

# **Empowering women: More than one way?**

MASOODA BANO

## **ABSTRACT**

Female empowerment programs are central to the working of most international development agencies. Increasing number of studies, however, note that the women's rights NGOs supported by Western development agencies are failing to win popular support among ordinary women, especially in Muslim societies. By studying the factors shaping growing demand for female madrasas (Islamic seminaries) in Pakistan, and comparing the conception of female empowerment promoted through these madrasas and their popular appeal with that of donor-funded women's rights NGOs, this study identifies two reasons for the latter's failure to win popular support: (1) an unwillingness to respect and accommodate alternative conceptions of womanhood; and (2) a failure to recognize that incremental steps at reform, which teach the women to negotiate increased space for themselves by working within existing societal structures, can be more empowering for women in their daily lives than exposing them to Western conceptions of gender equality, which are unattainable in the given socioeconomic constraints. For the development agencies and women rights' NGOs, it is important to engage with the leaders and students of the female madrasas to understand the practical relevance of this education for the girls, rather than assuming it to be a product of ideological indoctrination perpetuated by the male elite and therein finding a justification to confront it. Developing context-specific indicators of women's empowerment is important for understanding the appeal of alternative conceptions of womanhood.

## **Introduction**

For international development agencies, the empowerment of women is a central concern, as gender is a cross-cutting theme included across all development interventions. However, these programs are faced with growing critiques for promoting a Western-centric conception of gender equality in developing countries (Abdellatif and Ottaway, 2007). What is little analyzed, even within these studies, is that in many countries the promotion of liberal feminism, with its Eurocentric origins, through state- and donor-supported development interventions actually leads to reactionary sentiments that reinvigorate religious movements arguing for more

locally rooted notions of female empowerment. The typical response among development agencies and the women's rights NGOs enjoying the support of these agencies is either not to engage with these female religious movements or to dismiss the alternative conceptions of female empowerment they promote as "adaptive preference"—where the women are free to make choices, but, imbued with the values of the patriarchal society, they make choices that run counter to their own well-being (Nussbaum, 1999, 2001). Based on interviews of 100 students in female madrasas from the four provincial capitals of Pakistan, this paper argues that the extreme expressions of religious values are often not just a case of religious indoctrination, but rather the result of the genuine appeal of those ideas and/or the optimal response to the choice available in the given context.

The first part of the paper situates the study within relevant literature and notes the research methodology. This is followed by a comparative analysis of the conceptions of womanhood as idealized in the two traditions. The last section documents the practical benefits of madrasa education for the female students and calls for recognition of the importance of developing context-specific indicators to measure the success of female empowerment programs.

### **Development interventions and women's empowerment: Existing positions and critiques**

In feminist theory, as well as studies of development interventions aimed at empowering women in developing countries, there has been for some time now a strong critique of their Eurocentric biases. Offering a critique of the hegemony of Eurocentric discourse in feminist movements around the world, Yin (2006) identifies three characteristics of that discourse: universalism, individualism and right-based ethics. Liberal feminism places emphasis on the individual rights of the woman and argues such rights to be universal, i.e., beyond the cultural differences between social communities. Some have argued that Western feminists view non-Western cultures as Others (Mohanty, 2002) and women's movements arguing for a non-Western conception of gender roles are often dismissed as "not progressive," backwards, ignorant or irrelevant. To date, the universalistic feminist discourse remains the standard against which all other forms of feminism are measured, despite strong critiques of such a domination since the 1980s (Yin, 2006).

This hegemony of the Western liberal feminist tradition over defining the ideal conception of womanhood is also reflected in the women empowerment programs pursued by international development agencies. This bias is reflected in the importance attached to the research of Martha Nussbaum, a moral philosopher whose work has been very influential within the international development community. Nussbaum (1999) argues that development interventions should promote the conception of individual liberty embedded in Western feminism as part

of their gender development programs. She claims (Nussbaum, 1999, 2001) that liberal individualism does not entail egoism or a preference for the type of person who has no deep need of others, but insists on the separateness of one life from another and the equal importance of each life, seen on its own terms rather than as part of a large organic or corporate whole. She provides two justifications for overriding culture-specific conceptions of women's rights. Firstly, she claims that the dominant voices representing a given culture are often those of the male elite and thus not representative of the voices asking for change. Secondly, she contends that individuals can acquire adaptive preference, whereby they are free to make a choice but have been so socialized into accepting an inferior choice that they continue to select that outcome out of lack of knowledge of better alternatives (Nussbaum, 1999). These two reasons, she argues, provide development agencies with the excuse to advance the universalist position of Western liberalism and override alternative conceptions of women's empowerment. The widespread acceptance of these assumptions within the working of the gender empowerment programs of most development agencies makes Fung (2000) conclude that Western feminism has been accepted as an inseparable part of modernization and development.

This paper attempts to highlight the limitations of development interventions aimed at empowering Muslim women when they are guided by such universalist assumptions. It primarily draws upon two sources of data. First, it rests on the publications of leading women's rights NGOs and the female madrasas to understand their conception of womanhood, i.e., the defining characteristics of a fulfilling life for women. This analysis of the publications is supported by interviews with representatives of women's rights NGOs and female religious scholars in 24 leading female madrasas in the four provincial capitals of Pakistan and across the five dominant Islamic schools of thought (*waqafs*). This comparative analysis helps develop an understanding of the profile of the women leading these movements and their differing worldviews. Second, the study draws upon group discussions with 100 students from the 24 madrasas to understand the appeal that madrasa education holds for them.

## Historical background

Though it came into being as a result of the demand for a separate homeland for the Muslims of the Indian sub-continent, Pakistan has remained in the hands of secular leadership for a major part of its existence. Despite the failure of the state to invest in human development, the limited efforts that have been made have tried to address the needs of women. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed an opening up of Pakistani society to global influences, and the state made increasing efforts to bring women within the public sphere. Ayub Khan, the martial law administrator who formed the first stable government in Pakistan, was enamored by the model of Western

economic prosperity and shared Western liberal values. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the first elected prime minister of Pakistan, who succeeded Ayub Khan after a small interlude by Yahya Khan, founded the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), which was to become the frontrunner of progressive and liberal forces in Pakistan (Mumtaz and Shaheed, 1987). Among other measures, Ayub Khan introduced the Family Laws Ordinance 1961, which discouraged polygamy by making a Muslim's man religious right to a second marriage conditional on securing permission from his first wife.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto accommodated women in grassroots politics as well in senior leadership roles, gave them constitutional guarantees including reserved seats in Local Bodies, and appointed women to key positions such as provincial governor, university vice-chancellor and deputy speaker of the National Assembly. This period also saw the rise of prominent feminist organizations within Pakistan, two of which were to greatly shape the discourse on women rights: the Aurat Foundation (1976), started by left-oriented university teachers, students and other working women; and Shirkat Gah (1975), established by young women, recently returned from Western universities (Mumtaz and Shaheed, 1987). After the ten years of Islamization drive under Zia ul Haq in 1980s, the country was back in the hands of the relatively liberal or moderate political regimes of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. After 2001, General Musharraf, having become an ally in the US-led "war on terror," tried to demonstrate his liberal credentials by undertaking special efforts to promote liberal cultural values in the society, giving women increased prominence in the political and public sphere: a third of the seats in Parliament were reserved for women, and the electronic media was encouraged to portray women in liberal roles. Although there is still a gap between male and female university enrollment ratios, the difference has been shrinking at a fast pace in recent decades.

Since the 1980s, development agencies have also made a serious investment in supporting female empowerment programs, and gender is a cross-cutting theme for all donors operating in the country. Much of these development interventions have translated into supporting women's rights NGOs, such as the ones mentioned above. This has resulted in the mushrooming of NGOs claiming to work for women's rights, although their ability to mobilize popular support remains limited (Bano, 2008). Similar concerns have been noted about women's rights NGOs in other contexts (Abdellatif and Ottaway, 2007).

This period has also seen a rise in a previously unknown phenomenon—namely, female madrasas. Male madrasas in Pakistan draw on a tradition that is over nine centuries old, but female madrasas emerged for the first time in the last half of the 1970s and since then have expanded dramatically. These madrasas present a challenge to the conception of female empowerment as promoted by the Pakistani state, development agencies and feminist NGOs. They argue for women to play a role within the home, rather than the economic sphere, and they teach women to value their traditional roles as mothers and daughter rather than working to establish their own independence. Three decades later, in terms of their total number and the student population, female madrasas are steadily catching up with their male

counterparts (see Table 1). In 2006, in the Deobandi *wafaq*, the largest of the five *wafaqs* in Pakistan, the number of female students registered for examinations at the highest level was twice that of male students—for the highest level (*Alimiyya*), there were 8,615 girls as opposed to 4,721 boys and for the next level (*Aliya*), there were 10,976 girls as opposed to 6,877 boys (Wafaq-ul-Madaris, 2006). In addition, on average the women had a higher passing rate than their male counterparts: the average rate for girls across all grades was 88.49% as opposed to 84.47% for boys (Wafaq-ul-Madaris, 2006).

Apart from spreading at a fast pace, female madrasas are also better able to mobilize indigenous resources to sustain their activities than women's rights NGOs. To date, the NGO movement in Pakistan remains foreign-funded (Bano, 2008; Kamal, 2000; Zaidi, 1999). The rapidly expanding movement of female madrasas, on the other hand, relies mainly on student fees, donations and payments made by the community for the services provided by the madrasa students—for example, leading *dua* (prayer) at a Quran reading ceremony or other rituals. The two also have different methods of operation. NGOs operate around projects focused on achieving specific outcomes; madrasas are mainly educational institutions trying to impart certain values and skills to the girls. The common aspect of the two, however, is that both want to promote a specific vision of women's well-being: the women's rights NGOs do it through advocacy campaigns and projects, and the female madrasas do it by running educational programs for girls.

**Table1: Comparative data on madrasas for males and females**

| <i>Wafaqs</i>                                  | No. of registered madrasas |        | No. of students in registered madrasas |         |
|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|--------|----------------------------------------|---------|
|                                                | Male                       | Female | Male                                   | Female  |
| Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al-Arabia (Deobandi)          | 6,800                      | 1,399  | 1,000,000                              | 200,000 |
| Tanzeem-ul-Madaris (Brehalvi)                  | 1,863                      | 201    | 75,806                                 | 7,000   |
| Rubita-ul-Madaris Al-Islamia (Jamiat-i-Islami) | 267                        | 106    | 47,183                                 | 8,730   |
| Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al-Salafia (Ahla-Hadees)      | 148                        | 187    | 15,488                                 | 16,301  |
| Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al-Shia                       | 337                        | 38     | 11,000                                 | 3,900   |

Source: Government of Pakistan (2006).

### Polarizing agents: Women's rights NGOs and female madrasas

Interviews with the leadership of the two groups indicate a distinction in the socioeconomic profile of the women leading the two movements. Leaders of prominent NGOs come from upper-income families with fathers and husbands in important bureaucratic, military or elite positions. In contrast, leaders of female madrasas are wives and daughters of male *ulama* (Islamic scholars), who typically represent the lower-middle income sector of society. The conception of women's empowerment is also strikingly different for the two. The NGOs share Nussbaum's (1999) emphasis on the superiority of universalist conceptions of women's rights promoted in theories of liberal feminism. The leaders of feminist NGOs argue for individual liberty, including sexual liberty, and involvement of women in economic and political activity. They favor women's freedom to make choices and call for the choices to be such that they prioritize the woman and not the family. Cases where women are seen to be making choices that sacrifice their own well-being to the family good are viewed as the result of patriarchal values, which need to be challenged. The focus of the leading women's rights NGOs ranges from creating economic opportunities for women mainly through provision of micro-credit to ensuring legal protection by providing legal aid or getting them to engage in political activity. In all these fields, most resources are focused on awareness-building programs for women rather than the actual delivery of these services.

The Aurat Foundation, one of the two most prominent women's rights NGOs in Pakistan, explains its primary activity as enhancing the women's economic and political status in the country. Its three strategic areas of intervention include:

information for women to build their capacity for decision-making and action, and information about women's issues and concerns to decision makers; capacity building of citizens groups, public authorities and public representatives to support women's participation in decision-making and their activism, as well as to enhance their access to opportunities and facilities at the local and district levels; and advocacy for developing an enabling environment for women's empowerment and participatory democracy in Pakistan (<http://www.af.org.pk/mainpage.htm>).

Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Center, the other leading women's right NGO in Pakistan, similarly advances a "rights-based perspective" which

addresses women's strategic needs through advocacy interventions that engage the government and international forums at the policy level to ensure that policies, programs and laws are appropriate for and responsive to women's needs (<http://www.shirkatgah.org>).



Its current projects include: Women, Law and Status; Women and Sustainable Development; Green Economics and Globalization; and Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights. Shirkat Gah's Women, Law and Status program argues that

a major obstacle to women's empowerment is local customs and practices that deny them rights to which they are entitled under state laws, especially in terms of personal status matters and fundamental civil liberties (<http://www.shirkatgah.org>).

As opposed to this very individual-focused and rights-based approach of the women's rights NGOs, scholars at the madrasas promote a different notion of female well-being, arguing that a woman's interests are best served in a stable family unit. The assumption is that men and women have different dispositions and that their respective interests are best served by the two having a clear division of labor. The demands for women's economic empowerment or sexual liberty are viewed as counter-productive to the women's own well-being. Economic independence is argued to increase the burden on women, and sexual liberty is viewed to make women vulnerable to unstable relations that damage them more than men. Piety, self-restraint and interdependence between the sexes is seen to be in the best interest of the women. In this context, references are repeatedly made to the pitfalls of Western cultural transformation—during my interviews, both the madrasa students and their teachers frequently talked about the breakdown of the family unit in the West; the economic burden on the woman; and the problems of single motherhood and children conceived out of wedlock. Referring to such cases, these women argued that Western feminism actually further burdens the woman rather than liberating her. They contended that women in Islam also have the right to free choice, but it is an informed choice based on an awareness that it is in their own interest to have a united family unit.

During interviews with leaders of madrasas representing all five Islamic schools of thought dominant in Pakistan, there was a consensus as to the woman's obligation to observe *purdah* (veiling); similarly, all praised the woman's primary role as homemaker and defended the strict prohibition on sexual liberty, noting the importance of preserving women's piety. Despite differences on many other doctrinal issues, on the subject of veiling and gender division of labor proposed in Islam, all were largely in unison. Repeatedly in individual and group interviews, students in the madrasas defended these precepts, at times for their practical relevance, but primarily because they held a logical appeal for them. The instrumental reason for wearing the *hijab* (headscarf) revolved mainly around issues of security in a society where weak law and order makes women from middle-income families, who rely on public transport, vulnerable to male harassment. The *niqab* (facial covering) was similarly presented as beneficial, helping to protect girls' identity by making it difficult for men to recognize them. Finally, the *jilbab*,

the full-length religious dress that covers the clothes was argued to reduce excessive spending on clothing.

The instrumental benefits of these religious beliefs were, however, always stated as side issues<sup>1</sup>; the primary debate revolved around the superiority of Islamic beliefs for women's actual well-being. For the respondents, Islam provided a more viable vision of gender equality than Western feminism. It was absolutely clear to these women that, in terms of equality, Islam gave men and women equal rights; the difference rested mainly in the role designed for them to optimize their respective biological strengths. In their reasoning, the denial of biological difference was unrealistic and thereby counter-productive, because it placed an additional burden on the women and threatened the family structure; both developments, in their view, were detrimental to women's interests. Asked if, by putting excessive emphasis on women's maternal role, they were not ignoring the benefits of attaining economic independence, the common retort was: "Why would women want to compete with a man or rival him when rationally it is in everyone's individual as well as societal interest for the two genders to cooperate and build on their respective strengths?"

For these women, the dividends associated with women's economic empowerment were deceptive, as such an approach neglected the additional burden imposed on women. In the words of one respondent, "it leads to a societal structure where collective expectations are so developed that, for a woman, the choice to be at home with her children becomes a non-option." This economic independence to many was the cause of the breakdown of the family structure in the West, because, in their view, where there are no natural reasons for interdependence between partners, family unity is automatically threatened: "If I earn as much as my husband, it is only natural I will be less inclined to heed him. This will automatically reduce the tolerance level within the household, threatening its unity." As compared to these options, by placing the responsibility of ensuring economic security squarely on the shoulders of men, while giving the women the freedom to pursue professional activities as a matter of choice, Islam provided a more viable model to these women.

These women were also quick to counter arguments for female sexual liberty as posed in Western discourse. For them, the natural instinct of the woman is to restrain her sexuality. They argued that the sexual liberation of women was actually of greater benefit to men, who, in their view, were naturally more prone to seeking sexual gratification than women who, by their very nature, seek emotionally secure and stable relationships. For these women, sex outside marriage was wrong because it marginalized the rights of the child conceived out of such a relationship, who had no social or legal recognition. At the same time, abstinence from sexual experience until marriage was argued to give special meaning to the marital relationship. In the words of a Western-educated respondent:

When women change partners frequently, they will only reduce the charm of the ultimate relationship because it is very natural that they will always



be comparing; therefore I say, why follow a route which is bound to leave you dissatisfied?... Why live with the baggage of failed relationships?

Another woman of similar profile noted how disappointed she was when, during a year-long stay in the United States, she ended up accompanying her host family to a wedding where the bride already had two children fathered by two different men. "I am liberal by Muslim standards. I don't wear a *hijab* and I work with male colleagues, but this kind of liberty leaves me unimpressed," she noted. These women were also of the view that early exposure to sexual relations made the women vulnerable to sexual impulses, which rushed them into unstable relationships. Further, it was argued that the emphasis on sexual liberty was all the more disadvantageous to women as they progressed through the life cycles:

During her twenties and thirties, a woman might have equal chances of drawing the attention of men, but it is more difficult for her to find a good husband as she progresses beyond forty; for men, age is hardly a constraint. It is therefore in a woman's own interest to be in a binding relationship rather than to seek short-term interactions.

This view, expressed by a middle-aged woman from an affluent background, was widely shared.

Thus, according to these women, owing to their very biological and emotional make-up, the institution of marriage and family was more in their interest than that of men. Consequently, when women made adjustments in the short term to safeguard the interests of their family, this was not viewed as an act of sacrifice or exploitation, but a rational move to protect their own long-term interest. As to why there should be extreme segregation between genders, it was argued that it is human nature to be tempted by vice; therefore, to avert undesirable actions, it was best to avoid temptation. Discouraging the free mixing of the sexes limits opportunities for casual relationships.

Comparing these perspectives with those advanced by Western feminists presents an interesting contradiction, as has been noted by other authors (Gallant, 2008; Vatuk, 2008). The former, which represent the rational Western world, draw upon notions of female equality based on ideal moral standards, while the latter, who are associated with an orthodox moral worldview, base their conception of gender roles on very rational calculations of what is biologically possible and practically feasible. What appears significant about these women's choices and decision-making processes is that they employ a means-end rationality. These women have a clear idea of a desirable end and calculate back from it: multiple pre-marital relationships and economic independence will logically make it more difficult for them to adjust to the demands of establishing a stable family, so why pursue those options when it is in the woman's long-term interest to be in a stable family?

A striking aspect of my fieldwork was the frequency with which the respondents women referred to what they viewed to be the outcomes of the Western feminist model—the high divorce rates in Western societies, single motherhood and the tendency to place parents in old-age homes. Whether these women acquired these views about Western society through the media, Islamic textbooks or a conscious propaganda campaign by the *ulama* is unclear, but what became evident during my fieldwork was that, even in the smallest madrasas in remote areas, girls were quick to refer to what they viewed as the failures of Western society as a means of defending Islamic precepts. The problems that they saw marking the modernity of the West thus ironically, it appears, became proof for these women of the wisdom of embracing tradition.

In sum, the debates within the female madrasas challenge universalist assumptions within liberal Western feminism on three counts. First, they argue for acknowledging the different biological and emotional needs of men and women. Second, they highlight the importance of sexual self-restraint to enable women to have more stable and gratifying relationships. Third, they prefer the family's interest over those of the individual, not because they prioritize the family over themselves, but because they feel that their own interest is best protected in a stable family system. These positions, especially those surrounding the relations between individual and family, are starkly opposed to Nussbaum's (1999, 2001) argument on liberal individualism. As such, they highlight the limitations of universalist positions.

There is thus a fundamental difference in the outlook of the leaders of the women's rights NGOs and those of the female madrasas: one prioritizes the woman as an individual; the other prioritizes the family, arguing that the individual interests of the woman are best preserved within a family unit. Abdellatif and Ottaway note the same divide marking the views of women activists of Hizbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood and those of Western aid-supported feminist NGOs in the Middle East, where the former view Western feminism

not as a struggle for the recognition of the rights of women, but as a movement to free women from all social constraints and obligations to the family and community, leading to excessive individualism and even licentiousness (Abdellatif and Ottaway, 2007:7).

The current research findings support the argument, advanced by scholars such as Abu-Lughod (2002) and Mahmood (2005), that we need to develop an appreciation of differences among women due to their different histories and circumstances and that women in different contexts can have structurally different desires. Further, while it is important to recognize that there can be more than one conception of women's empowerment and that development agencies need to be sensitive to these different conceptions, it is also important to understand that widespread adherence to a religious practice is often also indicative of it being the

most optimal choice, given socioeconomic constraints. Muslim women might have a preference for the Islamic conception of women's well-being, but the reason so many teenage girls in Pakistan prefer madrasa education over colleges after completing their matriculation in regular schools is that the former is better suited than secular education (or the ideals of Western feminism promoted by donor-supported NGOs) to expand their choice set and increase their ability to negotiate greater space within the family and society.

### **The relevance of female madrasas**

Within NGO circles, it is normally assumed that the choice to attend a female madrasa is a result of parental pressure within conservative families. However, in-depth interviews with 100 female madrasa students across the four provinces of Pakistan reveal that they come from a diverse range of socioeconomic backgrounds (most are from the middle class) and the majority enter the madrasa system after matriculation or after acquiring a bachelor's degree. The study of female madrasas highlights the heightened probability of the reassertion of tradition in societies where the state is failing to put in place formal institutions to attain the benefits of modernization. What it reveals are the challenges of relating to global influences when there is a mismatch in society's ability to engage with processes of "economic modernization" and "cultural modernization." Economic modernization in Pakistan led to public appreciation of Western living standards, increased demand for formal sector jobs and recognition of the benefits of investment in education. Space also opened up for women to seek higher education and employment in the formal economy. With the spread of media and increasing involvement of development agencies in implementing development programs, the ideas of material prosperity spread from cities into rural areas. Yet, although public expectations were raised, the mechanisms required to gain access to this economic prosperity were never institutionalized; rather, access to modernity was contingent on the initial resource endowment of each individual family. The state education system did not improve, jobs in the formal sector did not expand—especially not in proportion to the increase in population. Only 49% of the population is literate. The political domination of the feudal and military elite has resulted in low investment in education: maintaining the historical trend, education received 2% of the annual GDP in 2004, while military spending got 4% (World Bank, 2007a, 2007b). The unemployment rate was 6% in 2006 (Asian Development Bank, 2008), and the underemployment rate is much higher; in addition, 60% of the population resides in rural areas and is thus largely reliant on informal economic activity. With a population growth rate of 2.1%, the population of 159 million is estimated to double in twenty years.

The middle-income groups, even when willing to invest in private education, could only afford low-level schools whose students ultimately could not compete in

the employment market with graduates from elite educational institutions. This uneven distribution of the benefits of economic modernization on its own might not have triggered a reaction if economic changes were not being fast outpaced by the twin process of cultural modernization, whose spread—unlike economic development—was not contingent on the state developing a level playing field for all. Central to this was the role of the media, where a revolution in information technology made cable TV, the Internet and mobile phones accessible to the poorest income groups even in rural areas of Pakistan, especially during the last decade.<sup>2</sup> The cable TV network in particular, which has become the most economical pastime for families and young girls, has initiated a process of cultural modernization; it, however, also poses the most serious threat to traditional values. The most watched channels on cable are the ones airing Indian movies and soap operas. These give girls ideas of an economically empowered lifestyle and promote fanciful notions of romantic love affairs outside the institution of marriage, while at the same time implanting the idea of the right to choose one's own partner. For parents, especially those within the middle-income group, this discrepancy between the pace of economic and cultural modernity creates a most unsettling sense of loss of control, as many feel unable to regulate these new forces. Hopeful of reaping the benefits of economic modernization, these parents do make their girls enter secular educational institutions, but the government schools and colleges that they can afford provide no security of economic employment. Further, the secretarial level jobs, which are at times available, record high incidences of female exploitation. The result of this disparity between economic and cultural modernity has thus been increased frustration among the girls and the sense of a loss of control among parents.

The new reality for girls in middle-income families is that, after acquiring their bachelor degrees in secular colleges, they return to the confines of their home, waiting for their sole prospect of upward mobility—namely, a good marriage. The difference, however, is that, unlike their mothers, these girls have studied, are exposed to the latest fashion trends, know about the significance of Valentine's Day and have fanciful notions of romantic relationships with happy endings, drawn from Indian soap operas and movies. In a context where age at marriage is recording an increase, and cheap access to mobile phones and the Internet has made it possible to meet new people and sustain prolonged interaction without leaving the confines of the home, the fear that the girls could entertain ideas of having affairs has become a real and constant concern for these families. At one level, this provides incentives to parents to provide religious education to the girls for their moral training to prevent them from making the wrong choices. However, the decision to go to a madrasa is rarely imposed by parents; interviews show that the majority of girls come by choice because they also recognize that madrasa education provides higher dividends than secular education, given the socioeconomic constraints that regulate their choices.

In order to understand the girls' preference for attendance in female madrasas, it is important to grasp the socioeconomic and psychological relevance of the religious beliefs in the girls' day-to-day lives. Interviews in the four provinces reveal

that, given the context of Pakistani society where the state is failing to provide quality education and good employment opportunities, madrasa education provides much more meaningful means of social, economic and psychological empowerment for girls. To begin with, such an education is socially empowering. For the course of the study, the girls leave their homes, which involves travel—large madrasas are a big-city phenomenon, drawing many students from rural areas—and the opportunity to live with girls from different socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural settings. The result is the acquisition of a wealth of social networks and contacts, which these girls would have never acquired in their hometowns. For girls from remote areas or very conservative families, madrasas can at times become their sole means of access to a basic education:

When admitted to the madrasa I did not know how to read or write Urdu, as we only speak Balochi at home. So when I first wrote a letter to my mother in Urdu, she was so excited that she did not believe I wrote it myself. I had to write it in front of her when I next saw her to make her believe it.<sup>3</sup>

In a society where religion matters, these girls become an asset to the community upon returning to their homes. They become an authoritative voice to answer religious questions regarding the day-to-day matters of concern for local women; they are requested to conduct religious rituals and lead prayers at religious gatherings frequently hosted within the households<sup>4</sup>; and some acquire social respect and recognition by teaching the Quran to neighborhood children free of charge. Interviews across all five *wafaqs* and the brochures of these madrasas elucidate the emphasis placed by the *ulama* on the importance of spreading the knowledge they have acquired during their studies in the madrasa, which, as was visible during the course of my fieldwork, has a serious impact on student choices: all 100 respondents planned to engage in activities which would help them spread the message of Islam when they returned home on completion of their madrasa education.

If madrasa education makes the girls socially influential, it is not devoid of the potential to contribute to their economic prosperity. It is very common practice among the female students, especially those from rural areas and smaller cities with limited opportunities for religious education, to open a madrasa of their own on their return home: sixty percent of respondents stated that they would like to establish their own madrasas. Given that the female madrasas charge monthly tuition fees—though such charges are routinely waived to accommodate students from poor income groups, especially in large madrasas—they have the potential to be turned into profitable sources of income. The madrasa education thus enables women with entrepreneurial skills to open their own madrasas, an option that students of secular schools and colleges can rarely exercise. The primary reason for this difference is that starting a madrasa, which can even be held in one room in the teacher's house, is less cost-intensive than establishing a secular school, where the parents would prefer a proper building. Since 2002, truly entrepreneurial students can even enter



national politics: the policy of reserving one third of the seats in the national Parliament for women has opened up opportunities for female madrasa graduates to seek seats through the platform of religious political parties.

A much deeper factor than the ones analyzed above, and arguably the most significant in sustaining the girls' convictions in Islamic beliefs, is the strong psychological incentives provided by a madrasa education. Interviews and discussions with students reveal that religious beliefs help reduce the importance of many material aspirations, making the girls more content with their existing circumstances, in addition to giving them the confidence of being a positive force in society. The whole of madrasa education is tuned to making the girls feel of worth by teaching them to be proud of the critical role they play in society as a mother, sister, daughter and wife. This is captured well in a brochure of the Jamiat-i-Islami madrasa:

Half of the responsibility for the promotion and development of an Islamic Society is shouldered by women. Unfortunately, today's Muslim women are steeped in ignorance and have wandered far from the role they were born to play. To have a positive reformatory impact on Society, women with faith, *taqwa* [conviction] and high moral values are needed.

The brochure goes on to state the mission of the madrasa as: "To groom practicing Muslim girl students equipped with modern education who present themselves as role model women for the betterment of society." A recurrent theme in interviews and group discussions with the girls was how the teachings of Islamic texts added to their confidence and gave them a sense of purpose.

In addition to making the girls feel of worth by assigning great social significance to the roles they play as members of the family, madrasa education also empowers them by removing the fears they might have of individuals or social structures. The basic premise of Islamic teaching is, since all good or bad that comes to an individual rests in the will of God, no one can harm anyone else unless this is so willed by Allah. For girls, who are exposed to numerous pressures, especially when living in joint families in the initial years of their marriage, this is very psychologically empowering. To know the rights that Islam has bestowed on them as wives and daughters-in-law makes them confident of their place within the household and enables them to resolve more amicably any tensions by using religious discourse. The significance of these psychological mechanisms for ensuring a sense of purpose among the girls is significant when compared with the benefits of the secular education system that determines a student's worth mainly in terms of future employability—opportunities for which are, by all means, very limited. Thus, one important reason that a madrasa education is able to convince girls of Islamic beliefs is that these beliefs provide psychological means to deal with practical challenges that either have no material solutions or limited ones available to very few.

Another Islamic precept that pays significant dividends in generating a sense of contentment among madrasa graduates is the emphasis on the virtue of simplicity: to be grateful for whatever one has. Islam encourages the believer to strive for material prosperity but also highlights the virtues of being content with little. The madrasa education repeatedly draws on incidents from the Prophet's life, and those of his daughters, to psychologically empower the girls to deal with material scarcity. Whereas girls attending colleges face peer pressure to follow the latest fashion trends and have an eligible suitor on Valentine's Day,<sup>5</sup> the girls in the madrasa system, having been repeatedly exposed to virtues of simplicity and piety, come to view such desires as frivolous. Since most come to the madrasa after studying in the secular educational system, many find this moral position more rewarding than their prior experience of pursuing aspirations which were out of reach anyway. The madrasa education continues to make the girls' desires and demands match the practical realities of their lives, thereby reducing disappointment of unmet expectations and relieving pressure on the parents. Thus, while secular education and Western notions of gender equality often result in heightened frustration due to the failure of the state to provide means to exercise those choices, female madrasas equip girls to maximize their social, economic and personal well-being within the given socioeconomic constraints by training them to better play the only role that formal institutional structures allow them—namely, that of a homemaker. These practical reasons for the appeal of madrasa education among teenage girls from middle-income families shows that the demand for religious values and traditional norms, which have a popular following, is heightened when they are well-matched with practical realities.

## Conclusion

This article has argued for recognizing the need to engage with alternative conceptions of female empowerment, both as a moral prerogative of different communities, but equally importantly because of the greater practical relevance of these alternative conceptions in the given context. At times, these local conceptions of womanhood—being more sensitive to local realities—are more conducive to negotiating space for change for women from within the system than are ideas of Western feminism promoted from abroad. Irrespective of their ideological appeal, feminist ideas from the West can be simply impractical in societies where the state fails to provide the formal structure for ordinary citizens, men or women, to maximize their capabilities. When the state has no Social Security for single women, when the police force itself can become more of a source of harassment than protection, when the state does not provide the schooling facilities to empower girls to gain employable skills and when the market does not provide job opportunities,

the universalist ideals of individual freedom and Western-centric models of feminism face not just ideological, but very severe practical challenges.

When the state is absent, the security guaranteed by staying within the fold of the family unit becomes more important for the woman than seeking individual liberty, which, though liberating, also inherently exposes her to higher risks. Thus, while women's rights NGOs have the right to promote feminist ideals that they espouse, they and the international development agencies that support them need to develop better sensitivity not just to the legitimate moral basis of alternative conceptions of womanhood, but also to the practical relevance of these homegrown conceptions as opposed to Western conceptions of liberal feminism. Thus, when Kabeer (1999) identifies three interrelated dimensions of empowerment—resources (defined broadly to include not only access, but also future claims, to both human and social resources); agency (including processes of decision-making, as well as less measurable manifestations, such as negotiation, deception and manipulation); and achievements (well-being outcomes)—it is also important to recognize that what constitutes resources, agency and achievements is itself context-specific.

Empowerment, as Kabeer (1999) argues, should therefore not be interpreted purely in terms of achievements that represent the values of those who are doing the measuring. For leaders of feminist NGOs—who belong to affluent families and have had the privilege of the best education in the country, and some of whom have also been educated in Western universities and have access to decent employment opportunities—the idea of social recognition in the community as a prayer leader might seem a self-deluding preference. Yet, for the majority of the Pakistani girls who have no recourse to quality educational institutions and have no employment opportunities, being recognized and respected within their local web of community networks holds real meaning. Thus, development programs need to create context-sensitive tools to measure the sources of women's empowerment.

The appeal of alternative women's rights movements and resistance to Western conceptions of universalist feminist models can only be understood by recognizing multiple conceptions of womanhood and the different practical relevance of these alternative ideals in different contexts. It is important to highlight the instrumental benefits of these alternative movements, as recognition of their practical relevance is more likely to force development planners to take them seriously than arguments that draw attention to the intrinsic appeal of the alternative conceptions of womanhood they promote. As Kabeer notes,

Advocacy on behalf of women which builds on claimed synergies between feminist goals and official development priorities has made greater inroads into the mainstream development agenda than advocacy which argues for these goals on intrinsic grounds (1999:435).

This is because it is seen to be critical to development itself. Similarly, highlighting the practical relevance of these movements embedded in alternative conceptions of

women's well-being is critical to making the development planners recognize that ignoring them will not result in eradicating them. They exist because they serve a purpose, and it is important to engage with and understand the purpose they serve rather than dismissing them simply as an ideological opposition.

This is not to argue that, from the perspective of social policy, these sources of empowerment offered by madrasas should be viewed as optimal in the long term. Arguably, there are limits to the kind of empowerment that can be secured through better recognition of women in social networks and the psychological empowerment offered by the madrasas. What I argue is that, under the current circumstances, where the state fails to provide the education and employment opportunities associated with notions of development, these alternative sources of empowerment are rationally proving more appealing to these girls and their parents. For development planners and feminist theorists, it is important to recognize the rational appeal of these Islamic movements to better understand their growth; this understanding is also important to design policies that can offer incentives to attract these women to alternative notions of empowerment if the sources of empowerment offered through the madrasa platform are considered to be inadequate.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Similar functionalist interpretations of women's recourse to Islamic beliefs have been adopted to explain the popularity of veiling in many studies on Muslim women (El Guindi, 1999; Hoffman-Ladd, 1987; MacLeod, 1991; Zuhur, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Cable TV can be secured for a monthly payment of £3; Internet cafes allow one hour access for less than thirty pence; and three-minute domestic mobile calls cost less than ten pence.

<sup>3</sup> Stated by a student in the Jamiat-i-Islami madrasa in Quetta, who comes from a very remote village in rural Baluchistan, the province with the lowest developmental indicators.

<sup>4</sup> Within Pakistani society, it is common to organize many forms of religious gatherings at home. These can range from the collective recitation of the Holy Quran to holding a lecture on a specific Islamic precept.

<sup>5</sup> Based on interviews with girls in regular colleges.

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