



Religions and Development Research Programme

Mobilizing for Muslim women's rights in India

Nida Kirmani

In India in recent years, Muslim women's rights have come increasingly under the spotlight and Muslim women themselves have started to organize collectively in order to demand their rights both within and outside the mainstream women's movement. This research examines how women's rights activists working in Muslim communities have engaged with the question of religion, either within the women's movement or by creating a separate space for themselves.

Often religion is seen as a hindrance to the progressive social change needed to realize development objectives such as greater gender equality. However, there is little research that assesses the views of those involved on religion or examines the role of religion in social mobilization and activism. One of a series of studies of the role of religion in movements for social change, this research started from the assumption that progressive social change is more likely to occur as a result of active mobilization and the construction of a broad base of social and political support than through specific 'women's programmes' or external intervention. It set out to assess the extent to which mobilization has occurred and a broad support base constructed around the issue of Muslim women's rights in India.

The contemporary Indian women's movement has historically had an ambivalent relationship with religion, demonstrated most clearly during the debates around the question of personal laws during the 1980s and 1990s. Although these debates centred on Muslim women's rights, limited numbers of Muslim women actually participated in the discussions – a situation that has changed more recently. The research describes the emergence of two networks organized around the question of Muslim women's rights: the Muslim Women's Rights Network (MWRN) and the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA). Based on extensive interviews with members of the networks, the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) and other women's organizations in Mumbai, New Delhi, Lucknow and

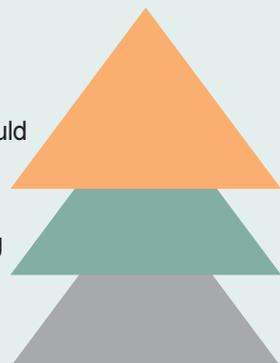
Kolkata, the study focused particularly on whether and how the MWRN and the BMMA engage with religion as part of a process of collective identity formation and within the debates that they foster and in which they participate.

The key findings of the analysis are:

- Muslim women are increasingly organizing for social change, both independently and as part of the wider women's movement.
- The MWRN and the BMMA are re-shaping the category 'Muslim women' as a means of expressing their political agency, rather than allowing this category to be defined by other political interest groups.
- Both networks are challenging the authority of the male religious elite to represent the entire 'Muslim community'.
- Both draw attention to the multiple forms of disadvantage faced by women in minority communities, including Muslim women.
- Both have attempted to engage with members of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board in the past, but have largely abandoned this strategy because of a perceived lack of progress.
- Within an Islamic framework, both networks have advocated greater use of the *nikahnama* (marriage contract) as a means of overcoming the limitations of Muslim Personal Laws, but with limited success.
- The women's movement is increasingly becoming diversified as members of minority groups, including Muslim and dalit women, organize collectively both within and outside the movement.

The study concluded that:

- Members of the women's movement should make more of an effort to positively engage with and create space for women from marginalized communities, including Muslim and dalit women.



- The membership and leadership of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board should have a better gender balance, as well as holding constructive and respectful dialogues with members of women's groups.
- The Board should reformulate its model *nikahnama* to safeguard women's rights, including a provision that protects women from arbitrary divorce and allows them the right to seek a divorce themselves.
- The national and State governments should include members of Muslim women's networks in discussions relating to the rights of religious minorities, including those related to the implementation of the Sachar Committee recommendations.
- Policy makers, the media and donors should recognize the diversity amongst Muslims in India, and ensure that women's voices are heard in discussions of Muslim identity, rather than allowing the male-dominated religious elite to define the interests of 'the community'.

Based on Kirmani, N. (2009) *Beyond the Religious Impasse: Mobilizing for Muslim Women's Rights in India*, Birmingham: Religions and Development Working Paper 35

<http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk/index.php?section=47>

