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Faith and Empowerment among Bangladeshi Muslim Women

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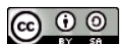
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Abstract

This study examines whether Islam in Bangladesh promotes or hinders women's empowerment. Using qualitative analysis of peer-reviewed literature, policy documents, and digital content, the research examines how religious teachings, cultural norms, and social realities interact. Although Islamic teachings emphasize justice, consent, and women's economic rights, these ideals are often unevenly applied due to patriarchal customs, informal dispute parties, and selective religious interpretations. The findings show that practices such as wearing the hijab, praying, and studying the Quran help many women build discipline, dignity, and social capital, which strengthens their confidence, mobility, and voice. At the same time, the same religious spaces, both offline and online, can become restrictive through social monitoring, 'religious vigilantism', family norms, and barriers in the job market. The findings suggest that religion can function both as a resource and a barrier, and its impact depends on factors such as class, location, disability, and access to digital platforms.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Muslim women, empowerment, Islamic feminist theology, digital piety



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Introduction

In contemporary Bangladesh, the principles of gender equality coexist with long-standing religious and socio-cultural norms that continue to shape women's roles and opportunities.¹ Legal frameworks such as the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (1961) have promised to expand women's rights, yet implementation has often been inconsistent.² Over the decades, development initiatives, educational reforms, and increasing employment opportunities have improved women's socio-economic status.³ Nevertheless, Bangladeshi Muslim women frequently define their identity and moral agency through Islamic beliefs, values, and practices, which they perceive as sources of empowerment.⁴ At the same time, traditional religious interpretations and patriarchal norms can constrain women's autonomy, limit public participation, and influence decision-making within families and communities.⁵ This study examines how Islamic beliefs, practices, and interpretations intersect with socio-cultural norms to shape the empowerment of Muslim women in Bangladesh. It examines the duality through which religion can function both as a source of agency and as a potential constraint, and explores how women navigate these competing influences in their daily lives.

Despite notable progress in women's education, employment, and leadership in Bangladesh, many aspects of women's empowerment remain shaped by religious interpretations and patriarchal expectations.⁶ Scriptural readings and customary practices continue to influence gender roles, often reinforcing limitations on women's autonomy, public presence, and decision-making power.⁷ These intersecting forces create a complex reality where religious norms can either support or restrict

¹H. S. Khatun, Ahmed, and Nasrin 2024

²Kabeer 1991

³Hasan et al. 2019

⁴Mahmood 2005

⁵Ahmed 1992; Kabeer 2011

⁶Mawa 2020

⁷Ahmed 1992; Kabeer 2011

women's rights, depending on how they are interpreted, practiced, and enforced.⁸

Muslim women's lived experiences demonstrate that religion is not uniformly oppressive.⁹ For many, faith serves as a source of moral strength, identity, and personal agency.¹⁰ Their navigation of religious commitment and social participation challenges binary representations of Islam as either liberating or restrictive.¹¹ This study, therefore, aims to explore how religiosity in Bangladesh functions within this dual framework – sometimes empowering women, sometimes constraining them, and how women themselves understand and negotiate this dynamic.

This study is limited to Muslim women living in urban and semi-urban areas of Bangladesh. It focuses specifically on how Islamic beliefs, religious practices, and socio-cultural norms shape women's empowerment, agency, and identity. While broader aspects of women's development, such as political activism, economic policy, or secular development programs, are acknowledged, they are not the primary focus of this research. The study emphasizes the lived experiences and perspectives of women themselves, exploring how they interpret religious teachings, negotiate social expectations, and balance faith with public and professional life. Data collection is focused on qualitative methods to capture these nuanced experiences, rather than large-scale statistical analysis.

This research is important because it looks at an issue that has received limited attention in academic studies: how Muslim women in Bangladesh experience both faith and empowerment in their daily lives. While many studies talk about women's progress in terms of education, work, or development programs, they often ignore the role religion plays

⁸Mahmood 2005; Wadud 1999

⁹Mahmood 2005

¹⁰Wadud 1999

¹¹Ahmed 1992; Mahmood 2005

in shaping women's choices and identities. By focusing on the voices and experiences of women who are both religious and socially active, this study offers a more complete picture of empowerment, one that includes spiritual values alongside social change. It helps us understand how Muslim women make decisions, find strength in their faith, and participate in society without giving up their religious beliefs. The findings are useful for academics, development workers, and policymakers who want to support women's empowerment in a way that respects their faith and cultural context. It may also encourage further research into how religion and gender interact, rather than being seen as opposites.

Background

The discussion of women's rights and dignity has been critical since the early days of Islam. The patriarchal society prevalent in pre-Islamic Arabia deprived women of many basic rights, and the arrival of Islam introduced a new perspective for women, one that recognized their spiritual dignity, legal rights, and social roles. Women could acquire knowledge, own and inherit property, and make decisions about marriage and divorce. The first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, Khadija, who was a successful businesswoman, and his third wife, Aisha, who was a prominent scholar, show that Islam encouraged women's intellectual pursuits and social participation.¹²

However, over time, these egalitarian principles have been disrupted. During the Abbasid and Ottoman periods, patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law began to dominate, and women's opportunities for public life and intellectual pursuits diminished.¹³ Similar effects were seen in South Asia, although women sometimes held spiritual leadership positions in the Sufi tradition. In British India, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's work on

¹²Wadud 1999

¹³Ahmed 1992

Muslim women's education and rights demonstrated that it was possible to interpret religious structures in a feminist manner.¹⁴

Bangladesh's Constitution and the 1961 Muslim Family Laws Ordinance promised to improve women's rights in matters of marriage, divorce, and inheritance. However, due to patriarchal social norms and resistance, these laws are not fully implemented in many cases.¹⁵ Nevertheless, progress has been made in various areas, with government education initiatives, financial empowerment initiatives from organizations such as BRAC and Grameen Bank, and shifts in employment greatly improving the social and economic status of Bangladeshi women.¹⁶

Islamic traditions continue to have a profound impact on women's daily lives in Bangladesh. For many women, practices such as modesty, veiling, and ethical behavior are part of their identity and religious commitment. Mahmud shows that these practices can enhance women's moral power and self-control,¹⁷ while Kabir argues that they can sometimes reinforce patriarchal structures.¹⁸ This historical and social context makes it clear that religion plays a complex role in women's lives: sometimes empowering, sometimes limiting. It is within this context that we can begin to understand how Muslim women in Bangladesh today navigate this duality.

Literature review

Bangladesh has made significant progress in women's empowerment in recent decades, particularly in improving girls' school enrolment rate, expanding women's employment opportunities in sectors like ready-made garments, and strengthening women-led local

¹⁴N. Khatun and Samaddar 2024

¹⁵Kabeer 1991

¹⁶Hasan et al. 2019

¹⁷Mahmood 2005

¹⁸Kabeer 2011

governance and community organizations, which refer to local groups formed to address community welfare, development, and social issues. According to the World Economic Forum's 2025 Gender Gap Report, Bangladesh now ranks 24th globally in terms of gender equality, marking a significant improvement from its 99th position in the 2024 ranking, as the country's gender parity score increased substantially over the past year.¹⁹ While access to education for boys and girls is now nearly equal, women's participation in the formal labor market remains relatively low, at approximately 21 percent.²⁰ Many women work in low-wage or informal sectors, where social protection, job status, and career progression are limited.²¹ Microcredit programs by organizations such as BRAC and Grameen Bank have empowered many women financially and strengthened their voices in families and communities.²² but research shows that in about 81 percent of cases, even when loans are given in women's names, the decision to use the money is made by male family members.²³ A field study conducted in Sylhet found that while women who took out loans felt confident and capable, strict banking regulations and strong patriarchal attitudes hindered their true empowerment.²⁴

The trend of research on religion and women's empowerment has changed significantly in recent years. Where Islam was once seen as being largely in conflict with women's advancement,²⁵ a growing number of scholars are now showing that religion can also be a source of strength, moral clarity, and identity for women. Many Muslim women in Bangladesh gain social status, self-confidence, and moral strength by participating in local Quranic study groups.²⁶ For many, the veil or regular prayer is seen

¹⁹WEF_GGGR_2025

²⁰ILO 2025

²¹Rahman 2024

²²Hasan et al. 2019

²³Rinta et al. 2022

²⁴Bhattacharjee 2016

²⁵Ahmed 1992; Raja Rhouni 2017

²⁶Huq and Khondaker 2011

not only as an obstacle but also as an expression of personal faith, devotion, and self-denial.²⁷ Yet patriarchal approaches to religious interpretation do limit women's voices in the family and society.²⁸ While Islam grants women certain rights in matters of inheritance, marriage, and divorce, prevailing customs and social pressures often undermine these rights in practice. This dual position, the gap between the ideals of religious education and the social reality, has a significant impact on the daily lives of Bangladeshi Muslim women.²⁹

While Bangladesh's legal and institutional framework has helped empower women, many limitations remain in practice. While the Constitution guarantees equal rights for women and men, in practice, patriarchal interpretations and a dual legal system – where both secular and Islamic laws co-exist – undermine women's rights. Informal justice systems such as *shalish* (village arbitration council) often take the place of formal law, especially in family and property-related decisions.³⁰ While Muslim family law grants women certain rights, in practice, traditional practices such as *nikah halala* ('halala marriage')³¹ undermine women's consent and freedom. Gender-based violence further accentuates this legal inequality, as access to justice is difficult for many women due to issues such as institutional complexity, social stigma, and lack of legal awareness. As a result, the main challenge for making legal frameworks truly empowering is not just to provide rights on paper, but to make them practical, accessible, and socially acceptable.³²

Women's empowerment in Bangladesh cannot be understood solely in terms of gender. Rather, it is important to consider the interplay of other

²⁷Mahmood 2005

²⁸Rani 2015

²⁹Tajkia 2023

³⁰Pieal 2025

³¹ 'Halala marriage' is a controversial practice in which a woman – after being divorced by her husband through triple talaq – marries another man, consummates the marriage, and gets divorced again in order to remarry her former husband.

³²Nahar 2021

intersecting factors such as class, geography, disability, and social expectations. Rural women typically face the most barriers when it comes to empowerment, with limited access to education, healthcare, legal aid, and employment opportunities, as well as limited freedom of movement. In urban areas, while opportunities are comparatively greater, class inequality plays a significant role.³³ While middle-class women have made progress in education and employment, subtle discrimination in the workplace and the double burden of domestic work continue to constrain them. Low-income women are vulnerable to various forms of exploitation in the informal labor market, where legal protections are weak or absent. Women with disabilities or special needs face an additional layer of deprivation, as they are often ignored in mainstream empowerment programs.³⁴ Childlessness, combined with social and religious pressures, also affects women's self-identity and social status.³⁵ Therefore, if women are to be truly empowered, policymaking must take this multidimensional reality into account; otherwise, benefits will remain limited to relatively privileged women, and the most marginalized women will remain deprived.

Over the past few decades, considerable research has been conducted on women in Bangladesh, especially in areas such as education, employment, microfinance, and political participation. Most of these studies have focused on development-centered approaches, highlighting how women gain economic independence and decision-making power through formal education and income-generating activities.³⁶ Simultaneously, a body of scholarship has emerged addressing women's role within the Islamic framework, exploring themes such as shariah, gender equality, and faith-based feminism.³⁷ However, a critical gap

³³Diwakar 2022; GES 2023-2026 Final Draft n.d

³⁴Nawaz and Bushra 2023

³⁵Nahar 2021

³⁶Moklesunnahar, Jui, and Islam 2023; Mou 2024; Sarker et al. 2024

³⁷Mahmood 2005; Tajkia 2023

remains largely unaddressed: the lived experiences of Bangladeshi Muslim women at the intersection of religiosity and empowerment.

Much of the existing literature sits within a secular development paradigm, so often overlooks how religious belief, spiritual practice, and Islamic values can serve as sources of agency for women. Conversely, studies grounded in Islamic legal discourse often omit the everyday realities and decision-making perspectives of women. For instance, studies highlight the positive impacts of empowerment on women's access to food security and education, but they rarely explore the role of religious beliefs in shaping outcomes.³⁸ Research on reproductive health and women's autonomy often fails to consider how domains are influenced by faith-based norms and moral reasoning.³⁹ Studies addressing economic autonomy through an Islamic legal lens do not delve into how religious identity shapes women's decision-making processes.⁴⁰ Even emerging research on digital expression and social media largely neglects the role of spiritual identity in shaping women's online presence.⁴¹ These gaps suggest that we still lack a nuanced understanding of how Muslim women in Bangladesh construct and negotiate their power, choices, and identity within a religious framework. We know little about:

1. How religious values and beliefs inform women's personal decisions and public engagements.
2. How women navigate the balance between piety and participation in modern life.
3. How Islamic values influence women's choices in education, dress, marriage, and career.

³⁸Mou 2024; Sarker et al. 2024

³⁹Chowdhury, Rahman, and Haque 2023

⁴⁰Tajkia 2023

⁴¹Koli 2024

Moreover, much of the literature continues to either present religiosity as a barrier to empowerment or portray women's progress as the result of external influences such as non-government organizations, government policies, or donor-funded development projects.⁴² This sidelines the possibility of women's faith-based agency. This study aims to fill a critical gap by exploring how Bangladeshi Muslim women navigate both religious devotion and active participation in modern society. It seeks to understand this dual reality through sociological and theological perspectives.

Methodology

This study primarily adopts a qualitative and documentary-based approach. No primary data were gathered. Instead, it reviews existing peer-reviewed studies, government and institutional reports, and recognized books and theoretical works. Relevant articles from international journals serve as data sources. The study uses descriptive and thematic analyses methods to identify key trends and theoretical insights concerning the social, religious, and institutional empowerment of Muslim women in Bangladesh. Specifically, the study looks closely at two books – *Qur'an and Women* by Amina Wadud and *Politics of Piety* by Saba Mahmud – to gain a clearer understanding of Islamic feminism and how religion supports women's empowerment. The analyses focus on key themes such as religious empowerment, gendered interpretations of religious texts, and women's participation in institutions. Ethically, the study relies solely on verified and publicly accessible sources. The study

⁴²In some areas, religious or social norms limit women's mobility and work opportunities. Many NGOs have helped women gain education, income-generating skills. And decision-making power. BRAC has supported women through school, health programs, and training to help them step outside their homes; Grameen Bank's microcredit programs have enabled many women to start small businesses, and ASA's saving and loan programs have encouraged women to participate in economic activities. In these cases, the changes are largely driven by NGO initiatives rather than internal social change.

acknowledges certain limitations due to the absence of primary data and the limited representation of rural women's experiences in existing literature.

Analytical Framework

This study examines how religion functions as both a source of empowerment and a constraint in the lives of Bangladeshi Muslim women. To explore this dual role, two primary analytical frameworks are employed. The first is the theological-feminist lens, based on Amina Wadud's work in *Quran and Woman*. Wadud argues that the Qur'an fundamentally supports justice and dignity for women, although patriarchal interpretations often obscure this message.⁴³ Using this framework, the study analyzes how women's religious beliefs and practices can foster agency and empowerment, influencing their confidence, moral resilience, and social participation.

The second framework employed is the sociological-intersectional lens, drawing on Saba Mahmood's work and Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality. Mahmood demonstrates that traditional religious practices, such as prayer, veiling, and adherence to shariah norms, can represent deliberate moral agency rather than mere subjugation. Meanwhile, intersectionality emphasizes that women's experiences are shaped by overlapping identities, religious, social, economic, and cultural.⁴⁴ In the Bangladeshi context, a woman may simultaneously be devout, economically active, and socially constrained.⁴⁵ This lens allows the study to account for these layered realities in understanding women's agency. Supporting perspectives, including digital piety, online Islamic feminism, and Mir-Hosseini's notion of active moral agency, are

⁴³Wadud 1999

⁴⁴Crenshaw 2006

⁴⁵Mahmood 2005

incorporated within the discussion.⁴⁶ Together, these frameworks provide a nuanced understanding of how religion can simultaneously empower and restrict Bangladeshi Muslim women in diverse contexts.

Findings and discussion

The chapter presents the key findings of the study, focusing on how Islamic beliefs, socio-cultural norms, and religious practices shape and influence the empowerment of Muslim women in Bangladesh. The analysis is structured through multiple theoretical lenses, including theology, sociology, feminist theory, and digital religious scholarship. The discussion integrates evidence from the Quran, Hadith, and contemporary academic studies to provide a nuanced understanding.

1. Theological Interpretation and Gender Justice

Contemporary debates on women's empowerment within Muslim societies often overlook the internal ethical resources of Islamic theology. Yet a closer engagement with foundational Islamic texts reveals a deep commitment to justice, dignity, and gender reciprocity. At the core of Islamic theology lies a vision of human equality that fundamentally rejects gender-based hierarchy. A careful reading of the Qur'an and authentic Hadith literature reveals that Islam conceptualizes men and women as ethical equals who share responsibilities in both family and society.⁴⁷ Islamic feminist theologian Amina Wadud, in her seminal work *Qur'an and Woman*, argues that the Qur'anic worldview does not endorse patriarchal dominance; rather, it promotes an ethical framework grounded in reciprocity, accountability, and mutual respect.

⁴⁶Mir-Hosseini 2006

⁴⁷Wadud 1999

To understand how these theological principles are translated into lived realities, it is essential to revisit the Quranic foundations upon which Islamic notions of equality are based. The Qur'an repeatedly affirms the shared origin and equal dignity of all humans. Verse 49:13 declares: "O mankind! we created you from a single male and female, and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the most honored among you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous one." This verse shifts the basis of human worth from gender or lineage to *taqwa* (God-consciousness), promoting ethical equality rather than social hierarchy. Similarly, Verse 16:97 reinforces that divine reward is not gendered: "Whoever does good deeds, whether male or female, and is a believer, we will surely grant them a good life and will reward them according to the best of what they used to do".

Qur'anic justice also extends to family relations. Verse 2:228 articulates a principle of reciprocity: "And women shall have rights similar to those against them, according to what is equitable." This positions women not as passive recipients but as active participants with legitimate rights and responsibilities. Similarly, Verse 2:232 safeguards women's autonomy in marital decisions: "And when you divorce women, and they fulfill their(former) husbands if they agree among themselves on an acceptable basis. That is instructed to whoever of you believes in Allah and the Last Day. That is better for you and purer, and Allah knows, and you know not." The prophetic tradition further reinforces this egalitarian vision, as the Prophet Muhammad made consent a foundational requirement for marriage: "A previously married woman shall not be married without her consent; a virgin without her permission" (Sahih Bukhari & Muslim). His Farewell Sermon dismantled all forms of racial and tribal superiority, grounding human equality in moral character rather than identity markers. His call to inclusive education – "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim, male and female" (Ibn Majah) – extends intellectual and spiritual development to women as a matter of principle, not exception.

The Prophet Muhammad's wives, such as Khadijah, a successful entrepreneur, and Aisha, a leading scholar of Hadith and jurisprudence, embody the lived expression of Islam's theological vision. Their roles demonstrate that female leadership and intellectual authority have been integral to Islamic tradition rather than later innovations. Taken together, these Qur'anic verses, prophetic teachings, and early historical examples illustrate that gender justice in Islam is not a modern reinterpretation but a foundational theological principle. This understanding aligns directly with the study's aim of examining how religious ideals shape women's empowerment. At the same time, it strengthens the theoretical framework by showing that the Islamic ethical tradition itself provides a robust basis for women's agency, one that often stands in contrast to the socio-cultural constraints identified in later sections of the analysis.

2. Social and Cultural Gender Roles in Bangladesh

Although Islamic theology promotes a framework of justice, dignity, and spiritual equality, the lived realities of Bangladeshi women reveal a stark disjunction between religious ideals and socio-cultural practices. In Bangladesh, women's roles and rights are shaped more by entrenched cultural traditions, kinship norms, and patriarchal power structures than by the foundational egalitarian principles of Islam. As a result, women frequently encounter systemic obstacles that prevent them from fully realizing the religious and legal entitlements guaranteed to them in scripture. This divergence is most visible in matters related to inheritance, marriage, financial autonomy, and property distribution.⁴⁸

The Qur'an offers clear and unequivocal guidance on these issues, affirming women's rights through multiple verses. For instance, Verse 4:7 states: "For men is a share from what their parents and relatives leave, and for women is a share from what their parents and relatives leave, whether

⁴⁸Kabeer 2011; Shuborna 2024

it is little or much.” This verse firmly establishes gender-inclusive inheritance as a divine mandate. Yet in much of Bangladeshi society, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, women are routinely discouraged or actively prevented from claiming their inheritance.⁴⁹ Families often justify this exclusion by appealing to notions of social harmony, customary expectations, or fear of community disapproval. Thus, a practice that contradicts the moral and legal foundations of Islamic inheritance law becomes normalized through cultural pressure.

The Qur’an also reinforces women’s economic autonomy. Verse 4:32 states: “For men is a share of what they have earned, and for women is a share of what they have earned.” This articulation of economic agency recognizes women as independent earners who possess legitimate rights over their income and property. However, in Bangladesh, socio-economic structures frequently restrict women’s mobility, employment opportunities, and control over personal finances.⁵⁰ Even when women contribute to household income, their labor is often undervalued or rendered invisible. In many cases, male relatives such as fathers, husbands, or brothers retain practical authority over women’s resources,⁵¹ reflecting a patriarchal system that contradicts the Qur’anic emphasis on autonomous economic entitlement. Marriage, another key domain of Islamic family ethics, is similarly shaped by cultural distortions. Verse 4:4 commands: “Give women their dowries willingly, with joy.” *Mahr* (dowry) is intended to function as a symbol of respect, economic security, and personal dignity for women. Yet in many Bangladeshi communities, *mahr* is either minimized, left unpaid, or treated as a mere formality rather than a binding financial right.⁵² Social pressure also discourages women from negotiating or reclaiming their *mahr*, reinforcing unequal power relations within marriage. The gap between religious principles and social

⁴⁹Pieal 2025

⁵⁰Bussolo et al. 2023

⁵¹Kirk, Fuller, and Collective 2020

⁵²Kulsum 2025

implementation reveals how cultural practices can undermine theological ideals.

This pattern aligns with scholarly findings that attribute gender inequality not to Islam itself, but to the patriarchal reinterpretation and selective application of religious norms. Researchers argue that the sociopolitical environment, including male-dominated community leadership, gendered expectations of obedience, and traditional family structures, plays a decisive role in shaping how religious texts are understood and practiced.⁵³ In many cases, cultural customs are presented as Islamic, even when they contradict the egalitarian ethos of the Qur'an. As a result, religion becomes a tool for legitimizing gender hierarchy rather than a source of justice. The primary barriers to women's empowerment in Bangladesh, therefore, stem from socio-cultural traditions that have been normalized across generations.⁵⁴ These structures restrict women's agency, mobility, and decision-making power, while simultaneously invoking religion to justify discrimination. The gap between Islamic ideals and social reality highlights a broader tension within Bangladeshi society: while Islam provides a comprehensive framework for justice and gender equity, its transformative potential remains unrealized without sincere, consistent implementation. By situating these findings within the study's theoretical framework, it becomes clear that women's limited access to rights is not due to theological shortcomings but to the social reproduction of patriarchal norms. The analysis demonstrates that gender roles in Bangladesh are shaped through a cultural lens that selectively draws upon religion, thus masking the ethical foundations of Islamic teachings on fairness, dignity, and equality.

⁵³Agadjanian 2025; Gondal and Hatta 2024

⁵⁴Fariha 2024; Mawa 2020

3. Religious Practice and Women's Moral Agency

In much of Western feminist discourse, it is often assumed that wearing the hijab or following religious practices means that women are quietly submitting to patriarchal norms. Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* challenges this assumption, illustrating that Muslim women (in this case, in Cairo) do not practice modesty, prayer, or religious discipline out of blind obedience. For them, these practices are part of a conscious effort to cultivate moral character. Through these acts, they build humility, self-discipline, and spiritual depth. In that sense, their religiosity is not a symbol of subordination but a way of strengthening their own ethical identity.

A similar picture emerges from Jocelyne Cesari's work on Muslim women in Europe.⁵⁵ Many women see the hijab not only as a religious obligation but also as a marker of political self-expression. In the United Kingdom, for example, a significant number of Muslim women who wear the hijab describe it as a 'deliberate, spiritual, and political choice'. Young Islamic feminists, in particular, use the hijab to assert visibility and agency in the public sphere. In Bangladesh, too, this shift has become increasingly visible. Young women who wear the hijab now draw on it as a source of confidence, not just in private life but also in universities, organizations, and public spaces. The popular phrase 'My hijab is not my weakness; it is my strength' captures a sentiment that resonates strongly with many young women today.

Meanwhile, in Bangladesh itself, we can see important gender equality developments in student leadership at universities. Following the July 2025 Revolution, one of the most notable developments has been the return of student union elections at public universities after a long gap. In this context, the Dhaka University Student Union elections are particularly significant. Several female students stood for election, including many hijabi students, alongside their male counterparts, and the results show

⁵⁵Jocelyne 2004

that these women earned considerable trust from their peers, winning several key positions, including Secretary, Liberation and Democratic Movement; Secretary, Common Room, Reading Room & Cafeteria; and two Executive Member positions. Their success has enhanced the visibility and influence of hijabi women in student politics nationwide.

Figure 1: Female Student Leaders from Public Universities at Dhaka University.



Source: These images were publicly shared on Facebook during the gathering of selected student leaders at the student elections.

At Bangladesh's second-largest university, Rajshahi University, elections were held for the Rajshahi University Central Students' Union after a 36-year hiatus. Women candidates won multiple important

positions alongside men, signaling an encouraging trend. Key positions won by women included two Joint Female Secretaries; Joint Secretary, Environment & Society; and Sports Secretary. This reflects a growing wave of hijabi student representation and their increasing acceptance in mainstream university politics.

Figure 2: Women student representatives taking the oath at the Rajshahi University Central Student Union inauguration ceremony.



Source: These images were publicly shared on Facebook during the oath-taking ceremony held at the Rajshahi University auditorium.

Figure 3: A group of female Student representatives elected in the Hall student union elections at Rajshahi University.



Source: These images were publicly shared on Facebook during the oath-taking ceremony held at the Rajshahi University auditorium.

Meanwhile, Jahangirnagar University, which boasts the highest proportion of female students among public universities, at nearly 50 percent, held its first Central Student Union elections in 32 years. Women won positions include Assistant General Secretary and two Executive Member positions. Chittagong University, too, held its first Central Student Union elections for 35 years – women hijabi candidates won positions as Joint Sports Secretary, Secretary, Student Welfare, Secretary, Social Services & Environment, and Executive Member.

These 2025 examples show that the idea of the hijab as a source of strength has become socially legitimate in Bangladesh. Many young voters, especially women, now associate the hijab with discipline, modesty, and moral consistency. This seems to have influenced the student elections to some extent, as several female candidates who wore hijab received a lot of attention and support. However, it's important to remember that they were not elected just because of the hijab; other factors like leadership skills and campaign promises also played an important role. However, this empowerment emerges only under certain conditions:

1. When religious knowledge and discussions are treated with respect.
2. When women's leadership is actively supported.
3. When harassment is a concern and the hijab provides a sense of psychological safety.
4. When women reinterpret their religious identity in ways that help them move confidently through education, professional spaces, and the digital world.

Within such contexts, the hijab becomes more than a religious garment. It becomes a marker of moral confidence, public presence, and decision-making power. Seeing it solely as a symbol of oppression overlooks the meanings that wearers themselves attach to it. Overall, for many Muslim women, religious practice can create real frameworks of empowerment. In Bangladesh and across the Global South more broadly, religion often functions not merely as a system of rules but as a space where women negotiate identity, dignity, and social roles. This is why Mahmood's insights matter: she reminds us that agency is not limited to

Western ideals of freedom. It can also emerge through committed, reflective religious practice, including of Islam.

4. Faith-Based Digital Piety and Women's Dual Realities: Empowerment or Control?

In contemporary Bangladesh, faith-based digital engagement has become a transformative social phenomenon, especially among young Muslim women. With the rapid expansion of affordable smartphones and high-speed internet, platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have evolved into influential spaces where women articulate religious identity, negotiate moral boundaries, and engage in public discourse.⁵⁶ This shift marks the emergence of what scholars describe as 'digital piety', a technologically-mediated form of religious practice where faith is performed, expressed, and contested within virtual communities.

For many women, these platforms open up an alternative intellectual and spiritual sphere that is often unavailable in traditional religious settings dominated by male scholars. Online female preachers, Islamic lifestyle influencers, hijabi content creators, and modest-fashion vloggers regularly share reflections on Qur'anic ethics, self-discipline, emotional well-being, and women's education. Their visibility demonstrates how digital media is reshaping women's access to Islamic knowledge, offering them opportunities to claim interpretive agency and moral authority. Researchers describe this phenomenon as 'digital piety and empowerment', where women skillfully merge religious identity with technological literacy to craft a respected social presence.⁵⁷

However, this emerging empowerment exists alongside a series of constraints that complicate women's participation in religious digital spaces. One central challenge is the rise of patriarchal digital vigilantism:

⁵⁶Koli 2024; Shuborna 2024

⁵⁷Rahman 2024

women who speak publicly about religion, whether discussing hijab, modesty, marriage rights, or religious ethics, often find themselves under intense scrutiny. Their dress, expressions, scriptural references, and even tone of voice become subjects of constant monitoring by online audiences who police religious norms.⁵⁸ Negative comments, unsolicited 'corrections', trolling, and moral judgment are common, reproducing the very gendered power hierarchies that many women try to navigate or challenge. This dynamic creates a dual reality for Bangladeshi Muslim women involved in digital piety. On one hand, the digital sphere provides unprecedented opportunities for spiritual learning, self-expression, community building, and public visibility. On the other hand, it exposes them to forms of surveillance and control that limit the emancipatory possibilities of their online engagement. Many women describe managing this space as a continuous act of negotiation, balancing authenticity with caution, visibility with vulnerability, and agency with social risk.⁵⁹ Their online presence, therefore, becomes a delicate exercise in maintaining religious credibility while resisting or tactfully avoiding patriarchal discipline.

Recent studies show that digital religious practice among Muslim women in Bangladesh brings both opportunities and challenges. Social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram help women learn about religion and express their identity, but they also face social pressures and scrutiny.⁶⁰ Research also finds that women's religious behavior and dress are often criticized online. So, women, try to balance their faith with social expectations and take care in how they participate online.⁶¹

Thus, faith-based digital engagement presents neither pure empowerment nor pure subordination. Instead, it forms a complex socio-

⁵⁸Ibid

⁵⁹Haimson et al. 2021

⁶⁰Al-Zaman 2021

⁶¹Isnawijayani et al. 2024

religious landscape where agency and control coexist. Bangladeshi Muslim women are not passive recipients of patriarchal norms; rather, they actively negotiate and reshape them. Digital piety becomes both a tool of self-making and a site of contestation, a space where women craft new identities, assert moral authority, and challenge traditional boundaries, while simultaneously navigating an environment of surveillance and critique.

5. Ambiguities and Contradictions of Empowerment

The findings of this study reveal that the relationship between religion and women's empowerment in Bangladesh is complex, layered, and often contradictory. Unlike liberal feminist assumptions that portray religion as either wholly oppressive or wholly liberating, the lived experiences of women demonstrate that empowerment unfolds through multiple social, cultural, and personal intersections. These complexities align closely with the theoretical framework of intersectionality and the study's aim to understand empowerment not as a singular outcome, but as a shifting and context-dependent process.⁶²

Empowerment, therefore, cannot be explained through religion or gender alone. Instead, it is produced at the intersections of class, education, family structure, locality, and access to public resources. For example, an educated, middle-class, urban Muslim woman from Dhaka may adopt the hijab as a conscious expression of moral autonomy, professional confidence, and modern Islamic identity. For her, religious practice does not conflict with aspirations for higher education, mobility, or leadership. In fact, she may see religion as offering clarity, discipline, and a sense of purpose that strengthens her personal agency. In contrast, a woman from a low-income rural background will likely experience religious norms differently. Limited access to education, patriarchal family

⁶²Crenshaw 2006

expectations, and local community surveillance may shape her involvement with religious practices in ways that restrict mobility rather than expand it. For her, the hijab, though rooted in the same religious tradition, might function as a mechanism of social control, especially if taken up due to family pressure or strict communal expectations. While one woman experiences religion as strength and visibility, another may encounter it as limitation and exclusion. These divergences underline a key argument of the study: Islamic empowerment is neither universally liberating nor universally restrictive for women; rather, it is mediated by a woman's broader social positioning.

This recognition directly supports the study's framework. Intersectionality provides the conceptual tools needed to explain why the same religious practice produces empowerment in one context and constraint in another. Similarly, Islamic feminist perspectives help illuminate how women reinterpret faith to navigate these contradictions. Instead of rejecting religion or blindly conforming to it, many women draw upon selective religious teachings to negotiate societal expectations, to assert dignity, or to resist patriarchy in subtle ways. This strategic and interpretive engagement with religion aligns with the study's aim of capturing empowerment as an ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed state.

The findings also demonstrate that women's moral agency is fluid. A woman may feel empowered through religious observance in her private life, yet face barriers when expressing the same identity in public. Conversely, she may challenge patriarchal norms by invoking religious arguments, only to be criticized by conservative voices who claim authority over 'proper' interpretation. This creates a constant tension between self-defined empowerment and socially sanctioned expectations. Such contradictions do not weaken the concept of empowerment; instead, they make it more realistic and empirically grounded. The study shows that empowerment, particularly within an Islamic framework, cannot be defined as a simple choice between liberation and oppression. It is a

dynamic process shaped by context, interpretation, and lived experience. Many Muslim Women in Bangladesh navigate faith not as passive followers but as active agents who negotiate, reinterpret, resist, and adapt religious values to fit their lives. Their empowerment, therefore, is deeply personal and highly contextual, at times strengthened by religion, at times constrained by it, but always shaped by the interplay of multiple social forces.

Conclusion

This study ultimately reveals an important reality: the empowerment of Muslim women in Bangladesh is neither linear nor simple. Although Islam upholds the moral and spiritual equality of men and women, this equality is not always visible in everyday life. The influence of long-standing interpretations, family expectations, social roles, and deeply rooted cultural practices often shapes how women experience their place in society. Yet change is undeniably underway. Faith-oriented spaces on digital platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, have created new spaces where women can express themselves, articulate their thoughts, construct their religious identities, and assert their moral and social positions. However, these online spaces are not entirely free. Women's activities and expressions are often evaluated through religious norms, social scrutiny, and familial expectations, even in the digital realm. Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that women's empowerment is multifaceted and complex, where religion, class, family structures, technology, and moral discourses continually intersect with one another. This study, therefore, highlights that the empowerment of Muslim women in Bangladesh is an ongoing process shaped by both obstacles and emerging opportunities.

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