



Women and Religion in Bangladesh: Obstacles and Opportunities for Empowerment

HIGHLIGHTS

- Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage and adolescent motherhood in the world with nearly three-quarters of girls married before the age of 18.
- Violence against women (VAW) remains a pervasive social phenomenon, strongly associated with dowry payments and unequal power dynamics in the home.
- Women's new economic agency has been tempered by unsafe working conditions, long hours, uncertain terms of employment, and a 'double burden' of domestic and wage work.
- In Bangladesh legal protection of women's rights is robust, but these protections are rarely enforced and often openly contested by conservative religious groups.
- Bangladesh's family codes, based in religious scripture, offer women unequal provisions in divorce, inheritance, and other legal matters.
- Development approaches that target women in isolation and focus narrowly on areas such as economic empowerment or health interventions do not adequately address deeply ingrained patriarchal ideologies and practices.
- Approaches to gender equality are needed that engage in a more nuanced way with social norms, cultural attitudes, and religious dimensions of gender.

Bangladesh has made remarkable strides toward gender equality in a relatively short period by reducing maternal mortality, expanding roles for women in politics, and considerably closing the gender gap in school enrolment at the primary and secondary levels. Access to education and employment has broadened women's spheres of influence beyond domestic spaces and challenged longstanding gender norms. Reflecting these accomplishments, Bangladesh's rank has steadily risen on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, from 100 in 2007 to 64 in 2015: the highest rank in South Asia and among the highest for a Muslim majority nation.¹ Women's empowerment has, however, emerged as a major fault line in the increasingly polarized relationship between secular and religious social forces. Patriarchal norms, often justified by religion, persist in Bangladesh and pose important barriers to gender equality. This brief explores the intersection of religion and gender as part of a larger country-level mapping of study in Bangladesh.²

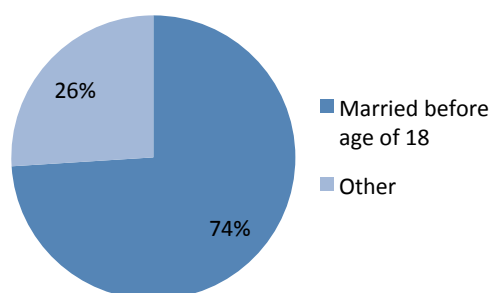
PURDAH AND SOCIAL AGENCY

Women and their bodies have long been an important projection of honor in South Asia. Ensuring women's 'purity' and moral integrity is often seen as critical to maintaining status and reputation in family, community, and society. *Purdah* (female seclusion) has traditionally been one principal way purity and honor are upheld. This includes the physical confinement of women in the home and veiling of women in public. Women's rights advocates view restrictions on women's access to public spaces as limiting women's social agency and thus represent a major barrier to full equality. Religious leaders, particularly in the 1990s, reacted strongly against development efforts to empower women, often citing violation of *purdah*. They argued that such programs impose Western gender norms, which threatened traditional structures and pose fundamental challenges to their moral authority. Fatwas, or Islamic legal pronouncements, directed at women for a violation of *purdah*, were a key part of this resistance. Between 1992 and 2002 there were more than 240 documented cases of fatwas against women who took part in NGO groups in rural Bangladesh.³

CHILD MARRIAGE

Marriage is increasingly a form of social capital in Bangladesh, used as a means to further a family's economic and political influence. A woman's marriageability depends on her perceived 'purity' and therefore families are marrying off daughters at younger ages to avoid the moral suspicion associated with older unmarried women. Conversely, a man's marriageability hinges on his economic capacity, which is often not established until the age of 30.⁴ 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 under the age of 49 were married before the age of 15 and roughly two-thirds before the age of 18.⁵

Figure 1: Marriage ages of women aged 20-49

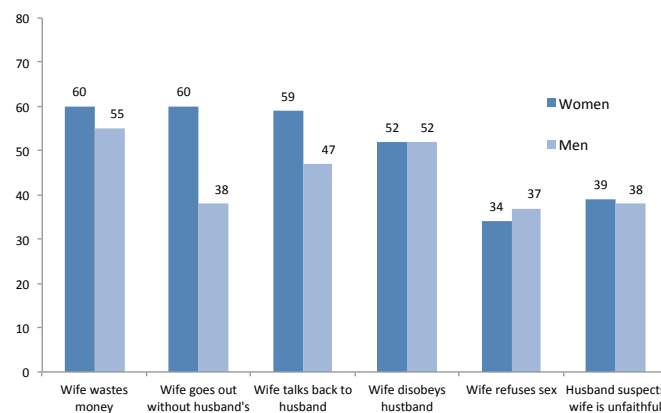


Source: UNICEF, "Women and girls in Bangladesh," http://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/Women_and_girls_in_Bangladesh.pdf (accessed November 23, 2015)

DOWRY AND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV)

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 represent up to 200 times the daily wage for the rural poor. Ironically, access to microcredit, aimed at empowering rural women, has in many cases facilitated the inflation of these payments.

Figure 2: 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.

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. Violence is used against a bride as a means to coerce her family, who might be unwilling or unable to pay a satisfactory dowry. In 2011 alone 7,079 incidents of dowry-related violence were reported, resulting in 325 deaths⁶ (real figures are likely to be higher due to under-reporting). Beyond dowry-related 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.⁷ Surveys conducted in rural Bangladesh have found disturbingly high rates of acceptance of IPV among both women and men (see figure). IPV has proven very hard to address as it challenges patriarchal authority within the household.

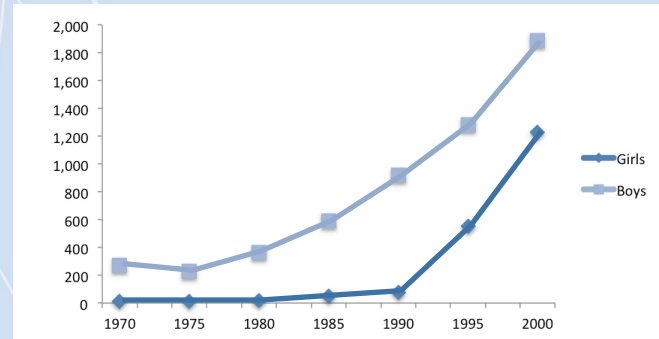
RELIGION, FAMILY LAW, AND LEGAL RIGHTS FOR WOMEN

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

RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT CASE STUDY: MADRASAS AND GIRLS EDUCATION

There have been encouraging examples of religious engagement on gender issues suggesting scope for expansion, which might help mitigate the growing religious-secular social rift. These approaches do, however, pose a new set of challenges particularly over social values. 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 exceptional progress in closing the gender gap in education. This is particularly noteworthy at the secondary level, which corresponds with the age between menarche and marriage, when restrictions on social mobility are strongest in Bangladesh. Conditional cash transfer programs for families who send their daughters to school and innovative private-public partnerships encouraged these traditionally all-male institutions to open their doors to girls. The percentage of female students in madrasas jumped from 7.7 percent in 1990 to 52 percent in 2008 and accounted for 35 percent of the expansion of enrollment for girls in that period.⁹ Though this distinctive mixture of conservative institutions and progressive state interventions appears to have had a significant impact on progress toward gender parity in education, some women's groups register worry over the social impact of expanding madrasa education, that may inculcate 'regressive' social attitudes. Studies have suggested that girls educated in madrasas held less favorable opinions on the expansion of economic and educational opportunities for women, and preferred larger families.¹⁰

Figure 3: 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.

Buddhist communities. The adoption of a uniform and secular family code has been a central demand of women's and human rights groups. The current family laws have unequal provisions for divorce for women, low or no obligation for maintenance, and allow polygamy in many cases. According to Sharia law, women are entitled to receive only half of the inheritance of their brothers, and women often forgo rights over property in favor of their brothers, a phenomenon sometimes called "good sister syndrome."

Issues of family law are critical to addressing extreme poverty in Bangladesh. Several studies have noted higher levels of food insecurity and poverty in women-headed households.⁸ Family law does not give women equal right to marital property during or at dissolution of marriage and economic entitlements after divorce are often meager and difficult to secure, forcing women to either endure abusive marriages or extreme impoverishment if they seek divorce.

LOOKING AHEAD

Bangladesh has made remarkable progress towards gender equality according to most indicators; however, its experience has also given credence to critiques of conventional approaches to women's empowerment. Research in Bangladesh highlights the risk of ignoring the embeddedness of gender issues in specific sociocultural contexts and points to the importance of engaging men, including religious leaders, in efforts to achieve gender equality.

- Given the connection between religion and social norms in Bangladesh, religious leaders should be engaged in strategies designed to empower women. Development actors and rights groups have been ambivalent or even suspicious of engaging imams and other religious figures, and dialogue that builds trust and understanding should be a first step.

- Lessons can be learned from prior engagement with religious leaders, such as the successful engagement of imams to broaden social acceptance for family planning in Bangladesh. UNICEF, UNFPA, and the Asia Foundation have engaged imams and other religious leaders on issues ranging from VAW to dowry. The results are encouraging, but such efforts are still limited in scope and questions remain as to whether such programs can reach more conservative religious leaders.
- Working with religious leaders to identify scriptural basis for women's empowerment has limitations, and interpretations are contested. While many imams have been willing to speak out against dowry and on health-related topics using scriptural arguments, other issues such as child marriage are less clear-cut.
- Interpretation from religious perspectives must come from local scholars and leaders to avoid accusations of cultural imperialism or the importation of social norms. This type of scholarship exists in pockets around the world and can be fostered in Bangladesh through exchanges and dialogue, but will take time to take effect.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ World Economic Forum. (2015) Global Gender Gap Report 2015. Available at: <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2015/rankings>
- ² Full country report and other resources at <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/subprojects/country-mapping-bangladesh>
- ³ Riaz, Ali. (2005) "Traditional Institutions as Tools of Political Islam in Bangladesh." *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 40.3: pp. 171-196.
- ⁴ Shehabuddin, Elora. (2008) *Reshaping the Holy: Democracy, Development, and Muslim Women in Bangladesh*. New York: Columbia University Press
- ⁵ UNICEF. (2010). "Women and girls in Bangladesh." Available at: http://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/Women_and_girls_in_Bangladesh.pdf
- ⁶ Huda, Shahnaz. (2006) "Dowry in Bangladesh: Compromising women's rights." *South Asia Research* 26.3: 249-268.
- ⁷ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2013). *Report of Violence Against Women Survey 2011*. Ministry of Planning Bangladesh.
- ⁸ Human Rights Watch. (2012). "Will I Get My Dues Before I Die? Harm to Women from Bangladesh's Discriminatory Laws on Marriage, Separation, and Divorce" Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/09/17/will-i-get-my-dues-i-die/harm-women-bangladeshs-discriminatory-laws-marriage>
- ⁹ Asadullah, Mohammad Niaz, and Nazmul Chaudury. (2013) *Peaceful Coexistence? The Role of Religious Schools and NGOs in the Growth of Female Secondary Schooling in Bangladesh*. *Journal of Development Studies*, 49(2)
- ¹⁰ Asadullah, Mohammad Niaz, and Nazmul Chaudhury. (2010) "Religious Schools, Social Values, and Economic Attitudes: Evidence from Bangladesh." *World Development* 38, no. 2: 205-217.

The primary author for this brief is Nathaniel Adams with research assistance from Alexandra Stark and oversight by Crystal Corman and Katherine Marshall. This issue brief is part of a larger country-mapping project conducted jointly by the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University and the World Faiths Development Dialogue with funding from the Henry R. Luce Initiative on Religion and International Affairs. More resources can be found online at: <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/projects/religion-and-development-country-level-mapping>.

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