



Religions and Development Research Programme

Female madrasas in Pakistan: a response to modernity

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There has been a recent surge in demand for Islamic education for young women in Pakistan. This research examines whether the increasing popularity of madrasa education can be attributed solely to the religious beliefs of parents and their daughters. While religion is important, it suggests that number of female madrasas (Islamic schools) has grown because they provide an education for young women from middle income families that responds to many of the pressures resulting from economic and cultural change.

The paper charts the birth, growing demand for and increasing numbers of female madrasas in Pakistan since the 1970s, noting that this reflects both demand from families and a positive response by the Islamic educational establishment. It attributes the recent surge in demand for Islamic education among girls who have already completed a secular education (mostly aged 16+) to the uncertain external environment. Globalization, development processes and wider availability of the mass media (especially cable television) are exposing young women from middle income families to western notions of gender equality and increasing their desire to access good jobs. However, the state has failed to provide educational and employment opportunities to match their aspirations. In addition, the erosive effect of cultural change on values that stress the importance of being a good Muslim, wife, mother and daughter concerns religious teachers, parents and many young women alike.

Findings from individual and group interviews with principals and teachers, members of the *wafaqs* (Muslim education boards), parents and students in female

madrasas throughout Pakistan show that the Islamic education provided by female madrasas is

- regarded as complementary to rather than a substitute for secular education
- perceived by both parents and daughters as encouraging piety and family-oriented values, thus increasing family stability and girls' marriage prospects

In addition, it provides

- knowledge and social contacts, especially for girls from remote areas
- improved social status for graduates in their communities of origin, where they can often play roles in the wider dissemination of Islamic knowledge
- opportunities for earning income from the establishment of independent girls' madrasas.

The research concludes that

- religion is not a monolithic institution that is inherently supportive or obstructive of development processes; instead it can be seen as an informal institution on which people rely when formal institutions fail to provide the means to cope with day-to-day uncertainties
- the choice of madrasa education by parents and their daughters is partly driven by religious beliefs, but is also a rational response to the socio-economic and cultural changes that concern them.

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