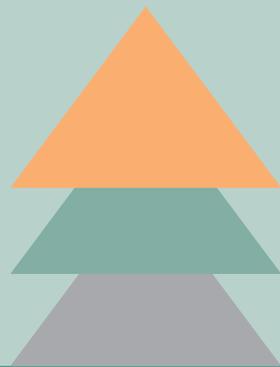


# Religions and Development Research Programme

## **Domains of Contestation: Women's Empowerment and Islam in Bangladesh**

**Sarah C. White**

Centre for Development Studies, University of Bath



Working Paper 36 - 2009

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# Religions and Development

## Research Programme

The Religions and Development Research Programme Consortium is an international research partnership that is exploring the relationships between several major world religions, development in low-income countries and poverty reduction. The programme is comprised of a series of comparative research projects that are addressing the following questions:

- How do religious values and beliefs drive the actions and interactions of individuals and faith-based organisations?
- How do religious values and beliefs and religious organisations influence the relationships between states and societies?
- In what ways do faith communities interact with development actors and what are the outcomes with respect to the achievement of development goals?

The research aims to provide knowledge and tools to enable dialogue between development partners and contribute to the achievement of development goals. We believe that our role as researchers is not to make judgements about the truth or desirability of particular values or beliefs, nor is it to urge a greater or lesser role for religion in achieving development objectives. Instead, our aim is to produce systematic and reliable knowledge and better understanding of the social world.

The research focuses on four countries (India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania), enabling the research team to study most of the major world religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and African traditional belief systems. The research projects will compare two or more of the focus countries, regions within the countries, different religious traditions and selected development activities and policies.

The consortium consists of six research partner organisations, each of which is working with other researchers in the four focus countries:

- University of Birmingham, UK: International Development Department, Department of Theology and Religion, Centre for West African Studies, Centre for the Study of Global Ethics.
- University of Bath, UK: Centre for Development Studies.
- Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, New Delhi.
- Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, Ibadan.
- University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
- Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan.

In addition to the research partners, links have been forged with non-academic and non-government bodies, including Islamic Relief.

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**Key words: Bangladesh, Islam, women, gender, Muslim, empowerment**



## Summary

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.

# 1 Introduction

The seeds of this paper were sown as I listened to another, which argued that radical Islam was an empowering option for women in Pakistan. Although the paper was much more sophisticated than this suggests, it raised for me the deceptively simple question, 'Does Islam empower women?' as one that needed further exploration. This paper is the result. Empirically, it reflects a longstanding interest in gender issues in Bangladesh, stemming from my PhD research in the 1980s (White, 1992) through more recent projects on marriage, family and wellbeing, and religion and wellbeing. Theoretically, it seeks to engage with recent scholarship on Islam and women's agency and subjectivity, set against a more general interest in the framing of questions and the politics of discourse and scholarship related to international development. The paper does not therefore provide a substantive answer as to whether Islam empowers women. Rather, it offers an archaeology of the question, aiming to disinter some of the many layers of politics in which it is embedded.

The first of these layers is the geopolitics of a 'war on terror' and the politics of scholarship to which this gives rise. This is where the paper begins. The second layer is the politics of modernity, which involve a complex entangling of the question's core components. This is interwoven with the politics of how empowerment itself is understood. The next section gives a brief introduction to how religion and gender are visible in practice in the modernity that is contemporary Bangladesh. A further layer concerns the politics of how religion is represented in gender-focused studies. The next section traces this trajectory, primarily in Bangladesh but also in West Asia, from absence, to opposition, to agency and subjectivity. A final layer concerns the politics of religion and empowerment in individuals' lives. This is explored through considering the commonalities and differences in what Islam means for two pious Muslim women of contrasting political and religious traditions.<sup>1</sup> The paper closes by suggesting two further dimensions of politics that are important in assessing women's empowerment: the domains in which power is expressed and the others that are constructed in the constitution of the self.

The data on which this paper is based are drawn from a sub-project on marriage and the family in Bangladesh within the Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) programme based at the University of Bath, UK, 2002-7<sup>2</sup> and a project on religion, values and wellbeing within the Religions and Development Research Programme, based at the University of Birmingham, 2005-10.<sup>3</sup> The interviews were carried out by research associates, following schedules that I had prepared.<sup>4</sup>

## 2 The politics of scholarship

The question of whether Islam empowers women arises amidst a powerful resurgence of academic interest in religion – and especially Islam. This is associated in turn with a global politics dominated by ‘the war on terror’. The progressive commitment to understand the lives of others in their own terms mingles uneasily with the motivation of surveillance, which seeks greater knowledge to neutralise the challenge that some Islam-identified movements direct towards the current world order. From a position of relative scholarly neglect, the current risk may be of over-emphasizing religion and particularly Islam, as heightened Western interest means that funding available for programmes and research with Muslims far exceeds that for other religious groups. As Filippo and Caroline Osella (2008) argue, there may be a mistaken stress on the distinctiveness of Islamic reformism, and a failure to locate it within a broader historical and socio-cultural context in which similar moves are evident across a range of faith traditions. Another danger in the context of Bangladesh is that scholarship may contribute to its political re-inscription as a ‘Muslim nation,’ with a consequent erasure of both minority religious and ethnic groups and shared regional or historical experience.

The question of women’s empowerment in Islam is thus unavoidably political. Lila Abu-Lughod’s (2002) blistering critique of the justification for United States intervention in Afghanistan on the grounds of ‘saving’ Afghan women draws attention to this:

In other words, the question is why knowing about the ‘culture’ of the region, and particularly its religious beliefs and treatment of women, was more urgent than exploring the history of the development of repressive regimes in the region and the US role in this history. Such cultural framing, it seemed to me, prevented the serious exploration of the roots and nature of human suffering in this part of the world. Instead of political and historical explanations, experts were being asked to give religio-cultural ones. Instead of questions that might lead to the exploration of global interconnections, we were offered ones that worked to artificially divide the world into separate spheres – recreating an imaginative geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which First Ladies give speeches versus others where women shuffle around silently in burqas.’ (Abu Lughod, 2002, p. 784)

It is against this backdrop that critical resistance to Euro-centrism and opposition to the US/UK geo-political military project may lead those on the left to seek progressive values, such as women’s empowerment, *within* rather than *against* Islam.<sup>5</sup> This leads to the conundrum that motivates this paper. The first aspect of this is intellectual. What appears to be a shift to valuing religious perspectives may be something of an intellectual sleight of hand. ‘Women’s empowerment’ is a value

identified with the liberal universalist tradition and codified in particular ways within understandings of international development. As Said (1985) and others have shown, this intellectual tradition is intimately bound up with the geo-political dominance of the Western powers. Seeking women's empowerment in Islam, however, re-confirms that this same liberal modernism furnishes the overarching criterion for judgement. Women's empowerment is not an *Islamic* value, any more than it is a *Christian* one – it is not a religious value at all. This is not to say that Muslim women, like Christian women, cannot use their religious tradition in ways that are empowering, but whether there is something specifically *Islamic* or *Christian* about such actions beyond the specific idioms they employ is at least open to question.

The second aspect is political. Calls to recognize women's empowerment through Islam are often framed in terms of the need to respect local actors' perspectives, rather than privileging analysis derived from outside. The irony, however, is that the move to recognize agency 'from below' itself reflects trends in global scholarship, and the analysis of local conditions is deeply implicated in global geo-politics. This over-writing by the global can obscure local and national politics, with the danger that a liberal impulse is betrayed into alliance with some distinctly illiberal forces. The conclusion of the paper seeks to address this by suggesting some criteria for analysing women's empowerment, which may help to bring the more immediate political context back in.

### 3 Theoretical knots

The politics of scholarship do not only concern the current framing of debates about Islam and women's empowerment, they are also constitutive of the question. Notions of women's empowerment and Islam are part of a broader complex concerning the politics of modernity outside the West. This means that all the key terms are deeply symbolic in their own right and also (varying) relations between them are already specified within the constellation of modernity. This brings a very serious danger of over-reading, with relatively limited observations casting a long theoretical shadow. Development narratives routinely use gender as a signifier of modernity in reference to levels of female education; contraceptive use; employment; engagement in politics and governance; visibility, mobility and dress (see for example UNICEF, 2007). Gender is also deeply implicated in the symbolic politics of religion, such that the iconic figure of the veiled woman may stand alternatively for piety, (sometimes instrumental) conformity, oppression, or nationalist resistance or assertion (see for example Mahmood, 2005, p. 24).

Such gender imagery refers to a broader symbolic set that defines religion, and Islam in particular, in relation to modernity – and vice versa. There are two major strands to this. First, dominant narratives of modernity expect it to entail the decline of religion, or at least the progressive confinement of religion to private and personal space.<sup>6</sup> Bangladesh, once identified with an absence of modernity (traditionalism or backwardness) is thus now seen to represent a 'paradoxical' modernity, in being characterized by advancing globalized capitalism on the one hand and the increased visibility of Islam in society and politics on the other. Second, as many authors have argued, inherent to the notion of modernity is an opposition to what it is not (for example, Grossberg, 1996). As Said shows in *Orientalism* (1985), Islam and Islamic societies offered a paradigmatic instance of the 'Other' through which emergent Western modernity sought to realize itself. In one set of images, Islam thus appears in opposition to modernity: as 'nature' or 'tradition'; as obstacle to progress; more recently as potential resource for development; or as (hostile) alternative vision. Alternatively, the stress is on relations between the two. Imagery of total otherness gives way to a narrative of (ironical) selective engagement (Al Qaeda on the internet; veiled women in Gucci sunglasses); or a reading of Islamist movements as a reaction or form of resistance against Western domination or the failed modernizing projects of oppressive Western-allied Arab regimes (Mahmood, 2005, p. 24; Deeb, 2006, p.15).

More recently, scholars have sought to go beyond the assumptions that infuse modernity with Western culture or assume an originary dynamic that emanates from the West. This builds on broader feminist, black and post-colonial studies and historical experience, which displace the supposed universality of modernist certainties, rendering them local and particular, the product of a particular time and place; fragmented by race, class and gender. Mahmood (2005, p. 25) argues for a view of relations between 'religion' and 'modernity' as mutually constitutive and malleable:

...the relationship between Islamism and liberal secularity is one of proximity and coimbrication rather than of simple opposition or, for that matter, accommodation; it therefore needs to be analyzed in terms of the historically shifting, ambiguous, and unpredictable encounters that this proximity has generated.

As discussed further below, Lara Deeb (2006) describes 'an enchanted modern' amongst Islamists in Shi'i Lebanon. She argues:

...rather than view Islamists as necessarily engaged in a struggle with modernity, we can instead view spiritual progress as a potential aspect of the modern (Deeb, 2006, p. 18).

## 4 Understanding empowerment

The definition of empowerment has been the subject of many papers in itself, and it is not possible to review this literature here. Instead, some indication of the contours of the debates is given through discussion of two broad approaches. The first approach is indicated in the previous section. Closely related to conventional development indices, it sees 'women's empowerment' in any change towards more equal gender scores within such indicators, and sees such 'empowerment' as itself an indicator of progress towards development.<sup>7</sup> This generalized approach can extend to embrace almost any positive change for women. For example, increased income for women is described by some as 'economic empowerment,' even if the women are operating as individuals without any form of gender-based mobilization.<sup>8</sup> The United Nations Development Fund for Women, UNIFEM, also sees women's empowerment as closely associated with social progress, but grounds this strongly in a feminist analysis of power. For UNIFEM, at the core of empowerment are issues of cognition and agency: critical consciousness of gender relations, a sense of self-worth and control over one's own life, the ability to exercise choice and bargaining power, and the ability to organize and have influence to achieve social justice (DFID, 2000). The approach I use here has much in common with this, developed by Jo Rowlands (1997) through her interaction with women's groups in Honduras.<sup>9</sup> Rowlands (p. 112) identifies first a 'personal' dimension of empowerment, which involves self-confidence, self esteem, scope for autonomy and dignity. Her 'relational' dimension concentrates on close relationships. I extend this to include a more social orientation that is community rather than family-focused. This involves reputation and command of respect; personal connections beyond the household; and an ability to negotiate the terms of these relationships. Rowlands' 'collective' dimension refers to confidence, agency and self-management, which is achieved through collective action. In her approach, like that of UNIFEM, empowerment does not mean simply making things better for women, but achieving some more fundamental, structural transformation in the constitution of gender relations – within the individual, in personal relationships, and through collective action.<sup>10</sup>

## 5 Bangladesh: religion and gender in society and politics

The state of Bangladesh was founded in 1971 on secular principles, but has increasingly identified itself with Islam. In 1977 General Ziaur Rahman removed secularism from the Preamble to the Constitution and replaced it with “faith in the Almighty Allah” (Huque and Akhter, 1987, p. 206) and inserted a statement that Bangladesh is part of the Islamic *ummah* (Karim, 2004, p. 295). This was reinforced by General Ershad (1982-1990), who declared Islam the official religion of Bangladesh in 1988. During the period of democratic politics (1990-2006), both major parties increasingly sought to buttress support by appeals to Islam, and one formed an electoral alliance with the Islamist party Jamaat-i-Islami.<sup>11</sup> As Dina Siddiqi (2006, p. 2) states:

A gradual but sustained mainstreaming of Islam in public political life, in the representational practices of the state as well as in national policy and constitutional principles, began in the mid-1970s..... By the mid 1990s, Islamic symbols and idioms had become part of everyday political vocabulary.

In society also, the visibility of Islam is increasing. The number of mosques has grown, and they are more elaborate, with more people attending. Far outstripping even the fast growth of regular school provision has been the rapid spread of madrasas (Muslim religious schools).<sup>12</sup> In 2002 almost 3 million students were enrolled in government madrasas, with possibly a further 2 million in the more hard-line, privately financed Qomi madrasas (Karim, 2004, p. 297-8). While formerly a male preserve, madrasas are increasingly taking in girls too – Asadullah and Chaudhury (2007) report that girls now make up 50 per cent of secondary level madrasa enrolment. There is also increased observance of core Islamic practice, such as prayer and fasting, including amongst the young, and a marked increase in women wearing maxis, burqas and shawls over their saris.<sup>13</sup> Such social trends may help to explain Dina Siddiqi's (2006, p. 2) observation:

With notable exceptions, the majority Muslim populace has not felt especially threatened by such moves; hence state sponsored Islamization has faced muted and intermittent resistance.

Amongst minorities, however, a threat has been felt. Since Partition in 1947, when what is now Bangladesh was divided from India on religious grounds (as East Pakistan), there has been an exodus of Hindus towards India. This has ebbed and flowed over time, with the wealthiest leaving at Partition, and increasingly poorer people migrating as the years pass. Much of this is illegal and no official figures exist, but the Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD), a Dhaka-based NGO, estimates that 5.3 million Hindus were lost to Bangladesh due to out-migration between 1964 and

1991 (Human Rights Features, 2000). For some, such out-migration followed particular incidents of violent aggression. The Vested Property Act, which empowers the state to seize Hindu-held lands, has also been a major factor (*ibid*). For others, with the increasing celebration of Islam in state and society, there was simply a growing sense of insecurity, a feeling that Bangladesh was 'not our country'.<sup>14</sup>

The increasing visibility of religion in public life is matched by narrowing indicators of gender inequality. A major feature of the past twenty years has been the rise of garments to the forefront of Bangladesh exports. In a society where, normatively at least, 'women don't go out', this has had a major impact in social and political as well as economic terms (Dannecker, 2002). More broadly also, traditional purdah prohibitions on women doing work 'outside' the household have shifted with increased need for cash income and increased diversity of options for employment. While some still maintain that women should not work outside the home, for most people the major issues now are the kind of work, what and where it is done, and how women conduct themselves within it (White, 2007).

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) census data show a rapid drop in fertility rates, from an enumerated child-to-woman ratio of 807 in 1981 to 519 in 2001. Literacy has also risen. BBS recorded the literacy rate for the population of five years and upwards in 1981 as 23.8 per cent, with the female rate 16 per cent and the male 31 per cent. In 2001 the total figure was 43 per cent, with the female rate at 39 per cent, and the male at 47 per cent. Finally, more women are active in politics. Though on a family rather than a feminist ticket, Bangladesh had a woman head of state throughout the democratic period of 1990-2006, since the two major parties alternated in power and both were headed by women. With the support of government quotas and the advocacy of non-governmental organizations, more women are now holding political office at local and regional levels also, although the reservation of seats for women in the national parliament remains a matter of major contention.<sup>15</sup>

## 6 Religion in Bangladesh gender studies

The trend towards increasing visibility of religion in state and society is also reflected in the gender and development literature on Bangladesh. Ethnographic studies from the 1970s to the mid-1990s discuss religion mainly as a grounding for patriarchy, embodied in purdah and elaborated through (often ancient) philosophical and religious texts. The textual analysis tends to rely on work done in relation to India or the Middle East, rather than Bangladesh itself,<sup>16</sup> but there is some discussion of local religious idioms and how they shape women's worlds (for example, Lindenbaum, 1968; Blanchet, 1983; Kotalová, 1993; Rozario, 2001). The primary focus of the literature is modernization, the fuller integration of women into global capitalist modernity (development), with the main emphases on women's 'outside' employment, control of income and (control of) fertility. Purdah is the primary way in which religion features in this. Religion is thus rendered in the familiar position of tradition, obstacle or constraint. Not only does religion seem to constrain women's mobility in practical terms, even its symbolism is directly opposed to 'development', with an ideal of seclusion pitted against the injunction to 'bring women out.'

This symbolic opposition is evident also in more political studies, which focus on the increasingly close identification of the state with Islam and the negative implications this has for women (for example, Guhathakurta, 1985; Kabear, 1989). It is no coincidence that women's organizations have been prominent among the 'notable exceptions' that Siddiqi mentions as having protested state identification with Islam. Reliance on external funding has ensured that the Bangladesh state plays an equivocal role with respect to gender and Islam. As Karim (2004, p. 295-6) points out, General Zia was not only instrumental in bringing Islam into the administration, universities and research, and rehabilitating hard-line Islamic parties; he also promoted women's participation in public works programmes, set up a Ministry of Women's affairs, recruited women into the police force and reserved places for women in parliament. His coming to power coincided with the United Nations Decade for Women in 1975 and a new focus on women in development amongst major aid donors.

Through the 1990s, ethnographic studies turned their attention more directly to the politics of religion within society. Rozario (1992) gives an early example of this, exploring how, in a mixed Muslim, Christian and Hindu village, gender values buttress community as well as class-based domination. A series of 'fundamentalist' attacks on NGOs and *fatwas* (religious legal opinions) issued against women provided the major impetus for subsequent studies through the 1990s and into the new millennium.

Between January 1993 and December 1996, more than 60 *fatwas* were recorded in Bangladesh (Ain O Salish Kendro, 1997 in Shehabuddin, 1999).<sup>17</sup> Most of these were against ‘immorality,’ especially of poor women; some were against the gender work of NGOs. There were also some high profile attacks on NGO offices and events by religiously motivated gangs. These made clear that the politics of representation surrounding gender, Islam and modernity are not confined to the rarefied space of academic debates. Rather, they are repeatedly acted out in personal relationships, family and community life; in local, national and global politics; by development agencies and public intellectuals; and in the entanglement between all these. Representations of these events set up women as key bearers of a symbolic opposition between on the one hand religion and ‘the mullahs’ as retrogressive, and the NGOs as women’s advocates and harbingers of modernity; and on the other hand religion as upholder of morality and authenticity, against the NGOs as agents of imperialism. Whichever ways the moralities run, religion is posed as the antithesis to ‘women’s empowerment.’ In an ironic reversal of the usual associations between women, culture and irrationality, it is thus the men - ‘the Mullahs’ – who in Bangladeshi representations were first to ‘get religion’, while ‘the women’ continued to be identified in a secular way.

More recent feminist analyses interrogate these conflicts in a sophisticated way, resisting the easy binaries described above. They point out, amongst other issues, the non-democratic, clientelist and even coercive aspects of the NGOs’ behaviour; and the intertwining of globalization, economic and political, rural and urban and class-based shifts and power struggles (Shehabuddin, 1999; Karim, 2004; Naher, 2005; Siddiqi, 2006). Rather than identifying women’s interests consistently with one group, they tend to see all sides as seeking to use poor rural women instrumentally to advance their own power and status.<sup>18</sup> While ‘women’ may be caught in the cross-fire between contradictory movements and individual struggles for social and political dominance, these studies also reflect the more general academic trend to recover women as agents, resisting, subverting and selectively co-opting different aspects of the forces that do battle with and over them. In her discussion of the politics of *fatwas*, Shebahuddin (1999, p. 1014) thus argues:

...both secularist and Islamist perspectives represent elitist visions of society and of the role of the rural poor within it.

While accepting that ignorance may be widespread in rural Bangladesh, she maintains that:

...it is actually knowledge - that is, the knowledge, grounded in experience, that the state is weak and incapable of enforcing its own rules and helping them to improve their lives - that compels the rural poor to comply with Islamist notions at certain times, with secularist notions at others (Shebahuddin, 1999, p. 1014).

Naher (2005, p. 209) sees the poor women in the village that she studied as both “perfectly conscious” of their subordination and exploitation and capable of “organized action and open defiance.” What held them back were more pragmatic concerns – the power of their adversaries and the lack of sufficient support, either from their men or from the NGOs. This is a familiar argument, evoking (explicitly in Naher’s narrative) the considerable body of scholarship that has been inspired by James Scott’s discussion of resistance and the ‘weapons of the weak.’ It indicates a shift from a passive and static construction of women as the bearers of ‘culture’ or the objects of others’ action, to the exploration of their relationship to religion, through the figure of women’s agency. Naher positions herself at one pole, identifying women’s consciousness and agency as somehow exterior to the political struggles that seek to shape it. Gerami and Lehnerer (2001), writing in the context of Iran, adopt a somewhat similar perspective, as they describe how women acquiesce, resist, subvert or transform ‘fundamentalism’ in responding to the demands of their families and the state. Other writers, however, have sought to go beyond the oppositional placing of ‘religion’ and ‘women’s agency’ to explore women themselves as religious subjects. The duality of the notion of ‘subject’ is intentional here, since it evokes both the passive mode of ‘subjection’ – being subject to – and the active mode of ‘subjectivity’ – being subject of. Islamist women become the subjects of research, with a growing interest in seeing things in their own terms. Again a range of positions are evident. Torab (1996) focuses on one Iranian woman religious leader, to describe how even a single individual may comprise multiple subjectivities, moving between conformist and subversive forms of discourse and action.

In her study of the mosque movement in Egypt, Mahmood (2005, p. 15) seeks to explore women’s agency within, rather than against, the religious structures in which they live.

Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms.

This is not only an intellectual process, but is also embodied in ritual practices, style of comportment, dress etc. The relation between these outer forms and one's inner state comprises a central axis for the cumulative creation of the 'pious self' (Mahmood, 2005, p. 31)

For Mahmood (2005, p. 32), individuals "are summoned to recognize themselves in terms of the virtues and codes of these traditions":

Among mosque participants, individual efforts toward self-realization are aimed not so much at discovering one's "true" desires and feelings, or at establishing a personal relationship with God, but at honing one's rational and emotional capacities so as to approximate the exemplary model of the pious self. ... The women I worked with did not regard trying to emulate authorized models of behaviour as an external social imposition that constrained individual freedom. Rather, they treated socially authorized forms of performance as the potentialities – the ground if you will – through which the self is realized (Mahmood, 2005, p. 31).

Lara Deeb's (2006) study of mobilized Shi'i women in Lebanon similarly presents a profound challenge to established approaches to religion in social science scholarship. Deeb states:

I am working from the premise that faith is not a façade, not just a mystifying thing that we need to look past in order to understand what is "really" going on. Instead faith *is* what is going on, it is a very real thing in and of itself, located in practices, discourses, inner and outer states, relationships, and effects in the world (Deeb, 2006, p. 40).

Dissolving the 'paradox' of religion and modernity, she describes the Shi'i vision as an 'enchanted modern.' Here, the modernization of the fight against poverty and underdevelopment is seen as essentially twinned with spiritual progress towards greater public piety through 'authenticated' Islam, replacing spiritual ignorance or unreflective 'tradition.' Deeb (2006, p. 34) explains how the material and moral are bound together within the key concept of *iltizâm*, commitment.

There are many ways to express *iltizâm*; a socially inclined person might distribute food to the poor, a politically inclined person might collect donations for Hizbullah Resistance fighters, and a religiously inclined person might pray and fast regularly. Ideally these three strands merge in a person, forming the perfect braid of the humanitarian, the political, and the religious that is *iltizâm* and that is expressed through public piety.

## 7 Two religious women

In this section, I introduce two women from northern Bangladesh and consider the similarities and contrasts between them. As suggested by the survey of literature above, studies are often structured by an implicit or explicit opposition between the secular and the religious. It is also commonly reiterated that there are 'many Islams,' but in practice there is much greater visibility of a certain kind. Hence in this section I have chosen to discuss two religious women who are both deeply serious about their Islam, but have very different religious outlooks. Neither has a paid job, but both are recognized for religious leadership and called on by others in their neighbourhoods to read the Qur'an, lead prayers, and offer religious teaching and advice.

Amma Huzur<sup>19</sup> is a middle aged, lower middle class rural woman. She has grown up children and one son of sixteen who is still at home. She is closely associated with the Tablighi Jama'at, and is leader of a *talim* (religious instruction) group that she began around fifteen years ago. Her life is suffused with the mission she sees as "to make the disorderly society ordered". She holds weekly meetings with village women to "remind them about religion" and organizes larger meetings on a monthly and annual basis. She also travels to lead meetings in other villages when invited. She has established a *talim* house in the village, where women can meet regularly for prayer and religious instruction. She is proud of their extension and elaboration of the mosque, and is involved in collecting money to establish a *qomi* madrasa beside it.

The Tablighi Jama'at is a pietist movement of religious revival, the origin of which is typically dated as 1927 (Metcalf, 1998). It is a mission-focused movement, but mainly oriented towards its own, Muslim community, seeking the revival of the inner life and personal purification, rather than external converts or state power. While abjuring politics, it is not simply oriented to the self, since at its core is the commitment to go out in the world and invite other Muslims to return to the true path of Islam (*daawat*). The movement is very de-centralized, staffed by volunteers, and with no bureaucratic structures. Core Tabligh activities involve missionary tours, in which individuals commit to spend a certain period of time travelling in a group to invite others to join them. This receives a mixed press – some welcome it as an expression of piety, while others criticize those involved for neglecting their primary responsibilities to provide for their own families.<sup>20</sup> Although women may accompany their husbands on these tours under special circumstances, they are generally undertaken by men. The Tablighi Jama'at is now a huge international movement. Its annual gathering at Tongi in Bangladesh is the

largest Muslim gathering aside from the Hajj, attracting more than two million people. Amma Huzur is thus linked into a wide network of people, stretching to national level and beyond. The main focus of her work, however, is more local, calling to women in her own and neighbouring villages. As well as offering religious instruction, she also gives counselling and advice and practises some spiritual healing, through the application of holy water and holy oil.

Afsana Begum<sup>21</sup> is a rather older, much wealthier woman who lives in the district town. Her husband died two years prior to the study and she has three daughters. The eldest, an interior designer, lives with her family in Australia, the second is an honours graduate, married with a family in Dhaka; the youngest is studying for her Masters at home. While not occupying any formal position of religious leadership, Afsana Begum is invited by neighbours to preside on special religious occasions and is happy to do so, to read the Qur'an and explain about Islam, not taking any payment. She is also happy to respond if called in as an elder to help resolve local problems. She has a particular commitment to washing the bodies of Muslims who have died, to ensure that they are properly prepared for burial, and offers this service to rich and poor alike. Describing herself, she says:

We are religious people but we are not conservative.

Although very different in many ways, these two women also have much in common. Both stress the importance of the core practices of Islam, not simply as religious obligation, but also as the source of profound pleasure. Afsana Begum says how she feels bad if she misses a time of prayer. Amma Huzur wonders at the breadth, depth and beauty of Islam:

Now, when I start to explain verses of the Qur'an and Hadith, it takes the whole time and is a never-ending thing. Analysis of one *ayat* (verse) may take one's whole life.

Both ground their religion in the sacred texts of the Qur'an and Hadith (sayings of the Prophet), although Amma Huzur also draws strongly on Tabligh texts, some of which she has memorized completely and draws on frequently in her own preaching. Both women stress the priority of the Qur'an and Hadith texts against alternative sources of authority. However, the 'other' against which they set these texts is very different. For Afsana Begum, it is the *maulanas*, the popular preachers who propound their conservative views in the name of Islam. For Amma Huzur, the despised other is 'Bengali culture' which she sees as infused with Hindu thought. Hindus, for Amma Huzur, are a

source of contamination and impurity, embodied particularly in gender-related social ills: love affairs, cosmetics and dowry.

Both women refer to the fear of judgement after death in explaining their commitment to religion. For Amma Huzur, this is a frequent refrain:

There are two places to go after death. One is *jannat* [heaven] and the other is *jahannam* [hell]. No-one will live forever. Life after death is the real life. Everyone has to earn *soab* [merit] in the present life to get access to heaven.

For Afsana Begum, by contrast, it is more about the time of life:

The older you get the more you fear death. This is natural. You will be afraid to think that you have to leave earth alone. Nobody will go with you. You have to stand before Allah on the day of *Kyamot* [judgement]. When you grow old you'll want to do good.

The notion of fear sits uneasily with ideas of empowerment and meshes closely with critiques of religion as ideological domination. Mahmood (2005, p.141) however poses this differently, stating how the ability to fear God is seen as the basis for moral discernment, while a lack of the fear of God is both a cause and a consequence of a life lived immorally.<sup>22</sup> While to Western ears references to judgement day suggest the women's subordination to an ideological other, therefore, they can also be read as indexing maturity and so local constructions of autonomy – as indeed Afsana Begum's references to her age could be seen to bear out.

Both women stress that on judgement day, each individual will alone be held responsible for what they have done. For both, however, faith also involves a strong responsibility towards others. Amma Huzur emphasizes the need to awaken religious commitment:

When I hear the *azan* I go to pray but that is not enough. It is more important whether I am able to take others with me to pray.

Afsana Begum also recognizes the importance of nurturing others' faith. She tells, for example, how she taught her children, and is now teaching her grandchildren, the stories of Islam, so that they are grounded in these from the beginning of life. However, she also sees a wider, more social aspect to religious responsibility. Islam is about peace, charity and respect for others.

Both women argue strongly for the need to separate religion and politics, but what this means is slightly different for each of them. For Afsana Begum the context is the politicization of religious identities. She regards both her Hindu and Muslim neighbours as part of her community and deeply regrets the divisions that are being sown on the grounds of religion:

Islam encourages peace. So we should have room for all religions as well as different opinions. Is it fair if we want Hindus to participate in our Eid prayer? We are Muslim and they are Hindu. We have our own set of rules and they have theirs. Everyone should try to follow their own religious rules. This is what Islam wants us to do. Our Mohammed says “fight only when someone attacks you”. Islam doesn’t encourage unfair, unjust activities.

While this might be read as a rejection of Islamist political parties, she reports her fury at a statement by Sheikh Hasina, leader of the (more secular) Awami League that there is growing tension between Muslims and Hindus in Bangladesh. Afsana Begum checked this with her Hindu neighbours, she claims, and they said they felt completely safe.<sup>23</sup> She continues:

Actually our country is Golden Bengal. We are all the people of Golden Bengal. No matter who is a Muslim or who is a Hindu. Politicians should not talk like that. They are politicians...they should not be involved in religious matters. Religion is a matter of personal thinking, individual choice. Politicians can do nothing except generate animosity. ... Politics and religion are completely separate matters. Politics is full of lies. Politicians are damn liars...you, I and everyone knows this. Can you deny it? Tell me [she was angry]. How can a liar talk of religion? How dare s/he? I want to ask them, what is the relationship between religion and politics? Do your politics only if you are a politician. Don’t tag it with religion.

For Amma Huzur, the issue of politics and religion is not about communalism, but about relations between the Tabligh and Jama’at-i-Islami. Although for many people their similar theologies make them two fingers of the same hand, on the question of politics there is strong antipathy between them. Jama’at people disapprove of the Tabligh for concentrating on personal piety, for avoiding collective responsibility for the state of society, and for encouraging women to travel. Locally, they have tried to close down some of the meetings she has organized. Nevertheless, they have approached Amma Huzur and offered her money to motivate people to vote for them. She resents this. Voting, she says, is a matter of personal choice, not to be bought for money. For, her, the holy war, or *jihad*, is not about seizing state power, but is interior:

Tabligh Ja'amat has created the space for women to work for Islam in the village. We are trying to make the disorderly people ordered. We forbid them to commit any dishonesty in daily life. This is called a *jihad*. It means the fight against one's own self. He or she has to eradicate their evil desires from inside. They have to make their *bibek* (conscience) to set rules to direct their life on this earth and the life after death.

## 8 Women's empowerment?

Where then do Amma Huzur and Afsana Begum take us with the question posed at the beginning of this paper, as to whether Islam empowers women? Taking Rowlands' framework of personal, relational and collective dimensions of empowerment, again we find that there are similarities and differences between the two women. For both, Islam has offered a refuge from deep personal crisis. When Afsana Begum was married, at fifteen, she found that her husband already had a wife and family. In her shock, grief, isolation, helplessness and sense of guilt at the first wife's sorrow, she turned to Allah. Amma Huzur intensified her *talim* work after her husband brought home a second wife. For both of them, therefore, religious devotion was a response to their powerlessness – neither could change the marriage situation in which they found themselves. For Amma Huzur, it has gone on being very difficult, as her husband's angry nature has brought conflicts with herself, their sons and the neighbours. Both women, however, have also found a source of strength in their faith. It has given them a way of re-framing their lives as meaningful. Afsana Begum found the capacity she sought to build a good relationship with her co-wife and her children. Amma Huzur found in holding *talim* meetings not only personal fulfilment, but also a legitimate way to spend time away from home. She also turned the presence of the new wife to her advantage, announcing that she could now take on the work of the household, leaving Amma Huzur free to follow her religion.<sup>24</sup> As time went on, the knowledge they gained through religious study increased both women's confidence to speak and be listened to.

Socially too, Islam has clearly strengthened both women's positions. For Afsana Begum this is less marked, being a consolidation of an already strong position in class and status terms. Nevertheless, the recognition of her piety ensures her an ongoing role in the community, offsetting a potential loss of status attendant upon the death of her husband, two years before. For Amma Huzur, the importance of this social aspect is marked. She married her present husband in a love marriage – they both broke up previous marriages to marry each other. This provoked such acrimony and social disapproval that no-one visited their house for two years. For her, Islam has offered a means of social rehabilitation. Her piety, coupled with her hard work in improving the economic situation of the family, has earned her the reputation of a good wife and mother. As neighbours say, where previously people would avoid her and gossip about her, now they go to her for help.

When it comes to the collective level, we do not know anything about Afsana Begum, since she chooses to focus her attention on her remaining unmarried daughter, rather than spend too much time

away from home. In Amma Huzur's case, however, there is evidence of some degree of empowerment through the *talim* meetings. Such meetings offer a rare space for women to come together outside the house (Metcalf, 1998). In class terms too, respondents made clear that they experienced a real affirmation in Amma Huzur "an illiterate woman like ourselves", leading and teaching so effectively (Amma Huzur learned to read Bengali only when she felt the need to understand the meaning of the Qur'an).<sup>25</sup> The meetings may also at times constitute a site of resistance. An elderly neighbour of Amma Huzur, a dedicated member of her *talim* group, says that men do not wish their wives to come because they don't want them to talk about 'family matters' with other women. She gives an example of when a woman told them that her husband was having an affair with his brother's wife, while his brother was working in the Gulf. Members of the group caught the two together, threatened them with disclosure and got the sister-in-law sent back to her father's house. Whether this constitutes an example of women's empowerment, of course, rather depends on which woman's perspective is taken. It is, however, an example of women working together to combat a threat that the woman concerned could not address alone.

When it comes to the question of structural change, it is necessary to consider both women's words and their practice with respect to gender. At heart, both work within and generally accept a patriarchal idiom. This places women at the centre of the family and the family at the centre of women's lives; and holds this as fundamentally inscribed in Islam. Within this, Afsana Begum combines faithfulness to core Islamic texts and values with celebration of the freedoms of modernity. Mothers should bring up children to observe core practices – prayer, fasting and charitable giving. She does not, however, believe in forcing this – she would rather let children come to these practices in their own time, as she did herself. She repudiates the old understandings of Islam, which meant that she as a young girl could have no say in her own marriage, because voicing an opinion was seen as disobedience and risked severe censure. Instead she believes it is important to recognize the need to adjust to the times in which we live. Her children, for example, chose to go to school and not madrasa, so they would be equipped for the present 'age of science.' She and her husband were happy to go along with this:

Islam says everyone should have a right to choose.

While Amma Huzur preaches against the sari as too revealing, Afsana Begum says the issue is modesty in dress: women do not need to cover their faces, hands or heads.<sup>26</sup> Her view on women's

employment also suggests an easy accommodation of modernity and Islam. The mother of three professionally qualified daughters, Afsana Begum states robustly:

Actually Islam never says that women only have to stay home or they cannot work outside. Islam has been distorted by some bad interpreters..... What Islam says is to stay in *shalinota* [modesty/decorum].

Amma Huzur's position is considerably more ambivalent. The dominant burden of her script is heavily patriarchal, identifying women's place as firmly within the domestic sphere. Meetings for religious purposes aside, Amma Huzur preaches against women going out of the house and against their involvement in politics. Along with regular prayer and fasting, women's primary responsibilities in Islam are to serve their husbands and to perform properly their duties as wives and mothers. Women are the way to bring the whole family to a life of piety:

If we can make a mother pious then she will be able to raise her children accordingly. A mother is the centre of a family and the first teacher of the children.

Even if a husband is bad, through her piety she may be able to reform him and bring him back to Islam. She also suggests that piety will bring husband and wife closer together:

A husband cannot beat a pious wife so easily.... When a wife starts praying *namaz*, it softens her husband's mind towards her.

In seeking to live her preaching, Amma Huzur shows both the power and the limits of this path. In many ways her achievements are impressive. She has brought her husband into the Tabligh and managed to curb some of his worst excesses in terms of rudeness and violence. Perhaps most significantly in terms of women's strategic interests, she has managed to marry her daughters without any dowry, on the grounds that dowries are against the teachings of Islam.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, however, her acceptance of her husband's dominance as legitimate means that her achievements are strictly limited. Both of their sons have rebelled against their madrasa schooling, one has already left home and the other wants to join his brother in Dhaka. Her co-wife had remained only two years in their house, but as the final round of interviews took place, her husband scandalized the neighbourhood by planning to marry for the fourth time. Although she had tried to reason with him, Amma Huzur felt that ultimately there was nothing she could do to stop him. One of the ways he justified marrying again is that she is too taken up with her religion.

## 9 Conclusion

This paper began with the deceptively straightforward question: 'Does Islam empower women?' It then sought to trace the many layers of politics in which this question is embedded, from the geo-politics of scholarship to the politics of modernity, through the politics of defining empowerment, how the relationships between gender and religion are represented in popular debate and scholarship, to the roles Islam plays in the lives of two Bangladeshi women.

After all this complexity, the first point in conclusion is very simple: that the implications of 'Islam' for women's empowerment cannot be assumed. The contrasting views of Amma Huzur and Afsana Begum show that two deeply religious Muslim women, living in the same region of the same country, may have very different readings of both the gender and general politics of Islam. Their views vary according to broader political outlook and personal experience and are related to other factors such as class, personality, urban/rural residence and family culture, though they cannot simply be read off from these. Individual differences also relate, of course, to broader traditions of worship and scholarship in Islam, which have barely been touched on here.

The second point concerns the broader discussion about modernity, agency and subjectivity. It is now clearly established that the West has no privileged claim over modernity, and that there are many possible trajectories towards the modern. From the stance of many of the people whose worlds this paper describes, a modernity where women's economic and political empowerment is accompanied by their pervasive sexualization is at least as 'paradoxical' as one in which religion is valued. It is also clear that the over-reading of particular events, such as the 'religious' attacks on NGOs and 'women' in Bangladesh, with heavy political symbolism on both sides, is frankly unhelpful. It serves only to entrench existing stereotypes and to obscure analysis of what is really going on. By contrast, the careful exegesis of religious ways of looking at the world, such as that given by Lara Deeb, is very welcome in its ability to challenge prejudice about and ignorance of other people's lives. The *verstehen* commitments of ethnographers to seek to understand people in their own terms should be extended to religious actors just as to any others. The literature reviewed and the cases presented here clearly suggest that women's subjectivity may be found within and not just against religion – and that such subjectivity is many layered and at times contradictory.

This commitment to understand religious actors as nearly as possible within their own terms, however, needs to be matched by another: the commitment to understand the significance of their activity *within its own context*. Scholars on both sides of the divide on the 'war on terror' may ironically share the tendency to lift highly individualized accounts of women's empowerment or subordination out of their home context and re-deploy them in the service of arguments which derive from the global sphere. This point is made strongly by Farzana Haniffa (2008) in her discussion of a piety movement amongst Muslim women in contemporary Sri Lanka. Haniffa (2008, p. 357) criticizes Mahmood (2005) for her

...fetishizing of intention ....without a concomitant analytical interest in the larger context in which such a self is desired, or the social consequences of choosing such a self.

While recognising the piety groups in Sri Lanka are part of globalized Islam, therefore, Haniffa (2008, p. 352) argues that the specific logics through which they operate must be understood in relation to the national context of militarization and religious and ethnic conflict.

Drawing attention to the social context thus suggests two further dimensions that are important to the assessment of women's empowerment. These are, first, the exterior that is constructed in the identification of the self; and second, the relation between the domain in which empowerment takes place and other, overlapping domains. The lack of attention that these dimensions have received points again to the genesis of empowerment as a concept within Western paths to modernity. In concluding this paper, I briefly discuss these two dimensions in turn.

Notions of women's empowerment, like the one employed in this paper, tend to refer to individual women's self-actualization, increased room for manoeuvre, and/or their gains through collective action with like others. This ignores an important aspect of the narratives considered here: that the women's self-representation is set off against a depiction of others whom they see as *unlike* themselves. This suggests that to assess the 'empowerment' effect of a particular subject position, it is not enough simply to consider an individual or those with whom she identifies. Rather, one needs to explore also whether it is empowering or disempowering for those whom it identifies as 'other'.

The identification of oneself by contrast with others that one sees as different, is of course well recognized with respect to the politics of identity, as well as psycho-analytic perspectives on the

realization and definition of the self (for example, Craib, 1998; Benjamin, 1980). Haniffa (2008, p. 366) is concerned with the collective dimensions of this. Despite the fact that Muslims in Colombo live in mixed communities, she says:

...many practices of religious self-making persistently call for the cultivated distancing of the religious other and promote a sensibility of community exclusiveness among Muslims.

This growing exclusivity is in part due to the increased intensity of specifically Islamic activity and debate, but it also accompanies growing use of the pejorative term *kafir* in place of the more neutral, 'non-Muslim'. *Kafir* in Colombo was used relatively benignly, not as an alien and fearful 'other', but as an object of compassion, for being less favoured due to their lack of the gift of Islam. In Bangladesh, where Muslims are the majority, such caution in the associations given to *kafir* may not necessarily be observed. In considering the empowerment effects of different forms of religious identification, therefore, this question directs us to ask what implications the positions taken by Afsana Begum and Amma Huzur have for 'bad' Muslim women, non-Muslims, and non-Bengalis in Bangladesh? How does these women's identification in and through religion impact on the moral and material room for manoeuvre of these 'outsiders'? The question can be asked similarly in relation to the narrative of US invasion of Afghanistan that Abu Lughod critiques. Such a narrative certainly affirms Western womanhood as empowered, but is the picture it paints empowering for Afghan women, or for women or Afghan people in general?

Secondly, while it is important to assess women's agency and empowerment within their particular domain, it has also to be recognized that domains can be co-opted by others and made to serve very different political ends. Haniffa (2008, p. 355) thus notes that many women experience the piety movement as transformative at a personal level. This notwithstanding, she cautions that the increased exclusivity it promotes may not augur well for the Muslim community as a whole, in a broader national context of increasingly rigid ethnic/religious identifications, in which Muslims already occupy an ambiguous and marginalized position (Haniffa, 2008, p. 371-2).

In Bangladesh the most obvious example of the slippage and co-option between different domains is the relationship between the pietist Tabligh movement and the Islamist political party, the Jamaat-i-Islam. There is a strong rhetoric of hostility between these two, with followers of the Tabligh

maintaining the Jamaat have sold out religion to politics; and Jamaat party members identifying the Tabligh as self-centred, self-indulgent and unwilling to take on the social responsibility of ordering society. Despite this, the Tabligh, through their non-political work, may nevertheless be sowing the seed that the Jamaat can very easily bring to harvest. Having expressed his distaste for the Tabligh, and the major criticisms he has of them, a Jama'ati activist put it like this to a member of the research team:

But in other ways, it helps us a lot for the national election. They are trying to spread Islamic values in every ladder of the society and not participating in the national politics. When the election time will come, we will take the benefit of their activity. Village people or town people if they become more and more pious, it is better for Islam. People will think about us before give their votes.

Historically Jamaat-i-Islami has held a hard patriarchal line on gender issues. While a number of scholars note that the exigencies of electoral politics have made some dent in this (Ahmad, 2008; Huq, 2008; Shehabuddin, 2008), most commentators still expect that a Jamaat-led government would – at very least - narrow the scope for women's engagement in public life. Such considerations necessarily give pause to the claim that any option can be considered simply in its own terms. Rather, the broader social and political context may make a particular stance highly vulnerable to being co-opted for perhaps quite different ends. This needs to be part of the consideration of the implications it has for the empowerment of women.

This paper affirms the moves within recent scholarship to try to get beyond historical prejudice and explore the different ways that women live lives that are at once modern and religious. Critical to this is the commitment to seek to understand the subject's own perspective on his or her actions. It is important to recognize, however, that this insistence on seeing things from the subject's point of view is a *response* to global geo-politics, not a denial of them. Taking the global as reference point carries the danger of obscuring the more immediate practical contexts of local and national politics. This paper thus suggests two further criteria for the analysis of empowerment, which seek to address this. These shift attention from the individual or group subject to the social and political context in which they are situated and thus to broader patterns of enablement and exclusion. The two questions are as follows: What exterior is constructed by the constitution of the 'self'? And how might the domain within which this identity is constituted itself be co-opted for use by others and re-deployed to achieve very different ends?

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Particular thanks are due to Hasan Ashraf and Suborna Camelia, who undertook the main interviews on which this paper draws.
- <sup>2</sup> The support of the UK Economic and Social Research Council is gratefully acknowledged. The work was part of the Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) research programme (<http://www.welldev.org.uk>). The sub-project involved individual interviews with 70 respondents from two villages in different districts and 16 focus group discussions.
- <sup>3</sup> The support of the UK Department for International Development is gratefully acknowledged. For more details on the Religions and Development Research Programme see [www.rad.bham.ac.uk](http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk).
- <sup>4</sup> The interviews were part of a much larger study, which involved intensive research employing a range of methods, including community profiles, household survey, income and expenditure survey, quality of life measures, and detailed case studies of community events and issues.
- <sup>5</sup> Paradoxically such moves mirror the energies political leaders such as George W. Bush and Tony Blair put into (re)defining Islam – for example as a ‘peaceful religion’ – as a means to recruit religion ‘on our side’ in the war against terror (Sen, 2006, p. 68).
- <sup>6</sup> For example all of the ‘founding fathers’ of social science – Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Freud – expected religion to decline in significance. Whether this has proved to be the case even in the West is, of course, contested.
- <sup>7</sup> This very generalized understanding of women’s empowerment is commonly used. However, the Human Development Report (UNDP) distinguishes two measures of gender progress. The Gender Empowerment Measure is “a measure of agency... [focusing on] the extent to which women and men are able to actively participate in economic and political life and take part in decision-making.” The Gender-related Development Index (GDI) is the Human Development Index (a composite of life expectancy, educational attainment and income) differentiated by gender. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/humandev/hdi/>
- <sup>8</sup> The justification for this, which generally remains implicit, lies in the broader complex of associations that sees women’s social ‘status’ as linked to their economic activities, see White (1999). See also Buvinic (1986) on the tendency of women’s economic projects to be redefined towards social objectives.
- <sup>9</sup> Rowlands (1997, p.15) identifies the three dimensions as follows. The personal involves “developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the effects of internalised oppression. ... [The relational involves] developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship and decisions made within it. ... [The collective she defines as] where individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone.”
- <sup>10</sup> This is usefully captured in Maxine Molyneux’s (1985) distinction between ‘practical’ and ‘strategic’ ‘gender interests’, which are respectively those interests which women have in improving their situations within the existing gender order and in bringing about structural change in that order.
- <sup>11</sup> The Jamaat-e-Islami is the main Islamist political party in Bangladesh. Out of favour after liberation for having supported Pakistan, Jamaat-e-Islami re-entered politics as an active and visible participant in 1990, forming a ruling coalition with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party after the 1991 election.
- <sup>12</sup> I. I. Choudhury (2005) states: “According to government published sources (BANBEIS), during 1980-2000, the number of registered junior and high madrassas increased by 271 per cent compared to 185 per cent growth of secondary schools. During the same period, the number of students in junior and high madrassas increased by 818 per cent compared to only 317 per cent growth of secondary school students. Today, 30 per cent of all secondary level students are from madrassas and they are catching up fast. These statistics do not include thousands of unregistered ‘Quomi’ madrassas all over the country, nor does it include English medium ‘Cadet Madrassas’ that are sprouting up in urban areas.”

- <sup>13</sup> The burqa is a full length garment worn over other clothes outside of the house. A maxi is a full length dress, generally worn at home, which is identified by some women as more Islamic than a sari, as it covers the full body. Shawls are now being worn on top of saris to provide additional modesty, especially by women who cannot afford a burqa.
- <sup>14</sup> The pull of a celebration of Hindu tradition coupled with economic development in India are no doubt also factors in the decisions to migrate.
- <sup>15</sup> BangladeshNews reports that “Currently there are around 14,500 women representatives elected to reserved seats in over 4,000 union parishads, 6 city corporations, and the municipalities. However, the commitment of the National Women’s Development Policy 2008 to reserve 40 percent of seats for women in all tiers of the local government system was rescinded, apparently after violent protests by hardliner Islamist groups (<http://www.bangladeshnews.com.bd/2008/05/12/govt-retreats-from-pledge/> ).
- <sup>16</sup> Examples would include Liddle and Joshi (1986) on India, and Fatima Mernissi (1985), Leila Ahmed (1992) on the Middle East.
- <sup>17</sup> In a great victory for feminist organization, the highest court in Bangladesh declared all fatwas illegal in 2001 (Karim, 2004, pp 303).
- <sup>18</sup> In some cases this includes ‘elite urban feminists’ who are castigated for being out of touch with the rural women in whose name they claim to speak.
- <sup>19</sup> Amma Huzur is a title conferred on female tabligh leaders.
- <sup>20</sup> Barbara Metcalf (1998) sees this as having a gender dimension, since typically it is men who are being criticized for failing to honour their patriarchal responsibilities, adopting instead implicitly feminine attributes of being gentle, soft-spoken, and sharing in reproductive labour.
- <sup>21</sup> This is a pseudonym.
- <sup>22</sup> This is not random, but a core aspect of Islam, which propounds the ‘classical triad’ of fear (al-khauf), hope (al-rajaa) and love (al-hubb) (Mahmood, 2005, p.140). In the Judeo-Christian tradition a similar tradition is present, in which ‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.
- <sup>23</sup> Whether this can be taken at face value, of course, may be open to doubt.
- <sup>24</sup> This is reminiscent of the common cultural strategy of mothers-in-law in relation to their sons’ new brides. Usually interpreted either in pragmatic terms as a way to get a rest, or as a way of exerting power, this usage of it suggests it could also be a means to manage jealousy regarding the threat of the mother’s displacement in the son/husband’s affections.
- <sup>25</sup> Although she ‘read’ Arabic before that, this was only for recitation, as she did not understand the meaning of the words.
- <sup>26</sup> Her own adoption of the burqa is pragmatic: since her husband’s death she has to go out to the bank and so on and found she did not like the way that people were looking at her.
- <sup>27</sup> The spread and inflation of dowries in South Asia has major negative effects for women. In the WeD data the only cases of people managing to avoid dowries were those like Amma Huzur, who were able to marshall their piety as a defence (see White, 2007, for more details).

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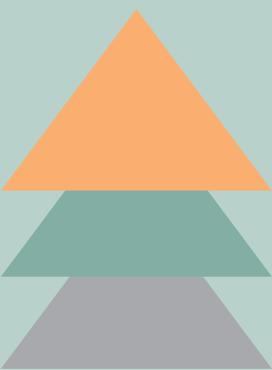
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