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.