Religion and Development in Bangladesh

The Asia Foundation advances social justice for women, good governance, and interfaith tolerance through engagement with male and female religious leaders across Bangladesh.

Religious leaders in Bangladesh carry considerable influence and command high levels of respect in society as they play important roles in shaping the values and beliefs of individuals and communities. For over a decade, The Asia Foundation has worked in partnership with influential *imams* (religious leaders) and community leaders to advance social justice for women, good governance, and interfaith tolerance and dialogue in Bangladesh.

**SOCIAL JUSTICE FOR WOMEN**

Women comprise slightly more than half of the population of Bangladesh, and dedicated efforts to increase the participation of girls and women in education, business, politics, and social movements have been successful. Nevertheless, women and girls continue to face social, political, and economic discrimination and are frequently victims of violence both in and out of the home. Since 2008, The Asia Foundation has been engaging religious and community leaders to advance social justice for women within an Islamic framework. Designed and implemented by Muslim religious leaders, scholars, and activists, this program has helped communities to understand and advance women’s rights within Islam, including those rights related to marriage, custody, inheritance, education, employment, and political participation. In addition, these initiatives have shared important information on legal aid services, medical assistance, and judicial support for women who experience violence. Program activities have also helped to foster a network of influential religious leaders, scholars, and advocates – both men and women – who are committed to advancing women’s rights across the region.

Since 2012, the Foundation has been engaging the wives of religious leaders, in addition to *imams* and Islamic scholars, in order to reach out to women directly and thereby strengthen social justice outcomes more inclusively. Through trainings and community outreach activities, this program has addressed issues related to women’s rights and the prevention of physical, sexual, economic, and psychological violence against women. With men through *khutbas* (weekly sermons) and with women through facilitated “courtyard meetings,” these efforts have reached over 1,100 *imams* and *imams’* wives, and are more than 110,223 male and female community members. As a result of this initiative, Muslim women have become more aware of their rights and more vocal in asserting those rights with the support of their husbands. Further, through their engagement and leadership roles in this initiative, the wives of *imams* have become more prominent leaders in their communities and are prepared to share critical information when they are sought out by neighbors.

The Asia Foundation

Improving Lives, Expanding Opportunities

BANGLADESH

The Asia Foundation has been working in Bangladesh since 1954.

Through an integrated approach informed by local context and voices, we address critical issues of governance and law, economic development, women’s empowerment, environment, and regional cooperation.
GOOD GOVERNANCE

To foster more inclusive participation by citizens in decision-making and social development, the Foundation has engaged imams, imams’ wives, and higher secondary-level students from madrasahs and other schools on a range of governance issues. A series of training workshops addressed leadership, tolerance, accountability, and transparency, and how to practice these values in everyday life within families, schools, and communities. Imams and imams’ wives conducted outreach in their communities on these issues, and participating youth formed school clubs focused on social development. Furthermore, these efforts resulted in greater understanding between students from madrasahs and secular schools, who rarely interact in their everyday lives, but through this program’s workshops and community development activities, had the opportunity to work together.

INTERFAITH TOLERANCE AND DIALOGUE

More than a decade ago, The Asia Foundation initiated a program to enhance the capacity of leaders of influence – Muslim religious leaders, leaders of other faiths, and secular community leaders – to contribute to national development and democratic reform efforts and, in so doing, to preserve and advance values of democracy, tolerance, diversity, social harmony, and understanding in Bangladeshi society. A primary component of the program was a partnership with the Bangladesh Imam Training Academy and its seven training centers across the country. The Foundation collaborated with the Imam Training Academy to enhance its existing 45-day training course for imams with a three-day add-on program to educate imams about various developmental, social, and cultural issues, such as healthcare services for women and children, modern agricultural methods, and women’s rights.

To complement classroom learning, the Foundation organized field visits to expose the imams to governmental and nongovernmental service centers and project sites. The Foundation conducted similar training programs with Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian religious leaders and secular community leaders, and included interfaith activities to promote greater understanding and dialogue about common development challenges.

The Foundation has continued to encourage tolerance among different religious groups in Bangladesh, by supporting interfaith workshops that bring male and female religious leaders together to discuss democracy, good governance, women’s rights, interfaith coexistence, youth engagement, and mutual respect. In these facilitated training workshops, leaders from different faiths have expressed their solidarity on these development issues, and their common goal to enhance mutual respect and tolerance in their communities. Since participating in this initiative, some participants have decided to independently form interfaith committees in their communities, to continue drawing men and women from different faiths together to discuss common interests, issues, and community-wide solutions.

LEADERS OF INFLUENCE

The Asia Foundation’s Leaders Outreach Initiative (2005-2007) and Leaders of Influence (LOI) program (2007-2011), both funded by USAID, addressed development challenges by helping trusted leaders master the tools of grassroots activism to advance democratic values and promote access to basic social services. The LOI programs reached over 26,000 participants, including Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian leaders as well as imams, local-elected officials, community service club members, women and youth leaders, and professionals. Through a series of orientations and workshops, participants became familiar with development projects and practices in their communities on issues such as health, education, religious harmony, environmental conservation, and women’s empowerment, with gender and good governance as cross-cutting themes. This knowledge sharing culminated in a regional conference in March 2010 in Bangladesh on the Role of Religious and Community Leaders in Advancing Development in Asia, which brought together religious and traditional leaders, political actors and development practitioners from 14 countries across Asia.