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# Gender, religion and the ‘developmentalization’ of male Muslim imams in Bangladesh

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**Abstract**

In this article, I explore how entanglements between two international development organizations, the state and male Muslim imams or congregational prayer leaders, in Bangladesh from the early 1980s to the present time combine in the ‘developmentalization’ of thousands of male imams as mobilized, institutionally fixed repositories of male Islamic authority. Following Arturo Escobar’s argument that development discourse organizes and manages the South through problematizing specific issues that development apparatuses then proceed to resolve, I suggest that male imams are mobilized in order to satisfy specific contingencies elaborated by, among other things, development itself. Drawing on textual analysis and empirical work with development policymakers and imams in Bangladesh, I analyse the origins, conditions and exigencies under which male imams become partners in development activity, including programmes that target women’s reproductive health choices and provide intimate, personal contraceptive care. I adopt a critical feminist development studies perspective, wherein gender concerns and women’s issues are a critical consideration of development interventions in the South, to explicate how both gendered resistance and complicity are evident in complex ways within these alliances. My research suggests that although evident in Bangladesh, imam mobilizations are facilitated by linkages at local, national, regional and transnational levels.

**Keywords**

Bangladesh, development, gender, imam, Islam, Muslim, South Asia, women

**Introduction**

My research is best explained through an event that I observed several years ago. I was working as a freelance writer for a multilateral development agency, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), when I attended a training workshop in Comilla, Bangladesh,

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organized by a state-run maternal and child welfare health centre which receives funding from UNFPA. The workshop represents a major health innovation launched in the 1980s by the state with the help of international development organizations whereby thousands of female high school graduates, drawn from their respective localities, are trained as Family Welfare Visitors (FWVs) to deliver basic contraceptive services to women inside their homes, across rural Bangladesh. There were some 30 female trainees; the trainers were all male.

A Ministry of Health official who was also a medical doctor conducted the workshop, assisted by a female medical doctor who was the head of the clinic. The workshop involved practical training by the male official on proper management – insertion and removal – of an inter-uterine device (IUD) on a larger-than-life model of female genitalia. The trainer called upon the young female recruits to practise insertion methods in front of the group, chastising them loudly in a form of address in Bangla that denotes a subaltern status<sup>1</sup> if they hesitated or fumbled.

I observed with some surprise that two male imams, Islamic congregational prayer leaders, were present at this workshop. Initially, they sat as observers and later, after being invited in respectful terms by the official, one of the imams made a speech about the Islamic perspective on childbirth, referencing the Qur'an and Hadith.<sup>2</sup> He stressed that Islam encouraged the 'spacing' of childbirth in order to ensure the well-being of the mother and through her of the family, community and nation.

My surprise at the involvement of imams, I must note, was not because of assumptions regarding Islamic approaches to contraception. Islamic theological positions on birth control, including abortion, are not uniform, and furthermore, they are not a contentious religious issue in Muslim communities generally or specifically in Bangladesh.<sup>3</sup> What struck me as extraordinary was why religious sanction was being solicited for a development activity at all and especially on women's reproductive health. Development activity, as I use the term, refers to institutionalized, formal regimes of change undertaken soon after the end of World War II by post-colonial nation-states in the South, under direction and funding by secular or mainstream international development organizations in the North (Escobar, 1988, 1995; Esteva, 1992; Rist, 2008). The organizations are secular in that they do not have an explicit religion or faith-based mission and are predicated on the objective of bringing political modernity to the South (Ferguson, 2005; Nandy, 1992, 1994). They include multilateral organizations under the umbrella of the United Nations and bilateral organizations such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

My understanding of mainstream development follows the argument outlined by Arturo Escobar (1988, 1995) and supported in compelling ways by other scholars (Ferguson, 2005; Nandy, 1994; Rahnema, 1997; Rist, 2008) that development is a discursive construct that combines with the notion of poverty and under-development to regulate and 'produce' the South through an increasingly powerful development apparatus. The latter is inclusive of national state mechanisms and since the closing decades of the last century, regimes of privatization that privilege market-based interventions, with problematic consequences in particular for poor rural women and men (Feldman, 2001; Kabeer, 1994; Sharma, 2008). As feminist development studies scholars have noted, since Ester Boserup first critiqued development for its patriarchal bias in the 1970s,

mainstream development has incorporated, at least in ostensible ways, women's issues and gender considerations as key development requisites (Cornwall et al., 2007; Pearson, 2005; White, 2006). My freelance assignment for UNFPA, which was my reason for observing this workshop, was explicitly to focus on women's empowerment and autonomy in reproductive health care. Although mere male membership in the development apparatus does not automatically denote patriarchy, the involvement of women in positions of power and decision-making in development activity signals gender inclusivity, a point to which I return later in this article. The workshop was surprising because it demonstrated patriarchal power relations through the gendered roles of trainer and trainees, the male trainer's authoritative behaviour towards the female trainees, the compliance and silence of the female trainees and even the senior woman medical doctor and finally, the legitimizing, authoritative role of the male imams.

Here, I need to clarify several assumptions about the specific role of imams. Scholars writing on religious issues in Bangladesh often refer to imams as 'clergy' or conflate them with ulema or Islamic religious scholars.<sup>4</sup> However, although imams are a common feature of most Muslim communities across the world and in Bangladesh, their role is not quite the same or 'equivalent' to that of clergy in other religious traditions, nor are they necessarily ulema. Imams are leaders of a specific, mandatory portion of salat, Islamic canonical prayers, called *nomaj* in Bangla, when these are held in congregation. Muslims, both women and men, do not always pray in congregation; women in Bangladesh rarely do so. Although Muslim women in, for instance, Egypt may articulate their agency and religiosity through mosque-based activity (Mahmood, 2005), in Bangladesh women do not go to mosques as a matter of course. Salat is normally undertaken on an individual basis by women. Siddiqi (2006) notes that mosques in Bangladesh have for long been all male spaces, and first-hand experience on my part supports this reality. My experience growing up in Bangladesh in an extended family and community of observant Muslims was that women did not pray or enter a mosque for any reason whatsoever. Even on major religious days, women prayed inside their homes, individually, without an imam. Women seeking alms, in particular, were often forced away from the vicinity of local mosques, an act that I observed with consternation on many occasions. More recently, from the late 1990s to 2001, I worked as a journalist and development consultant in Dhaka and travelled extensively across Bangladesh. My male Muslim colleagues would freely access mosques at various locations, including across the street from the newspaper *The Daily Star*, in Dhaka, but I could not accompany them. I undertook prayers on a mat next to my desk in a noisy, open-plan office; inside a car or auto-rickshaw; in corridors and private rooms. The UNFPA office in Agargaon, Dhaka, included a female prayer room and I undertook *nomaj* there on many occasions, with other women. We always prayed individually, not in congregation or behind an imam.

Gender segregation and patriarchal interpretations of religious leadership specifically during salat are strict elements in Muslim customary practice generally, a fact borne out also by recent re-interpretations and challenges to the same (Elliot, 2005; Maher, 2009; Safi, 2005).<sup>5</sup> Implicit assumptions of male privilege in imamhood in Muslim practices render the role of imam gender specific and contingent. It follows that the congregations and constituencies that imams have interactions with are likely to be overwhelmingly male. I wondered how and to what extent imams were partners in development activity

in Bangladesh. What was the development rationale for such an alliance especially at an initiative pertaining to women's reproductive health choices? Under what historical conditions or exigencies had it emerged and how did it relate to issues of religion, gender and development in post-colonial Bangladesh?

## **Complexities of gender, religion and development in Bangladesh**

Scholars grappling with entanglements between gender, religion and development in Bangladesh provide a substantive backdrop for my questions. Lamia Karim (2004), Dina Siddiqi (2006), Elora Shehabuddin (2008), Shelly Feldman (2001), Najma Chowdhury (2008) and Elora Chowdhury (2009), to name a few, present insightful analyses of how women in Bangladesh are challenged by a range of interests and agendas including that of religious leaders including imams, rural elites, the state, donor agencies, and domestic and transnational regimes of modernity, global capitalism and privatization. Although they do not identify partnerships between male imams and development regimes, they explore tensions between radical religious interests, women's movements and progressive, modernizing regimes of development to suggest that secular forces, such as progressive non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Karim, 2004), and modernizing discourses, such as that of Bangladeshi nationalism (Chowdhury, 2008), propelled by donor pressures (Karim, 2004) are often complicit in rendering women vulnerable. Shehabuddin's (2008) work, on how rural women strategize in self-aware ways between the pressures of rural elites, religious leaders and their own aspirations, demonstrates both the agential power of women and the potential for scholars to move beyond binary readings of religion and modernity in relation to development. Feldman (2001) maps the ways in which different constituencies positioned against radical Islam often exploit the notion of women's rights to promote their own agenda. I find very instructive her argument that fundamentalism is not a clash between 'clergy' (which I assume to include imams) and modern secularists, but rather fundamentalist discourses unfold against a backdrop of challenges faced by established elites who use the idiom of religion to mobilize support.

Siddiqi (2006) argues that the involvement of imams in fatwa-related violence directed against rural women in Bangladesh is a recent phenomenon. She shows how imams or rural mullahs<sup>6</sup> were never integral to the process of *salish*, informal village 'courts' that in the early 1990s began to issue fatwas for punitive justice often against vulnerable village women. Her research shows that these courts were usually run by rural elites and community representatives, but in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in a climate of heightened politicization of religion, increasing global pressures on rural economies and clients, religious subjects were brought into these processes to strengthen secular vested interests. Her study demonstrates the fluidity of imams in Bangladeshi Muslim communities, even as it also shows how alliances between religious and secular interests often combine in violence against women.

Chowdhury (2009) sums up several core issues and dilemmas for feminist analyses of religion, gender and development in Bangladesh. She traces the complex, competing and often contradictory trajectories of Islamist, secularist, state-centred

and donor-driven constituencies in Bangladesh in order to emphasize that feminists need to engage in more nuanced analyses and acknowledge linkages that connect 'disparate power structures' (Chowdhury, 2009: 415), including the links between Islamist and secular agendas. She notes that while the state is implicated in donor-driven modernization that has contradictory consequences for women, the women's movement and feminist politics are often uncritically allied with the NGO sector and so-called progressive secularists. Her point is that we cannot necessarily identify any of the foregoing constituencies as autonomous or always emancipatory for women or as necessarily inimical to them. She reinforces a point made by gender scholars of development, that gender mainstreaming in a variety of sites, by the Bangladesh state and domestic NGOs and within and by development organizations in the North, is often a rhetorical strategy to appease diverse pressures including transnational feminist politics and donor-driven agendas (see Cornwall et al., 2007). What I take away from this conversation is that we cannot assume that simply because there are male imams in development, there has been a concurrent strengthening of patriarchy; rather it is important to understand the conditions under which these linkages have emerged, how they are being sustained or strengthened and what these imply for feminist concerns about women's issues in development.

### **Imams in development discourse**

In this article, I trace the origins of imams as partners in development in Bangladesh. I examine how in the 1980s an unknown number of imams are co-opted by development to bolster a population control policy that appears to be in trouble, reportedly from Islamist radicals. I suggest that these mobilizations form the basis for a much bigger engagement, from the 1990s onwards, when male imams are trained by the thousands by the UNFPA and USAID to support and promote a range of programmes including a reproductive health policy. I track strategies, mobilizations and the rationale in terms of development policy that emanate from UNFPA, USAID and its implementing NGO in Bangladesh, The Asia Foundation (TAF), and a quasi-government organization called the Islamic Foundation, which facilitates the mobilizations. I identify the gendered contours of the partnership, which are complex in that while women's interests are challenged by imam mobilization, they also seem to open up spaces for feminist articulation and expression. In particular, there are notable instances of feminist disenchantment with regimes of modernization and a concurrent embrace of (male) religious agency, limited though it may be.

My methodological approach for this article is twofold: (1) I examine textual documents available in the public domain, in print and electronic format, authored by the donors, as these pertain to imams in development; (2) I also draw on fieldwork undertaken in Dhaka, Bangladesh, over a period of 3 months in 2006. During this time, I conducted interviews with senior policymakers in UNFPA, USAID and members of senior management, including gender specialists, at several domestic, donor-funded NGOs; the management of the Islamic Foundation; and I also conducted interviews and a focus group meeting with 12 male imams trained by USAID as partners in development.

It is worth noting that my fieldwork was conducted under intimidating circumstances that space constraints preclude from discussing in detail. Briefly though, my predicament may be seen as common to researchers who endeavour to ‘study-up’.<sup>7</sup> Many donor organizations were impossible to access. I wrote to and called each of the 10 major development partners as listed by the Government of Bangladesh (Economic Relations Division n.d.),<sup>8</sup> but only four, including USAID and UNFPA, responded. Access to USAID, which is housed inside the US Embassy in Dhaka, involved running a heavily armed gauntlet, being body searched and having to surrender my tape recorder before I could enter the inner sanctum of the embassy. At UNFPA, a gender specialist brandished an Imam Training Manual during a meeting but refused, point blank, to let me glance at it, citing official policy. Trained imams were selected by the head of the Islamic Foundation, a civil servant who made it clear from the start that I was allowed into the Foundation’s sanctum at his discretion entirely and who insisted on being present – and frequently interrupted – in my meeting with the imams. My selection of interview subjects was thus limited by conditions of ‘studying-up’ in the field.

My theoretical framework is grounded in the understanding that the mobilization of male imams is a form of ‘developmentalization’ as outlined in Escobar’s (1995: 155) work on development as discourse which, in turn, rests on a Foucauldian architecture of interlocking and immanent power relations (Foucault, 1980). Developmentalization is a systematic and institutionalized way of conceptualizing and executing change in order to produce ‘solutions’ to identified ‘problems’. The argument is that while ‘problems’ do exist, development defines and produces the same in such a way as to find solutions that are amenable primarily to development – not those that are generated within and by the societies themselves. An important aspect of this framework is to understand erasures and silences, such as the absence of certain constituencies, the use of strategies to limit their influence, as well as critical nodes of resistance. As I discuss later in this article, issues of gender and women’s interests play out in relation to these considerations in important ways.

## Fluidity and complexities of imams in Bangladesh

As noted earlier, imams are facilitators of prayers, and unlike priests or clergy (in other religious traditions) they do not undertake sacerdotal duties or ‘bless’ congregations. Imams are not necessarily ulema or even spiritual guides often known as *pir* or *shaikh* in the Islamic Sufi tradition, although ulema or *pir* may undertake the role of imams (Bennett, 2012; Pemberton, 2006). Scholarly studies of Islam in South Asia tell us that a rich, variegated and dynamic range of professional secular-religious positions were replaced or rendered powerless under colonial rule by imperial officials (Hoque and Khan, 2007; Metcalf, 2009; Zaman, 2002). None of these studies identifies imams as a specific group in colonial or post-colonial times. The only scholarly work exclusively devoted to imams in Bangladesh that I could locate (Hours, 1991) portrays a composite, monolithic Muslim male imam as a ‘precarious’ worker and servant of the community, with little agency or will, in terms that are evocative of neo-colonial depictions of the passive, victimized and ignorant ‘other’ (Mohanty, 1991). I find this account problematic and hesitate to define the ‘object status’ (Mohanty, 1991: 57) of ‘the Muslim imam’ in

homogeneous terms. As well, there is no agreement on the precise number of imams in Bangladesh: Estimates range from 200,000 to a million and indicate the non-institutional, widely dispersed nature of male imamhood. The imams I interviewed were attached to rural congregations centred on a mosque or masjid and, in few instances, also a maktab<sup>9</sup> or school attached to it, on a part-time basis. Most earned their living as farmers, fishermen or petty shop-owners in rural towns. Their income as imams came from private donations to mosques or to them directly for private tuition to children. According to the director of the Islamic Foundation, imams are not paid by the state for their work as imams.

Imams are usually schooled in the madrasah or Islamic religious educational system that operates outside direct state control (Ahmad, 2007). It comprises two major streams: a privately funded stream called Quomi with an orthodox curriculum called the Dars-e-Nizami established in Deoband in India in the 19th century and found across South Asia, and Alia, a system that follows the Sufi-influenced Bareilvi school also originating in colonial India and incorporates a modernized version of the Dars-e-Nizami curriculum with the modern public educational system. The Alia madrasah is government-funded but runs outside the formal public education system. In 2006, the Bangladesh government recognized Alia madrasah degrees to be equivalent to that granted by the public system. I did not find a reliable estimate of how many imams actually emerge from a madrasah and if so, which stream dominates. While imams are educated for the most part in one of the above-noted madrasah streams, all students who are trained in the madrasah streams do not become imams.

To sum up, imams are not easily categorized as a professional or homogeneous class, their fluidity stemming from the contingent nature of their role and the specificities of Islamic customary practice. They are placed fairly low in the hierarchy of Muslim professionals, and evidence suggests they have not been an institutionalized or clearly constituted, uniform group of subjects in socio-political, cultural, economic or religious terms in Bangladesh. It may be argued that although commonalities exist between imams, these do not translate into homogeneity or sameness such that imams may be understood as fixed and uniform. It is interesting, therefore, to map how they come into the ambit of development.

## Post-colonial formations

Farida Akter, head of UBINIG, an NGO with branches across the country, recalls hearing anecdotes of male imams being asked to promote new varieties of rice seeds by Akhtar Hameed Khan, well known for spearheading the Green Revolution in (East) Pakistan in the 1950s. However, we find no written record of these contacts. In fact, in post-colonial East Pakistan, from the birth of Pakistan in 1947 into the late 1950s, there is little evidence of the mobilization of imams in national development, which was dominated, for the most part, by an 'old guard' (Kothari, 2005) drawn from the British (Indian) Civil Services, whose members were informed by modernizing and nationalist impulses in which religious agency and moral disciplining processes were shaped by traditionally ambivalent, liberal Hanafi and Sufi-influenced sensibilities and practices (Jamal, 2010). To borrow from a different context, the dominant ideology was akin broadly to

'Kemalism', an arrangement in which Islam is an element in the political order, not a master signifier (Sayyid, 1997). These characteristics of post-colonial (East) Pakistan have been subsumed in part by the rise of a particular brand of fundamentalism in later years (Jamal, 2010) by Indian claims to exclusive ownership of secularism in the sub-continent, as Ayesha Jalal (1997, 2002) has argued, and by religio-political issues in the movement and birth of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh came into existence in 1971 after decades of economic exploitation of East Pakistan by a West Pakistani military-industrial-bureaucratic elite. Popular support for Bangladesh erupted on the issue of ethno-linguistic identity, specifically to demand equal status for Bangla, which was pitted against the hegemony of Urdu, the dominant language with which (West) Pakistan was identified. Underwritten into these linguistic identity affiliations was a religious entity, Islam, which became associated more obviously with Pakistan, but acquired increasing significance in Bangladesh as well, not least because of India's support for Bangladesh and the former's historical hostility to Pakistan and the notion of an Islamic state. In paradoxical ways, in newly independent Bangladesh, Islam, while being pitted against Bengali ethno-linguistic identity, became a distinct and more divisive marker of national identity. The post-colonial polity evident in the early years of Pakistan, as referenced above, was eroded in the birth of Bangladesh as a uniquely Bengali-Muslim tension between Islam and ethno-linguistic identity, summed up aptly as 'the continual quest for self-definition: Bengali but not Indian, Muslim but not Pakistani' (White, 1999: 310), began to pre-occupy the national imaginary.

## A development 'problem'

Imams are mentioned for the first time in the development literature in connection with a population control programme that was launched initially in the 1960s. It is important to explain the context in which the programme was introduced and how imams were subsequently deployed instrumentally by development. Starting off in the late 1950s, development experts in the North and specifically in the United States began to focus increasingly on the 'dangers' of population growth in the South. An influential book by Paul Ehrlich, inflammatorily entitled *The Population Bomb* (quoted in Duden, 1992: 153), encapsulated the foundations of a new orthodoxy, namely that 'over-population' and 'outbreeding' by the South were the root cause of poverty and the failures of development in the South, and an imminent threat to prosperity everywhere (Duden, 1992: 150). Initially, the US government did not support interventions on population control; President Eisenhower stated in 1959 that birth control was strictly outside the realm of government responsibility (Duden, 1992: 149). Countries in the South cautioned against a narrow focus on the 'population problem' to the exclusion of the socio-economic context that led to population increase and, for some time at least, population control initiatives by international development organizations such as USAID, while targeting women as principal actors in the population issue, also focused on socio-economic incentives to encourage family planning (Kabeer, 1994: 189). But the US government eventually succumbed to increasing pressures from a new coalition of private and public experts on population whose principal focus was on a development 'problem', namely that women

in the South were too fertile and having too many children (Donaldson, 1990 quoted in Grimes, 1998: 381).

A radical new population programme was soon launched, spearheaded by the American government, through USAID to curb women's fertility rates through various means, including coercion (Hartmann, 1995). The US government, caught between the pressures of American domestic opinion against birth control, evident in Eisenhower's unequivocal statement noted earlier, and that of a new population establishment, swiftly and secretly initiated the formation of a new multilateral development agency, the UNFPA in 1969 through which it could process its population control policy, without the knowledge of the American people (Grimes, 1998). USAID has sought funding approval from Congress for UNFPA since its inception (Cohen, 2011).

East Pakistan, densely populated with a fertility rate of 6.3, one of the highest in the world (Mitra et al., 1997: 31, quoted in Raikes et al., 2003), soon felt the effects of the new policy. A small, privately established family planning programme (Akhter, 2005; Larson and Mitra, 1992) was augmented by government involvement after pressure mainly from USAID and UNFPA (Caldwell et al., 1999; Hartmann, 1995). Thousands of mainly poor rural women were pushed to adopt contraceptive services, undergo tubal ligation or sterilization, with material incentives provided covertly by USAID as 'miscellaneous' expenses to prevent a backlash from constituencies in the United States (Hartmann, 1995). Bangladesh was extremely vulnerable to donor funding, and the national state was under pressure, especially in the 1980s, to curb population growth. During the 1980s, a major onslaught began under the military dictatorship of H.M. Ershad to bring down the population growth rate, and among other initiatives, FWVs, mentioned earlier, were introduced to deliver contraceptive services to rural women in their homes.

It is in this context, nearly two decades after the programme was first introduced, that development activity began to involve imams in Bangladesh. In 1984, the Family Planning Association of Bangladesh (FPAB) set up an Islamic Research Cell (IRC) to win the support of 'religious leaders' for the programme (Uddin, 2000). I must point out here that evidence on the *raison d'être* of these interventions, as well as their end results or outputs, emanates exclusively from development practitioners involved in the programme. First, there is clear indication of a 'problem':

Religious leaders proclaimed from public platforms as well as preached from the Mosque pulpits that family planning was against Islam. They called it an act of infanticide or an act of Satan. (Neaz, 1996: 38)

From the pulpits of mosques across the country, it was decreed that family planning was an 'act of Satan', an evil act. (Uddin, 2000: paragraph 1)

No details are provided about these acts of religious opposition, in terms of the number of imams, their precise locations or time frame. What the experts state next is that through development interventions, all opposition to family planning from imams simply evaporated:

Now many of the same clerics are supporting family planning work. (Uddin, 2000: paragraph 2)

Today religious opposition has been to a great extent reduced in Bangladesh ... Imams from Mosques have been preaching in favour of family planning which has a tremendously positive impact among males. (Neaz, 1996: 40)

In contrast to the foregoing narrative, scholars writing on the population programme in Bangladesh do not identify Islamic opposition as an element in any way in the programme (Caldwell and Barkat-e-Khuda, 2000; Caldwell et al., 1999), while those who do engage with the question of religious influences state that decision-making by women and men on family planning choices, including in particular contraceptive use, shows no influence of religion (Bernhart and Uddin, 1990; Rob, 1988). Rob (1988) states categorically that women and men rarely take decisions on contraception from imams or on religious grounds. Rural women's agency, including their strategies towards diverse pressure groups that wish to influence their choices, is documented in some detail by Shehabuddin's (2008) study which, though pertaining to a later era, drives home the point that women are not necessarily or easily influenced by male imams. Empirical studies demonstrate that a notable decline in the fertility rate in the mid-1990s reflects substantive changes in lifestyle, greater awareness of and aspirations towards modernity and progress among rural families (Bernhart and Uddin, 1990; Caldwell et al., 1999; Rob, 1988). A survey of 1200 women in a rural area reputed to be particularly conservative in Bangladesh is worth noting (Bernhart and Uddin, 1990). Initially, nearly 15% of the women in the study stated that their husbands opposed family planning on religious grounds. Later, when the researchers began to engage in open-ended conversations with the supposedly conservative husbands, they found that 25% were currently using contraception, and another 50% were willing to do so.

This evidence indicates the early mobilization by international development interventions, of male imams as the 'solution' to a 'problem'. As noted earlier, development discourse often defines a specific 'problem' and then assembles an apparatus to resolve that problem. And it is not that such problems do not exist; rather that once a problem has been 'discovered', development does not 'seek so much to illuminate possible solutions as to give "problems" a visible reality amenable to particular treatments' (Escobar, 1995: 42). The framing of population growth as a 'problem', followed by the mobilization of an apparatus to deliver 'particular treatments' to deal with that problem, echoes this contention.

This is not to claim that there was no growth in population, but that the notion of population increase was constructed as a threat to development and modernity and linked to regimes of control and regulation over women's reproductive behaviour (Akhter, 2005; Kabeer, 1994). As noted earlier, urgency and secrecy were evident in the population programme. Fears of American domestic right wing politics forced the US State Department to set up the UNFPA as a surrogate for its population control work abroad. There was also frustration in development circles at the slow rate of progress in reducing fertility rates in Bangladesh (Neaz, 1996). It was in this context that development practitioners identified religious leaders as a 'problem' and also a 'solution' to that very problem. Once again, this is not to suggest that religious opposition to family planning did not exist, but that rather than a 'natural process of knowledge that gradually uncovered problems and dealt with them' (Escobar, 1995: 44), development interventions produced certain visible realities that were amenable to development solutions.

Policymakers at UNFPA and USAID do not link their partnerships with imams to these early family planning incentives, but I want to suggest that development alliances with imams were formulated during this time. Records show that by 1996, nearly 7000 imams attended training sessions and 37,000 participated in workshops by the IRC (Uddin, 2000). Workshops such as that referenced at the beginning of this article are held on a regular basis under various umbrella organizations including state clinics funded by the UNFPA, and imams are a common feature at such events and, as discussed below, Imam Training Programmes for thousands of male imams have now emerged.

## The 'developmentalization' of new social actors

A critical aspect in the training of imams is an assumption that an imam is an Islamic 'equivalent' of clergy or priest or, if he is not, then *he ought to be*. During my interviews with them, USAID and UNFPA officials demonstrated that their understanding of an imam was mediated through their experiences in other societies, not necessarily relevant to Bangladesh, but when I problematized these assumptions, I was rebuffed or ignored. There was a disinclination to consider that imams were not ulema or that village elders, elites and working professionals such as barbers and medical experts, many of whom were women, exercised different nodes of authority, legitimacy and influence in community life and leadership in Bangladesh. The USAID representative referenced South American Christian priests and the Catholic Church repeatedly as a template for the organization's work with Bangladeshi imams. The head of the Asia Foundation, during my meeting with him, cited Indonesia, where he had worked earlier, as the inspiration for the Bangladesh imam initiative. When I remarked that Indonesian conditions were distinct from those in Malaysia, never mind Bangladesh, there was no response. The representative continued as though I had not spoken. He cited bomb blasts that occurred in August 2005 (BBC, 2005) as a reason for the involvement of imams. These blasts were blamed on a militant group responsible for extreme acts of violence and embroiled in complex ways with Islamist transnational and domestic politics. I asked how imams were connected to these specific blasts and was told that even if imams were not, mosques, generally, were conduits for Islamist militancy, and imams were susceptible to their influence.

Remarks by donor decision-makers indicate recurring slippage between extremist Islamist groups, Islamic political parties, criminal gangs and male imams. 'The mullah' and 'the imam' are repeatedly fused and interchanged, as are mosques and militant and criminal gang-related activities. It is evident from these exchanges that donors scrutinize, select, and consign social actors such as imams to processes of 'developmentalization' through training programmes with little reference to local context, diversities and differences.

## Interconnected nodes of influence

How trainers construct the process and how the programmes shape and inform the subject position of 'trained' imams indicate that there are interconnections between seemingly independent development initiatives, at various levels. At the local level, the

Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh, a quasi-state body under the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) with branches across the country, provides a major point of linkage since USAID and UNFPA select and train imams through the Foundation. The Foundation has its own educational training courses for imams, but these are precariously positioned because of funding constraints that are contingent on domestic politics and transnational interests. Although it gets funding from the state and from foreign governments (Islamic Foundation, n.d.), the Foundation has been used by different political leaders, from the country's founder to military dictators, to boost their Islamic credentials for a domestic vote bank, to garner donor funds from Islamic countries, and also, conversely, regional tensions involving Indian hegemony have curtailed its activities (Siddiqi, 2006; interview Islamic Foundation). In other words, the Foundation is vulnerable to different agendas and interest groups, especially religio-political pressures from the Bangladeshi state and international donor funding.

Training for USAID and UNFPA takes place through the Islamic Foundation on a rolling basis with groups of 40–60 imams at a time being enrolled in intensive, 3-day camps which include workshops, meetings in the evenings and several field trips to NGO sites selected by USAID and UNFPA, respectively. Imams receive an unspecified amount of money, described by the donors as 'small', as a per diem allowance, during their training. This is in marked contrast to the Foundation's own educational courses for which imams receive no remuneration. In fact, as noted earlier, imams are not employed by the state; they survive as private citizens, through charitable trusts and largesse of their respective communities and through various occupations. Since imams are not on the Islamic Foundation's payroll, their association with it is unstable and contingent on specific projects, such as donor training.

From 1999 to 2006, approximately 70,000 male imams were trained by USAID and UNFPA in Bangladesh. The sheer number of imams, their geographic range and networks established through the Islamic Foundation's branches across Bangladesh, the precarious economic prospects of males who become imams, as well as the vulnerability of the Islamic Foundation to external donors and the state, all provide the context within which imams are mobilized and trained.

The Islamic Foundation plays its own role in mobilizing imams. For instance, it has been increasingly porous to centralized ideological control since the 1990s when the Friday khutba (an address made by a specialized imam known as khatib at the noon *nomaj*) began to be 'centralized' or constructed according to guidelines provided by the Foundation. According to Khushi Kabir, head of Nijera Kori, an NGO working with landless women who are often subjected to fatwa-related violence, a major issue linked to imam mobilizations by development donors is the centralized, more sophisticated administrative efficiencies that may be harnessed for specific objectives including against women's interests. She notes that violent confrontations between progressive NGOs, rural women, and radical rural elites including imams, in the 1990s, coincided in uncanny ways with a systematic and organized dissemination of khutba by imams in mosques in those specific locations. The emergence of 'strikingly similar' khutbas at this time is noted also by Siddiqi (2006). Kabir contends these are a distinct departure from customary practice in rural Bangladesh. A khutba typically reflects current, community issues at the local level, even as it also emanates from individual imams who are

embedded in their respective communities. Kabir cautions that coalitions such as imam-development partnerships erode the heterogeneous and non-institutionalized individualism of Muslim religiosity and the potential for women's autonomy in these ambiguities.

Other sources indicate that a national khutba policy legitimized by the Islamic Foundation emerged gradually from the 1990s onwards, when Imam Training by donors was launched. The Islamic Foundation acknowledges its emphasis on what the Director describes as 'high and uniform standards' of khutba in keeping with 'national objectives' (interview), but we find no written records of the content of khutbas in the 1990s. Recent expressions of this policy may be found in several publications including a glossy, *Khutba Guide on HIV/AIDS* (Waliullah et al., 2006) for imams across the country funded by USAID through the Masjid Council for Community Advancement (MACCA), a domestic faith-based NGO that is also working with UNFPA and is closely allied to the Islamic Foundation. In this and other publications authored by UNFPA, the Islamic Foundation and USAID, reference is made consistently in laudatory terms to 'trained' imams as increasingly skilled interlocutors in both secular and religious terms.

In interviews, imams repeatedly referenced their enhanced status post-training and commented that donor interest reinforced their legitimacy and desirability as model citizens poised to contribute to national development. They emerged from training feeling empowered and authenticated in terms of being seen as modern Islamic religious subjects, able to contribute to national development. Their remarks indicate that they self-identified as important religious leaders in Bangladesh specifically after being selected to be trained and through relationships with powerful donor representatives.

It is interesting to note that when asked specifically to evaluate Imam Training in terms of its aims and objectives, their responses were often about something other than the training itself. For example, one imam's response was to bring up a heated exchange he had had with a visiting American researcher earlier that year when the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers allegedly by Hezbollah in Lebanon was in the news. The American apparently asked rather aggressively,<sup>10</sup> if the kidnapping could not be considered a crime, at which the imam recalled,

Imam: I retorted with my own question. I asked him: 'But from which exact location were they abducted, where were they when this wrong was perpetuated on them? They were not abducted from inside Israel, they were taken from Lebanese soil – so why did they go there in the first place?'

When I asked if he had stated his views in so many words, the imam forcefully stated that he had, adding, 'They have helped us but that does not mean they can silence us!' Responses like these indicate the construction of self-aware, increasingly empowered and authoritative religious subjects through development interventions.

## Gendered contours and tensions

I explore in some detail the ways in which imam alliances are framed and rationalized by policymakers, imams, gender specialists at USAID, UNFPA and several NGOs, in order to draw out the implications of these alliances for gender concerns and women's issues

in mainstream development. My aim here is not to draw conclusions on the impact of imam mobilizations as this is beyond the scope of my study. Rather my aim is to understand how various vested constituencies view and rationalize imam mobilizations.

Policymakers at USAID and UNFPA seem to be unaware of their exclusive attention to an aspect of Muslim religious practice that privileges men, even as they reference male imams in privileged terms. They describe imams as quintessentially simple, salt-of-the-earth folk, but also eminently qualified subjects with moral authority and influence over their 'flock', which in turn they assume to be gender inclusive. An excerpt from a document widely circulated by The Asia Foundation (n.d.) illustrates these assumptions:

*As persons of influence* at the local and national level, religious leaders of all faiths are *ideally placed* to serve as interlocutors between local communities and those responsible for development decisions and implementation (paragraph 1, emphasis added)

After elevating imams to a high status, as 'persons of influence' and 'interlocutors' between ordinary people, including women and men, and those in authority, the document goes on to highlight in sweeping terms the 'extensive knowledge', influence, and unique instrumental value for development of religious leaders in both religious and secular terms. I asked policymakers how religious leaders could have 'extensive knowledge' of everyone in their local communities since women and imams did not socialize or even often have contact with one another. My interview participants did not respond to my question. Their approach, like that evident in the document, was as though imams were a hitherto hidden and undiscovered resource in Bangladesh that only international development experts have managed to 'see'. I was struck, both during my interviews, and while exploring the foregoing and other similar passages, by the gaze of international expertise scrutinizing society and 'finding' a seemingly untapped group of exemplary male citizens who are positioned to straddle various domains, while the experts themselves remained virtually unmapped or invisible, echoing what has been famously noted as 'the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere' (Haraway, 1991: 189).

A document authored by UNFPA defines and constitutes imams as normative leaders, with little regard for gender differences. It claims that imams are 'religious representatives [...] in villages and cities throughout the land' (Das Gupta, 2003: 22) not only by virtue of leading mandatory salat, but also because they are involved in 'sundry' religious and cultural activities, from a name-giving ceremony to 'marriage, divorce, re-marriage, inheritance and other significant personal changes in people's lives' (Das Gupta, 2003: 22). The discourse conflates customary acts of cultural and religious significance with that of mandatory salat, grouping Islamic processes that have vastly differing legal, cultural and religious significance under one umbrella. Marriage, divorce, re-marriage and inheritance have legal, cultural and religious significance, while the name-giving ceremony is merely customary. Furthermore, while imams are often facilitators of, and preside over Muslim marriage, divorce and re-marriage, legal authority to register these contracts is vested in a qazi<sup>11</sup> or marriage registrar. Inheritance matters lie outside the legal authority of an imam and are interpreted and enforced through the civil judicial system in Bangladesh (Hoque and Khan, 2007).

The Islamic Foundation premises are an important element in the mobilization of imams in that this site is the hub of decision-making, generating ideas and processing alliances and changes in relation to state policy and international development partnerships with thousands of male imams. In gender terms, the Foundation is similar to a mosque in Bangladesh: Ordinary Muslim women are barred from entering save as menial staff. As a Canadian researcher, I was 'allowed' to enter the Foundation headquarters but as a Muslim woman of Bangladeshi origin, I felt under pressure, specifically because of the 'gaze' of religious men inside the Foundation premises, to cover my head, an act that the head of the Foundation remarked on in complimentary terms, reinforcing my gendered outsider status.

As noted earlier, the presence of women in development interventions is important, but not because women's mere presence is expected to automatically usher in gender-sensitive or egalitarian precepts and processes. Research demonstrates that women play a distinct role in how policies are implemented in development organizations; also that women do gender work differently than men (Goetz, 2001; Jackson, 2002; Staudt, 2002). This is not to suggest that women and men are inherently different but, as Cecile Jackson (2002: 505) states, 'the experiences of women often shapes [sic] their approach to their work in distinctive ways which leads to distinctive understandings of development priorities and ways of working with others'.

There are no women working for the Islamic Foundation and none have been 'trained' under the Imam Training Programme. Here I must add an interesting piece of information found in a recent USAID evaluation of imam mobilizations (USAID Mission Bangladesh, 2011). In a list of the number and type of participants in Imam Training, the report states that 94 'secular' female participants have been trained in this programme but, and this is the interesting detail, among these women participants, 'curiously, 31 were men' (USAID Mission Bangladesh, 2011: 15).<sup>12</sup> The detail is added in a footnote. No other information is given about the women participants. In the absence of more information, I can only speculate that first, it was impossible to find women imams in Bangladesh but USAID felt it had to demonstrate gender equity and settled for 'secular' women participants; however, the initial report may have been somewhat economical with the truth and inflated the actual number of participants, an inaccuracy that was rectified in the footnote. Whatever the reason for this curious contradiction, it reinforces the impression that integrating gender inclusivity in development partnerships with imams is highly problematic.

Gendered acts of resistance, as well as compliance and acceptance in feminist articulations, are evident in the imam mobilizations in interesting ways. I focus here on power relations and on the presumption that 'where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault, 1980: 95) and yet, resistance 'is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (Foucault, 1980: 95). In other words, tensions are embedded within the mobilizations, not necessarily external to them. During an interview with two male Bangladeshi experts at TAF who work closely with imams and the Islamic Foundation, I asked them why women were not involved in Imam Training and they responded as follows:

The Asia Foundation (TAF): We haven't involved women because we felt that imams, they are not comfortable with women coming in there.

- Interviewer (IV): Have the imams expressed their disapproval of women entering the space?
- TAF: No, they have requested – but only informally – that for the time being, don't bring women into the Foundation. In time, there will be a better level of comfort and they may come [into the Foundation] at that time. But they [imams] have no bar against women being present in the field.

The remarks suggest that the physical presence of women makes imams uneasy and discomfited, a sentiment that echoes the bar against women entering mosques and other public spaces of overt male religiosity. At the same time, however, the remarks tell us that imams 'have no bar' against women's presence 'in the field', a response that in my view indicates resigned acceptance of a reality since imams cannot stop women from working or living on a day-to-day basis. Together, in my view, they imply a potential for women's autonomy that imams find unsettling. As far as imams are concerned, the practices and processes of everyday life, as they are experienced in the villages, homes and communities of Bangladesh, may incorporate women as subjects and agents in their own right, but imams as religious subjects will exclude women from their specific religious domains.

Also evident in this exchange is the involvement of the development expert in the gendering of the discourse. TAF stresses that the ban against women entering the Foundation is not a fully formed policy, perhaps partly in order to indemnify itself from being complicit in an anti-women stance, and also implying that imams are understandably wary of women because any reservations they have are merely 'informal' and temporary. In another exchange, the head of TAF notes that on a rare occasion when several women from USAID's development projects in the field were permitted into the Islamic Foundation, there is a level of 'raised discomfort' especially because the women 'refused to put their scarves over their heads and annoyed the imams'. In contrast, he describes his own impression of imams undergoing training as a 'kind of magical thing to observe' and most imams as 'very simple gentlemen from remote villages who have had very little stimulation of any kind'. On several occasions, the TAF head identifies closely with male imams, using the first person plural almost without noticing.

An interesting pattern in trainers' viewpoints is the assurance that development interventions inevitably resolve problems that are identified (by development) as being in need of solutions. Going back to the earlier passage about an 'informal' ban on women, TAF comments: 'In time, there will be a better level of comfort and they may come [into the Foundation] at that time'. How the better level might be achieved is not stated, but obvious nonetheless: through development interventions. Several examples provided during interviews echo this theme and are uncannily similar to those in textual sources (Das Gupta, 2003; UNFPA, 2005b)<sup>13</sup> including in relation to family planning (Uddin, 2000).

An encounter related in similar language but on separate occasions by an imam, the Islamic Foundation head and a Bangladeshi expert at TAF, merits attention. In this encounter apparently, a female project manager in charge of an NGO is apprehensive of

imams when the latter visit the NGO as part of their training. The project manager is so afraid of annoying the imams that she deliberately 'holds back' from coming forward to meet the imams. The imams, however, display rare open-mindedness and ask to meet the manager, after which 'tensions are clearly resolved'. Each account stresses that imam training and exposure will combine to diminish imams' feeling of apprehension with regard to women.

The implications of these comments, in my view, are that imams are seen as privileged subjects and their propensity to exclude women is rationalized in different ways. The implication is that when imams are carefully exposed to the vagaries of women (and their uncovered heads), they demonstrate their inherent egalitarianism and accept the women. I do not wish to suggest that imams are inherently unfair or motivated by ill intent. Rather, I want to mark how power relations constitute imams and women subjects differently and the gendered resistance by women evident within these constitutions. In embracing the development project, and becoming subjects of development discourse as framed by the imam training programme, trained imams are described simultaneously as backward, non-modern and simple men who are, it is implied, understandably suspicious of gender and developmental progress. They are constructed not only as a potential challenge to the development mission but also as subjects being given opportunities to strengthen their gender and religious authority in the service of development, somewhat like 'soldiers of secularism'.<sup>14</sup> Women's oppositional strategies are both obvious and latent in these constitutions. If power relations underpin the institutionalization of imams, they simultaneously provide distinct possibilities of women's resistance and contestations of the same.

At the same time as my research denotes gendered resistance, there is a sense also that feminist ideals and women's issues are being compromised by a global economic agenda and regimes of development and modernization and these failures of development encourage advocates of social justice to form tacit and even open alliances with religious, patriarchal interests. For instance, Farida Akhter feels let down by the Bangladeshi women's movement's failure to stand up for causes that conflict with dominant donor agendas 'because obviously, they run NGOs that are funded by the West and they cannot annoy their benefactors' (interview), while she admires the so-called Islamists for 'standing up to neo-imperial global ambitions by the West' (interview). Akhter asserts that while religion is a private matter, one cannot be penalized for being religious and thus, in her view, there is room for imam mobilization albeit in a gender-egalitarian manner:

The point is, imams don't have power perhaps, but they have legitimacy. Otherwise why do people stand behind them and pray? If you are standing behind someone in prayer then that person *already has some indirect standing*. We cannot see imams as anti-women in every case. (Farida Akhter, UBINIG, interview, emphasis added)

A Bangladeshi gender specialist at UNFPA, one of the few senior female policy-makers who consented to be interviewed for my research, voiced perspectives that demonstrate feminist support for Islam-centred modernization. She explained in great detail the Islamic egalitarian principles that she observed on a visit to Iran, contrasting

these with problematic, neo-imperial imperatives in global politics and specifically in the foreign policy of the USA in the Islamic world. In her perspective, imams as modern subjects embrace and symbolize gender-sensitive partnerships inspired by Islam's egalitarian core.

For instance, I asked her how imams in the UNFPA programme might relate to *salish*, often the site of unfair and violent 'judgements' against women in Bangladesh. Her response was emphatic: 'And why shouldn't the imams speak out against such a judgement, they surely will!'

During our conversation, she stopped several times to read out loud Qur'anic verses from the UNFPA Imam Training Manual (which she refused to let me see, citing policy), including a verse that stresses the equality of women's and men's labour. Then, she made a surprising reference to *ajol* (Bangla for the Arabic *azl*, coitus interruptus), while pointing at the Manual to emphasize that she was quoting directly from it. She said emphatically that although not prohibited by the Qur'an or the Prophet Muhammad, Qur'anic directives stress unequivocally that men could not practise *ajol* without the consent of their wives:

This means it is personal but not prohibited. *What else do you want?* (She looked up at me). Those who are practising *ajol*, *they must take their wife's permission*, in this way women's empowerment is being invoked. (UNFPA, interview, emphasis added)

This reference to *ajol* seems to me to signal a desire to stress the egalitarian aspects of Islam in relation to women, and to decry implications of male bias on the part of male Muslim imams. According to Haideh Moghissi (2000): 'although different interpretations and traditions within Islam make it hard to generalize, it can be said that Islam is a sex-affirming cultural and religious tradition' (p. 21). Indeed, recent feminist studies of Muslim women's agency and Islamic feminist political empowerment and practices of piety are useful in opening up the possibilities of modern religious subject positions (Grewal, 2014; Jamal, 2005, 2010; Mahmood, 2005) and substantiating that gender and modernity are entangled in more complex ways than in fixed oppositional positions.

## Coalitions and linkages

I want to note that the institutionalization of male imams emerges against a backdrop of transnational linkages in development discourse. The UNFPA works globally with religious subjects, groups, and institutions on population control policies and reproductive health (UNFPA, 2002, 2005a), forging alliances with (predominantly male) religious elites across the globe (UNFPA, 2002, 2008). Its programme initiatives include working with Uganda's bishops and Muslim community elders, engaging with Muslim scholars in Iran, 'tapping the potential' (UNFPA, 2005a: 75) of Buddhist monks and nuns in Cambodia, and like USAID, cooperating with the Catholic Church in South America (UNFPA, 2005a). These connections gloss over the agency's uneven relationship with religious interests (Cohen, 2011) and that of its funding source (USAID, n.d.) and are promoted, instead, to strengthen its developmental credentials. In an address to a think

tank in Washington, DC in April 2002, the executive director of the UNFPA (2002) remarked that

building alliances with and involving members of religious traditions are factors that can actually determine a program's success or failure. This is especially critical in traditional societies where women's actions to regulate fertility may disturb a social contract and where [patriarchal] control over women is strong.

The statement above demonstrates a fusion between largely male religious authority and development expertise through the bodies and lives of women and raises problematic questions about the likely impact of using religious authority to supposedly empower women, while simultaneously reinforcing traditional, religious authority over women. UNFPA places the onus of 'disturbing' a patriarchal social contract, on reproductive health grounds, solely on the shoulders of women and then goes on to suggest that the way to overcome the disjuncture is to appease the traditional religious leaders and patriarchal systems of organization. As well, the logic in this speech juxtaposes the otherwise clearly stated objectives of the UNFPA to empower women with its unproblematic touting of alliances with institutional nodes of religious authority and power which, by its own testimony, are pitted against women's interests. I am not advancing a dichotomous relationship between 'secular' women and assumed patriarchal 'religious' authority but rather mapping the contradictions that emerge within the mandate of the multilateral itself, which focuses on women's health and reproductive choices

## Conclusion

My aim has been to explore how a particular kind of gendered and authoritative male Muslim imam has been increasingly mobilized through what may be called 'the authorizing signature' (Mohanty, 1991: 53) of state sanction and international development in Bangladesh. Imams are selected, trained and invested with authority, influence and power over community issues that are identified primarily by development organizations as 'problems' in the South in need of resolution by development. These issues and the selection of imams as partners in development coincide with contemporary ideological interests of various constituencies including the nation-state, donor-driven pressures on it and transnational developmentalism. While moving away from the assumption that the mere presence of women fulfils gender concerns in development, or that male imams automatically signal patriarchy, we find that for a number of reasons, imamhood is not open to Muslim women in the same way as it is to men. Consequently, development partnerships with imams in Bangladesh preclude women's involvement, even as they outline and open up spaces for women's resistance and tacit support of the same. Entanglements between gender, religion, and development in Bangladesh through imam mobilization thus expand our understanding of how post-colonial societies engage with religious issues under transnational pressures of modernization and in relation to assumptions of gender neutrality in the discourse of development.

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## Notes

1. In Bangla, forms of address differ depending on relationship and status; the women trainees and even the woman medical doctor were addressed in a form denoting a lesser status as 'tumi', while the imams were addressed as 'apni', which signals respect.
2. A Hadith is a historical written tradition based on oral transmission of sayings, rulings and directives of the Prophet Muhammad, reported by one of his family members or a companion (see Esack, 2005: 15).
3. Leila Ahmed (1989) discusses important distinctions between Islamic laws and Islamic philosophical opinion, the former giving women distinct rights to prevent and terminate pregnancy, while the latter, influenced in part by the Aristotelian philosophy of the supremacy of the male in relation to the female, restricts women. Also see Ahmed (1992: 92). Donna Bowen's (1997) exploration of the UN Population Conference in Cairo in 1994 provides important explanations of reproductive health issues and international development agendas of the West.
4. Ulema may be understood as an umbrella term for Islamic scholars (singular: a'lim). Within ulema, there are various categories denoting specialized qualifications such as mufti, a scholar authorized to offer a legal opinion or fatwa, or maulana, a scholar with eminence and some form of power or authority (see Zaman, 2002).
5. This documentary called *Veiled Voices* maps challenges faced and overcome by three women imams in Lebanon, Egypt, and Syria, respectively.
6. 'Mullah' is a religious scholar or imam and it signals, in the case of rural mullahs, a far lower standing in terms of eminence and credentials than a maulana. The precise difference between an imam and a mullah is difficult to map because imamhood is extremely fluid and may be a temporary occupation. Imam and mullah are roughly equal in stature and job description and may be used interchangeably or they may be differently qualified/authorized, depending on the context.
7. Initially emerging as a framework in anthropology in the late 1960s (Nader, 1974 [1969]), 'studying-up' entails a research focus on structures, relations and individuals with power and authority. For recent scholarship, see Hertz and Imber (1995), Luff (1999), Conti and O'Neil (2007) and Heron (2007).
8. My research was conducted in 2006; the websites I accessed have been updated to 2014.
9. Islamic school attached to a mosque with curriculum limited to Qur'an and Hadith; less formal and comprehensive than a madrasah, which has a wider curriculum.
10. 'Prosono kore boshe porlo' in Bangla implies the question and questioner are being provocative.
11. Qazi (Arabic qadi) was originally a judge or magistrate in the mainstream South Asian judicial system, relegated to the position of a minor religious functionary during British colonial rule (see Hoque and Khan, 2007; Zaman, 2002).

12. On Page 15, Table 5: Secular Groups Projected Outputs by Results Achieved, we find 94 'Women Leaders' under the column heading 'Female Participants'. A note below the table states, 'Curiously, 31 of the "women leaders" group were males'.
13. 'The attitudes of many religious leaders have changed dramatically, and they, in turn, have changed perceptions in their communities' (UNFPA, 2005b: 12).
14. I am grateful to Dr Amina Jamal for suggesting this phrase.

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