

# An Interview with Lamia Karim

A cultural anthropologist, CSWS's new associate director researches women's lives in global Asia.

**Q: Tell us about growing up in Bangladesh. Who shaped your early views on feminism?**

I grew up in Dhaka, Bangladesh. My mother was an economist, my father a sociologist. I grew up in a family of strong women. My great aunt was a published poet in 1920s British India, no small feat for a Muslim woman in those days. Growing up, she was held up as an ideal that we were expected to emulate. However, my family gave me conflicting messages. On the one hand, I was taught that a life of learning was an ideal that I should pursue. On the other, I was told that I should get married, and pursue higher education only if my husband allowed it.

The person who shaped my early views on feminism was the twentieth-century Bengali Muslim emancipator, Begum Rokeya Sakhwat, who advocated education for women. And my mother, who despite being a highly educated woman who earned more than her husband, subordinated her desires to my father who was a patriarch. I was very disturbed by that.

**Q. How did you arrive in America?**

I came to the U.S. in 1980. I attended Brandeis University outside Boston on a four-year Wien scholarship for international students. Wien Scholars are a diverse group of outstanding international students at Brandeis. The professor who influenced me deeply was David Gil. As an undergraduate, I took a graduate seminar with him that transformed my life. He taught us to strive for social justice, and to become the change that we wanted the world to be. I recently saw him in Boston. He is 86, and is still teaching!

**Q: What brought you to the study of anthropology?**

In 1991, I joined the graduate program in journalism at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. I was soon disillusioned by journalism and its search for objectivity in a world that is highly subjective. A friend suggested that I try anthropology instead. I took a course in cultural theory, and that opened a new way of thinking about the world. Then I went to Rice University for my graduate studies where I studied under James Faubion and George Marcus, two leading figures in anthropology. At Rice, we were treated as cohorts, and we had stimulating lunch seminars with leading figures in the social sciences. Most importantly, we were encouraged to think for ourselves. I must add, though, that I have an ambivalent relationship with anthropology. Its colonial roots and its interest in studying the "primitive" and the "exotic" deeply disturb me, but it is precisely this discomfort that makes me want to push anthropology's boundaries. And let us not forget that anthropology is the only discipline that has a historical engagement with the notion of the other. So anthropology, perhaps more than any other discipline, has to wrestle with difference, and I see this struggle within anthropology as its strength.

**Q: In your work you must encounter women whose lives and views are very different from yours. How does the fieldwork experience challenge your feminist views?**

Learning to conduct fieldwork has been one of the most important



pedagogical tools in my life. Ethnography robs the researcher of hubris because you are thrown into uncomfortable situations.

The majority of the women I meet through my research would not take on the label "feminist." Yet many of them are feminists in that they believe in autonomy, and they have developed different strategies of negotiating power within patriarchal family situations. My research has deepened the way I think about women's lives, and has taught me to see women not as victims, but as creative beings with tremendous potential.

**Q: How would you define your intellectual trajectory?**

My life traverses two worlds, the first and the third, so to speak. I am constantly negotiating the pushes and pulls between these two cultures. My ideas have been shaped by a philosophy that is feminist, postcolonial, and social-justice oriented. It was education that changed my life; thus, I am very committed to the idea of education for women. Two pivotal events shaped my early years, the independence struggle in 1971 when Bangladesh separated from Pakistan, and the famine of 1974 in Bangladesh. During the war, I remember waking up one night to hear the horrifying cries of women as Pakistani army officers raped them. The women lived in a dorm across from where we lived in faculty housing. When the famine occurred, I had to literally walk over dead and dying bodies to get to school. I remember seeing babies trying to suckle at the dry breasts of mothers who were dying or almost dead. I still have dark memories of those days. Yet I have found no answer to the human capacity to injure those we make into "others," whether in times of war or peace. So, I look at my life as a journey toward learning about our human capacity to overcome against tremendous odds.

**Q: You describe yourself as a secular humanist. Yet in your recent research funded by the National Science Foundation, you chose to study a group of extremely religious women in Bangladesh. What were some of your findings, and how was that experience for you as a feminist?**

I was always drawn to notions of piety among religious women. My parents were secular. Growing up, my father took us to visit Hindu and Buddhist temples, as well as a local Catholic church, and he taught us that all religions were different paths to the same—communion with the divine. So, my life was shaped by secular principles. Religious women fascinate me because they live according to beliefs that are so different from my belief system.

Last year, I did my research among a small group of women belonging to the Islamic pietist movement known as Tabligh Ja'maat. It is a male-dominated transnational movement that began

in India in the 1920s. Women in this group adhere to a strict interpretation of the Quran. They rejected Western societies as corrupt and observed Islamic rituals with regard to bodily comportment. They also reject modern education in favor of a return to an Islamic golden age, that is, the time of Prophet Mohammed. Interestingly, most of these women entered the movement after marrying men who belong to the Tablighi Ja'maat. I found that the men brought their wives into the movement. The men dedicate 120 days a year in missionary work during which they stay away from home. They want wives who will not sexually transgress while they are away. Moreover, the Tablighi leadership has realized that in this globalized, media-saturated world, they cannot leave their women outside the mosque. They have also introduced weekly prayer meetings for the women to keep them within the hierarchical structure of the movement. Dissent is not allowed within the group.

**Q. Tell us about your forthcoming book, *Microfinance and Its Discontents: Women in Debt in Bangladesh*.**

My book is a trenchant critique of microfinance policies and practices in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is known as the heartland of microfinance. It is home to the 2006 Nobel Prize winner, the Grameen Bank. My findings argue against the received wisdom that microfinance is good for poor women. While there are cases where women have benefited, I found that in the majority of cases, women had suffered. I found they were becoming more indebted through the microfinance lending policies adopted by the Grameen Bank and the leading NGOs in the country. In many instances, microfinance lending practices made the poor poorer. Moreover, there was an increase in violence and abuse against women when they could not repay on time. In recent years, the trend is toward social businesses that link corporations with the poor of the world. We need to be cautious about these link-ups, especially in unregulated markets where the poor are made into consumers with no safety nets.

**Q: You have been profoundly moved by the experiences of women acid survivors in Bangladesh who use music to heal themselves. How would you like to help these women?**

Acid violence also takes place in other Asian countries, in parts of Africa, and even in North America. However, Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of acid attacks on women. One of my new research projects is on women I met in Bangladesh who were scarred by sulfuric acid thrown on them by men when they were very young. Encouraged by the late feminist activist, Nasreen Huq, these women have formed a music group called "Ponchomshur" or "Fifth Note." They gather every week to sing and heal themselves through music. When I met these women I was shaken to my very core to see faces so scarred, but when I heard their music, I realized that despite their bodily and psychic scars, they have found a way to sing, to smile, and to live normal lives. Most are from poor families. They were subjected to acid attacks because they had spurned sexual advances by young men, or their family could not pay the dowry demanded by their husbands, or over property disputes.

The feminist movement in Bangladesh has been very effective in organizing these women to demand their rights. Most of the perpetrators are in jail.



A teenager dances at the acid survivors healing group in Bangladesh.

There is a foundation to help the women financially. And society has begun to recognize this as a heinous crime. The women keep their faces uncovered and live as normally as possible. They go to school, work, sing and dance, fall in love, marry, and have families. I plan to write their stories because their lives have something to teach us all.

**Q: How do you see the feminist movement in Bangladesh? What are its strengths and weaknesses?**

The feminist movement in Bangladesh has been very active since the 1971 independence of the country. It is a vocal movement in the urban city of Dhaka, less so in the provincial towns and villages. The movement has made many strides in regard to women's participation in public life, getting women elected, and in reserving quotas for women in education and government employment. About 30 percent of union councils—the lowest tier of government at rural level—is now composed of women. Feminists in Bangladesh have been trying hard to pass a universal civil code that would apply evenly to all women regardless of religious affiliation, but that is still an uphill battle because of resistance by religious groups.

The movement's leaders are mostly upper-class women, and social relations tend to be hierarchical with poorer women deferring to the wisdom of upper-class leaders. There is a reluctance to discuss class issues, and that is a major drawback of the movement. Garment workers who are mostly women and belong to trade unions might have the potential to create a working-class feminist movement. But that remains to be seen.

**Q: How can feminists in the United States form alliances with feminists in the global south?**

I think respect for difference is key for any meaningful dialogue to take place. Feminists in the developed north must not come across with a saving discourse, that is, they are going to save these poor, oppressed women from the patriarchy of their cultures. Yet that is what happens in the majority of cases I have seen. We need to form alliances that respect the different kinds of choices women make given their cultural values and religious beliefs. Women who wear the veil are not necessarily oppressed, as many in the West think. Women make this decision based on piety or for personal reasons. The beauty industry in this country is very damaging to a woman's health and self-esteem. Many women in Islamic countries say they do not want their bodies to be commercialized. The key is to recognize the differences that make us unique and the commonalities that make us equals struggling for rights that are often culturally and religiously circumscribed.

**Q: How do you envision your role as associate director of CSWS? What are some of the things you would like to accomplish?**

When I joined the University of Oregon in 2003, CSWS was one of the first places with which I had an affinity. Over the last seven years, I have had many relationships with the Center—from organizing a conference, speaking at its seminars, and benefiting from its research grants. I see this new position as an opportunity to learn how centers are run at a university. Under the mentorship of director Carol Stabile, I anticipate building a robust feminist research agenda at CSWS and also working on planning that would create leadership positions for women at the university. The next two years hold many challenges, and I look forward to this. ■

—Alice Evans interviewed Lamia Karim in June 2010.