



## Religions and Development Research Programme

# Women's empowerment and Islam in Bangladesh

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The question of whether Islam empowers women arises in the context of a mainstream development discourse that prioritizes gender equality and a resurgence of academic interest in religion. Given the longstanding use of gender as a key signifier of both modernity and Islam, it is a complex question. Here, it is addressed in the context of contemporary Bangladesh where, while conventional indicators of gender inequality are narrowing, Islam is increasingly visible in society and politics.

In one set of narratives, religion/Islam appears in opposition to 'modernity', as 'tradition', an obstacle to progress. In contrast, it is also regarded as a potential resource for development or a source of an alternative vision. Yet another narrative sees Islam and modernity as selectively engaging with and influencing each other. In some of the development literature, any improvement in the position of women is labelled 'empowerment', although other sources recognize that empowerment depends on increased agency, choice and bargaining power. In the gender literature, religion is absent, has a masculine (and oppressive) presence, stresses women's (oppositional) agency, or sees women themselves as religious subjects.

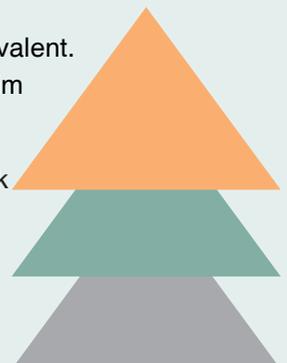
This paper draws on long term research in Bangladesh, including a larger project on Wellbeing in Developing Countries and additional in-depth work on culture and religion.

Founded on secular principles in 1971, the state of Bangladesh has increasingly identified itself with Islam, which is also increasingly visible in society, as indicated by levels of religious observance and the expansion of madrasa education. Women's literacy, participation in income earning activities and engagement in politics has increased, while fertility has declined. However, reliance on external funding means that the state plays an equivocal role with respect to gender and Islam. It

promotes women's participation in the economy, politics and society at the same time as bringing Islam into government. As well as their political manifestations, relationships between gender and Islam are also played out within family and community life and in the often hostile interactions between religious leaders and NGOs. Women can be caught in the crossfire, but are also active agents, resisting, subverting and selectively engaging with aspects of the religious forces that do battle with and over them.

As a concrete illustration of women's complex position and strategies, commonalities and contrasts between two individual Muslim women from northern Bangladesh are analysed in depth. One is a middle-aged, lower middle class rural woman, who is closely associated with the revivalist Tablighi Jama'at movement and is leader of a *talim* (religious instruction) group. The second is an older, wealthier urban woman, who informally fulfils some local religious leadership roles. While the former regards Hinduism as the main threat to Islam, the latter sees the conservative views of popular preachers as a greater threat. Both value and actively practise their faith and believe that it implies a strong responsibility towards others, but both resent the attempts by politics to co-opt religion. For both, Islam has offered a refuge from personal crisis and difficult family relationships, and has increased their social standing. However, both work within and are generally accepting of a patriarchal idiom that places women at the centre of the family and the family at the centre of women's lives. While the second woman combines faithfulness to core Islamic values with recognition of the need to adapt to contemporary times, the first is more ambivalent. The views of the two deeply religious Muslim women studied thus vary

- according to their broader political outlook and personal experience and
- in relation to other factors such as class, personality, urban/rural residence and family culture.





Overall, therefore, the implications of 'Islam' for women's empowerment cannot be assumed, since they differ according to traditions of interpretation, personal experience and social location. The research demonstrates that women's narratives (whether within or against religion) must be understood both in their own terms and in their social and political contexts. This suggests that it is necessary to understand

- women's own perspectives
- how religious women construct 'others', to assess the implications of self-empowerment through religion for those others

- how the family or local domain may, depending on the broader social and political context, be co-opted by wider forces, to serve different political ends. For example, in the Bangladesh context, piety may be transformative at the personal level, but if the Jamaat-i-Islami wins political control it may narrow the scope for women's engagement in public life.

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