

## International Women's Day

# Women Mobilizing: New Forms and Challenges

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In recent years religious symbols such as veiling, faith based schools and Islamic television channels are entering the public landscape. These occurrences can be seen to lie in individual choice, but new forms of organising show how groups of women seek to find meaning in their lives through these phenomena. Recently, women of all social classes coming together to discuss



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and better understand their religion, has become increasingly prevalent. What is it about these gatherings that draw women, especially given Bangladesh's long history of women organising? Women of Bengal have a long history of organising- against colonial powers, for advancement of their rights and to provide services for the welfare of their communities. Examples include, Lila Nag's Atmoraksha Shomiti under the Raj; All Pakistan Women's Association in the Pakistan era; Bangladesh Mahila Parishad which organised as a part of the liberation movement; and other research, activist, advocacy and issue based groups such as Nari Pokkho, Women for Women, Kormojibi Nari etc. While these groups are far from homogeneous both in constitution as well as in the particular agendas they fight for, all have taken a position vis a vis women that is defined, by them, as secular and liberal. Within this framework, issues that address women's sexuality have been approached in a strategic way. For example, interviewees of the Pathways research on women's organisations said that while the slogan "shorir amar shidhhanto amar" (my body, my choice)

was unproblematically used around issues of reproductive health-advocating that women should be allowed to choose when and how many children to have- the same slogan had to be placed under the “reproductive rights” banner while being applied in the case of acid survivors and potential victims, who, the activists felt, have the right to say 'no' to a romantic proposal and end a relationship. The interviewees said that this strategic link of two diverse issues was established so that one did not have to confront the socially acceptable definition of the ideal comportment of a “good girl”. The reason for this stems from the apprehension that outside of the marital framework within which reproductive rights are located, any talk of women's rights pertaining to their bodies would bring up issues around sexuality, morality which are very closely intertwined with religion, which activists believed should be a private matter. By keeping sexuality, morality and religion at bay, feminists left the ground open for new kinds of organising, where the premise of religion as private would be turned on its head. By foregrounding their position on sexuality in a way that endows women with a sense of agency, groups organising around religion appeal to the average Bangladeshi woman ranging from students, house wives of different socio-economic backgrounds, and young and old professionals.



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Thus taleem- classes based on readings from the Quran, hadith and other religious literature proliferate. Pathways research on sexuality, religion and empowerment finds that the average woman- be it the factory worker in peri-urban Bangladesh, or the student of public as well as private universities like the idea of taleem, where projects of change are anchored by clearly spelling out ideal roles, behaviour and dispositions of the “good Muslim girl”. For example, women preachers and followers argue that “answers” to acid violence lie not only in changing the law and increasing the severity with which

offenders are to be punished, but that prevention needs to begin at the very personal level. So, women should first take the responsibility of covering themselves properly- not to exempt men of their responsibility in curtailing lewd and violent behaviour, but to excel in their own role in

obedience to God and the maintenance of social order. So, their particular position on sexuality- that it needs to be contained in specific ways gains legitimacy as part of a larger project that is asserted as ultimately beneficial to women. Equating specific modes of containing sexuality with power and accountability, women draw a sense of worth as gendered and sexual beings, and find purpose in participating in such groups. Women in these groups also take power beyond the domestic and sexual realms to influence and reconfigure their existing roles in more “public” projects. In doing so, they draw on ideas such as “women's advancement” “the modern woman”, “liberation and emancipation”, “justice and dignity”- notions historically affiliated with a liberalist discourse.

Drawing from insights gained in the research, we feel that the vacuum left by feminists calls for greater reflection in understanding why new forms of organising are gaining momentum. Given that issues of sexuality and morality play a large part in the lives of women, is it opportune for feminists to rethink and reconfigure their process of organising to better accommodate the needs of the average woman?

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