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Security Nexus Conversation

# WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN BANGLADESH: PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND BUILDING PEACE

By Saira Yamin<sup>1</sup> and Lailufar Yasmin<sup>2</sup>

*An Interview with Dr. Lailufar Yasmin, Professor, Department of International Relations University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Transcript prepared by Ms. Kamaile Patton. Click [here](#) for a video of the interview.*

*In this interview, Dr. Lailufar Yasmin, a distinguished alumna of the DK I APCSS Advanced Security Cooperation course (ASC 19-2), talks to Dr. Saira Yamin about Bangladesh's initiatives to empower women, particularly in countering violent extremism as a critical objective of its National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace, and Security (2019). She shares her insights on the NAP formulation process as it seeks to build peace through preventative strategies. Key players supporting this important effort have been especially cognizant of the influence women as mothers, wield at the household level. It empowers them by building their capacities and provides for measures to address structural barriers to gender equality. She also talks about her academic role in positively influencing younger generations.*

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Dr. Lailufar Yasmin at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh, August 2016.

**SY. (Saira Yamin):** Dr. Lailufar Yasmin, please tell us about your background for the benefit of our listeners.

**LY. (Lailufar Yasmin):** I have been teaching in the Department of International Relations University of Dhaka for a little over 21 years now. I did my undergraduate and postgraduate from the same university, in the same department. Then I did my second master's from Georgia State University in Women's Studies. That was under a Fulbright Scholarship and that is when I started learning institutionally about the issues that affect women that often we take for granted and that may have different types of undercurrents. My thesis explored how violence against women is carried out in a manner that has political implications, and is often overlooked. I received the best thesis proposal award for the academic year for my work, and received the very prestigious Ethel Woodruff Draper Research Fellowship for the Development of Young Women. Upon my return home, in about two years-time, I went to the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland. This was under a British Chevening scholarship where I did a three-month course on peace and conflict issues, to learn about how to co-exist even when a conflict may seem intractable.

After about a year, I went to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing where I had a nine-month fellowship to study China's national interests after 9/11. Thereafter, I was in a kind of dilemma about my career path, whether to develop my expertise on China exclusively, in Peace and Conflict Studies, or in gender issues? Ultimately, I chose a completely different path. There was a kind of restlessness all around the world, especially after 9/11. Ideas about who is modern and who is not, were now being questioned in terms of religiosity. I found the debate very problematic and felt it needed to be addressed through research and an academic perspective to advance a better understanding of what is secularism. So I researched this topic for my PhD at Macquarie University in Sydney under an International Postgraduate Research Scholarship (IPRS) awarded by the Australian Foreign Ministry.

My doctoral research enabled me to relate how violent extremists take advantage of certain situations. For example, women's place in religion, and women's place in society are politicized through the application of Sharia (Islamic law). Often these are not religious but cultural and indigenized interpretations of the law as I demonstrated through my research. My academic effort has helped me to expand my knowledge on gender, religion, and security. Upon my return to Bangladesh, I decided to specialize in Women, Peace and Security (WPS) focusing on violent extremism. I am also working on Bangladesh's foreign policy and Chinese interests in Bangladesh, specifically on the value of cooperating with China from regional and bilateral political perspectives.

**SY:** Please tell us about your experience as a woman, as a leader, as someone who is helping to influence thinking and scholarship in your country and region.

**LY:** This is a very interesting question as we have had female leadership in the topmost tier of Bangladesh for decades. It has been an interesting experience for the younger generations in particular. For example, one of my friend's nephews, who is only eight years old, asks "can a man be a Prime Minister in Bangladesh?" Since his birth, he has only seen a woman Prime Minister successfully running the country. Clearly Bangladesh's experience has had an impact on societal construction of roles. Yet one wonder why it is still difficult to accept female authority and female leadership in other tiers of society. So, despite many positive developments, it's still very difficult for women to assert themselves, because assertiveness is often perceived negatively. It is seen as a woman throwing a tantrum, or trying to get attention, and such. In my capacity, teaching at the undergraduate level, for example, I often have a class size of over a 100 students. Currently, I am teaching a class of 134 students in the first semester of their first year. So you could well imagine when they see me, someone with a small stature physically, they are surprised to see that I am so bold. However, they pay attention to what I have to say because I give equal attention to all my students and impress upon them that education is not just about getting a degree. Education is also about acquiring important life skills. It is about respecting your classmates, regardless of their gender. My first year students are generally 18 years old and sometimes a little younger. So the first thing I do is to talk about what it means to be an adult as the concept is very interesting in Bangladeshi society. While an 18 year old is officially an adult, there are certain social experiences you are expected to go through to be treated like an adult. To share my personal experience when I was married, I was considered an adult. But when my husband passed away 14 years back, and not having children, I am generally treated like a non-adult in my family and various other circles. I am perceived as someone lacking critical and wide life experiences. I try to debunk the myth that a single woman who is educating young adults, who is

grooming them to understand what it takes to be an adult, to take responsibility for their actions, is not lacking in any way. Such ideas define societal views of adulthood, and are transferred from parents to our younger generations. On my part, I try to cultivate a sense of growing together rather than the emphasis on competition in our society, offering them fresh perspectives on adulthood. I try to influence their worldviews in the classroom by showing them that women can lead effectively, by being an example for them.

**SY:** I am pleased to note the mention of female Prime Ministers. Bangladesh's experience has been quite unique in this regard. Do you think women lead differently than men? How have they impacted the landscape in Bangladesh, not just Prime Ministers, but also women like yourself?

**LY:** This is a very interesting question. There are women who lead differently than men, yet there are others who don't. In politics, the Machiavellian idea that national interest precedes all other interests is an important one to keep in mind. I would argue it is an important driver of both female and male behavior in leadership positions. There is evidence to support this. Politicians like Israel's Prime Minister Golda Meir and Britain's Margaret Thatcher dubbed as the Iron Lady, are examples that come to mind. Both wanted to play by the rules in pursuit of their national interests. However, ideas about women leaders modeling masculine strength while preserving their feminine attributes have also emerged. Julia Gillard, Australian Prime Minister, was photographed knitting a sweater for Prince William's baby. So, whether it is in Australia or Bangladesh, there is societal pressure on women despite being in leadership positions, to show their feminine side. However, when we talk about having more women in leadership positions to engender political change, it becomes an explicit strength of a government. The *Foreign Affairs Magazine* published an article in March 2020 titled "[The Best Foreign Policy Puts Women at the Center](#)." It elaborates what happens when countries promote a feminist foreign policy. Sweden has taken a lead in this effort. Canada's [Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations](#) is a similar endeavor envisioning transformative change by increasing the participation of uniformed women in the United Nations peace operations.

While such efforts will make a difference, the assumption that women's participation will engender peace is fundamentally a patriarchal idea. Patriarchy has negative as well as positive aspects. We tend to view patriarchy as an ideology suppressing women's voices but it has helped shape the thinking that women are peaceful. This notion may be debunked in a lot of ways. Consider the Algerian war of independence (1954-1962) where women carries weapons to help the revolutionaries. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by a young female suicide bomber. The notion that women are inherently peaceful has been crafted through discourse. In Bangladesh, in one case, a female extremist surrounded by the police used her baby as a shield threatening to kill if they didn't let her go. One would think a mother who has given birth to her child could never take do that. So women are not always peaceful but their stories are not usually told. Violent extremists understand this and actively recruit women to achieve their goals.

Looking at it positively, the view that women are peaceful has been helpful in conflict de-escalation. In Algeria and some other African states, rebel groups were willing to surrender their arms to women as they were perceived as more trustworthy. So, there are some interesting sides to the discourse on women's capacities to engender peace. Yes, women do lead differently in

some cases, but there is a risk in generalizing this concept. We need to contextualize our understanding of women's capacities in leadership roles and in different roles. Mercedes Fitchett's "[Countering the Female ISIS Threat in Indonesia](#)" is a fantastic article on the southeast Asian context. Her field research revealed that women are recruited through online chat groups where they often expressed not having a sense of agency, or not having voices in their homes despite perhaps being financially self-reliant. I feel that with the down-turn of the economy in a pandemic environment, especially in Bangladesh where a lot of capable women who are secondary wage earners, especially in the urban context, may be equally vulnerable. They are the first ones to lose their jobs when businesses start to lay off people. So what if these women are recruited by extremists like the ones in Indonesia? This is an area where I feel in Bangladesh, in our efforts to counter violent extremism and especially as we consider women's leadership roles, we need to identify and understand their vulnerabilities. If someone tells a woman experiencing hardship that they are going to help them, help give them agency, it gives them a sense of empowerment. They could easily be misguided and exploited for nefarious ends.

**SY:** Your comments suggest that there is a correlation between women's agency, their need for empowerment and engagement in terrorist activity. This view resonates with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2242 (2015) drawing attention to the relationship between gender inequality and the rise of violent extremism. This dynamic is sometimes seen as a challenge to the global WPS agenda. Do you agree with the view?

**LY:** A number of studies show that women who are victims of domestic violence often feel a deep-seated need for revenge. When they are approached by extremist groups, they see it as an opportunity to release their pent up emotions, the anger they feel toward their intimate partner, and sometimes their immediate families whom they serve as primary care-givers. It is a manifestation of displaced aggression. When Bangladesh's National Action Plan (NAP, 2019) on WPS was being formulated, a number of academics including myself, were consulted and we underscored the imperative for women's participation at all stages in the prevention of violence, peacebuilding, and peacemaking as envisioned by the [United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on WPS](#). One of the goals of the WPS NAP formulation process was to define violence in Bangladesh's context. The nation is going to be 50 years old this year, however, it has not experienced armed conflict and violence like some other countries in the region. So we considered what building peace might entail in Bangladesh's context. Consequently, Bangladesh's NAP articulates that building peace would involve provisions for structural recognition of women's contributions and structural protections for women survival in day-to-day life – these could be economic, legal or societal. Thereby, the Bangladesh NAP essentially expands on the [Prevention Pillar of the United Nations WPS agenda](#). It recognizes women's vulnerability to recruitment by violent extremists as an outcome of systemic and structural constraints on women's agency.

We need to pay special attention to the family structure and the household especially because mothers wield a lot of power. Mothers are the first teachers and educators of their children. It is up to them to raise them as peaceful or violent individuals. After the infamous Holey Artisan Bakery terrorist attack in July 2016, investigations revealed that many of the perpetrators were completely disconnected from their families. Their families had no idea about their radicalized ideologies and peers. Seemingly, they were just fine young boys, the regular guys, and it came as shock to the families to see them involved in a major

terrorist attack. Social bonding within the family is a challenge in urban areas where both parents often work. They provide all types of electronic gadgets to their young children connecting them socially to the rest of the world, but they do not monitor their activities and do not have adequate time to spend with them. Therefore, the relationship between parents and children is sometimes neglected. Traditionally, mothers are expected to spend more time looking after children but in an expensive city like Dhaka, you need a second income, and unlike stay-at-home mothers, full-time working mothers have significantly more demands on their time.

The dilemma of balancing work and family life is still being discussed in Bangladesh's context. In semi-urban and rural areas, a number of initiatives have been undertaken by the Bangladesh government along with USAID and other donors through community outreach. The hope is to educate them about the role of mothers, to make them understand the power of words, and the power of language to demotivate potential supporters of radical action and expression. This is a very important piece of our WPS agenda as we consider countering violent extremism at the national level. In the formulation of our NAP, this discussion was not confined within Dhaka city as it represents an urban perspective, the perspective of a minority. The NAP formulation process therefore, entailed dialogue with stakeholders beyond the capital city in several districts, where they engaged religious leaders at the grassroots level to elicit their ideas. We often think that rural culture is very conservative, and their values are very rigid, but once you reach out to local communities when you start to reason with them, while it may take time, it is still possible to influence their patriarchal views and enhance women's agency.

**SY:** What advice would you give to women to speak up and share their perspectives? Women, such as yourself offer unique and diverse perspectives. We need more of them to speak up to help bring change.

**LY:** My advice may resonate more with women in Dhaka city and urban areas. To share a recent personal experience, before the pandemic's social restrictions, my last public engagement was on March 8<sup>th</sup>, a celebration of International Women's Day. Besides talking to the students about the importance of this day, my colleagues and I were asked to speak about someone you would choose to be if you could. I chose Cleopatra because of the political power she had. I firmly believe that women can make a significant difference in decision-making positions, be that in local politics or national politics, however they can make their voices heard. But they often experience some obstacles. In my case, I learned the importance of saying "no." Because women in South Asia are expected to be submissive, always expected to say "yes." So, you start by challenging this norm by staring people down at times. You have to learn how to use your body language correctly, to be confident, and there are lots of tips and tricks. I learned by experience, by practicing some of these behaviors, and when I realized how effective these were, I started reading the literature, there is a lot that is being written on this topic. There was an interesting article about how athletes stare each other down during competitions. They had a photo of Serena Williams, the American tennis player, staring down at another athlete. So there is power in your look, in your gaze.

I advise my students to remember that when flying on a plane, the advice given is that in case of a hazard, first attend to yourself. Put your *own* mask first, then help others. Women are conditioned to believe that it is their duty to take care of others. The definition of love in our society is for a woman to take care of a man and overlook her own needs. But if someone loves you, they would reciprocate and meet you halfway. But

women are givers, they usually don't have many expectations. I encourage my students to think of their own needs without any guilt because if a woman cannot satisfy her own needs and make herself happy first, she will not be able to take care of others. She may turn into a bitter person, and others around her will also suffer as a result. I remind them of the guidance received on an airplane to attend to yourself first and not feel guilty about it. I hear perspectives such as a woman must put her child first, but such an attitude shows your child that you are a weak person sacrificing your own interests and aspirations. Some studies show working mothers are able to raise children who are relatively more grounded. They model confidence and strength and their children have better relationships with others. Women's empowerment does not mean the ability to earn an income alone. Empowerment also means an equal role in decision-making in the family. I conducted a critical study in the late '90s, in Dhaka, in an urban setting and outside of Dhaka. The findings revealed that despite women earning money, they did not get to decide where to invest it or which school or college their children would attend. These are significant decisions and were relegated to men. I do not believe this situation has changed very much. Society still subscribes to the view that a man would always know better. This is something we need to confront. Stare them down - things will change gradually.

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