

Religion and Development: An Ethnographic Study of Jamia Hafsa in Islamabad by **Sara Kamal Bajwa**

Educational institutions in Pakistan function under three separate systems— public, private and *madrassas*. The media and the government turned their attention towards the *madrassas* only after the September 11, 2001 attacks, as there was a growing perception that terrorism in the region is fueled by these *madrassas*. Although several studies have been undertaken to analyse the *madrassa* curriculum and its impact on the female students, the role and attitudes of *madrassa* teachers, and the challenges they face, a full account of an ethnographic study especially capturing perceptions and views of the females regarding religious education, empowerment and development remains yet to be explored. This thesis is an in-depth ethnographic study that uses the grounded theory approach as the theoretical framework for analysis. The literature reviewed on the role of religion in development, gender and development approaches and studies conducted on the South Asian and Pakistani context helped in the understanding of the basic concepts, themes and processes related to this study. The data was collected through using research techniques such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, along with participant observation of the researcher, conducted with the females; students, teachers and head of administration at the prominent yet controversial Deobandi female *madrassa*; Syeda Jamia Hafsa, in Islamabad. The data has been taken primarily from a purposive sample of the population. This study seeks to explore whether religious education empowers or disempowers females at this particular *madrassa*. The results indicate that according to the perceptions captured on the field, religious education empowers the females at the *madrassa*; as they become more aware and conscious of their rights and responsibilities, and the roles that they have to play in the society. An educated woman has a role to play in the development process which can be both at; the micro and the macro level. The government does not play any role to support this *madrassa* even though the state has a responsibility towards religious education. Finally, an attempt has been made to develop an indigenous model of interaction for this *madrassa* based on the findings of the research and reflections of the researcher.

**Keywords:** Deobandi *madrassa*; development; empowerment; gender; Islam; perceptions; religious education.