

FALSE PATRIARCHAL SERMON NARRATIVES ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND THEIR GENDERED CONSEQUENCES IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract. Digital circulation of Waj Mahfil sermon clips in Bangladesh often promotes patriarchal misreadings that travel from screen to household rules and institutional actions. This study analyzes four widely viewed clips containing false patriarchal narratives alongside paired reported incidents to map how selective interpretation and platform amplification produce constraints on girls' schooling, women's employment and leadership, and safe mobility. Using a consistent case template with brief excerpt, scriptural verification, timeline, and analysis, the study applies representation theory to show how meaning is made through captions, metaphors, and editing, and social norms theory to explain how those meanings harden into injunctive and descriptive rules. Cross case findings reveal a common mechanism. Vivid claims about female obedience, polygyny, and women's unsuitability for public life are amplified online, absorbed in families and communities, and then enforced through harassment, gatekeeping, or administrative decisions, with documented consequences that include education dropout, economic vulnerability, curtailed participation, domestic violence, and dangerous delays in care. The article contributes a claim to consequence framework that separates religious teaching from preacher rhetoric and identifies actionable leverage points for educators, community leaders, platforms, and policymakers who seek to support accurate religious learning and protect women's rights.

Keywords: *patriarchal misreadings, gender perspectives, Bangladesh, coercive control, sermon*

Introduction

In Bangladesh, religion, media, and daily life now meet on the same screen. Waj Mahfil sermons that once filled village fields or mosque courtyards travel via Facebook, YouTube, and short-video apps to audiences across districts and into the diaspora (Campbell, 2013; Hoover, 2006). This reach widens access to learning but also favors vivid, simplified, emotive claims that draw clicks and shares (Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2013). Authority is encountered not only in a preacher's words but in captions, thumbnails, subtitles, and recommendation feeds that pre-frame meaning (Yasmin, 2023; Jenkins et al., 2013). In this environment, messages about women's roles in family, work, education, mobility, and leadership are taught and packaged in ways that can shape everyday choices (Thizbee, 2025; Kabeer, 2024). Waj Mahfil is a long-standing forum of public religious instruction. Today its recordings reach mixed rural, urban and overseas audiences. Credible teaching sits alongside speculative or poorly sourced content, and monetization can push attention-grabbing material up the feed. Many viewers rely on these clips because access to balanced study circles or trained teachers is uneven, especially outside major cities (Yasmin, 2023; Jenkins et al., 2013). When claims about women are presented as binding rules without context, they can harden into household norms and institutional expectations that constrain schooling, employment, leadership, and access to care (Kabeer, 2024; Thizbee, 2025).

Research in religion and communication shows that digital media change how authority, interpretation, and participation work in religious communities (Campbell,

2013; Hoover, 2006). Audiences now meet sermons as short clips, subtitles, sound bites, and reaction videos that move through pages, groups, and messaging apps (Jenkins et al., 2013). As circulation expands, context can narrow. Viewers may receive partial quotations, paraphrases without source, or claims that sit uneasily with mainstream readings, yet still feel persuasive because they arrive in a familiar aesthetic and are endorsed by peers through likes and shares (Yasmin, 2023; Couldry and Hepp, 2017). These dynamics matter for gender. Online discourse rarely remains abstract. It enters family talk, school and workplace expectations, and community norms. Bangladesh-based studies on online safety and participation document how hostile discourse chills women's visibility and voice, while verification gaps and weak moderation help misleading content travel widely (Yasmin, 2023; ActionAid Bangladesh, 2022). At the same time, scholarship on women's agency in South Asia shows how norms about respectability, mobility, and obedience shape concrete choices about schooling, employment, and leadership, especially when resources are scarce and social sanction is strong (Kabeer, 2024).

Within this broader field, Waj Mahfil recordings provide a useful lens. They are culturally familiar, easy to access, and often framed as moral guidance. They also illustrate how authority is negotiated online. A clip's meaning is produced not only by the speaker and text, but also by selective editing, the sequencing of highlights, and the conversational layer of comments. For many viewers, these materials function as everyday reference points. The same portability that increases access also increases the risk that claims detached from context will circulate as rules of action. Firstly, the study traces a clear line from what is said online to what happens offline in education, economic security, health, and civic life. Secondly, it adds brief, source-based notes that show where a clip's wording or scope departs from mainstream readings. Thirdly, it turns the findings into usable guidance for educators, community leaders, and platforms so they can support accurate religious learning and reduce harm. The objectives of this research are as follows: (1) Determine whether circulating sermon misstatements normalize male authority in household and community norms; (2) Evaluate whether exposure to these narratives correlates with reduced participation by women in schooling, paid work, and public leadership; (3) Assess how these narratives shape gender perspectives by diminishing women's perceived status and opportunities as members of society and as citizens.

Literature review

There is an emerging body of literature regarding misinformation in popular religious speech and its implications for women's education, work, and civic participation in Bangladesh. Islam grants women a high and honored status. However, this principle is not reflected in many Muslim societies and that Western audiences often hold misconceptions about women in Islam. Some Waj Mahfils ridicule women and in the name of religion, people sometimes block women's education and earning, even though Islam does not forbid either. Thus, women's position in Islam is being distorted and misrepresented to the public (Hossain, 2021). A set of recurring sermon claims, such as, women's roles fixed to domestic service and childbearing, discouragement of girls' schooling, normalization of polygamy, and standing requirements for spousal permission to move is documented, which show how partial citations, paraphrase without source, and dehumanizing analogies travel on YouTube and Facebook. Such consequences urge verification against religious scripture and hadith (Thizbee, 2025).

How women's agency is negotiated within, against, and through patriarchal norms along with why shifts in income or policy do not automatically yield equal participation without normative change, has been mapped for Bangladesh, illuminating how religiously framed rules can narrow life chances when received as binding obligations (Kabeer, 2024). Evidence of online hostility shows tangible chilling effects, such as, many women reduce activity, mask identity, or step back from public engagement in response to abuse, with weak redress mechanisms compounding harm (ActionAid Bangladesh, 2022). Bangladesh-focused analyses similarly trace how misogynistic tropes circulate through attention-seeking formats and lax moderation, depressing women's visibility and participation (Yasmin, 2023). Networked platforms have reconfigured religious authority, as sermons now arrive with titles, thumbnails, and other paratexts that steer interpretation and elevate selective readings for mass audiences (Campbell, 2013). Media logics, such as, brevity, impact, and publicity shape how religious messages are produced and received, often compressing context and shifting authority from institutions to media formats (Hoover, 2006).

Simple, vivid, emotionally charged content travels far, aided by platform design and community curation, and these dynamics help short sermon clips reach new publics while shedding nuance (Jenkins et al., 2013). Repetition across feeds can naturalize selective claims as "common sense," even when grounded in partial quotations or weak sourcing (Couldry and Hepp, 2017). Finally, meaning is made through selection and framing as analogies, labels, and omissions are not merely found in texts. Applied to sermons, such representational moves can re-code women's roles and rights in public imagination, with downstream social effects (Hall, 1997). Existing scholarship maps the themes and how these sermons move online, yet two gaps remain. First, few studies systematically verify the Qur'an and Hadith citations used in clips or explain when scope and conditions are taken out of context for online audiences (Thizbee, 2025). Second, there is little process-level analysis that links a specific online claim to a concrete social outcome, such as changes in participation in education, employment, public leadership, or access to care. This article addresses these gaps by restricting the sample to misstatements already established in prior scholarship.

Theoretical framework

This study combines representation theory and social norms theory.

Representation theory

Following Stuart Hall, representation is the process through which language and images make meaning rather than mirror it (Hall, 1997). Meaning is produced through selection and framing in speech, captions, thumbnails, and other paratexts (Campbell, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2013; Hall, 1997). I analyzed Waj Mahfil clips by Bangladeshi speakers as representational acts and trace how selective citation, metaphor, labeling, and silence position women as domestic, dependent, or unsafe in public (Haq, 2011; Hall, 1997).

Social norms theory

Social norms theory links meanings to behavior (Bicchieri, 2016; Cialdini et al., 1991). In this study, each clip is treated as a norm signal that carries injunctive cues about what one ought to do and descriptive cues about what people like us do (Cialdini

et al., 1991). This lens clarifies how audiences translate media messages into household rules and public actions in schooling, work, leadership, and emergency care (Kabeer, 2024; Bicchieri, 2016; Cialdini et al., 1991). Analytically, the study uses representation theory to read how captions, metaphors, and editing choices make meaning, not just mirror it, and social-norms theory to show how those meanings travel as injunctive and descriptive cues that people translate into household rules and public actions.

Materials and Methods

Study area

The study area of this study is social media, where the focus is on Waj Mahfil clips by Bangladeshi speakers that are posted on YouTube and Facebook and reach audiences in Bangladesh.

Method

This study applies qualitative content analysis to recorded Waj Mahfil speech and its online packaging. Claims are coded, cited sources are checked, and patterns are compared across four cases. Claim selection is restricted to misstatements already established by prior scholarship. The goal is to connect these previously verified claims to reported impact cases. Using focused case studies, the analysis examines whether these claims normalize male authority and reduce women's participation in education, employment, and public life, and it assesses how such narratives shape gender perspectives by diminishing women's status and opportunities as members of society and as citizens. For verification I consulted Qur'an and Hadith, and I also drew on peer reviewed research articles and scholarly books, along with policy and research reports on women's participation and online harms in Bangladesh. Public platform documentation helped interpret visible monetization and distribution cues. Crucially, the cases do not assert that any specific sermon clip directly caused the paired incidents. Rather, each clip is treated as a carrier of frames and norm signals, and the analysis asks whether those frames align with the targets, justifications, and repertoires of action reported across incidents.

Study population and sampling

By using purposive sampling, this study selects four widely circulated Bangla Waj Mahfil clips by Bangladeshi speakers, recorded in Bangladesh and shared on YouTube or Facebook. Each clip makes an explicit claim about women's roles or rights and cites or paraphrases Qur'an or Hadith, and each has been flagged in prior scholarship as a misstatement. For every clip, I pair it with one Bangladesh-based incident or public document in the same domain. Clips are transcribed in Bangla and translated into English.

Inclusion criteria

Bangla sermons by Bangladeshi speakers are used for this study. The included clips are public and intact, makes explicit claims about women's roles or rights, cites or paraphrases Qur'an or Hadith, has clear audio and video, shows upload date and source, and the focal claim matches a misstatement already established by prior scholarship.

Results and Discussion

This study follows a consistent case template, where a brief clip excerpt with timestamps, a short scriptural check against mainstream sources, a paired reported incident or evidence based public document to anchor real-world outcome, a simple process-tracing timeline, and concise analysis. Claim selection is limited to statements already identified as misstatements in prior scholarship. Importantly, the cases do not claim that any specific clip directly caused the incident that follows. Rather, they show that the sermon frames, the targets they single out, the justifications they rehearse, and the repertoires of action they recommend closely mirror what appears across reported incidents during the period.

Objectification as a control trope

Discourse and misinterpretation regarding limiting girls' schooling and policing women's presence: The sermon of Shah Ahmed Shafi

Shah Ahmed Shafi, in a sermon circulated via YouTube, argued that girls should only study up to class four or five, claiming this would enable them to calculate their husband's money after marriage. Shafi also opposed co-education, comparing women to tamarinds and stating that contact with women generates "bad thoughts" in men of all ages. His discourse frames women's education as a social threat, delegitimizes their autonomy, and reinforces patriarchal control over female life choices. Mainstream readings emphasize pursuit of knowledge and mutual moral responsibility rather than gender-based ceilings on education (Qur'an 20:114; 39:9; 9:122). The "tamarind" comparison is a rhetorical device, not a scriptural teaching, as there is no textual basis for restricting girls' education to primary grades or for depicting co-education as intrinsically sinful (Thizbee, 2025). The sound-bite "girls are like tamarinds" and a simple policy line "stop at class 4–5" are vivid, emotionally charged cues that travel far on social platforms, where engagement incentives privilege short, moralizing content over context and sourcing (Yasmin, 2023; Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2013).

Reported case: Dhaka University student harassment on attire, police-station siege, and case withdrawal

On 5 March 2025, a Dhaka University student was stopped by the staff member, who called her dress "inappropriate" and made "foul comments". That night, DU authorities handed him to police, and the proctor said he admitted to verbally abusing the student during questioning. Later, in the early hours of 6 March 2025, a crowd identifying itself as "Tawhidi Janata" (lit. "monotheist people"; used as a protest banner by self-identified religious crowds in Bangladesh) gathered at Shahbagh Police Station around 1:00 a.m., entered the station, and livestreamed from inside the duty officer's room while demanding the detainee's release. Officers repeatedly said they had no authority to release anyone and urged the group not to create a "mob" situation, before the crowd moved back outside around 2:15 a.m. to continue a sit-in. By morning the mobilization shifted to the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Court, where the DU library employee was granted bail the same day, signaling a transfer of pressure from police premises to judicial settings ("DU employee gets bail in student harassment case," 2025). Supporters identifying themselves as "Tawhidi Janata" greeted the accused outside

court with flower garlands and widely shared images also showed him being presented with a turban and a copy of the Holy Qur'an. The next day, the student applied to withdraw the case, with coverage describing rape and death threats (*Figure 1*).



Figure 1. DU employee Mostofa Asif granted bail, 6 March 2025.

From discourse to social impact

The pathway in this case begins with categorical messages of the sermon that girls should stop school after class four or five and with a stigmatizing “tamarind” metaphor that frames girls’ public presence as morally dangerous as it triggers male desire. These short, emotionally charged lines travel quickly on platforms that reward sensational moral talk over careful context (Yasmin, 2023; Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2013). Once absorbed at home and in community spaces, these cues legitimate the public policing of women’s presence. The March 2025 Dhaka University incident shows how a crowd styling itself “Tawhidi Janata” besieged Shahbagh Police Station overnight to demand the release of a man accused of harassing a female student, then shifted the pressure to court where he secured bail the same day. It was an escalation that normalized the targeting of the complainant, who withdrew her case amid death and rape threats. Survey evidence shows the downstream behavioral response, where many women self-censor, reduce posting, or hide identity after abuse (ActionAid Bangladesh, 2022), and editorial summaries of national polling report that roughly half of women avoid online engagement or mask identity for safety. Here, the pattern unfolds step by step, where a moralizing message with women objectification in the name of religion reaches people and goes viral online, the framing then rallies a crowd that presses its demands in public, and institutions accommodate that pressure through suspensions, restrictions, or other concessions so that women’s safe access to public space narrows at each stage.

Education outcomes are shaped in the same way. In many households the message is received as religious permission to pull daughters from secondary school, when “girls are like tamarinds” is repeated as common sense and paired with a ceiling on schooling. National reporting shows that secondary enrollment has fallen for three consecutive years, a trend that heightens girls’ exposure to early marriage negotiations once they leave school. Global and country-level child-marriage monitoring warn that Bangladesh

continues to face very high rates and UNICEF likewise reports that Bangladesh has the highest child-marriage rate in Asia and urges investment in girls' education to reduce risk (UNICEF, 2025). Complementary analyses by Girls Not Brides emphasize that restrictive gender norms which are often framed in religious language, lower the perceived returns to girls' schooling and accelerate marriage as a "protective" strategy in conservative settings (GNB, 2024).

Taken together, the "tamarind" objectification along with the bright-line schooling ceiling do not remain discursive flourishes. They provide ready-made rules for gatekeeping women's visibility and movement and for curtailing girls' education as these rules are validated by crowds in the street and then reflected in institutional behavior. The net effect shows harassment and self-censorship in public life, falling secondary retention for girls, and higher exposure to early marriage, all intensified by the attention economy's preference for simplified, moralized claims (Yasmin, 2023; Jenkins et al., 2013).

Normalizing polygyny

Discourse and misinterpretation regarding plural marriages: The sermon of Abu Twaha Muhammad Adnan

Abu Twaha Muhammad Adnan, in a sermon circulated in 2021, stated that marrying more than once reflects a man's strength and that marriage depends solely on the will of the male. He claimed that men can have multiple marriages if they choose, citing demographic statistics which is, "1 man to 4 women" and comparing it to Western countries. He also labeled feminists as "Agents of Dajjal," framing opposition to male polygamy as morally corrupt or anti-Islamic. This discourse presents polygamy as an unquestionable right of men while dismissing women's agency and legal consent (Alor Path, 2021). The verse most commonly cited on plural marriage (Qur'an 4:3) presents polygyny as a 'conditional' permission tied to a stringent requirement of justice among wives; mainstream readings note that where justice cannot be assured, the text directs men to "one" (Qur'an 4:129) and underscores the limits of equal treatment. Nothing in the verse makes polygyny a measure of masculinity or a status ideal (Thizbee, 2025). The demographic claim that there are "four women for each man" is also incorrect: Bangladesh's 2022 census reports ~98 males per 100 females, and global estimates likewise cluster close to this, not 1:4 (UN DESA, 2024; BBS, 2022). The "backbone" rhetoric and the sweeping "1:4" statistic are vivid, simplified cues that travel easily on social platforms; engagement-driven circulation favors emotionally charged claims and primes audience interpretation before viewers encounter careful sourcing (Yasmin, 2023; Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2013).

Reported case of plural marriages in the community: Allegations against Mufti Mamunur Rashid Qasemi and the "Ideal Marriage Bureau"

A woman who identifies herself as the third wife of Mufti Mamunur Rashid Qasemi, a Bangladeshi Islamic preacher and founder of the Ideal Marriage Bureau (IMB), posted detailed allegations on Facebook. In a public post, she alleges that IMB arranges "contract marriages" for one to two months with wealthy men, after which those men leave and divorce their wives, claiming the wives argued too much. She adds that, on the one hand, they claim to provide women with homes and families, and on the other hand, they deliberately use women and plan to ruin their family lives. When she argued

about these matters, he pronounced a verbal divorce yet continued to be intimate with her afterward. When she became pregnant, she was pressured to terminate the pregnancy, again in the name of religion. Shortly after the termination, she learned he had married a 13-year-old in Kushtia, prompting her to file a case on 14 October 2025. In podcast interviews, she also said she was manipulated, in the name of religion, into becoming her husband's seventh wife, although it was her first and only marriage. Following the accusations, additional coverage highlighted a Facebook post from Qasemi's verified page asserting that ages 12–13 are a "perfect" time for girls to marry, and that those who oppose marriage at that age "cannot be Muslim." National outlets reported and reproduced that position alongside the ongoing allegations

From discourse to social impact

Section 6 of the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961 requires written permission from the Arbitration Council before a man may marry again while an existing marriage subsists. Permission is allowed only when the new marriage is "necessary and just," and violations trigger penalties, including immediate payment of due dower and possible criminal sanction, with appeals to the Assistant Judge (Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, 1961, § 6). Rights reporting shows what happens when these safeguards fail. Women in polygynous unions often face reduced maintenance, long legal delays, and weak redress, which creates material insecurity for first wives and children (Human Rights Watch, 2012). The pathway observed here begins online. Platforms and preachers translate the "permission" of polygyny into a standing license for serial marriage and easy divorce, then wrap it as religious consultancy. Under that banner, entities like the Ideal Marriage Bureau (IMB) advertise "quick marriages," encourage multiple marriages and larger families, and market "Sharia guidance" on marriage, divorce, and family life to make fast and serial marriages seem normal, while sidelining the Qur'anic requirement that a man must treat multiple wives justly in time, money, respect, disclosure, and welfare (Ideal Marriage Bureau – IMB, n.d.; Qur'an 4:3).

Public statements by Mufti Mamunur Rashid Qasemi, IMB's founder, amplify the same frame. In October 2025, national outlets reported his claims that having 8–10 marriages in a lifetime is not wrong, and that marrying girls at 12–13 is "perfect" for Muslims, positions that shift a conditional allowance into a prescriptive norm for men while minimizing women's consent, age protections, and welfare. In this frame, Qasemi frames it as a religious duty that a wife must not oppose a husband's additional marriages, claiming that a woman who does so forfeits the right to remain a wife, a position presented as Islamic guidance rather than a legal interpretation. The instrumentalization also obscures accountability. IMB's sales pitch and Qasemi's public posts valorize male initiative and "strength," while casting women's objections as either illegitimate or signs of "Westernized" influence. In practice, this script legitimizes short-term or serial marriages, weakens disclosure norms to first spouses, and socializes community bystanders to see repetition as normal and righteous rather than as a burden that typically falls on women and children.

Relatedly, concealment and non-disclosure recur in prominent preacher cases, including the very speaker of the sermon examined here, Abu Twaha Muhammad Adnan. Reporting in 2021 documented a second marriage that was unknown to his first wife and family until media attention followed his disappearance, where multiple outlets reconstructed the timeline using family testimony. This indicates how a "male

prerogative” framing enables concealment and weakens women’s ability to assert rights or plan their lives. Taken together, platform incentives, consultancy offerings, and sermon clips supply a ready script in which men act, families learn after the fact, and community discourse reframes objections as religious weakness. In short, a conditional allowance is recast as a status ideal, which shifts bargaining power toward second marriages undertaken without safeguards. That shift exposes first wives to financial risk and litigation, outcomes consistent with both the legal framework and rights evidence cited above.

Reinforcing gender subordination

Discourse and misinterpretation regarding the public participation of women: The sermon of Shaykh Abdur Razzaq Bin Yusuf

A sermon delivered by Shaykh Abdur Razzaq Bin Yusuf, a Bangladeshi Islamic speaker, was circulated on social media where he stated that “women are created only to bear children and to serve their husbands, not to run the country or work in offices and courts”. To justify his statement, he referred to Surah Al-Baqara (2:223), describing women as “fields of production”, and Surah Ar-Rum (Qur’an 30:21), emphasizing that wives are created for men’s peace and contentment. In this clip, Shaykh Abdur Razzaq repeatedly refers to women in possessive terms, portraying them as dependent upon and belonging to their husbands. This excerpt serves as a primary example of how certain religious discourses circulating online promote restrictive gender roles through selective interpretation of Islamic texts. Mainstream readings treat the Qur’anic verse 2:223 as guidance on lawful marital intimacy under ethical restraint and accountability to God, not as a statement of female destiny, property status, or public exclusion. Verse 30:21 centers mutual tranquility, affection, and mercy between spouses; it does not impose a public/private hierarchy or bar women from leadership. In short, neither verse fixes women’s social role to childbearing or domestic service, nor do they prohibit women from public responsibility (Thizbee, 2025). The clip is packaged with a headline/thumbnailed that foreground a definitive claim about women’s “proper place,” a style social platforms tend to surface because vivid, simplified, emotionally charged content travels farther and faster (Yasmin, 2023; Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Campbell, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2013; Hoover, 2006;).

Reported case: Cancellation of a women’s football tournament in Hakimpur, Dinajpur

On January 29, 2025, at the Bawna temporary football ground in Ali Hat Union, Hakimpur Upazila, Dinajpur, a group operating “under the banner of Towhidi Janata” marched to the venue around mid-afternoon and demanded suspension of a women’s football tournament organized by the Bawna Student Welfare Council. Despite the arrival of the Upazila Nirbahi Officer and senior police officials, tensions escalated into a clash that injured at least ten people, after which the Upazila administration suspended the event. Representatives of the protesting group said they had earlier submitted a memorandum seeking cancellation, while organizers questioned the stoppage and alleged administrative support for the disruption; police stated that action would be taken against those involved.

Discourse to social impact

The sermon's claim that women do not belong in "office or court" is packaged as a bright-line rule, which plays a simplified, emotive message that platforms surface and spread quickly (Yasmin, 2023; Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2013). As it recurs in feeds, that line is readily received at home and in community spaces as religious permission to police women's public presence. The January 2025 suspension of a women's football tournament in Hakimpur, Dinajpur shows how this travels from screen to street, as a crowd mobilized under a religious banner pressed local officials until the event was halted, even in the presence of administrators and police. The move from clip to crowd to cancellation traces the full chain, where message hardens into a rule of action, community pressure meets the state, and women's participation is curtailed. The same discourse also underwrites reproductive control. National and international reporting notes that Bangladesh does not criminalize marital rape, and expectations of female obedience make it harder for women to refuse sex or to negotiate the timing and spacing of births (US Department of State, 2024). Population surveys further show that "husband/partner opposed" is a cited reason for non-use of contraception, highlighting how spousal vetoes can override women's preferences (USAID, 2020). When sermons elevate "belonging to their husbands" or the "fields of production" narrative without the proper context, that cue legitimizes both workplace gatekeeping and pressure to bear children "in the name of religion." Country guidance likewise documents expectations that women marry, produce children, and limit movement, with harassment used to enforce compliance, and these pressures intensify when framed in religious terms (UK Home Office, 2024). National evidence points to the same chilling effect, where women who want to pursue their career as athletes, political candidates, or journalists face harassment and coordinated pressure, leading to withdrawal or self-censorship (Yasmin, 2023; ActionAid Bangladesh, 2022). In short, when categorical claims about women's "proper place" circulate as religious obligations, they legitimize informal gatekeeping and formal decisions that restrict access to public life, with online amplification accelerating the shift from talk to outcome (Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2013). In sum, the clip's message about a woman's "proper place" is amplified online, absorbed at home as guidelines over work and mobility, thereby rendering by institutions, making exclusion and reproductive coercion easier to enforce (US Department of State, 2024; USAID, 2020; Jenkins et al., 2013).

Restricting women's mobility

Discourse and misinterpretation regarding permission-first norms: Case of Amir Hamza

Speaker Amir Hameza tells his audience that a woman may not leave home without her husband's permission, even for a death in the family, and that traveling beyond "48 miles" without her husband or one of fourteen specified male relatives is forbidden. He goes further, saying a wife should choose whatever the husband chooses "even if it is harmful," as long as it is technically permissible. The message builds a rigid guardianship model in which obedience overrides women's safety and judgment. Mainstream readings point another way. The Qur'an casts believing men and women as mutual protectors and allies (Qur'an 9:71) and describes marriage as reciprocal care as well as "a garment for one another" (Qur'an 2:187; Qur'an 9:71; Qur'an 2:187). Classical discussions about women traveling without a mahram (unmarriageable kin, a

close relative with whom marriage is permanently forbidden). arose in particular historical safety contexts and are not blanket bans on movement, especially where necessity (*darūra*) applies, and likewise, the idea that a wife must adopt a husband's choice "even if harmful" runs against the basic juridical maxim of "no harm and no reciprocating harm" (Thizbee, 2025; Kamali, 2006). Consistent with prior scholarship, the clip therefore misstates scope and application rather than reflecting the core scriptural ethic (Thizbee, 2025). The clip is packaged in a way that foregrounds bright-line "permission" rules and a striking obedience "even if harmful" exactly the sort of vivid, simplified claim that social platforms surface and spread quickly. Captions and thumbnails that promise moral clarity or controversy increase click-through and sharing, accelerating uptake over context (Yasmin, 2023; Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Campbell, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2013; Hoover, 2006).

Reported case: Coercive control, movement restrictions, and the death of DU student Elma Chowdhury Meghla

Elma Chowdhury Meghla, a Dhaka University Dance Department student in her mid-20s, was found unresponsive at her in-laws' Banani residence on 14 December 2021 and taken to United Hospital, where doctors declared her dead. Police had found injury marks on the body of the deceased. Afterward her father filed a murder case against husband Iftekhar Abedin and his parents, and police arrested Iftekhar. A Dhaka court placed him on remand for questioning. Relatives and classmates alleged torture and coercive control, claiming she was "tortured to death". After marriage Elma faced forced religiously coded control, such as dress codes including being compelled to wear hijab, hair cutting, phone seizure, tight movement surveillance including a "bodyguard," and resistance to her continuing studies, based on interviews with teachers and friends. On 14 April 2022, the Detective Branch briefed that Meghla died by suicide, stating she acted "being unable to tolerate torture," and that her husband and in-laws had instigated her (Alam, 2022). Coverage of the charge sheet reported that on the day of her death Meghla wanted to go out, but her husband barred her, scolded and physically assaulted her, and locked her in a room, with the sequence linked to her death by suicide.

From discourse to social impact

The permission-first discourse in the Amir Hamza clip broadcasts a clear rule: women should not act, move, or decide without a male guardian's leave, even when welfare or urgency is at stake. Platform dynamics then amplify this kind of bright-line message. Simple claims that promise moral certainty, paired with memorable numbers and rules, are boosted by recommendation systems and social sharing, so audiences are more likely to absorb them as household policy rather than as historically situated opinions (Yasmin, 2023; Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Campbell, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2013; Hoover, 2006). In social-norms terms, the clip supplies both an injunctive cue about what one "ought" to do and a descriptive cue about what people "like us" do, which makes obedience appear required and typical at the same time. This discourse does not remain abstract. It travels into family rules and crisis decisions, shaping when and how women can leave home, whom they may call, and how long they must wait for approval. In Elma Chowdhury Meghla's case, contemporaneous reporting described strict monitoring of dress and movement, confiscation of a phone, escorts that controlled mobility, and resistance to her continuing studies, all framed as religiously proper

control. Doctors at United Hospital declared her dead on arrival after she was taken from her in-laws' home on 14 December 2021, and police subsequently arrested her husband, who was remanded for questioning; a year later the Detective Branch briefed that she died by suicide and that her husband and in-laws instigated her through torture.

Seen through a public-health lens, the pattern intensifies the well-known “three delays” pathway in emergencies: delay in deciding to seek care, delay in reaching appropriate care, and delay in receiving adequate care after arrival (Thaddeus and Maine, 1994). A permission-first script lengthens the first two delays. If a woman must secure a husband's consent, a male escort, or approval from in-laws before leaving, deciding and departing can both stall. System-level capacity gaps can then compound the third delay once a patient arrives at a facility. The same clip rhetoric that elevates male permission travels online as short, vivid rules that are surfaced and resurfaced by platforms. As these rules recur, families translate them into everyday gatekeeping: dress codes, curfews, phone checks, call-log audits, restrictions on visiting friends or attending classes, and “no travel without a male” thresholds that echo the 48-mile meme. Over time, such practices harden into coercive control, where surveillance, isolation from support networks, and restriction of movement or study are justified as religious duty rather than domination. Global health and violence-against-women literature describes this pattern precisely: controlling behaviors often include monitoring a woman's movements and restricting contact with family, friends, or services, which can delay or prevent care when it is urgently needed (WHO, 2005). At a community level, the same sermon logic primes bystanders to treat public disciplining and surveillance of women as legitimate. In 2024-2025, national commentary repeatedly flagged “moral policing” pressures against women's participation in public life, calling for state action to ensure safety in streets, workplaces, and institutions and to enforce standing anti-harassment directives. The result is a feedback loop: viral clips set expectations, families and neighbors enforce them in daily life, and institutions sometimes validate that pressure, which narrows women's safe access to public space and, in emergencies, increases the chance of fatal delay.

Conclusion

In Bangladesh, viral Waj Mahfil clips that distort religious teaching don't stop at the screen, rather they settle into homes as rules that limit women's choices. Across all four case studies, a consistent pattern emerges linking digital religious narratives to tangible constraints on women's lives. Despite focusing on different domains, girls' education, polygyny, public participation, and mobility, each case shows how selectively framed, patriarchal interpretations of Islam gain traction online and then translate into social norms and actions that undermine women's rights. In each instance, a preacher's vivid but selectively framed message, for example comparing girls to “tamarinds” or declaring women unfit for public roles, spreads through platform logics that reward emotionally charged, simplified content, which are well-documented features of contemporary media circulation (Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Campbell, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2013; Hoover, 2006). As these messages repeat, they solidify into injunctive norms, what one ought to do, and descriptive norms, what people like us do, which families and communities begin to enforce (Bicchieri, 2016; Cialdini et al., 1991). The cross-case evidence shows that, regardless of the specific claim, these narratives consistently normalize male authority and female subordination in everyday decision-making.

Parents pull daughters out of secondary school, husbands take additional wives without meaningful consent, crowds bar women from sports and leadership, and wives' movement is restricted "for their own good." In short, each narrative moves from screen to society via the same mechanism: misinterpreted religious claims are amplified by digital media and then internalized as community rules, producing concrete harms ranging from educational dropout and early marriage risk to coerced seclusion and dangerous delays in care (Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Bicchieri, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2013).

These findings support the study's objectives. First, circulating sermon misstatements entrench male dominance in household and community norms; this echoes broader evidence that "classic patriarchy" in South Asia codifies restrictive codes for women unless actively renegotiated (Kabeer, 2024). Second, exposure to such narratives correlates with reduced female participation in education, work, and public life, a pattern consistent with research on how hostile climates and stigmatizing discourse depress women's visibility and voice and with Bangladesh-focused scholarship on media-driven norm setting (Kabeer, 2024; Jenkins et al., 2013). Third, the narratives reshape gender perspectives by positioning women primarily as wives, mothers, or dependents, thereby eroding support for their leadership and autonomy. Across cases, women are described as objects of temptation or as fields of reproduction, denied agency in marriage decisions, and deemed unfit for roles outside the home. Such representations codify inequality in cultural and religious terms, reinforcing precisely the kinds of social codes Kabeer (2024) documents. Taken together, the analysis shows that these viral patriarchal narratives are not harmless rhetoric; they materially constrain women's roles across multiple spheres (Kabeer, 2024; Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2013).

A key contribution of this study is its claim-to-consequence mapping that links specific online discourses to offline outcomes. By verifying each sermon's citations against mainstream scholarship and clarifying scope and conditions, the study shows how context can be stripped to produce rigid rules that misrepresent Islamic teachings, then circulate as action guides. This fills a knowledge gap by separating religious fact from preacher fiction while also demonstrating real-world damage: delayed or denied care, lost education, economic vulnerability, and curtailed civic presence. Reading the four cases together demonstrates a systemic pattern rather than isolated incidents. The theoretical lens matters here: following representation theory, the sermons operate as representational acts that narrow how women's value and capabilities are framed; following social norms theory, the same clips provide normative cues that prompt households and communities to act on those frames (Bicchieri, 2016; Hall, 1997; Cialdini et al., 1991). In effect, online media reconfigure how religious authority is encountered, with media logics and peer endorsement shaping what becomes taken-for-granted guidance (Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Campbell, 2013; Hoover, 2006).

Safeguarding women's rights and opportunities will require multi-pronged interventions that interrupt the path from false claim to harmful outcome. Educators and religious leaders should foreground accurate, contextual teachings that recover Islam's egalitarian emphases on knowledge, justice, and consent. Community leaders and civil society can use claim-versus-truth briefings to challenge viral misreadings in local forums and support families in women-affirming decisions. Platforms should adjust curation and moderation practices so that sensational misinformation is not rewarded over contextual accuracy. Policymakers should treat these narratives as barriers to

development and enforce existing legal protections. Knowing the mechanism, representation that frames, circulation that amplifies, and norms that enforce, allows interventions to be better targeted. Breaking the cycle of misinterpretation and misogyny through informed education, community dialogue, and responsible media practices can help ensure that religious discourse uplifts rather than undermines women, and the cross-case synthesis provided here offers a grounded starting point for that work.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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