religious groups for women. This new trend opens the possibility for women to be religious leaders and organizers, though not with the same authority and power men usually enjoy in the religious sphere. Muslim women's evolving roles in various religious groups, forums, and reading circles are not limited only to Bangladeshi society but also to other societies where they have begun to take some responsibilities for the religion, which were restricted to them historically, as religious leaders, Islamic preachers or interpreters of Islamic texts (Kalmbach 2012; Lehmann 2012). This dynamic gender role entails the significance of re-examining the boundaries of women's practices in the religious sphere.

This study focuses on the shift in boundaries for understanding the

gender relations in the religious sphere. Boundaries between sexes in their respective spatial, social and psychological dimensions delineate the structure of gender relations at a given time and place (Gerson and Kathy 1985). In a changing socio-cultural context, shifts in boundaries are closely intertwined to the transformation of gender relations in the religious sphere as well as in wider society. I examine women's boundaries in the religious sphere by taking into account a women's Islamic reformist group, named *Char Sathir Dal* (Group of Four Companions; hereafter GFC), working for a renewal of Islamic faith among the womenfolk in Bangladesh. GFC has emerged as an alternative group against the transnational Islamic missionary movement of Tablighi Jamaat (Propagation Party/Group; TJ) that originated in the 1920s in the Indian subcontinent and is known as the largest piety-based Islamic reformist movement in the world. By illuminating the gender practices between the mainstream TJ movement and the GFC, I examine how women's increasing involvement in Islamic movements generate the potential opportunity to redefine the boundary of women's position and participation in the wider Islamization project and religious spheres.

Tablighi Jamaat is widely known in academic scholarship as an Islamic faith-renewal and missionary movement, which aims to perfect Muslim life with the moral and spiritual guidance of Islam. The female wing of the TJ movement, popularly known as Masturat Jamaat,¹ has spread around the world. So far, scholarship has focused overwhelmingly on the men's aspect of TJ activities (Masud 2000), and women's participation in this movement is explored in a limited number of studies (Metcalf 1998, 2000). GFC claims that it is identical to the women's wing of TJ, Masturat Jamaat. It asserts that it is following the same ideology and method of TJ, and the only difference is the absence of men's leadership for guiding the Tablighi activities. While the TJ women's wing (Masturat Jamaat) works under the guidance of its male TJ leaders, the GFC is completely led by females. Since leading female Tablighi activities without male guidance and authority is considered a violation to the principles of TJ, Tablighi male leaders do not recognize the new female group as a branch of TJ. Despite the mainstream TJ's critiques, the evolvement of GFC raises several questions: a) why is GFC operating as a separate female Tablighi group and movement, b) are there any differences in terms of gender ideology between mainstream female TJ and GFC, c) can the forms of activities as performed by GFC without male companions, authority and guidance generate any change in refashioning and reconfiguring the traditional boundary and role of women in the religious sphere? The visibility of Muslim women in public religious space, in particular, invites us to reexamine gendered boundaries in Islamic religious practices and movements, which conventionally confined women

to the boundary of home often with a limited ability to engage in religious activities under men's authority and guidance.

In this paper, I first examine the similarities and difference of religious activities between TJ and GFC, and the comparison will illuminate that why GFC is distinctive from TJ and operating beyond the male authorship and guidance. Also, I analyse the core gender discourses of TJ and GFC activities and show how women of the group are making a change in established gender structures of the Islamic movement.

Second, I delineate that the evolvement of GFC is itself a form of resistance to the gendered ideology of the mainstream TJ in which women's participation is always subject to their unmarriageable male companionship. I put GFC's evolvement in the wider social context in modern Bangladesh where women's visibility outside the boundary of home has increased significantly in recent decades. The women in Bangladesh are visible in various social contexts, and the emergence of GFC and its activities outside of the home is also interlinked to women's visibility overall in the wider Bangladeshi society.

Third, as mentioned earlier, historically Islamic religious movements have maintained a division of social spaces between sexes. I try to examine the distinction of home for women and world for men as practiced in TJ based on the defined dichotomy of inner/outer or spiritual/material domains of activities in Indian society (Chatterjee 1989). I illustrate the way the women of GFC engage in everyday religious activities and exercise agency through the process of negotiation and domination. They involve themselves both in 'inner' and 'outer' domains of activities². The women's inner or religious selves involve them to make other women religious in the community. They express concern about the 'inner' domain such as cultural identity and religious tradition, and at the same time they become conscious about the women's right of accessibility in all religious rituals that are the matter of the 'outer' domain or material aspect of their lives. The ethnographic account of this study discusses that the way GFC women resist against restricted gender norms, organize new group and perform collective religious performances in *Talim ghar* (*Talim* means religious lessons which are separately arranged for men and women and *ghar* means a house. While for men *Talim* is arranged at mosque but for women it is held at a *ghar*. *Talim ghar* is the house for religious lessons only for women. Hereafter, *Talim* house) such as women's prayer, Koran teaching class and *zikr* (also *dhikr*, chanting God's name, Allah, rhythmically) that carry significant meaning in terms of transforming the boundary and gender relations in religious spheres. These activities were historically and conventionally performed by men, and GFC introduced these for women also. This indicates the women's capability to create and organize new spaces for collective religious performances and observances for

women. It also renders the possibility for women to be involved in new roles of leadership in Islamic movement. Focusing on women's participation in new leadership role, I argue that women's involvement in the process of resistance and negotiation carries significant meaning to changing women's status in the religious sphere.

Finally, I try to illustrate how the women's attachment in the 'outer world' through their involvement in religious movement makes them conscious about male-female relations in society. Focusing on a case study of a female follower of GFC, I argue that women's engagement in outer world may affect the gender relation in the family as well as in wider society.

The argument of the study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two phases in 2011 and 2013 among the followers of both TJ and GFC in two different locations in Bangladesh. I observed the activities of TJ based on a women's reading circle in Rajshahi, a metropolitan city located in the northern part of Bangladesh. For the GFC, I have conducted fieldwork in Gaibandha, a district town in the northern part of Bangladesh. In this study, mostly I have used the evidence from the GFC in Gaibandha, and although it would not be fair to generalize the findings only from the case of Gaibandha, the case would be suggestive to generate new research interest in female religious activism and new forms of female leaderships as potential and visible phenomena in Bangladesh. Although GFC's popularity is not like the female group of mainstream TJ in Bangladesh but its presence and identical characteristics are noticed in different parts of the country, found in some earlier studies. For example, White (2010); Ashraf and Camelia (2008) have shown women's empowerment by analysing cases of female Tablighis from northern Bangladesh, though they did not distinguished them as GFC followers, their cases mostly represent them as followers of GFC and not the mainstream TJ. For example, Ashraf and Camelia (2008) have discussed the case of a female Tablighi leader known as *Amma Hujur* (the title is used to show respect due to her religious knowledge) and her activities in *Talim* house are particularly evidenced in GFC, not in mainstream TJ. Female leadership is also not recognized in TJ and women are advised to do religious activities under men's leadership. *Amma Hujur's* activities in *Talim* house are similar to the activities of GFC leaders in Gaibandha that will be discussed in detail later. Therefore, GFC is not a single organization in Gaibandha but is also found in other parts of the country.

Moreover, during my fieldwork among the female Tablighis of *Masturat Jamaat* in Dhaka (capital city of Bangladesh) and Rajshahi, I have noticed that they frequently criticize GFC group's activities since it works without a *mahrem* (man) which is considered *bidah* (illegal) to them. It means that GFC groups, although limited in scale, are organizing and spreading

in Bangladesh with a new dimension of leadership from females. The GFC group in Gaibandha started its journey from its network with the GFC group in the district of Bogura, and through women's networks the group is spreading in different parts of the country with a similar ideology and activities.

GENDER PRACTICES IN TJ AND GFC

In order to know the gender practices among TJ and GFC, I shall discuss how these two groups observe the religious activities while one (TJ) is led by men and another (GFC) is led by women. One of the central aspects of Tablighi reformism is *dawa*. The word *dawa* literally means 'to call' or 'to invite' people, particularly in an Islamic sense, or from the perspective of the TJ movement, *dawa* is used to call people to the right path of Islam. Tablighi *dawa* emphasizes 'enjoining good and forbidding evil'. TJ organizes its *dawa* mission following the method of travelling with a group or *Jamaat* from one place to another. Usually a group of five to ten people travel from one place to another, staying at mosques in a community and calling on Muslims to return to perfect their Muslim life guided by Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. People engage in this kind of missionary tour for short durations (3-10 days) or long durations (40 days to one year). The Tablighi project of individual moral reform is embedded in the *Jamaat* tour in which one cultivates Islamic faith through repetitive performance of Islamic rituals and engaging in missionary activities. In association with TJ activities for women, the GFC designs its *dawa* activities to put the decision-making power in the hands of women, and as such changes occur in the structure, space and leadership of the GFC. In proceeding section, I shall discuss the core activities of both groups of TJ and GFC such as: *Talim*, *Jamaat tour* and *Mashwara* (consultation meetings).

Talim: Both of these two groups arrange a weekly *Talim* or reading circle for Islamic lessons in which women from the neighbourhood join. The number of participants in the regular *Talim* of both groups is almost the same – approximately 20-30 women join in. The same reading material in listed Tablighi books is read in both types of *Talim* sessions. The only difference is the place of performing *Talim* and the decision of forming a reading circle. In the case of TJ, *Talim* is arranged inside the home of a female Tablighi follower, while the GFC group uses a separate *Talim* house. In the case of GFC, the *sura* (governing body made by regular female members) decides and regulates the *Talim*, while in TJ it is guided by male Tablighi members from the local mosque.

In the case of TJ, the female Tablighi are committed to their neighbourhood *Talim*. They are not allowed to visit another *Talim* (such as to lecture or to speak). In contrast, GFC followers visit several *Talim*

and give speeches to encourage women in their reformist mission. Where TJ requires women to stay at home to practice their knowledge and to create an Islamic environment at home and in a limited space, the GFC members believe that if the women do not reach out to other women with *dawa* then expecting women's reform in masses is absurd. Like the male Tablighi, the GFC followers visit different *Talim*, where they give speeches among the gatherings to encourage others to engage in Tablighi reformism.

Jamaat tour: One of the core components of TJ activities for women is participation in the *Jamaat* tour, a missionary activity comprising five to ten pairs of men and women. When the *Jamaat* team reaches a destination, the male Tablighi followers stay at the mosque and the females in a house of a local Tablighi. One male is selected as *amir* (leader) for the whole group and the women are enjoined to obey the male leader's decisions. Like TJ, the GFC also arranges a *Jamaat* tour and visits neighbouring places, however, the *Jamaat* is formed only of female members. During the period of the *Jamaat* tour, they stay in *Talim* houses, or in some cases where a *Talim* house is not yet built, women stay in a local Tablighi follower's house. According to the head of the GFC, they arrange *Jamaat* tours of 20-30 women, mostly during the month of *Ramadan*.

Mashwara: It means meeting, consultation or discussion where Tablighi followers take part in *mashwara* preceding their activities. Like TJ, the GFC also maintain this principle. Since TJ has no constitution, decisions are taken in *mashwara*. All Tablighi members are enjoined to take part in *mashwara*, held in a mosque. TJ does not allow women's participation in *mashwara*. If a TJ woman has any query, then she informs her male relative of it and the man relays the message to the male elders in *mashwara*. Female Tablighi women are enjoined to do work according to the male *mashwara* and they are strictly prohibited from doing Tablighi works according to their own initiative. In contrast, the GFC members attend *mashwara* in a *Talim* house weekly. Like TJ, the GFC has a *sura* that consists of ten regular members who are assigned for conducting the activities in different areas and are encouraged to report at meetings. All members may express their arguments in the meetings. TJ and GFC both do not believe in a hierarchy of status – all members are considered equal. However, *amir* is considered an authority in TJ and all must obey him. In the case of the GFC, there is no *amir*, however, the head of the group, Ayesa, is recognized as the leader of the GFC.

The above discussion reveals the core gender discourse of TJ: dependence on male authority and seclusion at home with limited space for religious worship. In contrast, by organizing similar activities in GFC, it suggests that women have the ability to organize and lead Islamic religious groups independently beyond male guidance. Women can do

religious preaching in and out of the home without attachment to men. GFC provides evidence that women can work as a leader to guide the women's religious group. This change suggests the need to examine women's space and male-female relations in the conventional men-centred Islamic movement.

CHANGING DYNAMICS OF BOUNDARIES IN RELIGIOUS SPHERE

From its inception, TJ distinguishes the gendered boundary between men and women and it allows men to preach Islam to the outer world and women to do so in the inner world, i.e. home. According to a Tablighi elder,

Men and women both are responsible for preaching Islam. The responsibility of women is not less than men's. Nevertheless, the difference lies in method that is in which way the work will be done. These differences are arranged because Allah has made them women. A woman is responsible to establish Islam at home while a man is given responsibilities for the world³ (Hossain 2007: 18).

TJ's ideology of separate social spaces between sexes can be traced back to the colonial gender discourse in Indian society: women's in association with domestic realms and men with the outer world of the society. Researchers explicate that the anti-colonial politics and nationalism in Indian society reinforced the idea of home/world (*ghar/bahir*). This inner/outer distinction (Chatterjee 1989) successfully redefined Muslim women's role as 'mistress of private space' (Robinson 2007) and ensured men's authority over women. However, Robinson (2007) argues that the way in which the Islamic movement invites women to take part in Islamization provides a sense of individual religious responsibility and mastery in religious knowledge, and this leads to the emergence of female religious authorities with their own rights. In recent years, women's increasing participation in Islamic movements, and access to those areas in which men used to play dominant and leading roles, require a closer examination on the reconfiguration of the conventional gender boundary and gender relations in contemporary Islamic movements and religious spheres. The early scholars have indicated that the Islamic movement creates a new source of mobility for women in the religious sphere and provides shared gender roles (Metcalf 1998) that encourage a more egalitarian relationship between men and women. Although Metcalf did not discuss enough on the gendered boundaries as defined by the ideology of TJ and practiced in the movement, her explanation suggests that divisions in boundaries according to the gender line are overlapping. Thereby the idea of separate boundaries in the Islamic movement according to gender and its changing dynamic remain vague and unclear in academic scholarship.

The clear gender-based demarcation lines of boundaries, spaces, and actions in religious practices and movements is increasingly being blurred due to Muslim women's new roles in Islamization projects and other forms of religious movements in many societies. As argued by Huq & Sabina (2012), by arranging female led *tafsir* (Koran interpretation) classes, the female religious activists are moving for their extended roles in Islamization. Such new forms of actions and activities performed by women suggest that women are extending their roles beyond the domestic realms or private space. Shifting gendered boundaries in religion or religious movements is caused, as often argued, by women's ability to involve themselves in those activities, which were historically known as men's work. Frisk (2009) contends that when women take the responsibility of performing collective religious rituals they create some space for them. As I will argue later, the GFC women are leading religious rituals according to their personal understanding of Islam, which is figured as 'women's Islam'⁴ (Ahmed 1999). Through their participation in religious gatherings and in leading religious rituals without men's authorship and leadership, the women are constructing the ideas of faith in ways that sustain and dignify their actions and allow a sense of well being and agency (Torab 1996). All such new forms of women's Islamic activism reshape male-female relations and the boundaries defined for each sex in the Islamic movement.

Changing patterns in the structure of gender is often analysed in relation to human experiences. Gender relations in Islamic movements are overwhelmingly focused on men's experience, while women's experiences remain relatively unexplored. Without exploring in detail about women's experiences in the TJ movement, it is often argued that women's participation in TJ provides an advantage to women, for they use their religious prescription such as clothing to exercise power over men (Feo 2009). Also, TJ offers a new family structure that provides women avenues for exercising agency (Siddiqi 2012). This dynamic delineates a change in the structure of gender by relocating women as active rather than passive recipients of Islamic movements. However, the changing trend and dynamic of gender relations allows us to re-examine the boundaries between the sexes in the TJ movement, and for this we need to focus on women's experiences of doing religious activities that are relatively unexplored in earlier studies.

In this study, I conceptualize the boundaries of home and world in a broader sense as a root dichotomy of inner and outer domains of activities. In the changing socio-cultural context, I argue, despite women's association to the 'inner' domain or spiritualism, they may exercise their powers to perform some forms of creative actions that allow them to engage in the outer world. Religion or spiritualism is always seen as free from material concern; however, it offers a powerful space of resistance to injustice and provides the avenues for critical contestation and political engagement.

(Dei 2001 cf. in Zine 2004). I argue that the GFC follower's religious commitment and devotion to Islam encourages them to resist against women's oppression and injustice in the Islamic movement. The religious women struggle to connect with the wider religious sphere, or the 'outer' domain, and create new meaning of their roles and relations with men's religious worlds. On one hand, GFC women's concern about men-women separation, as represented in veiling practices and men's authority over women, reconfirms their status as bearers of cultural and religious identities and traditions. Concurrently, it is through wearing the veil and by being submissive to men's interpretation that tends to re-emphasize women's home-based seclusion discourse, they are able to organize religious activities outside of the home, and this gives them the opportunity to move from home to world.

GFC'S RESISTANCE AGAINST MEN'S RELIGIOUS WORLD

Like TJ activities for women, GFC also started its journey from the capital city of Dhaka, Bangladesh, and spread across the country through women's networks. The head of the GFC group in Gaibandha is a woman by the name of Ayesa⁵, (a 45-year-old living in Gaibandha who teaches at a college) who started her journey forming a separate Islamic religious group in her hometown in the 1990s.

At the initial stage of fieldwork, I focus on the very essential factual context of organizing a separate group composed of only women while the mainstream TJ also has arrangements to include women. I observed that TJ's ideology itself creates some space for women to organize new groups. According to the Tablighi ideology, as its founder Muhammad Ilyas states, doing tabligh is not only the duty of *ulama* (Islamic scholars) and *Sufis*, rather it is the duty of all Muslims – men as well as women – to engage in Islamic preaching (Sikand 2002). This narrative creates a sense of individual responsibility among the pious women that is observed among the followers of the GFC, who simultaneously express their wish to engage in Tablighi. Merina (a regular member of the GFC and a 45 year-old educated housewife living in Gaibandha) explains her wish to perform Islamic reformism in the following way: 'We, as the followers of last prophet Muhammad, it is our duty to disseminate his messages to all Muslims. Here, he never made any category between men and women. If we refrain from obeying his order, just think, how we will response to Allah hereafter?'

Then, she continues the discussion with respect to her modesty: 'I do not have vast religious knowledge, but what I believe is that I should provide my knowledge to others who have a need for it. Now I feel happy that I reach so many women who are Muslim in name even if they do not know the (faith of Islam) well.'

Finally, she confidently said, 'The structure of TJ allows women's

participation only when their male relatives are with them, thus there is no scope for us because our male relatives still are not ready for the Tablighi works. So should we limit ourselves to the home until our male relatives engage in TJ? Will the men respond to Allah on our behalf?’

The narrative clearly addresses the pious woman’s sense of self-responsibility to attend Islamic preaching and the desire for resisting the core principle of the *mahrem* male in TJ. Therefore, TJ is playing a twofold role for women. It encourages women to join in Tablighi activities like their male counterparts, but they are only allowed to join the mainstream TJ if their unmarriedable male kin or relatives accompany them. In such ideological complexity, the pious women, who have no *mahrem* male relatives to accompany them in the movement, organize in a different way. The GFC’s origin has been understood in this complex context of male dependence of TJ and women’s resistance against it.

Religious women’s resistance against male dependence in Islamic movements and their move for organizing new groups is a recent phenomenon which should be analysed in a broader context of changing dynamics of women’s socio-economic status in Bangladesh. GFC is formed with the educated and semi-educated members, and most of the members are housewives. To these women who spend their time mostly in household activities, until recently there were no religious platforms, organizations or forums under which they could organize themselves. They outlined this difference in terms of gender, i.e., historically religious groups were organized and led by male authorities who had religious knowledge and very few women associating with religious knowledge engaged in Islamic activities under men’s guidance. Thus, mastery in religious knowledge is a vital factor to organize and lead religious groups. The recent development of GFC is interlinked with the growth of women’s education in Bangladesh. GFC has emerged and developed in the last three decades, and during this period Bangladesh has been a great success in providing girls’ education (Asadullah & Chaudhury 2008). According to the census report of 1974, the female literacy rate was 13.7 per cent as compared to male’s 29.9 per cent (Islam 1997). The census report of 2010 shows the current female literacy rate has increased to 52.54 per cent while the male rate reached 57.56 per cent (BBS⁶ report 2010). The higher rate of girls’ education in Bangladesh is an important factor for increasing women’s involvement in contemporary Islamic movements. The women of the new generation understand Islam not by depending on the interpretations of the traditional Islamic scholars but by direct access to the Islamic texts that provide a diversified meaning of Islam. GFC women are seen to justify individual participation in Islamic activities according to Islamic texts rather than following the men’s interpretation. As GFC leader Ayesa states, ‘I have faith on the basic principles of Islam: [as] it is the duty of all Muslims, men and women, to

worship Allah- [this] allow us to organize and lead religious groups. Our intention is to please Allah.'

The narratives indicate that their direct access to Islamic texts legitimize the way the women interpret that they have the right to be involved in religious activities like men.

Not only has women's access to education encouraged GFC women to be involved in the Islamic movement but so has the overall growth of female visibility out of home i.e. beyond the private domain. As one GFC member claims, 'Women are currently going everywhere individually for education, employment, politics, and entertainment and nobody raise questions about these. Only when women go for Islamic activities in the absence of male relatives do they become victims of *ulama's* (Islamic scholars/clerics) criticism.'

Women's visibility out of home has increased several times in the last three decades compared to earlier decades in Bangladesh. In the last three decades women's access to public services, NGOs and in the apparel industry has boomed. Nevertheless, many educated women are still occupied with household activities and are confined to home. The women from the educated and housewife class are seen to take part in female religious groups through which they can engage in wider and outer society, and their intention is to perform social roles by providing religious lessons to other women (Huq & Sabina 2008). GFC's emergence has to be considered in this particular background of women's increasing visibility outside of home.

The socio-economic backgrounds of the members in the GFC group in Gainbandha comprise women from lower- and middle-income groups. The heads of those households (men) are typically engaged in government, non-government service or in small business. Women from the very poor class and from the elite class have a limited engagement in GFC because they do not have leisure time for attending religious activities. GFC followers mostly belong to a middle age group from 25 to 40 and above. Young girls attending school or college are also seen to take part in GFC reading sessions with their female family members. The educational background of GFC followers reveals that most of them have a secondary level (grade 10), while some have primary and few have tertiary. In GFC, very few women have engaged in public service; rather most of them are housewives. Through involvement in religious networks like GFC, the women of this educated housewife-class enter into the outer world beyond their daily activities at home.

What are the financial sources of the women who lead the GFC group? Like TJ, the GFC group is also a volunteer organization that does not collect fees from the followers and does not pay anything to the followers for participating in Islamic preaching. Moreover, the devoted women are seen to donate money to a common fund for GFC. Two of the major

financial sources of the group are religious endowments from the community people and donations from the followers. For the devoted women, donating money for religious purposes is considered sacred, through which they will benefit in the next life. How the poor followers donate money for religious purposes is remarkable and reflects their deep religious motivation for the GFC. This commitment by the poor followers is seen in the case of constructing the *Talim* house in Gaibandha. The original house for the GFC in Gaibandha was a small size house made of wood and tin and later was built into a four-storied building. A devoted woman (Ayesa's mother) donated her land for the construction of the *Talim* house, the construction of which cost a considerable sum of money, collected from the followers. During my fieldwork in Boali, (a village under the Gaibandha district), I observed that the followers, most of whom are very poor, donated their collection of *mustir chal* (handful of rice) for the construction of the *Talim* house. Since the women are mostly housewives, they saved money from their daily livelihood costs or sold rice, donating the money to fund the GFC. The women's religious motivation and responsibility to GFC inspired them to donate money for the purpose of Islamic preaching.

Donating money for religious purposes, of course, carries deep affection within GFC and is a widely practiced religious norm. On the other hand, for the women from rich families in particular, donating money to GFC is also a means of raising their status in the community through the women's group. For example, Gayeda's case (a 60 years old woman from a wealthy family) reveals that she became popular and respected among the community people because of her contribution to make the *Talim* house at Boali. She donated land as well as bore all the costs of constructing a *Talim* house at Boali. Every week she arranges religious lessons at her *Talim* house to make the poor women religiously learned, and after the religious lessons she provides snacks to the participants. Because of her efforts at the *Talim* house, she became respected not only by the women but also by the men in the village. Therefore, the GFC group is managed by women's hard physical and financial efforts.

The above discussion of the GFC formation in Gaibandha clearly shows that the women of the new generation hold an intention to raise questions about the existing male dominated structure of Islamic movements, which they face as a problem. Because of their perceived religious responsibility, they criticize men's interpretation about the limitation of women's roles and involvement in Islamic movements. The social context of the increasing visibility of women in contemporary Bangladeshi society provides the environment to organize religion in different way. As a result, despite the mainstream TJ's arrangement of limiting female access to the movement, the women gather in GFC to create a separate group for and by women. Through their individual and collective performances,

GFC members move to a new space beyond their private space and thereby create a space in the community for themselves.

TALIM HOUSE AS AN EXTENDED BOUNDARY OF WOMEN'S COMMUNITY RELIGIOUS SPACE

From the beginning of GFC, it moved to create a permanent place for women in the community that would give them opportunities to be involved in religious preaching like their male counterparts outside of the home. As the mosque remains the centre of all male-centred Tablighi activities, the home remains as an important place for female Tablighi activities such as gathering, sharing, and teaching Islam to womenfolk. Somewhat close to the idea of the mosque that not only sanctifies the TJ movement but also connects the male Tablighi followers to the wider community, the GFC has established a permanent place, a *Talim* house for preaching and teaching Tablighi lessons. This house, as a symbol of a collective religious space for women, gives the female TJ followers the opportunity to be involved in the movement beyond their domestic boundary. The effort can also be seen as a way to establish women's equal access to all religious rituals like men. On the other hand, building a *Talim* house as a women's space can also be seen as a way to gain acceptance and recognition from the womenfolk of the community. Since the idea of a women's mosque is still unconventional in Bangladesh, the *Talim* house serves as a mosque-like space for women where they do not just involve themselves in Tablighi activities but also offer collective religious observances. The members of the GFC identify the *Talim* house as if it is a female mosque where women can gather for individual and collective praying as well as for attending Tablighi activities. With essential similarities to how the male members of TJ use mosques, the GFC group utilize the *Talim* house for praying, hosting TJ groups coming from the outside and conducting *mashwara*. In such a way the GFC, as an emerging female-led group, introduces the idea of creating a women space through which they can also perform their responsibilities like the Tablighis in the community.

How does the *Talim* house serve as a mosque-like institution to the community if it is not like a real mosque? Its structural shape is not like a mosque; rather, it looks like a single house. There is no call for prayers (*athan*) like mosques and the *Talim* house does not arrange weekly congregational prayers as performed in regular mosques each Friday. However, collective prayers, congregational in nature, are performed on the occasions of several annual religious festivals such as *eid-al-fitr* (the festival that marks the end of Ramadan), *eid-al-adha* (the festival of sacrifice) etc. Usually every regular mosque has an *Imam* (prayer leader), however the *Talim* house has no female *Imam*. Rather, this *Talim* house

can be dubbed as what Jaschok (2012: 44) termed a 'women's mosque just like home', which is used as a sanctified place by the devoted women and is used for doing collective and individual performances inside the room. The concept of a 'women's mosque just like home' might have been developed because of its non-recognition in a wider socio-religious context. The concept of a women's separate mosque is still seen as contesting with the dominant and traditional norm of the male dominated religious world and their mosques. Studies on women's mosques in Middle Eastern countries show that female mosques are, in most cases, part of male mosques (Mahmood 2005; Frisk 2009). Males lead the collective prayers, while females are recommended to attend prayers from behind a curtain or wall. This type of spaces in the mosques for Muslim women is considered as "male's domain" (Lehmann 2012:505). However, this is an urban-based practice and widely unseen in rural areas in Bangladesh. If compared with transnational and national contexts, the GFC's *Talim* house, a home-like space for women, serves as an institution for women's religious practice and involvement in Islamic movements. The opportunity to perform Islamic rituals inside the *Talim* house has given the community women a sense of attachment to a mosque, and they believe that it is a mosque for them. They often rationalize it as a mosque for certain activities performed in the house are similar to that of what a traditional mosque serves in the community. For example, it is very common that mosques provide Koran teaching classes. The *Talim* house is no different from that. It also has a regular Koran teaching class for the female Tablighi members and their children. As I observed during the fieldwork, approximately 25 children and middle-aged women took part in regular Koran lessons every day during the early morning. Three female Tablighi serve as volunteer teachers by turn. Largely, the Islamic learned-men (often referred to as *hujur*, expressing reverence to Islamic scholars) provide the mosque-centred Koran or elementary Islamic teachings. The Koran classes in the *Talim* house provide the women a new role to teach Islam. Moreover, it also provides a space for redefining the tradition of women's religious practices.

One of the important roles of the *Talim* house is arranging collective prayers for community women during the month of Ramadan. The women from the neighbourhood attend the *Terawi* prayer (an additional night prayer offered only in the month of Ramadan) in the *Talim* house. Moreover, collective prayers for celebrating the two annual festivals for Muslims (*Eid-ul-Azha* and *Eid-ul-Fitr*) are also arranged in the *Talim* house. Conventionally, the Muslim women in Bangladeshi society offer prayers at home. The *Talim* house gives them the opportunity to offer prayers with other community women out of their homes. On the occasion of religious festivals, Muslim men usually wear a new dress used to offer prayers in an open space or in the premise of a mosque. This type of collective

gathering for performing certain religious observances is widely practiced among Muslim men and the Muslim women usually have very limited opportunity to offer prayers beyond the boundaries of their homes. The *Talim* house of the GFC allows them to take part in collective religious offerings outside of home. According to a female Tablighi member, more than a hundred women participate in these special prayers during festivals. For the first time, according to her, the GFC introduced the new tradition of a women's collective *eid* prayer in the community. In the beginning years of the GFC, the participants were very few in these collective prayers. Gradually, it has increased, and it indicates that the community people are accepting the new tradition.

Besides collective prayers, women also offer *zikr* (remembering God by chanting his name rhythmically) and *dua* (supplementary prayer for receiving God's favour). They arrange these *dua* for seeking remedy for illness and other material problems in daily life. The collective rituals the women perform in the *Talim* house are important to understand the changing nature of the conventional boundary of religious practices for women. Usually, Muslim men observe and perform such religious practices and observances in a mosque, and in most cases the religious clerics and those who are regular in observing such practices are revered by the community people for their efforts to attain some form of spirituality. By observing and performing similar religious practices, the female Tablighi members of the GFC raise their status in the community, and many others recognize and support their efforts for attaining spirituality. As observed during the fieldwork, a woman from the community donated 10,000 Taka (Bangladesh currency) to the *Talim* house for seeking God's blessing for her deceased father through GFC members' *dua*. Since the GFC members attain some form of spirituality according to the donor's belief, it is possible that God may respond to them if they seek some favour for her deceased father. This is how the GFC members are being recognized by the community for their spiritual practices, and the *Talim* house provides a new space for them to connect with wider community people, though mostly women.

How do the GFC women's activities represent them in outer world while it is completely limited within womenfolk only. By resisting dependence on men, GFC women ensure women's access in all religious rituals like men but by limiting activities to womenfolk they define their space at home again. In this case, spirituality plays an important role to guide the women as their religious motivation and responsibilities encourage them to establish equal access for women in all religious rituals but at the same time they become obedient to the religious tradition. The devoted women intentionally keep their activities limited to womenfolk. They believe that the *Talim* house is their own place, it is the place only for women and men have no access to the women's space. In this space women can criticize

men's views, discuss women's affairs and take decisions according to their own point of view. In this case, redefining the ideology of seclusion and the use of veiling by GFC is a significant example for redefining the concept of seclusion of women.

In mainstream TJ, only male Tablighi followers are allowed to make door-to-door visits in the community to call the menfolk to the path of Islam. Female members are not permitted to do the same due to the restricted gender norms of seclusion. The head of the GFC, Ayesa, criticizes it as in the following: 'The male Tablighi leaders do not allow their wives to visit neighboring places to perform *dawa* (group visits of TJ followers to preach Islam for renewal of faith) among the women for fear of violating seclusion rules; rather, they suggest that neighborhood women come to them (in a house). Do you think the neighborhood women's seclusion is less important than the wives of male Tablighi leaders?'

This narrative clearly addresses Ayesa's resistance to the notion of female Tablighi followers' confinement and the home-based Tablighi activities. The GFC members with Islamic attire (veil) are visiting far off places for *dawa* activities without the companionship of male partners. They often draw examples from early Islam in order to justify their activities. Referring to the prophet's wives, Ayesa explains that the female companions of the Prophet Muhammad followed him in many occasions and they even joined him in the battlefield. Ayesa draws on several prophetic traditions and narratives in order to legitimize her opinion that women can have an equal contribution to religion and society. Ideologically, GFC believes that women's involvement in *dawa* activities outside is better than staying at home for fear of violation of gender norms and seclusion rules. Their *dawa* activities without male companionship are also against the longstanding gender norms of the society. Traditionally, social and cultural norms, in rural areas in particular, do not allow women to go outside or to visit long distant area alone. The GFC members are seen to take part in religious activities by making groups of three or four women, especially in village areas. Women's group tour, according to a GFC member, is a strategy to avoid the rumour and gossips about those women travelling outside the community. In such a way, the GFC encourages women not only religious activities outside but also employment opportunities. Ayesa, as the leader of the group, engages in job in addition to her Tablighi activities, and this encourages many women to follow her – to engage in livelihood works and religious activities, which are not possible if someone would like to follow the home-based gender norms and seclusion rules only. In this sense, they redefine the notion of seclusion or veiling as a bridging strategy to connect their spiritual and material world. Nevertheless, GFC women reinforce the practice of veiling, which is always criticized by the secularist as restoring men and women's difference and separation (Papanek 1971) For the GFC women, veiling

or any form of Islamic attire is an expression of their agency over their own body, and by utilizing it they can pursue their own choices.

Therefore, GFC women's concern and continuous efforts for establishing women's rights in all religious rituals must go beyond the home, although by showing respect to socio-religious traditions or sometimes by redefining the tradition. Moreover, building a *Talim* house in a separate place rather than arranging a *Talim* in Tablighi women's house (the practice of TJ) shows their concern for ensuring that more women participate in religious activities. If the *Talim* house is conducted in one's house then some woman may not attend religious performances frequently because of the male member's presence in that house. So for building a *Talim* house a separate place is chosen so that woman can visit the place any time without any hesitation. This ideology connects GFC women to a wider world with a broader agenda of making more and more women religious in the community. In such a way GFC women are extending their boundary of religious practice out of the home and in order to do so how they negotiate with socio-religious traditions will be discussed in following sections.

GFC WOMEN'S NEGOTIATION FOR CHANGING GENDER ROLES

As discussed earlier, GFC's emergence was the outcome of women's resistance against restrictive gender norms in TJ that opened the possibility for them to take leadership roles. Do the new roles bring women the same status as their men counterparts? Conventionally the term 'religious leadership' is interlinked with religious authority and often seen in relation to scholarly abilities to perform certain religious activities such as preaching, teaching, interpreting religious texts, leading worship, and providing guidance on religious matters (Kalmbach 2012). As seen in Ayesa's case in GFC, as a woman, she represents the leader and organizer of the group. GFC's religious activities clearly adduce how the women can organize their own religious space without male guardianship and leadership. The *Talim* house and its activities has gradually been recognized by the community, as we have discussed earlier, which helps Ayesa to attain a social and religious status among the womenfolk in the community. The members or followers of the GFC recognize her as 'mother of the group'. The GFC leaders are not only recognized and respected among the womenfolk but also with the men's networks in the local community. As observed during the field visit, a local elite man, also a follower of TJ invited the GFC members to deliver a religious speech to the women of his community. The man arranged a place at his house where women from the neighbourhood areas could gather and attend the speech given by GFC preachers. According to the man, 'The women of GFC are working for making the community women more pious. They are

guiding women according to Islam, so why should men prevent them from doing such good actions.⁷

This suggests men's changing attitudes towards women's contribution to Islamization. Despite Ayesa's popularity and leadership roles in the GFC, she never claims to be a female religious leader like her male counterpart. She strongly believes that women cannot be *imam* (prayer leader of a mosque) or *amir* (leader) like men. According to her, the role of *imam* is particularly assigned to men; thus, women should not struggle to obtain the status. Despite leading the collective prayers of *eid* festival, she refrains from performing as a regular *imam*, and this clearly suggests her obedience and loyalty to the Islamic doctrine of religious authority and to the tradition and culture of local society. She has to meet the challenge from male leaders in the community. Since the activities of GFC are not recognized by the mainstream TJ, Ayesa faces a continuous threat from the local leaders of mainstream TJ in Gaibandha. In the beginning of the GFC, according to her, the male Islamic clerics of the local community pressured her to stop the group's activities. Also, other community members criticize her activities in the community. Some well-educated women in the local community, who have no affiliation with TJ, criticized the GFC activities as a violation of Islamic rule, especially the performance of religious rituals such as praying, *zikr*, and *dua* (supplication) at the *Talim* house.

Moreover, in the patriarchic local religious context of Bangladesh, GFC activities led by women are not only seen as a violation of Islamic gender norms but also as resistance to the long standing tradition and cultural practices of gender. In the context of an unequal social context, the authority of female religious leaders is seen in relation to women's subordination to and dependence on male authority (Jeffery, et. al. 2012). In the case of Ayesa, her group is working independently without dependence on men and nevertheless she cannot ignore the social and religious norms of men's authority over women. So they negotiate with the tradition. In this negotiation process, GFC leaders do not challenge the male authority but rationalize that women should have the rights to play equal roles in religion, like those they are practicing. It might be seen as a way to gain acceptance and recognition for their roles in the community. In such a way, through the process of negotiation and resistance they exercise their power to establish equal roles in religion.

Therefore, the nineteenth and twentieth century's Islamic reformist discourse emphasized women's role in the Islamization project in relation to their domestic realm in which they would be guardians of morality. But now the GFC women's roles reveal that they are not limited to home, the female leaders are being invited to preach and teach Islam outside of their homes. Such widened activities for religion do not only increase women's status among the womenfolk but also among menfolk inside and outside of their communities.

RECONFIGURING GENDER RELATIONS

Women's access to the public arena of the religious sphere has affected male-female relations in society. Family as the smallest unit of society holds the evidence of change in the male-female relationship. Here I will discuss one case of a GFC follower, Masuda, a 45-year-old housewife who lives in Gaibandha and joined GFC after bitter experiences in her family life. She states, 'My husband used to beat me regularly. Once I decided to commit suicide, but fortunately I met Ayesa at that time. She suggested that I keep patience, as Islam also prescribes so. Following her suggestion, I joined the GFC and found peace in my life. Now I am very busy in GFC.'

During religious gatherings, the women discuss and share their daily life experiences with other members. Through this social interaction, they learn to adapt to different strategies in their family lives. Masuda found that the Tablighi activities, religious gatherings, meetings, and social interactions with other members gave her some sort of socio-psychological support from her monotonous family life in which she had to face domestic violence. In the beginning of her Tablighi involvement, family members did not accept her physical mobility outside the home nor her involvement in the GFC activities, and she needed to spend time for such activities often by reducing her domestic work. If some problem arose, she had to face physical torture by her husband. However, her devotion to religion encouraged her to continue despite the problems she faced in her family. Gradually, she became familiar to the women's circle and her skill in providing *dawa* increased her status among the members. When Masuda's husband lost his job, she discussed it with other members of the group. One day she requested Asma, a GFC member whose husband is the owner of an apparel factory in Gaibandha to find a job for her husband. Because of Asma's favour, Masuda was able to manage a job for her husband. This event increased Masuda's status to her husband who realized the benefit of his wife's network outside the home. Moreover, he began to believe that losing his job was a punishment from God because he did not let his wife attend GFC activities. Finally, he also changed and became a pious Muslim. Masuda states that now her husband regularly attends prayer and does not forbid her to attend religious activities. Masuda's status in the family and the relationship with her husband, in particular, has been changed due to her devotion to GFC's activities and the social network and capital she could utilize centring on these activities.

Masuda's case reveals that the GFC's Tablighi mission, to some extent, breaks the social taboo on talking about domestic violence. Domestic violence is not an uncommon phenomenon for many women who live in a patriarchal society in which men enjoy higher social status and prestige than women. In addition to Islamic activism, the social relationships and interactions among the GFC members make women more conscious about their life experiences such as violence and other forms of oppressive

behaviour towards them. While remembering her past family life, Masuda realized that if she were clever, like what she is now, she would not have had to face domestic violence in her family life. She felt that now she is smarter than before because of her association with GFC, social relationships, and networks with the other women. Although discussion of domestic violence in *Talim* house has very little impact on reducing the trend of violence against women, it raises the consciousness about various aspects of oppressive behaviour against women in their families and often equips them with certain strategies to face the difficulty in their own life context. Most of the GFC women mention that their husbands did not welcome their involvement in religious activities out of home. However, they could defend and resist their husbands' opposition by rationalizing that they are in the path of spirituality. They try to manage their household activities with more sincerity and punctuality in order to avoid any clash between the work in the family and in the Tablighi activities.

Moreover, women's involvement out of kin networks in the community has increased their status, which in turn affects their positions in their families. Since they are often invited to other religious ceremonies and Tablighi programmes, they gradually get recognition on their mastery in religious knowledge from their family members. This helps them reshape their relationships with their male partners, and they find that they are making process to have their voices heard in family decisions. For instance, Masuda reports that her husband does not want to continue her daughter's education anymore. But she believes girls need proper and higher education. Masuda resists her husband's view and allows her daughter to continue her study. Her husband does not bear the cost of education for his daughter. Masuda arranges a part-time job for her daughter by which she manages to continue her study. Education may reduce the sufferings of women both in the family and in the outside world, according to Masuda. Masuda's resistance against her husband does not mean that she ignores men's authority at home. In most cases, the religious devoted woman like Masuda believes that a man is the authority at home. However, their resistance and power of exercising their decision, in some cases, reveal that they are not always oppressed and victim at home. By using women's social network they are extending their access out of home. On the other hand, their involvement in women's group helps them to exercising agency to raise their voice at home. Therefore, it can fairly be said that religious activities of the GFC does not just affect the boundary of religious practices for women but also to the gender relationship of the women in their families.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have tried to locate the way in which GFC emerges as an alternative TJ movement from the mainstream form of TJ. The case

exemplifies that the female Tablighi followers are in the process of transforming their defined boundary of religious practices and in the Islamization project. Although the GFC movement is limited to womenfolk, it affects to the reconfiguration of boundary of male and female in the Islamic movement. It provides space for women to teach and preach Islam and discuss their own life experience. The for-women-and-by-women environment in the *Talim* house allows the members of GFC to perform and observe certain religious practices and observances collectively, which they used to offer individually at their homes. Through a *Talim* house, the women construct a religious space beyond the boundary of their homes. Although a *Talim* house also represents a home-like environment for women, it is a place where they can connect themselves with a wider community of people, can have social interactions, and build new social relationships. GFC's broader agenda for community reform represents their presence in the wider world beyond their limited roles at home. At the same time they believe that if the women become perfect in religious knowledge, they will guide other family members. Thus, GFC also reinforces women's greater roles in domestic realms. In this sense, GFC women have bridging roles in the Islamization project that connect them in the home and in the outer world.

However, it is difficult to say that GFC members are deliberately challenging the traditional gender norms and practices in the religious sphere in Bangladeshi society. Instead, without challenging the core gender norms of men's authority over women, the female religious activists exercise their agency to enhance and redefine gender roles and rights to religion and in the Islamic movement, and this may lead to refashioning the conventional gendered boundary for women's religious practices. In this sense, the Muslim women in the Islamic movement are not only the passive bearers of religious tradition. GFC has redefined the tradition such as veiling and seclusion, which confine women at home for fear of violating the rule of male-female separation, to enhance the gender roles in community. Veiled women's presence out of the home represents their Muslim identity as well as shows them as active agents in their rights. Through everyday activities, GFC has established women's right to attend religious activities independently in absence of men and to lead religious activities without men's guidance. Their status at home and in the community has improved though men's dominance in the social and religious hierarchy, in general, continues to persist. Despite being in a subordinated religious and cultural condition, women's agency may contribute to reconfigure and reshape the gendered boundary and relations of religious practices and movements.

The case of GFC is the example of women's mobilization in the name of religion at the grassroots level. This is not a discrete case, for such activities are organized in many parts of the country, as informed by several interviewees. Due to its informal and often less-organized nature,

GFC remains relatively unnoticed unlike the mainstream female TJ. Increasing the involvement and operation of GFC activities is closely interlinked to the social dynamics and changes to the persistent patriarchic norms and ideology in Bangladeshi society. The increased visibility of women in wider society inadvertently affects the overall Islamization process in Bangladesh. More and more women are invited to adopt the Islamic way of living in response to the social changes, and in this process TJ plays a vital role. In response to the restricted gender norms and structure in the mainstream TJ activities, GFC provides a more flexible opportunity for those women who had hitherto been less active role in Islamization process. Despite GFC's questionable legitimacy as a representative wing of the mainstream female TJ, it could gain some forms of recognition, for the group did not deliberately challenge the superior role of male authorship and guardianship in religious sphere. In this sense, the process of negotiation is not deliberate for extended gender roles in Islam; rather, it is the product of the activities operated and maintained by the member of GFC. In the one hand, Islamizing women's self and body through GFC activities indeed fits to the patriarchic norms in Bangladeshi society and on the other hand, it inadvertently provides the opportunity to Muslim women to extend their roles in religious sphere. Through these extended roles, they reconfigure their traditionally defined boundary for performing religious activities and for taking roles in religious sphere. In this sense, the uniqueness of their agency is generated by their activities, despite their unwillingness to resist the core gender division and ideology in religion.

NOTES

1. *Masturat* is a composite of two separate words: *mastura* and *aurat*. In Urdu, *mastura* (with its origin from Arabic) means hidden/unrevealed or chaste, and *aurat* generally refers to women. Thus, *masturat* refers to women with the connotative meaning that they should not be exposed or revealed to men as prescribed in Islam. *Masturat Jamaat* is the naming of Female Tablighi Jamaat (FTJ) that upholds the notion of seclusion for Muslim women in the Tablighi movement. Throughout the study, I use FTJ, which means *Masturat Jamaat*. Although men also participate in this *Jamaat* (group of people), it is primarily for facilitating women's activities in the movement under veiling and seclusion doctrine for women in Islam.
2. The dichotomy of outer and inner world was helpful to understand the nationalist ideology and struggle against the colonial power in Indian subcontinent, as argued by Chatterjee (1989). According to the nationalist discourse, the 'inner', spiritual domain was the core of Indian cultural identity in contrast the West was considered as the superior in 'outer' material domain of economy, statecraft, etc. The distinction between inner and outer world can be understood in relation to the distinction of separate space between home (*ghar*) and *bahir* (world); women represent home, the spiritual domain and men represent the world, the material domain (Chatterjee 1989: 624).

3. Mawlana Saad, a *Sura* (governing body of TJ) member of the world Headquarter of TJ, New Delhi, for details of his speech see Hossain, 2007: 19.
4. Ahmed (1999) argued that when the women figured out religious issues, they would raise questions, and this has resulted in a type of Islam that is essentially women's Islam (as opposed to an official, textual Islam or men's Islam).
5. The names used in this paper are pseudonyms.
6. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, report, 2010.
7. Interview with a male Tablighi follower, Gaibandha.

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