



Conservative outlook, gender norms and female wellbeing: Evidence from rural Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Following Identity Theory proposed by Akerlof and Kranton (2000), we conceptualize the interactions between conservative outlook and female wellbeing through influencing gender norms. Conservative households often prefer women to stay home, which correlates to female employment and decision-making autonomy, affecting female physical mobility and female nutrition. Finding a suitable indicator for conservative outlook is difficult as we typically lack household-level ‘value survey’. In the fast modernizing context of rural Bangladesh, wearing *burqa* (veil) is often perceived as an indicator of socially conservative outlook. Using this insight, we process the data from the second wave of the Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (BIHS) for 2015 to test the statistically robust association between household-level conservative outlook and gender-sensitive wellbeing indicators such as female employment, body mass index, and decision-making autonomy for the population of ever-married females aged 15–49 years old. After controlling for individual, household, and regional characteristics, and using sub-regional fixed effects, our findings suggest that living in conservative households is associated with lower probability of female employment. Females from conservative households are less likely to be in wage work or salaried jobs. The probability of being overweight is also higher for the females in conservative households as compared to non-conservative households.

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1. Introduction: cultural outlook matters

This paper is about whether ‘cultural outlook’ is associated with economic outcomes. It is generally agreed that what cultural views one expressly adheres to belongs to the realm of individual tastes and preferences. Articulation of ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative’ views on a specific cultural issue – within the general biases of social norms and institutions – is often seen as an expression of individual ‘identity’.¹ For instance, a society may be governed by conservative norms that restrict women’s physical mobility, but the individual outlook may be different from society at large and can adopt a view favoring female mobility. The question we want to address is

whether cultural outlook is associated with detectable economic outcomes for the individuals through spillovers and externalities.²

We incorporate identity into a general model of behavior and then demonstrate how identity influences economic outcomes. Specifically, we consider employment, intra-household expenditure and mobility decisions, and nutrition. Identity Theory as articulated by Akerlof and Kranton (2000) incorporates a “person’s sense of self” in the utility function of an individual decision process. “Sense of self” comes from the household, society, and tradition which provides a behavioral prescription for an individual. A conservative or traditional household is more likely to provide a conservative behavioral prescription. A traditional behavioral prescription by the household can negatively affect females’ employment outcomes, health, and empowerment, which overall reduces their ‘capabilities’. Sen (1999) defines capabilities as the ability to live a good life in terms of ‘being and doing’. In this paper, we test the relationship between the conservative or traditional

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¹ Liberal and conservative terms are to some extent relative, as they are often differently defined in diverse cultural contexts. Be that it may, the contention of the paper is that views we hold on cultural issues may have economic consequences.

² For an insightful early review of culture’s effect on economic development, see Harrison and Huntington (2000).

outlook of the household and the employment, health, and empowerment of females in Bangladesh.

1.1. Indicator of conservative outlook

Finding a suitable indicator of judging the presence of conservative outlook at the individual/ household level poses a challenge in the absence of household-level ‘value survey’. In this paper, we show the relevance of cultural outlook by examining the economic implications of differing social practices in relation to the observance of *purdah*. These different social practices of *purdah* can be vividly seen in the different physical manifestations of *veiling* ranging from simple head scarf to full-body *burqa*. The choice of *veiling* as an indicator of personal outlook is guided by the consideration that individuals have a certain latitude to the forms of veiling within the general observance of *purdah*.³ While there is no direct requirement to veil in any religious texts, many women choose to do so and in a variety of ways that have nuanced meanings (Amer, 2014). One line of inquiry supports a restrictive definition, whereby observance of *purdah* is achieved by the wearing of the veil, requiring females to cover their skin and conceal their form. It focuses on the “broad set of norms and regulations that promote the seclusion of women and enforce their exclusion from public places and specifies gender-specific labor” (Amin, 1997). Another interpretation of *purdah* draws from the tradition of the legal school (as in case of the Maliki school) which advocates rulings from pragmatism using the principles of *istislah* (public interest) wherever the core religious texts do not provide explicit guidance. The third line of inquiry is that *purdah* can be understood figuratively, as the “veil of the mind,” whereby the subject is asked to lead a life of purity and not required to wear a veil all the time while outside of domesticity. These different gradations of interpretations give rise to different cultural practices with respect to the observance of *purdah* (and *veiling*), allowing us to differentiate the association of cultural outlooks with economic outcomes.

It may be emphasized that the “veil” is a generic term that stands for all external manifestations, from *hijab* (covering of the head and parts of the upper body) to *burqa* (covering of the entire body from head to toes, though not necessarily the face) to full *naqaab* (covering of the entire body from head to toes, including the face, save the eyes). All these forms of veiling are guided by different social customs and individual outlooks that influence the identity of women in traditional societies (Bartkowski & Read, 2003; Davary, 2009). However, the veil can be used for different reasons. Mule and Barthel (1992) identify the veil as a coping strategy for women, as a way of expressing self-esteem and autonomy in a patriarchal society, where, independence of the women is limited. In other contexts, McIntosh and Islam (2010) show that women are more likely to be the female entrepreneurs – with better networking capacity – if they cover their heads, or if their families are supportive. However, the association of the veil as an indicator of conservative identity may vary from the religious-majority to religious-minority countries. Wagner, Sen, Permanadeli, and Howarth (2012) find that in Indonesia, which is a Muslim majority country, women see wearing the veil as a ‘convenient act.’ In India, where Muslims are a minority, the veil is used for the assertion of ‘cultural identity.’ The motivation for wearing a veil may be as important as the act of wearing a veil as an indicator of conservative outlook. In the case of rural Bangladesh, where female participation in manufacturing and other non-agricultural sectors is fast rising it remains an open question whether wearing

veil would be viewed as a convenient act or likely to be interpreted as a dragging factor.

In this paper, we consider a specific form of veil – wearing a burqa – as a proxy for conservative identity at the household level. This is because, as compared to other forms of veil requiring only partial covering of the body, we consider the burqa, which is a long garment that covers women from head to feet to be a *more conservative* form of clothing that is consistent with the orthodox interpretation of *purdah*.

1.2. Relevance of the Bangladesh case study

The choice of Bangladesh for this outlook-outcome study may offer different insights. First, it is a Muslim majority country, but where diverse cultural presence is noticeable. Both Bengali (defining language and culture) and religion (predominantly Islam) played an important role in the making of Bengali Muslim identity and Bengali nationalism in Bangladesh. In such mixed (syncretic) contexts, the association of the conservative practice of *burqa* may be ambiguous. Second, the policy context is also different in Bangladesh. The rural areas of Bangladesh have made considerable progress over the recent decades in female economic advancements and in areas of gender-sensitive human development due to the development activities of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), as well as supportive social policies of successive regimes. Export-led manufacturing, such as the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector, played an important catalytic role in advancing female economic empowerment. This may diffuse the alleged negative association of *purdah* reported elsewhere. The argument is that the ‘form’ of *purdah* can go hand in hand with a new enriched social ‘content’: the tradition is re-invented by modernity. The popularity of *hijab* as a form of *purdah*, especially among urban women, may be viewed in these terms. However, this may not be applicable to the same extent with respect to *burqa* as a form of *purdah*, which remains as a symbol of conservative legacy. Third, there are also opposing trends at work. The incidence of *hijab* has gone up visibly in recent years, which may indicate an increasing trend towards “construction of identity” around traditional norms. We cannot comment on the reason of changing social norms, or whether with rising *hijab* practice women in the future will move later towards the more conservative form of veil ‘*burqa*’. But with rising incidence of *hijab*, whether conservative outlook has any correlation with female well-being and economic empowerment begs scrutiny to anticipate the possible economic implications of such change.

There have been important empirical works in the past, especially in the Bangladesh demography literature, on the norms of *purdah* (see, Kabeer, 1990; Amin, 1997; Hossain and Kabir, 2001; Asadullah and Wahhaj, 2016). These studies broadly point out that the dual pressures of *purdah* and poverty weigh heavily on the lives of rural women. The general conclusion has been to argue for the norms of *purdah* (broadly defined) having *restrictive influences* on women’s labor market participation, empowerment and, consumption. However, none of these studies have explicitly incorporated variables relating to the *purdah* norm as an independent explanatory factor in shaping economic outcomes at the household or individual levels. Besides, the issue is not one of wearing the veil *per se*. The relevance of identity or outlook as the motivating factor underlying the regressive correlation needs to be considered. After all, the veil *per se* may not be associated with barriers to female advancements: the veil may be just the reflection of a preexisting conservative mindset prevailing at the household level (we call it *conservative household outlook*) that fails to see women beyond their traditional reproductive and caregiving roles. Caught in the middle of clashes between tradition and modernity, women may use the symbolism of the veil – in an instrumentalist way – as if

³ Although *purdah* commonly refers to the religious and social practice of female seclusion prevalent among Muslim communities, it can be found in different forms in many non-Muslim communities in South Asia that adhere to the practice of female seclusion.

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