

Chapter 40

Segregation of Women in Islamic Cultures and Its Reflection in Housing: A Study of Spaces for Women in a Bangladesh Village

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In Islamic societies, religion plays a significant role in shaping the home and the environment. An important feature of the Islamic culture is the segregation of women from males other than next of kin. This influences the female pattern of activity and movement, both in the home and in public areas. The organization of space in the Muslim home reflects this particular pattern. Consequently, there is a general separation of male and female domains in the domestic architecture of almost all Islamic societies. This duality of space in turn reinforces the seclusion and segregation of women. This paper attempts to examine this socio-physical phenomenon in a particular setting—a community in north-west Bangladesh, where the author carried out a study in October, 1991.¹ Some of the findings from this study are presented in this paper.

Bangladesh, a country of more than 100,000,000 Muslims, is one of the least urbanized nations in the world, with ninety percent of its population living in rural areas. Poverty, the blight of this region, also plays an important part in shaping both societal standards and the living environment. This paper examines the spatial response to gender segregation norms in rural housing, taking into consideration the very serious issues of poverty and lack of resources prevailing in rural areas.

The system of segregation, seclusion, and veiling of women is known as *purdah* in Bangladesh, as elsewhere in South Asia. *Purdah*, which literally means curtain, refers to the physical segregation of living space, as well as the covering of body and face. In broader terms it also refers to the modest and deferential behavior of women and the restrictions on their movements. Societal and religious norms of segregation have far-reaching effects in every rural woman's life. These norms determine a woman's role and status in society, her life cycle changes, her activities, and her access to different institutions. All these, in turn, are realized by rules about the organization of living space. The study was approached by focusing on the living patterns of rural women. Women's activities, occupations, and mobility were addressed as these directly affect women's use of space, both in private and in public areas.

The Village

The field study was undertaken in two adjacent villages, Bajitpur and Shadashivpur (Fig. 1), in the district of Chapai Nawabganj near the Indian border. This region is mainly dependent on agriculture. Mango, sugarcane,

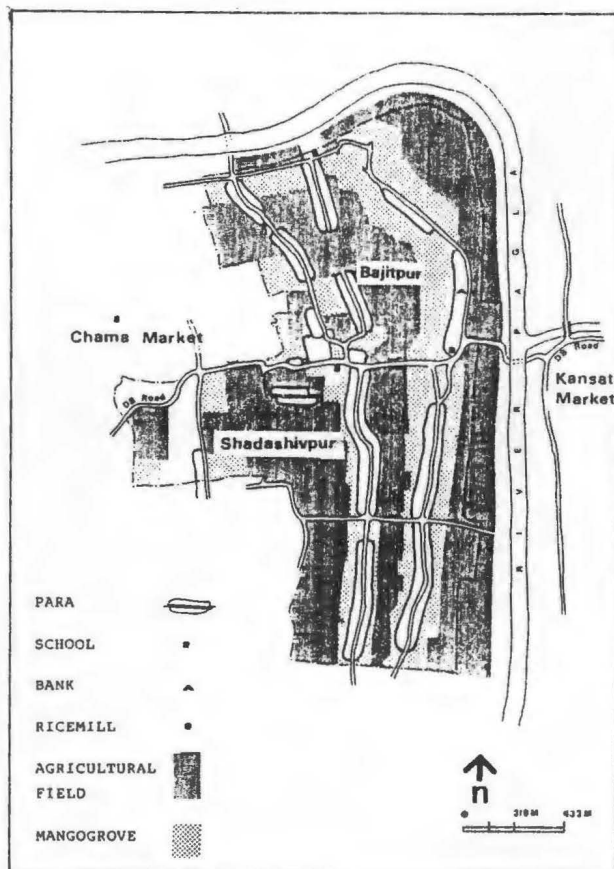


Fig. 1: Map of Bajitpur and Shadashivpur.

and paddy are the main crops. Jute, pulses, mustard vegetables, etc. are also important cash crops. Three socio-economic groups were studied—the landless laborers, who make up sixty percent of the villagers, the farmers (including both surplus and subsistence farmers), and the landlords.

The two villages are divided by a main circulation spine (D.B. Road) connecting two markets. The main public institutions—the schools, the bank and the ricemill are located on the main road and on its main subsidiary, the road along the edge of Bajitpur, parallel to the river. The individual settlements or neighborhoods are arranged on two sides of the village roads which branch off from the main road. These neighborhoods are known as *paras* and are generally named after an occupational group or a former neighborhood chief. Narrow footpaths join the *paras* at the back of the homesteads.

A definite hierarchy of spaces was found in the circulation pattern. How much or how little women will use

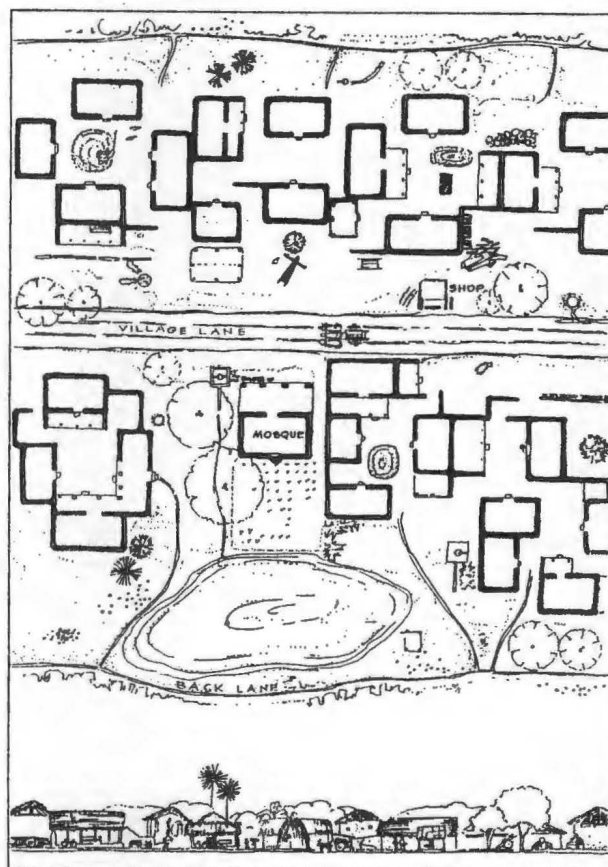


Fig. 2: A Village Lane and Part of a Neighborhood.

these circulation spaces depends on their position in this hierarchy. Women usually do not use the main road, especially on market days when the traffic increases. Women often take longer routes to visit other neighborhoods, rather than walk through a busy main road. The secondary roads, which are the village lanes, have homesteads organized in a linear pattern on both sides of the village lanes (Fig. 2). Men walk along these roads and congregate to stand and talk. Mosques and small neighborhood shops on the roadside also encourage social gatherings. Children play all day long in safe surroundings. Women are almost totally missing from the street life. Their appearance there is conditional to necessity and to modest behavior. Sometimes women are visible in the entrances of their homesteads, looking out at the road. Their role in the street life is as discreet spectators, never as participants.

The third category of roads is the network of backlanes and footpaths at the back of the homesteads. These lanes, which are often nothing more than narrow dirt paths created by walking feet, meander through mango

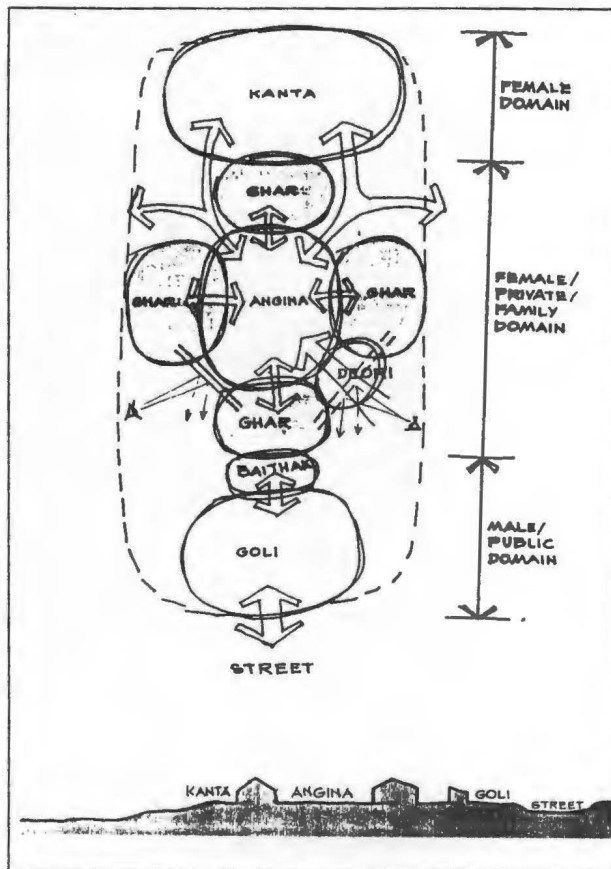


Fig. 3: Sequence of Spaces in the Home.

groves and crop-fields and link the different *paras*. These lanes are freely used by women to get about, but men also use them to get to their fields or as shortcuts.

Generally public spaces are conceived as "male spaces." Women do not visit public institutions such as the mosque or the bank. They avoid open fields and public roads. Societal norms prevent women from working in agricultural fields or mango orchards, which are acknowledged "male" preserves. The open market has connotations of being an indecent place for women to be in. Women usually do not visit the marketplace or neighborhood shops, where men congregate not only for trading purposes, but also to socialize. Although women are not totally excluded from public spaces, their use of such spaces is conditional to necessity and discretion. Women cannot and do not use public space in the casual and relaxed manner permitted to men. When a woman ventures out of her home, veiling the body and face with her sari and discreet behavior are the norms. While bicycles are the common mode of

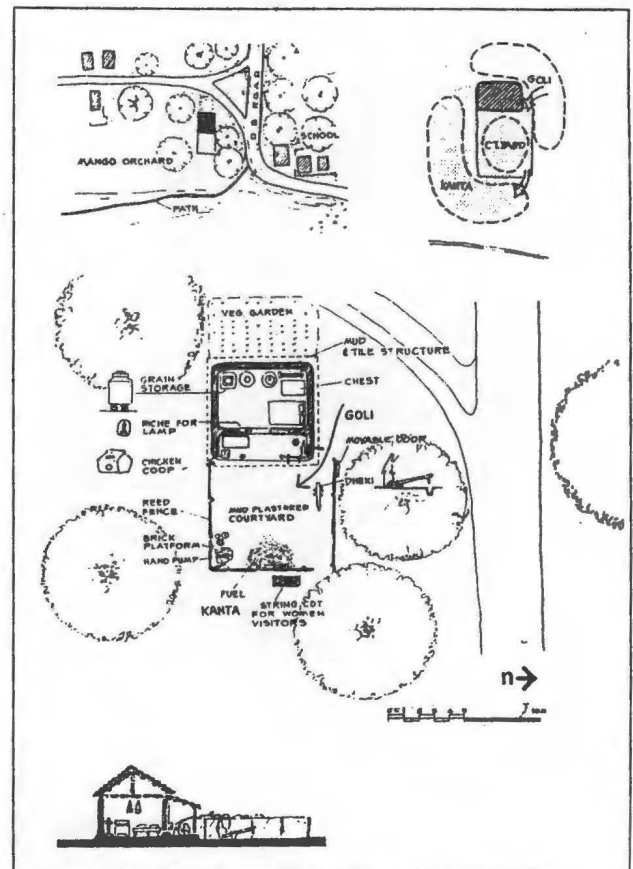


Fig. 4: Homestead of a Landless Nuclear Household.

transport for rural men, women travel in covered oxcarts or boats, or curtained rickshaws.

The Dwelling

In the Islamic world, the most common dwelling form is the inward-looking courtyard house. Closed to the outer world, it opens toward a central court, thus fulfilling the need

for privacy, as well as for adequate light and ventilation. Islamic norms for seclusion of women have given rise to several architectural devices and elements which are more or less common in the domestic architecture of all Islamic countries. These include:

- organization and orientation of the elements of the house
- secluded and private open space
- small exterior openings
- entrance with screen wall for visual privacy
- multiple entrances to segregate paths of men and women

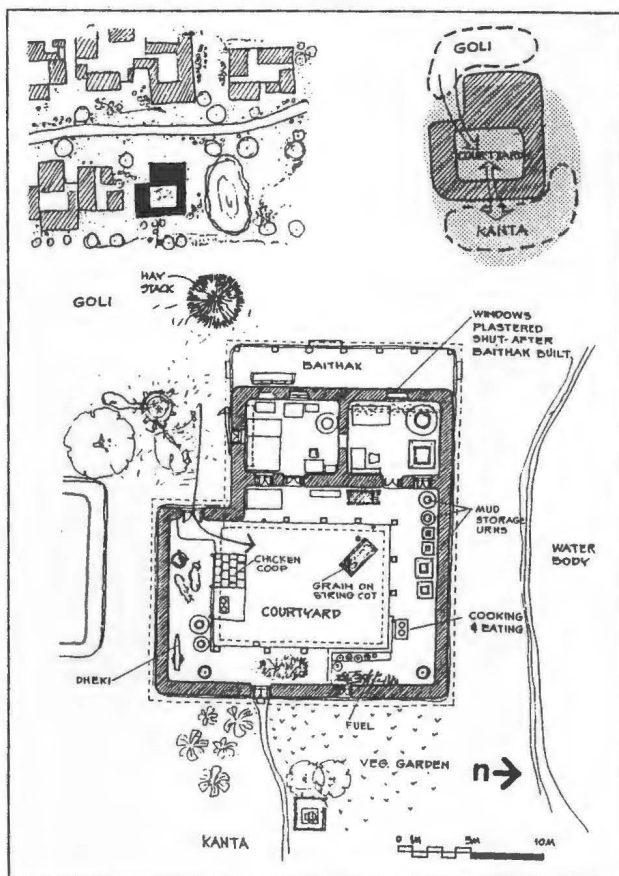


Fig. 5: Homestead of a Farmer.

The traditional Bangladeshi homestead employs all these devices. It is usually an aggregation of loosely spaced free-standing units grouped around a central courtyard. In this region, however, the more compact layout with adjoining rooms is also noticeable. The size and number of huts and the size of the courtyard is a good indicator of the economic condition of the family. Each house is unique and changes with the needs of the family and reflects the pattern of its growth and modifications.

The spaces in an individual homestead are laid out in a distinct hierarchical sequence (Fig. 3). The total plot is not built on. There is a fairly large transition space on the street side of the plot. This is a semi-private space known as the *goli*.² At the back of the house is an open space with vegetation known as the *kanta*. The living area is made up of several huts (*ghar*) grouped around and facing a square or rectangular courtyard. This courtyard, known as the *angina*, is the heart of the

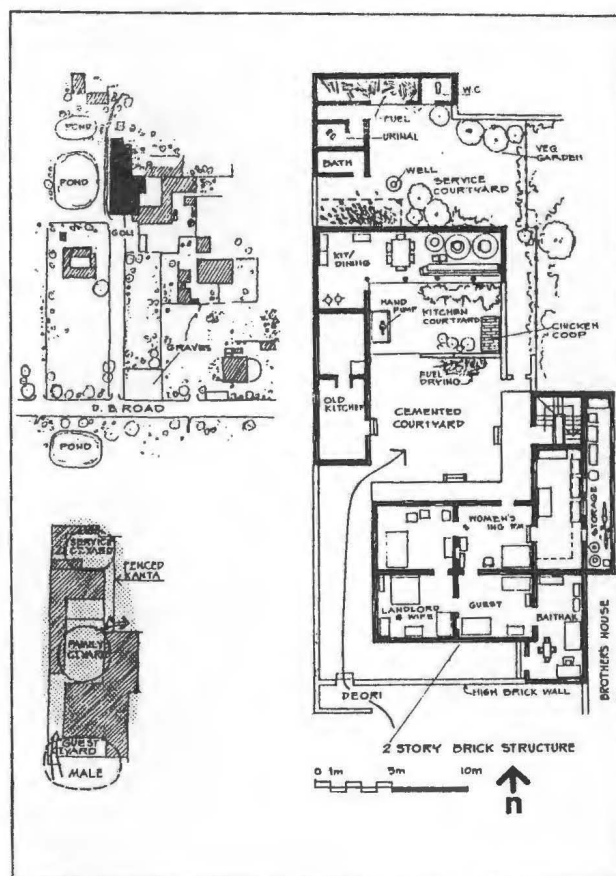


Fig. 6: Homestead of a Landlord.

homestead where most activities take place. The courtyard is entered on the street-side by the *deori*, the indirect entrance which acts as a visual barrier. There are one or more huts around the courtyard, which are used only for storage and for sleeping. Most huts have attached semi-open covered spaces known as *baranda*, which act as transitions between the open courtyard and the enclosed hut.

The dwellings of different socio-economic groups (see examples in Figs. 4, 5, and 6) from the survey were examined and compared to understand the interaction between status and the dwelling form. Although the three main groups—the landlords, the farmers, and the landless laborers—share basic norms of *purdah* and a basic concept in dwelling design, each adapted the different spaces of the traditional dwelling form to their own particular lifestyle. The concept of male and female domains at the front and the back of the homestead, respectively, is present in the homesteads of all

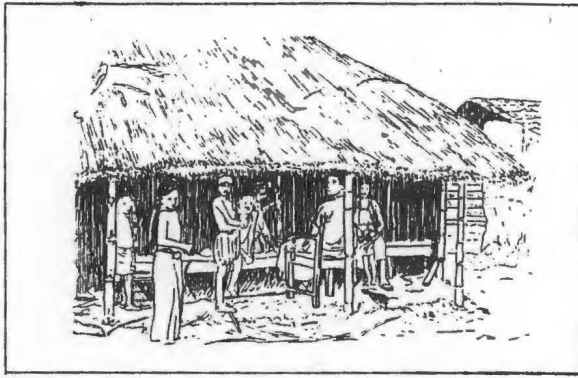


Fig. 7: A Baithak.

income groups. There are some differences, however, in how these domains are achieved and how visual privacy is maintained.

In farmers' homes, the spacious *goli* in front of the homestead is used mostly for feeding livestock, threshing produce, and keeping the haystack and farming implements. Men usually gather here in the evenings to converse. Male landless laborers use their considerably smaller *goli* for socializing or manufacturing articles for home consumption or sale. The landlords usually did not rear cattle (except perhaps a milk-cow) and used the *goli* mainly for socializing. Several landlords built walls around their *golis* and planted elaborate flowering gardens in this space. The *goli* is considered to be "male" space, although women too use it to some extent for work that often spills over from the courtyard, for example, drying grain or making mud storage bins. They, however, do not linger there for extended periods of time, and it is obvious that they do not feel at home in this space, although it is part of their homestead. In many of the homesteads, there is a long shaded porch facing the *goli* for receiving male guests. This is known as the *baithak* (Fig. 7). In poor households, the *baithak* is often absent. Sometimes a male guest is important enough to be brought into the courtyard. Some women reported that, in such cases, they hid in their kitchens or rooms till the visit was over.

The homestead is usually entered through a corner of the courtyard between two huts. This entrance—the *deori*—is generally indirect with specially built walls for visual privacy. In affluent households the courtyard has boundary walls with entrance doors that can be locked. Often in poor households, the entrance is not visually obstructed by staggered walls. Nevertheless, there is always an attempt to create visual barriers, either by

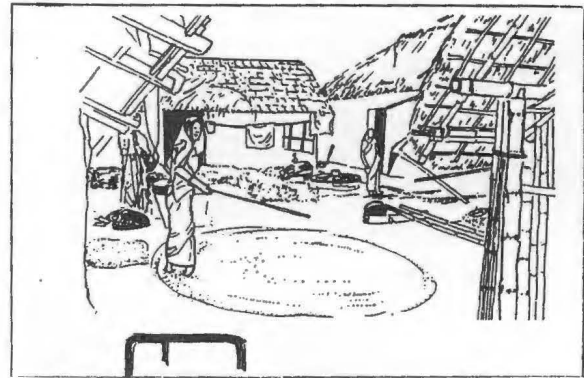


Fig. 8: A Courtyard.

hanging a jute-mat or old quilt in the doorway or by a movable door made with leaves in a reed-frame. The gaps between the individual huts are fenced, at least on the street side. Among the poor, where adherence to *purdah* is less stringent due to practical needs, the fences are lower and more transparent, and sometimes even non-existent. As the families move up the social ladder, the boundaries of the house become more defined and solid, the walls become higher, with entrances that can be locked and barred. Apart from the need for privacy, this also reflects the need to safeguard wealth.

The courtyard of the house is the focus and spiritual center of the home. This is the space where women spend most of their time, the space for the majority of their activities. The courtyard supports all the activities of work and leisure. Processing paddy, manufacturing household items, rearing children in a safe environment, cooking, and socializing all take place in this central place (Fig. 8). There are built-in mud stoves in the courtyard for open-air cooking during fair weather, which is most of the year. Landlords' courtyards are usually divided into spaces with separate functions: a cemented portion for general household work; a small vegetable and flower garden; and another cemented space for work connected to the kitchen. The courtyards of the other two groups are more multifunctional. Women visit neighboring courtyards almost every day. Neighboring courtyards are usually inter-connected so that women can visit each other without having to go out on the road. Women, known or unknown, never need permission to enter a courtyard. It is quite acceptable for women to use courtyards to get from one place to another. Men other than family members, however, will never enter a courtyard unless invited. For a male, entering a courtyard without permission is an act of symbolic violation.



Fig. 9: The Backyard or *Kanta*.

The *baranda* is the transitional space between the open courtyard and the enclosed space of the hut. These semi-open porches are usually attached to a *ghar* and face the courtyard, but they may also be attached to the courtyard wall. The *baranda* is a shaded space used as an extension of the courtyard to support outdoor activities during hot or rainy weather. It also protects assets such as storage urns, animal coops, and cooking implements.

The individual huts known as *ghar* are usually single- or two-room multifunctional structures used mainly for sleeping and storage. They are also used for other household activities during inclement weather. In the typical village home, usually one nuclear family shares one room until the son grows up and marries. Then another hut is built for him. Homesteads of the landless are usually organized loosely with separate one-room structures surrounding the courtyard. Farmers' houses tend to be more compact with adjoining rooms and walled corners for additional living and storage space. With increasing wealth, more semi-covered space is needed to shelter animals, household implements, and storage urns. This need has given rise to the walled courtyard with long wide *barandas* attached to the wall. The mud huts often have no windows and only one doorway as a source of light. If there are windows present, they are very small, usually only a horizontal slit or round narrow holes. The reason given for absence of windows or for their small size is visual privacy and, more importantly, a safeguard against evil spirits entering the room. Bigger windows are screened by shutters or tiles from passers-by.

The *kanta* is the backyard of the homestead, which usually contains the vegetable patches, bamboo groves, and family hand pump where women wash their utensils



Fig. 10: The Women's Pond.

and clothes (Fig. 9). It was found that private hand pumps, even when shared by several families, were located in the backyard, while public hand pumps provided by the government were invariably placed on the roadside. Women who used public hand pumps usually carried the water to the backyard to wash and clean. The *kanta* in the landlords' houses are enclosed with walls, creating an additional service courtyard for latrines, bathing spaces, and fuel storage. In the other two groups, the *kanta* remains unfenced, although the vegetation in the back of the house provides privacy for the women while they work or bathe. The *kanta* is considered primarily women's space.

Most homes are built with family labor unless the family is wealthy enough to be able to afford hired help. The building of a new home involves separate established roles for men and women. Women dig and prepare the mud, while men build the walls and the roof. The plastering and repair of the walls and the floor is also considered women's work.

Mobility in the Public Realm

Women also bathe at a special spot in the riverbank, commonly referred to as the "women's pier." There is also a women's pond (Fig. 10) near Kanapara in Shadashivpur, where women from as far as one kilometer away come for their daily bath and to wash clothes. These spaces are considered to be essentially women's spaces and men usually avoid them.

For natural functions the usual practice is to use the fields or bushes. None of the landless houses surveyed had latrines in their homesteads. Of the twenty-one farmers' houses surveyed, five had latrines in their

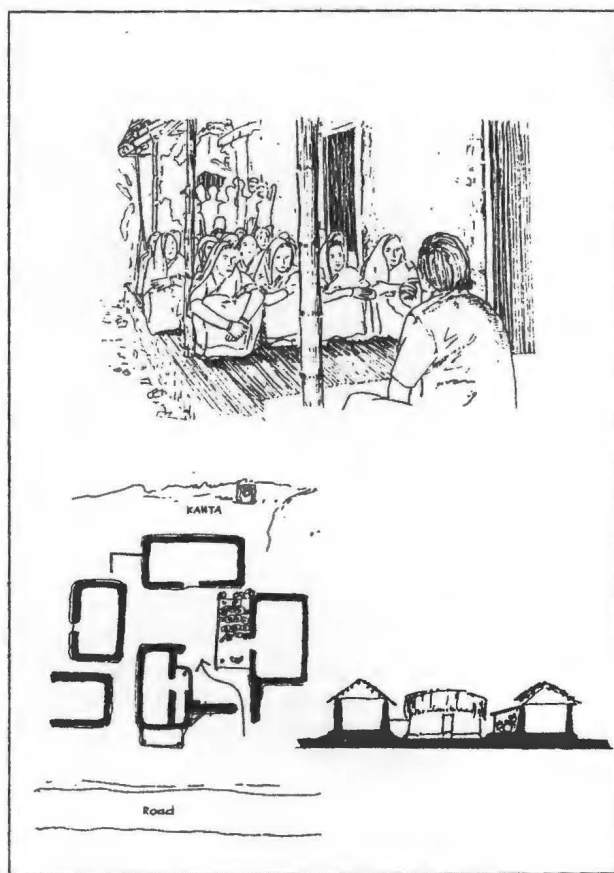


Fig. 11: Grameen Bank Meeting.

backyards, indicating the changing sanitation practices with increase in wealth (and stricter adherence to *purdah* for women). All the landlords' dwellings had well-built latrines. The absence of enclosed latrines is the source of complaint for many of the women. Several women reported waiting until dark or going before daybreak, in order not to be seen. A sanitary slab is not expensive, only about two dollars, but men do not see a latrine as a priority and women, although the main consumers of domestic space, do not have much say in the decision-making process. The few homesteads that have sanitary toilets are of the pit-latrine type, usually placed in the *kanta* at a safe distance from the house (up to twenty meters).

The production of rice, an important crop, also has a definite division of roles. Women spend considerable time in productive work in the agricultural sector. Women work daily in processing and storing the farm produce. Men grow paddy, but women are responsible for paddy processing, storage, and seed germination, in

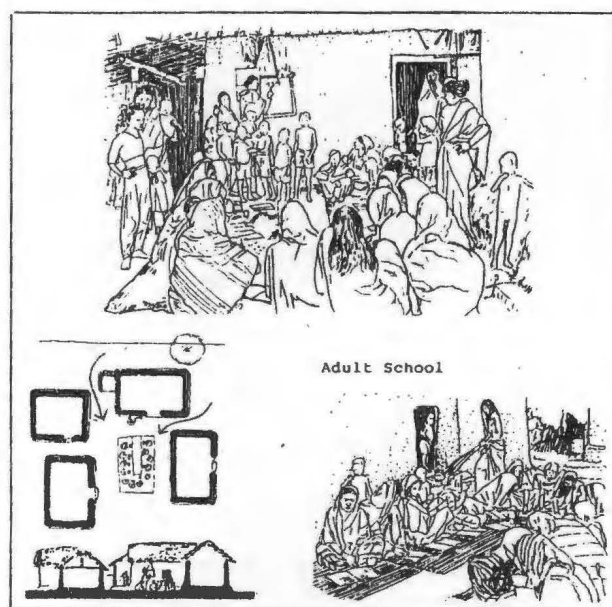


Fig. 12: Adult School for Women.

short, all the activities that can take place within the home. For poor women, processing paddy for richer families is one of the few income-generating opportunities available to them. An electric ricemill set up a few years ago, although viewed by the villagers as a symbol of development for the village, was actually detrimental to the income-earning capacity of the women, as getting rice husked at the mill was cheaper for the affluent families. Thus opportunities for work, which are normally limited, decreased even more.

Women are excluded from daily and weekly markets, both as vendors and buyers, but they are not totally excluded from commercial activities. Door-to-door vending is very common. Most women do not observe *purdah* in front of male vendors, as they are mostly considered village "brothers." Wholesalers also visit the homesteads to buy eggs, vegetables, or chicken from the women.

There is an agricultural bank in the village, but no woman has ever visited the bank. Grameen Bank, a mobile bank which gives income-generating loans mainly to poor landless women, has started operations in one of the *paras*. Grameen Bank recognizes the limited mobility of rural women and sets up a weekly office in one of the courtyards/*barandas* of their members' homesteads (Fig. 11). Because of cultural constraints regarding the mobility and use of the public domain,



Fig. 13: Sari Vendor in a Courtyard.

women tend to cluster in a limited range of occupations based within the home. Processing paddy, sewing embroidered quilts or clothes, manufacturing household utensils, working as domestic help, or raising livestock, fowl, or vegetables are some ways that women can generate an income. However, the constraint of working at home and having to depend on male intermediaries makes them vulnerable to exploitation.

There is an adult education program run by an NGO active in this region. Classes for women are held in a courtyard in a farmer's house (Fig. 12), while the men's school is held in the *goli* of another homestead. There are about twenty-five women in the class. The course that they follow is known as "functional education" and lasts for six months. This school is fairly successful, with no dropouts to date and a waiting list for the next course. All the women, however, were from the same part of the neighborhood. Distance from home seems to be a determining factor in attendance at school.

Women in this area have little access to health care. The usual practice is for husbands to describe the symptoms of their wives' illness to the male doctor in Kansat or to the two homeopaths in Bajitpur and bring medicine for their wives. Unless it is absolutely necessary, women are not taken to the doctor. Women's lack of mobility and the long distance that has to be covered to reach government health facilities in Kansat means that women are mostly left out of modern health services. Thus they are compelled to rely on indigenous health care practices which are easily accessible and which operate within the given social constraints imposed on them. There are several village practitioners, known as *kobiraj*, who dispense traditional herbal medicine.

The study confirmed that access to public, political, and economic institutions, insofar as they are situated in the

public domain, is difficult and often impossible for rural women. However, the courtyard house in Bangladesh supports private as well as public functions like marketing, banking, and school, although exclusively for women. When vendors come into the courtyard, several women from the neighboring homesteads congregate to create a small market in the courtyard (Fig. 13). The success of the adult education program for women is due to a great extent to its location in one of the neighborhood courtyards. It facilitates the attendance of women with limited mobility and also assures that women feel comfortable in familiar surroundings. Rural women tend to be intimidated by alien environments.

Conclusions

Although architecturally the rural house facilitates the segregation and confinement of women, it provides an environment that is not claustrophobic or confining. The design and arrangement of the courtyard house mitigate the effects of confinement in several ways. The courtyards are fairly large with a feeling of openness. One courtyard flows into another, heightening the sense of space and movement. Three kinds of spaces—enclosed, semi-open, and open—satisfy the separate spatial needs for different activities. Access to neighboring courtyards assures frequent visits from other women; total isolation is not the norm. Most of the families studied were nuclear, often sharing a homestead with separate cooking arrangements. The spatial arrangements of their shared living quarters and common courtyards assured many of the support systems of the traditional extended family, such as combined child rearing, household help during illnesses, companionship, and emotional support, especially for the women.

The creation of domains and the physical boundaries within the homestead are instrumental in achieving a segregated existence for women, but these boundaries are not the crucial factor in the separation of men and women. Societal standards and religious injunctions are far more effective in maintaining the separate world of women. The field study revealed that, rather than a strict physical separation of domains with the exclusion of either sex, behavior and space use determined the limits of the domains. The separating physical boundaries exist, but are made flexible by time zoning, use/avoidance, and behavioral norms. Age, status, and financial standing also determine the rigidity of the spatial barriers between domains. For example, the physical boundaries of the homestead define the limits of living space more for younger women than for older. For newlyweds or new mothers, these boundaries are

absolute and impossible to disregard. But generally, for other women, the physical boundaries are flexible and vary according to time, period, and occasion. However, the kinship boundaries of the family and the physical limits of the homestead and the immediate neighborhood very much define the world of the average woman.

The special needs and problems of women in the provision of shelter has long been a neglected field, especially in developing countries. Any development work or upgrading of settlements in gender-segregated societies must take into account the value system and needs of women. This is not to say that the status quo—that is, the segregation of women—should be upheld; rather, physical interventions should be sensitive to the prevailing norms of society, which are changing, although very slowly. Reports from elsewhere in Bangladesh suggest that more and more women are coming out of seclusion and entering work places which are traditionally considered “male” spaces, such as construction and road maintenance sites. Any rural development must recognize the transition in societal norms and must attempt to incorporate the essence of the change in planned interventions in the built environment.

Notes

¹ The field study was funded by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Grants Subcommittee of McGill University, Montreal, Canada.

² All spatial terms used are in the local dialect.