The women in AKWT have found ways to combine their domestic roles with their social activism. Balancing ideals and pragmatism, they interpret and negotiate gender norms in their everyday.

**Gender segregated arenas**

In contexts where gender segregation is a norm, these women's organizations can be seen as essential for the inclusion of women in social work and activism. On the one hand, these all-women organizations contribute to upholding and reinforcing gender segregated environments; on the other hand, they provide a space for women to contribute as development actors, in ways that women find in congruence with their interpretations of Islam and what they consider appropriate gender roles.

### Women as agents of change

In our research in Oslo and Pakistan, we find that women play important roles as ‘development actors’, in their local communities, in Oslo, in Pakistan and as part of transnational communities. The women we have talked to in Oslo and Pakistan emphasize the need to assist women, and to change women’s position in society. Women are seen as particularly vulnerable, and often in need of protection and help. But not unlike conceptions in mainstream development, it is necessary to listen to the women's voices and understand women’s initiatives do not fit the mainstream understanding of development.

One of the central questions arising from our research is how mainstream development actors, including scholars, donors, and practitioners, can deal with actors whose visions for gender and development do not map neatly onto liberal feminist ideals.

Instead of disregarding actors that hold alternative visions of a good society, ideal gender roles, and ideas about women’s rights and empowerment as irrelevant to development, a more fruitful approach might be to look for the converging ideas of visions, and agenda.

With the objective of improving the situation of women and enhancing women’s participation in development processes, a pragmatic step would be to set aside ideological and religious differences and focus on the common ground. Opening for dialogue on issues of shared interest such as those of women’s health, education, employment and protection from violence are obvious starting points.

### Women’s voices

In order to recognize women’s contribution to development, it is necessary to listen to the women themselves, and the ways they give meaning to their actions. This includes women that might have different visions of development – and ideal gender roles – than those of secular liberal feminists. This can open up for greater recognition of diversity among women’s voices, and for the choices women make. Focusing on ‘women’, there is a danger of overemphasizing women’s common interests, and overlooking women as a heterogenous group. Just as there is no such thing as a unitary feminist movement, the positions of ‘religious women’ are diverse.

Our research on women’s religious practice, social engagement, and development work reveals that to separate ‘the religious’ from ‘the secular’ gives little meaning to many of the actors involved. There is need for a more in-depth understanding of the role of religion in different contexts, and of how the religious is intertwined with other social structures.

Further reading

Borchgrevink, Kaj & Marta Bivand Erdal (2014) Muslimk dagligt for de fattige. VG.


Erdal, Marta & Kaj Borchgrevink. 2015. Diaspora development engagements seen through the prism of Islamic charity. PRIO Policy Brief 16. Oslo: PRIO.

For updates on publications from the project see the project website: www.prio.org/private-islamic-charity

### Notes


5 All names are pseudonyms.

6 AKWT is a women’s welfare and development organization associated with Pakistan’s main religious-political party, the Jamaat-e-Islami.

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**THE PROJECT**

This Policy Brief is part of the project ‘Private Islamic Charity and Approaches to Poverty Reduction’, funded by the Research Council of Norway. Drawing on qualitative data from Pakistan and in Norway (2013-2016), the project explores the interaction between Islamic charity and development, focusing in particular on transnational and gender dimensions.

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**PRIO**

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.
Religion is often considered an obstacle when it comes to the belief and development of people. However, when it comes to the belief and development of women, religion can also be a powerful tool. Today, we look at the role of religion in development and argue that religious women play a more active part in development, in co-gender environments.

**Gender and religion**

While it has become almost obligatory to include gender in development, there has been little interest in the relationship between religion, gender and development. This has led to a renewed interest in religion and development in many parts of the world. This is clearly not new, as helping people in need through charity is part of all religious traditions and has been central to the origins of many contemporary humanitarian and development actors. The international development sector, however, as it has developed, can be seen as largely materialist and secularist.

To the liberal feminist, religion is often considered a potential harmful force. This reflects a tendency to view religious women as victims of their beliefs – duped by ‘false consciousness’, or ‘adaptive preference’ – causing women to make choices contrary to their own well-being. This might be understood as a consequence of the narrow and gender development agenda, in which the universality of gender equality norms are commonly taken for granted, and where alternative or conflicting ideals are regarded as irrelevant, or as detrimental to the advancement of gender equality.

Women activists hold diverse views on religion and feminism, and includes secularist liberal feminism, religious feminists and women activists that explicitly take a feminist stance.

**Feminist concerns**

Secularist liberal feminists are particularly concerned about the influence of fundamentalist or conservative religion that is seen to deter, or pose set-backs for, the advancement of gender equality and women’s rights. It is clearly important to include gender perspectives in analysis of religion and development, and not to uncritically accept the culturally justified oppression of women. Yet, there is also a need to not disregard women as active agents, and to take seriously their engagements for development, for contributing to social change. To do this it is necessary to listen to the voices of women, including those that might have different visions of development – and ideal gender roles – than those associated with liberal feminism.

**Material and spiritual development**

In Pakistan, women play important roles in charity and welfare in unorganized forms – as charity and welfare in unorganized forms – as charity and welfare in unorganized forms – as charity and welfare in unorganized forms. Women also play a more active part in development, in co-gender environments.

Gender dimensions are related to migrant generations, as women-only groups are commonly led by women that have themselves migrated to Norway. While there might be women born in Norway taking part in these groups, and co-education initiatives more often take place among Muslims born in Norway. In the second generation, women also take place in formal organizations, in gender segregated and co-environment.

In Pakistan, women play important roles in charity and welfare in unorganized forms – as charity and welfare in unorganized forms. Women also play a more active part in development, in co-gender environments.

**Service to the community**

In the community hall in a suburb of Oslo, a group of women calling themselves ‘the helpers of Fatima’ meet on a monthly basis. Fatima was one of the Prophet Muhammad’s daughters, and the women meet for religious gatherings, to learn about Islam, to pray to and socialize. Part of what they do is to collect charity. Each month, the women collect money for a children’s home in Pakistan that is run by Minhaj-ul-Quran, a transnational religious organization with branches in Norway and many other countries around the world.

The women describe their network as extensive, with branches in different countries, and women also play a more active part in development, in co-gender environments.

In a low-income neighbourhood in Lahore, the Al Khidmat Women Trust (AKWT) runs a welfare center for women in the local community. The organization focuses on helping women and children, concentrating the focus of their activities on health, welfare (i.e. cash grants, dowry-boxes), education and vocational training, but also on dawa (invitation to Islam) and on progressive growth of the individuals to become a good Muslim. The organization is run by middle-class women volunteers, mobilizing funds from individual donors.

**Gender complementarity**

While women’s rights and advocacy NGOs, in Pakistan as elsewhere, commonly focus on promoting equality between men and women, AKWT emphasizes gender complementarity. Ideal gender roles are based on gender norms defined by biological difference, reflecting what they conceive as ‘God’s given’ differences between men and women. Men and women are seen to be equal, but this is not understood as same, but rather as women and men having different and complementary roles, including rights and duties. While men’s primary role is to protect and provider of the family, women’s primary roles are that of a mother, a wife, and as caretaker of the home. But this is not contradictory to women taking active part in public life through activism and welfare work. The gender roles based on complementarity are also reflected in the physical separation of men and women. The AKWT is an all-women organization, collaborating with its male counterpart, the Al Khidmat Foundation, in times of emergency. The norms of gender segregation and notions of complementarity between men and women influence the activities of these women’s organizations. According to one of our research participants, men do what women cannot do, like constructing tents or distributing relief help in flood waters. Women do what men cannot do, reaching women.
This policy brief presents two particular case studies in which women’s religious practice, social engagement, and gender intersect: (i) religious practice, social engagement and development among women in the Pakistani diaspora in Oslo and (ii) women’s religious-political activism in Pakistan.

These case studies draw on qualitative data, including interviews with 40 individuals in Oslo and 45 individuals in Pakistan, focusing in particular on the voices of women researchers and participants and how they reflect upon their religious practice and social activism.

The two case studies, despite their differences in type of organization and geography, overall show how examining the intersection of religious practice, social engagement and development work can shed light on women’s role in development, in contexts where they are often not considered.

Religion and Development

Religion is a motivating and structuring factor for engagements for development in many parts of the world. This is clearly not new, as helping people in need through charity is part of all religious traditions and has been central to the origins of many contemporary humanitarian and development actors. The international development sector, however, as it has developed, can be seen as largely materialist and secularist. Strongly influenced by both the modernization and the secularization theses – maintaining that with modernity the world will become more secular – development scholars and practitioners have for long disregarded religion as a factor relevant to development. Contrary to common predictions, religious practice and religion have not waned in importance, but is seen to grow and gain significance in public life, particularly in countries in the Global South. This has caused renewed interest in religion and development in recent years.

Religion as obstacle

Attention to religion in development can, however, be characterized by taking an instrumental view of religion: focusing on how religion can stimulate development, without questioning what ‘religion’ means for the actors involved. Religion is often considered an obstacle when it interferes with ‘secular’ development goals promoted by mainstream development actors. This is particularly the case when religion is seen as interfering with ideals of gender equality, and women’s rights and empowerment, central to mainstream gender and development discourse and practice.

Gender, religion and development

While it has become almost obligatory to include gender in development, there has been little interest in the relationship between religion, gender, and development, and in understanding different perspectives of women involved in development initiatives through religious arenas and organizations. Women in religious organizations are often not acknowledged as agents of development.

To the liberal feminist, religion is often considered a potentially harmful force. This reflects a tendency to view religious women as victims of their beliefs – duped by ‘false consciousness’, or ‘adaptive preference’ – causing women to make choices contrary to their own well-being. This might be understood as a consequence of the normative gender and development agenda, in which the universalization of gender equality norms are commonly taken for granted, and where alternative or conflicting ideals are regarded as irrelevant, or as detrimental to the advancement of gender equality.

Women activists hold diverse views on religion and on feminisms, and includes secularist liberal feminisms, religious feminisms and women activists that explicitly take anti-feminist stands.

Feminist concerns

Secularist liberal feminisms are particularly concerned about the influence of fundamentalist or conservative religion that is seen to deter, or pose set-backs for, the advancement of gender equality and women’s rights. It is clearly important to include gender perspectives in analysis of religion and development, and not to uncritically accept the culturally justified oppression of women. Yet, there is also a need to not disregard women as active agents, and to take seriously their engagements for development, for contributing to social change. To do this it is necessary to listen to the voices of women, including those that might have different visions of development – and ideal gender roles – than those associated with liberal feminisms.

Revisiting ‘religion’ and ‘development’

To understand the intersection of religion, gender and development, we believe it is necessary to revisit conventional understandings of both ‘religion’ and ‘development’, and to remain open to understandings of these concepts that do not clearly distinguish between the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’, but view religious practice, social engagement and development as intertwined.

Islamic charity and development

Islamic charity is an individual obligation for men and women. Giving charity to poor people who are less well-off is a key aspect of Islam. Directions for giving charity are detailed in the Islamic tradition, and include obligatory (zakat) and voluntary (such as sadqa) alms. Islamic charity is given individually and collectively and includes small-scale, formally and informally organized charitable practices of Muslim organizations and diaspora communities, as well as large-scale formally organized Muslim NGOs.

A case study from Oslo

Islamic charity in the Pakistani diaspora in Oslo is organized informally through religious networks and works (in mosques and privately), as well as in formal development organizations.

There are significant gender dimensions to the organization of migrant Islamic charity and development engagements in the diaspora. While men are represented more strongly in formal development organizations, middle-class collective engagement often takes place through informal women’s groups formed with the purpose of religious teaching and practice, such as Quran classes (lahjaj) often arranged for and by women.

The helpers of Fatima

In the community hall in a suburb of Oslo, a group of women calling themselves ‘the helpers of Fatima’ meet on a monthly basis. Fatima is one of the Prophet Muhammad’s daughters, and the women meet for religious gatherings, to learn about Islam, to pray and to socialize. Part of what they do is to collect charity. Each month, the women collect money for a children’s home in Pakistan that is run by Minahal-ul-Quran, a transnational religious organization with branches in Norway and many other countries around the world.

The women describe their network as an extended family, they take care of each other, help each other, and make sure that everyone is all right. Each year they organize bazaars to raise money for projects to help the poor and needy.

Giving charity is seen as an obligation and explained as an integral part of their religious practice. As Aisha’ told us: ‘If God has given you something, God expects you to share that with those that don’t have. If you have good health, time at your hand... part of that belongs to the poor’.

These women are just one example of such a group. Many other women also collect money to support schools, hospitals and needy individuals either in Norway, in Pakistan or elsewhere in the world. The amount collected in these women’s groups is not insignificant, and is used to provide both immediate relief (i.e. to help widows in need, or in response to emergency appeal) and long-term development (i.e. through investment in education).

Informal arenas

In informal arenas, the character of women’s arenas for social engagement and development work – closely linked to religious practice – make women’s contributions less visible than that of men, who more often engage in formal organizations, such as development NGOs. This makes women less likely to be counted as agents of development.

Gender and generation

Gender dimensions are related to migrant generation, as women-only groups are commonly led by women that have themselves migrated to the host country (although there might be women born in Norway taking part in these groups), and co-gender initiatives more often take place among Muslims born in Norway. In the second generation, women also play a more active part in informal organizations, in gender segregated and co-environment.

A case study from Lahore

In Pakistan, women play important roles in charity and welfare in unorganized forms – as part of the regular distribution of Islamic charity (zakat and sadqa) taking place in the domestic arena. Through family and other social networks – but also in formal charity and welfare organizations which, unlike the political domain, have been acceptable public arenas for women’s activism for some time. Yet, women in religion-political organizations are rarely considered as development actors.

In a low-income neighbourhood in Lahore, the Al Khidmat Women Trust (AKWT) runs a welfare center for women in the local community. The organization focuses on helping women and children, concentrating the focus of their activities on health, welfare (i.e. cash grants, dowry-borses), education and vocational training, but also on dawa (invitation to Islam) and on promoting the image of Muslims born in Norway to become a good Muslim. The organization is run by middle-class women volunteers, mobilizing funds from individual donors.

Gender complementarity

While women’s rights and advocacy NGOs, in Pakistan as elsewhere, commonly focus on promoting equality between men and women, AKWT emphasizes gender complementarity. Ideal gender roles are based on gender norms defined by biological difference, reflecting what they conceive as ‘God’s given’ differences between men and women. Men and women are seen to be equal, but this is not understood as same- ness, but rather as women and men having different and complementary roles, including rights and duties. While men’s primary role is as protector and provider of the family, women’s primary roles are that of a mother, a wife, and as caretaker of the home. But this is not contradictory to women taking active part in public life through activism and welfare work.

The gender roles based on complementarity are also reflected in the physical separation of men and women. The AKWT is an all-women organization, collaborating with its male counterpart, the Al Khidmat Foundation, in times of emergency. The norms of gender segregation and notions of complementarity between men and women influence the activities of these women’s organizations. According to one of our research participants, men do what women ‘cannot do’ like constructing tents or distributing relief help in flood waters. Women do what men cannot do: reaching women.

Photo: UN Photo / John Isaac @ Flickr

a welfare center for women in the local community.

The organization focuses on helping women and children, concentrating the focus of their activities on health, welfare (i.e. cash grants, dowry-borses), education and vocational training, but also on dawa (invitation to Islam) and on promoting the image of Muslims born in Norway to become a good Muslim. The organization is run by middle-class women volunteers, mobilizing funds from individual donors.
The women in AKWT have found ways to combine their domestic roles with their social activism. Balancing ideals and pragmatism, they combine their domestic roles with their social activism.

Gender segregated arenas

In contexts where gender segregation is a norm, these women organizations can be seen as essential for the inclusion of women in social work and activism. On the one hand, these all-women organizations contribute to upholding and reinforcing gender segregated environments; on the other hand, they provide a space for women to contribute as development actors, in ways that women find in congruence with their interpretations of Islam and what they consider appropriate gender roles.

Women as agents of change

Women as agents of change

In our research in Oslo and Pakistan, we find that women play important roles as ‘development actors’, in their local communities, in Oslo, in Pakistan and as part of transnational communities. The women we have talked to in Oslo and Pakistan emphasize the need to assist women, and to change women’s position in society. Women are seen as particularly vulnerable, and often in need of protection and help. But not unlike conceptions in mainstream development, the women in AKWT also view women as agents of change. Due to women’s central position in the families, commonly being responsible for raising children, taking care of family health and supporting children in education, women are seen as central in bringing about change in the family, and in society.

The women organizations are recognized as important by their male counterparts. Women are essential for reaching women, and for addressing women’s needs and concerns. The women organizations are essential for including women in social activism and development work, particularly in gender segregated environments.

Common ground

We find that many of the activities that the women in our study focus on are similar to those supported by mainstream development organizations. They focus on women’s education, health and protection against violence. However, not all share liberal feminist ideals about equality between women and men in all spheres of life.

One of the central questions arising from our research is how mainstream development actors, including scholars, donors, and practitioners, can deal with actors whose visions for gender and development do not map neatly onto liberal feminist ideals.

Instead of disregarding actors that hold alternative visions of a good society, ideal gender roles, and ideas about women’s rights and empowerment as irrelevant to development, a more fruitful approach might be to look for the converging ideas of, views, visions and agenda.

With the objective of improving the situation of women and enhancing women’s participation in development processes, a pragmatic step would be to set aside ideological and religious differences and focus on the common ground. Opening for dialogue on issues of shared interest such as those of women’s health, education, employment and protection from violence is obvious starting points.

Women’s voices

In order to recognize women’s contribution to development, it is necessary to listen to the women themselves, and the ways they give meaning to their actions. This includes women that might have different visions of development – and ideal gender rules – than those of secular liberal feminists. This can open up for greater recognition of diversity among women’s voices, and for the choices women make. Focusing on ‘women’, there is a danger of over-emphasizing women’s common interests, and treating women as a homogenous category. Just as there is no such thing as a unitary feminist movement, the positions of ‘religious women’ are diverse.

Our research on women’s religious practice, social engagement, and development work reveals that to separate the ‘religious’ from the ‘secular’ gives little meaning to many of the actors involved. There is need for a more in-depth understanding of the role of religion in different contexts, and of how the religious is intertwined with other social structures.

Further reading

Borchgrevink, Kaja & Marta Bivand Erdal (2014) Muslim women’s attitudes towards fatigues. VG.
Erdal, Marta & Kaja Borchgrevink. 2015. Diaspora development engagements seen through the prism of Islamic charity. PRIO Policy Brief 16. Oslo: PRIO.

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Women, Islamic Charity and Development: Case Studies from Oslo and Lahore

Religion is often considered an obstacle in efforts to realize gender equality objectives and enhance the position of women. Yet, in many contexts, religion provides a significant frame for development engagement. Examining the intersection of religious practice, social engagement and development work among two women’s groups in Pakistan and in the Pakistani diaspora in Oslo, we argue that a contextual approach helps to highlight women’s role as actors in development. A more nuanced and contextualized understanding of the role of religion can break down stereotypes and open for dialogue on issues central to gender and development.

Brief Points

• Islamic charity is gendered. Women and men have equal obligations for giving charity in Islamic traditions, but often engage in different arenas.
• Organizing in informal arenas, and often closely linking religion and social engagement, women are often not counted as development actors.
• Particularly in the diaspora, many women’s initiatives do not fit the mainstream understanding of development.
• Gender norms – and understandings of gender equality – are not fixed but interpreted in particular contexts.
• Paying attention to women’s activism that promotes understandings of gender equality that diverge from secular liberal ideals can broaden perspectives on gender and development, particularly relevant in religious contexts.

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