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Loss, Gain, Survival: Women in Bangladesh

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Loss, gain, survival: Women in Bangladesh

Honours of Creative Industries Dissertation

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13.11.2009

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
Abstract
This dissertation explores the changing public and private paradigms of Bangladeshi women in a modernising society, and investigates the aspects of modernisation that are driving such change. It argues that there is a rising level of violence against women, as traditional patriarchal paradigms meet modernisation and the Western hegemony. While modernisation has been instrumental in encouraging the integration of women into the public sphere, the Western assumption that modernisation will increase women’s empowerment in an incremental manner ignores the new issues and tensions that modernisation creates. In both the public and private spheres, women’s empowerment in Bangladesh is a constant struggle of losing and gaining, and at times of sheer survival.

The research employed both traditional and contemporary ethnographic methods. Traditional methods included participant observation and interviews. I conducted 142 interviews with Bangladeshi women; 15 with commentators and 127 with women of lower socio-economic status. To address the problem of Orientalism, the research employed contemporary ethnographic methods combining a phenomenological, constructivist and collaborative approach to create a case study on the representation of an acid attack survivor. The survivor was invited to be an active participant in her representation process. The research includes a photographic book that explores the complimentary and at times contradictory relationship between voices of Bangladeshi women and images by placing them side-by-side. It is acknowledged that both the written and photographic representations are influenced by subjective factors, such as gender, ethnicity and class. However, this is mediated to some degree through the numerous and diverse narratives featured throughout both the written and photographic components, and by recognising the Western filter brought to the research.

The study found that several aspects of modernisation, including government initiatives to modernise social and economic conditions, government literacy campaigns, the garment industry and micro-finance are significantly affecting women’s lives. However, the effects are both empowering and endangering. Whilst modernisation may bring women out into the public sphere and offer education and employment opportunities, it
also opens a window for further discrimination and violence against women in both the public and the private sphere.

This dissertation questions the ideology that modernisation will automatically increase Eastern women’s empowerment at an incremental level, and investigates the new tensions wrought on Bangladeshi women through modernisation. Acid attack, a modern crime unknown in Bangladesh before the 1980s, is an excellent example of the tensions and resulting high level of violence to women in a society negotiating rapid modernisation. The collaborative representation case study along with the photographic book offer a unique insight into the shared representation of Bangladeshi women and a hybrid context in which the images are read. I argue that the West needs to understand that not all discrimination and violence against women is a result of a ‘backward’ culture. Rather, sometimes it is a result of rapid change and cultural resistance.
I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief: (i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or (iii) contain any defamatory material. I also grant permission for the Library at Edith Cowan University to make duplicate copies of my thesis as required.
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Introduction

In 2008 for one month and again in 2008/2009 for five months, I was given the opportunity to explore the lives of working class women in Bangladesh through the medium of photography. Overwhelmingly three issues arose with all those I spoke to, interviewed and photographed: the traditional place of women in the patriarchy of Bangladeshi society; the changing paradigms of women’s place in a modernising world; and the rising level of violence against women as patriarchy meets modernisation and Western hegemony. These issues are, in some degree, reflected in the photographic component. Even the opportunity to photograph women in public is a testament to the changes wrought on Bangladeshi society in recent years. The photographs, as an artistic body of work, conjure with the old patterns and emerging ideas of womanhood in Bangladesh in both the public and private sphere. Sometimes the photographs explore the traditional paradigms; sometimes they blatantly address the point at which the patriarch confronts both women and Western ideology. The undercurrent of contradiction and tension is expolined with voices of Bangladeshi women forming an insightful and emotive narrative juxtaposed against the photographs.

While the photography explores the inherent contradictions the issues raise, using a hybrid, phenomenological and collaborative approach, the accompanying dissertation explores the issues identified systematically. I argue that while modernisation has been instrumental in encouraging the integration of women into the public sphere, the Western assumption that modernisation will increase women’s empowerment in an incremental manner blatantly ignores the new issues and tensions that modernisation creates. Such an assumption is naïve; women’s empowerment in Bangladesh is a constant struggle of losing and gaining and at times of sheer survival.

Bangladeshi society is dominated by a patriarchal system that controls and subordinates women through social norms and practices that define their social standing and conduct. Women are isolated within the family system and men traditionally maintain control over income, assets and most decision making (Schiler, Hashemi & Badal 1998). Islam and Sultana state, “gender-gaps still exist in every sphere of women’s lives and women are deprived of their fundamental rights” (2006, p. 56). From birth women are treated as the least valuable member of the family. They have far less access to education, property rights, nutrition, health and mobility in the public sphere. The widespread
practice of dowry encourages the notion that daughters are ultimately an economic drain on the family.

This thesis discusses the many issues and constraints lower socio-economic class women face. It considers what aspects of modernisation are leading to changing paradigms in Bangladesh, as the social norms shift and women increasingly integrate into the public sphere. It examines what happens when new paradigms contradict and conflict with tradition resulting in increased resistance to change. Before closely analysing these factors, the paper must examine the contested area of representation and research in a cross-cultural context. To establish a framework around the question of the legitimacy of a Western researcher representing Eastern women, the concepts of Orientalism and Occidentalism are discussed in relation to the control of women in both the East and the West. It is imperative to address the lens through which I, as a Western photographer and researcher, analyse and represent the situation and circumstances of women in Bangladesh.

The analysis of change in women's circumstance shows the most prominent influences on the increase in participation of lower socio-economic class women in the public sphere are the garment industry, micro-finance and education. These influences and their positive and negative consequences are considered. While Western ideology suggests modernisation leads smoothly to an increase in human rights, this assumption is often challenged (Nader, 1989). Women in Bangladesh face many forms of discrimination and violence. These forms of discrimination and violence are investigated, along with factors and trends of such violence. I return to issues of representation with a collaborative edit of photographs of an acid attack survivor. In this section the woman chose the images she wished to use to represent her circumstance in an international and public media arena.

Chapter one discusses the methodology adopted to conduct my field research. My research combines traditional and contemporary methods of ethnographic research. The majority of the study is interpretative and qualitative with information gathered through participant observation and supporting interviews. These methods also formed the basis for the photographic component. These techniques were also combined with a contemporary phenomenological, constructivist and collaborative approach to create a
case study on the representation of an acid attack survivor. Farida, an acid attack survivor, was invited to be an active participant in her representation process. This case study is analysed in chapter eight. Both the written and photographic representations are influenced by subjective factors, such as gender, ethnicity and class. However, this is mediated to some degree through the large quantity of varying narratives that are consistent throughout both the written and photographic components, and by recognising the Western filter I bring to the photographs.

As I am a Western researcher representing Eastern women, it is necessary to investigate the vexed issue of the legitimacy of representing the ‘Other’. The second chapter necessarily deals with the discourse of Orientalism, addressing Said’s (1978) theory and the issues surrounding it. Nader¹ (1989) has critiqued and expanded on Said’s theory of Orientalism, to include the East’s representation of the West,” which she terms Occidentalism. She argues that the dialectic between the East and the West, and the constant comparison with the ‘Other’, works as a form of control of women in both the East and the West. She also believes that the East/West dialectic diverts attention from the male/female dialectic, and that it fails to acknowledge that empowerment of women is a process of losing and gaining ground rather than a positive incremental increase.

Chapter three provides an overview of the social status of women in Bangladesh and their position and participation in the public and private spheres. Participation by Bangladeshi women in these spheres is constrained by social and cultural determinants: Religion, family structure, history, economics, patriarchy, government policies, increasing modernisation and the changing aspirations women derive from increased education (Gayen, 2009; Islam, 2008; Mahtab, 2007; Nader, 1989 & Kabeer, 1991 & 2001). Increased participation in the public sphere and the resulting change has brought both positive and negative change to women’s lives.

Lack of literacy is an important factor restricting the development of women in Bangladesh. Females have previously had a far lower literacy level than that of their male counterparts. This is due to the social attitude that education for women is far less

¹ Laura Nader is an American anthropologist. She has been a Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley since 1960 and was the first woman to receive a tenure-track position in the department.
valuable than education for males. Education of women traditionally centred on domestic duties. Chapter four presents the new trends in literacy levels based on the 2008 Bangladesh Literacy Assessment Survey, recently released by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. Due to a number of government and non-government organisations (NGO) policies and procedures, the participation of women in education has begun to change. This change is reflected in my interviews with women who were not educated themselves but wish for their children to be; a school teacher discussing the general change in attitude amongst parents in a nearby slum; and the statistics, which depict an increase in female literacy levels.

Chapter five considers the role of the garment industry, an expanding and lucrative industry, and how it has affected the lives of millions of Bangladeshi women. Through my fieldwork, I found that the garment industry had influenced most of the women I interviewed in both positive and negative ways. The garment industry is responsible for the employment of millions of women from lower socio-economic classes (Balk, 1997; Mahtab, 2007; Nader, 1989; Sachs, 2005 & Wright, 2000). It has had an influence on family relationships, women’s entry into the labour market, financial and domestic decision-making and is linked to a reduction in birth rates. However, the garment industry is also creating a great deal of tension, due to its effect on changing social norms. I illustrate the problems that this increasing change is creating and the resistance to such change.

Micro-finance is another key industry that is compelling modernisation and industrialisation. Therefore, it also is met with counter attacks and resistance against the consequent change in social norms. I discuss micro-finance in relation to the empowerment of lower socio-economic class Bangladeshi women. Micro-finance has been widely described as one of the key influences on the empowerment of women. However, studies suggest that it has not increased women’s involvement in economic decision-making or their presence in the labour force. Rather, women have often become a medium for the financial benefit of men (Kabeer, 2001; Goetz & Gupta, 1996; Mahtab, 2007 & Naz, 2006). They are given all the responsibility of the loan, without any power over how or where the loan is spent. Studies also suggest that micro-finance, although successful in alleviating poverty, has aggravated other issues Bangladeshi women face, such as domestic violence. Chapter six examines both sides
of the argument and evaluates how successful micro-finance has been in empowering the women of Bangladesh.

Whist these factors are the forces driving social change in Bangladesh, the strong patriarchal value system counteracts and slows such change. Studies suggest that patriarchal values create resistance to modernisation and encroaching Western influences (see Nader, 1989 and Schiler, Hashemi & Badal, 1998). Chapter seven presents the injustices predominately lower socio-economic class women face due to their inferior position in the public and private spheres. Bangladeshi women often become victims of violent crimes due to a number of factors such as their inferior social status and the lack of implementation of law enforcement. The most commonly reported crimes include domestic violence, rape, dowry related torture and, perhaps the most heinous of all, acid attacks. Acid attack is a modern crime that occurs in both public and private spheres. However, acid attacks ultimately result in forcing survivors back into the private sphere through social isolation. Acid attack is a confronting example of the damaging side of modernisation and the effects of patriarchal resistance. This chapter offers statistics and reasons why these crimes take place, and also conveys personal accounts from victims of such crimes.

The topic of representation is revisited in chapter eight with a case study of the collaborative representation of Farida, an acid attack survivor. I used a collaborative process, where the acid attack survivor chose the images I took of her (Pink, 2007). She was asked to choose the images that she felt best represented her situation. The images were selected with the expectation that they would be published in an international and public arena. This chapter discusses her image selection and her reasons for choosing each image. It is an interesting insight into representation and the issues of Orientalism, and the positioning of Eastern women as victims.
Chapter one: Loss, gain and survival in the field - Methodology

The methodology for my research is diverse and has been modified over the course of the fieldwork. Originally, my methodology proposed a phenomenological, constructivist and collaborative approach, encouraging women to use images as a tool to construct a narrative of their lives. While extended use of this approach proved impractical, the approach was used for one case study on the representation of the ‘Other’ in chapter eight. The majority of my research is based on a more traditional approach to ethnographic research such as participant observation. However, this is also combined with other contemporary methods such as the hybridity of translating words into pictures and pictures into words (Leavy & Pink, 2009, 2007).

The ethnographic research, underpinning much of the study, is interpretive and qualitative with information gathered through participant observation and a series of photographic representations, concerned and informed by stories gathered from Bangladeshi women through interviews. The photographs are influenced by subjective factors, such as gender, ethnicity and class. However, this is mediated to some degree by the number and diversity of narratives from different women, and by recognising and analysing the western filter I bring to the research. The theoretical framework is explored through a textual analysis of Orientalism, Occidentalism and the representation of the ‘Other’. This establishes the legitimacy of a Western researcher representing Eastern women. My original research questions were:

1. What issues are identified by feminist writers and activists as priorities in the social advancement/improvement of lower socio-economic class women’s lives in Bangladesh?

2. Using a distinct group of women in Bangladesh, lower socio-economic class, as a case study, what discourses and photographic practices can be evoked and employed to represent Bangladeshi women’s lives?

3. How can the perspectives of Bangladeshi women be included in photographs taken by a ‘Western’ photographer?
As mentioned previously, two persisting issues arose from the interviews: the traditional place of women in the patriarchy of Bangladeshi society and its changing paradigms in a modernising world; and the rising level of violence against women as the patriarchy meets modernisation and western hegemony. While my original research questions are still explored, the structure of my research changed somewhat to include research into the garment industry, micro finance and education along with violence against women.

The thread that ties the research together, modernisation and its effect on women, became evident through the interview process and therefore the research area was expanded. The original research questions are explored with the objective to recognise, and therefore attempt to avoid, the western ideological filter I bring to the research, and to represent lower socio-economic class women based on issues informed by them.

1.1. Ethnographic fieldwork

My fieldwork began with participant observation. This involved a three-step process. Firstly, I conducted several meetings with staff members of Nari Phoko, the leading Bangladeshi women’s rights organisation. They initially identified the issues that most affect Bangladeshi lower socio-economic class women. They listed dowry, domestic violence, acid attacks and rape. I chose to interview activists prior to academics as activists are on the frontline of activism, research and aid for Bangladeshi women. I found that some academics had not spent time in the slums or with the women facing the issues that the academics write and theorize about. Therefore I found it imperative to go straight to the major organisation that deals directly with the issues.

Secondly, I conducted interviews with staff from grass root level non-government organisations (NGOs) that were constantly working in the field. I went to three grass-root NGOs to investigate the previously mentioned issues. To speak with women who had become victims of domestic violence (I later found this was the case with almost every slum dweller I interviewed). I worked with staff members from Dustho Mohila Sheba Shongstha who work with women who have suffered from rape, domestic violence and dowry related violence and torture in the Mirpur Slums in Dhaka. For information and access to acid attack survivors. I went to the Acid Attack Foundation, a Bangladeshi foundation with international funding and international visiting volunteer doctors and surgeons. I was also informed that sex workers are one of the most marginalised and discriminated groups of women in Bangladesh and also the most
common victims of rape. To contact these women I went through Protirodh Durjoy Nari Shongho, an NGO dedicated to helping street based sex workers. They have a large number of field workers, all ex-sex workers, who travel to the common street sex worker locations and offer assistance, guidance and general emotional support.

Thirdly, I interviewed the women who were personally suffering from these issues. I first went to the Mirpur slums and interviewed a number of women, some of whom the organisation had suggested, but most at random. A few issues arose from these interviews: the extreme amount of pain and suffering as a result of the dowry system (discussed in chapter seven); the wide spread occurrence of domestic abuse; the increasing influence of the garment industry (discussed in chapter five); and a change of attitude towards education for women (chapter four). As the garment industry was a new area raised by the women during interviews, and obviously a significant one, I began to conduct research into the garment industry and was able to gain access to a local garments factory to interview women. These interviews revealed changes in economic freedom, birth rates, discrimination and increased exposure to violence. I spent a two week condensed period interviewing in the slums; however this was interrupted due to the upcoming elections as the NGO staff were concerned for my safety around that time and were hesitant to allow me to interview in those areas for a few days due to fear of political unrest.

I then commenced my research into the sex industry. I first made contact with Protirodh Durjoy Nari Shongho and interviewed a number of former sex workers. During these interviews I simply asked for their story. I was extremely surprised at the openness and strength they showed when recounting their horrific stories of how they had become sex workers, as one woman shows when stating, “I am not afraid, I have nothing to hide. I will tell you everything” (Sex Worker, personal communication, January 19, 2009). As these women are now fieldworkers who patrol the streets at night, I went out with them on their fieldwork to interview the women who were still working in the field.

I then began my research into acid attack survivors. I met with the director of the Acid Survivor Foundation (ASF) to discuss my project and the intention of conducting a collaborative photographic narrative. I interviewed several acid attack survivors at the foundation, along with lawyers, caseworkers and psychologists to get a greater
understanding of acid attacks. The director required both a verbal and written account of my research and methodology and spoke with both my translator and I to make sure that the research would not cause any further harm to the acid attack survivors. This research has formed part of both chapter seven and eight. I will discuss the collaborative approach further in this chapter.

1.2. Interviews
I conducted a total of 142 interviews in Bangladesh and a survey involving 100 garment workers. I interviewed fifty-three women in slum areas, mainly in the Mirpur district as this is where Dustho Mohila Sheba Shongstha operates. These interviews were informal and began with the women telling their story, which was proceeded by follow up questions. I wanted the women to tell their story to establish what was important to them and also to give them more control over the interview process. Some of the women were suggested by the NGO staff, others I approached at random and some approached me. All interviews (apart from the Nari Pokho activists and the academics) were conducted with a translator, which I will discuss later. The interviews were digitally recorded and were later transcribed by my translator or myself if they were in English. The date, location, name and age of the interviewee were all recorded. However, the names of the lower socio-economic class women have been omitted for ethical reasons. This has one exception, Farida, the acid attack survivor. Through the collaborative process Farida gave permission for her identity to be revealed, in fact she insisted on it.

I interviewed seven garment workers when I became informed about the garment industry’s influence on lower socio-economic class women. I was only able to conduct seven interviews before I was asked to leave the factory. It is extremely hard to gain access to garment factories. I was lucky enough to gain access, but I was only given a short period of time. During this time I also conducted a survey of one hundred female workers. I asked four questions; What is your age? Are you married? Do you have any children and if so how many? Where are you from (rural/slum area/urban)? From these questions I was able to assess the average age (and if they were married later), birth rate and the common area women were from.
I interviewed seventeen people in relation to acid attacks including survivors, family members, the director of ASF, psychologists, caseworkers and lawyers. I interviewed four ex-sex workers and twenty-two street based sex workers. To get the perspective of the women who are working to strengthen women’s rights in Bangladesh, I conducted interviews with four academics and seven activists. To conduct further research in the change of attitude towards women in education I visited a BRAC school and interviewed the female teacher and all of the children. I also attended and digitally recorded a three-day women’s conference in Dhaka to gain further knowledge into the women’s movement in Bangladesh.

1.3. Translation issues
As mentioned earlier, I used translators to conduct the interviews. Working through a translator was a constant struggle. I originally wanted a female translator. I thought it was necessary to use a female translator whilst conducting research into women’s rights. However, this proved problematic. The first translator recommended to me had a degree in social science and had written a paper on acid attack survivors. I thought it would be extremely beneficial to use her as my translator. Unfortunately, when she found out that we would be meeting with acid attack survivors and also interviewing slum women she was no longer interested in the position. Although she had a degree in social science and had written a paper on acid attacks she had never met an acid attack survivor and had no interest in doing so. This came as a great surprise to me. That was until I met my next translator. She was a little more flexible and agreed to come to the slums but would not go before 10am and she had to be home by 5pm, as she did not think it was safe or appropriate for two women, unaccompanied by a male, to still be out. She translated for me during the two weeks I was interviewing in the slums. She was constantly late by at least an hour every day and she seemed overtly aware of the class difference between herself and the women in the slums. Unfortunately, her lack of respect transcended the language barrier.

When the interviews in the slums were complete, I spoke with Nari Pokho who suggested I use a male translator. I used the male translator for the interviews with the sex workers and acid attack survivors. The male translator was able to be out after dark, which was essential for interviewing street based sex workers. However, the male translator had major issues following my instruction and was continually trying to take
control and restructure my research plan. He would arrive over an hour late and would answer his phone constantly during interviews. This destroyed a number of interviews with the street based sex workers who were hesitant to talk in the first place. Both translators also tried to position and tell participants how to pose for photographs, completely changing the situation of the photograph. Therefore I almost always photographed alone. The three-day women’s conference I sat through was completely in Bangladeshi and held shortly before I went home. I had to pay the translator in advance and was to receive the transcripts within a month. After months of emailing her I received half of the first day’s recordings. She has since ignored all correspondence and I have not received the rest of the conference. Therefore, I would say that the biggest research obstacle was working through translators.

1.4. Participant observation
The consistent method throughout both my written and photographic ethnographic research was participant observation. I spent a great deal of time interviewing, observing and photographing women. To get a closer sense of their lives I slept at the places I was researching and photographing. This saw me sleeping in the slums, in a cyclone shelter with NGO workers, in a refugee camp, and in the homes of rural women. This also meant sharing a bed with them too as it is rare that they will have more than one bed. For part of the photographic component I spent two blocks of two weeks on an island in the Bay of Bengal. I had no translator, there was no one that spoke English on the island, no police, no clean drinking water, and no electricity. I spent the majority of my time in a refugee camp photographing the women’s daily lives. The main areas I conducted participant observation were the Bay of Bengal, Dhaka, Bhola, Chittagong and Manikganj. The photography was always influenced by what I had learned through my interviews.

1.5. Multiple voices
Whilst conducting the research, multiple voices came into play. I had my western perspective that I tried to mediate and subdue but could never completely leave behind. I also had the critique of Orientalism that was constantly in the back of my mind when photographing. The research was primarily driven and concerned by voices of the middle class academics and activists, and most importantly the lower socio-economic
class activists and women. Both my voice and the voice of the women were mediated again by the voice of the translators, who ultimately spoke for both the women and me.

1.6. Collaborative photography
I adopted the technique of collaborative photography along with a form of phenomenology to explore issues surrounding the representation of the 'Other'. My adaptation involved photographing a participant’s daily life for one week and compiling the photographs for the participant to construct a photographic narrative that she felt best represented her life. The order in which she chose the images along with her unedited explanation was documented to construct the narrative. The process is discussed in detail in chapter eight. For this case study, I chose to use an acid attack survivor. There are three reasons behind this choice. Firstly, acid attack directly affects the survivor’s appearance, making visual representation all the more significant. Secondly, the interviewed NGO directors and academics listed acid attack as the most heinous crime in Bangladesh, and thirdly, because acid attack directly relates to modernisation and is on the rise; Bangladesh now has the highest rate of acid attacks in the world.

The case study involved participant observation, which began with an extensive interview about the attack and her life since, along with a week of photographic documentation. For this documentation, we spent the entire week together. I also used the method of visual phenomenology, “a perspective that places experience at the centre of knowledge-building” (Leavy, 2009, p. 226). This emerging technique generally centres on the researcher’s experience reflected in their visual art. However, when combined with collaborative photography, it focuses largely on the participant’s emotions and subjective experience through a photographic narrative. I adopted these methods as I felt the traditional method of participation observation was not sufficient. By opening up a dialogue about the images, I not only gained a deeper understanding of the woman’s circumstance but also gained knowledge of her position on her own representation. These themes are explored in both chapter seven and eight.

1.7. Integration of methods
My diverse research methods have combined to create a written ethnography that includes a case study of collaborative photography along with a photographic
ethnographic book. The chapters of this dissertation were formed through the issues that arose from the interviews with Bangladeshi women and have been discussed in the introduction and will unfold in the following chapters. I feel it is necessary here to discuss the photographic book. Leavy discusses the notion of “hybridity and the third space”, where an artist turns words into pictures or pictures into words (2009, p. 232). Leavy considers “what it means to transform text-based data into visual imagery … that seeks to create a dialogue between inquiry and art.” This is created when “art and inquiry, or image and word meet … the merging of the subjective and objective” (2009, p. 232). This is particularly relevant to my photographic component as I integrate words and pictures in the photographic book. As Leavy states:

Visual images are unique and can evoke particular kinds of emotional and visceral responses from their perceivers; they are typically filed in the subconscious without the same conscious interpretive process people engage in when confronted with a written text. (2009, p. 216)

My photographic component sets out to avoid these preconceived visceral responses from viewers. Rather than simply translating words into photographs or photographs into words, I explore the complementary and at times contradictory relationship between the words and images of Bangladeshi women by placing them side-by-side. I have invited the reader to include the women’s stories in their own interpretation. This is particularly evident in the collaborative representation in chapter eight where the survivor is in control of the hybridity between images and words. It is also evident in the photographic component, which offers a unique opportunity to achieve further collaboration in a way that the written component alone cannot. In this instance, my photographic practice is a contemporary method that enhances the traditional methods used.
Chapter two: Orientalism, Occidentalism and the empowerment of women

I am a Western researcher, investigating and representing issues concerning Eastern Bangladeshi women. This position makes it necessary for me to consider the concept of Orientalism. The discourse of Orientalism describes the processes of investigation and thought by which Europeans came to know and establish the orient as their inferior binary ‘Other’. Said describes Orientalism as the discourse “by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively” (1978, p. 66). He continues:

Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the orient; dealing with it by making statements about, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, by settling it, ruling over it: In short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orient. (1978, p. 3).

Orientalism has had a profound effect on research concerning the Orient. Said (1978) viewed the acquired knowledge, collectively gathered by researchers, scholars, anthropologists, travel writers etc., as creating a misrepresentation of the Orient, asserting cultural dominance. By acknowledging the link between knowledge and power, Orientalism has created a dialogue that allows us to be aware of ethnocentrism. It insists on close consideration of representation and knowledge of East in relation to the West, with concern to language, visual representation, culture and religion. The concept of Orientalism is particularly valuable for research such as mine, as it invites analysis and reflexivity about research conducted in and on the East.

However, there are many inconsistencies within the Orientalism debate. One issue that directly relates to my position is that women are not considered active participants and are almost omitted completely from the discourse, except as objects. Orientalism essentially refers to a Western male gaze. It analyses the representation of women whilst excluding representations produced by women. Lewis argues, “women’s differential, gendered access to the positionalities of imperial discourse produced a gaze on the Orient and the Orientalized ‘Other’ that registered difference less pejoratively and less absolutely than was implied by Said’s original formulation” (1996, p.4). Said (1978) does not consider that perhaps Western female gaze could be significantly different to the Western male gaze Orientalism is centred on.
By excluding women as active participants, Said (1978) is stereotyping the producers of Orientalist material as white and almost exclusively male, thus falling into the trap of his own critique. Young states, “Said’s account will be no truer to Orientalism than Orientalism is to the actual Orient, assuming that there could ever be such a thing” (cited in Ahluwalia and Ashcroft 1999, p. 77). Said states that Orientalism has created a false reality or identity of the East. This attracts further criticism. If Said believes that the representation surrounding the Orient is false, then what does he consider to be true representation and how could this be achieved? These questions are not addressed in Said’s work. Porter considers this to be a major inconsistency in Said’s work:

On one hand, says Porter, Said argues that all knowledge is tainted because the Orient, after all, is a construction. On the other, Said appears to be suggesting that there might be a real Orient that is knowable and that there is a corresponding truth about it that can be achieved. (cited in Ahluwalia and Ashcroft 1999, p. 73)

Porter argues that if there is no knowable Orient as Said suggests, “Orientalism in one form or another is not only what we have but all we can ever have” (cited in Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 1999, p. 73). Porter states that Said also praises some scholars for not following the Orientalist stereotypes, but fails to “show how within the given dominant hegemonic formation such as an alternative discourse was able to emerge” (cited in Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 1999, p. 73). These inconsistencies show the problematic issue of trying to define the point where representation ends and misrepresentation begins. Young states, “how does any form of Knowledge – including Orientalism – escape the terms of Orientalism’s critique?” (cited in Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 1999, p. 18).

Nader (1989) also argues that Said does not consider “the way images of gender relationships fit into Western views of the Muslim world or the ways in which the Arab Muslim world constructs visions of the West” (1989, p. 346). Nader addresses the relationship between the Orient and the Occident. She expands Said’s theory to include the binary oppositions not only created and reflected upon by the West, but also the East. Nader believes the critical representation of the ‘Other’ has not only resulted in a deflection from the issue of subordination of women in both the East and the West, but also serves as a mechanism that creates patriarchal norms and keeps them in place. She argues that by concentrating on the East/West dialectic, the male/female dialectic becomes disadvantaged.
However, like Said, Nader (1989) believes the critique of the ‘Other’ is a tool to obtain a perceived positional superiority over the ‘Other’. This stems from the notion of hegemony. Nader states, “The notion of hegemony, as developed by Gramsci (1971), implies that systems of thought develop over time and reflect the interests of certain classes and/or groups in society who have managed to universalize their own beliefs and values” (1989, p. 324). Foucault also viewed hegemony as responsible for the relationship between truth and power. Nader explains, “his notion of ‘true discourses’ (1972) refers to the restriction of discourse on alternative conceptions of reality and provides a set of concepts with which to understand the exercise and the operation of power in its different forms” (1989, p. 324). Gramsci and Foucault agree that a hegemonic relationship is established “not through force or coercion, nor necessarily through consent” (Nader, 1989, p. 324). Instead they believe it is engrained in our bodies and in our minds due to the practices and techniques developed over time. Said’s (1978) work was highly influenced by these discourses. Said, “questions how in a specific historical and cultural context a hegemonic discourse has resulted from a play of ‘power’ and ‘truth’” (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 1999, p. 18). He believes that, through the West’s representation of the East, the West has managed to maintain a perceived positional superiority. Nader is also concerned with male hegemonic power and sees this dialectic as cutting across the East/West dialectic. My work is primarily concerned with the power dialectic between male and female. However, I acknowledge the Western filter I bring to my representation and my analysis. I have developed a strategy of foregrounding the voices of Bangladeshi women to sit alongside my photographs, providing a context for the reading of these photographs.

Nader (1989) also expands Said’s notion further by including Eastern representation of the West. She relates the dialectic of East/West as a form of control of both Eastern and Western women. Nader believes the East also position themselves against the differences of the West. She refers to this as Occidentalism, the opposition to Orientalism. She states, “writers of the East also use a grid through which they filter the West and by which they react to the west. The ‘Other’ is not mute in either direction” (1989, p. 326). Nader states, “today the West is accessible to the people of the Orient through modern communication technology. The East is not. The West presents itself by means of soap operas … or movies of the Wild West or by the nightly news” (1989, 23)
p. 327). I agree that the West does represent itself through these channels that are consumed in the East. However, I disagree with her statement that the East is not accessible. Bollywood has created many movies that are viewed in the West and widely followed in the East. In Bangladesh, every family I stayed with, if they had a television, watched Bangladeshi movies and television shows on a nightly basis. Although these shows are not widely viewed in the West, they are viewed regularly in Bangladesh and portray representations of Bangladeshi social norms.

It is naive to say that the East always remains weak and voiceless, especially in this age of globalisation. Due to the Internet, information is shared globally at a rapid rate. Bangladesh has a thriving photojournalism school that has produced many brilliant photojournalists, who are gaining international success and recognition. These Bangladeshi photojournalists, however, are also involved in representing the ‘Other’. Most of these photographers are from a middle-class or upper-middle class background, are mostly male, and yet commonly represent lower socio-economic classes. Other than nationality, these local photojournalists have little in common with their subjects in terms of lifestyle or upbringing. This brings us back to the issue of who has the right to represent whom. Does a middle-class Bangladeshi male have more right to represent a lower-class Bangladeshi woman than a Western woman? Could it be argued that as a woman I have more access, sympathy and understanding towards the subject? Does this not depend on each and every photographer personally? A possible result of using the Orientalist critique is a reductionist view on representation creating an ‘either/or’ explanation. The end point of the reductionist view to its absurdist limits would result in three-month-old Bangladeshi baby girls only being able to be represented by other three-month-old baby girls. Thus Nader (1989) calls for an approach that foregrounds ‘both/and’.

At a personal level, I experienced the ‘representation’ of myself by the East. Whilst I was in Bangladesh, thanks to technological advancements such as camera phones, I was continually photographed, usually without my consent. Everyone I met asked me information about my family, my marriage status, my religion, my country and myself. This was especially the case with rural people, where I was their first encounter with a foreign person. At events such as the Bangladeshi News Years Day and various exhibitions, I was, without fail, photographed continually and interviewed by every
news camera present. In this scenario, I was the ‘Other’ and the questions directed at me worked as a method of formulating information about me, but even more, as a means to find out how I was different from them. When I first arrived on Dhal Char, I was photographed on one man’s phone. The next day people came up and presented me with that photograph on their phone. It had been passed around to many phones. Nader (1989) refers to this reverse process of representation as Occidentalism, the ways in which the East compares and contrasts itself against the ‘West’. In this case the men of the island were in control of the representation of Occidentals.

Nader (1989) argues that both Orientalism and Occidentalism work as a process of control over women. However, even though the outcome is the same, the processes are not quite similar. Nader notes one such difference. “If the Orientalists’ view of the Orient is redolent in racism as Said (1978) maintains, for Muslims, at least in theory, non-believers are not inherently ‘bad’ or ‘inferior’, they only need the ‘right’ religion” (1989, p. 328). Nader explains Muslim positional superiority is not racial; rather it is based on a religion that can be accepted by all human beings. Achieving positional superiority involves different processes in the East and the West. Nader explains the West uses development programs in the East to establish and maintain positional superiority. The East achieves positional superiority differently “claiming to be more philosophical and less materialist” (1989, p. 328). The West essentially uses development as a form of control, both in the West and East, whereas the East uses religion.

The hegemonic view in the West is that development through industry and technology will lead to advancements and a better way of life in developing countries (World Bank, n.d). Nader describes modernisation as one process that allows the West to maintain positional superiority. This does not always result in positive outcomes for Eastern women, or Western women for that matter. Ester Boserup (cited in Nader, 1989) argues that modernisation has had a detrimental effect by decreasing self-sufficiency and increasing women’s dependence on men. Nader states, “in the two decades of gender research that confirmed Boserup’s original conclusion, case studies such as those of the apparel and micro-electronic industries, and studies of the expansion of industrial production to areas of Asia … confirm Boserup’s conclusion that women’s lives were changed, but not necessarily for the better” (1989, p. 329). This situation will be
discussed later in relation to the modernisation of Bangladesh and the impact on women.

The Western view that development will empower women operates as a tool to ensure the East adopts Western development programs. The West obviously stands to benefit greatly from Western developments in the East.

Since the beginning of the colonial period encounter with the West, the Islamic world has had to face Western standards of modernism that were often foisted upon it from the outside. However, both internal and external efforts to modernize brought increased dependence upon and domination by the West. (Nader, 1989, p. 330)

Middle and upper class Eastern men who interacted with Western men through business, and who would benefit from being viewed as ‘Modernised’, embraced the modernisation of the East. Nader explains, “a difference in lifestyles gradually emerged between upper and middle class urban women and the women of lower income groups whose men saw no advantage in the change of customary ways” (1989, p. 331). This is very evident in Bangladesh through the difference in dress and lifestyles of middle class and lower class Bangladeshi women, particularly the younger generations where young women from middle class backgrounds adopt some aspects of Western dress such as wearing jeans with their traditional dress. Nader states, “Western women as symbolic of the positional superiority of the West is a deeply ingrained idea” (1989, p. 329) in Western hegemony.

Modernisation, although asserted on the East as a solution for the empowerment of women, is still contested in the West in terms of women’s empowerment. Nader argues, “the control of women in the West depends heavily on the concept of progress; the idea of progress also plays a central role in the diffusion of Western female subordination patterns” (1989, p. 335). Nader believes that development in the West creates the ideology that women’s rights have progressed as an incremental model along with modernisation. “The incremental model functions as control. Those who perceive the status of women as sometimes one of gaining ground and at other times of losing ground are closer to reality” (Nader, 1989, p. 336). The incremental model for women must also be measured in relation to that of their male counterparts. Studies show “that men gained significantly more than women over time, and that women had suffered a
loss in status” (Nader, 1989, p. 336). This shows that ideologies are not absolute or concrete. Rather they shift, are challenged and change form over time. An area of lost power that was never regained in the West is evident in the midwifery debate. Due to the technological advancements in medicine, men controlled the power and choice in birth. This was a case of a loss of control for women to gain the safety of technological advancements (Steen & Walsh, 2007).

The theory of Orientalism and the feminist critique of some of its aspects surrounding representation of the ‘Other’ is critical to my photographic practice when representing Bangladeshi women. Again, this relates back to the question of who has the right to represent whom. I would argue that when photographing anyone other than oneself, one is inevitably representing the ‘Other’. No matter how well informed the producer is about the subject, even if they ‘belong’ culturally with the subject, photographs will always be a mediated representation. Photographs are contingent on many varying factors such as light, space and movement. A photograph can never represent a whole truth when one takes into consideration that the image filters through a process of mediation. It begins with how the subject chooses to position him or herself in relation to the other. The image is again mediated by the producer and the different techniques and attributes they adopt to represent the subject, the context in which the image is viewed, and the different ideologies the viewer brings to their individual reading of the photograph. Muecke (n.d.) gives an excellent analysis of the difficulties in photographing the ‘Other’ objectively:

The problem of writing about other peoples is shared by travel writers, anthropologists, journalists and, more recently, writers in cultural studies, who claim to have to have made some progress over all the others. But how? And what is the problem? At its simplest, the problem is one of representation: when we write about the Others, or take pictures of them, do we make them seem more like us than they are, or less? But, the reader protests, the job is to paint them just as they are.

Sorry, but you can’t. Things, as always, get more complicated. Even a ‘simple’ photograph of someone entails the following: who has the means to take it (owning a camera, etc), how the image is composed according to cultural conventions (‘realistic’, posed as portraiture, etc), what gets included in the frame, has the subject given permission or has it been asked for, is the photo part of a social exchange or contract to do with friendship or love, does the subject want to be paid or are they expecting to see the results, how will the photograph be published or will it be kept as a private souvenir, and so on. In any case, trying to
photograph someone so they look ‘natural’ (‘just as they are’) actually involves a great degree of skill in achieving precisely the desired effect. (n.d, p. 11)

Muecke’s (n.d) analysis has direct relevance to my body of work in Bangladesh. Muecke makes clear that my Western background and accompanying ideologies is just one of the many filters that touch each photograph. Every subject I photographed in Bangladesh was aware they were being photographed. Each photograph involved an interaction with the subject, which lasted anywhere from twenty seconds to a week. Each woman and man photographed was involved in their representation, through interaction, or by making a visual suggestion or composing themselves to convey themselves how they wished to be seen. This involvement changed and shaped each and every photograph and instantly created a collaborative participation in the representation.

My photographs should be read and thought of as a representation, informed by information provided to me by Bangladeshi women. These women ranged from academics and activists who theorize and deal with representation, to acid attack survivors and sex workers who are frequently those represented. The photographs are not an absolute. They are not intended to represent a whole truth. By acknowledging the filters through which the work is produced, the worst excesses of Orientalist behaviour are avoided. The body of work is a small and partial window into my personal experience and, most importantly, interaction with lower socio-economic class Bangladeshi women.
Chapter three: social status, religion and the state

Before addressing the social status of women in Bangladesh, it is important to briefly outline the term ‘empowerment’ in regards to Bangladeshi women. Mahtab (2007) defines empowerment as the process of awareness that allows women to recognise, evaluate and change their position in society. She lists six main manifestations of women’s empowerment as the “sense of security and vision of a future; ability to earn a living; ability to act effectively in the public sphere; increased decision-making power in the household; participation in non-family solidarity groups; mobility and visibility in the community” (2007, p. 129). Through modernisation, women are beginning to achieve some of these. However, on the other hand some of these ‘manifestations’ are being endangered due to patriarchal resistance to changing paradigms.

The low social status of women in Bangladesh affects Bangladeshi women in both the public and private spheres. Mahtab states, “in Bangladesh, women bear many of the marks of a “disadvantaged minority” in the social, economic and political realms” (2007, p. 20). At present, women’s rights and social status in Bangladesh is at the forefront of debate nationally and internationally. Although the dialogue and recognition of inequality has been largely established, there remains a huge disparity between the social status of men and women. Bangladeshi social norms and constraints are centred on strong patriarchal value systems. Women are historically disadvantaged in employment, education, and participation in economic and political decision-making and are often victims of violent gender related crimes (Mahtab, 2007). Although the social status of women in Bangladesh is slowly changing, it is a process of loss, gain and survival. Bangladeshi women, in particular lower socio-economic class women, are still treated as inferior to men and are still resigned primarily to the role of mother and wife. Their self worth is traditionally based on their marriage status and the success of their husbands. This social norm is so strong it can sometimes be viewed as a form of empowerment for women. I encountered this point of view from one young man who was discussing women’s rights amongst friends outside my cabin on a ferry. I asked him for his opinion on the position of women in Bangladesh:

Different types of dialogues are continuing now in different areas. But, you think that they are created by someone, who fixed the specific role of a women as well as for a men. He (Allah) fixed the limitation that men have power up to that limit and how much power a women possess. If you observe the rule of Allah, you will
see that Allah has given the women the highest power among all ... it is the husband’s duty to take care of her until her death. As the girl has no duty related to financial matter so she needs not to do any kind of work outside her family. Allah gave the women the special opportunity to lead the life depending on their husband. (Local Religious Man, personal communication, January 30, 2009)

It is clear that this young man believes that women are fortunate to be able to live their lives through their husbands and have no need to participate in the public sphere.

The notion of male superiority is something that is deeply engrained into the social system. M. D. Akhter, the General Program Coordinator of a women’s rights NGO in Bangladesh, spoke at a three day conference for women’s rights I attended in Dhaka. Whist speaking out about domestic violence and equal rights for women, he also suggested alternatives to domestic violence:

We have to learn to negotiate with others without being violent. What I do is, I control people under me with my eyes, not with words or my hands. I do it even with my wife, who abides by my rules ... my wife understands the signals I give her through my eyes; she even understands what I want. (M. D. Akhter, personal communication, May 19, 2009)

This man, speaking in front of many female activists at a women’s rights conference, believes he respects his wife’s rights because he does not hit her. What he fails to conceive is the control he has over her does not give her equal rights. To him, this process of control is quite normal.

The social status of women in Bangladesh is an immense and complex issue. As Nader (1989) explains, the shift in social norms, due to modernisation, is not straightforward in terms of its affect on the development of women. Although social norms are beginning to change, so to is the resistance against such change. For the most part this is to the detriment of women’s empowerment and is creating further tension. This relationship between new paradigms and the tension it causes is apparent within the photographic narrative through the juxtaposition of the quotes and the images, which are at times complimentary and at other times contradictory. This indeterminacy supports the idea that women’s empowerment in Bangladesh, and elsewhere, is a process of loss, gain and sheer survival.
The government plays an instrumental role in changing social norms and cultural beliefs that create gender inequality. Cultural practices and the resulting social norms are most likely to shift through strong government policies and the implementation of consequent laws (Mahtab, 2007). This view was shared by all of the Bangladeshi academics and activists that I interviewed (Begum, 2009; Gayen, 2009 & Islam, 2008). Islam feels that as the culture is so strong, it takes strong laws in order to create social change. She states:

In every country it is very important you are guided by your morality, your ethics, by your principles. In our country it depends on the implementation of the law. That means that the majority of people are not guided by their morality, by their ethics. So when the laws are strong and the government is strict, in that case the trend decreases. But when the government is flexible when they are not concerned with what is happening, then the trend increases. This is the problem. It has to start with the government. (N. Islam, personal communication, December 28, 2008)

Government policies have changed substantially over time. More consideration is now paid to women’s development policies. It was in 1972 that the constitution first recognised the equality of gender in all spheres. This was contradicted, as they “went on to reserve for members of one sex any class of employment or office on the grounds that it is considered by its nature to be unsuited to members of the opposite sex” (Kabeer, 1991, p. 43). At this time, education for women was recognised, but only in relation to their domestic role. Kabeer notes, according to the first five-year plan, “the level of schooling of women determines the efficiency of household management. Educated women pay better attention to nutrition, health and childcare than the uneducated” (1991, p. 43). Clearly gender equality, especially in the public sphere, was not of importance in the early government.

Kabeer (1991) explains that the international women’s movement was making itself felt in political and foreign aid realms. It saw that the interests of women were taken into account. Foreign donors began to develop separate budgets for women’s development.

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and aid, and gave aid with conditions that would benefit women’s development. As Kabeer states, “these developments had their positive effects in the Bangladesh context by introducing a new and potentially official discourse on women, by giving women’s productive contributions a greater visibility and by increasing the number of development projects directed at women” (1991, p. 45). In 1975, Zia-ur Rahman came to power. This was also the year of the United Nations International Women’s Year. Zia adopted the cause of Women in Development (WID) and the second five-year plan was released for 1980 to 1985. This would be the first plan to give specific attention and consideration to strategies to improve the development of women. The Ministry of Women’s Affairs was developed, thirty parliamentary seats were reserved for women and ten percent of public sector jobs were reserved for women. Legal initiatives were also implemented, including the creation of family courts in 1985, with exclusive jurisdiction over parental and conjugal rights cases. Ordinances were enacted to deal with violence against women such as trafficking, rape, murder and acid throwing, all punishable by death (Kabeer, 1991). These were the first political initiatives towards the empowerment of women in Bangladesh.

Although both the current Prime Minister and Opposition Leader are women, the participation of women in the political decision making arena, as in most countries, remains quite low. Women occupy only 5.1% of decision-making roles in political parties. Due to this, women obviously have less opportunity to influence the planning, development and implementation of policies and political decisions. Participation of women in the judicial system is also lacking. Women occupy only 1% of positions. However, it is important to note the low presence of women in politics is obviously not exclusive to Bangladesh. Governments in both developed and developing countries are considerably male dominated. Despite the lack of women occupying higher positions in Bangladeshi politics, the number of Bangladeshi female voters has always been high. In the 1996 general election more than 80% of women cast their vote. This is an astounding figure when you consider that most of these women were illiterate and from rural areas where the practice of Purdah is common. However, in most cases the women’s vote is influenced by male family members (Mahtab, 2007). While women’s rights and basic freedoms are stipulated in the constitution on several occasions and women are ensured equal rights, these clauses are rarely reflected in social norms of the Bangladeshi society (Mathab, 2007). Women’s rights have become a much debated
political issue in Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi government has “realised that there is a need to eliminate discrimination as it presently exists and also as it may present itself in the future” (Mahtab, 2007, p. 133).

Bangladesh is a secular state, although Islam is widely followed by over 80% of the population. Kabeer believes Bangladeshi women have benefited from secularism due to “the presence of different and contradictory ideologies, both within state discourse as well as in the wider polity, which have helped impede any systematic curtailment of women’s rights in the name of Islam” (1991, p. 38). Women of Bangladesh are not required by law to follow certain codes of Islam such as dress codes. However, gendered social norms in Bangladesh are highly contingent on Islamic codes with women seemingly disadvantaged by the most patriarchal elements of both Islam and Hinduism.

Murshid states, “religion has been manipulated to ensure male domination followed by the advocacy of economic emancipation for women and revision of personal family laws” (n. d, p. 119). One major example of this manipulation is the widely followed practice of dowry. Dowry is perhaps one of the most detrimental factors affecting the social status of Bangladeshi women. Dowry has been appropriated from Hindu culture and directly contradicts Islamic codes that state the bride should receive Mahr (a form of dowry) from the groom. Huda states, “demands made by the husband’s side to the bride’s side, have in the last few decades become a widespread practice supported neither by the state law nor personal laws, but apparently designed to strengthen traditional patriarchal assumptions” (2006, p. 249). Religious codes also dissuade women from participating in public spheres. Family laws are still governed by religion, that see women get unequal marriage and property rights, creating a discrimination that begins from birth.

The relationship between religion and the state is complex and contradictory. Nasreen states, “on the one hand, there has been a resurgence of religious consciousness, expanded membership of the religious fundamentalist parties and growing numbers of Islamic institutions. At the same time, income-generating projects for women have proliferated, the ideological preconception about women’s domesticity is being challenged and growing visibility of women has become a threat to the fundamentalist
ideology” (n. d, p. 3). Nasreen agrees with Nader (1989) that the increasing insurgence of Islam is a reaction to the encroaching Western development policies implemented in Bangladesh. Nasreen explains, “polemics surrounding women and the family are responses to the contradictions of social change and emerge in the context of a patriarchal society undergoing economic and political transformations” (n.d, p. 4). With the increased prevalence of such change comes an increase in the resistance that reinforces traditional and religious social norms.

This can encroach on political policies, such as the 1997 National Women’s Development Policy. When interviewing various academics, particularly from a political science background, they stipulated the 1997 National Women’s Development Policy as the most important policy concerning women’s rights. On the eighth of March 2008, International Women’s Day, the Chief Adviser announced the implementation of the National Women’s Development Policy. This policy was developed in 1997 as a step towards achieving equality for Bangladeshi women. However, in 2004 the Policy was restructured to disregard a large proportion of the set initiatives such as equal rights of property, land and inheritance and also reserved seats in Parliament for women. The proposed policy announced in 2008, by the caretaker government, has again been restructured and now reflects the 1997 Policy more closely. This recent change may seem a positive step, but the 2008 proposed policy omits any reference to the equal rights to inheritance. This is a point of major contention amongst women’s rights activists.

Even this weakened initiative has met with fierce objections from religious conservatives, depicting the tense relationship between tradition and modernisation and Western Ideology. Islamic groups largely condemned the 2008 policy. As reported on E-Bangladesh (2008), “Islamist leaders accused the interim government of trying to implement anti-Shariah policy in the name of national women development policy although, they said, the Qur’an had clearly mentioned women’s right to inheritance.” The country has a secular legal system, though on issues of inheritance and marriage, Muslims follow Sharia law. Several thousand Islamic activists took to the streets to protest against the proposed National Women’s Development Policy and demanded that the government immediately withdraw the proposal. They were specifically protesting against a possible change in inheritance laws that would allow women to equal rights to
inheritance as men, even though this was omitted from the 2008 proposal. This caused the government to announce, on the eleventh of March, that it had no intention of passing any laws that were considered anti-Islamic. This statement completely contradicts the initiatives, especially in regards to equal marriage and property rights for women.

The Women’s Development Policy is the main political priority amongst women’s rights activists and academics, but so far protests by religious groups have resulted in an overturn of the policy. Islam states:

There are some religion parties, their main policy is to protect the religion and they are giving the explanation that religion is saying this, this, this and so you cannot go beyond this. They are trying to create some sort of problem. Some time governments become hesitant to implement this type of policy. They are thinking this will cause problems. The immediate past caretaker government has taken the Women’s Development Policy. They have taken the initiative to implement this policy, but they could not because this type of group has created extreme problem and that case caretaker government just suspended this policy, they are not implementing this policy. (N. Islam, personal communication, December 28, 2008)

In an interview with Kaberi Gayen3, she explained that if this policy could be implemented despite the strong opposition from the Islamic leaders it would be a vital step towards equality between Bangladeshi men and women:

This present government, they actually formulated a policy. called Women Development Policy in 1997. They proposed for that equal rights to inheritance. But the government, they changed that clause. And then again the caretaker government, in 2008, they also took that initiative. But not with the equal rights to property. Even then the mullahs they came to the streets and protested and the government had to stop it. Now the present government again have come with the promise of implementing that 1997 Women Development Policy. I know if they can actually implement it, it will be a good move. Maybe still then the custom won’t allow it, but if there is a law then it can be enforced. (K. Gayen, personal communication, February 4, 2009)

The implementation of such policies and laws alone are not enough. Many laws in Bangladesh, especially those designed to protect women, are not enforced and are

3 Dr. Kaberi Gayen is an Associate Professor, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Dr Gayen in involved in a weekly television program on Bangladeshi TV that discusses current women’s issues. She has also authored various articles such as Communication and Contraception in Rural Bangladesh.
therefore useless. One such law was enacted in 1980 to prevent the exchange of dowry. As *Women's Magazine of Bangladesh* (2008) has found, “a recent survey showed that 80 percent of men and 90 percent of women are not aware of the laws. Due to lack of publicity and enforcement, the two laws became ineffective and many women become casualties.”

The new government’s implementation of the Women’s Development Policy is viewed as an important step towards the development of women’s rights in Bangladesh. Women’s rights activists are hopeful that the new government will take the correct steps to ensure this. Islam (2008) concludes:

> We don’t know what the future is, but the present government announced that everything will be according to law, there are lots of laws but no implementation. We have enough good laws, if we implement these laws this type of violence will automatically be decreased. So [the] government is trying to implement these laws. So that this is encouraging that in the future it will develop a decreasing trend. (N. Islam, personal communication, December 28, 2008)

As stated earlier, widespread changes in cultural practice must stem from the government. However, as Nader’s (1989) theory on modernisation suggests, changes to government policies and procedures are met with constant religious backlash. This again shows that changes to social norms, through government intervention or through other means, are a constant struggle between change and resistance.
Chapter four: Education and literacy rates

One positive result from modernisation is the increase in female adult literacy rates. This is due to both NGO and government initiatives centred on increased education for women. Education is an important instrument for the empowerment of women in Bangladesh, as it is all over the world. The gap between male and female literacy levels has always been significantly in favour of males. New studies suggest that this has begun to change. In the 2008 Bangladesh Literacy Assessment Survey, released by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, national literacy rates are on the rise for the entire country. The survey also declared that female adult literacy is now higher than the male adult literacy levels in both rural and urban areas for the first time in history. The adult male literacy rate in rural areas is at 46.1% whilst the adult female literacy level in rural areas is at 46.7%. Urban literacy rates are naturally higher than rural areas due to access to better resources and facilities. For the urban areas the adult male literacy level stands at 56.7% compared to the adult female literacy level of 57.1%. These are extremely promising statistics for both men and women with the overall adult literacy level reaching an all time high of 48.8%.

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2008) also depicts the dramatic increase in literacy levels since 2002 and the closure of what was previously a massive gender gap in literacy levels. In 2002 the male literacy level was 43.6% whilst the female literacy level was at 32.0%, a gap of over 10%. A significant gap also existed in 2005 when male literacy levels were at 47.0% compared to the 36.7% of female. It is encouraging that the 2008 statistics portray an increase in literacy levels and, most significantly, a closure in the gap between male and female literacy levels. This is an extremely positive step towards the empowerment of women in Bangladesh, as lack of education in the past has had a detrimental effect on the freedom and choices of women. Islam (2006) expresses, “lack of education is one of the main factors, which deters women from equal participation in socio-economic activities with her male counterparts and helps to perpetuate the inequality between sexes” (2006, p. 57). The 2008 literacy levels depict a change in these constraints as women reach an all time high in literacy levels.

These statistics depict a growth rate of 3.9% per year from 2002 to 2005 and again a higher growth rate of 5.55% from 2005 to 2008. If these growth rates are sustained, Bangladesh could be looking at an estimated literacy rate of 71.2% in 2015. The adult
female literacy level growth rates are astounding. The growth rate between 2002 and 2005 was 4.67% whilst the male growth rate was only 0.5%. Again from 2005 to 2008 adult female literacy levels climbed by 10.19% compared to the 1.12% of males. Female education, as represented by the 2008 statistics, can have a dramatic effect on the increase of the overall literacy of the nation. This can then lead to a dramatic improvement in the national economy if women are permitted to participate fully. Mahtab asserts, “education of girls and women is inversely related to the development outcome of nations, and all development indicators are positively influenced by the education of girls and women” (2008, p. 22).

The growth in literacy can be attributed to the recent policies and activities of both government and non-government organisations aimed at increasing female literacy levels. In 2000 the government implemented a program called the Food for School program. This program compensated families with food if they sent their children to school. This proved to be highly successful not only in increasing school enrolments but also in alleviating some of the malnutrition facing poorer rural families. The program covered 17,811 public and private primary schools in Bangladesh. An estimated two million families benefited from the program and school enrolments reached higher levels (International Food Policy Research Institute, 2001).

In 1995 the government developed a Nation Action Plan (NAP) for women’s empowerment. In relation to education and training, the NAP discussed a number of strategies, some of which have been implemented in recent years. The most significant was the access to free education for girls up until the twelfth grade. This was to encourage higher education for women. However, although female literacy levels are at an all time high, and equal to that of their male counterparts, women still have the highest drop out rate at secondary level. This is due to a number of reasons, but in particular to family pressure as girls, especially from lower socio-economic classes, are married off young to avoid higher dowry prices and demands.

Nevertheless, offering free education to girls has been instrumental in increasing female enrolments and changing social norms and the belief that it is not worth educating daughters. My interview with one BRAC schoolteacher, who has been running a school
for underprivileged children in the slums for over twelve years, reflected these trends. She explains:

There were some problems for girls to join at first ... Actually here seventy-five percent of the students are female. Like, there are thirty-six students. Among them eleven were male and twenty-five are female students. Usually we take more girls than boys. We prefer girls because these are socially deprived girls. And in our country people, especially those who are poor, tend to send boys to school rather than girls ... Now a days parents are sending their girls to school. That's not a problem at all. In fact the rate of early marriage for girls has decreased a lot. When we call parents meetings, we tell them the bad side of early marriage. (BRAC School Teacher, personal communication, December 24, 2008)

The role of schools for the underprivileged includes educating the parents as well as their children. As the BRAC schoolteacher explains:

Sometimes, we have to face issues. Like, today I called a girl to the school but she was doing some chores and she was supposed to sell something. I asked her mother to send her to the school and the mother said, 'Madam, we need to earn money and manage our food too.' Then I said to the mother, 'You are a grown up, you can manage your money and food somehow. But if you are depriving your child from the light of education, it's not fair and you are loosing some great opportunity.' Then the mother said, 'Ok madam, take her to the school.' (BRAC School Teacher, personal communication, December 24, 2008)

There are many NGO schools all over Bangladesh. However, BRAC is the largest free schooling provider with over 30,000 primary schools all over the country with one teacher and around 30 students in each school.

Technical skill schools have been established such as UCEP, which is the largest of its kind in Bangladesh. UCEP teaches practical trades such as automobile (repair, operation and maintenance), garments making, electronics (assembling and repair), printing and packaging, electrical, air conditioning and refrigeration (installation, repair and maintenance) and textiles (spinning, weaving and knitting). UCEP opened in 1972 and is located in six major cities in Bangladesh. It has forty-eight general schools and eight technical schools. At present, a total of 34,000 children are pursuing Integrated General and Vocational Education at the UCEP Integrated General and Vocational Schools and Technical Schools. Of these students, over 50% are girls, as a quota is held for girls to receive education (UCEP, 2008). These schools have been instrumental in increasing the educational opportunities of women and changing social views that women do not need an education. The success of these programs is reflected in the 2005 - 2008
10.19% increase in female literacy rates, the closure of the literacy gap between genders and the overall increase in literacy in Bangladesh.

Rising literacy is an extremely positive result of the effects of modernisation. A shift in social norms that previously constrained women from valuable education has been achieved through the initiative of both government and NGO’s initiatives. This is evident in the significant rise in female literacy rates and the interviews that depict a change in parents’ attitudes towards the education of their daughters. Increasing education rates appear to be the most encouraging aspect of modernisation in terms of women’s empowerment in Bangladesh. It appears to be meet with less resistance and tension than the other aspects, the garment industry and micro finance, discussed below. If this literacy trend continues, it will not only contribute significantly to women’s empowerment but will benefit Bangladesh as a nation.
Chapter five: The garment industry

The garment industry is one of the main factors encouraging a shift in social norms and the position of women in Bangladesh. The garment industry has become a lucrative and expanding industry, responsible for employing millions of women and in effect influencing the social norms they live by. Of the more than fifty interviews I conducted with lower socio-economic class urban Bangladeshi women, the majority of women mentioned they were in some way affected by the garment industry. Traditionally, the notion of work is linked to the male’s role in society. It was usually only in cases of desperate poverty that women would accept paid work (Balk, 1997 & Wright, 2000). However, the garment industry is changing the idea of paid work as a wholly male territory, and is leading to changes in the social attitudes that discourage women from accepting paid work. This development is creating a change in social norms, which brings about both positive and negative change in the position of women. As noted in chapter one, when development increases, so does the resistance to such change.

Because of the large number of female employees now working in the garment industry, norms have begun to shift. Mahtab\(^4\) (2007, p. 62) states, “at present, the garment factories in Bangladesh alone absorb one point five million workers of which ninety percent are women constituting almost seventy percent of the total employment in the manufacturing sector.” Social change is contingent on the new economic globalisation that is the driving force behind the garment industry.

From a positive perspective, women are gaining access to their own income and developing new social networks through their co-workers. Sachs (2005) argues that integrating women into the work place is imperative for improving the social and economic status of women in Bangladesh. He states that access to work has created “a new spirit of women’s rights and independence and empowerment” and leads to “dramatically reduced rates of child mortality; rising literacy of girls and young women.” He believes the increase in “the availability of family planning and contraception have made all the difference for these women” (2005, p. 14). Sachs believes the key to decreasing poverty is to increase women’s status, by giving women

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employment. Sachs notes that Bangladeshi women working in the garment industry conceive fewer children, as work has become their priority. Sachs states, "the average number of children for these mothers was between one and two" (2005, p. 14). In many cases in the garment industry, women have no education. However, under the influence of their informed colleagues, they become aware of practices such as family planning and contraception. The women also become determined to improve their financial situation through work, and realise this will not happen if they have a large family.

Sachs' view is supported by the responses of garments employees I interviewed at Adams Apparels in Mirpur, Dhaka. On arrival, I was invited to speak with the general manager, Shahidul Haque Mukul. He stated that the ratio of workers at Adams Apparel is eighty-five percent female and fifteen percent male. A survey I conducted at Adams Apparels found that forty-five percent of employees were listed as eighteen years old. It is probable that most of these were actually younger. Eighty-eight percent of workers were under the age of twenty-two years old and sixty-seven percent of the workers were unmarried. Forty-eight percent of the women were from rural areas and are now living in nearby slums, forty percent were from nearby slums and twenty-two percent were from poorer urban areas. The most encouraging statistic was the birth rates: Seventy-nine percent of the women did not have a child; ten percent only had one child; twelve percent had two; four percent had three; three percent had four; one percent had five; and the remaining one percent had six. In the 1970's married women had an average of seven children each, in 2004 this had decreased but was still at 4.6 children per women (Centre for International Research, 2004). The interviews and statistics from the garment workers suggest that women are becoming more educated in family planning and are more often than not establishing a career before considering children. When speaking with one of the garment factory workers, aged twenty-three, I asked her why she and her husband had not yet had children. She responded:

Because, actually I want to earn money and save them for my child's future, I want to ensure a good future for him. As both of us are working then we should be careful about our career and our future plans. If I get pregnant and stay at home for it, how on earth will we be able to run our life without money problems? (Garment Worker, personal communication, December 24, 2008)
Given the research into women’s rights, such a change in birth rates depicts a change in social norms that primarily view women as mothers or wives rather than participants in the economic and labour arenas. Now, women can envisage a place in the public sphere.

The participation in paid work also gives women more financial decision-making power within their family, a role traditionally viewed as solely a male role. I asked the same woman how her and her husband currently organised their finances. She responded:

Actually, what we do is, my husband sends 5000 taka to my mother-in-law who is very sick and who stays in the village. And from my earnings, what I do is, I have little siblings at home who go to school. I send money for their schooling. The rest we save in a bank account for our future. (Garment Worker, personal communication, December 24, 2008)

This practice is shared by many of the workers. The general practice of the women was to save their money for their children’s future in the hope that their children would have access to the education they were unable to obtain. One eighteen-year-old garment worker was married when she was just eight years old. She received very little education and had her first child when she was just eleven years old. This scenario is quite common in rural and slum areas of Bangladesh. She moved to Dhaka with her husband from their rural village in the hope of finding work. They have both been employed in the garment industry for the past four years. Before her employment in the garment industry she would stay at home with her two children, aged seven and four. However, as the couple are now both working in the garment industry, both are involved in the financial decision making for their family. This is a role that is traditionally only taken by the male of the family. She informed me, “yes, we actually spend our salaries together for the family. Both of us are working so it has become easier to run the family” (Garment Worker, personal communication, December 24, 2008). This is a common theme amongst the married garment workers. Another married worker with one child explains, “my husband is actually a supervisor. He is the one who spends for domestic purposes. We pay our rent with his money and a part of it is also sent to our village home. My income is fully saved in the bank for our future” (Garment Worker, personal communication, December 24, 2008). These women represent a new and growing population of women, with increasing financial power.
The garment sector has obviously had a positive influence on women’s rights in Bangladesh, creating millions of jobs, influencing a decrease in birth rates and encouraging greater equality in domestic financial decisions. However, the garment industry also has many discriminatory factors and even negative influences, especially for the female employees. This relates back to Nader’s (1989) criticism of the Western hegemonic view that development will improve the lives of Eastern women in an incremental manner. Unfortunately it is not that simple. This study found that the result of modernisation is complex and for the most part contradictory. Yes, the women’s lives have in fact changed, but unfortunately, with such change comes many problems. As Nader states, “when the East borrows Western technology, a lifestyle accompanies these new forms and Western gender relations travel with the technology” (1989, p. 328). This creates a shift in social norms, as seen with the garment industry, which creates tension between modern and traditional values.

Mukul, the General Manager of Adams Apparel, claimed that women could occupy a number of different positions within the garment industry. “They can work as a Helper here, or as an Operator, or as a Quality Controller, or Supervisor, and they can even be an Assistant Production Manager” (S. H. Mukul, personal communication, December 24, 2008). When asked if it was realistic that women would be able to obtain any kind of supervising role he admitted: “mostly the high authorities are taken by men. Maximum women work here is as a Helper or an Operator, sometimes as a Quality Controller.” (S. H. Mukul, personal communication, December 24, 2008). These are the lowest positions available in the garment industry. The majority of women occupy the position of Helper or Operator. Mukul also claimed there is no wage difference between men and women; the wage depends on the position. However, as women occupy the bottom roles, there is obviously a big wage difference. Due to gender discrimination, they are not promoted to higher positions like Supervisors or Production Managers. These posts are reserved for male workers. Pay and position discrimination occurs regularly. Males are automatically given higher positions of authority and therefore higher pay. Overtime is also a big issue:

In this regard too, female workers are discriminated more than males. As reported by the female workers … there is no guarantee of the payment, and most of the factories usually keep one months payment of overtime earning as security money
Women often have to work fourteen-hour shifts with few or no breaks. The shortest shift available is nine hours. For a helper or operator, this involves sitting, or in some cases standing, at a sewing machine for the entire shift. Working such long hours due to overtime can cause many problems. Mahtab (2007) reports that women can suffer several injuries and diseases due to continuous standing and insufficient breaks, such as severe backache, deterioration of eyesight, anaemia, malnutrition and swelling of the hands and feet. One factory worker I interviewed was working as a Helper. To advance to the position of Operator and receive a pay increase, she had been learning the skills on her break. She earns 1300 Taka per month, approximately twenty-six Australian dollars. Her hours are eight to five. However, it is usually the case that she has to work overtime. She explains, “if I have to work overtime then I have to work till nine pm, but never more than ten pm” (Garment Worker, personal communication, December 24, 2008). Her hourly rate for overtime is 4 Taka, less than eight Australian cents per hour. This means during days of overtime, she will work from eight am till at least nine pm with no breaks as she is training to be an Operator.

Whilst the working conditions are a major problem, the main concern for female workers is their security. Many female workers face harassment and outright violence in the workplace. Mahtab states, “they remain under constant mental pressure of the Supervisors. They are always working under fear of being verbally abused or being beaten by the Supervisors” (2007, p. 72). She continues, “the most adverse impact of women garment workers of Bangladesh is violence against women” (2007, p. 78). This violence can take many forms, from mental and verbal abuse to physical abuse and sexual harassment and abuse. Mahtab details such harassment as ranging from “demeaning remarks to unwelcome touching and grabbing … Verbal abuse and sometimes even beating by their supervisors are very common punishments” (2007, p. 78).

Rotna (2008), a welfare worker I interviewed, also agreed with Mahtab’s views. Rotna lives in Mirpur. She runs the organisation Dustho Mohila Sheba Shongsthta, which is primarily concerned with the welfare of abused women living in the Mirpur slums.
Women come to Rotna with all types of issues and complaints of abuse. Rotna explains the main issues relating to garment workers are:

Physical assault, violence, overtime by pressure, like a girl doesn’t want to do overtime but the authority is creating pressure to do the overtime. Most cases girls don’t get maternity leave; instead they get fired from the job. Let me give you an example, a girl was hurt by a needle in a garment [factory]. Instead of removing the needle or going to the doctors, they cut the finger off the girl. We raised our voice against this. After that, the garment [factory] gave some compensation to the girl but we couldn’t catch the person who cut her finger off. Another problem in the garment industry is the female workers are less paid. (R, personal communication, December 22, 2008)

Female garment workers also face security issues when finishing work. There have been many reports of women being attacked or raped on their way home. Many of the workers are young, unmarried and from rural areas and can be naive about the environment. As women routinely leave work after dark, they become easy targets for violent crimes. “According to the survey conducted by Majumdar and Begum (1999), female garment workers account for only two or three percent of the total population of women in the metropolitan area of Dhaka, whereas they account for eleven percent of rape cases” (Mahtab, 2007, p. 74). This is an alarming figure and shows that garment workers have become prime targets for these types of crimes. Due to this, women are becoming more conscious of the problem and often work together to avoid situations such as these, by walking home in groups. It is common to see large groups of female garment workers on their way home after shifts. As one worker explained, “I didn’t face any kinds of problems. Actually when we finish working in the garments we come back home in groups. I have two other sisters who work with me at Adams (Apparel), we always stay together” (Garment Worker, personal communication, December 24, 2008).

Women workers who move in from rural areas often rent a room with other girls. This is referred to as a mess. These women frequently face sexual harassment and assault. The landlords have been known to take advantage, as the women do not have any traditional male ‘protectors’ living with them. Mahtab states, “female workers who live in rented houses are prone to being abused and even become victims of rape by the local rent collector, when they cannot pay the rent on time due to their late receipt of their own salary by the factory owners” (2007, 74).
Solicitation into the sex industry is also a prevalent problem within the garment industry, especially due to the low income the garment workers receive. Women are often approached by pimps or female co-workers and solicited into the industry, sometimes under false pretences. I interviewed a former sex worker who now works for Durjoy Nari Shongho, an NGO dedicated to the welfare of active sex workers. She explained how she was tricked by a pimp into leaving her position in the garment industry:

After I reached Dhaka, a lady arranged me a job in a garments factory. I worked in a garments factory that was situated in Maghbazar. After sometime I was trapped by pimps. A lady influenced me to work for her. She proposed to give me 1200 taka per month. I used to get 400 Taka. She said I would get food, oil and soaps. I would live with her sister. They do business, by exporting cloths to India in the black market. At that time I had no idea about sex work. I had absolutely no clue about anything. That lady took me to her house. In her house, I saw four to five other girls. They were very pretty. That was her apartment where she operates her business as a pimp. She sets her girls with the customers in various rooms. I didn’t know anything about it before I went there. When I entered the house I started to talk with the girls. Those girls asked me what I do. I said I worked in a garments factory. They said, so why did you come here? I said, I came to work for that lady, she has a clothing business in India. Those girls opposed. They said, no she do bad things with girls. I had no clue about what could be the bad things. I asked, what are you talking about? They said, she does business with us, does bad things, we work as a sex worker to earn money. I said, what is a sex worker? They said, man sleeps with us and pays money. They enjoy us and that’s how we earn money. That time I understood, I started to cry. (Former Sex Worker, personal communication, January 8, 2008)

Other women make the choice to enter the sex industry due to lack of pay and the physical pressures of the garment industry. As one sex worker (2009) states:

I got married then my husband left me. Then I came back to my parents but as they were very poor they couldn’t support me. So I went to work in a garments factory. It wasn’t a good experience for me, as the supervisors behave badly. They wanted my body. I got fed up by this and eventually I joined the crowd. (Sex Worker, personal communication, January 8, 2008)

Modernisation is a double-edged sword. On one side there are many positives for lower socio economic Bangladeshi women that did not exist prior to the development of the garment industry. The garment industry has loosened many social constraints; provided employment to many Bangladeshi women; had a positive influence on birth rates; encouraged family planning; and allowed more equality in domestic financial decision
making. However, on the other side it has also created further sexual and physical abuse and discrimination for the women. This tension is created by the new value systems that are imported along with the developments from the West, and by resistance from the prevailing social norms in Bangladesh.
Chapter six: Micro-credit and the empowerment of women

Micro-credit is another important institution influencing the lives of millions of rural and lower economic class Bangladeshi women. Microcredit has provided loans for at least forty-six percent of the country’s population. Approximately ninety percent of these loans have been given to women (Mahtab, 2007). However, micro-credit is a highly contested issue, especially in its role in the empowerment of women. On the one hand micro-credit is thought to empower women by giving them the means to participate in economic activities and gain financial independence, or at the very least contribute to the family financial decisions. On the other hand, critics believe it rarely has this effect. In fact, they believe that it sometimes does the opposite, putting more pressure on women and creating an increase in domestic violence and family disputes (Kabeer, 2001; Goetz & Gupta, 1996; Mahtab, 2007 & Naz5, 2006).

Microcredit has existed in many forms for many decades. However, the Grameen Bank was the main contributor in Bangladesh to lift micro credit to a large-scale means of financial aid. Professor Muhammad Yunus, creator of Grameen Bank, won the Nobel Prize for his initiative in 2006. Professor Yunus created a financial institution in 1983 that specialised in offering small loans to poor rural Bangladeshis, usually women, without collateral (Naz, 2006). The loan was originally given to women, as women are more likely to repay the loan and invest the earnings for the loan back into the family. Women are also the poorest of the poor in Bangladesh and have the least chance of access to conventional banking. Bangladeshi women proved to be quite efficient at repaying the loans. As Goetz and Gupta state, “women of Bangladesh have gained an international reputation for their excellent credit performance in specialised credit institutions. This achievement is all the more remarkable given the extreme sociocultural constraints on women’s productivity and their access to capital in Bangladesh” (1996, p. 45).

Instead of collateral, micro-finance works on the principle of group responsibility, accountability, participation and mutual trust amongst members (Naz, 2006). Groups

5 Farzana Naz began her career as a journalist for a daily newspaper in Dhaka, The Daily Independent. She was awarded the NORAD fellowship in 2003 to M. Phil. in Gender and Development. Her main research interests are Gender and Development in Bangladesh.
rely on each member of the group to repay their loans. If one member fails, it reflects badly on the entire group. Therefore, peer pressure works to encourage all members to repay their loans. The three major institutions responsible for the majority of loans are Grameen Bank, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and the Association for Social Advancement (ASA). Other smaller non-government organisations operate throughout rural Bangladesh. Mahtab explains, “microcredit as a poverty alleviation intervention is able to address in aiming [sic] at increasing household income and raising the aggregate level of household wellbeing and the dynamics of resource allocation within the household” (2007, p. 86). Micro-credit has proven to be effective as an aid to alleviating poverty. However, its effect on the empowerment of women in Bangladesh is not wholly positive.

Before delving into the arguments surrounding micro-credit and its effect on the empowerment of Bangladeshi women, it is important to define the term ‘empowerment’ in relation to micro-credit. Naz states, (as per the Department for International Development) “women’s empowerment is more than simply marginal increases in income. It requires a transformation of power relations … this means that development must take into account, not only income level but also relations within households, markets and communities” (2006, p.52). Empowerment in terms of micro-finance should not just be viewed as the act of taking the loan and making the repayments, because in many cases the women may have little or no participation in how this is achieved. Empowerment, in the case of micro-finance, should be the active participation in financial and domestic decisions and activities. This view emphasises undoing the social constraints that Bangladeshi women face, such as the view that it is solely the male’s role to manage the employment and financial sectors and the household decision-making. There are many factors to be considered in the definition of ‘empowerment’ of Bangladeshi women. However, for the benefit of assessing the impact of micro-finance, it is important to concentrate on a select few: the ability to participate in how the loan is spent; participation in the chosen income deriving activity; participation in how the subsequent income is spent; and participation in how the loan is repaid. The main factor to focus on in the empowerment of women through micro-finance is their participation in the economic decisions and activities derived from the loan.
Micro-finance undeniably has a positive affect in alleviating poverty from struggling households. It is reported that regardless of who spends the loan in the household, households had higher income consumption standards than the equivalent non-loan households (Kabeer, 2001). And although most of the loans ended up in the hands of the male in the household, women loanees did benefit from the loans with an increase in female consumption standards:

Women who made use of at least some of their loans had higher consumption standards and were more likely to have a role in household decision making, either on their own or jointly with their husbands, than “passive” female loanees, and both in turn had considerably higher consumption standards and were more likely to participate in household decision-making than women from male loanees households or from households who had not received any credit. (Kabeer, 2001, p. 65)

A study by Pitt and Khandker (cited in Kabeer, 2001) concludes that the gender of the loanee influenced the household decision making outcomes. It was found that women’s participation in decision making carried more weight in households where the loan was given to the female in comparison to when the loan was given to the male, or not at all. The indicators of empowerment due to micro-finance listed earlier were assessed in rural Bangladesh by Hashemi, Schuler, and Riley:

[W]omen’s access to credit was a significant determinant of the magnitude of economic contributions reported by women; of the likelihood of an increase in asset holdings in their own names; of an increase in their exercise of purchasing power; of their political and legal awareness as well as of the value of the composite empowerment index. In addition, BRAC loanees tended to report significantly higher involvement in “major decision-making.” When women’s economic contribution was used as an independent variable, the effect of access to credit on the empowerment indicators was reduced but remained significant, suggesting that one important route through which women’s access to credit translated into “empowerment” was via their enhanced contribution to family income. (cited in Kabeer, 2001, p. 65)

Their study suggests that women who take control of their loans experience empowerment and control over their financial situation. Loanees who lose control of their loans to their husband or other male family members still benefit more than families who do not receive loans as they experience an increase in consumption rates that result in a better livelihood.
One major contribution of micro-credit to the empowerment of women is an increase in mobility and social interaction. This is due to the process of giving loans to groups of women and holding loan repayment meetings each week. Grameen use these meetings to initiate discussions about how the women use the loans and any problems the members may be facing. Grameen also claim they conduct talks and offer advice on practical issues such as childcare, health and nutrition, birth control, dowry issues, family savings and so on (Naz, 2006). The group interaction has formed new processes of social interaction amongst women outside of the home and their normal social paradigms. This has allowed women to become more mobile and establish new social networks and support systems. These groups have become a form of education as women discuss issues and strategies amongst themselves and also with the trained member from Grameen or other NGOs (Naz, 2006).

There are varying degrees of involvement from the women receiving loans. At the lower end of the scale, the women are described as having no involvement or control on how the loan is spent or the activities that derive the income to repay the loan and sustain the family. On the upper end of the scale are the women who maintain full control over how their loan is managed and physical involvement in the activities that generate the subsequent income for repayments. Whilst micro-credit is responsible for alleviating poverty and empowering women at the upper end of the scale, the reality is that the majority of women fall into the bottom category. Montgomery, Bhattacharya, and Hulme state:

Only nine percent of first-time female borrowers were primary managers of loan-funded activities while eighty-seven percent described their role in terms of “family partnerships.” By contrast, thirty-three percent of first-time male borrowers had sole authority, over the loan assisted activity, while fifty-six percent described it as a family partnership. They also found that loans did little to change the management of cash within the household for either female or male loanees. Interpreting reports of “joint” management as disguised male dominance in decision-making, the authors concluded that access to loans had done little to empower women. (cited in Kabeer, 2007, p. 64)

The problem is that although the loan is initially given to the women, the strong social norms and customs see that the money and the decision making power ultimately falls into the hands of the men. This can create many problems for Bangladeshi women.
Gayen also agrees, “the motive is good. But the women, because of the social customs, what happens is the credit is taken out in their name, but who ends up with the money? That is very important. The husbands, they have to give it to their husbands” (K. Gayen, personal communication, February 4, 2009). It is apparent that the social norms and perspectives must change dramatically before we can see a large-scale positive influence on women’s empowerment through micro-finance. As it stands, only nine percent of women have control over their loans. The remainder of women have become a medium for the men to gain loans, creating extra pressures on Bangladeshi women. Women have to deal with the demands for loans by their husbands and also pressure from their loanee peers if their husband is unable or unwilling to make the repayments. As Gayen explains, “she is being stigmatised by her other fellow members if she cannot give back the money. But the money is being used by her husband or son or the male people of her family. So actually, if micro-credit worked that well I don’t think the women of our country would suffer still that way” (K. Gayen, personal communication, February 4, 2009).

Bangladeshi women who receive loans are therefore under pressure on two fronts; from within their family and also from the peers in their new social network. Women are often forced to sell their possessions, use their savings or cut back on their own consumption to repay loans that their husbands have spent. The men’s unwillingness to repay the loan or the women’s inability to receive a loan or a higher loan can often result in violence. Kabeer states, “[the women] have responsibility without control” (2001, p. 64). This obviously is not empowerment. In fact it is quite the opposite.

Women in Bangladesh have a significantly lower social status than their male counterparts. Gender inequality is deeply imbedded in the social norms of the strong patriarchal society. As mentioned earlier, women are discriminated against from birth as they are seen as an economic burden. Schiler, Hashemi & Badal explain, “women often have no independent sources of income, little or no education and few marketable skills, no independent property or money, and no social identity outside the home” (1998, p. 148). Micro-credit aims to counteract this by offering women a means to gain an independent income. However, this can have a negative effect as it is often viewed as a challenge against the patriarchal system and social norms that are widely practiced in Bangladesh. As Nader (1989) explains, modernisation does not always result in positive change.
As the change becomes more prominent, so do the counter assertions. Women are often beaten over trivial matters and are a convenient target. Men also beat their wives as a way of controlling their wives' behaviour and reasserting their own dominance, maintaining patriarchal values, and also exploiting their wives for financial gain (Schiler, Hashemi & Badal, 1998). Introducing micro-credit into rural areas can increase the rates of violence as the women begin to gain more financial and social power and men often feel that the patriarchal system is under threat. In a report released by Aktaruzzaman and Guha-Khasnobis they claim, “our results show that female borrowers who have less or no control over the use of the given credit, face significantly more domestic violence compared to the non-borrowers” (n.d, p. 19).

As women become more economically educated, gain access to funds and become more mobile, they become more inclined to speak out against what they feel is unfair domination or exploitation. In these scenarios, the cases of domestic violence increased more than cases where women had nothing that could be taken from them:

The highest level of violence against women was in the village where it was most apparent that a transformation in gender roles was underway. Sixty percent of all women of reproductive age in this village said they had been beaten by their husbands during the proceeding year. This village also had the highest percentage of women who were contributing to family support (41 percent). In contrast, the village with the smallest percentage of women who said that they had been beaten in the past year (14 percent) had very few women who were contributing to family support (10 percent). (Schiler, Hashemi & Badal, 1998, p. 151)

This shows a direct correlation between the rates of domestic abuse and women contributing to the family through micro-credit loans. However, the authors also found that if the woman’s earnings reached high levels, or the husband was unable to earn (due to poor health etc), then incidents of domestic abuse actually declined. This was only evident when the woman’s earnings had reached quite a high level. The authors reported cases where women even faced domestic violence when working to support a sick husband, outside the home, as this conduct brought shame on the family. Schiler, Hashemi & Badal interviewed a variety of women and found that they had varying opinions on whether micro-finance is a catalyst for domestic violence:

One women said that the Grameen women were beaten less than others, except when they put pressure on their husbands to hand over money for the loan instalments. Several women said Grameen members were beaten less because they provided cash for their husbands to invest, and this improved the family's
standard of living, and described cases in which this appeared to be true. Other cases were cited in which men beat their wives in struggles over control of loan money. (Schiler, Hashemi & Badal, 1998, p. 152)

This evidence suggests that micro-finance can aid a reduction in domestic violence only if women give full control of the loan to their husband. If they speak out, or in some cases simply ask for the weekly repayment money to take to their meetings, they may face a violent reaction. Therefore, it does very little to influence the empowerment of women if we go by the previously discussed indicators. The patriarchal system remains unchanged and women are simply the medium for men to acquire loans.

As discussed earlier, Grameen claim to discuss several issues women are facing, however they do not address issues of domestic violence. This is even the case when Grameen are confronted with women who bear the physical signs of domestic abuse. Schiler, Hashemi & Badal recount one woman's testimony, "I never once heard any protest against domestic violence in the Centre meetings. Grameen Bank never wants to know whether the women get beaten by the husbands when they ask for money for the instalments" (1998, p. 154). Cases have been reported where women are actually beaten at weekly meetings. Many cases have been reported of men coming to the meetings in anger and physically abusing their wives in front of the Grameen field workers and the women in the group:

Once a member's husband beat his wife while a Grameen Bank meeting was in progress, in front of all of those assembled. He wanted the money she had saved to pay the loan instalment for gambling. The Bank worker admonished him, saying, 'Have you no sense of decency, beating your wife in front of us?! You must repay the money immediately!' The same Bank worker described another case, in which a husband dragged his wife into another room and beat her while the credit group meeting was going on. In this case the Bank worker said to the man's father, who was sitting nearby, 'What kind of son do you have, beating his wife in front of us? If he needs to beat her so badly let him wait until we have gone!' (Schiler, Hashemi & Badal, 1998, p. 155)

These kinds of comments only reinforce the common view that men are free to assert their dominance by physical abuse. Although the field worker did intervene, in both cases he undermined his comment by stipulating it was the fact that the beating was taking place in public that was so wrong, not the actual beating itself.
It seems irresponsible on Grameen’s behalf not to follow up the consequences of loans and the subsequent repayments. However, the field workers in this particular study claim that directly addressing the issue of domestic violence could result in a revolt against Grameen’s field work. Schiler, Hashemi & Badal state, “they sense that speaking out against domestic violence would be perceived as a challenge to men’s rights over their wives and, thus, could jeopardize the programme’s acceptance by the community” (1998, p. 154). This is the case with many feminists and activists in Bangladesh; small steps must be taken towards change, especially women’s empowerment, as social and religious norms are strong and are defended aggressively. However, if Grameen Bank and the other micro-finance institutions are serious about empowering women, more needs to be done than just handing out a loan and collecting the repayments. Training should be undertaken by the field workers on how to effectively deal with these situations so as to guide the women and the men of the community. As most field workers are male, perhaps a higher presence of female field workers will help to provide guidance and support to the women. The women need guidance on how best to manage their loan with their families and how to participate with their husband in the successful practice of obtaining an income and repaying the loans. Schiler, Hashemi & Badal believe:

Given the widespread acceptance of men’s violence against their wives, a meaningful attempt to intervene through credit programs would require extensive awareness-raising efforts directed at programme staff as well as members and their families. Although the possibility of a patriarchal backlash is a real one, the credit programmes might begin with open discussions of the problem of domestic violence in group meetings. (1998, p. 156)

Micro-credit is helping to alleviate poverty in Bangladesh. However, its claim of empowering women remains contested. Micro-finance is creating extra tension for Bangladeshi women. In most cases women relinquish all control of funds and simply become a medium for their husband’s financial gain. This maintains the males’ perceived positional superiority in the widely patriarchal society. It is evident that the majority of female loanees do not experience empowerment or a change in the social order of their family or wider society. The increase in development, especially through micro-finance, is creating changes in social norms and increasing claims that development results in empowerment for women. However, this is also met with a
backlash that aims to maintain the patriarchal system and can involve violent repercussions for women.
Chapter seven: Violence against women

These changing paradigms in Bangladesh and the resistance from the patriarchal system results in discrimination against Bangladeshi women in both public and private spheres. This is the worst side of the double edge sword of modernisation. The discriminatory social norms and increased tension due to modernisation often lead to violence against women. Farouk states, “violence against women is amongst the most serious threats to the overall development and progress in Bangladesh” (2005, p.1). Despite constitutional policies and legislation pledging gender equality, the status of women in Bangladesh remains much lower than the social status of men. Women are viewed as little more than another asset owned and controlled by the male. The patriarchal value system is viewed as the social norm that resigns women to subordinate roles that are dependant on men. Schiler, Hashemi & Badal explain, “women come to see dependence and deprivation relative to male family members as natural, a logic that encourages them to accept men’s violent behaviour against them” (1998, p. 148). Men maintain control over the economic and social decisions within the family and society but now do so in an environment that sometimes challenges traditional authority. Violence against women is prevalent and common in Bangladesh, and is on the rise. Farouk explains:

Brutal attacks on women have become commonplace and widespread across the country. Daily news reports are filled with atrocities including physical and psychological torture, sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape, dowry related violence, trafficking, forced prostitution, coerced suicide and murder. The rate of reported violent acts against women has risen consistently and at an alarming rate, especially since the early 1990’s. (2005, p. 3)

The chart below (cited in Faiz-Ud-Din, 2008, p. 110) shows the reported infringement of rights of children and women in 2003.
The statistics on violence against women are alarmingly high and, considering that it is one of the most under-reported crimes in Bangladesh, the figures, in reality, are almost certainly much higher. The following chart (cited in Farouk, 2005, p. 4) shows some of the statistics of violence against women in 2004.

**Table 1**

Acts of violence committed against Bangladeshi women in 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Violation committed</th>
<th>Case filed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>740</td>
<td>402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dowry related killing</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acid-burnt</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical torture</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually harassed</td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempt to rape</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>1456</td>
<td>491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torture for Dowry</td>
<td>85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide due to dowry</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide (Reason not known)</td>
<td>562</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide after Rape</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gang Rape</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder after Rape</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The statistics on violence against women are alarmingly high and, considering that it is one of the most under-reported crimes in Bangladesh, the figures, in reality, are almost certainly much higher. The following chart (cited in Farouk, 2005, p. 4) shows some of the statistics of violence against women in 2004.

**Table 2**

Acts of violence committed against Bangladeshi women in 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Torture for Dowry</th>
<th>Acid-burnt</th>
<th>Abduction</th>
<th>Rape</th>
<th>Murder or Murder after Rape</th>
<th>Harb</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Total no. of Violence</th>
<th>Total no. of accused</th>
<th>No. of arrested</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5081</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>1048</td>
<td>3063</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>4568</td>
<td>12746</td>
<td>54901</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In both years, the most disheartening statistic is the amount of cases filed compared to reported crimes. More than half of the reported crimes were not filed. In 2003, over 1456 rapes were reported, yet only 491 cases were filed. In the 2004 there were 12,746 reports of violence against women and only 5,584 arrests. This is less than half of the reported crimes. Considering that violence against women is one of the most underreported crimes, the actual number of crimes committed is in fact much higher. Therefore there are many more crimes that went unpunished. These statistics reflect the lack of efficient law enforcement and a poor attitude towards justice against those who have committed these violent attacks on women.
There are many factors that contribute to the large number of violent acts committed against Bangladeshi women. The first and most influential reason is that the strong patriarchal social system. Men are perceived as superior and see it as their right to maintain this dominance in a physical manner. There is also the tradition, especially in village areas, to use religion to legitimise the patriarchal system and values. Community leaders, again particularly in rural areas, will actively oppose the progress of women in order to safeguard their own positions of power within the community. They often remain quiet or even blame the victim of violent crimes to enforce the patriarchal system and discourage women’s empowerment. This was seen most vividly with the acid attack survivor who was forced to marry her attacker so he would not be punished. Secondly, although laws exist to protect women, correct enforcement of law and court procedures rarely takes place. It is often the case that law enforcement will take bribes, destroy evidence and ignore serious complaints. This has lead to a total breakdown of trust and confidence in the law enforcement process so that crimes mostly go unreported (Farouk, 2005).

Another contributing factor is the lack of support within certain communities that have become desensitised to the regular occurrence of violent crimes. Community members may fear retaliation for interfering in what is viewed as a norm, or may be suffering from a range of problems themselves and therefore rarely intervene (Farouk, 2005 & Mahtab, 2007). The most common and damaging forms of violence that became evident through my interviews, and are listed in table 1 and 2, were domestic violence, dowry related crime, rape and acid attack.

Domestic violence, in its various forms, is the most common of all the violent acts committed against women. Domestic violence occurs across economic classes, but is much more common amongst rural and poorer families where economic problems are prevalent. Farouk states, “an international report published by the United Nations in September of 2000 ranked the country first in wife beating and found that nearly half of the adult female population surveyed reported physical abuse by their husbands” (2005, p.6). This is an alarming statistic if at least half of the women in the sample group surveyed reported domestic abuse; keeping in mind the statistic may be higher as domestic violence is rarely reported.
Thus, domestic violence in Bangladesh is endemic and, to some extent, socially accepted. Farouk states, “despite the severe consequences to women’s physical and emotional health, domestic violence is not recognised as a serious social problem and society does not perceive domestic violence to be a serious crime” (2005, p. 6). Domestic violence is viewed as a personal matter, one to be dealt with privately in the home. However, this is normally resolved by the women’s subservience. Schiler, Hashemi & Badal interviewed many rural men who saw domestic violence as the man’s right:

Sister, if you don’t beat them they’ll stop being good. And if they’re good, and you beat them, they’ll stay that way … our wives would not be beaten so much if they were obedient and followed our orders, but women do not listen to us, and so they get beaten often. (1998, p. 151)

Their study also found that women shared this point of view and acknowledged that their husbands had the right to beat them.

The patriarchal system of Bangladesh places the women’s importance in relation to her position in her husband’s home. Women are taught that their self-worth directly relates to their marital status and men are socially conditioned to believe they are the superior sex. They are treated differently from their sisters, as the more valued member of the family with more access to assets, education and employment. As Farouk explains, “Bangladeshi women, as part of a patriarchal society, are from an early age, taught to be submissive, tolerant, and self-sacrificing” (2005, p. 5). These values make it extremely hard for women to speak out against domestic violence as the blame may often fall on the victim’s shoulders. Rather than being treated and supported as a victim of abuse, the women are stigmatised by their perceived failure to build a strong family unit. Rural women’s socio-economic situation makes it impossible for them to leave, so they endure many beatings, as they have nowhere else to go. It is very rare that their parents will take them in after a failed marriage.

Although dowry is illegal in Bangladesh, it is a major factor that curtails women’s equal rights and social status. The women’s family gives dowry in the form of money, possessions and land to the husband or his parents upon marriage. As discussed earlier, dowry is appropriated from Hindu tradition and goes against Islamic practice, yet is widely followed as it benefits the patriarchal society. Dowry encourages discrimination
that begins from birth. Preference for male children over female is prevalent, as families often have to produce large sums of money for dowries to marry their daughters off. On the other hand, a male child will bring in dowry and also a wife to look after his family, as women are expected to live with and serve their in-laws after marriage. Islam shares this view and explains that dowry is a deep rooted tradition in Bangladesh that is rarely questioned:

You have to remember that Muslim people are very religious and they are guided by the tradition. Suppose, dowry, they are taking this as if it is very normal. It is the tradition. They do not find any fault in this system. They are taking this as normal, this is the tradition, and this is the culture so we are taking it. They are not thinking that this is not fair we should not do that. Suppose my in-laws are taking dowry from my in-laws, and then they use this dowry for their daughter. They think that this is the system. I will take dowry from my daughter in-law and use it for my daughter. It is no problem. That is why there is a strong ask for sons. (N. Islam, personal communication, December, 2008)

Dowry continues to be considered a strong social norm in Bangladesh, and is a major catalyst for violence against women. The issue of dowry causes many problems for women in Bangladesh, in particular dowry related violence. In 2003 there were two hundred and sixty-two reported dowry related killings, and in 2004 there were 3081 reports of dowry related torture (Faiz-Ud-Din, 2008 & Farouk, 2005). Many women are tortured or killed over dowry. An article in the Daily Star\(^6\) states:

A woman on fire has made dowry deaths the most vicious of social crimes. It is an evil prevalent in the society and despite efforts by some activists and women's rights organisation to eliminate this menace, the numbers have continued to climb. In villages marriage was once considered a very sanctified bond united in the worst or best of times, in sickness or in health through the vicissitudes of life. But dowry related deaths have shattered that bond of peaceful and happy relationship. A recent survey by the Bangladesh Human Rights Organisation, and Bangladesh Women Lawyers Association revealed that in 2001, there were 12,500 cases of women repression, in 2002 the figure rose to 18,455 and in the year ending in 2003 the figure climbed to 22,450. The grisly act of a brute and greedy husband in Chapai Nawabganj as reported in the newspapers in December 27 last is a story better not be heard. Having failed to realise a dowry claim of Tk. 20,000/= Shamsher killed her wife Marina just on the 22nd day of their marriage. The most grisly side of the story is that Shamsher hired three other monsters for Tk. 300/= and Marina was slaughtered by Shamsher after she was forced to be gang raped by four human monsters including himself. (Amin, 2004)

\(^6\) The Daily Star is a Bangladeshi Daily Newspaper. It is available mainly in major cities.
According to the human rights organisation Odhikar in their October 2008 report on human rights violations in Bangladesh:

The most common reason for violence against women occurs due to dowry demands. Between January and September, a total of 219 women reportedly became victims of dowry demands. Due to dowry related violence, a total of 154 women were killed and 57 tortured. During this time, 8 women reportedly committed suicide, as they could not bear the abuse any more.

Many women I interviewed named dowry as the main contributor to their suffering and misfortune, especially in rural and poorer communities where dowry is relied on by the family of males for much needed financial support. In many cases the in-laws and/or husband will torture or beat the woman so her family will be pressured to produce more dowry, or the dowry they may have promised but have been unable to deliver. In my interview with Rotna (2009) she named dowry as the biggest issue women face in Bangladesh. She felt it was the main contributor to violence and discrimination against women. It is not only men who abuse and torture women over dowry. In many cases the mother in-law participates in, and sometimes instigates, such abuse. One woman I interviewed was twenty-two years old and was married approximately eight or nine years ago. She was beaten and tortured by her in-laws and her husband due to their dowry demands. She claims, “after marriage his family demanded dowry, but my family couldn’t fulfil their demand” (Slum Dweller, personal communication, December 23, 2008). He eventually left her as his parents arranged another bride for him to meet their demands.

Another women claimed her husband did not beat her over dowry, however his parents did. He left her because of it. She was married to him at age ten and he was much older than her. She states, “he quarrelled with my parents because they couldn’t fulfil the dowry and that’s why he left me” (Slum Dweller, personal communication, December 24, 2008). Her parents blamed her for the failure of the marriage and she was forced to leave home. Luckily her aunt took her in and she is now working in the garment industry. Her husband has since remarried. Dowry, in these cases, acts as a contributor to violence and the derogatory attitude that views women as an economic commodity. If money cannot be derived from the woman, then they may be abused, or cast aside.
Rape, particularly gang rape, is another damaging crime with a high rate of incidence in Bangladesh. The victims of these crimes not only suffer physically and psychologically, they also face the stigma of bringing shame and dishonour on their families. As Farouk explains:

Rape is one of the most brutal forms of violence against women in Bangladesh. In a culture that holds a woman’s chastity sacred, rape crimes are particularly injurious to a woman’s self-identity and social future as well as her physical and psychological well-being. The ever-increasing rate of rape crimes is an alarming phenomenon and depicts the diminishing value of women in society. (2005, p. 7)

Women are often tortured and killed when raped. The incidences of gang rape are also on the rise, suggesting that it is acceptable amongst some male peer groups. It is not only the rape that is alarming; it is the after effect as the women struggle to exist in a society that now views them as dishonourable and basically worthless. Women are often turned out of home, disowned by their family and viewed as disgusting and dirty.

Women who have been raped are often viewed as sluts or whores. In light of this, and the fact they have nowhere to turn, women may begin to work in prostitution as a means to survive. Many of the sex workers I interviewed turned to prostitution after being raped. One woman recounted her traumatic ordeal. She was working in a garments factory at the time and living in a shared house with other garment workers. She was ten years old:

One night a co-worker who also lived with me asked me to go out to get a coil for the electric heater that had burnt out. It was 12.30 at night. I told them I would collect it later, but they refused. When I went out the local gangsters caught me and took me to a playground of a school nearby, it was close to a mosque, and gang raped me. There were ten to fifteen men altogether and I couldn’t do a thing. Afterwards when I came back to my living place the girls I live with refused to let me in. I told them it is not my fault, but they wouldn’t budge. I couldn’t make them understand anything, how may I understand such a thing at that time. I didn’t even have my menstruation then. When I came to my living place my mess-mates refused to let me in then the landowner told them it was an accident and she didn’t have anything to do with it, please let her in. But they didn’t. (Sex Worker, personal communication, January 19, 2009)

The young girl had no choice but to turn to prostitution. She had nowhere to live and was taken in by a pimp who took her to the district of Narayanganj, known for prostitution. After returning to Dhaka she faced harassment on a daily basis. She continued:
I kind of starved for a month or so, actually lived on leftovers or whatever people gave me. It was like a living hell for me as men used my body but didn’t pay me for it. They used to come in dozens and jumped on me whenever they wanted. They even had long lines to have me ... I was about 13. (Sex Worker, personal communication, January 19, 2009)

She had completely resigned herself to prostitution, stating, “and you know I can only work one type of work, as a sex worker” (Sex Worker, personal communication, January 19, 2009). As with domestic violence and other violent crimes committed against women, rape and gang rape often go unreported. This is largely due to the social stigma that surrounds the women who fall victim to these damaging crimes. It is also due to the lack of confidence in the justice system, as women often do not want to go through more trauma only to have the legal system fail to bring justice. As the 2003 statistics show, out of the 1456 reported rapes, only 491 cases where actually filed. Spousal rape is also not legally punishable as Faiz-Ud-Din states, “sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under thirteen years of age, is not rape” (2008, p. 108). This reiterates the notion that men are superior and their wives are little more than domestic help and sexual objects. Their husband can have sexual intercourse with them whenever he wishes, with or without her consent.

Perhaps the most violent and disturbing crime committed against Bangladeshi women is acid attack. Acid attack is often considered a crime of ‘backward’ or ‘barbaric’ cultures. However, acid attack is a new crime directly related to modernisation. Acid attack first occurred in Bangladesh in the 1980s and is becoming increasingly common. Acid is often used as a weapon as it is cheap and easy to obtain. It is not only women who are the victims of acid attacks. There are also many cases where men are attacked. However, approximately seventy percent of survivors are women. Women are attacked for various reasons, such as dowry disputes, refusal of love, marriage or sex. Increasingly, the most common cause is over land or property disputes with neighbours. It is alarming that women are still the common victims in land disputes, as they are very rarely landowners. This reaffirms their position as the inferior and weaker sex and therefore, a prime target. The Acid Attack Foundation (ASF) (2008) describe the typical results of an acid attack:

An acid attack is caused by the perpetrator throwing nitric or sulphuric acid over their victims face or body to cause disfigurement and mutation. In many cases the face is completely destroyed. The acid causes the skin tissue to melt and can
sometimes even reach the bone causing it to dissolve. In many cases, the acid gets in the victim’s eyes causing blindness. The resulting scars go much deeper than the skin. Acid attack survivors not only suffer understandable psychological trauma, they are also ostracised by the community and face social isolation. In many cases even their own parents do not support them (Acid Survivor Foundation, 2008).

Acid attacks not only result in pain and suffering, they also force women back into the private sphere through social isolation. Acid attack is a confronting example of the resistance against modernisation, in particular women’s empowerment and integration into the public sphere.

Women who have survived an acid attack find it virtually impossible to find employment, marriage or even friendship. The fact that the women will most likely never marry again is particularly damaging in a society such as Bangladesh, where women’s economic and social value is based on their husbands. Acid attacks result in physical, psychological, economic and social trauma. In some cases local law settles the matter. The local law nearly always sides with the perpetrator, who is able to keep his freedom and even remarry, whilst the survivor of the attack is ostracised by society. One woman who survived an attack explains how she was forced to marry her offender so he would not face jail time:

I was proposed marriage. I said no and as a result of this my attacker threw acid all over my face and body. I cannot describe my pain. After treatment I went back to my village. I was made to marry him so he would not go to jail ... we are still married. (Acid Attack Survivor, personal communication, January 12, 2009)

Due to poverty and the lack of medical facilities in rural areas many patients can go days before receiving treatment. One acid attack survivor (2009) recounts the pain she suffered from her attack:

My uncle threw acid on me. He proposed to marry me and as a result of my refusal he threw acid on me. He himself threw acid on me. It was at night at one-thirty when I was sleeping. The date was the twenty-sixth of April 2000. The man first opened the door and threw acid from a bottle to my face and other parts of my body. After the incidence first I was admitted at Chittagong Medical College hospital and I stayed there for seven days having no treatment. (Acid Attack Survivor, personal communication, January 12, 2009)

Another acid attack survivor accounts the horror of the night her own husband through sulphuric acid all over her face and body:
He was involved with gambling and sometimes also drank alcohol. He demanded dowry from my parents three or four years after my marriage. In the night of incidence he lost in the gambling and told me he would sell the home, his only property. I opposed with his opinion and he became angry with me. But I thought everything would be easy if we got close sexually, as I heard that it makes couples very connected. After sexual intercourse I went to sleep with my child. When I was sleeping my husband went outside and locked the door with a bar. That I could not understand. Suddenly I found myself in extreme pain and burning and both me and my child shouted. Hearing our screaming people from the other house came out and entered my room by breaking the door. After that I knew nothing except pain that I cannot express now. There was no muscle in different areas of my body. (Acid Attack Survivor, personal communication, January 20, 2009)

The survivor also recounts the emotional pain she experienced upon returning to her village after treatment, “I used to hide myself inside the mosquito net. I just cannot go out outside and meet with people. I feel pain inside extremely. I never see myself in the mirror” (Acid Attack Survivor, personal communication, January 20, 2009). Her son also faces discrimination by society. “My child cannot show his face to society for his father’s conduct” (Acid Attack Survivor, personal communication, January 20, 2009). Her brother explains that the incident has brought shame on the entire family. “Our family had a prestige to all, but this incident has broken the entire honour to us” (Bother of Acid Attack Survivor, personal communication, January 20, 2009). She now lives in one room with her sister and her sister’s son. She is very scared for her future, as her family are no longer willing to take care of her:

Birds get back to their nest but I do not have any place to sleep. I said that I live with my sister. She has her son also who will get married soon. Then we would have no place to live later. My brother has no capacity to support me anymore. He has his family and growing sons who need more room to live. So I am nowhere. (Acid Attack Survivor, personal communication, January 20, 2009)

Her brother does what her can to help her. In this regard she is extremely lucky as most families will turn their back on their daughters due to the stigma associated with acid attacks. However, her brother also has to support his family and faces pressure from them. “Now I just cannot bear my sister’s sufferings. I also could not save any money for the future. Now it is difficult for me to bear my family expenses. My wife and sons blame my sister if I try to do anything for her” (Brother of Acid Attack Survivor, personal communication, January 20, 2009). Her brother’s wife and children have found
it hard to accept her since the incident and not only ostracise her, but become angered at her if her brother helps her financially.

Many laws exist to prevent and deter offenders from committing acid attacks. However, lack of law enforcement and lack of implementation of harsh punishment render the existing laws virtually useless. Offenders charged with committing an acid attack are punishable by death. Unfortunately, courts are extremely hesitant to hand down such sentences. The Acid Control Act was introduced to control unauthorised importation, production, storage, sale and use of acid without the appropriate license. These are all punishable offences, but due to the absence of effective monitoring or inspection processes, acid is readily available from many places such as grocery stores and stationary shops. Due to the lack of correct law enforcement many cases go unreported.

The crimes also go unreported as a result of intimidation, social stigma, poverty and lack of awareness. Nevertheless, between 2000 and 2004 over 1772 cases were reported (Faiz-Un-Din, 2008). As discussed above, acid attack is a ‘Modern’ form of violence. Incidences of acid attack were first reported in the 1980s and have grown increasingly since. Farouk states, “Bangladesh has the highest worldwide incidence of acid violence and, acid burns constitute nine percent of the total burn injuries in Bangladesh” (2005, p. 8). Modernisation has not only brought literacy and a move to the public sphere but has also introduced heinous crimes, such as acid attack, that force women back into the private sphere.

Almost every interview I conducted with rural and lower socio economic class revealed these women had suffered abuse in the form of either domestic violence, dowry related torture, rape or acid attack. These crimes highlight the extreme tension created when modernisation and traditional resistance clash. As women increasingly integrate into the public sphere, there becomes a higher risk of falling victim to these damaging crimes. These women, although extremely traumatised and stigmatised, are doing their best to survive in an intensely patriarchal society, which is struggling with the massive social change of modernity.
Chapter eight: Collaborative representation with an acid attack survivor

Finally, I return to the issue of the representation of the ‘Other’. As mentioned previously, this is particularly fraught in my case, as I am a Western researcher representing Eastern women. Photographs are a powerful medium. They provoke emotion, thought and response. But what do the women who have fallen victim to violent crimes, and are victims of the injustices within the Bangladeshi society, think of their representation? How do they see themselves and their situation in the context of an image? As part of my research in Bangladesh, I lived with Farida Begum, an acid attack survivor, for a week. I photographed her daily life. We slept in the same bed, ate all meals together and spent the entire day together. At the end of the week I requested she pick the photographs she thought best represented her and her situation (Appendix A and B), with the consideration that an international audience would view them.

The following photographs are the images Farida selected and her reasoning behind the selection. Acid attack survivors struggle immensely with their physical appearance, so the importance of representation in this case was extremely significant. The interview was emotionally taxing for Farida and she put a great deal of consideration into the images she chose. Despite being told she could choose as many images as she wished, Farida only chose ten. She had the choice of colour or black and white images. She chose the black and white. She said, “these black pictures are my choice. I like all the pictures. I was beautiful previously. Now I have nothing. Now this beauty is my beauty. My chest gets divided to see these pictures now” (F. Begum, personal communication, January 20, 2009). The order she chose them, and her commentary, is as follows.
Figure 1. The first image chosen by Farida

I liked to see it. Nobody else would be attacked by acid. People should be afraid of seeing the picture so that they never let others be attacked by acid. Only the acid burn victim can realise the pain of acid. I request people to look at my face, my eyes and stop throwing acid on others. This is my only wish.

Figure 2. The second image chosen by Farida

If I was not in my position, that is not be attacked by acid, I would sew the bed or pass the thread of the needle. I feel pain by seeing the needles and threads. I don’t have one eye but I have the other eye. I am passing my life with extreme sufferings. Having the difficulties, I am still proceeding in my life. I request others not to throw acid to any people.
When I was normal, my lying position looks beautiful. Now I am a survivor of acid victim. Many people are afraid of seeing me in my lying position. I feel much sorrow and sleep alone. I sleep alone so that nobody is afraid of my face. My eye never closes; it remains open when I sleep. My appearance looks very ugly, very devastating. I cannot keep any body beside me. I wish nobody will sleep alone like me because of acid. That is why I chose this picture; I want to share my feelings with others. I just cannot express myself only for my distorted appearance. I cannot mix with anybody. This is my desire, my feelings of sadness.
I like this picture very much. I had led my life with my husband for ten years. But out of an altercation he had thrown acid on me. I feel very sad to see this kind of window. It is as if a heavy storm blows toward me. Still now I feel pain when I stand beside a window. I feel panic still now if anybody throws acid to me through the window! I would like to alert everybody so that no one will throw acid ever. Everybody should close the window before going to sleep.
This is my picture! I just cannot accept it, I feel pain. After that I say to myself that I am improving and my gratitude goes to ASF. I remember Monira Apa [Director of ASF], Rikta Apa [Her case worker], and Ruksana Apa [ASF worker] for their cordial help. My nose, lips and face were clung together, They treated me and gave me my present condition. Now my facial condition is improving.
This picture indicates my front side and back side. It is all alike. It is horrible to look at my front side as well as the backside. I have no muscle in my neck and in my back. I suggest everybody repeatedly and repeatedly not to throw acid on any human beings. Those who are victim of acid only know the suffering of acid. He or she has no meaning of being alive or dead. That is why I am requesting repeatedly, my brothers and sisters, never throw acid on anybody. If anybody does harm to you please rely on the legal system. Never take acid in your hand. This is my wish.
If I were in my former position, I would have a baby. I will fondle him or her. It is very pathetic to me that I have a baby but I never took him in my lap because of my injury. Everybody is afraid of me; no one comes close to me. When I see a baby I really feel like taking care of it but I cannot. I can not express my deep feelings to anybody. What can I say more? He [her husband] also attacked my child. I live my life in extreme sorrow. I request to all never keep anybody away from their baby.

Figure 7. The seventh image chosen by Farida

If I were in my former position, I would have a baby. I will fondle him or her. It is very pathetic to me that I have a baby but I never took him in my lap because of my injury. Everybody is afraid of me; no one comes close to me. When I see a baby I really feel like taking care of it but I cannot. I can not express my deep feelings to anybody. What can I say more? He [her husband] also attacked my child. I live my life in extreme sorrow. I request to all never keep anybody away from their baby.

Figure 8. The eighth image chosen by Farida

In this picture I can stand with my brother, sister and father. We are able to take a snap altogether. When I was normal I captured my picture very smartly. I now take a photo in a very simple way. I feel very sad but I fell also happy thinking that I can stand beside others. These are all my wishes.
When I had a good face, I used to swim at the river, I felt delighted. Now I feel shy to go to the outside, let alone swimming. If I go for a bath now to the river everybody looks at me. I always go to the river covering my face. I just rush to the river and come back so quickly after taking only a short bath. Otherwise many people will gather. They make comments about me. I feel embarrassed. What more can I say to you? I wish to go to the river and swim.

I remember this; I saw a photograph from my past. It is the wish that comes from the deep of my heart, that is I am a mother of a child, but I also wish to live a conjugal life. But in my reality I need to suppress all of the wishes and desires of my mind. I was attacked by acid eleven years ago. I don’t know how I am passing my days. I feel disgust when I think of this matter. If I would have my face in minimum beauty I could
lead a family life or get married to somebody else. I can build my own family. I would have a very good feeling. I cannot express my sufferings to anybody. I have also my inner demands like any other person. I cannot express these.

Clearly Farida has positioned herself as a victim. However, the act of self-presentation here is heroic. She was adamant she wanted the horror of what she has been through and her continuing struggle portrayed in the images. She wanted people to be shocked. She wished for the images to act as a deterrent against acid attacks. Begum (2009), who strongly believes these sorts of "weird and strange crimes" should not be highlighted in the media, does not share this position:

There is particular violence in Bangladesh, its heinous. I don’t have the language to describe it. But I don’t think there is any need to highlight it too much … there is violence against women in other countries and we have violence against women in our society. I just think to highlight it and draw attention to it, especially foreign attention to it. To show that Bangladesh is especially degrading women more, because I don’t think it is especially more compared to other societies ... so I think these crimes should not be highlighted and Bangladeshi men should not be condemned. That weird and strange crime, do you think it represents a society? Should be used to represent a society? (A. Begum, personal communication, April 18, 2009)

Begum (2009) has raised an excellent point. However, it is a point that will only lead to contradictions. These crimes should not be used to represent a society as a whole. Nevertheless, it will also lead to damaging effects if awareness of these crimes does not exist. The media is an influential medium for raising awareness and much needed funding for NGOs that address these crimes. The Acid Survivor Foundation, for example, used both national and international media outlets to their benefit to raise awareness of the issue of acid attacks. This included awareness on the rise in acid attacks, how to immediately treat burns after the attacks and prevention and treatment issues. The Acid Survivor Foundation even created an annual media award in 2005 to recognise the involvement of the media in raising awareness of acid attacks. They also held an international conference this year to heighten international awareness (ASF, 2008).

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The contradiction lies in the different approaches towards representation. Begum (2009) comes from a political science background and when she speaks of representation she is referring to its effect on the Bangladeshi state:

Bangladesh is poor. It is a poor developing country; there are so many ways to manipulate a poor developing country because of its weaknesses. Its state is weak, its laws are weak and we are struggling with our economy. Maybe those who like to highlight it get some benefit out of it. They may have a hidden agenda, from a political science point of view, to degrade Bangladesh as a failed state, as a wrong state, as a society infested with terrorists and infested with religious fanatics. Its nothing like that, it is a struggling democracy. As I said, I am saying this as a political science person. (A. Begum, personal communication, April 18, 2009)

As previously discussed, by portraying Bangladesh as a weak state, or poorly developed country, Western countries are able to benefit from introducing development programs. Nader claims, “in the West positions of superiority are translated into development programs for transforming the lives of those technologically underdeveloped and the mechanisms used are related to programs of economic development” (1989, p. 328). This supports Begum’s concept that heightening these issues will lead to benefits in the West, to the detriment of the East. However, if we look at the views of the institutions that protect the victims of violent crimes and the views of one of the survivors, we see that they contradict the views of Begum. To those who have survived an acid attack representation, and in turn greater awareness of these crimes, is instrumental in the fight against these heinous crimes. Farida is very specific on her thoughts about her representation:

I liked to see it (the photograph). Nobody else would be attacked by acid. People should be afraid of seeing the picture so that they never let others be attacked by acid. Only the acid burn victim can realise the pain of acid. I request people to look at my face, my eyes and stop throwing acid on others. This is my only wish. (F. Begum, personal communication, January 20, 2009)

Abstract discourse of ‘political science’ and ‘modernisation’ thus conflicts with personal discourse of an actual survivor who has suffered real, tangible pain and suffering. That is, a material experience of cruel reality. I have chosen to highlight Farida’s views on the representation of acid attack first and foremost as she has actually suffered the consequences first hand. As she said, “only the acid burn victim can realise the pain of acid” (F. Begum, personal communication, January 20, 2009). I have also chosen to highlight acid attacks because it is a direct instability of change, of modernisation meeting traditional patriarchal resistance. However, this is not to say that

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I have not taken Begum's (2009) views into account. I do not think these crimes should represent a society. I disagree with the Orientalist view that crimes such as these are the result of a 'backward' or 'barbaric' culture that needs to be modernised quickly to avoid such crimes. Rather, it is a modern symptom of the extreme stress on a culture trying to negotiate between modernisation and traditional culture.
Chapter ten: Conclusion

While my areas of research may seem diverse there is one major thread that ties the research together: modernisation and its affect on the lives of lower socio-economic and working class Bangladeshi women. This thread became apparent to me whilst conducting research into women’s rights in Bangladesh and also into theories surrounding representation. Through my fieldwork, the key issues became apparent: the traditional place of women in the patriarchy of Bangladeshi society; the changing private and public paradigms for women in a modernising society; the rising level of violence against women as the patriarchy meets modernisation and Western hegemony; and the different and contradicting opinions surrounding the representation of the ‘Other’. I have argued that while modernisation has been instrumental in encouraging the integration of women into the public sphere, the western assumption that modernisation will increase women’s empowerment in an incremental manner blatantly ignores the new issues and tensions that modernisation creates. This naivety can result in a misleading understanding of the cause of injustices women face and thus diverting attention from effective solutions. I have explored this argument through my interviews, field research and secondary research and through my photographic representation. This research has demonstrated that women’s empowerment in Bangladesh is a constant struggle of losing and gaining and, at times, of sheer survival.

Looking into modernisation in a country and culture that is not my own means it is essential for me to reflect on my position as a Western researcher, investigating and representing issues concerning Eastern Bangladeshi women, through an analysis of Orientalism. The concept of Orientalism is particularly valuable for research such as mine, as it invites analysis and reflexivity about research conducted in and on the East. However, there are many inconsistencies within the Orientalism debate. Nader (1989) believes the critical representation of the ‘Other’ has not only resulted in a deflection from the issue of subordination of women in both the East and the West, but also serves as a mechanism that creates patriarchal norms and keeps them in place. She argues that by concentrating on the East/West dialectic, the male/female dialectic becomes disadvantaged. Thus Nader calls for an approach that foregrounds ‘both/and’.

While my work is primarily concerned with the power dialectic between male and female, it also considers the East/West dialectic by acknowledging the Western filter I
bring to my representation and to my analysis. I developed a strategy of foregrounding the voices of Bangladeshi women to sit alongside my photographs, using collaborative representation to provide a context for the reading of these photographs. I have also included, as often and in as much detail possible, the voices of the women who deal with the key research areas first hand. Therefore, I offer a voice to those who often remain voiceless in the representation process. I have endeavoured, through use of these methods, to avoid the worst aspects of Orientalist behaviour and interpretation.

I would argue that when photographing anyone other than oneself, one is inevitably representing the ‘Other’. A photograph can never represent a whole truth when one takes into consideration that the image filters through a process of mediation. It begins with how the subject chooses to position themselves in relation to the other. The image is again mediated by the producer and the different techniques and attributes they adopt to represent the subject, the context in which the image is viewed, and the different ideologies the viewer brings to their individual reading of the photograph. Muecke highlights the dilemma for those seeking ‘the truth’. “But, the reader protests, the job is to paint them just as they are. Sorry, but you can’t” (Muecke, n.d, p. 11). Every image I captured involved an interaction with the subject, sometimes lasting for weeks. This involvement changed and shaped each and every photograph and instantly created a collaborative participation in the representation process. However, it is impossible to completely subdue my Western ideologies and preconceived knowledge. My photographs should be read and thought of as a representation, informed by information provided to me by Bangladeshi women. The photographs are not intended to represent a whole truth. The body of work is a small and partial window into the lives of Bangladeshi women, read through a number of different forms of mediation including secondary research, interviews, collaborative representation and participant observation.

Secondary research shows that gender inequality is deeply embedded in the social norms of the strong patriarchal society of Bangladesh. The low social status of women affects Bangladeshi women in both the public and private spheres. At present, women’s rights and social status in Bangladesh is at the forefront of debate nationally and internationally. Although the dialogue and recognition of inequality has been largely established, there remains a huge disparity between the social status of men and women. Many laws in Bangladesh, especially those designed to protect women, are not enforced
and are therefore useless. Changes in cultural practice must stem from the government and by reinforced implementation of the law. However, changes to government policies and procedures are met with constant religious backlash. This again shows that changes to social norms, through government intervention or through other means such as modernisation, are a constant struggle between change and resistance; the constant struggle of loss and gain.

One positive result of modernisation is the increase in female adult literacy rates. For the first time in history, this rate has become higher than the male adult literacy levels in both rural and urban areas. Growth in female literacy rates can be attributed to the recent policies and activities of both government and non-government organisations aimed at increasing female literacy levels. This is an extremely positive result of the effects of modernisation. It depicts a shift in social norms that previously constrained women from participating in valuable education. This change in social norms is also evident in the interviews that depict a change in parents’ attitudes towards the education of their daughters.

Other aspects of modernisation have a more mixed impact on women’s empowerment. On the positive side, the garment industry is one of the main factors encouraging a shift in social norms and the position of women in Bangladesh. This became apparent through the many interviews I conducted with lower socio-economic women. Through the garment industry, women are gaining access to their own income and developing new social networks with their co-workers. Women working in the garment industry conceive fewer children and, under the influence of their informed colleagues, they become aware of practices such as family planning and contraception. The women also become determined to improve their financial situation through work, and realise this will not happen if they have a large family. The participation in paid work also gives women more financial decision-making power within their family, a role traditionally viewed as solely a male role. They are also working hard to ensure a better future for their children. Given the research into women’s rights, the lower birth rates and increased economic freedom show a change in the view that women are solely mothers and wives.
However, there are also many negative factors that arise due to these changing paradigms. Women occupy the bottom roles and often have to work fourteen-hour shifts with few or no breaks. For a helper or operator, this involves sitting, or in some cases standing, at a sewing machine for the entire shift. While the working conditions are bad, the main concern for female workers is their security. Many female workers face harassment and outright violence in the workplace and also security issues when finishing work. There have been many reports of women being attacked or raped on their way home. Solicitation into the sex industry is also prevalent. The garment industry is a key example of how modernisation can create both advantages and disadvantages for those most affected. This tension is created by the new value systems that are imported along with the developments from the West, and resistance from the prevailing social norms in Bangladesh.

Micro-credit is another important institution influencing the lives of millions of lower socio-economic class Bangladeshi women and contributing to the tension of modernisation. Microcredit is a highly contested issue, especially for its role in the empowerment of women. On the one hand micro-credit is thought to empower women by giving them the means to participate in economic activities and gain financial independence, or at the very least contribute to family financial decisions. Women who take control of their loans experience empowerment and control over their financial situation and women who do not experience control over the loan still benefit from an increase in consumption standards. One major contribution of micro-credit towards the perceived empowerment of women is an increase in mobility and social interaction. The group interaction has formed new processes of social interaction amongst women outside of the home and their normal social paradigms. This has allowed women to become more mobile and establish new social networks and support systems. This is much like the scenario in the garment industry.

On the other hand, critics believe micro-finance rarely increases empowerment for women. In fact, they believe that it sometimes does the opposite: as the change becomes more prominent, so to do the counter assertions. Introducing micro-credit into rural areas can increase the rates of violence as the women begin to gain more financial and social power, and men often feel that the patriarchal system is under threat. Grameen claim to discuss several issues women are facing, however they do not address issues of
domestic violence. This is even the case when Grameen are confronted with women who bear the physical signs of domestic abuse. Cases have been reported where women are actually beaten at weekly meetings. Bangladeshi women who receive loans are under pressure on two fronts; from their husbands who take control of the loan and also from the peers in their new social network who expect them to repay the loans. The increase in development, especially through micro-finance, is creating changes in social norms and increasing claims that development results in empowerment for women. However, this is also met with a backlash that aims to maintain the patriarchal system and can involve violent repercussions for women.

These changing paradigms in Bangladesh and the resistance from the patriarchal system result in discrimination against Bangladeshi women in both public and private spheres. Reported rates of violence against women are extremely high, which is alarming considering gender related crimes are the most underreported crimes in Bangladesh. The most disheartening statistic is the amount of cases filed compared to reported crimes. More than half of the reported crimes were not filed. The four most common violent crimes Bangladeshi women face are domestic violence, dowry related violence, rape and acid attacks.

Domestic violence is perhaps the most common of all the violent acts committed against women. Domestic violence occurs across economic classes, but is much more common amongst rural and poorer families where economic problems are prevalent. The patriarchal system of Bangladesh rates the women’s importance in relation to her position in her husband’s home. Women are taught that their self-worth directly relates to their marital status. Men are also socially conditioned to believe they are the superior sex and therefore most women and men believe that domestic violence is a private and acceptable practice. Dowry is a major factor that curtails women’s equal rights and social status in Bangladesh. Dowry encourages a discrimination that begins from birth. Preference for male children over female is prevalent, as families often have to produce large sums of money for dowries to marry their daughters off. Many women I interviewed named dowry as the main contributor to their suffering and misfortune.

In the ‘public’ sphere, rape and gang rape is a damaging crime with a high rate of incidence in Bangladesh. The survivors of these crimes not only suffer physically and
psychologically, they also face the stigma of bringing shame and dishonour on their families. It is not only the rape that is damaging; it is the after effect as the women struggle to exist in a society that now views them as dishonourable and basically worthless. Women often begin to work in prostitution as a means to survive. Perhaps the most violent and disturbing crime is acid attacks. Acid attacks are becoming more common in Bangladesh, and they now have the highest rate of reported attacks. Acid is often used as a weapon as it is cheap and easy to obtain. As with all crimes, many laws exist to prevent and deter offenders from committing acid attacks. However, lack of law enforcement and lack of implementation of harsh punishment render the existing laws virtually useless. Almost every interview I conducted with rural and lower socio economic class revealed these women had suffered abuse in the form of either domestic violence, dowry related torture, rape or acid attack. These women, although extremely traumatised and stigmatised, were doing their best to survive in an intensely patriarchal society.

Acid attack is a confronting example of the negative results of modernisation. Acid attack is a modern crime, which first began in the 1980’s and the incident rates have been increasing ever since. Acid attack survivors struggle immensely with their physical appearance, so the importance of investigating issues of representation, through collaborative photography, was especially important. It is evident that the acid attack survivor I collaborated with positioned herself as a victim. However, I must stress that the actual act of self-presentation here is heroic to say the least. Farida was adamant she wanted the horror of what she has been through and her continuing struggle portrayed in the images. She wanted people to be shocked. She wished for the images to act as a deterrent against acid attacks.

Begum (2009) also raised an important counter argument. She feels these crimes should not be used to represent Bangladeshi society as a whole, which they definitely should not. Nevertheless, it will also lead to damaging effects if awareness of these crimes does not exist. The argument is fraught with contradiction and it ultimately rests with the different approaches towards representation. Begum (2009) comes from a political science background and when she speaks of representation she is referring to its effect on the Bangladeshi state, whereas Farida is speaking from a personal point of view and wishes only for public awareness to deter future acid attacks. Acid attacks are generally
stereotyped as a result of ‘backward’ or ‘barbaric’ cultures. However, acid attacks are a modern and increasing crime in Bangladesh. Therefore, correct information of the result of moderation is imperative to assist in greater knowledge as to why these crimes occur and how to develop appropriate solutions.

My experience in Bangladesh was certainly life changing: it raised issues that have since made me question my approach, my society, my ideologies, and myself. My original proposal began with a naïve intention to focus the photographic representation on moments of strength, avoiding any connotations of victimhood. This original view aligned more with the ideologies of Begum (2009), who believes that Bangladesh should not be represented as weak. It also aligned with Said’s Orientalist critique. However, this view changed substantially through the fieldwork. I originally struggled with my preconceived knowledge of Orientalism and found it difficult to photograph as I was constantly confronted with stories of immense struggle and victimhood, the very theme I was trying to avoid. It was not until I started interviewing many lower socio-economic women that I began to feel that avoiding these representations of women could also be considered Orientalist practice. The realisation that local female commentators rarely had direct contact with lower socio-economic class women also caused me to revaluate my proposed research plan. By making a conscious decision to represent lower socio-economic Bangladeshi women as strong and not as victims I would still be controlling how I felt they should be represented. Thus would have conveyed my ideological standpoint rather than the view of the women I had interviewed.

I considered the best practice was to photograph what I saw, concerned and informed by the information that I had gathered first hand from lower socio-economic Bangladeshi women. Perhaps I have still managed, in some way, to convey the strengths of the Bangladeshi women and the positives they take from their situations. However, I have included the negative aspects and their sheer struggle for survival in a strong patriarchal society. I believe their continual struggle to merely survive in their circumstances is testament to their strength. This dissertation, along with the photographic component, is an exploration of the struggles Bangladeshi women face. It explores the loss, the gain and the struggle to survive as modernisation increases and the traditional paradigms both relax and tighten: at times creating new tension and at other times releasing old
tension for Bangladeshi women. It is important for the West to understand that not all
discrimination and violence against women is a result of a ‘backward’ culture. Rather,
modernisation and the integration of Western ideologies with Eastern cultures can
curtail women’s empowerment. It essential to explore the cause of such problems,
rather than assuming modernisation will automatically amend such problems. This will
lead to a better understanding, not only of the cause and effect, but also of possible
solutions.
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