

# The unanswered questions about women's role in religion-based politics



NABILA TASNEEM ANONNYA

Nabila Tasneem Anonnya is a fellow and PhD student in sociocultural anthropology at Arizona State University, US.

In 2022, many in Bangladesh were stunned when Shila, a woman in her sixties, assaulted a young girl for wearing jeans and a crop top at the Narsingdi Railway Station. How could a woman publicly assault another woman over her choice of clothing? At the time, it seemed like a shocking aberration. But since then, such incidents have multiplied, suggesting an apparent normalisation of moral policing of women's choices.

But what raised more concern is the role played by a section of women in these dynamics. Since the July uprising, mobs of men have regularly harassed women in public spaces for not wearing the orna (scarf) or for wearing it in ways they considered "insufficiently" modest. In many of these incidents that later gained attention on social media, a group of women was present, either openly supporting the attackers or, at times, actively participating themselves.

The role of these women in Bangladesh, however, has expanded beyond policing public morality. Many now seem active across the right-wing political spectrum, campaigning for Islamist parties, mobilising grassroots women, and challenging feminist organisations and their proposed recommendations. This recent mobilisation demands a critical public discussion to understand its implications for women in post-uprising Bangladesh. While their political participation may seem slightly new in Bangladesh, historically, women supporting religion-based politics in Muslim-

majority countries have played a critical role, though whether that has improved women's situation remains an open question.

Women on the political right in Muslim-majority countries generally operate within the confines of conservative cultural codes and use an Islamic discourse on gender "complementarity"—according to which men and women are created with different natures or fitrat (innate characteristics) in order to fulfil different functions on earth—rather than gender equality to participate in party politics. We have already seen this ideological reflection in Bangladesh as well: when they have been asked about their positionality regarding gender equality in talk shows or interviews, they have either openly stated that they do not believe in gender equality or have tried hard to avoid answering the question. Within this particular Islamic political ideology, women activists do not organise and participate in cultural or political activities to compete with men on the basis of individualistic concerns, but rather because they believe it is their religious duty to support men in both public and private life. The question remains: if leaders from such parties are elected—parties that do not believe in gender equality—what does that mean for Bangladesh where three out of four women still face gender-based violence?

Female members of most religion-based politics in the country commonly claim that they

represent the silent majority of the female population who dutifully perform their social roles as devoted housewives and mothers, as well as their traditional religious duties. They usually define themselves against two figures: the secular modern woman—unveiled, public-facing, distant from religion—and the traditional Muslim woman—passive,

underrepresented in politics, and there are concerns that patriarchal moral codes within religion-based parties further restrict their participation as independent political actors. Although they are expected to mobilise extensively at the grassroots—organising voters, running community campaigns, and securing support for the

patriarchal gender norms.

It would be incorrect to assume that religion-based parties never use secular codes. For political gains, they often appropriate secular gender codes, albeit selectively. Women's rights to education, economic independence, choosing a spouse, and initiating divorce are among the most notable. These rights are

but what sets them apart is the trust they generate: their work is framed as aligned with religion, which allows them to appear as acting for divine purposes and guiding others along the "true path" in the political arena. This faith dimension not only legitimises religion-based politics but also makes participation and support for these parties a form of service rooted in religious responsibility, a highly legitimate cause that others cannot easily compete with. Religion-based politics across the globe have long relied on this dynamic.

Scholars have often discussed the factors that lead women to join right-wing movements. One key reason is gender conditioning, which is tied to what being a woman means in their social and cultural context. Many are attracted by promises of social stability or respect. Some women see joining these movements as a way to access public or organisational leadership roles that might otherwise be denied to them, even if it means upholding patriarchal norms. Fear or resistance to progressive social changes that challenge their way of life pushes many women to support these movements, as they seek to preserve a society that reflects and validates their identity and responsibilities.

In the current political arena of Bangladesh, representatives of religion-based parties must clarify to the nation whether this newly gained visibility of women in their party politics is merely temporary, aimed at creating a facade of a gender-inclusive public image, or whether it can become the norm. The critical question is the extent to which they will actively address the "women's question" in their political agenda, rather than assuming that women's progress will naturally follow from the establishment of a just Islamic social order. These questions cannot be bypassed if they are to demonstrate their true potential as political actors for women in Bangladesh.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

domestically confined, with limited religious knowledge. Instead, they present themselves as "enlightened Muslim women": religious, modern, socially active, able to move in public, however, without violating Islamic principles. This framing neatly fits into Muslim societies' long-standing desire to appear "modern" while preserving an "authentic" Islamic essence.

A long-standing feminist scholarly concern has been women's exclusion from decision-making. Across the world, women are highly

party—despite carrying the bulk of public work, they are systematically excluded from decision-making positions. This dynamic is already visible in Bangladesh, where religion-based party meetings and leadership gatherings remain overwhelmingly male, and women appear only as symbolic figures. Through this pattern, these parties rely on women's labour for mobilisation while keeping actual political power in male hands, using "symbolic feminisation" to project a gender-inclusive image without challenging the underlying

accepted only insofar as they do not conflict with Islamic gender rules although ultimate authority remains with men, a longstanding concern for feminist scholars. For instance, a recent remark by a leader of a party in Bangladesh proposing to reduce women's working hours sparked strong criticism, highlighting the tension over who holds the authority to decide women's participation in public and economic life.

The strategies women supporting religion-based politics adopt are not unlike those of other political parties,

## Reimagining education as the practice of freedom



SV ANWAR AHMED

SV Anwar Ahmed is a student of anthropology at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology. He can be reached at anwarahmedsust@gmail.com.

cultural experiences into dialogue, cultivating unity with difference.

How can we imagine a human being without curiosity? Yet genuine curiosity rarely reflects in school-going faces today. Many students appear as though their lives have already lost vitality—no expectation, no spark. We must recognise the long-term socio-cultural costs of producing a generation of vulnerable selves—or worse, human robots. These may serve the needs of a dominating state or powerful social forces, but are destructive for any society committed to collective flourishing.

Freire's distinction between problem-posing education and the banking model is crucial here. Problem-posing education cultivates ethical reasoning, collective problem-solving, and social imagination; banking education turns students into passive containers of information.

Without a significant number of reflective, balanced, and thoughtful individuals—products of good schooling—it becomes impossible to sustain a healthy, independent, and responsible society. Vulnerable selves often cannot recognise their own vulnerability. They struggle with critical ethical grounding and lack the capacity for self-critique, often believing their truths to be unquestionable. In contrast, intellectually mature individuals remain ever-curious, reflective, and socially responsible.

Schools, I believe, should help children become individuals who can observe, think, write, and understand themselves and others with ethical awareness. Even at a basic level, such anthropological practice nurtures tolerance and reflex. Students must also be allowed to make mistakes. As Humayun Kabir, an educator, wrote: "one cannot discover truth without making mistakes, and if these truths are learned only later in political or social life, society pays the cost. Therefore, students should encounter diverse experiences—including mistakes—during their formative years."

We need a generation that loves diversity and life itself; that values music, poetry, nature, and human dignity; that remains sceptical of the known and curious about the unknown; that seeks truth—not absolute truth, but evolving and partial truth. Such a generation must learn to imagine its future,

to understand the consequences of present actions. Without knowing history objectively—from social to subaltern histories—how can one envision the future? And without envisioning the future, how can one understand the present?

For Tim Ingold, an anthropologist, education is about maturation, not

matriculation. Teachers and students walk together as fellow travellers in the pursuit of truth. The teacher's role is not to make learning easy, but to exemplify generosity, companionship in inquiry, and honest critique.

Freedom, then, is not merely a constitutional or social right; it is a practicable act—something that can

be cultivated and nurtured in schools.

No education system is perfect. But acknowledging imperfection should not lead to silence. We must engage in the continuous research of education itself, searching again and again for more responsible ways of pursuing truth for the common good.

### Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Office of the Director  
Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control & Research (IEDCR), Mohakhali, Dhaka-1212  
Tel: 8802-222280376, 8802-2222986691 Fax: 02222280440

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