The Women’s Rights and Social Justice in Islam curriculum content highlights that Islam allows women to play an active role in public decision-making as leaders, voters, and citizens. This allows women to have a critical role to play to stop violence against women and other community leaders have encouraged them to take active roles in public decision-making.

SUCCESS STORIES

The curriculum content has had significant impact on individuals and, ultimately, communities. The following are some of the personal stories that were shared by imams and madrassa leaders in Bangladesh who were trained in the curriculum:

• One participant’s father was opposed to his elder daughter getting an education. The participant convinced his father that the sister deserved an education, citing references from the Quran and the Qur’an.

• After attending the training, a principal of a madrassa in Chittagong started two-hour afternoon classes for 30 girls in the community. These classes provide computer education and education on women’s rights within Islam, using the curriculum and handbook as a guide.

• A woman lecturer who attended the curricula training was forbidden by her in-laws to work. Through citing the curriculum’s references from the Quran and the Qur’an, she convinced her in-laws to let her work as a lecturer.

• One master trainer shared that with the help of this curriculum, he was able to tackle cases of abuse against women in garment factories.

• One man who did not give his sister her due share in inheritance was convinced by an imam to do so after the imam cited references from the Quran from the curriculum.

• Young men in a focus group described how the imam is a mentor and guide to them. They expressed their growing awareness of women’s rights in Islam because of this connection with the imam. One young man in the focus group said that if he were to ever have a daughter, he would educate her and would like her to become a doctor or an engineer.

The Asia Foundation’s program on women’s rights within Islam aims to promote national and regional networks of Muslim leaders who will continue to advance women’s rights in their societies and to foster communication and cooperation among Muslim leaders. The program was designed and implemented in Bangladesh in coordination with institutions in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

A key component of this program is a strong connection with local partners. Partners in each country helped to develop a country-specific training curriculum on women’s rights within Islam. The Asia Foundation collaborated with the Islamic Foundation in Bangladesh, with the Ministry of Hajj and Awqaf in Afghanistan, and with the International Islamic University in Pakistan. From August 2008 to December 2011, each partner developed a draft curriculum within their country through collaboration with eminent religious leaders and education specialists. These curricula were then refined through collaboration with their colleagues in the other two countries.

The output was three strong, locally contextualized curricula which served as the basis for the program.

In 2008, a program on “Advancing Human Rights and Women’s Rights within an Islamic Framework across South Asia” was launched using this curriculum as its foundation. The program’s aim was to increase understanding and support for human and women’s rights among Muslim leaders and within local Muslim communities through outlining the compatibility of women’s rights and Islamic teachings. The program was highly successful in increasing awareness of women’s rights in Bangladesh largely due to its ability to engage highly respected local leaders. Through the program, thousands of imams and madrassa leaders were trained, who in turn utilized the curriculum in different capacities including training workshops and dissemination within their networks. Such activities garnered widespread support among imams, who shared curriculum themes with influential leaders and within communities across the country.
agents of change in their communities. Encourages changes in the larger community including discussions on social and economic challenges arising from these. 

RELIGIOUS LEADERS

In recent years, Bangladesh has been undergoing rapid transformation in its social, economic, and political milieu. Curriculum topics address some of the current social and economic challenges arising from these changes in the larger community including discussion on women’s education, empowerment, employment, and inheritance. Building conversation around these issues encourages imams and other religious leaders to act as agents of change in their communities.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN ISLAM CURRICULUM WIDELY ACCEPTED BY RELIGIOUS LEADERS

The authority that imams have in communities allowed them to serve as an appropriate channel of communication to convey messages on women’s rights within Islam. Because this curriculum was developed through the participation of these respected imams and was utilized by them in trainings and workshops, the curriculum gained credibility in local communities. Focus groups with community members highlighted that imams’ interventions in areas related to women’s rights had the following results: divorce was prevented, daughters received their rightful inheritance of property from their families, girls gained opportunities to go to school, and women gained consent more often from their families to work outside the home (often as madrasas teachers). Additionally, imams reported heightened credibility and respect in their communities due to roles they were able to play through curriculum trainings as arbitrators in resolving local legal disputes. Many community members reported that the intervention of local imams in settling their family disputes, especially around inheritance and bride money, enabled them not to be “sinners.”

CURRICULUM ADDRESSES CURRENT ISSUES

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CURRICULUM IS RELEVANT AND ACCESSIBLE TO THE COMMUNITY AT LARGE

The curriculum’s design and development resulted in a tool that was both approachable and relevant to trainees. Communities were highly receptive to the curriculum’s content because it was developed by well-known Islamic scholars and religious leaders and its modules were written in simple language so as to be accessible to participants. Training participants reported that the curriculum’s structure and content was relevant, simple to understand, and easy to internalize. A handbook covering curriculum content was printed and widely distributed as a quick reference for follow-up discussions. After the trainings, many imams continued to use the handbook and curriculum lessons in community interactions related to women’s rights. Many of the participants trained in the curriculum, including religious leaders, madrasa educators, master trainers, and workshop trainees, have incorporated these methods in their own classes, both at madrasas and at universities. Many imams, for example, reported that the curriculum provided access to practical information to use in Friday sermons compared to the more philosophical teachings used before.

Additionally, the discussion and interest on women’s rights within Islam which grew from curriculum training and use has led to broadened national networks of leaders engaged in advancing women’s rights within Islam. An extension of the program, for example, enabled collaboration across borders in South Asia. Scholars from Bangladesh had the opportunity to interact with their Afghan and Pakistani colleagues to share similarities and differences related to the protection of women’s rights and human rights in their respective countries.

INCREASED PUBLIC AWARENESS AND ENGAGEMENT WITH WOMEN’S RIGHTS

Information received and shared from the training made a significant impact on the lives of community members. One of the curriculum trainees explained that lessons from the curriculum were relevant to both educated and non-educated people who visit the mosque where he works. Several imams explained that they had shared this curriculum with their wives and reported that their wives were able to utilize these lessons to resolve disputes for other women in their community and also educate women about their rights.

CURRICULUM HIGHLIGHTS

WOMEN AND FAMILY

The curriculum introduces the crucial roles that women play in families as mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives, noting that the importance of women’s roles is recognized in the Holy Quran and Hadith. In-laws are encouraged to respect the rights of wives during family disputes and men are reminded of their duty under Islam to properly take care of their wives.

EDUCATION RIGHTS

The curriculum emphasizes that Islam entitles women and men to the same rights to education. Training programs encourage discussion on the value of girls’ education and highlight that educating girls contributes to a better educated family in the future. Following the training, participating imams and madrasa teachers reported that they were more able to take a proactive role in stopping early marriage in their local communities and in advising parents to let their daughters stay in school. Imams cited these practices as the most Islamic thing to do. Many imams also shared that they had delivered sermons to their communities in support of education for women.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

The curriculum identifies the economic rights granted to women in Islam, teaching that women are as qualified and able as men to engage in financial transactions and property ownership. According to Islamic law, women can own, buy, sell and undertake any financial deal without the help of a guardian and without any restrictions or limitations. Imams reported that they carried these lessons to their communities, speaking more openly in protest of economic discrimination against women. They spoke on the need for women’s economic empowerment not only to improve women’s lives, but also for society’s overall poverty alleviation and long-term development.

INHERITANCE RIGHTS

Curriculum trainings have provided imams with a platform to engage in discussion and strategize on ways to build public support for fair inheritance rights of women. The training programs gave many imams the moral courage to take action to stop cultural practices that deny inheritance rights to women – a right cited as given under Islam. Many participants reported that they have shared these related training experiences with their family members, friends, colleagues, and local community members.

WOMEN’S SECURITY

The curriculum facilitate discussion on women’s security and violence against women in relation to Islam. Often cultural traditions enable the perpetuation of social problems such as domestic violence, gender discrimination, harassment, and abuse. Curriculum modules note that while some cultural traditions and religious customs allow men to exercise undue dominance over women, these are not approved in Islam. Imams reported realizing the importance of the training program in facilitating their role in promoting the equality of women within their local communities.

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