

# PATHWAYS SOUTH ASIA SYNTHESIS REPORT 2006–2011



**pathways**  
of women's  
empowerment



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## Pathways South Asia Synthesis Report 2006–2011

July 2011

Pathways South Asia is led by the BRAC Development Institute at BRAC University, Bangladesh with partners in Pakistan based at the Collective for Social Science Research, Karachi and the Sironoh Women's Resource and Publications Centre, Lahore. It is part of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme Consortium (Pathways RPC).

BRAC Development Institute (BDI) is a resource centre based at BRAC University that promotes research and builds knowledge on practical solutions that address poverty, inequity and social injustice. Its mandate is to challenge conventional knowledge and advance a southern voice in the global development discourse. The Institute is committed to multi-disciplinary and works across academic disciplines and across its activities in research, teaching and communications. BDI provides a space for researchers, policy makers and practitioners to develop new strategic thinking and promote new agendas for social change.

Pathways RPC is an international research and communications programme made up of activists and academics that explores and seeks to affect positive change in women's everyday lives. It is collectively run by six partners: BRAC Development Institute at BRAC University; the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy (CEGENSA), Ghana; Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK; the Nucleus for Interdisciplinary Women's Studies (NEIW) at the Federal University of Bahia, Brazil; the Social Research Centre (SRC) at the American University in Cairo; and UNIFEM.

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# Final Synthesis Report: Pathways South Asia Hub

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# 1 Overview

**“How do you measure empowerment? When donors give you money they want to see where it went and how it was spent. The focus has been on outcomes, number of people out of poverty, children in school, number of teachers, etc. But empowerment is hard to measure. Numbers are very important but it is not the ultimate thing.” (Sohela Nazneen, Pathways South Hub Researcher at the ‘Dialogues on Empowerment’ Conference, January 2008)**

## Context and background

Bangladesh has a long history of women’s mobilisation tracing back to the anti-colonial nationalist movement, first against the British and then Pakistan. Since Independence in 1971 (aside from women’s organisations) NGOs and donors, along with Government, have been key actors for promoting women’s rights. This has led to the development of a particular type of women’s empowerment discourse that promotes women’s productive roles, economic empowerment and family welfare (Nazneen and Sultan 2009).

## Various discourses on women’s empowerment

On the surface, there appears to be a high degree of national consensus about the importance of women’s empowerment in Bangladesh. One of our research projects, ‘National discourses on women’s empowerment: enabling or constraining women’s choices’ analysed the distinctively different perspectives through which different institutional actors – women’s organisations, NGOs, political parties and aid agencies – frame ‘women’s empowerment’. A quarter century ago, Alam and Matin demonstrated that how ‘the women’s issue’ was framed had powerful effects on which issues rose to the development and policy agenda for women in Bangladesh (Alam and Matin 1984). Twenty-five years on, the ‘women’s issue’ is more likely to be framed with reference to ‘women’s empowerment’ than to the more passive ‘women’s condition’.

Women’s organisations have tended to use the term ‘women’s empowerment’ sparingly with the majority focusing on women’s development and using emancipation and liberation as more transformational

terms. Where they do use the term ‘empowerment’, they emphasise the structural, cultural and multidimensional aspects of the process. The large development NGOs, on the other hand, have framed empowerment within their poverty alleviation agenda. Empowerment is considered to be an outcome which will result from the various inputs they provide. The view of change is linear and individual.

For the major political parties the approach has ranged from instrumentalist to rights-based (interestingly from the religion-based party). All three parties studied included language and concepts that are dominant in the development discourse on women such as ‘female headed households’ and ‘maternal health’, and all referred to UN conventions and human rights. In international development agencies ‘women’s empowerment’ typically appeared in relation to the Government of Bangladesh’s Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRSP), to demonstrate the alignment of agency goals with those of the Government. There was a strong emphasis on outcome indicators focused on human development, and a corresponding neglect of political context and women’s collective political capabilities.

An important source of influence on the discourse of women’s empowerment has been the various international conferences such as the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994, the Human Rights Conference in Vienna in 1993, the Women’s World Conference in Beijing in 1995, the Social Development Conferences with the stress on Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and finally international conventions that codify various rights, such as CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women).

### What is different about Pathways?

The Pathways programme brought together academics, researchers, activists and development practitioners, both



River of life exercise for exploring personal journeys of empowerment. Photo by Pathways South Asia

### Building constituencies – by women’s organisations

In Bangladesh, women’s organisations play an important role in articulating and framing women’s rights demands. Through alliances and coalitions they build wider constituencies for gender justice. Government and development agencies need to be aware and supportive of the role played by women’s organisations in promoting and protecting women’s rights. Through providing institutional support these agencies can have a positive role in enabling women’s rights organisations to be even more effective in protecting and promoting women’s interests and rights.

Working across generations and regions at the Building Constituencies for Gender Justice Thematic Meeting, January 2009, Dhaka. Photo by Pathways South Asia



in our national teams as well as internationally. We are working across generations and are emphasising capacity building. In our research on engaging with religion, women's work and participation in local government, we have joined with colleagues in Pakistan to undertake complementary studies. Working in an international research programme consortium enables us to have access to leading academics, up-to-date resources and also exposure to the work being done in various other hubs and countries. This has led to various inter-hub initiatives such as analysing cross-region similarities and differences found in the surveys on women and work in Ghana, Egypt and Bangladesh, which shed new light on the understanding of women's empowerment.

### **Overall insights**

We have been confirmed in our belief that empowerment is a complex process that can take many forms, many routes and is best seen as an ongoing journey. While it is about increasing individual choice, and the freedom and opportunities to make these choices, it is also concerned with bringing about structural and societal change so that these choices and freedoms are available to all women and not just to some. Sustained mobilisation and pressure by

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Sixteen-year-old Champa Chakma from Rangamati, Chittagong Hill Tracts is a spin bowler for the Bangladesh National Women's Cricket Team, and one of the protagonists in the video documentary *Stories for Change*. Photo by Sheikh Razibul Islam

women's rights organisations, social movements, alliances and coalitions is essential to make and maintain such societal change. The importance of mobilisation through organising is highlighted in our research on women's organisations building constituencies as well as our research on women's work and empowerment.

Empowerment is also contextual: to understand what is empowering or disempowering the researcher has to understand the social, cultural and economic context of the country, community and also the individual. Comparisons across countries and cultures must be done sensitively and in well-researched ways.

The complexities of individual lives have been reaffirmed and documented. We have found cases of increased freedom and choice but with greater economic deprivation. We found a case of national recognition and fame for a particular skill coexisting with domestic violence. We are also more aware of the vulnerability of various gains – the positive status someone has achieved can be undermined by various unforeseen forces such as illness, death, divorce, slum eviction, etc.

The subjective nature of both the definitions and processes of empowerment has been highlighted. What is surprising to many of us with a background in secular feminism is that religiosity is being chosen by some women as a route to empowerment.





Engaging academics, activists and policy makers at the book launch of *Mapping Women's Empowerment*, CIRDAP Auditorium Dhaka, 8 July 2010. Photo by Pathways South Asia

**"...women are not a homogeneous category. They are different depending on their position, religion, ethnicity, age etc. Since they are not homogeneous their empowerment cannot be of the same kind and degree. Empowerment therefore cannot be seen from any one angle only but must be seen from different dimensions and perspectives. The parameters to understand and judge empowerment will depend on the woman's own reality, culture and society. This insight is extremely important for those working to promote women's empowerment." (Professor Ainoon Nahar, Jahangirnagar University, speaking at the *Mapping Women's Empowerment* book launch, July 2010)**



Another insight gained is on the role of the media – not only in terms of the images of women that it presents but in terms of broadening women's horizons, providing them with more information, exposing them to ways of being and interacting.

### **Arenas of influence**

An integrated approach to communication helps to bring the research findings to a broader audience. Life-stories have been captured into a video documentary, interviewees' case studies are being used as material for short story writers and photographs from a photo competition have become part of a travelling exhibition.

At various points we are engaging with programme implementers in both government and NGOs to reflect on the work they have been doing and also challenging them to strengthen women's empowerment processes. This engagement ranges from media professionals, government statisticians, women's rights organisations and large NGOs implementing community health programmes.

We are producing material in the form of articles, books, research reports and special editions of journals that will contribute to research and teaching, both nationally and internationally.

## 2 Pathways South Asia hub projects

### **Conceptualising empowerment**

#### *National discourses on women's empowerment: enabling or constraining women's choices*

In this project, we compare and contrast conceptualisations of women's empowerment used by different actors: women's organisations, development agencies, political parties and NGOs in Bangladesh. We are using the findings as a means to challenge prevalent thinking on women's empowerment and understand the deeper historical tendencies and underlying patterns of thought and action which have led to the various actors conceptualising women's empowerment in diverse ways.

#### *Exploring new mediums for understanding empowerment and reaching a wider audience*

As a strategy to experiment with alternative forms of communication and reflect on the diverse meanings of empowerment, we have used different methods to communicate our research – for example through digital stories reflecting the realities of women's lives. This is enabling us to reach a wider audience group:

##### *Stories of Change video documentary*

Stories of Change is a video documentary that travels through different regions of Bangladesh and through different generations by following the narratives of five women ranging from a 16 year old cricketer to a 60 year old activist. The film depicts the lives and struggles of these women as a part of the efforts to make visible the trajectories of change experienced in the lives of Bangladeshi women.



Young writers transform research case studies into fictional stories, Stories4Change Writing Project, October 2010. Photo by Pathways South Asia



### Digital stories

We used digital story-telling to document the experiences of growth and transformation in women's lives from their own perspectives, in their own words and voices. The workshops we held in Dhaka and Chittagong enabled participants to make a 3–4 minute multimedia presentation by themselves, providing moving testimonies of individual lives and the contexts in which empowerment/disempowerment is experienced.

### Stories of Change writing project

We used Pathways research materials to inspire fiction as a way of sharing the Programme's findings with a broader and more diverse audience. At a writing workshop, writers were introduced to the craft of creating stories from research materials, from which the best stories have been published in a book. This is part of an inter-hub project in which Ghana, Nigeria, Pakistan and Egypt are also participating.

## **Building constituencies for gender equality and justice**

### *Women in local government in Bangladesh*

In this project we investigate the enabling conditions for women's participation in local governance and its influence on women's empowerment. Our objectives for this study are to explore the challenges faced by women councillors, how they negotiate these challenges, their own interpretation of their engagement patterns and processes, and whether new gender norms and roles are being created for women in the public domain.

### *Women in local government in Pakistan*

Through this study we investigate the 'criss-cross' processes through which women in Pakistan become empowered, focusing on how the larger institutional set-up (whether military or non-military) helps women achieve their goals. We explore how some of the major initiatives from civil society have contributed to women's voices at the local government level, and also look at individual case studies of women when they either surmount or fail to surmount societal pressures in their individual lives.

### *Review of strategic approaches to building constituencies by women's organisations*

In this research we document and analyse strategies and approaches used by three national women's organisations in Bangladesh to mobilise and advocate for women's rights and raise demands to the state and other rights holders. Our study challenges the established view that feminist voice, organisation and movement loses ground after democratic transitions. Our explorations have led to a multi-country book project on the subject of 'Feminist Activism', which will be published by ZED in 2011.

### *Mobilising resources for women's organisations*

Our research here interrogates the significance and relative impact of donor funding on women organising at

**The study shows that availability of bilateral funds for women's rights organisations is decreasing now. These funds, particularly the gender and human rights funds have played a key role in facilitating women's rights related work. The question is not about the volume of fund available for NGOs, but that whether women's organisations are able to access these funds in the current aid structure and mechanisms set up by the Paris Declaration. (Mobilising Resources for Women's Organisations research)**



Mobilising Resources for Women's Organisations workshop with the Doorbar Network, 5 September 2009. Photo by Pathways South Asia

### **Building constituencies: mobilising resources for women's rights**

While mobilising for women's rights is based on women's activism and voluntarism, it is facilitated and strengthened by donor resources. These resources enable organisations to carry out various activities and mobilise at a scale that becomes visible and allows them to become recognised and legitimate interlocutors for government, development agencies, political parties and other NGOs. The resources have also enabled the organisations to develop their internal capacities and perform better. However, while important, donor resources are not adequate to sustain a movement unless factors such as leadership, commitment of the organisational members and greater public support for the cause are present.

global, national and local levels. We do not assume that successful organising by women requires external funding. Rather we seek to clarify the conditions under which external financial support to women's organisations and groups has a positive impact on women's empowerment as well as the conditions in which successful mobilising is achievable without such support. This is a comparative research with Ghana, where one of the components of the research examines the role of international development agencies in supporting women's organisations.

### ***Sustainable security and peace building as Pathways of Women's Empowerment***

We investigate conceptions of security, peace and empowerment among the Hill women of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh. Our research explores the Hill women's actual and perceived role in security and peace building, the role of Hill women's organisations and their movements, major obstacles faced by Hill women and their strategies for overcoming these.

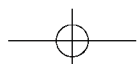
### ***Women in the 'right'?: women in religious political groups in Bangladesh***

We explore how and why women organise in religious groups and its political implications. Our preliminary studies have found that women's religious groups in Bangladesh are diverse in terms of composition, political objectives and interpretation of women's role in society/politics, and they have their own visions of women's empowerment. Our research is an exploratory study of women's engagement with religious political groups and also their connections with the mainstream political processes.

### **Empowering work**

#### ***Paid work and women's empowerment***

Our research involves two components – a survey and qualitative interviews. A survey of 5,200 women, aged 15





and above, of different socio-economic backgrounds in Bangladesh was done to compare the impact of various kinds of work on women's lives. The survey compares differences between paid and unpaid work, between paid work within and outside the home, and between economic activity and inactivity. From the survey sample, forty women were selected for in-depth interviews to qualitatively assess change in women's lives through different kinds of work. In particular, we explore a number of factors such as the influence of media, family support, and NGO membership that we found significant in the survey. Comparative analysis is being carried out with similar research in Ghana and Egypt.

### *Women Health Workers in Bangladesh*

Our research considers whether and how the work done by Women Health Workers leads to changes at the individual, family and societal levels. We explore how Women Health

A Health Worker engaged in paid work outside the home, representing transformation of social norms in the rural areas. Photo by ICDDR,B





Simeen Mahmud presenting her research findings in *Community Health Worker as Agent of Change* seminar in 2010

**"In our area, women are employed in all sorts of work, from being labourers to working in prestigious jobs. Seeing them, many fathers encourage their daughters to study. In other areas too, previously people did not give emphasis on their girl's education but now parents are interested in sending their girls to school since the health workers have been examples of what educated women do. Besides this, aged people now do not have any objection to women's employment since they are seeing other working women. Fathers are giving permission for daughters' employment." (A Health Worker with the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh)**

Workers are introducing new role models for women, challenging purdah, encouraging mobility, and creating pathways of empowerment. Our study compares public (government) women health workers with non-government women health workers from the pioneering programmes: ICDDR,B, Ganoshathya Kendro and BRAC.

### *Lady Health Workers in Pakistan*

Our research investigates the relationship between women's paid work and empowerment by focusing on the government sponsored Lady Health Worker programme. We explore how women community health workers challenge various social constraints and stereotypes by engaging in regular employment, in coming out of their homes, being mobile in their communities and fulfilling a socially valued role.

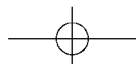
### *Gendered impacts of BRAC and WFW micro-Finance programming on Hazara Women in Kabul, Afghanistan*

Our study investigates the gendered impact of work (i.e. access to material assets) upon women's voice (i.e. status and identity) in public and private domains, and bodily integrity (i.e. physical and mental health, sexuality, mobility and physical security). Our research outputs contribute to micro-finance and empowerment literature in Afghanistan, and makes policy and programmatic recommendations regarding micro-finance provision in Afghanistan, and other (post)conflict environments.

### **Changing narratives of sexuality theme**

#### *Religion and women*

Our project looks at resurgent Islam and its influence on the formation of female identities and sexualities. We explore the ways in which women in their daily lives engage with religious tenets and observance, focusing on new forms of religious organisation and the appeal it has for women of various classes. We aim to see whether the new spaces in Islam 'permit' women greater freedoms



than has been popularly perceived. Some of the implications we explore include lessons that the secular women's movement can learn from women organising in these new spaces.

### *Media and women*

Our project explores how Bangladeshi women engage with television and the meanings, choices and subjectivities they derive from it. We examine changing representations of women and female sexuality and explore how women in different sites and classes engage with television and attach meaning to the images that are represented on screen. We enquire whether and where there are possibilities of empowerment that open up through women's engagement, pleasure, and learning from the media.

### *Changing narratives of empowerment in Pakistan: trajectories of desire and the mediation of socio-cultural spaces*

We examine the discursive changes that are taking place in areas related to the media, predominantly satellite television and religion, viz the global upsurge of religious fundamentalisms and resurgent patriarchies in Pakistan, in the wider context of new technologies, consumerism and globalisation. We have identified and attempt to grant visibility to new pathways and sites of change in the area of media and religion and women's empowerment.

### *Social change through video production in the Chittagong Hill Tracts*

Our project explores how minority communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts project identity, culture and change through video productions. We look at the process through which their stories, for long unheard, are now being told through new technologies and reformulated by local artists and cultural activists. We hope to influence media policies towards including the cultural productions of ethnic minorities in mainstream media.



Engaging secular women's rights activists at a roundtable on the role of religion in women's everyday lives, 29 December 2010. Photo by Pathways South Asia

### **Changing narratives – minority media in the Chittagong Hill Tracts**

Interviews with members of the Chittagong Hill Tracts communities and observation of their TV viewing show they feel that the mainstream media does not portray their everyday lives but turns them into cultural artefacts. Cultural activists and media actors have promoted the production of songs, dramas and films which are produced in the communities' own languages and which portray their ways of life. This shows how media technology can be used by minority groups to articulate their own cultural messages and forms. The policy implication is that mainstream media should make space for the dissemination of these products to allow for wider feelings of identification with, and ownership of, the national media.





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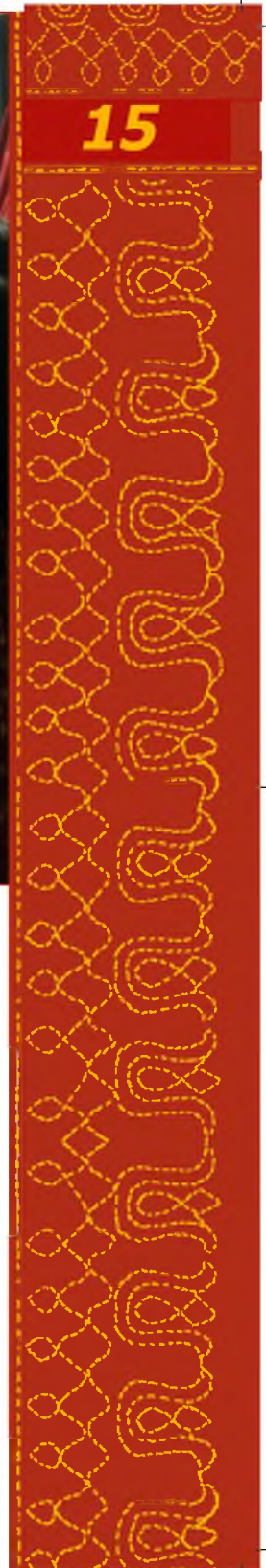
Family watching TV, Media  
Research, Agargaon, Dhaka 2008.  
Photo by Aanmona Priyadarshini

### *Cultural history of Bengali Muslim women*

We explore the identity formation of Bengali Muslim women by investigating the cultural and political history of Bangladesh spanning the 20th Century. We are investigating how women placed themselves in the anti-colonial nationalist movements of the early twentieth century; the import of language, culture and national identity for Bengali Muslims during the middle decades; and the contestations between nation, culture, progress, modernity and women's sexuality in a globalised world towards the end of the millennium.

### *Changing images of women photo exhibition*

Through this project we provide a visual record of the diversities in women's journeys through change in the spheres of women's voices, bodily integrity and work in Bangladesh. We held a competition among amateur photographers



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from which fifty-five photographs were selected to mount an exhibition that toured the country. Our resulting photo-documentary has brought public attention to the changing position of women in national life.

Visitors looking at Pathways 'Changing images of women in Bangladesh' photographs at the Shilpangan Gallery, Dhaka, December 2007. Photo by Pathways South Asia



### 3 Analysis of selected research

#### **Paid work as a pathway to women's empowerment**

Through a survey and follow-up in-depth interviews we examined the meaning and impact of paid work on the lives of women. We interviewed women, aged 15 and above, of different socio-economic backgrounds, in eight different districts of Bangladesh. We sought to explore the difference for women of being involved in paid or unpaid work, in paid work within and outside the home, and between involvement in any kind of economic activity and inactivity.

We found that access to paid work brings about a variety of positive changes in women's lives that are likely to contribute to their empowerment. It is also evident that these changes are most consistently associated with access to formal employment. Women are most likely to exercise a degree of autonomy over their incomes, to use it to purchase major assets in their own name (including land/housing), to have their own bank accounts, to be able to move around in the public sphere unaccompanied, to vote in elections, to know about the labour laws and to be consulted by others for opinions and information. Their economic contributions are also more likely to be respected by their families and by society at large. They are most likely to express views that reflect a departure from traditional norms and beliefs about women's roles, and to express optimism about the future and a sense of control over their own lives. For women in paid employment outside the home, their greater poverty and the less favourable conditions under which they work partly offset the transformative potential of their earning status.

#### **Work survey**

Access to paid work brings about a variety of positive changes in women's lives that are likely to contribute to their increased access to material resources and greater agency in their life choices. In particular, formal employment is most likely to lead to women exercising a degree of autonomy over their income, having their own bank accounts, being able to move around in the public sphere unaccompanied, voting in elections, and being able to decide about their own medical treatment. Women in informal employment outside the home also displayed these characteristics but in their case, greater poverty and the less favourable conditions under which they worked, partly offset the transformative potential of earning status.

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Research on empowering work, 2008. Photo by Sakiba Tasneem

We discovered two factors to be more consistent in predicting positive change in women's lives. One is the support of family members and it testifies to the importance of this set of relationships in mediating women's experiences, regardless of their work status. The other is regular viewing of TV. Whilst we used this as a proxy for access to information beyond the immediate confines of the community, it also broadens horizons and interests. NGO membership was also found to be contributing to positive change in women's lives.

We have found a major shift in the culture of son preference. A significant proportion of women mentioned that the sex of their child did not matter even if they were restricted to only one child. We feel this is a major finding given the patriarchal nature of our society.

Through our research on women's work and empowerment we seek to influence conventional thinking on how paid work empowers women. We want to bring out the tensions women face in paid work and how they negotiate the trade offs. We will seek opportunities to translate this research and its findings into policy influence at various levels, such

***"Rajpathai narir uposthiti nari adhikar protistha korbai"***  
**(women's visible presence on the streets will establish women's rights).** (Slogan by *Karmojibi Nari* – an organisation for working women in Bangladesh)





### **Changing narratives – religion research**

Women are increasingly engaging with religion to reinterpret their position within it and define a more active role for themselves. This ranges from women who are regular participants of Quran reading groups to students and women in urban slums. Some women are even reinterpreting religion to challenge the common understandings of unequal positions given to women and men in religion to give primacy to conceptions of equality. The women's movement needs to re-examine the role of religion in women's lives. The religion research also brings out the cultural dimensions of empowerment, rather than just the economic and political, a sphere that policy makers need to take note of.

as government e.g. the New Labour Code, private employers, NGOs, etc.

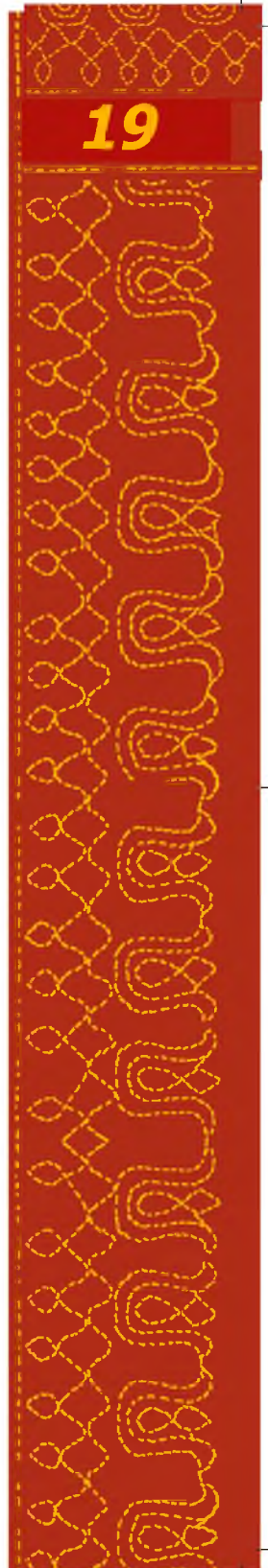
### **Changing narratives of sexuality: women and religion**

Through this research we sought to understand women's everyday engagement with religion in Bangladesh and Pakistan. We chose as our informants 'new women' – women who have, in recent times, become a visible part of society. These women are students, factory workers, working women who live in hostels, along with women who cultivate an intense religiosity by congregating in Islamic discussion circles known as Taleem or Dars.

The key findings argue that religion is extremely important in the lives of women. Women use religion in different ways with different levels of intensity. This engagement ranges from using religious understanding to feel more secure when travelling to places of work and having religious ideas bear upon notions of modesty, drawing the parameters of sexually accepted and modest behaviour.

At the extreme end of the spectrum is the use of religious ideas and practices in cultivating an intense piety where religion is expected to touch upon all aspects of life. The research demonstrates that women's religious discussion circles, where textually-based interpretations of Islam take place, are on the rise. Through these discussion circles women find new spaces to come together to learn, share and network. These spaces also allow women to become preachers, a position that has traditionally been occupied by men.

The research seeks to understand the reasons why women are turning to religion. We argue that besides the greater mobility and greater social acceptance that religion gives, through adhering to religious norms and practices, it is necessary to understand how women construct their sense



of selves through the interplay of religious norms and the various forms and practices they adopt for religious reasons.

Our research shows that a more nuanced account of what religion means to women is necessary. A greater engagement with religion allows women to exert themselves even to defy social customs, conventions and familial expectations. The significance of the research lies in its ability to add greater context and depth of understanding to the current waves of religious resurgence in both countries.

### **Women councillors' voice and experience in Pakistan**

This research examined opportunities and spaces created through policy reforms and advocacy for women councillors in the local government (LG) system in Pakistan. The research used a range of methods including secondary literature reviews and interviews with women councillors and other actors such as NGO representatives and women's movement activists. We found that the quota system in Pakistan makes women visible in LG by enabling them to enter the formal political space. The extent to which the women councillors are able to act as effective agents varies according to their class background, their location within the LG hierarchy, and the local socio-political context reflecting rural-urban as well as regional differences. Flaws in the structure of the LG system and male domination in the public sphere are the main impediments.

Women councillors have been effective in addressing matters relating to domestic disputes. Both their male colleagues and the community, recognise them as legitimate actors in this field. Though this kind of role may limit women to more 'traditional' areas, their activities have led to a decreased tolerance for domestic violence, honour killings or under-age marriage of girls. Women councillors have received conditional support from informal institutions within the community, NGOs and

### **Building constituencies – local government**

Social barriers to women's political participation in Bangladesh have been reduced, especially at the family and community level and are increasingly seen as women political actors in their own right. This is the result of affirmative action by the government and reservation of seats for women in local government bodies where women have gained experience and strength. Women are becoming forces to be reckoned with in local councils and they are more of a threat in the competition for scarce resources. This is leading to their facing greater resistance and competition from male counterparts in local government bodies and from male party members. Government administrative structures and processes need to continue to support women in local government bodies to counter this resistance and safeguard their positions and responsibilities.

বিশ্বনিয়ন্ত্রিত বাংলাদেশ রাষ্ট্র

অসং লোকের কর্মকাণ্ডে সমাজ ধ্বংস হয় না, সমাজ ধ্বংস হয় ভাল মানুষের নিষ্ক্রিয়তায়



আসন্ন-বাঁশখালী  
উপজেলা নির্বাচনে  
মহিলা-ভাইস  
চেয়ারম্যান পদপ্রার্থী

সারা বাংলাদেশের ইউনিয়ন  
পরিষদ পর্যায়ে পরিচিত নারী  
নেত্রী, ছনুয়া মনুমিয়াজী  
পরিবারের মরহুম আজিজুল  
হক চৌধুরীর সুযোগ্য কন্যা-

ইয়ামুন নাহার  
কে  
ভোট  
দিন

প্রজাপতি  
মার্কায়



নিবেদক - বাঁশখালীর জনসাধারণ

Campaign poster of Yamun Nahar, a Local Government Vice Chairperson, and participant of the Digital Story-Telling Workshop in November 2009. Photo by Pathways South Asia

donors. Training programmes, workshops, gender networks and advocacy have helped to build capacity and awareness and created a platform for voicing issues around women's rights. However, these need to be further developed as women constituents have raised expectations. For example requests for legal aid or financial assistance or women-centred projects for community development, require action following the rights-based advocacy conducted by the councillors. Failure to deliver may create

the perception that woman councillors are ineffective. The research findings stress the fact that to consolidate gains made through the quota system, LG structures and processes need to be strengthened. This includes: 33 per cent representation of women across all tiers of government through direct elections to reserved seats, providing incentives to political parties to field women candidates, creating women's caucuses, and ensuring that more women exercise their right to vote.

The new democratic government that took power in 2008 continued to keep the structure of LG until December 2009, the time its mandate expired. In July 2009 it was decided that all powers regarding LG would be returned to the provincial governments. Elections were promised over a three to six month period but have been repeatedly postponed. Provincial governments have little political interest in LG elections as elected representatives are perceived to be competing forces by the Members of Provincial Assembly (MPAs) and Members of National Assembly (MNAs) and there are disagreements within political parties over the exact institutional arrangements for LG.

The future of the LG system at present is unclear. However, the important role of elected LG representatives has been sorely missed during the recent crises confronting the country, caused by militancy and natural disasters. The fact that so many women have been empowered at the local level means that women councillors will continue to be active in their communities. While the effectiveness of voice depends upon a number of external factors, women's empowerment at the personal level stays with them. A key lesson to emerge is that for quotas to be effective, states need to pursue long-term political arrangements that ensure continuity of policy. This means political spaces and opportunities that have opened continue to be a part of sustained democratic processes.

### **Lady Health Workers – Pakistan**

Empowerment related to the Lady Health Workers (LHWs) Programme is positive and can be sustained in the long-term if the government remains committed to this initiative. The work serves as an important source of income to the LHWs' families. It is one of the very few employment opportunities for women in rural areas, who have expressed high interest in paid work. The Government being the employer adds legitimacy and importance to their roles. The personal satisfaction for LHWs in carrying out their duties, particularly because the work is a service to the poor, is extremely valuable to them, and is an important alternative role model for women in rural communities. Its magnitude makes it a public works programme, and the government should consider more such programmes that employ women.





### **Women Health Workers – Bangladesh**

Leading programmes in the area of community health and family planning enable women workers to change social and cultural norms and expectations around the importance of paid work, breaking purdah norms and encouraging the education of girls. Organisations with large numbers of field staff which support women health workers to challenge socio-cultural norms can contribute to societal transformation. The respect and responsibilities organisations provide their female community staff positively influence the women's position in their families and the community. Organisations investing in increasing their professional skills provide women with confidence and alternative options of employment.

## **4 Hub highlights**

### **Women Health Workers as agents of change – dissemination seminar**

The 'Community Health Workers as Agents of Change' seminar, jointly organised by BRAC Development Institute (BDI) and ICDDR,B, was held in Dhaka on 25 May 2010. Our seminar highlighted the influence of Women Health Workers on their personal and family lives as well as how they have been instrumental in bringing social change to their communities. Our research emphasises the role of the programme implementing agencies in providing the women with a professional status and supporting them to challenge various socio-cultural norms. Senior representatives of each of these agencies including a Director of the Directorate of Family Planning of the Government of Bangladesh commented on the research report and presentation. The four agencies who participated in the research expressed their interest in following up with their own programmes on how to further strengthen social change potential as well as the empowerment effects on the women workers.

### **Media influencing through discourses of women's empowerment research**

The Bangladesh 'discourses on women's empowerment' research has enabled our researchers to have the facts and figures to point out to the TV viewing public the shift in electoral promises on women's empowerment over the years. Sohela Nazneen, one of the researchers on the project was invited to be a panellist on the talk show "Road to Democracy", which debated what parties are doing for women's political empowerment. The other panellist on the show was the writer of the election manifesto of the political party in office. During the

debate, Sohela was able to refer to the promises made in the election manifesto by the government towards women's empowerment and highlighted the gaps. She also noted the changing patterns in promises made towards women's empowerment over the last decade. The research, which focused on the way women's empowerment has been conceptualised by different actors in society and the politics of how this concept is used, helped her elaborate the positions held by political parties towards women's empowerment and draw wider attention to this.

### **Why culture is important for development?**

Cultural studies are emerging as a field of study research which aims to explore the potential for social change from a broader and deeper perspective. Women's placement within culture has always been problematic. On the one hand, they are viewed as carriers of culture, and on the other, culture has a special address to them, objectifying them and exacerbating their subordination. We feel that understanding women's cultural positioning is essential to gauge the potential for positive change in their condition, and to understand the processes that would lead to empowerment. These are some of the reasons that led us to include a study on changing cultural narratives of women's lives within our research.

Being part of the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies (IACS) network has provided useful forums for disseminating our research findings, as participation in the biannual conference held in Tokyo in 2009 proved. A special issue of the IACS journal forthcoming in March 2011 will include our articles. We have also produced a photo essay titled 'Women on the Move' (Rahim and Azim 2009) that depicts a visual landscape of the changing positions of women in our national life. We will be hosting the next IACS biannual conference in December 2011.



Presenters and friends at the panel on 'Women and Popular Media' organised by the Pathways Programme at the Cultural Crossroads Conference in Hong Kong, July 2010. Photo by Pathways South Asia

**"It feels wonderful to have created my own Digital Story. Before I watched it, I couldn't have imagined that it will turn out so good. I feel as though I have rediscovered myself." (Participant at Digital Story-Telling workshop, November 2009, Dhaka)**





Participants learn technical skills to tell their personal stories audio-visually, Digital Storytelling Workshop, Chittagong Hill Tracts, April 2010. Photo by Pathways South Asia

### **Digital story telling in Chittagong Hill Tracts**

Digital Story-Telling workshops have promoted the use of technology for researching women's issues and furthering feminist goals. It also makes a case for the alternative research methodology and the use of technology and media as an instrument of research. The Digital Story-Telling Workshop held in Rangamati in April 2010 produced a rich repository of stories of success, struggle, identity, change and survival narrated by the women of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. These Digital Stories, which are part oral history, part personal archiving, gave us a glimpse into realities we do not often hear or see in the regular media and which the individual women do not get the chance to voice. The moving personal narratives allowed us to glimpse not only their individual histories and struggles but they also revealed what it means to be a woman in the Chittagong Hill Tracts at this time and the political and social implications of belonging to those communities.





Participants from ten countries discuss country case studies for a book on Feminist Activism at the Conference on 'Voicing Demands', Bellagio Center, Italy, November 2009. Photo by Bellagio Center, Rockefeller Foundation

### **Bellagio conference on feminist voice**

We organised a conference at The Bellagio Centre in Italy in November 2009, to bring together Pathways research conducted on feminist activism and constituency building by women's organisations. The 'Voicing demands: feminists reflecting on strategies, negotiations and influence' conference provided a space for dialogue on what it takes to enable women to exercise voice to realise their rights, and to renegotiate their citizenship with the state. As well as scholars and activists from the Pathways programme, participants included members of the programme's wider network, such as Sonia Alvarez, Adrian Leftwich and Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay, whose participation enabled Pathways members to deepen their analysis of how women can achieve greater citizenship, rights and empowerment.

At the Conference, participants shared empirical research from countries with different democratic trajectories – including several with recent transitions to democracy and long periods of military or autocratic rule. These reflections, discussions and analysis will be incorporated into a book to be published by Zed in 2011, along with papers presented at the conference.





Dr Imran Matin, then Director of the Research and Evaluation Division, BRAC, inaugurating the booklet set "*Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh: Debates and Possibilities*" at the Ekushey Book Fair, alongside Firdous Azim, Lead Researcher of Pathways Programme on 20 February 2010. Photo by Pathways South Asia

### **Making our research accessible through Bangla publications**

The Pathways Programme has published various reports and papers in Bangla to make its research findings accessible to a large and diverse audience. The first set of research reports titled *Women's empowerment in Bangladesh: debates and possibilities*, contains four condensed research reports plus an overview piece on the Pathways work. The booklets were published in February 2010 and were launched at the Ekushey Boi Mela (Ekushey Book Fair), the most important annual cultural and literary event in Bangladesh. The second set of research booklets *Women's empowerment: journeys of change*, containing six articles, some translations of published English pieces, and others written originally in Bangla, were launched in March 2011. These were launched at Dhaka University along with the book of short stories *Fire*



*and water: stories of transformation* that was produced from the Stories4Change Writing Workshop.

These Bangla publications have been written in non-technical language in order to make the content accessible to as wide an audience as possible. Through these publications we hope to draw students, academics, general readers, women's rights organisations, and a variety of other institutions and stakeholders into the various discourses, findings, insights and debates related to women's empowerment and hope that our work can reach a wide range of Bangla speaking audiences in the country.

**"We should break the stereotypes that are portrayed in the media: we see on television a nuclear family where the man is the bread earner, or sometimes the husband and wife together maintaining the family, but we want to see serials where it is the wife who is the sole bread earner. In scenes that show men driving around in their cars and motorbikes, they have their wives next to them; we'd now like to see women in the driver's seat" – participant of Media Research, Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka, June 2009**

## 4 Introducing the team

### Afghanistan



**Naysan Adlparvar** is a political ethnographer and development consultant. He worked for three years as a development practitioner in Afghanistan on gender, participatory poverty assessments, poverty reduction and related advocacy programming with NGOs and the United Nations. He has also worked in India on educational issues. Naysan is presently undertaking his DPhil at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex researching ethnic and religious identity and local-level social change processes in Afghanistan.

### Bangladesh



**Amena Mohsin** is a Professor at the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka. She has a PhD from Cambridge University, UK and has conducted post-doctoral research on gender and militarisation, at ISS, The Hague, Netherlands. Her areas of interest include minorities, gender, politics and security issues. She has published extensively in national and international journals and books. Amena is currently heading AIBS (The American Institute of Bangladesh Studies).



**Firdous Azim** is a Professor of English, specialising in post-colonial and feminist literary criticism. She has researched and published widely in these fields. Currently, she is Chairperson of the Department of English and Humanities at BRAC University located in Dhaka, Bangladesh. She is one of the lead researchers in the Pathways programme, where her special interest is in exploring the cultural history of women in Bangladesh. Firdous is a member of the Editorial Board of *Feminist Review* and *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. She is also an active member of the women's movement, Naripokkho.



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**Iqbal Ehsan** has completed his MSS in Anthropology at Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh. His areas of interest include gender issues, socio-cultural change, social inequality, social behaviour, media, education and religion. He is currently involved in the Pathways research on the Cultural History of Women in Bangladesh.





### **Mohammed Kamruzzaman**

graduated in Anthropology from Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh and has a post-graduate degree in Development Studies. He has been a social science/development researcher since 2001 and has worked on a range of issues including local governance, livelihoods, NGO governance, and well-being. He is currently exploring the relationship between women's work and empowerment in Bangladesh. Kamruzzaman's general interest is in understanding changing gender relations in the context of rapid changes in Bangladeshi society and culture.



**Perween Hasan** is Vice-Chancellor (designate) of the Central Women's University, Dhaka and is a Professor in the Department of Islamic History and Culture, University of Dhaka (currently on leave). She is involved in the cultural history project of the Pathways programme. She taught courses on history, world civilizations, art and architectural history, religion and women. Her book: *Sultans and Mosques: Early Muslim Architecture in Bangladesh* was published in 2007 (I.B.Tauris, London). Prior to her career as an art historian, she was a teacher of English Literature, and her interest in women and cross cultural issues brings her to Pathways. She is Vice President of the Asiatic Society.

**Maheen Sultan** coordinates the Pathways South Asia hub based at BRAC Development Institute, BRAC University, Bangladesh. She is a development practitioner, a women's rights activist and researcher. She has worked on issues of social development, poverty, community participation and gender equality in various capacities. She was part of the team that set up the women's empowerment research programme in BRAC University and is a member of Naripokkho, a Bangladeshi women's activist organisation. Her current research interests include women's organising and movements and women's work and mobilising.



### **Sahida Islam Khondaker**

works as a researcher for Pathways. Before joining the programme she worked as an Intern at the Centre for Policy Dialogue, a well-known policy think tank in Bangladesh. She is part of the Changing Narratives of Sexuality team and was involved with the research on Women and Religion and Women and Media. Currently she is working on the Cultural History research. She is also part of a new project, Stories for Change. Sahida's research interest is in culture, sexuality and religion.



**Sakiba Tasneem** is a Research Associate at the BRAC Development Institute (BDI). She supports the Pathways programme by designing and conducting both quantitative and qualitative research, cleaning and analysing the quantitative data and producing reports. Before joining BDI in February, 2009, Sakiba had been working in the BRAC Research and Evaluation Division (RED) for three years. Sakiba has a Masters in Economics from University of Dhaka. Her research interests include women's empowerment, child labour, extreme poverty, gender and health, poverty and the health service.



**Samia Huq** has a PhD in Anthropology from Brandeis University and is Assistant Professor at the BRAC Development Institute (BDI), BRAC University. As part of her PhD research, Samia has conducted intensive fieldwork amongst women's religious reading and discussion circles in Dhaka. With a broad interest in issues around religion and globalisation, religious movements and their relationship to debates around modernity and secularism, she is currently involved in research and a book project exploring the emergence of the 21st century Bangladeshi woman between religion, tradition, secularism and modernity.



**Naila Kabeer** is a Professor at the Department of Development Studies at the School for Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), UK. Prior to this, she worked for a number of years as a Fellow at IDS, working in areas of poverty, social exclusion and gender in relation to labour markets and livelihood strategies in the context of globalisation. Naila is a social economist working on the social and economic interactions between households, communities and the wider economy. She has substantial experience of training and advisory work with governments, bilateral and multilateral agencies and NGOs. She has been active in developing frameworks and methodologies for integrating gender concerns into policy and planning. She is currently engaged in research on social protection strategies and struggles for citizenship among workers in the informal economy.



**Samia Afroz Rahim** is a researcher and Communications Officer for the Pathways South Asia Hub. She has been engaged with the Religion, Media and Cultural History of Bengali Women research. She has also facilitated three Digital Story-Telling workshops in Bangladesh. Samia's interests lie in examining hierarchies of power – particularly of gender, class and sexuality – in relation to changing times and politics. She is also exploring the use of technology in documenting personal stories and its potential in generating new knowledge and bringing about social change.





**Simeen Mahmud** studied statistics at Dhaka University and medical demography at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. She was Research Director in the Population Studies Division at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies and is currently Lead Researcher on Women and Work with the Pathways Programme. Her current research focuses primarily on women's work, pathways of women's empowerment, NGO contributions to deepening democracy and mobilisation for citizenship and rights. She is a member of the Bangladesh Health Watch group.



**Sohela Nazneen** has a PhD in Development Studies from IDS, Sussex. She is an Associate Professor at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh and a Research Fellow for Pathways based at BDI. Her research focuses on institutional analysis of gender, specifically gender and accountability structures and gender analysis of NGO management practices. Her ongoing work includes feminist movement building in transitional contexts, impact of changes in aid structures on women's rights organisations and women's participation in Islamic movements.

**Aanmona Priyadarshini** was engaged with the research on Media and Women under the Changing Narratives of Sexuality theme and was the principal researcher on the Cultural Production of Minority Media research. She worked intensively in Rangamati and Dhaka while doing her MSS thesis on Population Policy. Her areas of research interest include gender, sexuality, health, body politics, power relations, representation and ethnicity. She has received a Fulbright Scholarship for a second Masters in the US, and is currently studying at Loyola University, Chicago.

## Pakistan



**Ayesha Khan** is a social science researcher who has been working in Pakistan for the last twenty years. Her areas of focus are poverty, gender, reproductive health, and refugee issues. Recently she has participated in a number of field-based research projects exploring the theme of empowerment, particularly with regard to its linkages with paid work for women in different local contexts, and its linkages with women's experience of induced abortion in Pakistan.



**Neelam Hussain** is a feminist and a human rights activist based in Pakistan. She is a founder member and Coordinator of Simorgh Women's Resource and Publication Centre, Lahore. Neelam has specialised in English Literature and has edited and written for a number of books including children's stories and English translations of two novels by women writers. Other than research undertaken for Pathways under the Changing Narratives of Sexuality Theme, she is currently involved with research on forced marriage and women's inheritance rights. Neelam is a member of Women's Action Forum.



**Saba Gul Khattak** is currently a Member of the Social Sector, Planning Commission of Pakistan and holds a PhD in political science. Her work focuses on governance and rights-based public policy issues from feminist perspectives. Her recent publications focused on Pakistani women's political and economic rights, child labour and protection, and issues of violence, development and peace. She serves on the governing bodies of public sector universities, NGOs and is also a member of the editorial boards of *Signs: journal of women in culture and society* and *theoretical perspectives*.

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