



## Women's Empowerment, Gender Justice, and Religion

### BACKGROUND

The second session of the *Speakers Forum on Religion and Development in Bangladesh* took place in Dhaka, Bangladesh on May 16, 2015. The topic, “*Women's Empowerment, Gender Justice, and Religion*,” was focused on the ways in which religious traditions shape legal rights and social obligations for women and men in Bangladesh. The aim was to explore secular and Islamic discourse on women's rights in order to understand how, what emerge as often divergent viewpoints, affect everyday realities of women and development prospects and approaches. The event highlighted efforts to advance scholarship on and foster greater public dialogue around women's place in religious traditions and to explore what Bangladesh can learn from regional experiences in Asia and broader international experiences.

### WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT, GENDER JUSTICE, AND RELIGION

The event was a daylong discussion, with a diverse audience, jointly organized by BRAC University and the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD). Syed Hashemi extended a welcome and set the discussion in a historical and political context. WFDD Executive Director Katherine Marshall introduced and framed the discussion in the context of the continuing Speakers' Forum and WFDD's research program. Three panel discussions followed this introduction: (a) on understanding concepts and the terrain of gender justice and the secular and religious divide; (b) advocating for gender justice within religious framework; and (c) local perspectives of religious women in Bangladesh.

The Speakers' Forum series is a joint initiative of the World Faiths Development Dialogue, Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, and BRAC University's Department of Economics and Social Sciences. The Forum involves a series of daylong events organized around critical social issues and development challenges. Topics also highlight areas where religious leaders or institutions play significant roles or where a fuller understanding of religious dimensions can enrich development work and policy.

The forums offer a non-politicized space for constructive dialogue on the real and potential contributions of faith-inspired actors to critical development topics, with a view towards deepening the national conversation on religion more broadly. They draw on experience and expertise of scholars and development practitioners from local, regional, and international contexts, thus providing points of comparison and opportunities for mutual learning. They will cultivate a global network of dialogue and collaboration on shared challenges. Easing tensions around religious roles in public affairs and exploring ways forward on divisive and deadlocked social issues are core objectives. The first Forum in November 2014 addressed the theoretical dimensions and practical realities of constitutional provisions for, respectively, secular and religious orientation of the state.

The event featured both internationally renowned scholars and activists and leading women's rights advocates from Bangladesh. They included:

- **Zainah Anwar**, founding member and former executive director of Sisters in Islam, currently the director for Musawah, a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family.
- **Flavia Agnes**, a legal scholar and pioneer of the women's movement in India. She is co-founder of MAJLIS Legal Centre, a forum for women's rights discourse and legal initiatives.
- **Firdous Azim**, professor of English and chair of the Department of English and Humanities at BRAC University. She is a longtime member of Nari Pokkho, a women's rights organization in Bangladesh.
- **Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir**, founder of the Fahmina Institute, an Indonesian organization working on progressive Islamic research that engages religious leaders on issues of gender, religious pluralism, democracy and human rights.
- **Sara Taylor**, deputy country director for Asia Foundation in Bangladesh, an organization that has worked extensively in the engagement of religious leaders around issues including violence against women.
- **Nani Zulminarni**, director of Women Headed Family Empowerment in Indonesia (PEKKA) and one of the founders of ASPPUK, a national network of NGOs working on women and economic issues.

## OPENING REMARKS

The session was opened by Professor **Syed M. Hashemi**, Chair of BRAC University's Department of Economics and Social Sciences and Professor **Katherine Marshall**, WFDD Executive Director and senior fellow, Georgetown University Berkley Center. Opening comments centered on important progress towards women's equality and welfare in Bangladesh, the centrality of women's roles in development, and concerns that women are increasingly affected by growing religious conservatism in various Muslim societies.

**Syed Hashemi** highlighted the complex history of religion in Bangladesh that has both contributed to progress and posed challenges for the empowerment of women. During the 1960s, he was himself an ardent Marxist, committed to the vision of a secular society. But he recognized in his own dreams similarities to those of Liberation theology: the idea of vital moral condemnation of poverty and social injustice. Today, however, he sees religion often used deliberately to trample the rights of people, seen most egregiously with the IS (Islamic State), but also in the surprising role Buddhist monks have played in the persecution of religious minorities. He noted that in Bangladesh religion has been increasingly hijacked in recent years to justify patriarchal repression. As the father of two girls, this issue is very personal to him, emphasizing that women must have the right to shape their own destinies. In thinking about the changing position of women in Bangladeshi society, it is essential to engage in a serious discussion about the role religion has and can play in both oppression and empowerment.

**Katherine Marshall** in her introduction traced the history of the Speakers' Forum and the shared goals of the partners involved (BRAC University, the Berkley Center at Georgetown University, and WFDD), which are to stimulate open and thoughtful discussion of religion and development issues. The issue of women's rights arises all over the world as a flash point, a Litmus test in relations between religious and non-religious actors and institutions. In Bangladesh, as elsewhere, women's calls for legal reform and increased protection of their rights under the law meet opposition from some conservative voices that often claim a religious justification for their positions on women's behavior and roles. The argument runs that women's empowerment, even including education, is anti-Islamic. Yet this interpretation comes in for fervent challenge from many Muslims.

The Forum takes as its starting point the need, particularly in the Bangladeshi context, to understand the ways in which religion can be used to justify discrimination against women, but also the ways in which women in their religious roles challenge patriarchal interpretations and advocate for gender justice. The latter efforts are often invisible or misunderstood. The Forum's objectives thus are to address both spoken and unspoken questions surrounding women's changing roles with a view towards reinforcing the significance of human rights commitments and their application in the Bangladesh context.

Much of the work of women who speak from a religious perspective on development issues is invisible—little recognized, researched, or documented. Work to build peace is a prominent example. On occasion and in some circumstances both women and society benefit from this invisibility (for example when it allows women to navigate conflict zones unseen) but more often it impedes their full participation. Women may have richer perspectives on social challenges than men who occupy more senior and formalized positions in religious and organizational hierarchies and consequently can be more detached from day to day issues and realities. Women can often operate under the radar, which can in some circumstances encourage innovation. However, the trade-off is that they often receive no credit for their work and limited opportunities for funding and support. The hope for the session is that it will draw much needed attention to the unrecognized roles and efforts of religiously inspired women to advance and support the aims of gender justice and equality and provide opportunities for Bangladesh to learn from regional efforts.

These are issues of remarkable complexity with intellectual, cultural, legal and personal dimensions; issues that are in the hearts and daily lives of women, but are not always in public discourse. The Forum aims to start a continuing discussion, reframing the ways that religious dimensions of women's empowerment are discussed and approached in the Bangladeshi context.

**Zainah Anwar**, co-founder of Sisters in Islam and current head of the Musawah Network, highlighted the importance of fostering a public culture of informed debate on religion and women's rights in Muslim societies. Particularly in contexts where Islamic teachings are used to justify discrimination against women, Muslim women need to assert a global public voice, arguing for equality and justice and demanding change. Many women's concerns center on family law, which is often based on patriarchal religious interpretations that hold that women are inferior to men. Those

that have called for change have been vilified, accused of being Western, anti-*sharia*, or anti-God. Despite this backlash, Anwar stressed that there are juristic tools and concepts within Islam that make a compelling argument for the increased rights of women. She gave the example of Morocco's recognition of marriage as a partnership of equals to illustrate the feasibility of family law reform, a recognition fundamentally grounded in religious arguments and supported by Morocco's king.

Many are afraid or unwilling to engage with religion on issues of women's rights, either because they fear that they are not sufficiently knowledgeable on Islamic theology or because they believe that engagement actually validates the legitimacy of *ulama* and their religious authority over women. Many activists have suggested that reconciling feminism and Islam is a futile endeavor because religion is fundamentally unjust. Anwar argues, however, that the influence of Islam has been growing in both public and private spheres and that willfully ignoring its importance in the lives of many women and its use and abuse in public policy harms women and endangers gains made in advancing women's rights. The past 20 years has seen a huge advance in progressive Muslim theological scholarship on women's rights, human rights, democracy, and identity. A critical reexamination and reinterpretation of texts is necessary to answer questions and meet challenges with which the tradition has not yet dealt.

Partnering with and supporting these Islamic scholars and activists became a central goal of the organization that Anwar founded, Musawah. It was launched in 2009. She stressed, however, that without scholarship, it is challenging to stand your ground when you are under attack. Anwar and fellow Musawah founders made a strategic decision when they took the name Musawah, which is Arabic for 'equality.' "It is an ideological, political position that we want to assert: the concept of equality in Islam." The goals of Musawah are "to assert at the global level that Islam can be a source of empowerment, not a source of oppression and discrimination... to open new horizons for rethinking the relationship between human rights, equality, justice, and Islam," to create "a new constructive dialogue where religion is no longer an obstacle to equality for women, but can be a source of liberation," and "to build a collective strength of conviction and courage to stop governments, patriarchal authorities, and ideological non-state actors from [relying on] the convenience of using religion and the word of God to silence our demands for equality." Musawah was intended as a space where diverse actors could work collaboratively towards these ends.

The organization works in three key areas: knowledge building, capacity building, and international advocacy. Musawah supports the creation of new feminist knowledge in Islam that challenges patriarchal interpretive traditions of Islamic law, particularly of the concepts of *qiwamah* and *wilayah*, which are often seen as sanctioning male authority over women. Anwar stressed the importance of capacity building with women's rights activists who may be well versed on gender and human rights, but often have very little understanding of Islam and consequently are often unsure how to deal with religion in the public sphere. To address this need, Musawah conducts trainings all over the world to expose activists to new scholarship on Islam. In terms of international advocacy, Musawah has engaged with the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in Geneva on issues of noncompliance that use Islamic law as justification.

Anwar concluded by saying “nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come” and that the time has come to engage with Islam from a rights perspective and create a public voice for Muslim women. Through public dialogue it is possible to bridge that divide between Islam and human rights by creating an Islam that upholds justice and equality.

**Flavia Agnes**, co-founder of the Majlis Legal Center in Mumbai, focused on her work to provide legal support to Muslim women in the Indian context. Majlis began working with Muslim communities after the 1992 riots, spurred by the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Under India’s 1950 constitution, all citizens are guaranteed equality before the law, however, because of the religious foundations of Hindu family law, women of minority faiths, particularly Muslims, have been denied certain legal rights. This legal vacuum has allowed muftis significant authority. A number of controversial pronouncements contributed to a growing view of Islam as backwards and oppressive and provided further justification for violence against Muslims. Riots in 2002 killed roughly 3,000 people, mainly Muslims. Agnes observed, “When violence against Muslims happens, it is the women who suffer the most.”

Agnes noted that at the time women’s rights groups were very Hindu dominated and the legal challenges faced by Muslim women were not well understood or prioritized. Despite conflicting laws passed by the Indian Parliament regarding divorce and alimony in Muslim families, “several judgments upheld Muslim women’s rights in terms of divorce maintenance by a very positive interpretation of *sharia*.” However, these judgments were not publicized in the media, due to a political climate that has been hostile towards Muslims. Instead, the media often highlighted only developments that portray Islam as misogynistic, often oversimplifying complex cases and dispensing misinformation. The focus on the oppression of Muslim women creates a false narrative of Hindu women as ‘liberated,’ which ignores many social problems in that community.

In defending Muslim women’s rights, Agnes has found it difficult to follow the model of countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, where the state and religion are interlinked and negotiations are easier. In India, where the state is antagonistic towards Islam, it is more challenging to be proactive, rather one must settle disputes through the court system. Agnes believes “Muslim women have rights...the Qur’an and *hadith* give women rights, but now it’s up to us to go to court, and get those rights interpreted.” Agnes worries, however that many women are reluctant to go to court, not least because of the associated costs. She suggested that “if you fight in the courts, and if you make access to justice affordable and relevant, we will be able to protect the rights of Christian women, Muslim women, Hindu women—all of them.”

**Firdous Azim**, professor of English and chair of the Department of English and Humanities at BRAC University, explored how the now ardently secular Bangladeshi women’s groups, long ambivalent towards religion, have begun to recognize the necessity of engaging on issues of religion and with religious actors. Historically women’s advocates emphasized religion’s role in perpetuating and justifying patriarchal social norms. More fundamentally however, the divisive role that religious

rhetoric played in Partition and during the Liberation War, contributed to a perception among women's advocates that religion only served to undermine their common commitment to establishing equality towards all.

Though secular in orientation, Azim emphasized that many women's groups including Mahila Parishad, Women for Women as well as her own group, Nari Pokkho, do not take a strong ideological position. Rather the movement has largely been informed by the practical realities of Bangladeshi women. Through workshops and conversation sessions, groups like Nari Pokkho have explored women's experiences regarding sexual and reproductive rights, education rights, and domestic violence. This extensive work in the field has allowed these groups to better articulate the demands of Bangladeshi women on such matters, but has largely ignored the role of religion in women's lives. As justification for a lack of focus on religion, many held that religion is private and their advocacy was focused on the public sphere. Azim, however, noted the contradiction in this position, given the fact that, for many women, their lives are often relegated to the domestic and the private. Indeed, the slogan of Nari Pokkho was 'the private is political.' The increasing recognition of the importance of religion to women's issues has presented activists with a challenge – how do they address issues of religion from within their secular framework?

The movement has also been unsure what to make of the growing number of religious feminists who have adopted the rhetoric of secular women's groups around rights and empowerment. These groups often frame respect for women and women's advancement in religious terms, viewing women's freedom and equality as something that can only be given by God. Their message has been well received and these groups have developed a large following in recent years. Azim recognized the necessity to engage with these groups, but highlighted some of the many challenges such an engagement poses. Nari Pokkho, for example, takes up the rights of sex workers, the rights of intersexed people, and other sexual minorities. She expressed concern that the religious women's groups were not likely to be as inclusive as their secular counterparts. Such challenges demonstrate that while dialogue and engagement are essential, this negotiation will be no easy task and if it is to be successful it must be thought out in great detail in advance.

Azim concluded that in advocating for dialogue with religious actors, she is not suggesting that the secularism is somehow outdated and no longer applicable to the Bangladeshi context. Rather she maintained that a strong commitment to secularism is critical to achieving equality for all people in a multi-religious, multi-communal country like Bangladesh. Azim referred to the renewed challenge of protecting minority rights and minority discourses, given the growth of majoritarian political rhetoric that makes reference to Islam, which has raised questions over the minoritization of women from other faiths, and how women are viewed within this religious discourse. Given these developments, she suggested, a secular perspective remains important in Bangladesh, especially for women.

**Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir** of the Fahmina Institute in Indonesia focused on the interpretation of Islam, emphasizing that Islam is not a fixed idea, but rather one that lives in the hearts, minds, and

lives of Muslims. Though Islam is a textually-based tradition, these texts have constantly undergone a process of interpretation throughout history. He disagrees with those who say Islam is inherently contradictory towards aims of gender justice, pointing out that even in the absence of religion, oppression of women would still exist in society. The Indonesian context provides many examples of religious leaders and secular activists working together on issues of social transformation, particularly around gender justice, one notable example being the National Commission for Women. “Many feel they have to reject religion to achieve gender justice,” Kodir observed, but efforts in Indonesia have shown that “belief in both Islam and gender justice can produce interpretations of Islam that are suitable to the contexts and needs of modern Muslim communities.”

However, attempts to interpret Islamic teachings from a perspective of gender justice are still just beginning and many challenges remain. In debating scriptural hermeneutics, key issues that arise are the authority of God versus that of human beings, remaining true to authorial intention in the sources versus allowing for expanded contextual interpretation, as well as issues related to the gendered nature of Arabic, which raises questions as to how women are to be included in the scriptures. A gender justice perspective raises many questions of scriptural interpretation such as how *tawhid* of God and belief in a single universal truth relate to social justice issues, whether Islam treats women and men differently, and to what extent women can follow the example of a male prophet. Practical issues are raised as well, regarding the roles, rights, and responsibilities of men and women in domestic and public domains.

Kodir categorized schools of theological interpretation, as traditional, middle-reformed, and progressive, illustrating the differences between these with the well-known al-Nisa (4: 34) passage. A traditional interpretation would suggest that men are protectors and maintainers of women and therefore superior in all respects; a middle reformed interpretation would reformulate this in terms of responsibility of men towards women, given their greater experience, skill, and knowledge; and a progressive interpretation would remove completely the gendered perspective, suggesting that all those who have more experience, skill, wealth, and knowledge have a responsibility to those with less.

Kodir closed by observing that “for those who believe in religion, let them have interpretations of it that support practices of mutuality and partnership between women and men in their daily lives—and let them participate in the act of interpretation using experiences of those daily lives.” Rather than focusing questions around what is ‘true’ or ‘false,’ we should focus on interpreting scripture to promote social harmony and ensure women are granted equal social advantages.

**Sara Taylor**, deputy country representative for the Asia Foundation in Bangladesh, focused on the history of Leaders of Influence program that the Foundation has supported. The LoI program was grounded in an attempt to dispel negative misconceptions about development among Bangladesh’s religious leaders and, more broadly, to bridge the divide between religious and development communities. The program worked in partnership with the Islamic Foundation of Bangladesh to enhance the curriculum used to train imams, by including briefings on issues in social development

and providing examples of organizations working on those issues. Sometimes jokingly referred to as “imams on a bus,” the program involved a series of field visits to see development projects being implemented, particularly those that targeted women and children. Taylor suggested that LOI filled a critical gap, “recognizing the importance that religious leaders have in shaping the way that communities look at issues related to social development.”

After the LoI program ended, the Asia Foundation continued to operate in this space, working with knowledgeable and well-respected Islamic scholars to develop a curriculum for imams that would look at women’s rights, including reducing violence against women, from an Islamic perspective. Imams disseminate this information to their communities via sermons, or other interactions with community members. However, while imams have significant access to men in their communities, they have less direct interactions with women. Based on feedback from imams involved in the program, the trainings were expanded to include imams’ wives in an effort to reach women. Taylor argued that this had significant impact for the wives, who are now “able to understand these issues and empowered to be religious leaders in their own right.” This new framework both complements the imams’ work with men in the community, and provides a space for women to talk openly about women’s issues and understand what Islamic teachings say about them.

As an international organization, The Asia Foundation often encounters suspicion that their efforts have a Western agenda or are ‘anti-Muslim.’ They have attempted to overcome this challenge by ensuring that Asia Foundation staff develop strong relationships with community leaders and take a neutral non-judgmental perspective, explaining to communities that their fundamental goal is not to change perspectives, but to address key development challenges within the local context. Taylor also emphasized the Asia Foundation’s desire to scale-up activities, particularly around violence against women and good governance, but pointed out that it can be a challenge to secure funding for this kind of work as there is a reluctance among some funding partners to work directly with Muslim organizations or religious leaders.

The Asia Foundation has a continuing commitment to working at the grassroots level at the intersection of Islam and women’s rights: “we have seen real changes in attitudes among—not only imams and their wives—but also in the communities in which they live because of the outreach they’ve been doing within their communities.”

**Nani Zulminarni**, director of the Program for Women’s Headed Family Empowerment in Indonesia (PEKKA), provided insight into the important impacts Islam has had on the women’s movement in Indonesia, since the Muslim-majority nation transitioned to democracy. The 1998 constitutional reforms have provided a sound legal basis to support expanded rights for women and has opened new spaces for women’s political participation at the national level. However, these advances have not been reflected at the local level. Because of the decentralized nature of the country’s political system, many women are subject to discriminatory local laws based on conservative Islamic interpretations. In Aceh, for example, Nani notes, “there are some areas where we are not allowed to wear jeans, we are not allowed to drive motorcycles” and that women have

been publicly caned for leaving the house with a man who is not their *mahram* [guardian]. Expanded understandings of rights to free speech have allowed a variety of groups to express their views, with many adopting rights-based language for very different aims. An example is protestors claiming that “polygamy is my right.” She suggested that this discrimination against women at the local level has had serious development implications. Maternity rates have actually increased since the advent of the MDGs. The new trends contribute to an increase in women living in extreme poverty.

In describing the landscape of the Indonesian women’s movement, Nani identified two types of groups: NGOs and faith-based organizations. While NGOs are often rooted in international human rights law and concentrate on high-level advocacy, faith-based groups focus mainly on grassroots advocacy and outreach using teachings from the Qur’an and *hadith*. FBOs also often focus on issues of daily life, which resonant more among local people. Because of the perception that they are an ‘elite’, many NGOs have struggled to attract followers and have very limited political influence in local level decision-making, where problems for women are most acute. This contrasts sharply with faith-linked organizations whose mainstream appeal has seen many local political leaders allying with them. Nani point out that many of these faith organizations are traditionalist and have sought to defend patriarchal social norms. They have been able to successfully stage counter protests to those held by women’s rights groups, often outnumbering them 10 or 20 to one.

Nani emphasized the need to build capacity in progressive faith-based women’s groups, drawing attention to five organizations in Indonesia that are pioneers in this area. The Fahmina Institute is the movement’s intellectual hub, supporting progressive Islamic scholarship and engaging religious leaders and youth. Rahima works with female *ulama* to introduce human rights issues to Islamic boarding schools known as *pesantrens*, and also works to increase knowledge of progressive Islamic interpretations within mainstream women’s organizations. Puan Amal Hayati works to build crisis centers at *pesantrens* in order to support survivors of domestic violence. Indonesia also has its own chapter of Musawah, called Alimat, which is a network of activists, scholars, researchers, and journalists committed to women’s equality and gender justice that collaborate on campaigns, outreach and education.

Nani described her own organization, PEKKA, whose primary focus is empowering women headed families by changing religiously informed social norms. Traditionally, women-headed households “are invisible in the system and in data, because of the influence of religious interpretations which say women can’t be the head of the family.” Yet, according to Nani, women head one in every four households in Indonesia, the majority of which are very poor. Because of their uncertain position these women often face social stigma. They have limited access to government resources. PEKKA “encourages women to stand up as the rightful head of the family, and to believe this is not against Islamic values and beliefs.” At the grassroots level, the organization uses workshops, led by progressive scholars, to expose local *ulama* to “new” Islamic interpretations regarding women’s social position. Many of these leaders have relied primarily on inherited understandings of Islamic tradition and have had no previous exposure to these concepts. The project has been very well received by local religious leaders and there are hopes to scale up the approach.

## RELIGION AND GENDER JUSTICE IN BANGLADESH: VOICES FROM THE GROUND

BRAC University Professor **Samia Huq** led an afternoon session that sought to connect some of the morning's conceptual discussions and regional experiences to the everyday realities of Bangladeshi women. This session aimed to give space to religious voices and featured four women who adhere to religious norms and practices, such as praying regularly and wearing the Islamic dress (hijab and burqa). The panel sought to explore how Bangladeshi women understand their rights and duties vis-à-vis their religious traditions and explored the different ways in which religious women assert agency and advocate for empowerment within a religious framework.

The session featured two life members of the Bangladesh Institute of Islamic Thought: Professor Nasima Hasan of Manarat International University and Ms. Mahmuda Sultana assistant vice president of Islami Bank Bangladesh, as well as two Imam's wives that have worked with Asia Foundation's anti-domestic violence program; Mosammat Asma Khatun and Mosammat Babli Khatun. Each of the women brought a unique perspective to the discussion from professional, academic and rural contexts. Their anecdotes contributed to a fuller picture of the experience of religious women in Bangladesh.

Mahmuda Sultana began the discussion by highlighting her father's strong support for women's education. She related that her biggest challenge came from her in-law's family, notably her mother-in-law who taunted her for her family's failure to pay a satisfactory dowry. She resolved to prove to herself by pursuing higher education and becoming a successful career woman. She worked very hard in the initial years of her marriage to complete her education while caring for young children. She said that her husband was supportive and that eventually she was able to silence her mother-in-law's critiques. She stated that religion has been an important source of strength throughout her life. It was never a hindrance for her. She argued that if all women were to pursue education and have professions, they would gain the tools necessary to fight discrimination against women.

Nasima Hasan also stressed on the centrality of education to women's empowerment. She voiced her view that Islam gives women all the rights they require, but that women need to understand that and become assertive enough to claim those rights from society. She gave examples from Qur'anic verses and from the Hadith to illustrate that it is not Islam, but rather people's ignorance and lack of will that oppress women. She felt that it was important to educate oneself so that women can become aware and agents of change in their own lives.

Mosammat Asma Khatun and Mosammat Babli Khatun shared the optimism that women can be both religiously pious and empowered. However, they did reflect on some of the larger structural constraints that shaped their lives and decisions. They were both from devoutly religious families, and whole-heartedly embraced Islam as a positive force in their lives. True to their religious affinity, they were married to equally religious men who later became Imams or religious leaders in their community.

Through in some ways religion has shaped their lives and guided their decisions, their religious devotion has also provided opportunities to become figures of authority in their own right, particularly through their work with Asia Foundation. Both women stated that being pious, dressing in an Islamic way, and being wives of religiously important men, not only gave them a certain social respectability, but allowed them to be viewed as knowledgeable on religious, social, and familial matters. Women from the community would often consult them for advice.

While both were highly respected figures in their community, they suggested that joining the Asia Foundation's program on violence against women has helped them find the conviction to use their social influence and speak out on matters of injustice against women. Mosammat Asma Khatun said, "In our hearts we have always known that violence against women is not a good thing. But certain cultural precepts and ideas allowed us to think that it can be tolerated sometimes. Through our involvement with the Asia Foundation we realize that the more positive and woman-friendly ideas are suppressed, only to suit the purposes of certain ill-meaning men in the community. We have come to realize that women are first and foremost human beings and all human beings deserve the same, kind, humane treatment. If women have shortcomings, it is enough to talk to them or advise them. Physically and mentally harassing them cannot be tolerated. It goes against the Quran and the example of Prophet Muhammad."

Mosammat Asma Khatun and Mosammat Babli Khatun also reflected on how being part of the program allowed them to develop personally and become more assertive in their own lives. This did not cause any trouble for them at home as their husbands, both Imams, were also part of the program and shared the aim of helping others and to create a better community and improve the lives of women. They said that they will continue to engage with religion in a positive manner, identify and fight oppression when they see it. Their commentary was met with regular cheers and applause from the audience, particularly the statement that if ever their husbands did not stand against oppression of women, they would not hesitate to defy them and march on alone if necessary.

### CONCLUDING COMMENT

The event offered a unique opportunity for Bangladeshi scholars, activists, development practitioners and religious leaders to engage with internationally renowned figures on this vital issue. Throughout the day there was a lively and spirited exchange with the audience on a number of issues around religion and gender that are timely and relevant in Bangladesh. These ranged from issues of women's dress and the increasing prevalence of the burqua to child marriage and dowry. Audience members also sought advice on how to articulate positions as lay Muslims on issues of women's rights and how to manage resistance from more conservative religious leaders.

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