

Religious schools, social values and economic attitude: Evidence from Bangladesh

Of late, there has been substantial public interest in religious education in Muslim countries. It is alleged that religious schools (also known as madrasa) promote extreme values and attitude and hence, increase polarisation and friction in the society. If true, this has important implications for the process of economic development. Studies on religious school attendance and the consequent post-schooling outcomes, however, are rare. In particular, none of the extant studies directly focus on the question of non-cognitive outcomes of religious schooling such as socio-economic attitude and values. Little is known on the attitude of teachers and students towards issues of social and economic importance such as desired family size, democracy, gender rights, labour force participation of women and so on. Using data from an in-depth survey of rural secondary schools in Bangladesh, this paper therefore compares social values and economic attitude of female graduates and teachers of secondary madrasa and secular schools.

A comparative study of religious and secular schools in Bangladesh is of significant importance for an additional reason. The majority of the madrassas in Bangladesh has undergone a modernisation scheme in the early 1980s. As a consequence of this reform initiative, madrasah students today study Mathematics, English and Science alongside various religious subjects. These religious schools, commonly known as Aliyah madrasas, not only offer a modern curriculum, they also compete with secular schools to attract female students in the rural area. These “modernised” religious schools have played an important role in closing the gender gap in secondary school participation in Bangladesh. Yet, long-term impacts of expanding educational opportunities for females via enrolment in religious schools remain unknown. A comparison of socio-economic attitudes of the graduates of modernised madrasahs and secular schools can not only fill this lacuna in the literature, it can also shed some light on the success of the modernisation reform that today distinguishes Bangladeshi madrasahs from religious seminaries elsewhere in South Asia.

The dataset used in this study has been collected as part of a larger study to determine secondary school quality in rural Bangladesh. The survey was conducted in 2005 and covered 94 secondary madrasahs and 231 schools. Our analysis in this paper is based on a sub-sample of these schools ($N=20$). A total of 190 girls who graduated in 2003 and belonged to our sub-sample schools were tracked. Both the teachers and the female graduates of these schools were interviewed in person to gather detailed qualitative data on attitudes. Our survey instrument includes a large number of questions relating to issues such as fertility preference, working women, democracy, military rule, social work and gender equality. The test instrument has been well tested and is sufficiently contextualized. In addition to qualitative data, the survey collected quantitative data on school inputs in a retrospective manner by consulting administrative records maintained by the school authorities. Information on parental and family background of the graduates was collected separately during the household visits. For the sample of female graduates, the working dataset was constructed by combining family and retrospective school-specific (and teacher related) records with information on individuals’ attitude and personal characteristics.

The objective of our study is test whether students and teachers associated with religious schools display hostile attitudes towards working women, working mothers, gender equity, democracy and so on. To this end, a total of eight dichotomous dependent variables were

created using qualitative responses of graduates. For each of these variables, Probit regression models were estimated to explore the relationship between religious school affiliation and attitude, net of the effect of family-background of the students and other school characteristics. Each of the eight models is estimated using three different specifications. The first specification extensively controls for personal and socio-economic factors of the female graduate but restricts the school specific determinants of attitude to school type only. The second specification extends the set of controls for school specific correlates by including teacher age, age-squared and gender in the list of regressors. Lastly, using matched data on teachers and students, we add to the list of regressors “the average attitude of teachers” and explore how teachers’ response to a given question influences that of a student.

Several important findings emanate from our regression analysis of graduate responses data. First, modernised religious education is associated with attitudes that are conducive to democracy. Second, when compared to their secular school peers, madrasa graduates have perverse attitude on matters such as working mothers, desired fertility and higher education for girls. Madrasa students are more likely to believe that the optimal number of children desired is not a matter of personal choice; rather it depends on God. Third, we find that student attitudes are positively and significantly correlated with that of their teachers. Exposure to female and younger teachers leads to more favourable attitudes among graduates. These findings are robust to controlling for a large number of school inputs (such as school expenditure, physical facilities, and teacher characteristics) and family background (measured by parental education and household assets). We conclude by discussing the social and economic implications of these findings.