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**“Contradictions of Religion and Gender in Development Discourse:
The Case of Muslim Women in Bangladesh”**

**By: Almas Zakiuddin
(Ph D Candidate, University of British Columbia, Canada)**

Northern or mainstream development discourses are suspiciously silent on the subject of religion. It is an overt silence, in the sense that religion seems to be deliberately omitted from consideration. There appears to be an implicit understanding that religion is a culturally sensitive topic, and hence, must be avoided by progressive development agents. At the same time, however, northern development agencies engage in partnerships with religious groups from their own countries, and work in collaboration with religious and patriarchal interests in the third world. This paper interrogates notions of western *secularism* as they pertain to development discourses in Bangladesh, a country with a majority Muslim population. Since the War on Terror, in particular, Bangladeshi Muslims are being seen as divided into the so-called *progressive* elements, and the so-called *radical* Islamist movements. Interestingly, the Islamists are vehemently nationalist, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist, while the so-called progressives, including, in particular, the non-governmental development organizations (NGOs), often ally themselves with multinational, western and capitalist-commercial interests. This paper examines how development processes and practices engage with religious issues and religious interests in these paradoxical circumstances. What role does the state play in these approaches? What impact do these perspectives have on women, especially in terms of women's social and political agency and freedoms? This paper argues that the dichotomy of third world religion versus northern development progress fossilizes and devalorises Muslim cultural practices. Such a dichotomy inevitably displaces critical examinations of neo-liberal practices in the name of culture that reinforce colonial, imperial and patriarchal oppressions in the third world..