Purdah as Privacy: Understanding Privacy in Bangladeshi Islamic communities

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Abstract

This proposal presents the first study of privacy perceptions and preservation in Bangladeshi Islamic communities. From a three-month long ethnography, we have found that the concept of privacy is intertwined with Islamic attires, everyday lifestyle of people, and social and family dynamics in Islamic societies. Based on our findings, we present 'purdah' as a major theme, which is entangled with the concept of privacy. We discuss how purdah shapes the notion of privacy in Islam for both men and women.

Author Keywords
Islam; privacy; usable privacy; Islamic privacy

CCS Concepts
•**Security and privacy** → **Social aspects of security and privacy;**

Introduction and Background
Privacy has long been one of the central interests in HCI and related disciplines. Despite the broad characterization of privacy that necessitates the understanding of people and their surroundings in a wide array of contexts and cultures [7, 8], most studies of privacy disproportionately involve Western-based, white, and middle-class demographics [4]. Central to many Western-centered privacy studies is the implicit assumption that individuals have the freedom

to make their own choices to participate in social and digital phenomena [5]. A strand of research recognizes the dominant body of contemporary privacy research as a colonial and market-driven approach where issues of privacy are simplified as a problem of rational trade-offs for different stakeholders in question [4].

In response, an emerging line of research is calling to bring human values to the fore in an approach of "decolonizing" privacy research, highlighting the Global South as a distinguished site of interest [4]. We attend to this call by studying privacy issues among Bangladeshi Islamic communities. The study joins the growing body of scholarship (see, for example, [3]) in HCI that presents the unique nature of issues and concerns of privacy in the Global South, and provides technology and policy implications to mitigate those concerns. In addition, we build on another strand of scholarships that shows the characterization of privacy based on the Islamic holy books, and privacy practices that are shaped by Islamic cultural values [1, 2]. Our research is guided by the broad question: "What is the cultural interpretation of and remedies for privacy issues in Bangladeshi Islamic society?" Around this question, we have two major contributions to HCI: First, we present our findings on 'purdah' - a unique notion through which Bangladeshi Islamic communities understand privacy. Second, our findings demonstrate that privacy is perceived as a gendered notion within Islamic community, where men and women have distinct roles in the communal culture.

Privacy as Purdah
Purdah–the Islamic regulations of veiling–has invoked a widespread scholarly discourse, heated political conversation, and diverse social rhetoric to date. The norm is often shown as a religious patriarchal instrument of constraining women's voice and freedom [10]. On the contrary to this view, purdah has been argued as an empowering means for rural Bangladeshi women that increases their social participation, mobility, and visibility [6].

Along this dual role–one that invokes the history of socio-religious restraint and another that speaks about the story of empowerment–purdah has become a dominant lens through which Muslims envision the notion of privacy in everyday life. This notion of personal and social curtailing prevalent in Muslim societies has shown a promising connection to the understanding of and remedy for privacy concerns in our study. As our study shows, many Bangladeshi Muslims describe the limit of bodily exposure, various other visual constraints on spatial arrangements, and controlled social participation as adherence to Islamic rules, as well as an intrinsic means for saving themselves from various concerns involving privacy breaches.

Method
We have been conducting the study since November, 2019 at mosques and madrasahs in Badda, Uttara, Gazipur, and Narshingdi, all located in or near Dhaka, Bangladesh. The authors of this study are born and raised in Bangladesh, and all of them are familiar with Islamic culture and norms.

The study consists of a set of techniques similar to ethnography, which includes semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observation of religious rituals and activities, taking part in religious activities, collecting demographic information of participants, and taking photos. All of these methods are not appropriate for every situation. For example, taking pictures during a ritual does not comply with Islamic norms. In such situations, we respect the preferences of our participants. Our participants are mosque leaders (including Imams, clerics, and committee members), mosque attendees, madrasah teachers and students,

and female participants of Islamic communal gatherings (known as *Talim*).

We are conducting the study in Bengali, followed by transcribing and translating the interviews and other materials into English. We are following the grounded theory approach [9], where materials are being coded to identify themes through which we inform our findings below.

Purdah and Privacy in the Lifestyle of Bangladeshi Muslim Community

Bangladeshi Muslims present purdah as an essential aspect of their everyday life both with and without referencing privacy. Purdah in a Bangladeshi Islamic community is not only seen as an aspect of women's attire but also as a regulatory mechanism for communicating in family and social circles. In our study, participants cited Quranic verses, Hadiths, and Islamic histories that define permission for both men and women in regard to whom and what are allowed for Muslims to see, communicate, and make relationships with. Such Islamic regulations lay out the boundary for public and private spheres for both Muslim individuals and groups.

A 45-year old madrasah teacher mentioned the importance of purdah:

"It is Faraz (Muslims' duty coming from Allah) for Muslim women to keep themselves protected through purdah from obscenity[1] . Now, if someone is using an Android phone or messenger, or WhatsApp, we should not say anything or spread any information that can potentially spread obscenity. And in a phone conversation, when someone [a woman] is talking to a man whom she is not allowed to talk

to[2] , there are some instructions in Islam. A woman should be aware of the rules when communicating with these men. [...] We should teach these rules to our children, too."

Another female madrasah teacher shared a similar view,

"We should stop sharing unveiled pictures of women [on social media]. People are suffering many ways for doing this... you know, social defamation, cheating. Think, for example, especially in Bangladesh, I have given a picture to a friend of mine. If he is not my husband, I am not allowed to do that. Islam prohibits that. We may not understand this sometimes, we have to keep remembering this."

As most of the direct Islamic regulations came before digital innovations, we saw various interpretations of how Islamic purdah rules could be applied in digital spheres. Several maulanas (Islamic scholars) explained to us about an Islamic tradition called Qiyas, where there is a provision of resolving conflicts regarding any Islamic regulations through the scholarly analysis and consensus over a solution. They asserted that translating everyday Islamic rules regarding purdah to digital spheres could be a great way of preserving privacy in Islamic communities.

One essence of the purdah for men is to control their eyesight from anything that is prohibited in Islam, which speaks about the significance of strict guidance for Islamic communities to control themselves from anything that they are not allowed to see. When talking about privacy issues, people indicated to this internal control of eyes and minds. An Imam suggested to enforce this education in the society,

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[1]The participant does not mean this only about the dress but also in terms of suggesting that a woman should stay away from whatever Islam has prohibited for them.

[2]There is a set of male persons with whom a female can communicate. Anyone else outside this circle are prohibited from meeting and talking freely in Islam.

"One of the primary rules in Islam is to control your eyesight; you cannot look at prohibited things. This is true not only for the male, but also for the female. My parents taught me this very clearly during my childhood, so I grew up with these values."

These and many other comments and stories demonstrate how purdah shapes the notion of privacy in Islam, both for men and women. The prior research on privacy in HCI and ICTD has presented diverse interpretations of what constitutes the distinction between public and private sphere across varied contexts and communities, both in the East and the West. In those studies, the contexts, communities, and cultures have been characterized by spatial proximity, professional affiliations, or personal relations. In this proposal, we have shown through the example of purdah how religious ideologies shape the personal and communal notion of privacy, which presents a unique avenue for HCI researchers to explore the aspects of privacy through the lens of religion.

Current Stage and Future Works

This is an ongoing study. We are conducting more interviews and arranging focus-group discussion sessions with a diverse group of mosque leaders and madrasah students. Going forward, we are exploring the privacy issues in relation to family dynamics and Islamic moral frameworks. We will report these findings in a future publication.

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