Domains of contestation: Women's empowerment and Islam in Bangladesh

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SYNOPSIS

This paper addresses the common question, ‘Does Islam empower women?’ in the context of contemporary Bangladesh. Its aim is not to offer a substantive answer, but to bring out the politics of the question, and to suggest some new criteria by which specific cases might be assessed. The paper begins by exploring the complexity of the question, given the longstanding use of gender as key signifier of both modernity and Islam, which is intensified in the current ‘war on terror.’ It then outlines briefly the situation in Bangladesh, characterised by narrowing indicators of gender inequality on the one hand and increased visibility of Islam in society and politics on the other. Tracing how religion figures in the gender literature reveals shifts from absence, to masculine (and oppressive) presence, to stressing women’s (oppositional) agency, and to seeing women themselves as religious subjects. Two individual religious women in Bangladesh are then introduced, and the commonalities and contrasts between them analysed.

The paper concludes that the gender politics of Islam cannot be assumed, since there is diversity by broader political perspective, experience, and social location. Affirming the moves of recent scholarship to understand religious narratives in their own terms, it nevertheless argues that this is not sufficient. There is need to explore two further basic questions: how others are positioned through the exterior constructed by the constitution of the self; and whether one domain may be co-opted by another, to serve very different political ends.

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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 which 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 involves 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. 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, and a project on religion, values and wellbeing within the Religion and Development Research Programme Consortium, based at the University of Birmingham, 2005–10. The interviews were carried out by research associates, following schedules that I had prepared.

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-emphasising 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 Osella and 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 where similar moves are evident across a range of faith traditions. Another danger, evident in the context of Bangladesh, is that scholarship may contribute to its political re-inscription as a ‘Muslim nation,’ with a consequent erasure of minority religious and ethnic groups, and the particularities of shared regional or historical experience.

The question of women’s empowerment in Islam is thus unavoidably political. Abu-Lughod’s (2002) blistering critique of the justification of 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 back-drop that critical resistance to eurocentrism 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. 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 Western powers. Seeking women’s empowerment in Islam ironically re-confirms this same liberal modernism as furnishing the overarching criteria of 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 recognise 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 recognise 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.

Theoretical knots

The politics of scholarship do not concern only 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 e.g. 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 e.g. Mahmood, 2005, p. 24).

Such gender imagery refers to a broader symbolic set which 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 within private and personal space. Bangladesh, once identified with an absence of modernity (traditionalism or backwardness) is thus now seen to represent a ‘paradoxical’ modernity, in being characterised by advancing globalised 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 (e.g. Grossberg, 1996). As Said (1985) shows in Orientalism, Islam and Islamic societies offered a paradigmatic instance of the ‘Other’ through which emergent Western modernity sought to realise itself. In one set of images, Islam thus appears in opposition to Modernity: as ‘nature’ or ‘tradition’; as obstacle to progress; or more recently as potential resource for development; or (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 modernising 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; racial, class and gender fragment. Mahmood (2005), p. 25) argues for a view which sees 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 analysed 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).

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, I give some indication of the contours of the debates through discussion of two broad approaches. The first approach is indicated in the previous section. Closely related to the conventional development indices, it sees ‘women’s empowerment’ in any change towards more equal gender scores within these, and sees such ‘empowerment’ as itself an indicator of progress towards development. This generalised 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 mobilisation. 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 organise and have influence for social justice (DFID, 2000). The approach I use here has much in common with this, developed by Rowlands (1997) through her interaction with women’s groups in Honduras. 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 which 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.

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 & Akhter, 1987, p. 206) and inserted a statement that Bangladesh was part of the Islamic ummah (Karim, 2004, p. 295). This was reinforced by General Ershad (1982–1990) who declared Islam as 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. As 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 madrassas (Muslim religious schools). In 2002 there were almost 3 million students enrolled in government madrassas, with possibly a further 2 million in the more hard-line, privately financed ‘quomi’ madrassas (Karim, 2004, pp. 297–8). While formerly a male preserve madrassas are increasingly taking in girls too — Asadullah and Chaudhury (2007) report that girls now make up 50% of secondary level madrassa enrolment in Bangladesh. 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. Such social trends may help to explain 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, this 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 (Human Rights Features, 2000). For others, there was simply a growing sense of insecurity, that Bangladesh was ‘not our country’, with the increasing celebration of Islam in state and society.

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 needs 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 record the literacy rate for the population of five years and upwards in 1981 as 23.8%, with the female rate 16%, and male 31. In 2001 the total figure was 43%, with the female rate at 39, and the male at 47%. Finally, more women are active in politics. Though on a family rather than a feminist ticket, Bangladesh had a woman head of state the democratic period of 1990–2006, since the two major parties who alternated in power were both headed by women. With the support of Government quotas and the advocacy of Non-Governmental Organisations, more women are now holding political office at local and regional levels also, although the reservation of seats for women in national parliament remains a matter of major contention.

Religion in Bangladesh gender studies

The trend towards increasing visibility of religion in state and society is reflected also in the gender and development literature on Bangladesh. Ethnographic studies from the 1970s to the mid 1990s discuss religion mainly as a grounding of 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, but there is some discussion of local religious idioms and how they shape women’s worlds (e.g. Lindenbaum, 1968; Blanchet, 1984; Kotalová, 1996; Rozario, 2001/1992). The primary focus of the literature is modernisation, the fuller integration of women into global capitalist modernity (development), with 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. This renders religion in the familiar position of tradition, obstacle or constraint. Not only does it constrain women’s mobility in practical terms, even its symbolism is directly opposed, with an ideal of seclusion pitted against the development 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 (e.g. Guhathakurta, 1985; Kabeer, 1989). It is no coincidence that women’s organisations 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), pp. 295–6) points out, General Zia was not only instrumental in bringing Islam into the administration, universities, 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 (2001/1992) 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 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). 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 within 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 were first to get religion in Bangladesh representations, 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, clientilist, and even coercive aspects of the NGOs’ behaviour; and the intertwining of globalisation, 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. 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, Shehabuddin (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’ (Shehabuddin 1999).

Naher (2005), p. 209 sees the poor women in the village that she studies as ‘perfectly conscious’ of their subordination and exploitation and capable of ‘organised 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.’ This indicates a shift from a passive and static construction of...
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 modernisation 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 iltizām, commitment.

‘There are many ways to express iltizām; 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 iltizām and that is expressed through public piety.’

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 recognised for religious leadership and called on by others in their neighbouring communities to read the Qur’an, lead prayers, and offer religious teaching and advice.

Amma Huzur19 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 ‘to make the disorderly society ordered’. She holds weekly meetings with village women to ‘remind them about religion’ and organises larger meetings on a monthly and annual basis. She also travels to lead meetings in other villages as she is 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 quomi madrassa 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, at its core is the commitment to go out in the world and invite other Muslims to return to the true path of Islam (daowat). The movement is very de-centralised, 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 mixed press — some welcome it as an expression of piety, others criticise those involved for neglecting their primary responsibilities to provide for their own families.20 While women may accompany husbands on these tours under special circumstances, they are generally undertaken by men. The Tablighi Jama’at is now a huge international movement. Their 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 practices some spiritual healing, through the application of holy water and holy oil.

Afsana Begum21 is a rather older, much wealthier woman who lives in the district town. Her husband died two years ago 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, she 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 a local elder to solve any disputes. She has a particular commitment to washing the bodies of Muslims who have died, to ensure they are properly prepared for burial, and offers this service to rich and poor alike. As she describes 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 memorised 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 the 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 towards 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 ability to fear God is seen as basis for capacity of moral discernment, while lack of fear of God both cause and consequence of life lived immorally. While to Western ears references to judgement day suggest references to her age could be seen to bear out. As indeed Afsana Begum’s ‘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 recognises 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 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 politicisation of religious identities. She regards her Hindu and Muslim neighbours as equally 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. 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’a-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 outside. Locally, they have tried to close down some of the meetings she has organised. 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 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.’

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? Again we find there are similarities and differences between them. For both women, 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,
Amma Huzur learned to read Bengali only when she felt the woman like ourselves they experienced a real af
a rare space for women to come together outside of the house. In Amma Huzur’s case,
attention on her remaining unmarried daughter, rather than
anything about Afsana Begum, since she chooses to focus her
people would avoid her and gossip about her, now they go to
good wife and mother. As neighbours say, where previously
situation of the family, has earned her the reputation of a
coupled with her hard work in improving the economic
proval that no one visited their house for two years. For her,
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marriage
is marked. She married her present husband in a love
of status attendant upon the death of her husband, two years
terms. Nevertheless, the recognition of her piety ensures her
on the work of the household, leaving Amma Huzur free
to follow her religion.24 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 disapp
approval 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 some evidence, however, of some degree of
empowerment through the talim meetings. Such meetings offer
a rare space for women to come together outside of 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
(Aamma Huzur learned to read Bengali only when she felt the
need to understand the meaning of the Qur’an).25 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
cought 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 you
take. 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 their words and their practice
with respect to gender. At heart both women are working
within and generally accepting of a patriarchal idiom. This
places women at the centre of the family and the family at the
centre of women; 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, charitable giving. She does
not, however, believe in forcing this — she would rather let
children come to them 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, for voicing an opinion was seen as disobedience
and risked severe censure. Instead she believes it is important
to recognise the need to adjust to the times we live in. Her
children, for example, chose to go to school and not madrassa,
so they would be equipped for the present ‘age of science.’
Her husband and she 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.26
This also governs her view on women’s employment. 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 shalino ta (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.27

Ultimately, however, her acceptance of her husband’s dominance as legitimate means her achievements are strictly limited. Both of their sons have rebelled against their madrassah schooling, one has already left home and the other is wanting to join him in Dhaka. Her co-wife remained only two years in their house, but as the final round of interviews took place, her husband scandalsised the neighbourhhood 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 justifies marrying again is that she is too taken up with her religion.

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, to the politics of how the relationships between gender and religion are represented in popular debate and scholarship, to the roles Islam has played in the lives of two Bangladeshi women.

After all this complexity, the first point in conclusion is very simple: that the implications of ‘Islam’ cannot be assumed. The contrasting views of Amma Huzur and Afansa 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 perspective and experience and are related to other factors such as class, personality, urban/rural, and family culture, though cannot be read off from these. Individual differences also relate, of course, to broader traditions of worship and scholarship in Islam, that 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. 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 sexualisation 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. The careful exegesis of religious understandings, such as that given by Lara Deeb, is very welcome. 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 paper therefore accepts the basic point that religious actors — just like others — need to be understood as nearly as possible in their own terms, but suggests that they cannot only be explored this way. In the first place, as mentioned above, even to talk of empowerment is to introduce a set of externally defined criteria, which do not arise from the religious traditions themselves. Secondly, this paper shows that questions of women’s empowerment and Islam are irreducibly political, carrying a remarkable symbolic weight which people seek to mobilise for a multitude of ends. In view of this, I suggest in conclusion that any assessment of women’s empowerment should consider a further dimension of politics that has received relatively little attention: the politics of the self.

Notions of women’s empowerment, like the one employed in this paper, tend to refer to individual women’s self-actualisation, increased room for manoeuvre, and/or to their gains through collective action with like others. This ignores an important aspect of both 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. Such relationality, of course, is well recognised with respect to the politics of identity, as well as psychological perspectives on the realisation and definition of the self (e.g. Benjamin, 1980; Craib, 1998). In the present context it 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 also to explore also the exterior that the representation of ‘self’ constructs. What are the implications of Afansa Begum or Amma Huzur’s positions for the ‘bad’ Muslim women, the non-Muslims, the non-Bengalis? How does their identification in and through religion impact on the moral and material room for manoeuvre of these “outsiders”? This question can be asked similarly in relation to the narrative of US invasion into 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 for Afghan people in general?

In the third place, while it is important to assess women’s agency and empowerment within their particular domain, it has also to be recognised that domains can be co-opted by others and made to serve very different political ends. The relations between the Tabligh and Jamaat-i-Islam are an obvious example of this, where 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 our 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 they give their votes.’

Historically Jamaat-i-Islami have 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 Jama'at-led government would — at very least — narrow the scope for women's engagement in public life. Whether in view of this the empowerment effect of a woman's involvement with the Tablighi should simply be considered 'in its own terms' should therefore at least be a matter of debate.

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 from the subject's own point of view. It is important to recognise, however, that this 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 context in which they are situated, and thus 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?

Endnotes

1 Particular thanks are due to Hasan Ashraf and Suborna Camelia, who undertook the main interviews on which this paper draws.
2 The support of the UK Economic and Social Research Council is gratefully acknowledged. The work was part of the Wellbeing in Developing Countries (Web) 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.
3 The support of the UK Department for International Development is gratefully acknowledged. For more details on the Religions and Development Programme Consortium see www.rad.bham.ac.uk.
4 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.
5 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).
6 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.
7 This very generalised 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 (UNDP).
8 The justification for this, which generally remains implicit, lies in the broader complex of associations which see women's social status 'as linked to their economic activities, see White (1999). See also Buvnic (1986) on the tendency of women's economic projects to be redefined towards social objectives.
9 Bhardwaj (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'.
10 This is usefully captured in 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 itself.
11 The Jamaat-i-Islami first held power at national level in Bangladesh in an alliance with the Bangladesh National Party, 2001.
12 Choudhury (2005) states: 'According to government published sources (BANBEIS), during 1980–2000, the number of registered junior and high madrassas increased by 271% compared to 185% growth of secondary schools. During the same period, the number of students in junior and high madrassas increased by 818% compared to only 317% growth of secondary school students. Today, 30% 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.'
13 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.
14 The pull of a celebration of Hindu tradition coupled with economic development in India, is no doubt also a factor in the decisions to migrate. 15 See BangladeshNews.com, 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% seats for women at 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/).
15 Examples would include Liddle and Joshi (1986) on India, and Fatima Mernissi (1985), Leila Ahmed (1992) on the Middle East.
16 In a great victory for feminist organisation, the highest court in Bangladesh declared all farwas illegal in 2001 (Karim, 2004, p. 303).
17 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.
18 Amma Huzur is a title conferred on female tablighi leaders.
19 Metcalf (1998) sees this as having a gender dimension, since typically it is men who are being criticised for failing to honour their patriarchal responsibilities, an adopting instead implicitly feminine attributes of being gentle, soft-spoken, and sharing in reproductive labour.
20 This is a pseudonym.
21 This is not random, but a core aspect of Islam, which propounds the ‘classical triad’ of fear (al-khauf), hope (al-raja) and love (al-ubb) (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.’
22 Whether this can be taken at face value, of course, may be open to doubt.
23 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.
24 Although she ‘read’ Arabic before that, this was only for recitation, she did not understand the meaning of the words.
25 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.
26 The spread and inflation of dowries in South Asia has major negative effects for women. In the Web data the only cases of people managing to avoid dowries were those like Amma Huzor, who were able to marshal their piety as a defence (see White 2007 for more details).

References


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