



Religion and Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh

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PROGRESS AND PITFALLS: THE CONTEXT

Gender equality and the empowerment of women have long had a prominent place in development discourse in Bangladesh. The nation's 1971 independence coincided with a sharpened focus on gender issues in international development thinking and practice, initially termed Women in Development and later reconceptualized as Gender in Development to reflect increasing recognition of the socially constructed nature of gender roles and relations. The new Bangladeshi government and the rapidly emerging civil society took up women's empowerment as a core focus, partly as response to brutal violence against women during the Liberation War, but also in order to take advantage of the new proliferation of funding made available by foreign donors for programs targeting women. Indeed, surveying development efforts in Bangladesh today, it is rare to find any project that does not make explicit provision for the impact on women.

Bangladesh has made remarkable strides toward gender equality on various fronts in a relatively short period, from significantly reducing maternal mortality to expanding roles for women in politics. Perhaps most noteworthy, it has closed the once-vast gender gap in school enrollment at the primary and secondary levels. Access to education and employment has broadened women's sphere of influence beyond domestic spaces and challenged longstanding gender norms. As a result of these accomplishments, Bangladesh has steadily risen on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, from a ranking of 100 in 2007 to 64 in 2015: the highest rank in South Asia and among the highest for a Muslim-majority nation.¹

Despite this longstanding focus on gender mainstreaming and progress in key areas, there are serious and entrenched barriers to real and meaningful equality for women in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage and adolescent motherhood in the world and violence against women (VAW) remains a pervasive social phenomenon, related in part to the ubiquity of dowry and unequal power dynamics in the home. The increasing participation

of women in the workforce, particularly in the garment sector, has offered women newfound economic agency and increased mobility, but these gains have been tempered by unsafe working conditions, long hours, and uncertain terms of employment. Working women also face a 'double burden' of domestic responsibilities alongside wage work as norms related to familial duties have been more resistant to change. The changing social role of women, through the expansion of opportunities in education and employment, has emerged as a major fault line in the increasingly polarized relationship between secular and religious social forces.

Bangladesh has a favorable policy environment, including the long-awaited 2011 National Women Development Policy and a number of other legal instruments and protections. However, legal rights and protections for women are rarely enforced and often openly contested by conservative religious groups. In the private sphere, Bangladesh's family codes, which are based in religious scripture, offer women unequal provisions in divorce, inheritance, and other legal matters.

In Bangladesh gender norms are intimately bound up with religious beliefs and cultural practices, as they are throughout the world. Women's empowerment efforts have at times been strongly opposed by conservative groups, often citing religious scripture to defend patriarchal practices. Given the fact that these practices and the ideologies that undergird them are deeply enmeshed in the social fabric of Bangladesh, critics have questioned the extent to which development approaches that target women in isolation and focus narrowly on areas such as economic empowerment or health interventions can adequately address ingrained social norms. Such critiques have been at the heart of recent work that has found that patriarchal power structures in the home have severely limited women's control of microloans, offering them little real empowerment in such programs and trapping them in cycles of debt.² It is clear that if the objective is bringing about substantial and lasting progress for women's empowerment in Bangladesh a more nuanced and sensitive examination of dominant patriarchal ideologies—and the sociocultural practices they inform—is needed. This is an area where religious ideas and religious leaders can and do play a significant role.

This note focuses on the roles of religious ideas, practices, and actors in forming social attitudes and norms around gender. The aim is both to inform ongoing dialogue and to support efforts to define constructive paths forward on women's empowerment. This is part of ongoing mapping work centered on religious dimensions of development in Bangladesh.³ Efforts to date have included a country overview report with particular emphasis on gender issues and a series of dialogue sessions in Dhaka in partnership with BRAC University known as the Speakers' Forum on Religion and Development in Bangladesh. The May 16, 2015 event, entitled "Women's Empowerment, Gender Justice, and Religion," took up many of the issues discussed here and a summary of that event is available online.⁴

RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER IN BANGLADESH: SOME HISTORICAL GENEALOGIES

Patriarchal norms and attitudes have been an enduring feature of Bangladeshi society, cutting across faith communities and social strata. While religious arguments are commonly employed in efforts to maintain the unequal status of men and women in economic, political, and social arenas, it is important to recognize that religious traditions in Bangladesh are not monolithic in their perspective on gender. The construction of gender roles in these traditions is the result of many diverse historical processes and ideological influences. Today, as always, there is considerable variability within and between religious communities regarding the social position of women. At various times and in various contexts religious arguments have been used to justify male domination over women and, conversely, to push for more equitable gender relations.

As evidence of the great diversity of religious positions on gender equality, some of the strongest calls to expand women's rights in nineteenth century Bengal came from religious figures. Hindu reformer Rammohan Roy, founder of the Brama Samaj, was famously instrumental in the abolition of *sati*, the practice whereby a widow was compelled to burn herself on her husband's funeral pyre. His successor Keshad Chandra Sen sought to end *pardah*, polygamy, and child marriage and allow women the right to inheritance and widows the right to remarry.⁵ This period saw considerable legal and social advances for women. Scholars and other observers, however, note the paternalistic nature of such reforms, pointing out

that women rarely had voice or agency in these debates.⁶ During the struggle for Indian independence, a principle motivation for such reforms was to present a modern face to the West and thus undermine the moral justification for colonial intervention in Indian society.⁷

Islamic reform movements have had a major influence on underlying gender norms in Bangladesh. The strong 'Bengali' character of Islam in the region has made it the site of many such movements since the nineteenth century. In contrast to Hindu reformers of the era, these religious movements were more focused on internal regeneration and a return to orthodoxy. Their stance toward the colonial authorities—and the perceived importation and imposition of Western social norms—was harsher, particularly with regard to gender.⁸ Muslim reformers placed a strong emphasis on the piety and moral virtue of women, viewing them as embodying honor in family and community.

Focused on the role of women in the transmission of morals and values, Islamic revival movements have in recent years begun to emphasize women's religious education in order to promote piety and proper religious practice. Until very recently, most women in Bangladesh had little access to formal education, including in religious subjects. Barred from formal worship in the mosque, women often engaged in syncretic and unorthodox spiritual practice centered in the home or at local shrines (as is still common particularly in rural areas). The perceived religious and moral corruption of Bengali Muslim women was seen to represent an existential threat to Islamic society; some reformers even portrayed women as potential "enemies from within."⁹ While this fear has been a primary justification for maintaining firm social control over women, it also inspired calls for equal access to Islamic education, and can partially explain the willingness of many madrasas to open enrollment to girls within government-sponsored efforts to achieve gender parity in education, which will be explored in more detail later in the paper.

Sufi traditions, which represent some of the earliest influences of Islam in Bangladesh, have generally allowed fuller and more equal participation by women in religious life, though gender norms vary widely across Sufi communities within Bangladesh and the region. *Mazars* (tomb shrines to Sufi saints) are not subject to the strict gender segregation of Bangladeshi mosques. In many Sufi groups women take on leadership positions.

Typically described as the mystical inner dimension of Islam, Sufis privilege a direct and vivid relationship with the divine, often achieved through music and dance.¹⁰ These unorthodox practices have led to significant points of contention with orthodox reformers. However, the emergence of viable alternative narratives to the mainstream Islamic discourse on gender relations rooted in Sufi traditions has largely been deterred due in part to strong divisions between orders (*tariqa*) and the strong inward spiritual focus of some Sufi groups.

Tensions between religious conservatives and secular feminists are longstanding. Members of Bangladesh's vocal and active women's movement, ideologically rooted in Western feminism, were fierce opponents of government-sponsored Islamization of the 1980s, viewing religion as instrumental in the oppression of women in Bangladesh. It has been noted that Bangladeshi women's groups are predominantly composed of urban middle and upper class women, mirroring strong class divisions in Bangladeshi society more broadly.¹¹ This deep class divide limits the participation of poor and rural women many of whom conceptualize and envision responses to oppression in different ways than those who drive discourse on women's rights nationally. The antagonistic stance of secular women's groups toward religion has in some cases alienated poor women and women of faith, leaving significant room for Islamists to champion the cause of these groups. Indeed, Islamist groups including those associated with the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) political party are increasingly coopting some of the rights-focused language of the women's movement to advance an alternative discourse that defines the rights of women as those explicitly granted in the Qur'an, which are interpreted as complementary rather than equal to the rights of men. These groups look toward the Middle East in constructing an "Islamic modernity" and see the veil as a marker of the modern and empowered Muslim woman.¹²

Within this ideological vein there has been a significant proliferation of women's *taleem* or Qur'anic discussion circles among the middle class, intended to cultivate a "correct" understanding of Islam and Muslim womanhood.¹³ Many of these groups are associated with JI and their student wing, Islami Chhatri Sangstha, as well as popular piety movements such as Tablighi Jamaat. Many others exist without explicit affiliation. These women's *taleem* are rooted in a "textually-based piety" that in some cases rejects central Bengali cultural manifestations of womanhood, including the singing of folk songs. In

reflecting on roles and expectations in home and society and reconfiguring their identities as women, *taleem* members are exerting agency, but generally without the desire to address or challenge patriarchy.¹⁴ In part because of the strong secular character of the women's movement in Bangladesh, progressive Muslim women's groups such as Musawah, which use a scriptural basis to challenge gender injustice, are not well developed.

PURDAH, POVERTY, AND DEVELOPMENT

Women and their bodies have long served as an important projection of honor in South Asia. Ensuring women's 'purity' and moral integrity is often considered critical to maintaining status and reputation in family, community, and society.¹⁵ Traditionally, this has been ensured through the practice of *pardah* (female seclusion), which seeks to limit interaction with non-kin men. Though not an explicitly religious practice, it has come to be associated with more conservative interpretations of Islam. *Pardah* can be broadly understood as a set of norms and strictures that exclude women from or restrict their activities within public spaces.¹⁶ It takes two main forms: physical confinement of women in the home and veiling of women in public. Women's rights advocates claim that by restricting women's access to public spaces, *pardah* is often used as a means of limiting women's social agency.

A common approach of NGO's in Bangladesh is the engagement of women in grassroots social groups, which now serve as visible and potent symbols for rapidly changing gender relations in rural areas. These women's groups form the basis for what has been called the largest population of mobilized women in the Muslim world.¹⁷ Grassroots empowerment efforts in Bangladesh have, however, met significant resistance from conservative religious leaders who view such efforts as an imposition of Western gender norms. From their perspective, empowerment programs threaten traditional power structures both in the home and the community and in turn pose a fundamental challenge to the moral authority of religious leaders. In the early 1990s local imams and other leaders in rural communities reacted with a period of sustained violence and vandalism against NGO programs and staff.¹⁸ Fatwas, or Islamic legal pronouncements, were a principal tool in these efforts to thwart women's empowerment programs. Most fatwas were issued for an alleged violation of *pardah* and were directed at the poor and marginalized women that composed many

of these new NGO groups. Between 1992 and 2002, more than 240 documented cases of fatwas were directed against women in rural Bangladesh.¹⁹ Surveys carried out in the wake of the backlash found that imams objected to trainings for women outside of the home, expressed concerns over the potential religious conversion of women, and objected to the lack of involvement of men in programs.²⁰ Many suggested that NGO programs violated what they termed the “most basic principle of Islam”: authority of the husband.

Bangladesh’s economic transformation, driven in part by over three million female garment workers, has necessitated increased mobility of women outside the home. This economic transformation has coincided with a growth in conservative and formerly uncommon methods of veiling including the burqa and niqab. Though there are pragmatic reasons for veiling, including a desire to limit harassment while commuting to work or school, the spread of this new conservative dress has alarmed many secular feminists, who worry it may signal the reversal of social gains made by Bangladeshi women over the past two decades. They view the trend as antithetical to the notion of empowerment, which has often been portrayed in discourse of the women’s movement as ‘casting off the veil,’ both literally and figuratively. While some see these new types of veiling as driven by the importation of more conservative interpretations of Islam by migrant workers returning from the Middle East, others attribute the new prevalence of veiling to Bangladesh’s own rapid economic growth and a concomitant rise in class-consciousness. The burqa and niqab are means through which the upwardly mobile can socially differentiate themselves from lower class women, who are, out of economic necessity, compelled to work physically demanding jobs that preclude the wearing of such garments.²¹ While middle class veiling is more strongly associated with urban areas, the burqa and niqab are increasingly seen in agrarian contexts as well, a phenomenon that has seen less exploration. As the middle class expands in Bangladesh, veiling as a means social differentiation seems likely to increase, threatening to further marginalize poor women.

CHILD MARRIAGE, DOWRY, AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The expansion of the middle class in Bangladesh has meant that marriage, always the central institution in Bangladeshi society, is increasingly a form of social capital by which

Figure 1: Age at marriage, women aged 15-49

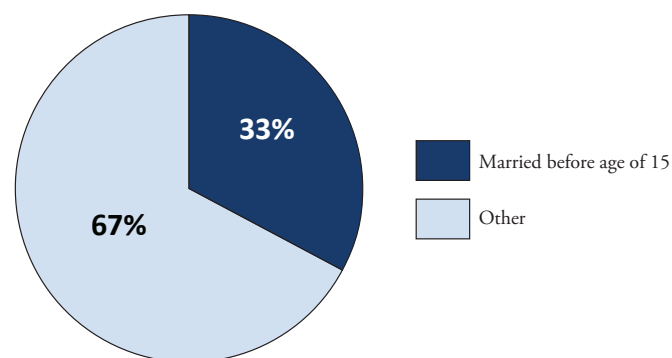
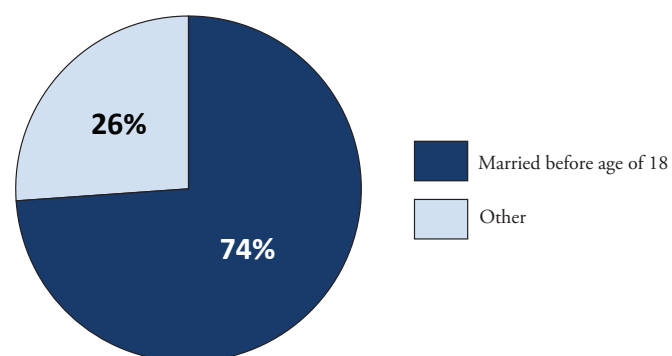


Figure 2: Age at marriage, women aged 18-49



Source: UNICEF, “Women and girls in Bangladesh,” http://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/Women_and_girls_in_Bangladesh.pdf (accessed November 23, 2015)

a family can further its economic and political influence. A woman’s ‘purity’ is a critical factor in marriageability, bringing up concerns of her dress, whereabouts, and age at marriage. To avoid the moral suspicion associated with older unmarried daughters, families have felt pressure to seek early marriages. Conversely, for a man to be considered marriageable he is expected to have established himself economically, which is often not achieved until around the age of 30.²² These incentives have led to increasing marital age disparities and alarming rates of child marriage.

Though the legal age for marriage in Bangladesh is 18 for women and 20 for men, Bangladesh has the world’s highest rate of under-15 child marriage and fourth highest rate of underage marriage overall. UNICEF reports that roughly a third of women between the ages of 15 and 49 were married before the age of 15 and roughly two-thirds of women between the ages of 20 and 49 were married before the age of 18.²³ The government’s recent proposal to lower the marriage age for girls from 18 to 16 years has been met with widespread condemnation internationally and from

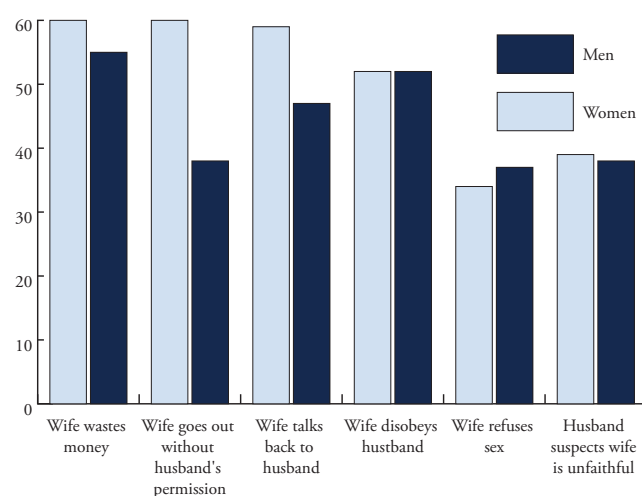
human rights advocates in Bangladesh. The government has faced accusations that it is seeking to address high rates of child marriage by simply changing the legal definition of child marriage and that such a move would further restrict the agency of adolescent girls regarding marriage, allowing greater familial and societal pressure to act upon them.

Pressures to secure a husband for girls at ever-younger ages coupled with the rapid monetization of the rural economy has seen the once uncommon practice of dowry (*joutuk*) become ubiquitous since the 1950s. Dowry, a gift of money or property given by the bride's family to the husband prior to marriage, can often represent up to 200 times the daily wage for the rural poor.²⁴ Ironically, access to microcredit, aimed at empowering rural women, has in many cases facilitated the inflation of these payments.²⁵ While dowry was traditionally associated with Hindu communities, some have tried to justify the practice in Islamic contexts by referencing the gifts given by the Prophet during the marriage of his daughter Fatima. The only marriage payment, however, that is formally established under Islamic law is a 'bridewealth' payment known as *mahr*. Dowry payments were banned in the 1980 Dowry Act, but have nevertheless become essentially an obligatory practice in many communities.

Dowry is a principal driver of intimate partner violence (IPV) in Bangladesh and studies have clearly demonstrated that dowry demands increase both the likelihood and frequency of domestic violence.²⁶ Here, violence against the bride is used as a means to coerce her family, who might be unwilling or unable to pay, to provide a satisfactory dowry. Violence is so commonly associated with the practice of dowry that the term 'dowry death', used to describe women who are murdered or driven to suicide due to dowry demands, has entered the common vernacular. In 2011 alone 7,079 incidents of dowry-related violence were reported, resulting in 325 deaths.²⁷ These figures likely represent just a small fraction of the total impact of dowry violence, as fear and lack of trust in the justice system compel many women to remain silent.

Several high profile incidents involving the rape and murder of young girls by police have brought public attention and widespread outrage to the issue of violence against women (VAW), however, intimate partner violence, the most ubiquitous manifestation of VAW in Bangladesh, has proven particularly difficult to address because it challenges male authority within households. Beyond dowry-related

Figure 3: Percentage of respondents who said that it was acceptable for a man to beat his wife, by specific circumstances, according to sex of respondent, Bangladesh, 2002



Source: Schuler, Sidney Ruth and Farzana Islam, "Women's Acceptance of Intimate Partner Violence within Marriage in Rural Bangladesh," *Studies in Family Planning* 39, no. 1 (2008): 53.

violence, IPV is a persistent and pervasive problem. In a 2011 study of married women in Bangladesh, 49 percent reported experiencing physical violence from a spouse, 53 percent experienced some type of sexual or physical violence, and 18 percent had experienced spousal rape.²⁸ Surveys conducted in rural Bangladesh have found disturbingly high rates of acceptance of IPV among both women and men (see Figure 3). However, group discussions with women undertaken in the same study revealed that many women strongly opposed domestic violence and wanted men who have committed such acts against their spouses to be punished.²⁹ In Bangladesh, there is a lack of research on the role religion plays in justifying IPV and patriarchal power structures within the household more broadly. Globally, the relationship between Islam and IPV is heavily disputed. While some scholars interpret Surah An Nisa 34 as justification of a husband's use of physical violence against his wife in certain circumstances, many others point to several hadiths that explicitly prohibit violence and mistreatment of one's wife.

WOMEN, RELIGION, AND PUBLIC POLICY

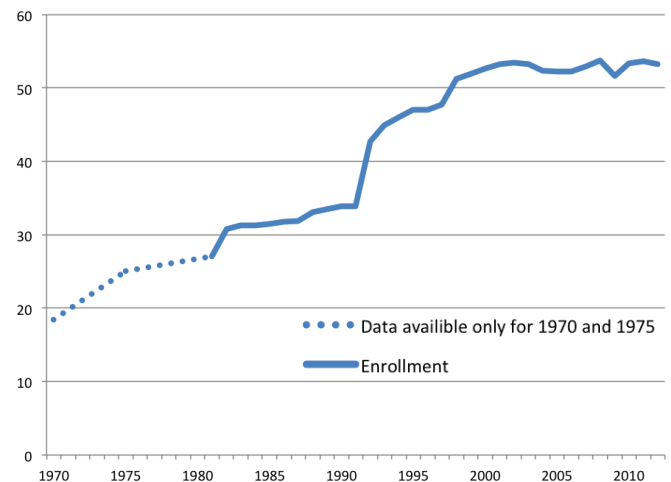
Several key pieces of legislation (see box) aim to increase legal and economic rights for women in line with the nation's commitments under the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination and Violence Against Women (CEDAW).

A long-awaited National Development Policy on Women and Children was finally approved in 2011. Initially proposed in the 1990s, the legislation faced substantial opposition from Islamist politicians over conflicts with sharia, which lead to significant alterations to clauses dealing with inheritance, economic opportunities for women, and the expansion of women's representation in Parliament. The government has also adopted a 'gender sensitive' budget and has aimed to disaggregate national statistics by gender to better gauge progress toward gender equality.

While the policy environment with regard to women's issues is fairly robust, Bangladesh has often lacked the capacity to ensure its implementation, particularly in the face of often-significant opposition from conservative and religious groups. Likewise women can be reluctant to defend newly enshrined rights in the formal justice system, not only because of notoriously long delays and financial expense, but also the severe social stigma from family and community that come from challenging longstanding social norms.

The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights to men and women under the law, but only in the public sphere; personal and family affairs remain governed by a complex set of religious laws, both codified and customary. Muslims, Hindus, and Christians each have their own family laws while Hindu law is applied in Buddhist communities. By determining the rights of women to marital property in instances of divorce and separation, issues of family law are critical to addressing extreme

Figure 4: Female Enrollment Percentage Secondary Level (1970-2012)



Source: Secondary Education. Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics, 2012. Web. http://www.banbeis.gov.bd/webnew/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=316&Itemid=171.

poverty in Bangladesh. Several studies have noted higher levels of food insecurity and poverty in women-headed households.³⁰ In the case of each religion's family code women are not granted equal right to marital property during or at dissolution of marriage. Likewise, economic entitlements after divorce are often meager and difficult to secure, forcing women either to endure abusive marriages or to face impoverishment if they seek divorce.

The adoption of a uniform and secular family code has been a central demand of women's and human rights groups, who suggest that current codes are highly discriminatory.³¹ This includes unequal provisions for divorce for men and women. Under Muslim family law, for example, men have the unilateral right to divorce, while this right is available to women only if granted in the marriage contract. Likewise, divorce is more restrictive for women than men under Christian law. While divorce is not permitted under the largely customary Hindu law, polygamy is allowed, as it is under Muslim law. Family laws are also used to determine women's maintenance during marriage and after divorce. For example, Muslim women are guaranteed maintenance for only 90 days after divorce. Christian women are entitled to maintenance, but this is tied to their chastity. Because marriage registration is optional in Hindu communities, many women face severe challenges even providing legal proof of marriage. Women's rights groups also focus heavily on inequality in inheritance. According to Sharia law, women are entitled

Legislation in Bangladesh Expanding the Rights of Women

1980	Dowry Prohibition Act
2000	Prevention of Women and Children Repression Act
2002	Acid Crime Control Act
2006	Bangladesh Labour Act
2009	Citizenship Amendment Act
2010	Domestic Violence Act
2011	National Development Policy on Women and Children
2012	Hindu Marriage Registration Act
2012	Human Trafficking Deterrence and Suppression Act

to receive only half of the amount their brothers receive. In practice however, women rarely demand this much, particularly where land and property is involved. Under the system of patrilocal residence in Bangladesh, owning land or a residence is critically important for men in efforts to secure a wife. Many women will forgo rights over property in favor of their brothers for this reason, a phenomenon sometimes called “good sister syndrome.”³²

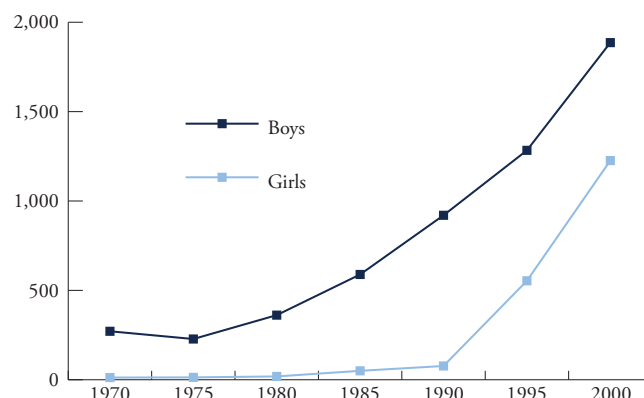
Though the ruling Awami League has expressed support for family law reform and the removal of related CEDAW reservations, their inaction is often perceived as fear of the potential backlash if legislation is seen as ‘un-Islamic.’ Changes to family law have been extremely contentious and have been opposed by religious leaders who suggest that the scriptural basis for these laws offers no scope for reform. Proposed changes to inheritance law, for example, served as a rallying issue during the emergence of Hefazate-Islami, an uprising of orthodox madrasa teachers and students in 2013. Opposition to changes in family law has not been confined to Muslim leaders: conservative Hindu and Christian leaders have, in the past, strongly resisted the push for a uniform civil code.³³

MADRASAS AND THE EXPANSION OF EDUCATION FOR GIRLS

Since the 1990s Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in closing what were at independence wide gender gaps in education through innovative private-public partnerships and conditional cash transfer programs for families who send their daughters to school. Expanding education for girls is seen as something of a ‘silver bullet’: lowering fertility, improving health outcomes, and ultimately boosting economic growth. Bangladesh has achieved gender parity at the primary and secondary levels, eclipsing many other South Asian and Muslim majority nations. This is particularly noteworthy at the secondary level for girls living in more conservative rural areas. Secondary school corresponds with the age between menarche and marriage, when restrictions on social mobility are strongest in Bangladesh; these mobility restrictions present significant gender barriers at the secondary level in rural Bangladesh.³⁴

By expanding access to girls and offering an environment in which *purdah* can be observed, Islamic schools (madrasas) have played an important role in Bangladesh’s noteworthy progress in closing the gender gap in education. Madrasas have a large and growing presence in primary and secondary

Figure 5: Growth of madrasa students by gender over time (thousands)



Source: Basic Education and Policy Support Activity, United States Agency for International Development, Bangladesh Educational Assessment: Pre-primary and Primary Madrasah Education in Bangladesh, by Amr Abhalla, A.N.M. Raisuddin, Suleiman Hussein (2004): 24.

education in Bangladesh. The number of madrasas grew rapidly since independence from 1,838 in 1976 to 9,384 in 2010.³⁵ In 2009, madrasas accounted for an estimated 13.8 percent of school enrollment at the primary level and about 21 percent of secondary enrollment. The government includes madrasas in its stipend program, provided that they register with the government and include secular subjects in line with the state curriculum. These incentives prompted the traditionally all-male institutions to open their doors to girls: the number of female students in madrasas jumped from 7.7 percent in 1990 to 52 percent in 2008. Madrasas accounted for 35 percent of the expansion of enrollment for girls in that time period.³⁶

Issues related to *purdah* can figure heavily in decisions on whether to send girls to school in many conservative communities.³⁷ Most madrasas (85 percent) maintain a ‘strict policy of *purdah*’ in the classroom as compared to just 18 percent of secular schools. Sixty-nine percent of girls in madrasas are required to veil as compared to just one percent of secular schools.³⁸ In conservative contexts, if madrasas are available, girls are six times more likely to attend secondary school as compared to more ‘progressive’ sub-districts.³⁹

This unique mixture of conservative institutions and progressive state interventions appears to have had a significant impact on progress toward gender parity in education. Quality concerns aside, some women’s

groups register worry over the social impact of expanding madrasa education. Despite their contribution in providing access to education for girls in some of the most remote and marginalized communities, the fear is that since schools play such critical roles in socialization, madrasas may inculcate youth with regressive social attitudes and perpetuate traditional patriarchal gender norms. There is some evidence to support these worries. Much of the ‘extracurricular’ education girls receive at madrasas involves proper Islamic etiquette and manners (*abab*) aimed at developing an ‘ideal womanhood’ that envisions women as guardians of Islamic virtue, piety, and morality.⁴⁰ A recent survey found that, as compared to female students at government schools, female madrasa students held less favorable opinions on the expansion of economic and educational opportunities for women, as well as preference for larger families.⁴¹ It should also be noted, however, that access to religious education has allowed women to become increasingly integrated into Islamic forums, organizations, and institutions long dominated by male imams, albeit with limited and circumscribed roles. This has expanded women’s influence in the ‘public sphere’ in significant ways. Even so, research findings suggest that many women who are taking on these new religious roles are not motivated by a desire to challenge male dominance in these institutions or in Islam more broadly.⁴²

LOOKING AHEAD

Bangladesh has made considerable progress toward gender equality, and this is reflected in many social and economic indicators. However, the Bangladesh experience gives some credence to critiques of conventional development approaches to women’s empowerment. Such approaches can fail to recognize how far gender issues are embedded in specific sociocultural contexts, and thus ignore factors that can complicate or ultimately undermine empowerment or equality efforts. Indeed despite considerable gains, deeply rooted patriarchal social norms prevail in many contexts, bound up in complex ways with religious and cultural traditions.

Experience in Bangladesh points to the necessity of not only better understanding the attitudes and behaviors of men but also engaging them in efforts to achieve gender equality. This mirrors the findings of various research efforts, most notably by the International Center for Research on Women, Promundo, MenEngage, and Sonke Gender Justice. This growing body of work emphasizes the need

for strategies that emphasize dynamics between women and men as opposed to targeting women in isolation. Men can and must play a critical role in changing views on masculinity that are harmful to women and ultimately transforming gender norms in their societies.

Religious leaders have a special role to play in such strategies given their social influence and moral authority. Assuming (and fearing) an ideological rift on gender issues, however, many local development actors and rights groups have been ambivalent toward engaging imams and other religious figures in such programs. Women’s groups in particular often perceive collaboration with religious leaders as acceptance and validation of their social authority, which is assumed to be negative.

Religious leaders have been engaged positively in various gender-related efforts in Bangladesh, suggesting scope to expand such approaches and potentially mitigate a growing social rift over these issues. The active participation of imams, for example, is widely seen as having played a critical role in bringing about broader social acceptance for family planning in Bangladesh and the substantial reduction in the overall fertility rate. More recently, several organizations including UNICEF, UNFPA, and the Asia Foundation have engaged imams and other religious leaders through the government’s Islamic Foundation on issues ranging from VAW to dowry. The Asia Foundation has pioneered approaches that engage imam’s wives and thus access informal networks of religious women, an area that warrants more exploration given expanding religious roles for women. The results are encouraging, but such efforts are still limited in scope. Questions also remain regarding the ability of such programs to engage more conservative religious leaders, as well as the kinds of issues that can be addressed through an Islamic framework. While imams have been willing to speak out against dowry using scriptural arguments, many contend that there is not the same kind of Qur’anic basis to oppose child marriage, as one notable example.

As Bangladesh’s experience with the expansion of madrasa education for girls attests, the potential impact of religious engagement is great, but—particularly on issues of gender—can be complex. Conservative religious groups in Bangladesh have long made accusations of cultural imperialism over the importation of Western social norms and notions of rights and empowerment. It is clear, however, that even if the goal is to better understand the construction and perpetuation of discriminatory

social practices, norms, and expectations for women in Bangladesh, engaging religious actors is key. A deeper and more nuanced dialogue that emphasizes the religious and

cultural dimensions of gender can benefit development practitioners and women's rights activists as they push for more equitable gender relations in Bangladesh.

ENDNOTES

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