Secular Advocacy, Religious Women and a New Framework for Ideas and Action: Challenges and Possibilities from Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Gender has long been a contentious issue across the religious-secular divide for debates on women's voice, progress and autonomy it brings to public policy and action and private/domestic life. Bangladesh has experienced this persistent clash for decades, albeit amidst many changes in laws as well as social conditions that affect women's lives. Many positive changes notwithstanding, the religious-secular divide remains one replete on the one hand with bitter guardedness and acrimony and on the other with potential for outlining the contours of a new politics centered on women's lives and realities. In this article, I explore the history of that clash extending to present times, discussing the women's movement's secular stance and prerogatives, followed by a discussion of the critical subjectivity of religious women. The paper urges for a consideration of contexts, constituencies and critical subjectivities to ask whether the relationship between advocacy for women's progress can be expanded, to what extent, and whether a concomitant debate on Bangladesh's contested secularism might shed light on a new and accommodative framework for liberal politics and positive change in women's lives.

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Women's Voice in Bangladesh:

Women constitute almost fifty per cent of the population in Bangladesh. Their voice is, of course, not a homogeneous one. They reverberate in various parts of society; in the private and the public space. At home as daughters, mothers, mothers-in-law, wives, and domestic workers- their dreams and aspirations are anything but uniform. In the public space, they appear as parliamentarians, leaders of political parties, and heads of government, professionals, businesswomen, students, labor leaders, workers in the ready-made garment industry, in the sex industry, and in many more formal and informal ways. The positions women occupy across the private-public spectrum certainly reveal an intersectionality of gender and class. It is important to grapple with the variety and the intersectionality in articulating a woman's agenda grounded in their own voices. In addition to the gender-class intersectionality, questions of ethnic belonging and religious affinity, and identity are additional factors that amplify the scope of and complicate women's "voice" and its potential to articulate an agenda for questions around progress in matters of gender and sexuality.

Voice is a widely-used concept in development and international policy discourse. It is defined as an avenue to achieve rights, citizenship, and empowerment. Gender and development academics and advocates use the term to capture women's agency (Kabeer 2016, Nazneen 2023; Goetz and Nyamu 2009) and collective empowerment (Agarwal 2010). The concept is "central to contestations and claims-making around gender equality and women's rights issues" (Nazneen 2024). The literature that frames voice as agentive does so under the assumptions of certain kinds of claims-making- particular kinds of demands that support women's economic and political agency and associated with these, a search for "autonomy" from structures of power that seek to keep women deprived of economic and political rights and tied to traditions that many deem passive. By and large, women's voice is conceived in terms of liberal objectives of change and empowerment[1]. In the case of Bangladesh, little attention has been paid to how claims-making can also be entangled with identity -based politics and, more importantly, identity formations. When attention has been paid to identity formations around identity politics, the claims-making that are heard have been difficult to contend with, especially

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where liberal outcomes are not uncritically aimed at as the ultimate ends to achieve. The discomfort in factoring these claims is two-fold. First, the question of religious engagement and consequent claims made are placed squarely within the category of "backlash", given that public Islamic and Islamist groups have a history of raising objections to the work of liberal NGOs and women's groups. Women asserting their voices and working for women's greater and collective good have best contended with religious identity-based claims through strategy, albeit at a distance and not in collaboration. Thus, undergirding the voice and backlash dichotomy is also the secular-religious one- emanating from public and political contestations of secularism and its relationship with Islam in Bangladesh[2] and pervading through the discourse of subject formation. The second discomfort, I contend, results from insufficient familiarity with the architecture of religious subjects and selves to really probe the question: what are the claims of women who question liberal outcomes because of religious engagement, and what are their aspirations for their lives? Can they be accommodated and brought into a conversation of women's progress that women themselves are empowered to articulate? How would one transcend the religious-secular binary and wrestle with forces on the ground by way of strategy and collaboration if a broader framework for women's progress was to be outlined.

In this paper, I question the religious-secular dichotomy, by placing at the center a discussion of both secular advocacy for change in women's lives and a discussion of religious women. I start by first drawing on the history and the growth of the women's movement, an assessment of their call and ambition, along with the outcomes and challenges of their aspirations. Next, I discuss religious women's voice, representing a heterogeneity of aspirations and what they understand to be women's collective good. Beyond simple compare and contrast, what I wish to draw from these two discussions is an identification of silences, compromises, and negotiations/tradeoffs that each bloc makes. Focusing on silences and tradeoffs is a strategy that is advocated for gender quality coalition building. Religious voices are considered to be hyper-political and defiant of the opportunities and lifeways more liberal-leaning women value. As discussed by scholars and elaborated later in this paper, their voice is thus seen as rigid and thereby difficult to engage with. The aspirations of religious women are typically considered through their political positions and the ethico-religious certainties the positions speak of. In this article, my discussion of the religious "voice" is described as multiple and complex, and laden with desires for speaking their truth to powers they feel burdened by. By highlighting insecurities and silences, I wish to present "religious"

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women as both aspiring and vulnerable- as embodied subjects who wish to leave their mark both in private and public. A discussion of aspirations and vulnerabilities of both secular women's rights advocates and their convictions, along with those of religious women, is intended to encourage a reflection of more than their mutual (dis) trust, highlighting the potential for collaboration.

Women's progress and women's movements:

Bangladesh has done fairly well on women's progress. In terms of gender parity, Bangladesh leads South Asia, scoring 72.2 percent and ranking 59th globally according to the 2023 Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum[3] (UN Women, 2024). The country excels in political empowerment, with a score of 55.2 percent, ranking seventh worldwide. Bangladesh is notable for having had women lead both the government and the opposition for more than thirty years. The country's gender parity scores are 96.2 percent in health and survival, 93.6 percent in educational attainment, and 43.8 percent in economic participation and opportunity, showing significant improvement since 2020.[^4](https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/human-dev-index-bangladesh-notch-still-stuck-medium-category-1135586) Despite these achievements, Bangladesh has a gender inequality index value of 0.530, ranking 131 out of 170 countries in 2021[5] (UN Women, 2024). Gender analysis reveals systemic inequalities that hinder women's empowerment and national progress. One group that has long been engaged in improving the collective lives of women are women's groups that consist of feminist and rights-based, and advocacy organizations. They are part of civil society and development organizations that work independently as well as in collaboration with the government.

Women's groups have a long history in Bangladesh that dates back to the colonial era and nationalist struggles for independence. The woman's agenda was intertwined with a framing of progress that determined the imperative for freedom from colonial rule. Within such a scope, the agenda was carved out by educated women who expressed themselves through writing and social activism by way of social welfare work. These activities were aimed at relaxing extreme segregation. However, all the while the discourse on progress was circumscribed by their own class position (and biases) and heavily influenced by mainstream modernist male priorities (Azim and Hasan, 2014; Amin1994). Many of the leading women speaking for reforms at the time were

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supported by male kinsmen. In the kinds of messages advocated, Begum Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) is widely considered to be amongst the founding matriarchs and visionaries for subsequent more formalized women's movements, especially for her trenchant critique of patriarchy and the influence of the established religious discourse of the time. She was embraced neither by modernists nor traditionalists (Azim 2016). While Rokeya left a mark in starting a movement that would bring women out of segregation and into formal education, well into the end of the colonial era, reforms in areas such as marriage, inheritance that would lead to a restructuring of familial relationships did not receive public traction (Roy 2010).

The Pakistan era saw (Muslim) women both come together as well as disagree. Led by the state-sponsored All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA), which consisted of wives of government officials, women mobilized across the east-west divide for reforms on Muslim Family Law. The landmark reform by the Muslim Family Law Ordinances (MFLO) in 1961 curtailed unilateral rights of Muslim men in divorce and polygamy and set a minimum age of marriage (Mansoor 1999). This legal reform was not without conservative religious backlash. However, the Pakistani state's determined stance to appear progressive in an attempt to build a modern Pakistan led the regime to trump conservative religious voices by upholding a more modernist reading of Islam. While this was a win for the women of Pakistan, they found themselves divided along questions of cultural sovereignty. East Pakistan, which became Bangladesh in 1971, had been in a struggle with its western wing that sought to dominate Bengalis economically, culturally, and politically (reference). Thus, a progressive resolution around the women's question, which united educated middle-class East Pakistani (Bengali Muslim) women with their west Pakistani non-Bengali counterparts, failed to cohere in the face of the cultural, economic, and political repression by the Pakistani state and the ensuing differences between the two groups on women. In East Pakistan, the women's movement thus became tied to the struggle for national and cultural sovereignty. Women's groups felt the urgency to create movements that would push back against the Pakistani state. The first women's group, *Mohila** *Porishod*, was born at this time, consisting of young female activists from the left parties and senior leaders from the Awami League women's wing (Jahan, 1995). These women's attire and cultural activities were central as emblems of their activism and what they stood for. It is important to add that many of these women were involved with the Chhayanaut movement, the cultural movement born in the early 1960s as resistance to the Pakistani state's repression of Bengali cultural expressions such as singing (the songs of Tagore) and classical dance. Women who

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fought to make their own voices heard also did so as bearers of a certain culture, which they bore in attire, comportment and cultural activity.

In independent Bangladesh, women remained active in asking for their rights in a similar manner and garb. During the war of independence, the Jama'at-e-Islami had aided the Pakistani military to carry out genocide against the liberation fighters. A part of the war crimes was rape of Bengali women, leading to the Jamaat-e-Islami losing credibility as a pro-nation, pro-people and pro-women party; a loss that continues to plague them to date. Consequently, women's pro-nation, pro-people activism felt the urgency to stand up against this Islamist onslaught that defiled women's emotional and bodily integrity. The "women/heroines of war" or *birangona*as these victims of rape were referred to, were to be protected from attacks- that came from Islamist quarters and from a violent hyper-masculine Pakistani state that used Islam for repression and violence. While the independent Bangladeshi state sought to do better and did recognize these women's sacrifice, it was later critiqued that they were not really given voice as "women"- on the basis of their own words, desires, and aspirations. Thus, who speaks for women when seeking to fight for and help them became a vexed issue as women's groups continued to do their work. And they felt strongly that, many challenges notwithstanding, their work would progress the most by keeping away from religion altogether. In doing so, the women's groups claimed for themselves a secular mantle in a nation that adopted secularism as its founding pillar, but subsequently tempered with and discarded its official place in the constitution.

As a secular force, women's groups consist of feminist and women's rights organizations that have footprints in social movements, development activities, protests against fundamentalism, violence against women, state repression, and authoritarian rule (Nazneen, 2020). These groups have worked within the context of "classic patriarchy" that allows men control over women's labor, sociality, and mobility, where religious personal laws go against the constitutional guarantee of equality by having different laws for women with regard to marriage, divorce, and inheritance. The centrality of marriage to grant women economic and social security, along with other circumscriptions around women's mobility, work, and bodies, created an environment where women's voices and agency required the work, often coordinated by the state and NGOs-both of which women's organizations have worked with. The result has been commendable. In spite of many barriers, women fare better now in social development indicators, with a sharp decline in fertility rates, maternal mortality, and gender parity in primary and secondary education (Nazneen et al. 2011). However, challenges remain.

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For example, even as women's participation in the formal labor force has grown, the numbers are lower than in other countries in South Asia. Similarly, while women's formal political participation has grown, women representatives state that they face many attitudinal, structural, and cultural barriers (Akter and Nazneen 2014). In other words, progress on women's issues and rights is uneven, hinting at the need for continued work on the public space so that it becomes more hospitable for women.

Women's groups and their secular stance have not, however, been without (self)surveillance. Feminists have always had to align their interests with nationalist ones. S.M. Shamsul Alam argues that both trajectories of nationalism — the secularized Bengali nationalism as well as the Islamized Bangladeshi one "do not view women outside the domain of nationalism, and women as agents are subsumed under the discourse of a modernizing nation state" (Alam 1998:444). Taslima Nasrin is a Bangladeshi writer whose writings advocating that women claim their sexuality against religious proscriptions, where religious men can be perpetrators, earned her huge fundamentalist backlash, leading her to eventually seek political asylum in the West. In her article, "Feminist Struggles in Bangladesh," Firdous Azim points out that the Taslima Nasrin case was celebrated by the West as representing a lone female voice who had the courage to stand up to their stereotypical notion of a backward and oppressive Muslim society. This view is contrasted with Nasrin's image at home, where many felt that she had betrayed her own religion and people. Within such contradictory ideas, feminists held a precarious position of simultaneously upholding women's rights to self-expression and promoting nationalism. As Azim writes, "The feminist task in indeed very difficult — to constantly hold the critical mirror up to social inequities which keep gender discrimination in place, but not to fall into the global vilification that Muslim cultures and so-called backward cultures are subject to" (Azim 2005:195). Azim's statement illuminates the reality that a conversation around sexuality is a difficult one. It is a progressive cause that feminists and women's groups would ideally like to hold up. However, it is also a cause that also hinges on an external western gaze that has long seen Muslim people as backwards and silenced by religious and cultural pressures. The local feminist agenda is to support local women without falling prey to such a western gaze that has long homogenized and "orientalized" Muslim people, notably through a passive framing of the lives of the women. Validating the hue and cry over Taslima Nasrin as a violation of individual autonomy was tantamount to supporting the view that hers was a "lone cause", especially at the erasure of the many struggles women are faced with and that women's groups have long contended

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with locally. Thus, tensions around sexuality often become about the West versus East, progress versus constraints, vertical solidarity versus horizontal ones, with one of the underlying currents being the dichotomy between the secular and the religious.

Advocacy, Secularity and the Body:

The discussion on women's activism and challenges leads one to understand several contours of the women's movement revealed through its aims, passions, political positioning, notion of self, and its flourishing that are assumed and consequently the labels both assumed and ascribed. The contested label of "secular" is one that brings home to women's issues all of the battles that are waged outside of women's lives and homes, in the public and political space, validating the age-old feminist claim that the personal is and must be political. Jose Casanova writes, "The secular has become a central modern category — theologico-philosophical, legal-political, and cultural-anthropological — to construct, codify, grasp, and experience a realm or reality differentiated from "the religious" (2009:1049). This is a realm that aspires to assert a certain autonomy, all the while being codified and institutionalized by the state and society. The creation of the secular is thus intertwined with the simultaneous (co) creation of the religious, constantly in imbrication with the sphere of religion (Asad 2003). As such, when we consider the women's groups' self-proclaimed secular status, we must remember the roots and relationality of their secularity. For the women, the roots lay in struggles for cultural sovereignty as well as national progress. While indeed the women who constituted the movement since its early calls were educated and middle to upper class women, the movement has recognized its class position and built relations with women of different kinds of socio-economic backgrounds, aiming to achieve horizontal solidarity. That solidarity is one that sought to bring women greater freedoms out of conditions that left them deprived, denigrated, and unable to access and negotiate with structures of power at the familial, social, political/national levels. Seeking material, social, and emotional improvement of women's lives, the women's movement has preferred a refrain from calls from religious platforms that have attempted to impede work that progresses a pro-woman's agenda. It is in this refrain, within the contextual realities in Bangladesh, that women's groups have located their secularity.

Women's rights groups and a progressive woman's agenda, notably those that espouse feminism, have had a rather antagonistic relationship with religion globally. Their

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professed secular standing has fallen back on secular logic from the enlightenment that has since framed religion as backward and irrelevant to progress in general and progressive women's change in particular. Lin Nyhagen outlines three ways in which feminists in the west have approached secularism for progress in their work. The first is a hard position on secularism that is hostile to all forms of religion in public and private. The second is a mixed stance on secularism that accommodates religion in the private sphere but not in the public, and finally, a soft stance on secularism that sees no problem with religion in the private or public spheres (Nyhagen 2017). Bangladeshi women's groups have mostly taken a mixed stance on secularism, believing that faith is a private matter, not to be used or mobilized for deliberation on public matters. They were part of the protests against the 8th Amendment to the Constitution of Bangladesh, which accorded Islam the position of state religion. The call to retain secularism was deemed beneficial for the women's movement for a number of reasons. First, the roots of the movement, planted through figures such as Begum Rokeya, whose call to change entailed a critique of custom that used religious approval to hold women back, were held up as worthy of remembrance and celebration. Next, the protest placed the struggle for women's rights at par with the struggles of discriminated groups, thereby creating a space for alliance-building against discrimination and towards equality in citizenship (Azim 2022). Part of the secular quest has, thus, also been the demand for a uniform family code, i.e., laws away from religion for women to secure rights in both private and public arenas. Their distance and refrain from all religious laws and customs, as well as platforms, have also been reactive as their mobilizations have hardly been free from genuine backlash, religious platforms-mostly voiced largely by "men of religion". The women's movement is thus embedded in history, politics, and culture, where a non-discriminatory approach and alliance-building without yielding to a (western) gaze that ignores and homogenizes the complex lives, realities, and struggles of women and the women's movement locally were constitutive of its secularity.

As Bangladesh's secularism is questioned, there is concern about women's struggles. As noted, women's groups have felt the need to embrace the secular and secularism in order to retain a certain kind of space from where their myriad demands can be voiced. This secular space, however, was not the same as the secular espoused by political parties who have tried to promote their political power struggles through the capacious calls of the women's movement (Azim 2022). The women's groups' fall back on secularism was based not on the political power struggles that have led to questioning and contestations around it, but rather its original principles enshrined in the constitutional proclamation

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of secularism as *dhormoniripekhota* (religious neutrality) whereby the state should be neutral vis a vis all citizens, irrespective of religious identity and treat all citizens equally before the law. The fact that such constitutional ideals could not be approximated is attributed to state controls of religious institutions and practices becoming politicized to simultaneously and paradoxically allow and curtail religious ideas and their influence in the public space. The lifting of a ban on religious politics in 1977, imposed in 1972, allowed the entry of religious/Islamic political parties who were part of the (East) Pakistan landscape but were politically opposed to Bangladesh. This included the Jama'at-e-Islami, who allegedly carried out war crimes against freedom fighters and women. Islamists of other stripes also mobilized with their ideals and values to galvanize support. A certain "Islamization" that ensued was thus considered an affront to secularism, even if the proliferation of different political ideas and visions can be considered democratic. However, democratic values and practices have been a sore point in Bangladeshi politics. And it is the abuse of power to restrain democracy that has led to another kind of excess, rendering secularism skewed and contested. Over the last 15 years, when Sheikh Hasina's Awami League justified their rule that robbed people of their right to vote, they premised such misdeeds on the basis of a promise of securing and delivering secularism. Their stance seemed to profess that, as the only secular party, they had to be in power (anyhow) to allow Bangladesh to grow and progress. A big part of this "secular" exercise was to stretch the state's regulatory power to surveil, intimidate and perpetrate violence against Islamic forces for acts committed and alleged. However, the "Islamic" trope was also used, often in unfounded ways, to persecute political opponents, dissidents who challenged the authority of the ruling elite or espoused a different version and different arrangements of state-politics and society. Islamist groups speak of a variety of different arrangements, and as such, they have been surveilled and persecuted. Critics allege that the incumbent regime has done this, resting on the global platform provided by the war on terror. However, as some have been persecuted, some forces have also been allowed space and even offered benefits[6]. Such political calculations with Islam notwithstanding, the "hard" secularism has not quite ensured the rights of minority groups either. One of the larger explanations for this is conceptual, that secularism's engagement of modern state-craft, regardless of political will, is inherently biased towards those with power. Contrary to its ideals of producing equality of all religions, it privileges the historically embedded cultural-religious ethos of the majority. Following this reasoning many argue that Bangladesh's appropriation of a Bengali identity has rendered its secular trajectory majoritarian and skewed right from the start, further aggrieved by repressive politics devoid of people's will and reflections

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of their aspirations. Of course, those who have subsequently contested the "hegemony" of the Bengali identity, seeking to "pluralize" it with a Muslim one are no less complicit in favoring majoritarianism. At this moment in history, as Bangladesh "relaunches" itself in the aftermath of a mass uprising, there is talk about a new constitution and new arrangements of state-religion-society. With secularism's dispensation questioned, it remains to be seen what kinds of new arrangements are envisioned to deliver ideals such as equal treatment of all religions and equality in general. With a variety of actors present, what any new dispensation may mean for equality remains an anxious question, an anxiety carried over through the history of and resistance against the women's movement, while carrying into the present moment. In fact, since the women's reform commission has launched its report advocating protections against a variety of social and political constraints and abuses against women, Islamists have launched trenchant critiques of their recommendations, alleging that they go against the values of a Muslim-majority country.[7] If a new state-society-religion is envisioned where the secular is recast, or not named at all, what will determine the critical and emancipatory bases of women's voice and their ability to come out into the open? How will the contest between the centrality and irrelevance of religion in determining justice and equality for women be weighed, and which side will have more of a say? Is it possible to arrive at a satisfactory mid-point? What are the new voices to both listen to for possible alliance-building, and contend with in order to ensure a women's agenda is true to the needs and realities of women's lives? In the face of a changing political and socio-cultural landscape, these questions that have long been important retain their urgency for both the lives of women and future directions in the work on women's progress.

In order to assess these questions, one may place women's voice in the midst of a larger contention around body politics- between the Islamic/religious/veiled body and the secular/unveiled one. Wearing the *hijab* and dressing to denote religiosity has become both fairly common as well as a source of secular suspicion. Whenever there is talk of Islamists having a say, the veiled woman is invoked as a threat, a phantom that will haunt women's rights and place in society. Historically, academic understanding of the topic in Bangladesh has favored a perspective where the appeal to cover one's head is located in an absence of women's mobility, rights, and responsibility. The literature suggests that when women become economically empowered, such as women who work in the ready-made garment industry, they may prefer a "purdah of the heart" over a literal, physical one (Kabeer, 2000). Or, when women do take the hijab as a genuine commitment, they do so by bequeathing responsibility for life's outcomes to God over

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oneself (Rozario, 2006). The secular subject that espouses the secular suspicion, seeing the veiled subject in need of becoming responsible, accountable, and "whole," is cast in a negative way too. Unveiled women are often considered to be without faith, devoid of the right morality. But what is a secular or religious body? Charles Hirschkind explores this question, arguing against arriving at concrete criteria and a "determinant set of embodied dispositions" but to open a conversation on processes that yield different kinds of values on senses, affect, embodiment, and action and their ability to deliver a political ethic (Hirschkind 2011: 641). According to Hirschkind, it is these confluences which come to be associated with and labeled as religious or the secular. I have outlined the processes, attachments, embodiment, and affect that produce certain kinds of action, of asking, demanding, resisting, and (self)surveilling on the part of secular women's rights advocates. I now move on to a discussion of religious women to assess a similar process behind their selfhood and aspirations

Religious/Islamic Women in Bangladesh:

Religious/Islamic women in Bangladesh, of course, do not constitute a monolithic category. It intersects class positions and privileges and regional belonging and political affinity, making it impossible to write of them in comprehensive ways. The bulk of the academic literature on Muslim/Islamic women is based on insights from the middle classes, both rural and urban, along with my own primary work amongst the urban educated middle to upper classes. To start with, it is important to state that these groups of women engage with Islam for a variety of reasons. These may be purely religious- in response to scriptural dictates subsequently mediated by familial and social factors. Or, they may be extra religious. Abdus Sabur writes about rural middle-class women, many from families where male heads work as migrants in East Asia or the Middle East, arguing that "Islamic" practices such as wearing the veil are about showing status and mobility and creating "symbolic boundaries, social hierarchy and sociocultural inequality" (Sabur 2022: 400). Women garnering status through an engagement with Islamic symbols is not new to how women have inhabited cultural and religious norms in South Asia in contemporary times as well as historically (Fernandes and Heller 2006). In Bengal in the earlier part of the 20th century, gender segregation and veiling differentiated elite Muslim women from the lower classes. Even when a call to emancipation came from elite women themselves, the call challenged religious and cultural norms that kept women away from education, for example. However, this call

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did not necessarily compromise the veil (Sabur 2022: 403). The most iconic example is Begum Rokeya herself. A beacon of change and emancipation and fearless in questioning religious norms and social customs, her image that inspired generations of secular women's rights advocates and feminists was of a woman who covered her hair. This "veiled" image has made Rokeya a figure that is claimed across a religious and secular divide, and more recently, subject to questioning and even attack [8].

The secular and religious divides notwithstanding, the veil, constituting particular Islamic customs and practices, has, thus, long been a part of the cultural landscape. And as such, these are not necessarily "intrusions" that women's rights advocates need to be wary of. However, the cause for concern was how these Islamic customs were re-imagined, re-packaged, and re-tabled for women of all backgrounds, especially through the work of Islamists. The Jama'at-Islami, for example, felt that women belong only at home, with caring for the family being their primary task, and as such, have countered the work of non-governmental organizations' work on women. Elora Shehabuddin argues that over the past two decades, the Jama'at-e-Islami's position has also shifted, taking into consideration new realities that necessitate women working and thus moving beyond work at home (Shehabuddin 2008). Without taking away the importance of caring for the family, they now highlight "Islam's recognition of women as 'individuals' with 'individual' responsibilities to God and Islam as well as Islam's support for women's right to study, work and vote "(2008: 578). Thus, the stance advocated by Abul A'la Maududi (1903-1979), the founder of the Jama'at, that the future of modernity depended on the regulation of gender relations, received some updates. However, regulation remained an important part of both the Jama'ati as well as other Islamist projects. The idea of complementarity over equality was one way in which gender differences were conceived and regulated. Islamist positions argued against substantive equality, as it was just not tenable given the biological makeup and societal requirements of men and women. In Bangladesh, the idea of complementarity remained strong for Islamists, while they deemed public participation permissible through measures such as veiling and segregated spaces for work. Shehabuddin argues that this shift was politically expedient for the Jama'at as they contended with the fact that women had also changed as a result of their engagement with the formal labor force and a variety of NGOs. The democratic era necessitated the garnering of votes from women who had now tasted greater mobility and freedom. The results of the Jama'at seeing women as a constituency to engage, as real participants in (their) politics and potential voters, are varied. First, many have expressed pleasure at understanding the importance of rituals and purdah,

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stating that they did not "fear" men as much before (Shehabuddin, 2008) Women also learnt that there was *one* correct interpretation in Islam and that it was the Jama'ati version, and armed with it, Jama'at's honesty merited their winning the polls. However, they never really soared in the polls. Shehabuddin contends that perhaps Islamists' limited address to gender relations and women's public participation works as a hindrance to their greater political acceptance.

The fact that women, even as they engage with Islamist platforms, exercise agency and dissent, is highlighted in other literature too. Maimuna Huq's work demonstrates that young women from a Jama'at-e-Islami girls' platform question and seek to re-interpret texts even as they wish to live by normative dictates (Huq, 2008). My own work on Muslim women argues that women engage with Islam not only because they are drawn to Islamist platforms, but rather because a renewed Islamic discourse is also propagated by local and transnational ideas that spread through social movements. What is very important to understand is that these ideas grow roots not as impositions but through the affinity they find in existing local conditions. Thus, in order to understand why women believe in the absolute veracity of a particular interpretive framework, one has to assess how questions of absolute veracity are addressed locally and what kinds of teachings and social contexts make the belief in "absolutes" possible. Similarly, as veiling or *hijab* catches on, one must explore how local conditions speak to precarities around women's bodies, and modes of empowerment, so that the hijab becomes a favorable choice. As women inhabit Islamic norms, they also question plenty. The women I conversed with often said that they are tired of the existing Islamist platforms, and that they would like to continue to learn and grow with the message of the Quran and associated literature so that Islamic ways of knowing and acting could speak to and from something new. To that end, while women engaged intently with Islamic learning and Islamic lifeways, they strictly avoided gatherings that were actively held by the main Islamist parties in Bangladesh (Huq, 2011). I found that women also dissented from and interrogated many religious norms that circulated socially to create ones that are more favorable for their personal and what they thought would be collective flourishing. In an article I wrote earlier on self-avowed practicing young Muslim women attending university, I heard expressions of desire to infuse the public space with more religious knowledge and debates so that women can carve out a space for their own understanding, cultivation, and practice of Islam. These women were also uninterested in existing Islamist platforms, which, they argued, did not allow a multiplicity of Islamic perspectives from which they could account for their present lives and continue to grow.

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Thus, instead of standing in opposition to whatever Islamic and Islamist dispensations are available, they wish to mold public Islam through a questioning of patriarchy and the male gaze, that draw from rather than shuns other kinds of knowledge. It is through such questioning and re-invigorated Islamic thinking that they wish for "more Islam" in the public space that women determine and can claim for themselves (Huq 2021).

Some research I have recently conducted on women from the madrasa world reveals yet other ways of simultaneous engagement with and questioning of the existing Islamic discourse. It is through the observance of religious ways of dressing and an "Islamic/modest comportment" that they speak of an advancement of their roles and opportunities. While their ambitions are faith-inspired, they do not shy away from speaking of social and structural barriers. They observe and write about the struggles of women, of polygamy, marriage, ideal husbands, ideal societies, and cities, but through it all, they believe Islam to be their path to progress.

They speak of an Islamic culture- enunciating that while it provides some universal principles and values, they take shape on an existing cultural template, and as such, each local culture must be valued. The creation of new Islamized cultures must be thought out carefully so that we do not unthinkingly adopt other (Arab cultures). Within this desirable Islamic Bengali culture, the madrasa graduates emphasize **"connections"** in a variety of ways. We heard participants' desire to think of the contours of both culture and the public space, as well as their own faith, through connections between western knowledge and Islamic knowledge. Arifa, who ran an "Islamic" magazine, said she wishes to inspire the youth through creative thinking about new possibilities by marrying her education in the social sciences along with her knowledge in the Islamic traditions.

These connections allow women to also question some of the insularity that frames their life choices, urging a consideration of madrasa graduates' aspirations away from an exclusively religious position and worldview. The madrasa women we spoke to mentioned a double marginalization. The first is the suspicion and conceit shown to them by the secular world. The suspicion, they argue, emanates from the secular world's equation of their position with Islamist belonging, without delving into the nature of that attachment, if any. The conceit follows from this and considers madrasa graduates' education and life choices inadequate for modern life and the change required for development and progress. Graduates of madrasas said that this marginalization from the "outside" often accompanied the same from the "inside", i.e., the world of madrasas and

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their own families and associates. Women complained of being rebuked from the "inside" world when speaking up against polygamy, against rigid roles socially ascribed to women, to society denying them their dignity and desires, as well as many of their rights. Women who were on a track to become "alimahs" -- teachers and preachers- bemoaned the lack of institutional infrastructure to safeguard their voice and agency to speak on their own terms. These women articulated the need to have platforms "of their own", even online ones that would provide them safe spaces from where they could speak. They expressed the desire to occupy these platforms in ways that allowed them the choice to articulate Muslimness, that their appearance is of value to them just as it is to address the many restrictions which both the "inside" and "outside" worlds place on them. The women seek to create platforms that can build bridges, born out of intellectual, affective, and feminine connections that allow them a voice that they are currently not afforded either by the secular or fully by the religious world. These women certainly feel vulnerable, underscoring the importance to not see them as subjects that are bound, rigid, and do not understand beyond certain ethico-religious certainties. They also articulate pressures both inside and outside their worlds that render them silent or in need of strategizing. This highlights the importance of alliance building with a greater scope and an expanded horizon.

Such critical stances espoused by women who self-identify as religious and critical of the secular bring to the surface certain questions of identity formation, religious (interpretive) frameworks that inform it, and state structures and institutional mechanisms that frame it. In the last section of this essay, I address some of these questions, shedding light on the relationship between women's demands, religious interpretations, and state structures that support them.

Best options for women:

As discussed in an earlier section, in the creation of a more favorable change and progress-oriented ecosystem, religious groups have more often come up with obstacles than conversation and collaboration, especially when structures of power within the family are questioned. As a result, women's groups have had to take on certain local practices such as the issuing of fatwas in village councils in which religion and male religious authority were deeply implicated[9]. Women's groups have also pressed for reforms in family laws, which have raised the ire of religious groups. The Jama'at-e-

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Islami in 2008 and 2010 and then the Hefazat in 2013, have led large-scale mobilizations against the National Women's Development Policy that mentions that women should be able to control their acquired assets. Religious groups read this to mean that the policy advocates equal inheritance for men and women, which they vehemently oppose on the grounds that it goes against the Shariah. Examples of social development initiatives show that village men complain of income opportunities for women through gender quotas in local government and for school teachers, along with tougher laws on violence against women (Schuler et al., 2013; Schuler et al., 2017). Thus, men and religious forces are joined in their allowance of opportunities for women that serve their families and larger community but stand in joint opposition to initiatives that challenge male patriarchal power (Nazneen, 2020:15). The ire of religious groups is further raised around questions of segregation, women's bodily comportment and sexuality -all of which have an effect on women's mobility and participation in the public sphere. Thus, in cases of sexual assault and rape religious groups would resort to the predictable trope of victim blaming to argue that women should dress and cover their bodies properly. Such Islamist backlash continues to the present. In fact, Bangladesh is embroiled in huge Islamist protests against the report submitted by the women's commission to the government in April 2025 that includes recommendations such as equal inheritance for men and women, a uniform civil code for marriage, and rights of sex workers[10]. The tremendous backlash by Islamists brings back to sharp focus the divide between Islamists and women's groups. However, beyond the divide, the backlash is bringing into sharper focus a conversation on progressive politics where women's needs and voices must occupy a central place to determine essential contours of broad and inclusive politics.

While religious forces have stood in the path of women's empowerment, making their ambivalence and sometimes hostility towards "inclusion" amply clear, a similar argument is levied against the women's groups too, alleging that they too are not inclusive. Already forced to strategize, to align with national development objectives away from a condescending imperialist stance and working with local women from the margins, what might "inclusion" mean by way of factoring in religious opinions and voices? Women's rights groups, weary of Islamist backlash, wish not to make progress about religion, but rather women. Critics argue that proposals for changes that engage Muslim women and Muslim family laws cannot exclude religion. But, who from the world of religion, amidst the often-toxic Islamist backlash, can be an ally, a partner in conversation? Women's groups have tried to engage a range of stakeholders, including Islamic

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scholars, with some success, especially while formulating the recent women's commission report. What more is required? Do women's groups have to harness the energy and potential of religion to deliver on their goods? What might that look like? And would the goods delivered be different? Scholars have argued that "religion" and religious engagement are indeed important and perhaps unwise and even undemocratic to ignore as a cultural /social value and ingredient. An exclusive focus on the negative dispensation of religion fails to recognize the kinds of questions and priorities that animate the lives of religious women and their complex subjectivities (Mahmood 2005, Scott 2007). Braidotti argues that critical subjectivity, such as the ones enacted and embodied by religious women, be recast in positive terms, and seen as part of an "ethics of becoming" (2008:19). For Braidotti, the focus for the emergence and shaping of critical subjectivity should be 'creative affirmation' and 'vital generative forces' rather than 'destructive oppositional strategies' (2008: 19). Such a framing of subjectivity nuances, if not mutes a pre-supposed clash positioned as one of secularity, as espoused and advocated by women 's groups, and religion, as proclaimed by religious groups and perhaps somewhat feared by secular advocates. Clearly, the non-secular positive subjectivity lies somewhere in between. In addition, it is important to note that secularity has not meant an absence of religion per se, but perhaps a privatized one, and the religion/Islam that is flaunted by religious groups is also not uniform and monolithic, and one without history. An insistence of the secular world that religion be private and inconsequential to public ideals has not helped the cause of thinking about what kinds of religion and within what interpretive frameworks allow for spaces, the kinds of institutional arrangements that can support the flourishing of capacious interpretations and the manner in which religious authority and discourse should be envisioned as part of the institutional arrangement. In other words, a conversation on secularism and its dispensation ought to have occasioned a conversation on religion. Similarly, an insistence of the pre-eminence of religion and religious identity ought to occasion a conversation on various contours of religion, various forms of authority that produce them and the different histories and contexts that have nurtured authority and interpretation. For an emancipatory feminist politics that seeks to strike a balance between individual freedom and forms of social relations, where a variety of interpretive struggles -- over needs and solutions must continuously take center stage (Fraser 2009), the women's question's ability to speak beyond the religion-secular binary is also of essence and urgency.

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Bangladesh's history offers examples of a consideration of interpretive frameworks and lending them to the service of the improvement of women's lives, especially with regard to the legal domain. In 1961, the Muslim Family Law's Ordinance (MFLO) was formulated, granting greater rights to women within the family, especially related to divorce, polygamy, and child care. The reforms that were recommended and subsequently put in place for the amendment of existing laws drew in women's rights activists from both East and West Pakistan. This coming together was also built upon the work of theologians, including Fazlur Rahman whose "double movement theory lay on a dynamic reading where context and background of revelation must "be brought together to yield a unified and comprehensive socio-moral theory squarely based upon the Quran and its *Sunna*counterparts (Rahman, 1979: 219-224). The intellectual and methodological grounding of such a theological position, broadly labeled as modernist Islam, allowed for a movement "forward" towards an understanding of women's place in society and gender relations in public and private. Needless to say, not all quarters of the religious world found the proposed changes "forward"-moving. There was backlash from traditional ulama and the Islamist groups such as the Jama'at-e-Islami, both on philosophical and methodological grounds. However, the regime of President Ayub Khan was a dictatorial one, which ensured that dissident voices found no traction.

Modernist theologies definitely succeeded in pushing a progressive gender agenda. However, within the history of Bangladesh, we see that the deployment of modernist theology by the state was highly selective, leaving the question of culture and ethnicity outside its liberatory potential. As East Pakistanis were pushing for a modernist Islam for gender and cultural identity alike, the Pakistani state's onslaught on Bengali culture as inadequately Muslim naturally put Bengalis on the defensive. It is around the demand for cultural and political sovereignty that the women's movement also split along the east-west divide. In East Pakistan, there were thinkers such as Abul Hashim who were also of a modernist bend with regard to Islamic interpretations. As I have discussed elsewhere, he went against the political stance of the Pakistan government and deployed the modernist framework to resist the cultural onslaught on East Pakistan (Huq, 2013). As the Pakistani state became increasingly aggressive, leading up to the military crackdown and war on Bengalis, the appeal of a modernist Islam that could "liberate" became muted, if not irrelevant, on both sides of Pakistan. The voice of Islamists, notably the Jama't-e-Islami, who saw the breakup of Pakistan as an affront to Muslim solidarity and aggression from India, and who did not support the MFLO that rested on a modernist interpretation of Islam, rose to the fore, both in political discourse as well

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as in war through violent means. The space for a critical wrestling with Islam to highlight its potential for dynamism became increasingly constricted, if not altogether absent.

It is in this absence where secularism, which in Bangladesh alludes to state neutrality towards all religions, becomes the anchor for questions around women's progress. This also provided a cover to women's rights groups who felt, also due to backlash from conservative religious quarters, that keeping religion out of formulas for women's progress was the best way to further a progressive gender agenda. To that end, since the MFLO in 1961, no progressive change has actively engaged the question of religious frameworks or religious interpretation. In the 1990s, Bangladeshi feminists were part of Women Living Under Muslim Law (WLUML), a transnational feminist solidarity network that promotes human rights and gender justice, and equality in contexts where women's lives are determined by "patriarchal and/or authoritarian interpretations of Islamic law" (https://www.wluml.org/mission-vision/). The task of this network was a secular one: to emancipate women from the negative grip of religious law. As such, Bangladeshi feminists who have long believed in keeping religion out of the question were drawn to the network to keep doing their work under a secular framework. In the intervening years, Bangladeshi women's rights groups have embraced women's private and even deep faith, drawing in religious women, devout women, and women in hijab. However, this inclusion has not resulted, nor did it intend to result in the change of the secular framing and objective of their work. The inclusion of critical non-secular subjectivity and therefore an expansion of the secular framework remains missing by way of civil society platforms for self-avowed religious women seeking a political subjectivity beyond a "secular" one. However, in other Muslim majority countries, women have sought out religious interpretive frameworks and implemented changes in Islamic law through them. Indonesia and Malaysia have seen the growth of Musawah, born out of the WLUML, but extending beyond to work actively with and through Islamic interpretive traditions. Musawah is promoted as "a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family' which came together through a dialogic process across national borders engaging Muslim activists and scholars (Anwar, 2009: 11). Musawah professes a commitment to religious pluralism and cross-religious dialogue and seeks to bring solutions to women who work through religious frameworks, helping to develop alternative interpretations of their faith in ways that challenge patriarchal domination of religion, and highlight women's rights as human rights" (Anwar, 2009: 8). I use the Musawah case here to garner a reflection by

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Bangladeshi stakeholders about expanding the parameters of "inclusion" that may urge both secular and religious quarters to place the critical subjectivity of a variety of women in conversation with one another. While such dialogical processes that actively engage and deliver alternative religious frameworks for women so that they continue to flourish have been successfully deployed in many Muslim majority countries, whether this will work in Bangladesh is a question that requires the careful consideration of many quarters of society. Perhaps that moment of consideration is imminent.

Conclusion:

Bangladesh is by no means unique, as a Muslim majority country, to have a checkered post-colonial path where progress accommodates women only tentatively or at best instrumentally. It is also not unique in its treatment of religion, where, whether secularism is an official proclamation or not, the conservative and rigid world of "tradition bearers" such as the alems (clergy) is brought into the public and political space for the political gains of the ruling elite. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan are all examples of where similar political maneuvering happens. The consequent existing political field within which positions are hardened leaves very little space for genuine conversations, especially around women- their bodies and selves- a conversation that is always appropriated for political gains rather than the genuine advancement of women's lives. It is this political field that is the work site for women's rights groups who wish to place women very much at the forefront of a conversation on progress and positive change. It is also this site that forces the women's groups to also acquire a hardened stance, perhaps out of strategy or for genuine philosophical and epistemic convictions, building walls for the protection of the constituency they wish to speak for. The various political and social impasses that recommendations and actual work to change women's lives encounter require various kinds of interventions at the levels of thinking and outreach. The burden of relaxing a hardened stance rests on everybody concerned. At an epistemic level, it requires an openness to the sociology of ground realities and the needs of women based on a wrestling with critical subjectivities. At the level of political economy, the powers that be must allow for an opening up of and continued access to social and economic opportunities that meet a variety of women's needs. At the level of (civil) society, many kinds of alliance building initiatives are required so that not only a multiplicity of women's needs can flourish, but also a multiplicity of Islamic traditions can flourish as part of a scheme to deliver pluralism and safeguard the

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right to religious freedom. Last but not least, and perhaps *the* most important element of them all- there must be genuine political will to ensure intersectional representations and inter-group conversations towards a continuous thinking through women's desires, needs, and their solutions.

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Footnotes

1 : Women's empowerment has long been considered through the lens of increased economic opportunities and the freedoms of mobility, decision-making, that are corollaries of economic upliftment. However, whether women's empowerment rests solely in these domains is a contested question, urging for a more holistic conceptualization of empowerment. For a discussion on debates around women's empowerment, see Nazneen, Sohela & Sultan, Maheen & Hossain, Naomi. (2010). National Discourses on Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh: Enabling or constraining women's choices? Development. 53. 239-246. 10.1057/dev.2010.11. ↩

2 : Secularism in Bangladesh has been debated and contested for decades. Islamists have argued that an absence of religion, which secularism normatively presupposes, does not represent the ethos of the people. The founding position of the first government of Bangladesh, led by the Awami League, is that Bangladeshi secularism does not advocate an absence of or irreverence towards religion. Political parties have shown affinity towards different kinds of Islamist parties and Islamic platforms at different times to enunciate and change the place of secularism in the constitution and polity. For more on Bangladeshi secularism, see Mostofa, Shafi Md. 2024. "Faith, politics, and power: The evolution of secularism and authoritarianism in Bangladesh." World Affairs. 1-
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3 : Find the full report here: https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf↩

4 : For a full report, see: https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/progress-on-the-sustainable-development-goals-the-gender-snapshot-2024-en.pdf↩

5 : The former Prime Minister clamped down heavily on the Jamaat-e-Islami for war crimes and for any opposition raised against her rule. For more, see https://theprint.in/world/banned-by-mujib-hasina-accused-of-1971-atrocities-contentious-history-of-bangladesh-jamaat-e-islami/2245347/. While she did this, she propped up the Hefazat-e-Islam, another cluster of Islamists as her allies, allowing them to have a say in textbook contents and recognizing the dawra-e-hadith- a madrasa degree as equivalent to a Master's in Islamic Studies. For more, see https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/dawrae-hadith-gets-masters-degree-status-1636399 ↩

6 : To read about the Islamist mobilization against the women's commission, see https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/abolish-womens-affairs-reform-commission-3884486↩

7 : After the July uprising that toppled Sheikh Hasina's sixteen year-long dictatorial regime, we have seen that while Rokeya had been claimed by secularists and non-secularists alike, there are quarters that also wish to malign and reduce her life's work to un-Islamic. Post -July, on social media and on real sites, the image of Begum Rokeya appeared with her face blackened and profanities written across. At the University of Dhaka, this was protested, and the original graffiti was reinstated. https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/365750/du-students-restore-defaced-graffiti-of-begum↩

8 : In the 1990s and early 2000s, fatwas -- or rulings given in name of Islam/shariah to (corporeally) punish women for societal "breaches" were a commonplace and a source of harassment and violence against women. In 2011, the government ruled that while a fatwa may be pronounced, it cannot be enforced and that any extrajudicial punishment would be illegal. However, fatwas and extrajudicial

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punishment remain in practice. https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/human-rights/zero-tolerance-fatwas-violate-human-rights-1509055↩

9 : For more on the Islamist backlash against the recommendations made by the women's commission, see, https://www.dw.com/en/bangladeshi-islamists-protest-womens-rights-proposal/a-72425960↩

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