

Refugee Review Tribunal

AUSTRALIA

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

Research Response Number: BGD17153
Country: Bangladesh
Date: 17 January 2005

Keywords: Bangladesh – Women – Burqas – Passport photos

This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

Questions

1. Do the majority of women in Bangladesh wear the burqa?
2. Are women in Bangladesh passport photos typically wearing the burqa or not?
3. Anything else you feel might be relevant.

RESPONSE

1. Do the majority of women in Bangladesh wear the burqa?

Information from the sources consulted indicates that the majority of women in Bangladesh wear *saris*. Two reports were located which discuss occurrences of Islamic vigilantism, in which women have been encouraged to wear *burqas* in certain areas of the country ('Bangladeshi police criticise "over-enthusiasm" of Islamic vigilantes' 2004, *Agence France Presse*, 6 May – Attachment 1; 'Lecturer banned after burqa order' 2004, *BBC News*, 28 September http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/3698142.stm – Accessed 16 December 2004 – Attachment 2). In general, the choice of dress for a Bangladeshi woman appears to be largely dependent on her socio-economic status.

A 2004 article by *Agence France Presse* states that "the majority of women in Bangladesh dress in saris but the burqa is also widely worn, especially in rural areas" ('Bangladeshi women opt for 'trendy' foreign burqas' 2004, *Agence France Presse*, 1 July – Attachment 3).

The most recent edition (2000) of the Lonely Planet guide to Bangladesh states that "the majority of women wear a sari... Worn under this is a short blouse and a plain cotton skirt. A *salwar kameez*, a long dress-like tunic worn over baggy trousers, is the modern woman's alternative to the sari. A long scarf called a *dupatta* or *orna* is draped backwards over the shoulders to cover the chest. One end of the scarf can be used to cover the head for a more modest appearance" (Plunkett, R. et al 2000, *Bangladesh*, 4th Ed, Lonely Planet Publications, Victoria, p.37 – Attachment 4).

Similarly, the Discovery Bangladesh website states that “Bangladeshi women habitually wear Sarees [sic] ... A common hairstyle is Beni (twisted bun) that Bangalee women are fond of” (‘Bangladesh: Clothing’ 2005, Discovery Bangladesh website <http://www.discoverybangladesh.com/meetbangladesh/clothing.html> – Accessed 7 January 2005 – Attachment 5).

In a 2002 academic paper, authored by Nadine Harig, the question of clothing worn by Bangladeshi women is discussed *vis-à-vis* distinct social classes and situations, employment and religion. Pertinent extracts follow in detail:

These days changes in dress are said to be indicators of state’s reliance on international capital and the shift towards Muslim dominance (White 1992, 30). Women still wear the traditional *saris*, though the cloth is less coarse than it used to be. Western influence is more evident in men’s and children’s clothes. In the literature it is argued that social obligations are strictly separated by gender (Wichterich 1998, 198). The Western clothing style of the majority of men in Bangladesh stands for modernity and orientation towards economic progress for example. Contrary to this women maintain tradition (Risseuw 1998, 106) by continuing to wear *sari* and *salwar kameez*.

...The *salwar kameez*, which is the national dress of Pakistan nowadays, has been worn for centuries by both Hindus and Muslims. In Bangladesh it has recently become the acceptable garb for female college students of all religions. The *salwar kameez* is said to be worn only by the educated few (Tarlo 1996, 133), and women often revert to *sari* after marriage.

I observed the women I interviewed wearing different clothing styles according to the situations. From my empirical data I would like to distinguish three central categories of circumstances related to a special clothing style.

1. ...The first of the three categories of clothing styles, then, consists of comfortable dresses or blouses and skirts the women usually wear at home. They are absolutely restricted to the private sphere.

2. My interviewees said that they like to wear *sari* occasionally, for festive or ceremonious reasons like marriages or going on an outing for example. They like to dress up attractively, which means to put on *sari*, ornaments and cosmetics. Besides this there are also official meetings of the NGO from time to time, where the female staff is expected to attend in *sari*. Furthermore the women wear *sari* when they go to the field. I assume the NGO-women dressed in this clothing style during the whole field visit for a certain reason. The NGO workers are often confronted with unfriendly villagers, who suspect or fear that these are missionary attempts towards religious conversion or that they are a new form of agent of the village elite (see Chowdhury 1989, 76-77). To inspire trust the female NGO-staff wear the national dress, because the village women are used to the *sari*. The *salwar kameez* would emphasise the distinction between the ‘well educated city women’ and the ‘poor village women’, but a homogeneous clothing style, the *sari*, is intended to reveal a closer relationship to the ‘clients’. A good relationship between the NGO-staff and the village people is vitally necessary for the success of a development project, since the NGO depends on their collaboration (see Britta Baumgarten, chapter 3.3).

3. The last category is composed of the *salwar kameez* which women wear primarily at the workplace, no matter if they are married or not. In general they explained that they feel more comfortable in the *salwar kameez* than in *sari*. I suppose this statement needs to be further interpreted than solely by the explanation of the comfortable fit of this piece of cloth.

...These days a new style of *salwar kameez* is fashionable, one which is cut tight to emphasise the female forms of mainly young girls, who favour it. It needs to be further questioned how this phenomenon can be interpreted according to gender relations. I assume this new variation of *salwar kameez* to be a further negotiating of traditional gender relations. These young women are very self-confident and follow in the footsteps of their forerunners. Whereas the preceding generation of women has made the *salwar kameez* presentable in Bangladesh society, the next generation does not want to hide their femininity anymore (Harig, N. 2002, 'Values and Lifestyles of Working Women in Bangladesh', Section 6, University of Bielfeld website <http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/sdrc/teaching/lehrforschungen/harig.pdf> – Accessed 7 January 2005 – Attachment 6).

2. Are women in Bangladesh passport photos typically wearing the burqa or not?

No information was found in the sources consulted stating whether Bangladeshi women are required to remove burqas for passport photos or not.

3. Anything else you feel might be relevant.

Nothing else of relevance was found in the sources consulted.

List of Sources Consulted

Internet Sources:

Google search engine

UNHCR *REFWORLD* UNHCR Refugee Information Online

Databases:

| | | |
|-------------|----------------|--|
| Public | <i>FACTIVA</i> | Reuters Business Briefing |
| DIMIA | <i>BACIS</i> | Country Information |
| | <i>REFINFO</i> | IRBDC Research Responses (Canada) |
| RRT | <i>ISYS</i> | RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State <i>Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.</i> |
| RRT Library | <i>FIRST</i> | RRT Library Catalogue |

List of Attachments

1. 'Bangladeshi police criticise "over-enthusiasm" of Islamic vigilantes' 2004, *Agence France Presse*, 6 May.
2. 'Lecturer banned after burqa order' 2004, *BBC News*, 28 September.
(http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/3698142.stm – Accessed 16 December 2004)

3. Bangladeshi women opt for 'trendy' foreign burqas' 2004, *Agence France Presse*, 1 July.
4. Plunkett, R. et al 2000, *Bangladesh*, 4th Ed, Lonely Planet Publications, Victoria, p.37. (RRT Library)
5. 'Bangladesh: Clothing' 2005, Discovery Bangladesh website. (<http://www.discoverybangladesh.com/meetbangladesh/clothing.html> – Accessed 7 January 2005)
6. Harig, N. 2002, 'Values and Lifestyles of Working Women in Bangladesh', Section 6, University of Bielfeld website. (<http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/sdrc/teaching/lehrfoschungen/harig.pdf> – Accessed 7 January 2005)