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 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 Pokhho, 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.

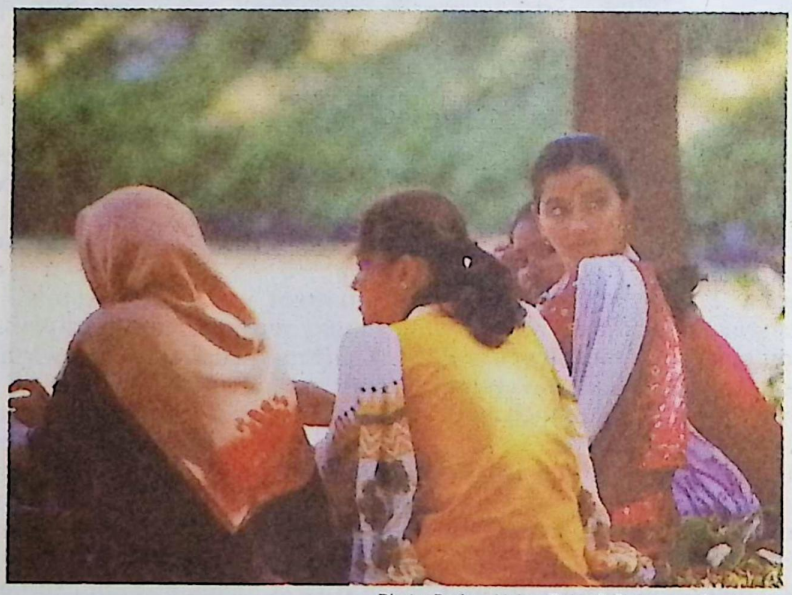


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Thus *taleem*- classes based on readings from the Quran, hadith and other religious literature proliferate. Pathways