The status and role of women in society and the persistence of religious violence are two of the most crucial social issues affecting Muslims in contemporary South Asia. Like many urban areas across India, Hyderabad has experienced continual eruptions of ‘communal’ violence between Hindus and Muslims. In the wake of communal riots, local Muslims sought to organize poverty alleviation efforts in an attempt to improve individual and collective wellbeing, and therefore circumscribe the vulnerability of slum areas to religious violence. Through a close examination of the intersection of strategies to promote Muslim women’s ‘empowerment’ and to reduce Muslim-Hindu violence within a large NGO in Hyderabad, India, this presentation chronicles attempts at gender reform in Muslim slum development projects. Such efforts result in two distinct modes of religious formation of to counter poverty and violence in Muslim communities.

In the ongoing day-to-day work of social development, religious discourse and performance constitutes a network of nodal points that animates projects of poverty alleviation and nonviolence. Religion keeps expectations of trust, commonality, and mutual purpose in play. By examining the ways that Islam becomes available for understanding intimacy, integration, and social fragmentation within a large Muslim NGO, I show that rather than presenting a unified interpretation of ‘liberal’ Islam, Muslims involved in social development shift between two alternative projects of religious formation based on gender. In order to organize affectively and contain the potential eruption of religious violence, Muslim NGO workers draw on a universalist understanding of religion in working with men. In contrast, their work to transform the pervasive conditions of poverty faced by Muslim women engages women through the purview of Islamic scriptural and legal authority. Both of these strategies serve to localize Islam, creating a dualistic local religious culture of gender that aims to transform the habitus of urban slums. Feminist theory of intersectionality is used to analyze the effects of such bifurcated religious engagements on gender consciousness and the local practice of Islam.