4 Gender ideology and social transformation

Economic transformation of society does not only have an impact on people’s economic conditions and production relations, it also influences social relations; changes in social institutions take place as well. The gender inequality in the ownership of the means of production and division of labour are reflected in social institutions, such as marriage, education and health care. This chapter will give an insight in the social, cultural and religious aspects of life in Bangladesh that reflect the norms and values that find expression in class and gender relations. These also play an important role in women’s access to land and their control over land. As Islam is an important facet of life and of gender relations in Bangladesh, I will start this chapter with a description of the changing role of Islam to give a better understanding of the wider context of women’s relationship to land. After that, I will elaborate on the position of women in Islam and other dominant gender ideologies. I will contrast Islamic norms and values with norms and values promoted by NGOs, international agencies and in some cases the state. These norms and values represent conflicting gender ideologies, which at times lead to contradictions in norms and practices. I will argue that these contradictory tendencies have led to tensions between various forces, but may also give women an opportunity to defy authority and use these contradictions to their own advantage. Women can sometimes use structure for their agency.

This chapter will be followed by two chapters in which I will give an assessment of the specific impact of the economic and social transformation on the lives of people in Jhagrapur. In those chapters I will give various examples to illustrate what the transformation means for the daily life of the people.

4.1 Islam in Bangladesh

With a population of around 150 million and 85 percent of its inhabitants Muslims, Bangladesh is the fourth largest Muslim country in the world. For a long time Bangladesh was known for its moderate form of Islam where Sufism has had a strong influence. The new Bangladesh was initially a secular state and for the people their Bengali identity would come first. They were proud of their culture and language for which they had shed a lot of blood. Since the late 1970s, the influence of Islam is on the increase, both at the state level and among the people. While the Bengali identity is still very important, more than before people also emphasise their Islamic identity. In 1977, the military ruler General Ziaur Rahman dropped secularism (and socialism) from the Constitution and in 1988 General Ershad declared Islam the state religion by an amendment to the Constitution. There was a strong resistance from civil society against this, led by a coalition of women’s organisations, the Oikyo Bodhio Nari Shomaj (United Women’s Forum) (Shehabuddin 2008). Naripokkho, one of the women’s organisations active in the

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57 General Ziaur Rahman came to power after a military coup in November 1975 and was killed in 1981 in a failed military coup. General Ershad grabbed power through yet another military coup in 1982. From 1975 to 1990 Bangladesh was under military rule.
protests, filed a written petition against the state claiming that the amendment was contrary to the fundamental rights of women. However, they failed to prevent this move by the government, signalling the dependence of the state on the support of other Islamic countries. Saudi Arabia had started giving considerable financial aid to Bangladesh while General Ziaur Rahman was in power. Saudi’s financial aid was given mainly for the purpose of building mosques and setting up madrashahs (Islamic schools) and other Islamic institutions. Between 1981/82 and 1990/91, the number of madrashahs (Koran schools) more than doubled and the number of staff and enrolment of students increased by nearly 300 percent. Moreover, Islamists who had collaborated with Pakistan during Bangladesh’s liberation war were systematically rehabilitated, including notorious war criminal Golam Azam, the Ameer of the Jamaat-e-Islami till 2000. The Mujib government (1971-1975) had cancelled Azam’s citizenship and he lived in exile in Pakistan, but General Ziaur Rahman allowed him to return to Bangladesh in 1978. In 1994, when Ziaur Rahman’s widow Khaleda Zia was Prime Minister, Azam’s citizenship was restored by a decision of the Supreme Court.

Another wake-up call was the fatwa against writer Taslima Nasreen. In 1993 Mullahs (religious leaders) ordered her death. They stated that she had insulted Islam with her newly published novel Lajja (Shame). In this novel she described the agony of a Hindu woman during communal attacks. The government did not give Taslima Nasreen protection and she had to flee the country; she is still living in exile. Fatwas were a new phenomenon and other fatwas, especially against women and progressive writers, followed. Political Islam has given rise to increasing violence against women (Women Living Under Muslim Law 1996; Guhathakurta 2005), not only by issuing fatwas but also other forms of violence. In particular women who do not strictly conform to Islamic values and morals as interpreted by Islamists are still targeted. Newspaper articles and other sources regularly report about gruesome

59 Saudi Arabia refused to recognise the new state of Bangladesh until General Zia took power (Kabeer, 1991). In Saudi Arabia the majority of the people adhere to Wahhabi Islam and the Shari. Wahhabi norms and values are promoted through madrashas and Islamic institutions.
60 According to Tazeen Mahnaz. (undated) “Women, Islam and the State: Subordination and Resistance” the number of madrashahs rose from 2864 in 1981/82 to 5959 in 1990/91 (http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/su/southasia/Tazeen.html, accessed 2 May 2006). Mahnaz took these figures from the Statistical Pocketbook of Bangladesh (SPB). I found in SPB 1990 that in particular the number of madrashahs had gone up (from 3439 to 5284) between 1986 and 1988. After that the increase was less dramatic. However, the reliability of these figures in the Statistical Pocketbook is questionable. E.g. according to SPB 1993 the number of madrashahs in 1991 was 6022 whereas SPB 1991 mentions only 5959 madrashahs in the same year, and SPB 2004 and 2008 show different numbers of madrashahs for the years 2001, 2002 and 2003.
62 Motiur Nizami Rahman, who was also a collaborator with the Pakistani during the liberation war, got a minister post. He took over the leadership of the Jamaat-e-Islami in December 2000 from notorious war criminal Golam Azam.
incidents of male violence against women. In January 2001 the Bangladesh High Court declared *fatwas* illegal. Nevertheless *fatwas* are still being issued.61

A factor that may also play a role in the increasing influence of political Islam is labour migration to the Gulf region. Migrants who return to Bangladesh bring home Wahabi Islamic norms and values from their host country and promote these in their own household and community. For example, some husbands now make their wives wear a *burka* or a separate veil covering most of their face when they go out, rather than only pulling their *sari* over their head.

The internationalisation of political Islam, fuelled by the rise in prejudices against Islam and discrimination of Muslims in western countries after the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on September 11, 2001 has contributed further to this growing Islamisation. This was also reflected in national politics. In the national elections on 1 October 2001 (less than three weeks after 9/11) the Jamaat-e-Islami increased its seats in parliament from two to seventeen and the Islami Oikyo Jote, an alliance of several Islamic parties, gained 14 seats. Khaleda Zia’s BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) formed an alliance with both these parties and the Jamaat-e-Islami was rewarded with two ministers’ posts in the cabinet.62 For the first time Islamists were taking part in the government. But in the national elections (Plate 12) in December 2008 the Awami League with its secular agenda promised to try the 1971 war criminals and won a two-thirds majority; the Jamaat-e-Islami could retain only two seats in parliament which drastically reduced its influence in national politics. In 2010, top leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami were arrested for alleged war crimes and the war crimes tribunal started its proceedings.

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Plate 12   Election posters in 2006 with Awami League and BNP candidates next to each other.
The surfacing of the JMB (Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh), responsible for more than 400 simultaneous bomb explosions in 63 districts all over the country on 17 August 2005, has made it clear that political Islam and terrorism have become a dangerous force in Bangladesh. The JMB is reportedly linked to Al Qaeda and has close connections to the Jamaat-e-Islami. For a long time, the BNP government denied the threat of political Islam, but in February/March 2006, due to international pressure, the main leaders of the JMB were finally arrested. Some of these leaders received the death sentence and have been executed, but the JMB has not been eradicated by far. Regularly new arrests of JMB members are reported in the media.

The changing role of Islam that I have sketched above - from an initial emphasis on Bengali identity to a growing tendency to emphasise an Islamic identity - forms an important part of the background picture needed to understand the contradictory tendencies in Bangladesh society regarding the position of women in society. Ideologies are not static, they change over time and structures are not monolithic entities but are full of internal contradictions. Gender ideologies adhered to by Islamic forces, by the state, by civil society and by western bilateral and multilateral agencies can be reinforcing each other, but are more often competing with each other. The state has to balance between these conflicting gender ideologies which at times leads to contradictory trends and tensions. These contradictions within the structure sometimes give women space to act. Certain conditions, both within structures and in individual circumstances, can enable or constrain women to act in defiance of oppressive structures and bring about changes, either individually in their own circumstances, or collectively in society. Structure does not necessarily constrain women’s agency, it can also allow space for women’s own creativity, or women can even use structural aspects to exert their agency. When the balance of power is on a side that is favourable to women’s demands, women can make use of the internal contradictions to advance their struggle for gender equality. Before I elaborate further on existing contradictions I will say something about how women are seen in Islam and the values and moral prescriptions that are imposed on them.

4.2 Islam, moral values and gender ideology

Purdah (literally veil, referring to the practice of seclusion of women) is one of the most important prescriptions of Islam to regulate women’s behaviour and gender relations. In Islam seductive power is attributed to women, they are seen as a potential danger for men. Therefore, so as not to arouse strange men and to protect women’s chastity, women have to go veiled (El Saadawi 1980: 257-259). The practice of purdah reinforces prevailing patriarchal norms. Closely connected to purdah is the concept of izzat [honour], which is mostly identified with women’s

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63 Apparently purdah is derived from organising principles that existed in Bangladesh and India before the arrival of Islam (Rozario 1998:259).

64 In Bangladesh more than 85% of the population is Muslim. In Jhagrapur there is only one Hindu family, the rest of the population is Muslim. Therefore I deal mainly with Muslim women in this book.
chastity. To protect women’s chastity and the family’s (men’s) honour *purdah* has been invented to keep women’s sexuality under control. The practice of *purdah* aims at controlling women and reinforces prevailing patriarchal norms. Marriage is the institution that regulates women’s sexuality, reproduction and gender relations and is one of the main mechanisms of subordination of women. Therefore a single woman, unmarried or divorced, is perceived as a threat; she can bring dishonour, not only to her family but to the whole community, as her sexuality is not under the control of a husband (Rozario 1992; Akpinar 1998). *Purdah* norms and values, and the honour of a family and the community, play an important role in defining women’s roles, their behaviour and their position in society. In Bangladesh, a woman who is modest and shy, who stays confined to her house and does not interact with men outside her family is regarded as a ‘good’ woman (Plate 13).

This ‘good’ woman identity is clearly imposed on women. It is debatable whether the ideological basis of these social norms and specific gender role lies in Islam or rather in patriarchal ideology. The ‘good woman’ norms and gender roles do not only exist in Islamic societies but in all patriarchal societies. Women are seen as the representatives of the core identity of a group (Schrijvers 1999: 308) and women as carriers of a group’s identity “are given the social responsibility of maintaining group boundaries” (Akpinar 1998: 48). Consequently, the dominant idea is that a woman who violates these gender norms by moving around freely without the control of male family members, damages the identity of the group and is seen as a threat to the honour of the family and society. Women who are regarded as damaging the honour of the group often meet with violent reactions. Men use the
(threat of) violence to assert their authority over women and to punish violations of societal norms regarding proper women’s behaviour. Male violence ‘to set a woman right’ is socially accepted by many. This structural violence against women is an expression of their subordinate position. I argue that the ideological basis of these gender specific norms lie in patriarchal ideology rather than in Islam. In a way, the patriarchal ideology that men are the providers and women the caretakers, and the Islamic inheritance laws contradict each other. In particular the practice of purdah and women’s right to maintenance that is laid down in the Koran, have reinforced the patriarchal ideology of subordination and dependence of women. On the other hand, Islam has given women inheritance rights, albeit not equal rights to men.

4.3 Contradictory developments
Increasing emphasis on an Islamic identity and the growth of political Islam with its excesses in the form of fatwas is not the only development. Simultaneously, there have been developments in another direction. Since the late 1960s, feminists worldwide have revolted against male-dominating ideologies and raised criticism that development programmes are male-biased and increase gender inequality.

65 Other forms of male violence, such as rape, acid throwing, killing and suicide as a result of male torture are also regularly reported in the press and by human rights organisations. Acid attacks are a relatively recent form of violence against women, first recorded in Bangladesh in 1983. In an acid attack a boy throws acid on a girl for instance because she refused to marry him or refused to have a sexual relationship. In 2002 the government introduced the Acid Crime Control Act of 2002 and the death penalty for throwing acid while the Acid Control Act of 2002 was introduced to control the sales of acids. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs reported that 172 women had been victims of acid attacks in 2009 (Odhikar 2010). If a woman survives an acid attack she is maimed for life.

66 This was renamed Ministry for Women and Children’s Affairs in 1994.
They also pointed out that women are not helpless victims who are resigned to their fate, but that they are also actors and agents of social change (Boserup 1970; Rogers 1980; Beneria & Sen 1981). In response to this the UN declared a Decade for Women (1980-1990) and western donors started pushing governments and development organisations to focus on women in their programmes. With the likely prospect of foreign funds, the government of General Zia set up a Ministry for Women’s Affairs in 1978, one year after secularism was dropped from the Constitution, and policies for women’s development were adopted. Similarly NGOs started targeting women and, driven by poverty, women increasingly came forward to participate in their programmes.

Due to these influences, the visibility of women has increased tremendously since the 1970s (Plate 14). Whereas, earlier, women were mostly not seen in public spaces, NGOs and government programmes now gave them a reason to move around their villages to visit a group meeting of their credit group, get a contraceptive injection or go to the bank in the nearby town to deposit their group savings or collect or invest money that their husbands sent from abroad. Not only poor peasant women, but also middle peasant women and even a few rich peasant women have joined such programmes. Another programme that was the result of increased attention for the development of women is a stipend programme for girls enrolled in high school and more recently also for girls studying in college that the Khaleda Zia government introduced in the 1990s. As a result, many more girls participate in higher education compared to the 1970s. Daily groups of teenage girls move around in rural areas on their way to high school, something that could not be seen in the 1970s. The mobility of women in urban areas, especially in and around the capital Dhaka has also increased as a result of the development of the garment industry. In the early morning, crowds of women can be seen in the streets of Dhaka and its adjacent areas on their way to the factory (Plate 15),
something that was unthinkable in the 1970s. The necessity for poor women to earn an income to survive prompted them to take up a job in a garment factory.

In reaction to these developments, Islamic groups started agitating against (mostly foreign funded) NGOs. In their eyes, these were promoting western values that were symbols of moral decay and against Islamic rules. A series of fatwas were also issued against NGOs and especially during the mid 1990s there were several violent attacks on NGO offices and schools. The reaction of Islamic forces was also to put an even greater emphasis on purdah restrictions and the norm that women should not work outside the house. In contrast, women started creatively redefining the concept of purdah in such a way that it would allow them to make use of opportunities offered by the government and NGOs, but at the same time would conform to social norms and values. Women moulded the meaning of purdah from a concept of physical seclusion into a concept of ‘purdah of the mind’ (Amin 1995; Rozario 1998; Kabeer 1994; Shehabuddin 2008; Rudnick 2009), clearly demonstrating their agency. For instance, Rudnick (2003, 2009:130, 131) found in a study on Bangladeshi migrant women in Malaysia, living away from their families, that these women emphasised their ‘inner’ qualities of purity rather than the ‘outer’ qualities of purdah, of being confined to the homestead. They had to move around to do their jobs and take care of themselves, but were more careful to cover their bodies properly to show their decency, their ‘pure’ mind and sincere intentions to avoid being labelled as ‘bad’ women. This indicated their personal responsibility, rather than control by guardians. By redefining purdah they renegotiated the boundaries of permissible behaviour.

At times the state was caught in between these competing and contradictory ideologies - the secular ideology of NGOs and their agenda of women’s equality and the Islamic ideology with its emphasis on purdah (Shehabuddin 2008: 115, 116). On the one hand, the state was dependent on western foreign aid. On the other hand, it needed the support of Islamic groups and other Islamic countries. To add even more to the dilemma of the state, western donors increasingly demanded repression of political Islamic groups, especially after the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001. The dilemma was also demonstrated when the Advisors’ Council of the Interim Caretaker government approved the National Women Development Policy (NWDP) on March 8, 2008. Political Islamist Mullahs immediately staged militant protests against this policy, demonstrating their resistance against gender equality. The Policy guarantees equal rights for women, in agreement with the equal rights principle laid down in the Bangladesh Constitution. It had been pending for years; first adopted in 1997 during the previous Awami League government’s tenure (1996-2001) when it included equal rights to inherited property, but later stalled and modified by the BNP government. To the dismay of women’s rights organisations, in reaction to the protests by Mullahs, the Caretaker Government formed an Ulema Committee to review the policy. This committee strongly recommended omitting or changing several provisions, such as equal inheritance rights for women as they were un-Islamic and the Caretaker
government partly backtracked from its intention to adopt the policy. Male hegemony and resistance against gender equality were once again demonstrated.

With the Awami League back in power since December 2008, the state is leaning once more towards secularist tendencies and supports women’s equal rights. Sheikh Hasina declared on 8 March 2009 (International Women’s Day) that she would reintroduce the National Women Development Policy. On 8 March 2010 Sheikh Hasina reiterated her promise to reintroduce the policy. She also promised to undo the changes made by the BNP government and stated that women should have equal rights to property. The latter is remarkable as it is a contentious issue as we have seen above, particularly contested by orthodox Muslims because, according to the Koran, women are entitled to only half the share of their brothers. Finally, the day before 8 March 2011 the policy was officially approved in a cabinet meeting. However the issue of equal inheritance rights has been avoided in the policy. When asked, the state minister for Women and Children’s affairs said the NWDP would not contradict the Muslim family law as it is not a law and does not affect the inheritance laws. Reportedly, the policy provides women with “full control” over their inherited and earned property; it does not mention equal inheritance rights. Conservative Muslim leaders loudly protested the government’s decision once more and threatened to paralyse the country if the NWDP is not annulled. The future will determine the government’s sincerity to effectively implement equal rights for women.

4.4 Education and gender

Education can be a factor in women’s inheritance of land. This section describes the present situation of education in Bangladesh and the role that education plays for women in getting or claiming their inheritance rights. Many scholars have highlighted the importance of education in the empowerment of women (Stormquist 2002; Kumar and Gupta 2008). Female literacy and the degree of participation of girls and young women in education is an indication of their position in society (Plate 16).

In line with the increased attention for the development and empowerment of women and their participation in society, the government introduced a nationwide stipend programme for girls in 1994, the ‘Female Secondary Schools Assistance Project’ (FSSAP), with financial aid from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the Norwegian government.

Realising that poverty was an important reason for non-enrolment and poor performance in primary school, the government also set up a primary education stipend programme for poor children in 2002.

68 In this context it is interesting to note that in Indonesia, also a Muslim majority country, there are two parallel inheritance laws, the Muslim inheritance law and the customary laws (Adat) according to which women get an equal inheritance share. (Ratna Saptari through personal communication.)
Girls who are enrolled in high school receive a monthly stipend under FSSAP on condition that they maintain satisfactory grades and attendance, and their parents have to agree to delay the girl’s marriage until she has completed her studies. The main stated objectives of the stipend programme are to obtain gender parity in education, enhance women’s income earning opportunities, and reduce population growth by motivating the girls and their parents to postpone the girl’s marriage till after completion of high school.

Despite the fact that the monthly stipend is only a small amount of money and despite a high drop out rate, numerous irregularities and corruption, it is clear that the stipend programme has contributed to a greater enrolment of girls in high school. In the 1970s only very few girls in rural areas participated in high school education and they were mostly rich peasant daughters. Now many girls attend high school at least for a few years. According to figures from the World Bank, girl’s enrolment in high schools has tripled nationwide from 1.1 million in 1991 to 3.9 million in 2005.

Plate 16 Girls in primary school in Jhagrapur in 1998. There is increased attention for the participation of girls in education.

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69 This ‘Female Secondary Schools Assistance Project’ (FSSAP) ended in 2001 and was followed by FSSAP II. According to World Bank project appraisal Report No: 23594-BD (2002): “This FSSAP II project sustains improved gender equity, and adds activities and incentives to improve the quality of education in participating schools and to improve both the management capacity of the Ministry of Education and monitoring and accountability mechanisms at the community level.” FSSAP II ended in 2008 and was followed by ‘The Secondary Education Access and Quality Enhancement Project’ (SEAQEP). This new project provides stipends not only to poor girls but also to poor boys in secondary education. Evaluations of the programme had showed that girls enrolled in high school began to outnumber boys more and more (see: http://www.worldbank.org.bd/WEBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/SOUTHASIAEXT/BANGLADESHEXTN0..contentMDK:21560858--pagePK:141137--piPK:141127--theSitePK:295760,00.html, accessed 1 March 2009).


71 In 1998 a girl in 6th grade received 25 Taka per month, in 7th grade 30 Taka and in 8th grade 35 Taka. Only from 9th grade girls get a bigger amount. In comparison, a day labourer earned 30 Taka per day.
However, only few girls complete high school and it is not clear what other effects the stipend programme has had on the position of women. There is no clear evidence that marriages are delayed or more women found employment as a result of education (Raynor and Wesson 2006; Bates, Maselko and Schuler 2007).

Given the fact that the amount of money received as stipend is very low and does not even cover all the educational expenses, it could well be that the stipend money itself is not the only incentive for parents to enrol a daughter in high school. The stipend may be one factor, but other factors may be at work here as well; many parents may continue to send their daughters to school if they would not receive a stipend (S. S. Ahmed 2004:40, quoted in Raynor and Wesson 2006). The realisation that education may increase the chances of earning and, connected to this, the expectation that dowry demands will decrease when a girl is more educated may be possible factors. Dowry demands decrease when a girl has had some years of higher education as it opens up the possibility for a job. This is an important reason why poor parents increasingly send their daughters to high school nowadays. On the other hand, as Ahmed and Naher (1987: 196) have pointed out, most husbands do not like their wife to work after marriage and there are hardly any employment opportunities for women in rural areas anyway. Ahmed and Naher (1987: 189) also pointed out that it was difficult to find a bridegroom if a girl was over-educated or over-qualified, as the bridegroom would have to be at least as qualified.

Finally, higher female participation as such, or rather gender parity in higher education does not necessarily mean that women will participate in society on an equal basis. At the structural level, the key question is whether increased participation in education contributes to a structural change in society towards greater gender and class equality. Obviously, this is not easy to measure. The quality of education is an important factor here, as well as the availability of employment opportunities after education. If the education system, the educational programmes, and curriculum are designed in such a way that class and gender inequalities are explicitly challenged, then education could be a factor in challenging traditional power structures. Inspiration for this could be taken from the life and writings of the famous Begum Rokeya Sakhavat Hussain, born in a landlord family in a village in Rangpur in 1880. She advocated gender equality and to realise her ideals she set up a school for Muslim women around the turning of the 19th to the 20th century. Similarly, if there is no sustained increase in opportunities for women on the labour market, women will remain dependent on their husbands for their livelihood.

72 A survey by CAMPE (Campaign for Popular Education) in 2003-04 found that two-thirds of the extremely poor children did not get stipends, but 27 percent of the well-off children do. Besides, the children received at least 30 percent less than what they should have (Daily Star 24 February 2006, “Stipends end up in wrong hands” by Inam Ahmed). The same has also been reported in other reports. Girls in Jhagrapur told me similar experiences.
4.5 Women’s reproductive rights and empowerment

Another much debated issue that relates to women’s empowerment concerns population control versus women’s reproductive rights. Population control and family planning programmes have had an influence on marital relations and on women’s position in the household. Since the 1960s, (then still East Pakistan) family planning programmes, or rather population control programmes, have been carried out by the government of Bangladesh, mostly pushed by foreign donors (the latter portraying doom scenarios of projected population explosions in poor countries). An increasing population would be a threat to the world’s resources and with that to the wealth of the foreign donors. For a long time, these population control programmes in Bangladesh were ineffective. True to the norm that men have jobs and provide the family income, most village level family planning workers were male, while it was mostly women who were expected to use contraceptives or undergo sterilisation operations. But, given the *purdah* restrictions on women’s contact with outsiders, these family planning workers could reach only men. Many people claimed that family planning was against Islam and men proved particularly hesitant to use contraceptives, as they feared that it would affect their masculinity and potency. As a result, not many people used contraceptives. However, this did not mean that women were not interested in contraceptives. On the contrary, women were very eager to know about contraceptives and several women used contraceptives secretly without the knowledge of their husband (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980:76).

Under pressure from foreign donors to make population control programs more effective, the government introduced incentives in cash and kind for sterilisation operations in the early 1980s. National and international women’s organisations highly criticised these programmes for being coercive. Studies showed that a disproportionately high number of people who were sterilised were from the poor classes, obviously attracted by the incentives (Hartmann & Standing 1985, 1989). Women’s organisations also demanded that the issue should be reproductive rights, as opposed to population control, giving women the right to free and informed consent and a choice on which contraceptive to use. Incentives were incompatible with this as a form of coercion and against the principle of free and informed choice. Moreover, programmes for family planning should include good health care and improvement of living standards. From the 1980s, NGOs started

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75 Feminists have emphasised that there is a distinction between population control and family planning. See for instance Hartmann 1987. Population control programmes are top down and serve the interest of the state, while family planning implies women’s agency, a woman’s free choice over her body.

76 For a detailed critique of population control programmes in Bangladesh and its scandals see Betsy Hartmann and Hilary Standing (1985 and 1989) and Farida Akhter (1992).

77 Reproductive rights, as opposed to population control, has been the main spear-point of feminists at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo. 179 governments agreed to ensure women’s ability to control their own fertility. In Bangladesh some of the organisations that were in the forefront to demand reproductive rights as opposed to population control were Nari Pokkho, a women’s campaigning group and UBINIG, an independent research organisation. Internationally the Women’s Global Network for Reproductive Rights has been active since the 1980s in voicing feminist demands regarding reproductive rights.
taking up family planning programmes and some of these included mother and childcare in their programmes. Instead of male workers, NGOs employed female workers to motivate women to use contraceptives. Propaganda campaigns for a ‘happy family of four’ through family planning were carried out via radio and television and religious leaders were mobilised to issue statements that the use of contraceptives was not against Islam.78 Also owing to increasing land scarcity and a growing penetration of the market, the use of contraceptives and family planning is now commonly accepted and Bangladesh has become one of the success stories of family planning programmes. But with the main responsibility for reproduction resting on women’s shoulders and patriarchal notions of male virility, the responsibility for the use of contraceptives still rests mainly on the shoulders of women.

The developments described above created choice and space for women to negotiate their influence in decision making within the household and the family. In chapter 8, I will look at what these changes say about women’s empowerment, what has been women’s role in these changes and to what extent they have contributed to a structural change in women’s position.

4.6 Summary and Conclusion

The social transformation that is taking place in Bangladesh can be noticed in several fields. First of all, there has been an increasing influence of Islam, including political Islam. The fatwas issued against women and violent attacks against secularist forces are an expression of this development. More or less parallel to this there have been four other developments that have had a major impact on the position of women. Firstly, the development of the garments industry from the late 1980s in which thousands of women found employment. Secondly, the growing influence of NGOs that target rural women in their (now mostly microfinance) programmes. Thirdly, increased efforts by the state since the 1990s to make secondary education more accessible to girls. Lastly, the wide acceptance of family planning practices in contrast to the 1970s when these programmes were highly unsuccessful. Each of these developments created choice and space for women to negotiate their influence in decision making within the household and the family. The state and local authorities often found themselves caught between these contradictory developments.

In the next two chapters we will see how the economic and social transformation of society has taken shape in Jhagrapur itself since 1975. In chapter 5, changes in class and gender relations will be analysed with regard to the class composition, land and labour relations. In this context microfinance programmes and dowry will also be discussed.