Walking a Fine Line: Navigating Middle-class Paradoxes of Sexuality, Gender and Belonging by Dhaka's Youth

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by

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Acknowledgements

Glossary

Behayapona	Shameless behaviours, such as public display of intimacy
Beyadob	A person who does not know/follow manners, e.g., an arrogant, boastful person
Bhodro	A modest person
Bhoy	Fear
Biroktikor	Annoying
Bodnam	Damaged reputation
Chokher porda	Sense of shame or boundaries of shame, literal meaning would be cover of the eye
Dhakaiya	Residents of old Dhaka
Gali	Swearing, using obscene terms
Kameez	A long tunic worn by girls/young women in South Asia after reaching puberty, typically paired with a *salwar* (loose pants) and *orna* (long scarf)
Khalamma	Aunt
Khet	A person who is middle-class but lacks a refined taste
Mofu/Mofiz	A dumb/stupid person
Lojjya	Sense/feeling of shame
Morjada	Dignity
Obhodro	Immodest, shameless
Oogro	Antisocial, a person who does not follow social norms of shame and modesty
Oshshosti	Feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed
Pichchi	Kiddo
Shonman	Reputation or respect
Shorom	Sense/feeling of shame
Shunam	Good reputation

Chapter 1

Studying adolescent sexuality in a paradoxical middle-class context

1.1 Introduction

The cover of this thesis is a self-portrait drawn by an 18-year-old Bangladeshi middle-class young man in Dhaka. It represents his middle-class aspiration of living a cosmopolitan life. He imagined what his relationship with his Bangladeshi girlfriend would look like if they were in Paris where he aspires to pursue his higher studies in art. He imagined taking a bus ride with her and roaming the streets of Paris without facing parents' and neighbours' prying eyes. In his dream they were living together like many other young couples in the 'West', something that is impossible for young people of his age (and any unmarried couple in general) in Dhaka due to premarital intimacy being taboo. Later in this thesis I will show that transnational mobility and living a cosmopolitan life is not just this one young man's dream but is shared by many other young people in Dhaka in the context of growth of an urbanising middle-class. This is particularly the case for middle-class adolescents because of their access to internet/smartphones, fluency in English and transnational mobility both online and offline.

This thesis is about middle-class adolescents' views on and experiences with intimacy, love and sexuality in Dhaka. Middle-class adolescents in Dhaka live in a paradoxical context where on the one hand they have enhanced opportunities to engage with cosmopolitan ideas of intimacy and gender equality due to their digital transnational mobility through access to internet and mobile phones, while on the other hand restrictive gender norms prevail in society at large. Before going into the details of my research, I will provide an overview of the paradoxical context middle-class youths live in and I will explain why I think this cohort is particularly important for studying the transformations in sexuality and gender practices and norms in the country.

1.2 Bangladesh in transition, young people at the crossroads

Located in South Asia, Bangladesh is experiencing the largest transition in its history over the last few decades. It has graduated to middle-income country (MIC) from being a least developed country (LDC) in 2015. With the country's economic upswing, the urban population continues to grow and is estimated to be doubled by 2050 (United Nations 2019). This has radically changed the landscape of the capital city Dhaka, both physically and socially. The city has expanded significantly and currently accommodates about 21 million people. The middle-class now constitutes

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almost one-fourth (22%) of the total population and is estimated to reach 30% by 2030 (Mujeri 2021). Dhaka-centred industrial and economic growth has spawned a rapidly growing middle-class in the city that is transnationally mobile and has access to a cosmopolitan lifestyle (Mapril 2014, Sabur 2014). Many middle-class families are now 'affluent', own a second home abroad and may even send their children abroad for higher education (Hussein 2018b, Karim 2022, Sabur 2014). Transnational mobility has become constitutive of Bangladeshi middle-classness, and is important for increasing one's social capital and networks, as well as for securing upward social and economic mobility and claiming a modern identity (Mapril 2014). This has significantly shaped the aspirations of middle-class youths as many of them now see migrating to a western country as a pathway to live a good life (Mapril 2014).

An emerging body of research hints at the possibility that the growth of urban economy and transnational migration is shifting the gender and sexuality related norms, particularly among the urban middle class. Middle-class women increasingly participate in the labour market, which is likely to shift how middle-class women value themselves and are valued by their families (Hussein 2018b, Sabur 2014). Whereas in the 90s the main motivation for educating daughters was to secure a good marriage for them (Blanchet 1996), parents now educate girls so that they can compete in the labour market and are economically self-reliant before getting married. Many middle-class young women these days hold highly paid jobs (Hussein 2018b, Karim 2012, Sabur 2014). Women's participation in the labour market is shifting practices of marriage and intimate relationships within the space of middle-class in Dhaka (Hussein 2018b, Karim 2022, Sabur 2014). The average age of first marriage for middle-class women in Dhaka is 23-24 (Sabur 2014), which is significantly higher than the national average age of girls at first marriage of 16 at that time, despite the legal marriage age for women being 18 since 1929. But also, the national average is increasing quickly, in 2022 it had risen to 18.7 (BBS 2022). Middle class girls now have an increased say in when and who to marry (Karim 2022, Sabur 2014).

Unlike the past when love marriages were considered shameful for the families, parents increasingly take into account their son/daughter's choices, as long as they conform to certain class, gender and religious boundaries (Karim 2022, Sabur 2014). This sanctions premarital intimacy to some extent. Parents approve and sometimes encourage the soon-to-be couples to meet and get to know each other, if they share a similar class background, there is a promise of (hetero)marriage, and they meet social and familial obligations appropriate to their gender and parents are still in charge of arranging the marriage (Karim 2022, Sabur 2014). Young women are strictly

advised to follow the norms of virginity and sexual purity and young men are asked to prioritise their career so that they can take on the future role of the 'ricewinner' of the family (Karim 2012). Men's role as provider remains dominant among the middle-class (Mapril 2014) (Hasan et al. 2019, Mapril 2014). Sons are expected to contribute to their parents' household and support them in their old age (Mapril 2014). Middle-class heterosexual men, however, generally enjoy more opportunities and freedom to act on their preferences than women or gay men (Karim 2012). Generally, a woman's sexuality is monitored for a longer period, continuing into adulthood, and women are granted less privacy and mobility outside the home (Hussein 2017, Karim 2012).

While certain gender norms and ideals, such as heteromarriage, 'sexually pure' women and 'ricewinner' men remain dominant at the larger societal level, researchers indicate that other models of femininity and masculinity seem to get popular among the middle-class young people in Dhaka. Dhaka-based young professional women, often referred to as 'new' women in the literature, are reconstructing the notion of respectable womanhood and the public/private boundaries (Hussein 2018b). They substitute an emphasis on domestic chores with a focus on building their career. These 'new' professional women spend evenings out socialising with friends and colleagues, stay out or travel abroad for work purposes without being accompanied by men from their families - all of which are certainly new practices for middle-class women. While many women continue to face hurdles in their marriages, many have support from their husbands and/or in-laws. Those who lack support from their husbands and in-laws, might decide to end their marriage which previously was perceived and experienced as shameful for women and their families (Karim 2022). Many young women who are in highly paid professions and are transnationally mobile do not always conform to marriage. They enjoy their newfound freedom and prefer to remain single (Karim 2022). Some women seek intimacy beyond heterosexual marriage although they keep it secret from their families (Karim 2022).

Existing literature in the field of gender and sexuality is heavily focused on women and research on men is scarce. A recent study captures an important ongoing shift in the construction of masculinity among urban educated middle-class young men (Hasan et al. 2019). While 'men as provider' remains dominant in young men's construction of a 'real man', they do not value physical strength or piety to the same extent as older generations. Instead, good income and professional skills are considered more important in order to claim respectable middle-class manhood. The same research found that young men are more supportive towards same-sex relationships than older generations men. While the earlier generations men do not approve of premarital sex, these young men do not consider premarital sex as moral

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transgression although it is not very common either due to societal surveillance (Hasan et al. 2019). Nonetheless, contrasting evidence has been presented by other researchers. According to a survey conducted among 610 students from public universities, it was revealed that a notable percentage of young women (21%) and men (36%) have engaged in sexual intercourse, predominantly with their romantic partners (Hossen and Quddus 2021). A considerable portion of these participants are likely to be middle-class students since public universities tend to attract a predominantly middle-class student population.

The above-mentioned literature indicates a paradox of change and continuity in the gender and sexuality norms among the middle-class. Both 'progressive' and patriarchal ideals of gender and of intimacy are practised. I situate my research in this larger transitioning context with a particular focus on middle-class adolescents who have remained largely absent in the existing literature due to a heavy focus on vulnerable youths, a gap that I will discuss below. Researchers have mostly explored the effects of social norms on young people. This thesis, however, gives voice to middle-class adolescents, both girls and boys, to show how they negotiate this paradox of change and continuity.

1.3 Research questions

The overarching question this thesis intends to answer is: How do middle-class adolescents (re)construct gender and sexuality related norms in their everyday life in Dhaka? This question will be answered through three sub-questions: 1) Which norms and identities do they (re)construct in which contexts? 2) How are these (re) constructions shaped by their middle-class gendered positioning? 3) What role does shame play in their reconstruction of norms and identities?

My aim is to understand adolescents' everyday negotiations with the paradox of change and continuity of gender and sexuality related norms. I will particularly focus on premarital intimacy, masculinity and femininity as they have been identified as the most contested norms in the literature discussed above and thus provide potential spaces for investigating the complexities and nuances that urban middle-class adolescents experience in their everyday life.

1.4 Rethinking the approach to sexuality

1.4.1 The dominant public health approach

Adolescent sexuality related research and practices in lower and middle income countries (LMIC) have been dominated by a narrow public health approach that understands sexuality as a health matter and focuses on sexual and reproductive health risks and harmful social norms and practices. These include sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, risky sexual behaviours, sexual harassment against girls, child marriage, menstruation poverty and unwanted pregnancy (Denno et al. 2015). This dominant public health approach almost exclusively focuses on 'vulnerabilities' of adolescents who live in slums and are deprived of sexuality education and victim of sociocultural shame that hinders them to access essential SRH information and means (Ainul et al. 2017, Biswas et al. 2020, Nahar et al. 2013). It largely focuses on girls and sees them as passive recipients of oppressive gender norms and practices, such as *purdah* (seclusion and strict public/private boundaries), sexual purity and child marriage which hinders them from reporting sexual harassment or problems they encounter in their intimate relationships, e.g., unwanted pregnancy, sexual coercion and threats. Boys are neglected, although they also might suffer from lack of sexual information and harmful norms of masculinity.

While understanding needs of vulnerable adolescents, and in particular the plight of vulnerable girls, is indeed important, a gendered 'vulnerability' paradigm does not allow a researcher to explore how young people themselves, both girls and boys, define sexuality and which aspects of sexuality matter to them. 'Vulnerability' mainly provides a framework for safe sexuality using a language of concern and outrage. Moreover, it does not help us to understand the particular concerns of middle-class adolescents. We lack essential data on middle-class adolescents, particularly in urban spaces, where there is an increasing exposure to cosmopolitan ideas about premarital intimacy, love, friendships, and interactions with the opposite sex in schools/colleges and on Facebook. Among middle-class youngsters, the abundance of information rather than a lack thereof might pose a challenge. Girls might consider themselves less of a victim. At their middle-class homes gender discrimination is decreasing, and they may be given equal access to education as well as to technology. Parents are delaying daughters' marriage. Women's aspirations are being shifted from becoming a housewife towards being a modern, cosmopolitan woman.

In this process of transition, meanings of shame about body and sexuality might have changed. Both boys and girls can reposition themselves, start thinking differently about their body and their relations. They may see themselves less of a

victim with the help of their expertise in using modern technologies and making use of a changing context. They may no longer see parents and teachers as adequate source of information as Naezer's research found in the Dutch context (Naezer et al. 2017). Middle-class adolescents in Dhaka have already made headlines in the local media several times for leading demonstrations on the issues of gender equality and protesting sexual harassment. Exploring middle-class adolescents' experiences, differentiated for girls and boys, is therefore important to make their voices heard and understanding the social changes happening in the urban space and their role in it. To do so, it is necessary to move beyond the dominant public health approach to sexuality, and in particular its language of risk and danger and the one-sided focus on victimisation of girls.

1.4.2 A positive approach to sexuality

A growing body of research suggests that young people's understanding of and experiences with sexuality are shaped by their positive experiences, such as, curiosity (van Reeuwijk and Nahar 2013), exploration of sexuality (Naezer et al. 2017), personal aspirations (Knibbe and Spronk 2022, Spronk 2011, Spronk 2012) the desire to feel intimate connections (Gebhardt et al. 2003, Ott et al. 2006), seeking sexual adventure and feeling excitement (Naezer 2018b, Naezer and Ringrose 2019), and securing a respectable social status among peers (Naezer et al. 2017, Ott et al. 2006). Taking inspiration from these studies, I turn to the positive sexuality approach (Cornwall and Jolly 2006, Lamb and Peterson 2012, Peterson 2010) that focus on positive dimensions of adolescents' sexual experiences and conceive them as sexual agents instead of mere vulnerable subjects.

While a positive approach allows a researcher to explore experiences of sexuality and intimacy beyond victimhood, it is not without its pitfalls. Understanding adolescents as 'agents' and 'autonomous' individuals can be tricky and can burden them with enormous responsibilities (Lamb 2010). Positive sexuality has been criticised for focusing too heavily on subjective negotiations and ignoring the role of larger structures (Bay-Cheng 2003, Lamb 2010). It also faces criticism for promoting a notion of sexual freedom that might not make sense to many adolescents (Lamb 2010).

Cornwall and Jolly's (2006), Lamb and Peterson (2012) and Peterson's (2010) approaches together offer a window for bypassing these limitations. According to these authors, dimensions of sexuality encompass sexual as well as wide ranges of non-sexual elements of everyday life that adolescents themselves consider important for their sexual and overall wellbeing. Peterson (2010) suggests that adolescents are constant negotiators of social norms and the negotiations can be experienced

as an important positive dimension by them. This is supported by Bell's research conducted in Uganda (Bell 2012) which found that even when adolescents encounter negative experiences, that does not necessarily mean they view themselves as passive victims. Thus, instead of employing a prior idea of what 'positive' means and what roles adolescents have, these authors emphasise that this needs to be defined based on adolescents' varied lived experiences. Focusing on lived experiences allows to capture contradictions and inconsistencies adolescents experience in their everyday lives while negotiating sexuality. What they might experience as positive in one context might not be perceived as such in another.

I am particularly interested in exploring contradictions and inconsistencies adolescents experience. These contradictions and inconsistencies are the potential spaces for investigating adolescents' negotiations of sexuality in their transitioning, paradoxical middle-class context. Bell conceptualised strategic negotiations as sexual agency (Bell 2012). According to her, even when adolescents encounter negative experiences, that does not necessarily mean they view themselves as passive victims. Instead, they constantly negotiate the meaning of these experiences, and understanding their negotiations can provide valuable insights about adolescent sexuality. Bell defines sexual agency of adolescents as 'processes where young people become sexually active and the strategies, actions and negotiations involved in maintaining relationships and navigating broader social expectations' (Bell 2012, p.284). Sexual agency therefore cannot be investigated in isolated individuals, but in adolescents' everyday negotiations that take place within a complex web of individual desire, social expectations and larger structural factors such as economic growth.

Following Peterson (2010) and Bell (2012), I conceptualise adolescents as co-constructors of norms on premarital intimacy, masculinity and femininity. Moreover, I will investigate their strategies, actions and negotiations with regards to exploration of sexuality, maintaining peer relationships, and dealing with familial and larger societal expectations. Peterson cautioned that negotiations should not be understood as a straight-forward, individualised process but that they take place within a complex web of individual desire, social expectations and larger structural factors such as economic growth. I understand young people's negotiations as a continuous relational process that takes place in their everyday social interactions, which simultaneously shape and is shaped by their gender and class position. I want to explore which norms they construct and how they shape their middle-class gendered identities in this process.

1.5 Thinking anthropologically: Investigating sexuality, gender and shame

The concept of sexuality remains elusive and challenging to define (Padgug 2007, p.17). To capture the diverse and nuanced experiences of adolescents, this study draws inspiration from ethnographic and theoretical literature, adopting a comprehensive definition of sexuality. It perceives sexuality as a multifaceted and all-encompassing category, comprising individualized sexual feelings and desires, social ideologies and practices related to kinship, gender relations, reproduction, power dynamics, symbolic gender meanings, and moral discourses (Naezer 2018b, p.20, Spronk 2012, p.7). Sexuality, in this broader perspective, encompasses various aspects, such as exploration, adventure, pleasure, intimacy, love, identity formation, negotiation of social status, and a sense of belonging (Karim 2022, Naezer and Ringrose 2019, Naezer et al. 2017, Ott et al. 2006, Roodsaz 2022, van Reeuwijk and Nahar 2013). Instead of imposing a preconceived, fixed definition, the study follows the lead of Naezer (2018b), Naezer and Ringrose (2019), aiming to explore which aspects of sexuality hold significance for individuals in their everyday negotiations of intimacy and gender norms/identities. Acknowledging that sexuality is inherently relational and shaped by interactions between individuals, the study particularly focuses on the ambiguities in adolescents' everyday sexual and gender practices and norms within their key social relationships. Investigating how these ambiguities play out in their everyday life enables to trace adolescents' complex and diverse negotiation processes with contradictory norms. It also offers an opportunity to build a nuanced, grounded understanding of adolescent sexuality which is currently missing in the existing literature.

Similarly, my research takes a relational approach to conceptualise gender. In much of the existing literature on adolescent sexuality in Bangladesh, gender has primarily been applied in two ways: as a category to identify sex differences in adolescents' sexual and reproductive health issues, and as a vulnerability factor leading to adverse health outcomes for adolescent girls. This research takes a different approach by conceptualising gender as the lived experience of adolescents in being a girl or a boy, intertwined with their familial and broader sociocultural surroundings. Drawing inspiration from the poststructuralist perspective (Butler 1990, Connell 2012) on gender relationships, which emphasizes the fluid and socially constructed nature of gender, I perceive gender relationships as products of continuous and complex negotiations among individuals, their societies, and the larger sociocultural context. Gender, from this perspective, is not an innate or predetermined attribute but is constantly moulded and negotiated through everyday practices and discourses.

By examining how adolescents navigate and negotiate different paradoxical ideas and ideals of masculinities and femininities in various social contexts, my aim is to understand which gender norms and identities adolescents are (re)constructing in their everyday life situations.

One of the ways by which norms are imposed is through shame. For conceptualising shame, I start by looking into the most widely discussed approach in studying shame, that is the 'guilt versus shame' approach, originally proposed by anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1967) and later elaborated by many in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and psychology (e.g. Lewis 1971, Lynd 1958, Tangney and Dearing 2002, Tangney 1996). They commonly see guilt as a superior emotion to shame. While shame is conceptualised as feeling small or low about the self (Tracy and Robins 2006), guilt is understood as feeling bad about certain deeds or acts one has committed (Tracy and Robins 2006). Guilt is considered 'less painful' as it is only about 'behaviour' that can be corrected. Feeling guilt is also good because it leaves the opportunity for individuals to rectify their behaviour, which leads to them being better persons and obtaining a higher sense of self-esteem. On the other hand, shame is more painful as it is often accompanied by a sense of worthlessness, of powerlessness and can destroy one's self-esteem and may result in social isolation. Shamed people feel exposed although it may not be the case that people are actually observing them. It is often the feeling that emerges from thinking about how others portray one's defective self (Lewis 1971). In this body of literature 'western' culture is largely understood as guilt culture whereas 'non-western' cultures are seen as shame cultures.

The guilt vs shame approach has been criticised for drawing hierarchies between different cultures and guilt and shame. Anthropologists critiqued that this approach is heavily shaped by the researchers' ethnocentric bias (Cozens 2018, Merz 2020). Researchers have demonstrated that such distinctions between shame and guilt often do not make much sense in people's everyday life, neither in the USA (Fessler 2004) nor in China, Indonesia, 'non-western' countries (Averill 1980, Fessler 2004, Harré 1986, Hochschild 1983, Lewis 2021). Researchers also found that people living in societies where an individual's sense of wellbeing is strongly connected with familial and collective wellness, such as in China and in Japan, experience and value shame differently (Bedford 2004, Cho 2000, Kitayama et al. 1995, Li et al. 2004). For instance, the ability to feel shame sometimes is not only highly valued but is also an expected virtue for larger self-development (Cho 2000, Li et al. 2004), or as an appropriate emotion to react to failure (Bedford 2004, Kitayama et al. 1995).

Taking inspiration from these insights, I choose to follow the footsteps of anthropologists like Cozens (2018) and Merz (2020) who recommended building knowledge from the ground focusing on 'emic' perspectives on shame. Despite being identified as a significant topic, shame has not been explored in Bangladesh. What we know until now are mostly 'etic' views that understand shame as a negative phenomenon, as a social mechanism to control adolescent sexuality or as a barrier for adolescents to access sexual and reproductive health information and services. Following Merz's (2020) suggestion, instead of having a prior understanding of shame as negative I will trace and analyse where, when and why it turns up in what the adolescents in this research share with me about their experiences of sexuality, love and intimacy.

1.6 Doing 'at-home' ethnography in Dhaka

This thesis is grounded in an ethnographic research conducted in Dhaka between 2016 and 2017, where I lived most of my life as a middle-class student and later as a professional woman. Traditionally, ethnographers were encouraged to study 'others' rather than their own communities because of the value of cultural comparison. Researching within one's own community was considered by some as a risk to maintaining professional distance and scientific rigor (Anteby 2013, p.1281). However, in recent decades, there has been a shift towards reflexive anthropology, embracing autobiographical and confessional elements in research accounts and also making it more acceptable to study one's own community. I frame my research as an 'at-home' ethnography (Alvesson 2009, Marcus and Fischer 1986). Alvesson (Alvesson 2009, p.159) defines 'at-home' ethnography as 'a study and a text in which the researcher-author describes a cultural setting to which they have a 'natural access' and in which they are an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants.' According to Alvesson (2009), while conducting an at-home ethnography, the researcher uses her access to the field and lived experiences and knowledges regarding her community. I spoke the local language Bangla and could initially use my own network to find respondents. However, as I will discuss below, accessing participants was not very easy despite me being a native speaker with local contacts. I had to reconstruct my identity to look and sound cosmopolitan.

1.6.1 Ambiguities in insider-outsider relationship and other difficulties of access[1]

A key lesson I have learnt from my year-long ethnographic fieldwork in Dhaka is that the 'insider-outsider' relationship can be messier and much more complex than one can assume prior to going to the field. The ambiguities in the insider-outsider relationship have already been widely discussed in the field of anthropology, sociology and psychology. One common presumption across these three fields is that this relationship needs to be understood beyond binaries, since an ethnographer's positioning as an 'insider' and/or 'outsider' depends on the context, and is shaped by the constant interactions between the ethnographer and her research participants in the field. The 'insider' and 'outsider' categories are not fixed and the boundaries between the two can be blurred. Indeed, I also constantly juggled between the 'insider' and 'outsider' positionings for building rapport with my research participants as I will clarify below.

Getting access to the participants was quite challenging for me due to the cultural sensitivity about the research topic and my deshi (local) identity. I was aware that as a deshi thirty-eight years old woman anthropologist, it would not be easy to find participants and get them talking openly about their intimate sexual experiences. I had to do a lot of groundwork before conducting my first one-on-one in-depth interview. As part of that, I spent eight weeks hanging out and having chitchats with a group of two boys and two girls who I met through a colleague in Dhaka and who later became the key informants for my research. They all were friends with each other. Together with them, I codeveloped my interview guidelines, data collection plans and strategies. Our conversations helped me a lot to think through different strategies, some of which were later proven to be very effective. For instance, they recommended that while meeting any potential participant I should show my university identity card and introduce myself as a Dutch PhD researcher and not as a deshi (local) researcher. Other important suggestions included using English words frequently, while communicating with participants and recreating my Facebook profile to look more bideshi (western). In a nutshell, their advice was to give the participants an impression that I am more of a bideshi than a deshi. In my pursuit of creating an image of bideshi I had to give my Facebook profile a new look. With the help of my key informants, I updated my profile photo to one taken in Kinderdijk in front of a windmill, and later replaced it with another taken in Keukenhof tulip

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[1]   A version of this section is published as: Camellia, S. (2019). Playing bideshi (western) by a deshi (local) ethnographer in the field: Ambiguities in the 'insider-outsider' relationship. *LOVA Journal of Gender Studies & Feminist Anthropology, 40*. 77–80.

garden. I also uploaded personal photos from my stay in the Netherlands as well as in other western countries.

All these strategies proved to be very effective as soon as I started approaching potential participants for one-on-one interviews and group discussions. The moment I disclosed my identity as a doctoral researcher from a Dutch university, I discovered that they perceived me as an outsider, which was necessary to obtain access and trust among the research participants as became clear in our conversations. At the end of each interview, I asked the participant why she or he was willing to share their stories with me. Some typical responses were: 'there is no risk in telling you this because you will go back to Netherlands and will not tell my parents or family' or 'you will not judge me like people here do'. While representing myself as a Dutch PhD researcher helped me to build good rapport in the field, my research assistant, who was a young local woman anthropologist, was constantly struggling to access participants. She encountered frequent rejection in the field particularly from the boys. We both believed that the existing sociocultural shame of having a cross-sex (male-female) conversation combined with her deshi identity was important in boys' unwillingness to talk with her. Conversely, this was not the case for me. With my crafted bideshi image I could position myself as an 'outsider' and thereby bypass that shame.

During one-on-one interviews, I realised that my positioning as an 'outsider' not only provided me with easy access to participants but also helped me obtain an 'insider' status without much struggle. Participants saw their views of sexuality as modern as opposed to their parents' generation (which is also my generation) and probably also as opposed to the deshi research assistant, and assumed my views would be like theirs. Hence, they could openly talk about sex with me, which is usually considered taboo and can normally not be discussed with an adult in Bangladesh. Many shared their intimate sexual experiences or their private conversations with their boyfriend/ girlfriend over Facebook, and invited me to join their closed Facebook group chats with close friends. Participants often addressed me as a 'close friend' while introducing me to their peers and encouraged them to participate in my research by saying, 'you can tell anything and everything to her because she is very open-minded and she is like us!'. During my fieldwork, I have been invited to join their social events, such as birthday parties, family dinners and social outings such as taking rickshaw rides, hanging out in shopping malls or in parks, visiting cafés. I could thus become an insider by positioning myself as an outsider.

My balancing between 'insider' and 'outsider' positions made me rethink and question what I was taught as an anthropology major student about insider-outsider relations. Drawing on references from classic ethnographies written by western anthropologists, I was taught that an ethnographer is either an insider or an outsider and each of the positions has its own benefits/pitfalls. While this insider-outsider dichotomy may make sense for western researchers conducting fieldwork in 'other cultures', it hardly did so when I entered the field, which is my own culture. Unlike a western researcher I did not have to learn the culture or the language because I was already part of it. Instead, I had to create a strategic image of an outsider in order to get access to the participants. Methods that work for western researchers may not work for the local researchers. All in all, as a deshi researcher I find the 'insider' and 'outsider' categories inherently unstable, and the boundaries between the two are very thin and can be transcended. These categories therefore need to be revisited based on local researchers' real fieldwork reflections.

Conducting fieldwork with Dhaka's middle-class youths presented significant other challenges, primarily due to the geographical distance between locations and the city's notorious traffic congestion. It was often impossible to conduct more than one interview per day. Additionally, finding a suitable location for conducting interviews proved to be another hurdle, as homes were not considered ideal places to discuss intimate topics like sexuality. To address these challenges, many of the interviews had to be arranged in cafés and restaurants. In Dhaka, restaurants serve as popular meeting spots for young people, providing them with a comfortable and informal environment to hang out, socialise, and build connections. The restaurant culture offered a conducive setting for the young participants to feel at ease which was necessary for facilitating meaningful discussions during the fieldwork. It also allowed me to observe their interactions with their peers, providing insights into their negotiations of sexuality and gender in groups.

1.6.2 Research participants

The main research group consisted of 72 middle class adolescents, 40 boys and 32 girls. These research participants were all between 15 and19 year old, and were secondary schoolers (grade 6-12). The mainstream education system in Bangladesh is divided into three levels: primary (grade 1-5), secondary (6-12) and tertiary. The reasons why I decided to focus on this group are twofold. First, because this is the age when youngsters become more interested in sexuality, in finding information about their body and relationships with others, and in experimenting. Secondly, in this period of life they become more exposed to the wider world. I got to know from my key informants and friends in Dhaka who had teen kids that parents start

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allowing a certain level of independence to children when they are promoted to mid-school. According to my key informants (which later was confirmed by my other research participants) parents buy children mobile phones only when they start going to mid-schools. Having access to mobile phones is considered necessary for educational purposes and to check on children's whereabouts.

The participants in the study exhibited a wide range of diversity in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds. Some came from affluent middle-class families, while others belonged to struggling middle-class households. The participants' fathers held diverse occupations, including bankers, doctors, engineers, government and non-government officials, as well as entrepreneurs and businessmen. A few of the participants' mothers worked as schoolteacher, banker, doctor, or in non-governmental organisations. All participants were fluent in English and had access to mobile phones and the Internet. They demonstrated a level of independence, as none of them were escorted by their parents during the research interviews. All in all, data was gathered from 72 adolescents (40 boys and 32 girls). These adolescents attended 14 Bangla-medium schools and hailed from 21 different middle-class neighbourhoods across the city. I received assistance in the research from one female research assistant, Malisha Farzana, who conducted six in-depth interviews and carried out preliminary data coding on those interviews.

Defining middle-class was a difficult task. Middle-class in Bangladesh is diverse, socially and economically. After having a series of discussions with my key informants and my middle-class friends in Dhaka who had adolescent kids I was convinced that school, neighbourhood and lifestyles are three main markers for class positions. I decided not to include upper-class adolescents who were enrolled in private English-medium schools, lived in upscale neighbourhoods, frequently visited western countries during school holidays, dined in high-end restaurants, and owned the latest model Iphone/Ipad. Instead, I selected participants from Bangla-medium schools who lived in middle-class neighbourhoods and, as I later came to know, had strong aspirations of going to western countries for holidays or higher studies but had no experience as such. They all did have their own mobile phones, albeit not an expensive one. As such they differed from lower class adolescents who could not attend middle and higher schools, lived in slums and only occasionally managed to own an old mobile phone.

The selection framework for recruiting my research participants evolved throughout the data collection phase and emerged from the data. I began with the basic categories, age (15-19 years old), gender (girls/boys) and class (middle class), and

then kept including more categories as they emerged from adolescents' narratives, such as affluent/less affluent, first-generation migrant/second-generation migrant, single-parent child, religious and ethnic minority. Initially, some participants were accessed through personal networks. Others were found through Facebook youth groups; multiple youth-led organisations; and photography-, sports-, writing-, filmography-, music-, debate- and art-based networks. These individuals then connected me with their friends as in snowball-sampling. Diversity was ensured by including teens from 14 different Bangla-medium schools and from 21 different middle-class neighbourhoods.

1.6.3 Data collection methods

Considering the sensitiveness of the research topic and the sociocultural taboo on talking about sexuality with unmarried adolescents in Bangladesh, I combined nonverbal methods such as observation, photo elicitation, videos/movies, Facebook chats with verbal methods (focus group discussion, in-depth interview, small talk). On the anthropological value of small talk, see Driessen & Driessen (2013).

I started with small talk via Messenger about participants' school, aspirations, friends, families and about my research. It helped building trust quickly as they could check out my Facebook profile and ask me any question they liked. During my year in the field, I spent at least a couple of hours every day on Messenger chatting with my participants. Chats were often initiated by participants themselves. A significant chunk of data was collected through small talk with participants on various occasions such as during our catch-up meetings, rickshaw rides, parties, or hangouts in shopping malls, parks or in cafés. I found small talk particularly beneficial for exploring inconsistencies, ambivalent views of participants and discussing sensitive topics (such as Islamic interpretations of marriage, sex, gender hierarchy or same sex desire) with them.

After having established some level of trust on Messenger, I invited the participant for a one-on-one in-depth interview at a restaurant/café based on the participant's choice. Amongst all the young people that I approached, three declined to participate due to their exams. Our discussion often started with a conversation about a movie, or a Facebook post that the participant had recently seen. During the interview, we often watched a movie clip or read a post together and the conversation then flowed from their views about these posts or movie to their own views on and experiences with love, romantic relationships, sexual pleasure, marriage, aspirations to look attractive, parental expectations and so on. During in-depth interviews, going over a participant's Facebook wall and posts also provided in-depth insight

of his/her opinions about various issues related to sexuality and shame. I have also analysed some of the Facebook posts, and comments made on those posts that went viral and sparked debate among adolescents. Altogether I conducted 40 in-depth interviews with 18 girls and 22 boys. Most of the interviews were completed in 2 to 3 sessions conducted on different days. The length of sessions varied between one and three hours.

Some participants preferred to talk in groups. I conducted 7 focus-group discussions, with four to six participants in each group. Some of the participants in these groups were also interviewed in depth. In total, 38 adolescents (22 boys and 16 girls) participated in focus groups and 6 of them (4 boys and 2 girls) also participated in in-depth interviews. The focus-group discussions followed a similar structure as the interviews to see if any additional data/new insights emerge in groups. During FGDs, I found using public posts (photos, videos, songs, poetry, stories, article, notes/status) from Facebook on relevant issues like sexual harassment, porn and same-sex relationship very helpful to engage the adolescents in lively discussions. This enabled me to explore adolescents' collective views regarding premarital sex and dominant ideals of masculinity and femininity. Among the seven FGDs, one was conducted using a Facebook Messenger group digital meeting with a group of adolescents who had been online friends for two years and who had never physically met.

In addition to the above methods I used different forms of participant observation. Throughout my data collection, while talking to my key informants, conducting interviews/discussions, waiting for participants in various restaurants, or spending time in the city for personal reasons, I observed adolescents' interactions, overheard conversations amongst peers and with others and took notes. It helped me to 'read between the lines' and make sense of data I gathered through small talk, interviews and FGDs. For more focused participant observations of youth's interactions with relationships/sexualities practices, I chose a street named Love Lane located in a typical middle-class neighbourhood area of the city, which is known as a place where adolescents hang out with their romantic partners and friends. I spent five weeks there, sat in different cafés during the afternoons and evenings and had informal one-on-one or group chats with them, as well as with the café managers/owners and parents. Many of them were from the nearby neighbourhood areas, and it gave me a clearer idea of the neighbourhood-based control/surveillance on adolescents' sexual activity. In addition, I spent six days hanging out with an adolescent photographers' group and attended four youth festivals where some of my participants participated in extracurricular contests.

1.6.4 Ethical considerations

All research participants were informed about the content of the research before interviews and focus-group discussions and they were asked for their consent. They were explicitly told that they were free to withdraw at any time, and when they showed hesitance, they were not further pushed. Following the university's rules for consent, permission was sought verbally from parents before interviewing participants who were below 18. Also, in casual and less formal situations (such as in parties and in Love Lane) people were told about my intentions and interests. To guarantee privacy, names have been changed and no information was given which could reveal anything about the identity of the participants. As explained above, several measures were taken to establish a good rapport and to provide a safe and welcoming space of sensitive listening where full attention was given to the participants own words and views. In such a situation talking about gender and sexuality with young people was welcomed rather than shunned and considered a taboo topic. Ethical permission was obtained from BRAC University Ethical Review Committee. All interview recordings and field notes were promptly transcribed using MS Word and subsequently destroyed. The transcripts and notes will be securely stored on my password-protected computer for a duration of 10 years.

1.7 Structure of the thesis

The main purpose of this chapter was to lay out the foundation of this thesis. Here I have provided an overview of the research context, the overarching conceptual framework that I used, and methods. The rest of this thesis is followed by four empirical chapters and a conclusion. The next chapter, chapter 2, unpacks the significance of silence about sexuality in adolescent-parent relationships, which emerged as an important dimension of adolescent sexuality in the context of home. It investigates what silence means to young people in their exploration of sexuality and pursuit of maintaining a respectable middle-class status at home. Chapter 3 focuses on adolescents' negotiations of premarital intimacy and explores which norms of intimacy they are (re)constructing in their paradoxical gendered middle-class context. Chapter 4 asks how middle-class adolescent boys in Dhaka construct different ideals of masculinity and negotiate those in their everyday life at home and among peers? The last empirical chapter, chapter 5 focuses on girls' experiences and explores the significance of physical appearance in their construction of modern-cosmopolitan womanhood. In the conclusion chapter, I return to the research questions and consolidate the key research findings presented in the empirical chapters, discuss the

theoretical implications and reflect on the significance of the findings of this thesis for policies and practices regarding youth sexuality in Bangladesh.

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Chapter 2

Beyond the talking imperative: The value of silence on sexuality in youth-parent relations in Bangladesh[2]

Abstract

Research conducted in various parts of the globe suggests that young people who can openly communicate with their parents about sexuality benefit in many ways. Correspondingly, in Bangladesh, the lack of an open communication on sexuality in the youth-parent relationship is considered a barrier to ensuring young people's sexual and reproductive health and overall well-being. Taking 'silence' as a core concept, this paper investigates what silence on sexuality means to Bangladeshi young people in their relationship with parents. It draws on findings from an ethnographic study conducted among 72 middle-class boys and girls aged between 15 and 19 years and 18 parents living in Dhaka over a year between 2016 and 2017. The findings suggest that silence is not always perceived as problematic by young people, and this is particularly true for topics related to sexual pleasure. This paper challenges the monolithic understanding that silence is necessarily bad and hinders young people from getting what they need. It offers an additional conceptual understanding to silence for studying sexuality among youths and designing interventions for their sexual and reproductive well-being.

Keywords: Sexuality; youth; silence; middle-class; Bangladesh

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2.1 Introduction

> **Boy:** *Father, when and how did I arrive on this earth?*
> **Father:** *(smiles) Your mother and I brought you from a hospital 12 years back.*
> **Boy:** *How did you arrive?*
> **Father:** *(remains silent for a few seconds) Your grandparents found me at their backyard.*
> **Boy:** *What about them? I mean my grandparents? How did they come?*
> **Father:** *(much annoyed) Their parents got them from relatives as gifts.*
> **Boy:** *Wow! I am so proud of my family! No one has ever had sex!*

A Bangladeshi anthropologist filmmaker told me this popular joke when he heard that I was doing a PhD research on the sociocultural construction of shame about sexuality among Bangladeshi urban middle-class young people. The joke makes fun of the absence of open communication between children and adults about sex in Bangladesh. Often adults assume that children do not know about sex and feel embarrassed to give information or answer their questions. The shame of talking about sex by children and adults is frequently mentioned in literature on Bangladesh (Gani et al. 2014, Nahar et al. 2013, Waldman et al. 2018) and in other contexts (Ashcraft and Murray 2017, Ayehu et al. 2016, Newton-Levinson et al. 2016).

Being a Bangladeshi urban middle-class woman anthropologist working in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for the past 10 years, I was confronted repeatedly with my own assumptions about child-adult communication on issues of sexuality at the very beginning of her fieldwork. As I wrote in my diary:

> *I had anticipated that having an open conversation about sexuality with young people would be very challenging. Hence, I was focusing on building rapport with Sajid [all names are pseudonyms], an 18-year-old boy and my first research participant. I was going slow to create an enabling environment so that he would openly talk with a woman researcher 20 years his senior. We were talking about our families, friends, hobbies and favourite films, and I could see him getting impatient. At one point he stopped me and said, 'Hey, I learned from my friend that we are going to talk about love and relationships. So aren't we? You can ask me any question you want. I only have one and a half hours before going to my class, so you better ask what you really want to know'. I almost choked on*

> *the water I was drinking and went completely blank for a few seconds. I*
> *finally managed to gather my thoughts and pose my questions.*
> *(Field notes, 14 December 2016)*

From the meetings with Sajid and 71 other boys and girls between the ages of 15 and 19 years, it became clear that silence on sexuality in youth-adult relationships is not complete among the middle class in Bangladesh. The ways participants shared their sexual fantasies and experiences in this research indicate that there can also be openness. However, what did seem stagnant was youth-parent communication about these issues. Topics they could openly discuss with a woman almost their mother's age were considered as unspeakable in their relationship with parents. Silence in youth-adult relationships therefore seems to be more complex and nuanced than how it has been understood in the existing mainstream literature on sexuality of young people.

The main research question this chapter addresses is: what does silence on sexuality in youth-parent relationships mean to young people? This main question will be answered through three more specific questions: (1) when and on which subjects does silence manifest itself according to young people; (2) in which contexts and on which topics is silence experienced as limiting or enabling by them; (3) how do young people perceive silence in relation to their increasing access to the Internet and social media?

2.2 Rethinking the public health approach to youth sexuality and the problem of silence

Mainstream literature across the globe has largely conceptualised youth sexuality as a health matter and viewed youth-parent communication as beneficial for young people's Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH). Open communication has been linked with increased knowledge of young people about the body and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), as well as with their enhanced positive attitudes towards delaying sex and using condoms (De Looze et al. 2015, Guilamo-Ramos et al. 2012, Kamangu et al. 2017, Silk and Romero 2014). Parental monitoring and control has been understood to have contributed in decreasing the rates of unprotected sex and early sexual debut among young people (Wight and Fullerton 2013).

Against this backdrop, silence on sexuality in a youth-parent relationship has been identified as a major barrier for effectively implementing youth SRH interventions particularly in the low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Denno et al. 2015). This is echoed in a recent review (Newton-Levinson et al. 2016) of peer-reviewed articles published between 2001 and 2014 focusing on young people's utilisation of SRH services in 15 LMICs. The authors show that young people in these countries are reluctant to utilise the existing SRH services due to societal and parental disapproval of premarital sex. Seeking SRH services is considered by parents as evidence of sexual behaviour and evokes the risk of damaging the reputation of their child. Based on this review, the authors suggest that young people need to be able to talk openly with their parents. Open communication is thus generally seen as enabling for young people, and many international experts recommend including parents in youth SRH interventions particularly in the LMICs (Ayehu et al. 2016, Chandra-Mouli et al. 2015, Kennedy et al. 2013). This philosophy is reflected in numerous ongoing SRH interventions targeted at developing parental awareness by different non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs).[3]

Similarly, the absence of open communication has been framed as a problem in previous research initiatives on youth SRH in Bangladesh. Parents are often mentioned as gatekeepers who withhold access to essential information on SRH from unmarried boys and girls out of fear that having knowledge will encourage them to be sexually active (Ayehu et al. 2016, Gani et al. 2014, Nahar et al. 2013, van Reeuwijk and Nahar 2013, Waldman et al. 2018). Parents' reluctance to openly discuss sexuality discourages young people from sharing their concerns about menstruation, contraception, masturbation, size and shape of penis, STIs/STDs and sexual harassment (Gani et al. 2014, Nahar et al. 2013, Waldman et al. 2018), which leaves many of them without information or support.

Although silence on sexual issues has been noted and problematised, it has not been a central research topic for researchers yet. What we know from the existing literature is that (1) there is silence; (2) this silence is considered problematic, as it hinders young people from getting what they need. Yet, little is known about what this silence means to young people. We do not know whether there is always silence or whether it is always perceived as a barrier by the young people themselves. Previous studies that identified silence as a barrier conceived youth sexuality as a health topic

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3   For instance, *The World Starts With Me* by RutgersWPF, Netherlands, implemented in 10 countries in Africa and Asia that include Bangladesh. Other examples include *Me and My World* by UBR Bangladesh Alliance and *Generation Breakthrough* by UNFPA Bangladesh.

and thereby mostly focused on the dangers, such as STIs/STDs or sexual harassment. An important part of young people's lives, however, encompasses pleasurable aspects of sexuality, e.g. romance, intimate relationships, sexual adventure and excitement (Cornwall and Jolly 2006, Naezer 2018a, Naezer and Ringrose 2019, van Reeuwijk and Nahar 2013). Young people's sexual behaviours are significantly shaped by their motivation for seeking pleasure (Ott et al. 2006, Parsons et al. 2000, Tschann et al. 2002), their desire for intimacy (Gebhardt et al. 2003, Ott et al. 2006) and social status, such as respect from peers (Ott et al. 2006). We know nothing about the links between silence in a parent-youth relationship and these pleasurable and positive aspects.

This chapter will focus on the voices of middle-class young people living in Dhaka who have received far less attention than young people living in poverty (Ainul et al. 2017, Amin 2015). The scholars who have focused on the growing middle class in Bangladesh have indicated that sexuality and gender norms are strongly connected to this social status (Karim 2012), which suggests that this group has more to lose when those norms are transgressed. On the one hand, middle class young people have increased access to SRH education at school and global information on sexuality through the Internet and social media. On the other hand, silence between parents and young people continues while the government tries to restrict young people's access to internet and pornography.[4] How young people deal with this contradiction we do not know. Based on the findings presented in this chapter, I will argue that, in the context of rapid urbanisation and digitalisation, middle-class young people's views on silence are much more nuanced and complex than have been understood in previous studies. While in some contexts and on some topics they experience silence as a barrier, in other contexts and on other topics they frame it as enabling and liberating.

2.3 Reconceptualising sexuality and silence

Going beyond the mainstream public health approach that Cornwall (2006) calls the 'doom and gloom approach' (p. 280), this paper will use the 'positive sexuality' framework (Cornwall 2006, Cornwall and Jolly 2006) to conceptualise youth sexuality. The links between sexuality and silence will be explored in relation to pursuit of knowing about their body, pleasure and intimacy.

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4   https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/human-rights/the-irony-restricting-access-internet-digital-bangladesh-1386799   https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/govt-blocks-510-porn-websites-1336600

Our conceptualisation of silence as contextual and potentially enabling is inspired by the feminist debate on the concepts of 'voice' and 'agency'. In the field of gender and development and feminist literature, a woman's ability to speak up about her concerns and to make her own choices are predominantly understood as synonymous to women's empowerment (Gilligan 1993, Klugman et al. 2014, Olsen 2003). In the same vein, silence is mostly conceptualised as a 'symbol of passivity and powerlessness' (Gal 1991, p.175). This fails to acknowledge that meanings of silence vary across contexts and get constantly constructed in social relationships (Gal 1991, Kabeer 2010, Parpart 2009, Sheriff 2000). Silence can be imposed or one can choose to remain silent (Sheriff 2000). One can 'be silenced' by someone else or one can 'be silent' (Fivush 2010, p.88).

Indeed, based on empirical findings, researchers argue that silence can be used as a strategy to avoid social stigma around HIV/AIDS (Parpart 2009), homophobia (Lorde 2015, Sarda 2008), infertility (Allison 2011) and racist remarks against women (Lorde 2015). It can also be embraced as a survival strategy in conflict (Armstrong 2002, Hans 2004) or post-conflict societies (Kelly 2000). Silent acts can also be performed as a form of resistance to oppressive social norms, for instance, wearing make-up and western clothes under the veil as silent challenges to Taliban rules in Afghanistan (Armstrong 2002, Hans 2004). Against this backdrop, feminist researchers in the field of gender and development have called for a critical reinvestigation of 'silence' in women's everyday lives (Kabeer 2010, Parpart 2009).

This chapter attempts to bring this alternative framing of silence in theories on women's empowerment into the field of youth sexuality. Inspired by them, the point of departure for this chapter is (1) the meanings of silence in a youth-parent relationship about sexuality can be diverse and context dependent; and (2) silence can also be experienced as enabling and liberating in certain contexts by the young people. As such, it will criticize the existing literature on youth SRH in Bangladesh and neighbouring countries that has understood silence in a youth-parent relationship mainly as a barrier to healthy sexual development and framed it negatively. This chapter will critically investigate the meanings of silence to see whether it has alternative meanings to young people themselves.

2.4 Research participants and methods

This paper draws on findings from an ethnographic study conducted among 72 (40 boys and 32 girls) self-identified middle-class young people between 15 and

19 years old in Dhaka during 2016 and 2017. Young people defined their middle-class position in terms of belonging 'in the middle' between rich and poor. By urban, they meant being part of the cosmopolitan youth culture, i.e. feeling connected with the rest of the world through the Internet and social media, having access to a cosmopolitan lifestyle, (e.g. eating at Pizza Hut or Nando's, watching Hollywood blockbuster movies in the Cineplex) and aspiring to go to a western country for higher studies. In addition to regular schoolwork, they saw participating in extra-curricular activities, such as debate/art/photography competitions and film/science festivals, as important for developing skills and building social networks. All the participants owned mobile phones with internet access and said they spend -4 hours daily on average on Facebook and YouTube.

Prior to the data collection, ethical approval of this study was obtained from the BRAC University research ethics committee. Initially some participants going to different schools (schools where students come from middle-class families) were accessed through my personal networks. Then, those participants linked me with other potential participants through Facebook. After making contact with each potential participant through Facebook and having exchanged small talks (Driessen & Jansen, 2013), a face-to-face meeting was arranged at a place of his/her choice to seek informed oral consent. At this meeting, the researcher explained the purpose and nature of the study, why and how the participant had been selected and what was expected from the participant. Participants were also informed that privacy, anonymity and confidentiality would be respected by using pseudonyms, leaving out revealing data and keeping source data confidential; further, they were told of the expected benefits of the study and future use of the data. It was explicitly stated that they had the right not to participate and to withdraw at any time from the study if they so wish. After that, their consent was explicitly asked and noted down. For participants below 18 years old, parents' permission was sought face-to-face or by telephone prior to interviewing participants.

Diversity was ensured by including teens from different schools and different neighbourhoods. Participants were 6th grade-12th grade students from 14 Bangla-version and English-version secondary schools[5] and from 21 different middle-class neighbourhoods[6] across the city. Altogether, 40 in-depth interviews (IDIs) were held with 18 girls and 22 boys and seven focus group discussions (FGDs) with five or six

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[5]   Bangla- and English-version schools follow the same national curricula but in different languages. Expensive private English medium schools were not included to avoid the risk of including youths of a higher socioeconomic background.

[6]   Class-based segregation of neighbourhoods is a prominent phenomenon in Dhaka. Slum areas or upscale neighbourhoods were excluded.

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participants each. In addition, 12 mothers and six fathers encountered at the school gates were engaged in small talk to understand the context better.

During IDIs, the researcher focused on understanding what shame about sexuality means to young people by asking broader questions such as how they learnt about love and sex, as well as in which contexts participants wanted or did not want to discuss their concerns. As a result, the chapter mostly draws on findings on silence that naturally emerged during the conversations with participants rather than in response to a specific question on silence. From the conversations, it emerged that there is silence about sexuality in a parent-child relationship, and I tried to understand young people's perception on that. FGDs were conducted with similar questions to see if any additional insights came up in group conversations.

All the interviews were conducted face-to-face in Bangla and, except for six IDIs, all IDIs, FGDs and small talk were conducted by me. Those other six interviews, with two boys and four girls, were carried out by a 22-year-old Bangladeshi middle-class woman anthropologist who was recruited as a Research Assistant (RA), assuming that she would have easier access to the participants because of her younger age. However, as soon as we started approaching potential participants, this assumption proved to be wrong. While the RA experienced frequent rejection in the field because of her 'insider' status, my own strategic positioning as an 'outsider' by my introduction as a Dutch PhD researcher helped me to gain access and build rapport without much opposition.

The researcher's dual position as both a middle-class Bangladeshi woman familiar with the language and middle-class culture and a professionally trained anthropologist working on a Dutch PhD provided a good balance between proximity and distance to explore in depth the perspective of young people and uncover an unexpected and underexplored side of silence on sexuality.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was read multiple times, and simultaneously coding and memoing were done in order to see what new topics are emerging. Interview/group discussion guidelines were constantly adjusted in light of emerging codes, in order to investigate those new areas. Constant comparison between codes was carried out in order to understand the relationships between different codes and identify themes. For instance, the open codes such as 'discuss menstruation with mothers' and 'no talk about romance with parents' indicated that there is silence in a parent-youth relationship. These codes then lead me to further probe what this silence means to young people. Then a series of more specific codes

for 'silence' such as 'respectability', 'age', 'gender' and 'topic' emerged. Concepts, codes and topics were discussed during this process with the other authors of the ensuing paper and members of the larger research group. The second and third author of the published version of this chapter initiated, acquired funding for and supervised the larger research programme on shame and sexuality in Bangladesh and provided thematic and theoretical context, as well as supervised and participated in the analysis and writing process.

2.5 Findings

First, we will outline when, why and how silence occurred and was experienced as a problem by the young people (Question 1 and 2). Second, we will present the findings on young people's positive understandings of silence (Question 2). Last, we describe how young people perceived silence in relation to their access to mobile phones and internet (Question 3).

2.5.1 Experiences of silence

In response to the question if the young people had ever wanted to discuss something their parents did not want to talk about, participants commonly reflected on their puberty. Many recalled asking parents about physical changes, which, according to them, is a major concern for young people going through puberty. Whereas girls generally expressed satisfaction about the ways mothers had explained menstruation or breast development, boys felt differently:

> *I was so scared when I first had wet dreams. I thought I had peed in my pants. I told my mother, but she didn't say a word. A few days later, I had it again and asked her to take me to a doctor. She advised to speak with my father first. When I told my father, instead of saying anything, he handed me an Islamic book and suggested reading a particular chapter. (Rumman, 16-year-old boy, IDI)*

Rumman added that his mother's silence made him think that he had a disease. From the Islamic book, he learned that it was not a disease, but his fear increased when he read in the book all the punishments for touching or looking at his penis. He had many questions but did not ask any because, by that time, he knew that this is an 'embarrassing' [oshshostir] topic for parents. Like Rumman, boys commonly shared that while parents could speak with them about growing a beard or change in voice, they felt embarrassed answering questions concerning the penis, such as

wet dreams, erection and its shape or size. During small talk, mothers explained why they feel uncomfortable discussing these topics with their sons:

> I can explain menstruation to my daughter because I know about it. How am I going to explain the chheleder bepar [male stuff] when I know almost nothing about it? Also, in our society, women are not used to talk about this stuff, so it's better that fathers do it. (Mother, small talk)

While explaining their reasons for silence, mothers tended to avoid mentioning the words 'wet dreams' or 'penis'. Instead, they used indirect phrases such as *chheleder bepar* or *oisob bepar* [those matters], which can be read as a sign of embarrassment. It indicates that they also felt shame in discussing those topics with another adult. However, there were a few exceptions. Two mothers mentioned that they 'had to' break their shame [*lojjya*] answer their son's questions, as their fathers were absent or worked abroad or the parents were divorced.

According to participants, fathers generally do not discuss sexual issues. Fathers viewed sexual education as a part of childcare and hence as a mother's responsibility. Moreover, boys preferred speaking with their mothers, as they felt distance in their relationship with their father. 'I hardly see my father as he is always outside home for his work' or 'we only talk with our fathers about our education' were words with which most participants described their relationships with fathers. Snigdho (16-year-old boy) explained why this is the case: 'Once I read somewhere that hugging a father is very difficult for a son. It is so true! Fathers have to be strong in order to discipline their children.' Boys saw the distance in father-child relationships as a manifestation of societal expectations that fathers are the 'ricewinner' of the family and need to discipline children. While silence in mother-son relationships occurred due to the mother's shame, in father-son relationships it happened because of the physical and emotional distance. In both cases, boys viewed silence as a problem:

> At that age [during puberty], we didn't have access to the Internet. Our school introduced these topics at grade seven, long after we had experienced wet dreams or erections. We only could discuss those with friends and always ended up being more confused and scared! (Sam, 16-year-old boy, FGD)

The other participants endorsed this statement that boys during puberty lack access to information.

These findings confirm that there are cultural taboos on talking about sexuality between parents and young people. However, the silence is not complete. Communication depends on the sex of the young people, with girls and mothers finding it easier to talk with each other than sons and parents. It also depends on the age, as young people only experience silence to their questions in early puberty when they have no or less alternative sources of information. And it depends on the topic, with the penis, for instance, being considered a sensitive topic. As we will see below, certain topics were also kept silent by the young people themselves.

2.5.2 When silence is not a problem

The answers to the question whether there were moments when young people did not want to discuss certain topics with parents yielded interesting insights. Participants distinguished differences between their concerns during puberty and post-puberty. As puberty passed, their concerns shifted from physical changes towards love, heartbreak and sexual pleasure. 'I like a girl but am too scared to approach her' or 'I broke up with my boyfriend but can't stop thinking of him' were some of the most common concerns participants shared during our discussions.

With this shift in concerns, the dynamics of silence change and take new meanings. Whereas silence on physical changes during puberty occurs due to parents' embarrassment, once puberty has passed, it is young people themselves who prefer not to discuss their new concerns:

> *We can talk about period cramps or concerns regarding being overweight but not love or topics that have any relation with sex. We can't discuss them because that'd be just awkward. Also, there is no need. These are fun topics, not problems and can only be enjoyed with friends. (Naira, 17-year-old girl, FGD)*

Seeking pleasure is thus considered as an important part of young people's exploration of sexuality during post-puberty, which they saw as unnecessary and an 'awkward' topic to discuss with parents.

'Awkward' was a common English phrase that participants used to express their feelings about the idea of having a conversation with parents on pleasurable aspects:

> *The thought of speaking with parents about love or sex feels simply awkward. We are not even comfortable watching kissing scenes on television in the presence of our parents. When I was a kid, my mother*

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> *used to tell me 'Close your eyes' during such scenes. Now she does not do that anymore. Instead, she seems absolutely okay watching romantic scenes in my presence, which makes me feel even more uncomfortable. (Rafid, 17-year-old boy in FGD)*

This quote exhibits how Rafid's internalisation of societal shame has shaped his understanding of youth-parent communication about romance, love and sex as embarrassing. Young people viewed any direct or indirect communication not only as unnecessary but also as shameful. 'These are our private matters and we do not want to talk about them, at least not with parents' said another participant in the group. Participants made it clear that they do not want certain boundaries to be transgressed in their relationship with parents:

> *Some topics should never be discussed with parents. Sex and porn are the ones. For instance, my mother knows that I smoke and I know that she knows but I will never ever confess that… because if I do that, the chokher porda [boundaries of shame] that we have between us will go away. A confession will prove that I have consciously disrespected her values and beliefs. But doing things behind her back means I am aware that what I am doing is not right. Porn or sex are also like that. (Sahil, 16-year-old boy, IDI)*

At one time, Sahil's mother accidentally found him smoking with a friend on the street. Later, when his mother confronted him, he completely denied it by saying, 'you saw someone else, ma'. Sahil used this incident as an example to explain the importance of not trespassing the boundaries of shame in order to maintain a respectful relationship with parents.

Against this backdrop, young people often use silence as a strategy to keep these boundaries intact and do not appreciate their mothers' attempts to initiate a conversation:

> *Sometimes my mother tries to be very friendly. She asks me if I like someone. The other day she saw me talking to the girl next door. After I came home, she was being very nice and asked me if I like that girl. Whenever I am on the phone, my mother thinks I am speaking with a girl or about a girl. Imagine what will happen if I tell her that I like that girl. She won't be able to sleep at night. She will think I am not doing my studies properly. (Nafis, 16-year-old boy, IDI)*

Nafis explained that, even though his parents are open-minded and allow him to socialise with girls, he never wanted to talk with his mother about girls. By consistently attaining good grades, he earned the reputation of being a 'good son'. However, Nafis feared that sharing his feelings for a girl with his mother might spark suspicion and lead to policing of his whereabouts. He thought it would jeopardise his reputation as good son. Nafis and many other participants saw their mother's friendliness and willingness to talk as 'a trap' for imposing more control on their lives. They thought that revealing romantic relationships would trigger parents' suspicion that their son/daughter was sexually active and thereby will put their reputation at stake. They kept silent to protect their good boy/girl image as well as to be seen as someone who shows respect for their parents' values.

Maintaining the image of a good boy/girl through academic accomplishments and sexual abstinence was generally considered as important by the young people, not only to protect one's own reputation or to avoid policing, but also to uphold the family's respectability:

> Our parents have done better than their parents and they expect us to supersede them. Whatever we do [love, sex], we cannot do it openly. That will destroy all our and our parents' hard work. And our [family's] reputation will be damaged. After all, we do live in an Islamic society which bans premarital sex. (Rimi, 16-year-old girl, FGD)

Participants thus saw themselves as the bearers of their family's reputation. In order to maintain a respectable middle-class position, it is expected that young family members remain focused on their education and do not break the social norms regarding sexuality. These considerations and the internalisation of the importance of upholding the family's reputation, as this FGD attests to, are translated into silence on their romantic and sexual experiences and desires among older young people.

The findings show that young people go a long way in protecting their parents from embarrassing communication and seeing silence as a form of adaptation to cultural norms. This absence of communication, however, only concerns their parents and not other adults or the world at large. Some participants who lived with joint families explained that they can talk about their concerns related to love life or masturbation with older cousins or young and friendly uncles/aunties who they can trust. However, joint families are not a common phenomenon in Dhaka anymore, and most of the participants were from nuclear families and did not have their extended families around. In such cases, they mostly sought a way out through the Internet.

2

2.5.3 Silence in relation to access to mobile phones, Facebook and the Internet

The findings showed a strong link between silence and access to mobile phones and the Internet. Parents said they buy mobile phones with Internet for their sons and daughters at the age of 13 or 14 years, as children need access to the Internet for educational purposes. Mobile phone operators offer free access to Facebook, which has opened new communication and information opportunities for young people on SRH: 'We have Facebook and Internet these days. We do not need our parents.' was a common response to the question whether they feel the need to talk with parents:

> *There are videos on YouTube almost about everything… some of them are really good, for instance, Birds and the Bees. In no way our parents can explain sex better than those videos. They will die out of shame [oshshosti]. (Ankur, 16-year-old boy, FGD)*

Participants in general perceived Internet as a more effective source of information than parents. They use Google, YouTube and Facebook to learn about relationships, contraception or anything else they do not discuss with parents. Participants also saw the Internet as a source of pleasure:

> *Reading articles or watching videos about romance or sex is fun… we use Internet not only for information but also for our enjoyment. (Ramisha, 16-year-old girl, IDI)*

Ramisha and many others see access to Facebook and the Internet as a gateway to autonomy. These are the spaces where they can navigate without parents' surveillance.

In response to the question how young people know which website is reliable, Sajid (17-year-old boy) said 'sometimes too much information can be confusing, but it can be worked out using common sense and verifying with other friends. Boys in general thought Internet has helped them clarifying their misconceptions about masturbation or porn:

> *When I first started masturbating and watching porn, I was very scared and felt guilty. I kept thinking I am letting my parents down by not being a good Muslim. Then I looked up on the Internet and talked with friends who are religious but open-minded and realised that there is nothing wrong in doing these things. (Rumman, 16-year-old boy, IDI)*

Rumman shared that he now has different views on premarital sexuality than his parents. Similarly, many other participants said that their opinions about porn, masturbation, homosexuality and virginity have changed after they read about them on Google or on Facebook. Luna, for instance, said:

> *After having sex with my boyfriend, I was so afraid thinking I am no more a virgin. I couldn't stop worrying about what will happen when my future husband finds out that I have lost my hymen! Then I googled and learned that all this hymen stuff is nonsense! (Luna,18-year-old girl, IDI)*

Like Rumman and Luna, participants thought Facebook and the Internet have played an important role in changing their views about premarital sex, and that they no longer share the views from their parents' generations. They identified themselves as the 'Facebook generation' and their parents as the 'television generation'. Facebook to them is an interactive medium, constantly evolving and connecting them with 'modern' ideas of romance and friendship, whereas television keeps their parents fixated on traditional ideas. They said that their parents mostly watch local and Indian soap operas/movies where traditional ideas are reinforced, such as that marriage is the ultimate goal of romance or that good girls have to remain a virgin until they get married. Participants thought that exposure to global ideas such as 'feminism', 'girl power', 'victim blaming', as well as 'friends with benefits', sex with 'no strings attached', 'group sex', 'anal sex' and 'orgasm' through Facebook and Internet has led them to view love and sexuality very differently from their parents. They see sexual pleasure as an entitlement both for boys and girls.

Ramisha, and some of the other participants, said: 'We don't need parents unless we face problems, such as sexual harassment'. However, further inquiry showed that, even regarding problems such as sexual harassment, they would indeed need their parents but still would not want to speak with their parents about such problems. Boys thought talking with parents would not bring any positive result, as people in general think sexual abuse happens to girls only and there is a lack of awareness about sexual abuse against boys. Girls thought they would lose their image as a 'good girl' after reporting such incidents. Reporting sexual abuse could expose the girls as being sexually or romantically active. A number of girls shared their experiences of being misunderstood and blamed by their mothers after reporting such incidents. Again, they saw Internet as a better and more effective alternative than speaking with their parents. To support this claim, participants showed Facebook posts where girls had disclosed the abuser's name and Facebook ID and received huge support from other Facebook users.

For young people, Facebook and Internet are thus liberating, enabling them to explore their sexuality and develop their own ideas about sexuality. Silence with parents about this liberating force is crucial. They remain anxious that their parents will find out what they know:

> We know many things about sex and pretend that we are ignorant. We don't want our parents finding out what we know because that will be embarrassing [lojjya] for us and for them also. (Raisa, 17-year-old girl, FGD)

In this FGD, the girls mentioned that they carefully maintain an innocent image by not showing any interest in sex and avoid talking about it in the presence of their parents. They saw silence as productive in avoiding embarrassment and upholding their reputation as sexual innocents to their parents.

2.6 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings presented in this chapter support the mainstream literature's claim that there is silence in youth-parent relationships on sexuality and that this limits young people's access to information about their bodies (Denno et al. 2015, Gani et al. 2014, Nahar et al. 2013, Newton-Levinson et al. 2016, van Reeuwijk and Nahar 2013, Waldman et al. 2018). However, our findings also show that the experience of silence is context dependent and is not always perceived as problematic by young people. It can be experienced as a barrier but also as enabling and liberating.

A closer analysis of the findings shows that whether there is silence depends on a variety of factors including age, sex and topic at stake. Silence on physical changes is experienced negatively at the onset of puberty, particularly by boys. Against the backdrop of a sociocultural taboo on cross-sex (mother-son) communication on SRH and lack of sufficient knowledge by mothers coupled with father's absence from childcare, it is mostly boys who encountered silence on physical changes during puberty and found this problematic. As puberty passed, young people's concerns shifted from physical changes to more pleasurable aspects of sexuality, and speaking about them with parents was not perceived as a necessity, as they gained access to other sources of information and support. In contrast to their earlier-felt need for information from their parents, during post-puberty they viewed communicating with parents about romance or sex as shameful and jeopardising their own and the family's reputation, as they are expected to focus on studies and stay away from any

sexual thoughts/activities. Whereas during early puberty, parents were more often avoiding communication with their children, during post-puberty young people themselves kept silent.

Findings also demonstrate that silence is multifaceted. Silence was perceived as a barrier by young people when they needed to speak about physical changes but received no answers. However, in the context of their positive experiences with sex in post-puberty, they viewed silence as productive. Silence was understood as an expression of respect for parents' views towards sexuality, which they thought is very different from their own views. Speaking up was seen as disrespectful, as it might challenge parents' views and disclose behaviour considered disgraceful for their and their family's respectability. In order to uphold a 'good' boy/girl image in the family, young people kept silent about their pursuit of pleasure and information on the Internet. Silence thus was also perceived as a strategy to rework the existing restrictive norms of sexual innocence and abstinence from premarital sex. Despite the restrictive norms and parental vigilance, by keeping silent about their life as well as their use of Internet, participants skilfully managed to get what they needed.

Finally, this chapter reiterates the feminist call mentioned earlier for building a critical understanding of silence and for re-emphasizing that silence needs to be understood in its specific context (Kabeer 2010, Parpart 2009), here in the participants' urbanising, middle-class context. Participants' motivations for silence were rooted in the middle-class notion of respectability, based on the importance of youth's education and sexual abstinence before marriage. Respectability has long been understood as an important element of the construction of middle-classness in South Asia (Chatterjee 1989, Donner 2012, Hussein 2017). Young people's responses indicate that they value respectability, as it is an important element of middle-class identity. They see it as their responsibility to improve their families' upward mobility through obtaining good grades and protecting their sexual reputation. They are aware that disclosure of their sexual thoughts and activities will not only destroy their reputation to their parents, but will also damage their parents' reputation in their respective families and communities. Yet it is the same middle-class positioning that helps them to explore sexual thoughts and activities beyond those of their parents. Economically, they are in the position to have mobile phones and free access to Internet. Moreover, their education has provided them with the required English language skills to search and understand information on international websites, as there is little available in Bangla.

This paper thus destabilises the predominant understanding in the mainstream literature on youth SRH that silence is always problematic and oppressive. Based on these findings, one might argue that Internet is contributing to the silence and thereby increasing the distance in youth-parent relationships on issues of sexuality. However, a closer analysis suggests that young people think this distance is necessary for a harmonious relationship. They defer to their parents out of respect and do not think it is necessary for parents to take the role of a friend. They think discussing topics relating to pleasure with parents is inappropriate and unnecessary as they can access information from the Internet. An in-depth understanding of all these structural elements of silence needs to be taken into account when researching youth sexuality. Improved insight enables the avoidance of overly generalised assumptions that silence is a serious problem and always bad and oppressive and, for health workers involved in SRHR education - or anthropologists studying youth sexuality – knowledge about when, on which topics or for which sex or age internet communication is more effective than parental communication.

2

Chapter 3

Doing it like Hollywood/Bollywood: Young people's co-construction of norms in intimate relationships[7]

Abstract

An emerging body of literature has demonstrated that educated middle-class youths in various Asian cities are reconstructing the norms of intimacy in the face of the globalisation of media and rapid urbanisation. Drawing on findings from an ethnographic study conducted among 72 middle-class 15–19-year-olds living in Dhaka, Bangladesh, this paper asks: how are middle-class young people (re) constructing the norms of premarital relationships? This paper provides important insights about the emerging social norms and spaces urban middle-class young people are co-constructing in Bangladesh, and highlights the importance of reconceptualising young people's roles in constructing norms.

Keywords: Young people; intimacy; social norms; Facebook; middle-class

3.1 Premarital intimacy and the Bangladeshi middle class: A puzzle

When a Bangladeshi photojournalist posted a photo of a young man and a young woman kissing in the monsoon rain on his Facebook account on 23 July 2018, it caused a stir among the country's middle-class society. The pair, sitting on a pavement right in front of the Dhaka University Teachers' and Students' Centre (Dhaka, Bangladesh), were university students, middle class and not yet married. Their kiss went viral within a few hours, making the headlines in several national and international media outlets on the following day (Carey 2018, Gowen 2018). While many appreciated the photo, others considered it an offence to the Bangladeshi 'culture'. This latter group called the photo obscene and condemned the photographer for violating the moral codes of modesty and shame. They expressed their concern that applauding such an intimate scene on a public platform such as Facebook would encourage young people to behave 'shamelessly' [*behayapona*] like 'western' youths. As a result of intense pressure, the photographer deleted the photo and posted an apology note. Despite this, he was fired from his job and was physically assaulted by other journalists in public. Interestingly, the couple in the photo did not face any public harassment.

This story hints at the clashing norms concerning premarital intimacy in Bangladeshi society. Like many other Asian societies, showing intimacy in public is largely discouraged as it signifies an open declaration of desire and one's sexuality, and is considered shameful for the person and his or her family. While this norm also concerns married couples, the norms for unmarried and particularly for middle-class youths are even stricter. They are also less likely to have access to private meeting places. Securing a private location away from parents, relatives, teachers and neighbours in a city with a population of 48,000 people per square kilometre is extremely difficult; yet, as the photo showcases, young people do manage to get intimate in the presence of others. Young people holding each other and kissing are not rare sights in the city's university campuses, fast food restaurants/cafés, parks or under the hood of a passing rickshaw in busy streets, all of which allow for some privacy away from family members' prying eyes. The above-mentioned photo shows the couple kissing in a seemingly busy place in the presence of other people who do not appear to be bothered by the act. The indifference of the man preparing tea at the adjacent tea-stall or the man sitting right behind the pair preparing his betel leaf suggests that perhaps people's concern is not so much about the actual act as it is about breaching certain 'social codes' of modesty and shame by documenting the

incident and posting it on Facebook. The moment it was brought under the public gaze, it could no longer be ignored.

This story thus shows that the norms of premarital love and intimacy in the Bangladeshi society are ambiguous. What is considered obscene by some is considered progressive by others. What is overlooked on a busy street may not be sanctioned on social media, although during the fieldwork, I came across similar photos on participants' Facebook Timelines that hardly encountered any backlash. This suggests the significance of contextuality in the ways in which norms are organised in the rapidly urbanising city. Here, we will show that young people are drawing new ideas from the Internet and Hollywood/Bollywood, and are reconstructing and co-constructing the norms of love and intimacy in various spaces. Tracing the ways in which they are doing so can provide important insights into the social changes occurring among the middle class of Bangladesh.

Drawing on findings from ethnographic fieldwork conducted during 2016 and 2017 among 72 middle-class 15–19-year-olds living in Dhaka, Bangladesh, this chapter asks: how are middle-class young people (re)constructing the norms of premarital relationships? This main question will be answered by exploring two specific research questions: 1) which norms are they (re)constructing where? 2) How are these reconstructions mediated by their gendered and classed positions? The findings presented in this chapter highlight important insights about the concerns of middle-class youths, who constitute a significant share of the youth population in Bangladesh and yet remain marginalised in research. Middle-class youths are the main consumers of mobile phones and Facebook in the country, which means they deal with a larger variety of contexts and adjoining contradictions in norms. The findings presented in this paper will provide a better understanding of the social changes happening in Bangladeshi middle-class society, and will highlight the importance of reconceptualising young people's role in constructing social norms.

3.2 Getting intimate with intimacy

Recent studies conducted in various Asian cities indicate that the norms of intimacy are shifting among the urban middle-class youths in the face of their increased exposure to global ideas of sexuality and along the lines of their aspirations to become modern and cosmopolitan. In Tokyo, Japan, unlike in previous generations, young people now consider public displays of intimacy to be an essential part of their relationships (Alexy 2019). Dating apps are becoming increasingly popular among

youths in Indian cities (Das 2019). Young people's perception of homosexuality is changing in Tokyo, Beijing (China), and Taipei (Taiwan) (Feng et al. 2012, Zuo et al. 2012). Young urban women in Japan and the Philippines are increasingly challenging the dominant 'heterosexual marriage model' (Cabañes and Collantes 2020, Kottmann 2020, Suzuki 2020). This growing body of research indicates that young people, particularly those belonging to the urban middle class and with access to cosmopolitan lifestyles, are reconstructing the norms of intimacy.

There is a dearth of literature in Bangladesh focussed on understanding how middle-class young people, who are facing rapid changes due to the growth of the economy and the booming of the middle class, are (re)constructing the norms of premarital love and intimacy. The little we know is that premarital sex is becoming a common practice (Karim 2012, Muna 2005). There are certain places in the city, such as university campuses, parks or cafés, where restrictions are more relaxed and young couples can meet (Karim 2012, Muna 2005, Zaman et al. 2013). There has been a significant shift from arranged marriages to love-arranged marriages, which sanctions premarital romances as long as they conform to class, gender and religious boundaries (Karim 2012, Sabur 2014). Parents' worries regarding their children's whereabouts lessen when they go to university, meet certain familial and social obligations, and maintain a good sexual reputation (Karim 2012). Parents sometimes overlook their sons' same-sex relationships if they are old enough, have met familial expectations by securing a successful career, and do not disclose their relationships outside the familial space (Karim 2012). These previous studies indicate that how well one can negotiate between their own wishes and their social expectations depends on one's sex, sexual orientation, age and social status. Familial and social obligations are gendered, as middle-class (heterosexual) men generally enjoy more opportunities and freedom to act on their preferences than women or homosexual men. Generally, a woman's sexuality is monitored for a longer period, continuing into adulthood, and women are granted less privacy and mobility outside the home (Karim 2012).

The literature above indicates that the intimate practices of young people in the urban middle class are changing, as well as the norms of intimacy which they co-construct. All these studies, however, have focussed on university students and professionals, and do not tell us how the younger cohorts, and who identify themselves as the 'Facebook Generation' (Camellia et al. 2021), are (re)constructing norms before they go to university or become economically independent. Research involving younger cohorts has mostly focussed on a narrow view of sexual and reproductive health, and problems such as early marriage and dowry, sexual abuse

and a lack of sex education. The theme of intimacy has been largely overlooked, despite having been identified as a major concern by adolescents themselves (van Reeuwijk and Nahar 2013). Moreover, researchers in Bangladesh have almost exclusively focussed on the poor, who live in slums and lack basic amenities. Part of the explanation for this focus could be researchers' dependency on external funders, whose interest is mostly on the poor as well as this narrow 'safety'-focussed understanding of sexuality. Additionally, the taboo of discussing intimacy with young people makes it a challenging topic for adult researchers.

3.3 Going beyond the victim/agent binary: Reconceptualising young people's role

Young people in Bangladesh and other low- and middle-income countries have been predominantly regarded as mere victims of social norms and practices such as early or arranged marriage and gender inequality (Chandra-Mouli et al. 2014, Santhya and Jejeebhoy 2015, Starrs et al. 2018). While the high rates of violence and sexual harassment against girls (Murshid and Murshid 2019) do demonstrate girls' vulnerabilities across all classes, the literature mentioned in the previous section indicates the capabilities of middle-class adolescents to navigate the restrictive norms to get what they want. Correspondingly, access to the Internet and Facebook has facilitated their autonomy to explore new ideas of sexuality while keeping their intimate lives private from their parents (Camellia et al. 2021). This chapter will investigate how young people construct norms in their middle-class context, and how their options are mediated by their gender and class. Researchers have pointed out that middle-class young women have more to lose if their sexual reputation is damaged than those belonging to lower socioeconomic groups (Camellia 2020, Karim 2012). A girl living in a slum can safeguard her reputation by relocating to another slum and hiding her past, or by persuading the man who got her pregnant to marry her with the help of neighbours and community leaders (Jesmin and Salway 2000, Rashid 2006).

Middle-class young people thus have a dual relationship with social norms. On the one hand, they can challenge the norms, while on the other, they are also subject to social norms in specific contexts. How do we conceptualise their agency to capture this duality? To answer this, we turn to recent literature on sexual agency, particularly the studies published by Cense (2019) and Bell (2012). They argued that agency needs to be investigated in individuals' everyday negotiations with their specific social and structural factors. Unpacking young people's strategic negotiations in their

daily social lives can provide important insights for practitioners when designing context-specific interventions (Bell 2012, Cense 2019).

Taking inspiration from these studies, here we conceptualise young people's negotiations with social norms as a continuous relational process that takes place in their everyday social interactions, which simultaneously shapes and is shaped by their gender and class positions. Thus, we conceptualise young people's role as the co-constructors of norms. We perceive young people neither as active individual agents nor as passive victims of social norms, but as interdependent social actors whose choices are shaped within a complex web of individual desire, social expectations and larger structural factors, such as urbanisation and the globalisation of sexuality.

3.4 Methods

The findings presented in this chapter are gathered from an ethnographic study conducted among 72 middle-class boys and girls between 15 and 19 years of age, all of whom live in various middle-class neighbourhoods of Dhaka, Bangladesh. The data were collected from face-to-face in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observations and participants' Facebook/Messenger posts. To be able to conduct research on such a taboo topic, I spent several days hanging out in malls and restaurants, and watching movies in a Cineplex, with a group of four young people who were friends with each other. During this time, I tried to learn their language and cultural practices and sought suggestions from them regarding how to approach young people to participate in interviews and get them talking about intimacy and their sexual experiences with her. As suggested by them, I emphasised my position as a PhD student in the Netherlands and an immigrant to Australia to potential participants. Prior to meeting them, I also revised my Facebook profile to make it look more cosmopolitan. I replaced my profile photo with one that was taken in the Netherlands and uploaded more photos from my stay in the Netherlands and other western countries. Crafting my identity as cosmopolitan helped me to gain the participants' trust, a strategy I reflected upon in an article (Camellia 2019).

In total, 40 in-depth interviews were conducted with 18 girls and 22 boys, and seven single-sex focus group discussions were held with five or six participants each. Permission was sought from parents before interviewing participants to avoid any backlashes. Most of the interviews/discussions were held in the participants' favourite fast food restaurants/cafés. In addition, I spent several evenings over a

period of five weeks in various restaurants/cafés located in 'Love Lane', a popular place where young people meet. There I conducted small talks (Driessen and Jansen 2013) with a number of young people, restaurant/café staff and owners. Four youngsters were helpful as key-informants. With them I discussed relevant topics, codeveloped my interview guidelines, data collection plans and strategies. Throughout the fieldwork, while conducting interviews/discussions, waiting for participants in various restaurants, or spending time in the city for personal reasons, I closely observed young people's interactions and conversations around me.

The data analysis was guided by the grounded theory approach (Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin 1994). All interviews/discussions were transcribed verbatim and simultaneously coded with AtlasTi. A constant comparison between codes was carried out to interpret the relationships between the different codes and to identify themes. For instance, the comparison between open codes such as 'no strings attached', 'passionate love' and 'girlfriend–boyfriend relationships' showed that gender plays a significant role in how young people construct the norms of intimacy.

3.5 Co-constructing norms of premarital intimacy by young people

Concerns about intimacy emerged as a central theme during the fieldwork. Many young people reached out via Messenger and expressed their interest in discussing their concerns about intimate relations. Conversations often revolved around love and intimacy, not because I specifically asked questions about it, but because the participants were more enthusiastic to discuss this topic than others. Love and intimacy almost always remained one of the central topics in their face-to-face or online discussions with peers. On Facebook, they frequently posted their poems, videos, photos, memes, jokes and paintings about relationships.

The participants frequently used the English word 'relationship' as a catch-all expression to refer to all forms of intimacy, ranging from passionate love to casual sexual relationships. The first inquiry began with attempts to unfold what they mean by 'relationship'. I therefor asked the straightforward question: 'What comes to your mind when you hear the word relationship?' This resulted in a long list of responses, including Bangla and English phrases such as '*prem*' [passionate love], '*para*' [pain], 'sex', 'fun', 'butterflies in the stomach', 'feeling over the moon', 'headache', 'expensive', 'too much work' and 'relationshit'. Their responses also included the names of Hollywood/Bollywood movies. Further exploration into what the participants meant

by each of these expressions/names prompted revealing discussions about how norms are being reconstructed by the youths, and how their options are mediated by their gender and class, all of which will be discussed throughout the rest of this chapter.

The following sections are organised under the three main reference points around which the participants organised their responses. The first section engages with Hollywood/Bollywood as the main cultural reference from where the participants draw ideas and ideals about relationships. The next section discusses how these ideas and ideals are manifested and reconstructed in the specific online space of Facebook, a platform used by almost all of the participants. The last empirical section delves into the constructions and negotiations of relationships in a booming restaurant area in Dhaka, Love Lane, a highly popular place among middle-class young people in the city.

3.5.1 Doing it like Hollywood/Bollywood

As mentioned above, Hollywood/Bollywood was often referred to by the participants in their discussions about relationships. Young people mostly access movies through File Transfer Protocol (FTP) servers provided by the local internet service providers as part of their internet package. These servers store hundreds of Hollywood/Bollywood movies, which clients can easily download to watch privately on personal devices and which can be shared via an USB drive with friends who do not have access to broadband internet. Almost all the participants mentioned watching movies as a favourite leisure activity. Many shared that, besides entertainment, Hollywood movies helped them to learn English and get a sense of 'the Western culture', which is largely perceived as 'modern', 'exciting', 'fun' and 'liberal'. A person's status was elevated if they could speak English fluently and had travelled abroad. This was the ultimate dream of many middle-class young people, who perceived a bright future with increased respect and status if they went overseas for education. Transnational mobility is constitutive of Bangladeshi middle-classness, and is important for increasing one's social capital and networks, as well as securing upward social and economic mobility and claiming a modern identity (Mapril 2014). The movies enjoyed by the participants, particularly the Hollywood ones, fuel young people's aspirations. In addition, being well-informed about the latest movies and engaging actively in discussions with peers are important to middle-class young people in Dhaka, enabling them to construct a cosmopolitan identity.

While talking about relationships, some movies were repeatedly mentioned, including the latest blockbusters 'Ae Dil Hai Mushkil' [O my Heart, it's Hard] and 'Fifty

Shades of Grey', as well as others from the early 2000s, such as 'Devdas', 'Friends with Benefits' and 'No Strings Attached'. In a focus group with 10th-grade boys, the participants referred to the Bollywood movie *Devdas* while explaining passionate love. Rafid [all names are pseudonyms], a 17-year-old who claimed that he is a 'movie geek', and who has been in and out of several relationships, stated:

> *You know how movies or novels promote the idea of passionate love [prem], right? They will tell you that love happens only once in a lifetime and that life becomes worthless if it doesn't happen. It did happen to me once and caused me so much pain and trouble [para]! I became a complete Devdas after we broke up. I failed exams. I was housebound for almost three months, and could not show my face to friends and relatives. Everyone was laughing at me. Our life is already stressful, and we can't afford to make it more miserable by becoming a Devdas. We have to be bindaas [a Hindi phrase he learnt from Bollywood, which means 'cool' and 'strong'] to get on with our lives. (Rafid, 17 years old, focus group discussion)*

Devdas is a melancholic, wealthy, young male character, originally from the classic popular Bangla novel *Debdash*, which has been made into films in Dhallywood, Tollywood and Bollywood.[8] Not being able to marry his childhood lover Paro, a young middle-class woman, Devdas develops a serious drinking problem and eventually passes away. Rafid shared that while he enjoyed feeling 'butterflies in the stomach' and 'over the moon' when he fell passionately in love with a girl, breaking up with her caused him a lot of heartache and trouble. Rafid criticised the celebration of the ideal *prem* in classic movies and novels, which glorifies self-inflicted pain and restraining oneself from sex. He explained that men like Devdas who destroy their future for the love of their life do not fit with modern society, in which maintaining a *bindaas* [cool] image and prioritising one's career remain integral parts of becoming the future ricewinner of the family. Rafid's evaluation of this dominant ideal of 'passionate love' is thus shaped by his embodied experience, as well as his internalisation of familial responsibility to become the future ricewinner.

Against this backdrop, boys and young men tend to look for relationships that involve minimum emotional investment:

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8   Dhallywood and Tollywood are the Bangla-language film industries based in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and Tollygunge, Kolkata, India, respectively. Bollywood is the Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai, India.

We only need fun. At our age, prem [passionate love] is not needed. It is required for marriage, and we are too young to be married. You heard about relationships as in 'Friends with Benefits' or 'No Strings Attached', right? [...] It's fun and without any baggage. You just have sex with someone and then pretend it never happened. It won't affect grades or cause pain. You won't have to drink poison or cut your wrist to prove your love. (Sahil, 16-year-old boy, focus group discussion)

Sahil's statement demonstrates how boys are reconstructing new ideals of intimacy in the context of their access to global ideas of intimacy through Hollywood/Bollywood. Sahil referred to the well-known cultural practice of passionate love among the youth that involves obsession and self-inflicting harm. Many participants, including girls, shared their concerns about the increasing youth suicide rates in Dhaka due to troubled romance and attachments, and the stress such emotionally taxing relationships tend to cause among young people.

While the increasing rate of suicides reported in the national media (Riyasad 2018) indicate that unrequited passionate love is prevalent, the above-mentioned findings demonstrate the increasing awareness of the importance of preventing oneself from getting into such situations. Several participants referred to another Bollywood movie, '*Ai Dil Hai Mushkil* [O my Heart, it's Hard]', in which the male protagonist moves on with his life and keeps flourishing with his music career after his proposal is rejected by the woman he loves. Drawing on this example, the male participants implied that staying away from any kind of obsession is important for building a good future. Against this backdrop, a more fun, 'no-strings-attached' relationship is preferred and emerges as the new ideal among the middle-class boys interviewed. It seems that the increasing resistance to self-harm practices among young people is very much in line with the recent shift in Bollywood films following the 2012 'Delhi Gang Rape' incident (Gupta 2015, Kaur and Zurbriggen 2020). In the face of widespread criticism against Bollywood's normalisation of sexual harassment against women in the name of passionate love, the film industry has started promoting more liberal ideas about gender roles and the ideals of femininity and masculinity, and love/intimacy in their movies. The public notion of shame has shifted in cinema; kissing and sex are shown, hinted at or implied in local Bengali drama as well as Hollywood, which has also shifted the way young people view premarital intimacy.

While the girls also drew ideas from Hollywood/Bollywood and saw emotional pain as a barrier for reaching their aspirations of being modern independent women, they cautioned that 'no-strings-attached' or 'friends-with-benefits' relationships

might harm their reputation in a cultural context where premarital sex is taboo. Only Naira, an 18-year-old girl said she had engaged in casual sex through Tinder. Naira mentioned that, unlike boys who can go around and boast about their ability to engage in casual sex, she keeps her relationships hidden. She was worried that her friends would judge her if they knew. The number of boys who reported having casual sex was also very low, but the main reason for that was stated as the 'unavailability of modern girls' who would agree to have sex outside of an established relationship.

> *The 18-year-old girl Rimi explained why girls tend to avoid casual sex:*
> *Our society is discriminatory towards girls. When a sex clip is leaked,*
> *everyone blames the girl and calls her khawa [literally 'leftover food',*
> *meaning not a virgin]. We have to be in a boyfriend–girlfriend relationship*
> *to make sure that if anything goes wrong, we can hold him responsible.*
> *(Rimi, 18-year-old girl, in-depth interview)*

Rimi indicated that girls run a higher risk of losing their reputation [*bodnam howa*] than boys if word of their sexual intimacy gets out. She explained that while girls also seek sexual pleasure and 'having a boyfriend is always cool', they have to make sure that their reputation [*shunam*] remains intact. Since society puts an unfair share of blame and shame on girls, they must take measures to minimise the huge personal, social and emotional risks incurred. Having sex within a romantic relationship, which the girls called a 'boyfriend–girlfriend relationship', puts some accountability on the boy and thus offers some protection to the girl. In such a relationship, a boy must agree to keep peers informed about their relationship and post photos regularly to acknowledge their romantic intimacy even if they are only looking for a short-lived relationship. A boyfriend–girlfriend relationship is therefore different from passionate love as it does not necessarily involve intense emotional investment, nor is it a 'no-strings-attached' relationship. 'If a boy wants to keep his relationship hidden from his friends, then he is being dodgy', said Preety, a 16-year-old girl, during an interview. According to girls, displaying romantic intimacy to friends is not only fun but is also necessary for securing their status as a 'girlfriend', although there is also pride in being desired and wanted by the opposite sex. This results in peers' approval of being in a relationship, and ensures their support if needed in the future when the relationship is over.

Thus, while following the same ideal of a casual premarital relationship, girls tend to emphasise the importance of public acknowledgement of the relationship among peers to protect their reputation and to rule out accusations of sexual promiscuity. While boys are more concerned with the emotional management of relationships,

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girls focus on sexual reputation management. Such gendered negotiations about the meaning and representation of intimacy are necessary to maintain their reputation as a 'good boy/girl' in society, which heavily relies on academic accomplishments for boys and sexual reputation for girls. While academic accomplishments are important for both boys and girls, it is mainly boys who are expected to be the future head of the family and take care of elderly parents and other family members (Mapril 2014). Avoiding emotional attachments that hinder this aim is therefore a central concern for boys. For girls, (the appearance of) emotional involvement is exactly what is needed to protect their sexual reputation.

All these findings demonstrate that gendered norms of intimacy are being negotiated and reconstructed by the middle-class youths. Young people do not simply embrace or distance themselves from a traditional or new ideal, but also modify it in accordance with their specific middle-class, urban, globalised, gendered context. Their middle-class positioning allows them to access popular global ideas about intimacy through what they see in Hollywood/Bollywood films and on the Internet, in relation to which they shape their own position depending on their specific context, concerns and needs. The boyfriend–girlfriend ideal is an example of a relatively new norm that allows girls to enjoy sex without jeopardising their social status.

3.5.2 Constructing an alternative space and belonging on Facebook

While Hollywood/Bollywood films function as a popular normative framework, in relation to which young people reconstruct ideas and ideals about premarital intimacy, Facebook appeared to be one of the most important semi-public spaces where those reconstructions manifested themselves and everyday experiences of intimacy were played out. 'Facebook has changed our lives. It's the space where we can speak about the unspeakable things', a 15-year-old girl mentioned in a focus group to explain the importance of Facebook in young people's lives. According to the participants, Facebook is a space where young people can express their views through text and images, bypassing their parents and other important adults in their lives. Although many of them had parents and relatives on their Facebook 'friends' list, they knew very well how to protect their privacy using Facebook's privacy settings. A number of participants shared that their parents are not very good at using Facebook, and it is therefore not very difficult to bypass them. Sometimes they just sneaked into their parents' account and 'unfollowed' themselves so that their posts would not show up on the 'newsfeed'. Many had two Facebook accounts, one for family and another for friends.

During fieldwork, I came across numerous photos, poems, songs and notes posted by young people on their own or their lover's Timelines, in which their friends were also tagged. 'We share at least one mandatory photo of our dating every week with our friends', said Daisy, a 17-year-old girl. Daisy and Asif post selfies kissing or hugging each other on Facebook every now and then. In response to my question of whether they have faced any backlash, Daisy said she remains cautious when posting intimate photos. She has more than 700 people on her friends list and does not share her photos with all of them. She does so only with select friends who she considers 'open-minded'. 'We do not want any trouble', Asif said. These and similar remarks from other participants revealed that, while Facebook has created opportunities for sharing intimate photos with friends, it is also a space for policing sexuality.

Asif's claim can be backed up by my conversations with others and observations of their Facebook activities. Many reported 'stalking' others' profiles as a routine activity. Participants tended to label girls who post photos of themselves kissing their boyfriend as 'too fast'(promiscuous) and boys shown partying with girls as 'too lecherous'. This shows that young people are co-constructing contradictory norms on Facebook. While posting intimate photos has become a new norm, negatively labelling such photos remains a common practice through which gendered norms of propriety become imposed and reproduced.

The participants explained that careful navigation between these contradictory norms is very important, particularly in the context of increasing religiosity and intolerance toward alternative views on sexuality in society. Nehal, a 17-year-old boy, received threats from strangers after he used a rainbow filter on his profile photo to show support towards LGBTQ+ rights and wrote on his timeline, 'If Allah hates LGBTQ+ people so much, why did/would he create them in the first place?'. After receiving abusive comments from strangers and being called an 'atheist', he changed his privacy setting from 'public' to 'friends only'. Since then, Nehal stopped posting anything related to LGBTQ+ issues on his own Facebook Timeline, although he still responds to discussions of LGBTQ+ issues on other people's posts.

Young people sometimes go to great lengths and find creative strategies to challenge the social norms they consider oppressive and 'backward'. The researcher met a group of young painters who made their own Facebook page to post their paintings explicitly showing sexual intimacy between same-sex and heterosexual lovers. Additionally, their paintings contain strong messages about other contested norms, including female sexual desire, violence in intimate relationships and the victim-blaming culture, among other topics. The page has more than 15,000 followers and

is managed by a 17-year-old male artist, Raad, who responded to my question about whether they have encountered any backlash, saying:

> Umm...not really. I think since these are all illustrations or paintings, not photographs, people do not bother so much. Also, because we are not adults yet, I think people spare us. They probably think we are just a bunch of spoiled, delusional kids and do not consider us as a threat (smiles).

Raad introduced me to his fellow painter, Nira, who said that she is called 'too fast' and 'horny' by some of her classmates for drawing nudes and intimate moments. Nira shared that she also receives praises from many of her online followers, who encourage her to keep drawing. Raad, Nira and their friends use their Facebook page as a platform to form a group and share their views about intimacy, gender and sexuality through paintings and satirical cartoons. This indicates that, in a context where premarital sex and same-sex relationship are taboo, Facebook can function as an alternative space to provide collective solidarity for young people to create a sense of belonging and to share their alternative views.

All these findings reaffirm our earlier claim, stated in the previous section, that young people are constructing new norms of intimacy. The findings presented in this section demonstrate how they have made premarital intimacy visible and present on Facebook. Young people find ways to break the shame about showing intimacy beyond private spaces and talking about taboo issues such as premarital sex and same-sex love, albeit within some limits.

3.5.3 Co-creating a safe space in Love Lane

Restaurants and cafés were identified as the most popular places for dating by the participants because the other options are 'too public', offer 'less privacy' and can be 'dangerous'. These are places where young people can hide from parents, relatives or teachers. As minors, they do not feel comfortable or safe meeting in public spaces such as parks or university campuses. From my conversation with young people, it became evident that university students do not allow high schoolers to date on their campuses. Some participants mentioned that they were asked to leave the campus by the students while dating. In parks, young couples risk being mugged by local thugs or being picked up or harassed for bribes by policemen who would accuse them of undertaking 'illicit' activities. Being picked up by police is considered 'scandalous' as it will not only lead to one's parents finding out that their son/daughter is dating, but also jeopardises the entire family's reputation. Girls in particular mentioned their concern about being sexually harassed by local thugs, which is a routine experience

for girls in public places such as parks. Against this backdrop, restaurants/cafés are places that feel safe and more private than Facebook according to the research participants, allowing them to meet physically.

Over the past two decades, the rapid increase in the numbers of restaurants/cafés went hand in hand with urbanisation and the growth of the middle class in Bangladesh. Hanging out with friends in restaurants/cafés has become instrumental for the production of a modern, cosmopolitan, middle-class identity among young people in Dhaka (Janeja 2010, Sabur 2014, Zaman et al. 2013). The significance of 'eating out' for maintaining social status among peers was evident in our conversations, as well as in the photos they shared on their Facebook Timelines on a regular basis. Taking your girlfriend out to a high-end café/restaurant occasionally is 'mandatory' for a boy to show friends how cool and rich he is. When I asked participants where they get their money from, some said they receive pocket money from their parents, while others earned their own income through tutoring or working as a youth journalist or photographer.

In Dhaka, there are several streets located in middle-class and upscale neighbourhoods that are known for eateries where young lovers meet and spend time. Love Lane is one of those streets, and it provided a good place to conduct participant observations. It is located in one of the largest and most densely populated middle-class neighbourhoods in the city. With several educational institutions nearby, Love Lane offers a strategic location for both young people and restaurant businesses. Although not the official name of the street, the name 'Love Lane' is popularly used because it is a place occupied mostly by young lovers.

Almost all the young couples I spoke with in Love Lane introduced themselves as boyfriend and girlfriend and were from different neighbourhoods to the one in which Love Lane is located. Couples usually avoid meeting in their own neighbourhoods to keep their relationships hidden from families and neighbours. They chose Love Lane because the restaurants are affordable and they feel safe in the area. While they do occasionally go to pricier places to celebrate special days and to post photos on Facebook for friends, for regular visits they look for fast food restaurants/cafés that offer food at affordable prices, and that ensure some privacy with friendly and discreet staff members. Once they find such places, they typically stick to them and build a good relationship with the staff through exchanging greetings, small talk and giving tips. Through these investments, they try to create a safer and more comfortable space for themselves.

My conversation with young people and staff members revealed that these places are not always safe, however. Restaurant/café staff members shared several stories of receiving threats from the police for allowing the 'illicit' activities of minors. Police raids, in which young people, particularly boys, risk being rounded up by policemen, are not uncommon. According to the owners/managers, the police extort money from them to avoid these raids. They have to regularly bribe police and local political leaders so that these raids do not take place in Love Lane, or to ensure that they leave their young guests unharmed.

> We must keep this lane safe for young people for the sake of our own business. If they find this lane unsafe, why would anyone come here? If we create a safe space, then they will bring in new people, which is very important for a restaurant business. (Shams, 44-year-old owner, small talk)

The young people in Love Lane informed us that, in addition to the protection they offer from police, the staff members also intervene if they see young people being harassed by local thugs in the area.

In addition to providing protection from the police and local thugs, restaurants/cafés in Love Lane offer some privacy to attract the young crowd. These places often are dimly lit and include tiny cabin-like spaces separated by concrete walls or curtains to ensure visitors' privacy. At the same time, to make sure that young people do not get 'too intimate' and go beyond kissing and touching, guests are constantly monitored using 'safety mirrors' or CCTV cameras. Many of the restaurants have notices mentioning 'This place is under constant surveillance by CCTV cameras' pasted almost everywhere on the walls. The more privacy a restaurant/café offers, the pricier their menu is. This was explained by an owner, who said, 'well, if they (youth) want more privacy, they have to pay more'. Intimacy has thus clearly become a transactional good in Love Lane.

In response to my question to staff members about their opinions on young people's dating practices, they often expressed their annoyance, calling young people 'a shameless generation'. Humayun, a 42-year-old owner-cum-manager, said, 'They know we are watching them, yet they have no shame [*lojjya-shorom*] in getting physical'. Humayun did not support young people getting intimate in a semi-public setting such as a restaurant; however, he did allow his visitors to do that. Shams, a 44-year-old owner, explained this further, saying, 'Sometimes I feel like kicking them

out of my restaurant, but then no one will come here. I could only politely ask them to leave in extreme cases.'

Such responses demonstrate how economics and negotiations of privacy, safety and shame are shaped in a co-dependent relationship between young people and restaurant/café businesses. Owners/managers, many of whom are also parents themselves, accept what they consider shameless behaviour to a certain extent in order to run their business. They provide a relatively safe space for young people's 'illicit relationships' while ensuring that young people do not go 'too far' by maintaining surveillance. The absence of surveillance could spark outrage among residents, and would mean risking their business being closed down for facilitating 'obscene' activities in the neighbourhood.

I tried to explore young people's feelings about the way in which restaurant owners manage their intimate practices, and their responses were as follows:

> Well, it is clearly an invasion of privacy, but this is Bangladesh and we cannot do anything about it. At least they cannot kick us out just for holding hands or kissing. They need us for their business. So, I don't want to think about the cameras too much. I just want to enjoy my moments with my girl.' (Ruben, 17-year-old boy, small talk)

> I used to feel very uncomfortable thinking someone is watching us. At times, I feel scared too: what if someone leaks our videos on YouTube? But where else would we meet? At least we are safe here. Our parents cannot discover our relationship. So, I try not to worry too much.' (Mouri, 16-year-old girl, small talk)

The above quotes demonstrate that young people accept restaurant surveillance as the price for intimacy away from their parents and the police. Their concerns of privacy mostly involve their families and neighbours, not adults in general. Restaurants need these young couples for their business, which gives the participants a sense of power with which they try to overcome their fear or discomfort and enjoy intimacy in a semi-public place.

The findings presented in this section demonstrate how young people are co-constructing spaces like Love Lane as safe places in the context of a growing middle class and booming restaurant industry. Their middle-class position allows them to spend money at restaurants/cafés and enjoy intimacy in a relatively safe and

private environment, which is not possible anywhere else. Together with the owners and staff, they are facilitating the youth restaurant/café-dating culture, and thus normalising premarital intimacy in semi-public spaces.

3.6 Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate that middle-class young people in Dhaka, Bangladesh, are co-constructing the norms of premarital intimacy. They are drawing new ideas and ideals from Hollywood/Bollywood and reconstructing the norms of premarital intimacy, while simultaneously co-creating the spaces/contexts in which these norms apply, such as Facebook and local restaurants. They break the link between sex and marriage, and do not think that sex should only happen in a long-term loving relationship or in a heterosexual form. They engage in dating, touching, stroking and kissing each other, holding hands and kissing in public, take photographs together, and openly talk about intimacy with their peers and trusted adults (for instance with me). Expressing female sexual desire is no longer considered a promiscuous or shameless act as long as it is performed within a girlfriend–boyfriend relationship. Young people are also reconstructing their views on LGBT rights. A closer analysis shows that a shift is taking place among the middle class, from an old-fashioned passionate monogamous love towards more fun relationships, and from hush-hush to being intimate in a semi-public space, such as Facebook or restaurants.

Our analysis shows that young people reconstruct the norms on (representations of) intimate behaviour, including which activities young people should feel ashamed of and what is respectable, and in which public/private locations different types of intimacies are allowed. Our analysis also shows that these reconstructed norms are deeply entangled with structural factors, such as urbanisation, which has led to a booming of the restaurant/café business, and globalisation through movies and the Internet. These forces place middle-class youths as consumers of media and restaurants who try to stretch the business rules on intimate behaviour on their premises and therefore must be controlled. However, the youth themselves also co-construct these norms and structures, e.g., which movies and relationships are acceptable, and which privacy rules and spatial settings are acceptable and used on Facebook or in restaurants.

The options for co- and reconstructing norms by young people are mediated by their middle-class positioning, which provides them with the resources to pay for Hollywood/Bollywood movies, Iphones with Facebook and drinks and meals at cafés

and restaurants. Moreover, young people's options for reconstructing norms are also mediated by gender. The norms are constructed in constant negotiation between an individual's desire and her or his social/familial responsibilities, which are gendered. Hence, while young people are reconstructing the norms of intimacy, they are also reproducing the existing unequal gender expectations, e.g., men have to be strong and successful, and women have to be sexually pure.

Finally, we urge researchers and practitioners to reconceptualise young people's role as 'co-constructors' of social norms instead of mere victims when designing research and interventions on youth sexuality in low- and middle-income countries. The empirical evidence this chapter presented suggests that young age is not always associated with victimisation by social norms. Sometimes young people benefit from being younger and by co-constructing contexts in which they can express their alternative views creatively and safely without encountering backlashes, unlike the adult journalist who was publicly assaulted for posting that lip-lock kiss photo.

3

Navigating towards a 'good future': Significance of appearance in the aspirations of Dhaka middle-class girls[9]

Abstract

Against the backdrop of rapid urbanisation, appearance has become the core of Dhaka middle-class girl's understanding of who they are and who they want to be. This chapter investigates the significance of appearance among thirty-two Dhaka middle-class girls in relation to their envisioned 'good future'. Findings show that girls use appearance to navigate between their contradictory roles and avoid shame. This chapter argues that while middle-class girls can employ thicker navigational maps to steer towards a 'good future', they are however, more at risk of experiencing shame due to the repressive sexual norms and a heightened pressure to become modern women.

Keywords: Appearance; aspiration; Dhaka; girls; middle-class; sexuality; shame

4.1 Introduction

> *We are now living in a time when our career starts as soon as we are in high school. In addition to do well in our studies, we have to look for opportunities to build networks, and skills. For girls, looks play a big role in there. I was part of a selection committee for a youth network. Whenever we used to recruit girl volunteers for our events, looks was the primary criterion. Girls who did not look presentable to us were out during the preliminary selection process.* (Sameera, 17-year-old high school girl, Dhaka)

This was mentioned by Sameera, while I was interviewing her as part of my doctoral research conducted among fifteen to nineteen years old middle-class girls of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh and one of the fastest growing megacities of Asia. She indicated that appearance has become a central concern for Bangladeshi urban middle-class girls in the context of their aspiration of building a successful career. Sameera came straight from her school for our interview, which took place at a restaurant near her school. I had been expecting to see her in school uniform, but she was wearing a nice maroon tunic over a pair of skinny denim blue jeans. As I looked into her eyes, I saw a trace of eyeliner too. I told her that she looked pretty, and she replied with a smile, 'I have been to my friend's place from school who lives right next door. I had to change my uniform and to quickly freshen up. We are meeting for the first time, and I didn't want to look exhausted to you. First impression is important, right?' This was pretty much a common experience for me throughout my interviews with the girls. They usually came well dressed, sometimes wearing makeup too. Like Sameera, other participants also mentioned that they wanted to look good in front of me because they saw participating in the interview as part of their networking process. Girls expressed their future plans of going to western countries for higher studies and thought I could help them with information and advice.

Throughout my conversation with Sameera and other girls, it became very clear that appearance is a central concern in Dhaka middle-class girls' lives against the backdrop of what they consider as their 'good future', which they define as having a successful career and becoming an economically independent woman. They are well aware of the high competition in the existing labour market and of the gendered expectations that girls have to look good to survive the competition. Girls' desire to look good was clearly evident in our conversations. Even a girl who was known as the prettiest girl in her school told me that she wanted to look prettier. Girls who thought they were not pretty and felt shame about their looks said they always try to look 'better' by wearing clothes or makeup that help them to look slimmer, taller,

fairer, and smart. Others confided that they are sometimes on a strict diet or go to the gym to lose a few pounds. Only a few girls challenged the idea that girls have to look pretty in order to succeed in their career.

Bangladesh is one of the South Asian countries that has faced rapid transitions over the last two decades due to rapid urbanisation and economic growth. On March 26, 2018, the United Nations declared that Bangladesh has met the criteria for graduation from the category of LDC (least developing country) to that of a developing country (United Nations 2019). The middle class is booming in Bangladesh, and a significant proportion of them are now affluent, transnationally mobile, and contributing to the global consumer market (Karim 2012, Khan 2017, Sabur 2010, Sadique 2013). A greater number of women now have access to public domains through education and paid employment. While premarital sex remains taboo, there has been a noteworthy shift in marriage norms among the middle class from arranged marriage towards love-arranged marriage and from early marriage to delayed marriage. Parents only approve romantic relationships which lead to marriage and do not breach the social code of abstinence of premarital sex. While girls are still expected to be married, they are no longer expected to get married early. Instead, they are also expected to complete their higher education and contribute to the economy. Girls have been steadily attaining better academic results than boys in Secondary School Certificate exams and Higher Secondary Certificate exams over the past few years.[10] How this larger sociocultural shift shapes girls' aspirations to look good, and how they experience and deal with at times conflicting and changing demands while navigating towards their future, has not yet been explored.

The research questions this chapter seeks to address are: How do girls use looks to negotiate a 'good future' in their specific urbanising, classed, and gendered environment? Which choices do they make, and which strategies do they apply and why? Drawing on findings from an ethnographic study, this chapter shows how girls often make careful choices about taking pathways that lead to their envisioned 'good future' and avoid pathways that contradict their dreams. In the process of their navigation, it can be argued that they are reproducing certain ideas of patriarchy by reinforcing the norm that girls have to look a certain way. However, I challenge this view, because it leaves unattended their everyday struggles of negotiating shame in a very gendered world and does not acknowledge their critical consciousness or political awareness. If I analyse it using an emic perspective, it shows that girls use this aspiration to look attractive as a tool which Appadurai (2013) has called

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[10]   Source: https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2016/12/30/girls-outperform-boys-in-gpa-5-pass-rate-in-pec-jsc-examinations

'navigational capacity', in order to avoid shame and align their choices or strategies towards their broader aspiration of securing a 'good future'.

This chapter contributes to the emerging South Asian feminist scholarship on 'New Womenhood' that defines 'New Women' of South Asia as middle-class, highly educated women who are constantly negotiating and challenging the boundaries of tradition and modernity, culture and religion, local and global, and discourses on gender and sexuality (Azim 2010, Hussein 2018b). This new strand sees 'New Women' as active agents of their lives as opposed to how the earlier scholarship viewed South Asian women as trapped between 'tradition' and 'modernity' and as objects upon which traditional rules are inscribed (Talukdar and Linders 2013). The 'New Women' are not a homogeneous category, as they are constantly being constructed at the intersection of gender, class and culture (Hussein 2018b). I see these girls as active agents as well as participants in this construction of new womanhood. What I add to this scholarship based on the findings presented in this chapter is that the aspiration for good looks is an integral part of this new womanhood for this new generation of middle-class girls in Dhaka. I will also show that these girls do not see themselves as mere victims of body shaming but as active navigators of shame towards their envisioned 'good future'.

This chapter takes inspiration from Appadurai's concepts of 'aspiration' (2013) and the 'capacity to aspire' (2004). Appadurai argues that one's capacity to aspire depends on one's access to power and resources which are defined by one's class position in society. Therefore, higher-class people have a greater capacity to aspire and thicker navigational maps. In addition to the participants' socio-economic positioning, this chapter will take into account their gendered position as being 'girls' in a highly patriarchal society which puts girls at greater risk of encountering shame for transcending social norms regarding sexuality. This chapter will investigate the significance 'looks' have in relation to girls' aspirations for a good future, and what kinds of maps they consider and which resources or strategies they use to navigate towards that good future. A key idea from Appadurai's thesis (2004, 2013) is that aspirations are formed in the continuous process of interaction and negotiation between individuals and their society, which is shaped by larger political or economic factors such as globalisation and urbanisation. Following his lead, I will carefully analyse concrete steps that girls undertake in their everyday lives and will explore which aspects of their social lives shape their individual narratives of choices and decision making, focusing on class and gender.

Findings presented in this chapter were collected over a year between 2016 and 2017 from thirty-two girls aged between fifteen and nineteen years-old living in Dhaka. Initially, a few participants were recruited from my personal network as well as from online youth networks. The rest were recruited using snowball sampling from various Bangla schools[11] known as schools for middle-class children, located in different middle-class neighbourhoods of the city. Anthropological methods, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and small talk (Driessen and Jansen 2013) were used to ensure an informal atmosphere and to encourage an open conversation. Parental permission was sought prior interviewing participants who were below eighteen years old.

All the participants identified themselves as belonging to the middle class. They generally understood schools, neighbourhoods, and lifestyles as the key markers of middle-classness. They defined their middle class position in opposition to both the 'poor', who live in slums and lack access to basic amenities, and the 'rich', who they saw as those who live in upscale neighbourhoods, study in expensive English schools, wear expensive clothes, own the latest model iPhone or iPad, eat out with friends in high end restaurants on a regular basis, and even spend holidays in western countries with parents at least once a year. In response to my questions about what it feels like 'being a middle-class girl', participants commonly referred to their future aspiration of becoming an independent woman and the privileges and pain they share for being in the 'middle' between the rich and the poor. According to them, they live a better life than poor, however, they encounter greater pressure than girls from poor or rich backgrounds with regards to upholding their sexual reputation. They thought girls from poor and rich background have more room to manoeuvre the societal shame about sexuality than the middle-class girls. 'A poor girl can relocate to another slum or a rich girl to abroad and start a new life there if her sexual reputation is jeopardised,' explained one participant during a focus group. Participants pointed out that in Dhaka the middle-class groups together in relatively smaller bounded communities in order to cope with the insecurities of city life. Most of their parents are first-generation migrants to the city and therefore have had to work hard to get a foothold and build their lives together. As will be shown in the rest of this chapter, while they have relatively greater opportunities to negotiate, they also have to remain cautious not to jeopardise their sexual reputation which they see as one of the core elements of middle-class girlhood.

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[11]   Bangla schools uses Bangla as the primary medium of instruction whereas English schools uses English.

The following section is divided into three parts. The first part lays out a brief overview of findings on how girls define 'good future' and the second part summarises girls' responses on the role of physical appearance in their understanding of 'good future'. In the last part, I will present narratives of three girls as examples to show how girls navigate through existing options and choices using physical appearance towards their aspiration of this 'good future'.

4.2 Defining 'good future'

In response to what girls aspire to as a 'good future', my respondents commonly contrasted their mothers' lives with what they had in mind for themselves. In many cases, they were critical about how their mothers were treated by their fathers and other family members, and shared that they envision a life for themselves that is better than what their mothers' experienced.

> *The way my father and his relatives treat my mother, seems that she is their slave. If she had a job and earning, they could not treat her like that. (Simi, 16-year-old, IDI)*

Simi's father has joint-ownership of several cloth stores with his brothers and they all live as a big family unit with fourteen members. Simi was not happy with how her father and other family members treat her mother. Since her mother is a housewife, in addition to taking care of the elderly family members she has to cook meals for everyone in the family. Simi mentioned that just because her mother does not work outside and bring in money she has to do an unfair share of chores and lacks a respected position in the family. Instead of appreciating the hard work her mother does from dawn to dusk, her father and other family members often criticise Simi's mother for not doing the chores properly. According to Simi, if her mother was a working woman like her two aunts then things would have been different.

During a focus group I asked participants whether any of them ever considered being a stay-home housewife in the future. It took less than a moment for them to answer 'No', all together in a loud and clear voice while vigorously shaking their heads. Faiza then explained why not:

> *We live in a strange society. All the praises go to fathers and blames to mothers. If we achieve good grades father will take all the pride and say, 'after all she is my child' and if we fail he will yell at his wife, 'do you eat*

grass all day at home? Can't you look after what your daughter is doing?'
(Faiza, 17-year-old, FGD)

Faiza mentioned, and others agreed, that they want to live a life with dignity [*morjada*] and respect [*shonman*] in the future, for which they think economic independence is the only means. They consider Bangladesh as a patriarchal society where women are not given respect and instead have to earn it. Some participants used the word '*purushtontro*' (the Bangla word for 'patriarchy') and said that they learnt the word from newspaper articles and television talk shows.

While speaking with girls who were critical about how their mothers were being treated at home, I tried to understand their perception of marriage in relation to their envisioned 'good future'. Everyone said they want to get married and thought good marriage to be an integral part of a good future. Here is an excerpt from my conversation with Neela:

> *I do think marriage is a beautiful thing and it's a way to build your own family. No one wants to live alone…You are married, aren't you? And I guess your marriage is not that bad, otherwise you two wouldn't be together now. See, marriage is not the problem, problem is how husbands and in-laws treat women and its changing now. You are an independent woman and you are in a happier marriage, and if you were not happy you could have left anytime! (Neela, 18-year-old, small talk)*

This quote is drawn from our casual conversation, which took place during a hangout in a rickshaw. Neela was sharing her feelings towards her parents' separation. She shared the above thoughts when I asked her about her opinion on marriage. Despite the fact that she witnessed her mother going through mistreatment by her father and other relatives, she did not think marriage was a bad thing. Neela and other girls did not challenge the notion of marriage, but they clearly challenged the unequal power relations between a husband and a wife. They saw self-reliance through economic independence as the only solution to obtain an equal status quo and a respectful, dignified married life. Participants also mentioned the English word 'companionship' as an important element of happy marriage:

> *Most of our mothers are housewives and all they can talk about are household affairs and TV serials. If the husband is a scientist what is he going to talk about with such a wife? Companionship is only possible in equal relationships. (Rupa, 17-year-old, FGD)*

Rupa thought that companionship can only exist when both partners are economically and intellectually equal. All seven girls who participated in this particular group discussion agreed that for better communication in marriage it is important for wives to work outside the home in order to get a better knowledge of the outside world, which is important for intellectual development.

While talking about their thoughts of a 'good future', some connected the idea of individual wellbeing to notions of the nation's progress. They said that they want to see Bangladesh as a violence-free country where everyone enjoys equal rights [shoman odhikar]. They thought that in order to turn Bangladesh into such a country, girls collectively need to push boundaries further with their academic and extracurricular success. Participants felt that girls are already making a good progress towards that:

> We have already come quite far from our mother's generation. We do not have to face boy child-girl child discrimination within our home anymore. We enjoy the same opportunities our brothers do in terms of education or extra-curricular activities. Now our job should be to equip ourselves using these opportunities to make a better world outside home. For that, we have to prove we are no less than boys…and we have been beating boys in HSC and SSC exams over the last few years already.' (Rohini, 17-year-old, Interview in pair)

Rohini's statement shows how she takes the task upon herself to contribute to a better future for girls in Bangladesh more broadly. She believes that equal opportunities at home have enabled girls to establish an equal, respectable position both at home and outside, and emphasised that all girls should work together towards that.

4.3 Linking physical appearance with 'good future'

In today's world, competition is so high! One will always remain behind if she does not get noticed…and for that, looks is very important. If she looks good, everyone will immediately notice her. If she doesn't, she has to work really hard. (16-year-old, focus group discussion)

As noted at the start of this chapter, participants made it clear that they are well aware of the high competition and the gendered expectation that girls have to look good in order to survive the competition. It has become very important for girls to

be visible in the public arena in order to build a network which they see as a pathway to obtaining a successful career. Girls use Facebook for that purpose:

> *Women are judged by their looks first, then by their qualities [Aage dorshondhari por-e goon bichari]. When I first opened my Facebook account I used a beautiful photo of a flower as my profile photo. No one sent me a friend request. Beauty has many benefits, you will get many friends, many likes on your photos if you look pretty. You have more support if you post something online. (15-year-old, interview in pair)*

This fifteen-year-old girl recounted that she had opened her Facebook account when she was 12 years old. She felt uncomfortable [*oshshosti*] and insecure [*bhoy*] to show her face to strangers and that is why she chose a photo of a flower as her profile photo. She waited for three weeks, but there were no likes or comments on her photo. Then she took a selfie of just her eyes and set it as her profile photo, and that got a few likes. After a month or so, she replaced her profile photo again with one of her full face, which received over a hundred likes. She negotiated her discomfort and fear with her desire to get likes. Except for two of the girls, all my respondents had Facebook accounts and I was connected with all of them. After talking with the girl quoted above I checked other participants' Facebook profile photos and found an intriguing pattern. Only a few had used photos of their face as their first profile photo. The rest used photos of landscapes, flowers, birds, or leaves, and after 2-3 weeks they had changed it to either a group photo with friends or family members, or to a selfie that only disclosed partial features of their faces. These later photos received a few more likes than the previous ones. Within a month or two they replaced these photos with new ones where their faces were clearly visible. These photos received significantly higher likes than the previous photos. This shows how girls use their looks to create visibility and claim public space, which is certainly a new phenomenon for young women of Bangladesh where traditionally women are discouraged from exhibiting their looks or socialising with strangers. All the research participants had their own mobile phones with internet connections. Except for two, all had personal Facebook accounts on which they spent three to four hours every day.

In focus groups and in-depth interviews, girls shared that they post their photos on Facebook not only to build networks but also to attract boys. Although they do not envision getting married early, they are aware that good looks are not only beneficial for building a successful career but also for ensuring a good marriage.

> *For guys, looks are important too, but it's not mandatory for them to look good in order to find a good-looking woman. Do you think anyone will like a female version of Himu? We all have to be like Rupa. (16-year-old, interview in pair)*

Here the girl referred to Himu, a popular fictional character in his late twenty's created by the Bangladeshi novelist Humayun Ahmed. The character does not care about his looks at all. He does not comb his hair or shave, and walks barefoot on the streets[12] of Dhaka. Despite his careless, unorthodox look, girls find Himu very attractive and fall for Himu easily. With this example, the participant tried to explain the significance of good looks for girls in the marriage market and indicated towards the existing gender discrimination against women in society. Men like Himu do not need to be good looking to attract beautiful women like Rupa. The following section describes how girls use their aspiration to look good or attractive as their navigational capacity to steer towards their perceived 'good future'.

4.4 Navigation towards a 'good future'

In this section I introduce three girls: Dahlia, Ramisha, and Lamiya. All of them were born and brought up in Dhaka. I have chosen to present their narratives because they are exemplary of the diverse concerns and experiences of girls in relation to their appearance and the desire for a 'good future'. Furthermore, these three stories allow me to provide an in-depth analysis of the different ways in which girls construct 'attractiveness' in their construction of a good future, as well as to probe contradictions and ambiguities in their stories about their capacities to aspire to that future. I will begin by recounting each of their stories, followed by an analysis of the key implications in a discussion section.

4.4.1 Dahlia: 'Sexy' and 'appealing'

> *To me, beautiful means sexy. There are plenty of girls who have good features, but not necessarily boys will find them all sexy. For example, you know the Bollywood actress Deepika, right? She has a perfect body, perfect face and everything, but still I find Anushka Sharma [another Bollywood actress] prettier, because she is sexy. The way she talks and moves, her body language, her smile, expressions, eyes all are so appealing, and so*

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12   Walking barefoot on the street in Bangladesh is considered inappropriate for middle- and upper-class people. Only extremely poor people who cannot afford buying shoes walk barefoot.

> *full of life! She is just my dream girl! I wish I could be like her! (Dahlia, 17-year-old, IDI)*

Dahlia aspires to achieve a 'sexy' look. To her, Bollywood actress Anushka Sharma is an ideal 'sexy' woman. Anushka is more attractive to her than fellow actress Deepika because she thinks Anushka's body embraces certain behavioural attributes which make her seem more 'appealing' and 'sexy'. Dahlia's understanding of these behaviours as 'appealing' and 'sexy' were shaped in her social interaction with boys. She said that boys often call her 'sexy' and tell her that they find her '*chanchalta*' (by this she meant being chatty and behaving silly) to be sexy because it enhances her 'appeal' and 'youthfulness'. Dahlia said that she loves to receive such compliments from boys. She acknowledges that she is not tall and fair-skinned like Anushka, but that she has other qualities: she is thin, has a pretty face, and is youthful [*Chanchal*].

Dahlia mentioned that her aspirations in relation to her looks have changed over time. She remembers being not very conscious about her looks until the day her ex-boyfriend had told her that she was 'too short', 'too dark', and not 'sexy enough' for him. It made her feel 'very low' (she used the English phrase 'low') about her appearance and triggered her to try out different looks and to post selfies on Facebook wearing makeup, red lipstick, trendy haircuts, and fashionable and revealing outfits (sleeveless, low-cut tops) with high heels to see whether boys would find her appealing or not. Dahlia said that receiving comments like 'you look hot', or 'sexy' has felt rewarding for her ever since, as it boosts her confidence about herself. At the same time, she says that while posting selfies on Facebook she has to remain careful to not wear clothes that are too revealing, in order to avoid being called 'slut'. Dahlia now visits a beauty parlour at least once a month for facials and to get her hair, eyebrows, hands, and feet done.

According to Dahlia, having a 'sexy' body is beneficial in order to find a good match, which is important to ensure a 'good future'. Dahlia finds exams boring and hard, and wishes she could quit school and get married. However, she knows that this is not possible, because being a housewife is no longer considered a respectable option for young women these days and her parents would be very unhappy if she ceased her education.

> *Nowadays we have to find our own husband. So you have to have some sort of qualities to attract good guys. I am not a very bright student, although my grades are not that bad, but I am not that super bright […] for me, it's easier to use what I have, which is my look. (Dahlia, 17-year-old, IDI)*

In this statement Dahlia indicated that arranged marriage is no longer a norm among the middle class. She feels there are two ways of attracting potential grooms: through attaining a great academic success or through being beautiful. Being the only daughter of a doctor father, she said that she feels 'guilty' (used this English word) for not being good enough to get into a medical school. She mentioned that she has a plan in mind to compensate for this and make her parents happy in the future by finding a husband who is a doctor. According to her, doctor-grooms are in high demand among middle-class women in Bangladesh and therefore she has to prepare herself well to win that competition by finishing her education and nurturing her 'sexy' look.

4.4.2 Ramisha: 'Confident' and 'change maker'

I want to look intelligent because I find intelligent girls the most beautiful. The confidence they have on their faces, in their gestures and postures, makes them even more beautiful than someone who is physically prettier. My favourite woman is Joyeeta, the main character of the novel Gorbhodharini.[13] She looks so sharp and intelligent, she does not look 'meyeli' (feminine), does not wear any makeup at all…rather she dresses like boys, hangs out with boys, scores top grades in her class. She is fearless, revolutionary and dreams to be a change maker of the society. I want to be someone like her. (Ramisha, 16-year-old, IDI)

Drawing on the example of Joyeeta, a young woman in her early twenties who did not believe in gender binaries and proved in the novel that a young woman can be as robust and resilient as a man, Ramisha mentioned that she wants to look 'confident' and 'intelligent'. She thinks an intelligent and confident look is essential to succeed in a career and be a 'change maker' in society. She feels that the position of women needs to be changed and believes that girls have the capacity to do so with their academic and extracurricular success.

Ramisha thinks her aspiration of attaining an intelligent, confident look came from witnessing her mother suffering from emotional and social pain due to her unhappy married life. Seeing her mother, she realises that being beautiful did not help her to find happiness. Against the backdrop of high divorce rates and marital violence, she thinks it is time that girls shift their goals from 'being beautiful' to being 'independent' and 'successful' through pursuing education and other skills-

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13   A Bangla novel written by a popular Indian Kolkata-based writer, Samaresh Majumdar. It is a story of a powerful friendship between four youngsters who dream of changing society into an equal society free of gender and class discrimination.

development activities. She thinks that there has been a significant transition from the past, and that girls nowadays have far more opportunities to consider themselves as 'equal' to boys, to compete with them, and to surpass them. She mentioned that this is also beneficial for a sustainable, happy marriage, since she sees an 'equal relationship' as the underlying precondition for a happy marriage and the only way to attain equality as through becoming successful and independent.

> *Girls who wear a lot of makeup lack confidence…and wait for prince charming to come and rescue them from their cage. I find these girls absolutely empty-headed, pea-brained. Why would you need a prince to rescue you and restore your confidence when you can do it yourself? We are not living in the 18th century anymore. Neither do we live in cages anymore. We are allowed to step out and educate ourselves. I think these girls are actually the lazy ones. It's a lot easier to put on makeup and attract boys than to compete with them and achieve equal success in education or in extracurricular activities. (Ramisha, 16-year-old, IDI)*

Ramisha stated that she recognises marriage as an important marker for securing a 'good future', and that wearing makeup and looking feminine is important in order to attract suitable grooms. However, she thinks she is too young to worry about that now and does not see any point in investing time and energy in being physically beautiful at this moment. Hence she has made a strategic choice to invest in developing her intelligence, because to her the job market is highly competitive and she feels she does not have much time to waste. The only spare time she gets after finishing all her homework and other extracurricular educational activities, such as participating in quiz competitions or science festivals, she spends in working for an organisation to earn some extra pocket money.

In response to my question about whether she does anything to look 'confident', she replied that she avoids wearing makeup and tries to keep a neat and natural look to give others the impression that she is confident about her features. Ramisha stated that her friends often call her 'pichchi'[14] (kiddo) which she finds annoying [biroktikor]. She thinks her 'pichchi' look is a big obstacle for attaining a 'confident' image among her peers. She follows certain strategies so that she looks a little older than her actual age, such as keeping her hair long or occasionally posting selfies or photos of herself

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[14]   In my conversations with Ramisha and other girls, it was clear that they perceive words such as khalamma or picchi as derogatory terms. When someone is called picchi this refers to an underdeveloped body, considered too thin and without curves. On the other hand, 'khalamma' implies a girl whose body is thought to look too old and to be in bad shape (as though she already is married with kids).

wearing a saree (traditional clothing usually worn by adult women). While Ramisha wants to look older, she mentioned that at the same time she does not want to look too old like a khalamma (aunt). Her fear of looking like a 'khalamma' comes from her high-prescription eyeglasses, and she takes them off when taking selfies or photos or while attending special events such as wedding parties, even though she hardly can see without them.

Ramisha also said that in order to look 'intelligent' she keeps well informed about current affairs and shows others her awareness by initiating or actively taking part in conversations about these issues with others. Ramisha spoke of how she also exhibits her interests through participating in academic and extracurricular activities and competitions. Additionally, she joins protests and speaks up about social issues, for instance regarding violence against girls and women. She mentioned that photos showing her participating in various protest demonstrations have been in the newspapers a couple of times already.

4.4.3 Lamiya: The 'cool' girl

Lamiya, a 16-year-old high school girl, did not explicitly talk about her aspirations in relation to physical appearance. She thought she did not have the 'privileges' of aspiring to obtain certain looks, rather that her vulnerabilities led her to embrace a rebellious 'cool-girl' image; someone who smokes cigarettes in public, wears boys' clothing, and mingles with boys. Lamiya said that she smokes not because she likes the taste of it, but because holding a cigarette gives her a great sense of power which she thinks has helped her to fight the trauma that she experienced two years earlier. She said that back then she used to be a 'very girly' person and was considered one of the 'hottest' girls in her class (she later explained that by 'hot' she meant having a pretty face and good body, slim but with curves). Her image completely changed from the moment her best friend made public a sexual Facebook conversation between Lamiya and her boyfriend, which had included a semi-nude photo of her.

> *People just could not take 'too much hotness' of me [she said, trying to sound cynical] …Since that very moment, from a 'hot girl' I became a 'slut'. Everyone started calling me khawa [leftover food, already eaten by someone else]. Our seniors [girls] began pointing their fingers at me, 'look at her boobs and bum. She looks like a khalamma [older women like aunts]. Must be doing this [referred to sexual intercourse] for ages!' I stopped eating because I wanted to become thin, so thin that my boobs and bum cannot be seen, and had to go to hospital twice because I became so weak. (Lamiya, 16-year-old, IDI)*

She mentioned that she suffered tremendous anxiety thinking of what would happen if her parents found out that she had been sexually active. She attempted to commit suicide several times. Lamiya thinks that being part of a combined family unit heightened her anxiety since all her extended family members from her father's side lived under the same roof, and so it would have been too shameful for her and her parents if anyone found out. She said that she had stopped going to school for almost two months, and that her parents were okay with this since she was unwell and as the doctor had suggested a break from school to get some rest. During this period, Lamiya thought she would never be able to face going back to school and started finding alternative ways to get out of this situation and keep pursuing her future goal of being independent. She looked for an organisation which could teach her other skills, so that she could still secure a job in future. She contacted an organisation through the Internet, and through them was introduced to a group of young photographers, boys and girls between eighteen and twenty years old, who all belonged to affluent, well-to-do families. All of them went to English middle schools and some of them were from very influential families (social and political elites). They lent her a camera and she began to join different photography projects with them, which she found helped her to improve her mental state considerably. After two months she started going to school again, although not on a very regular basis. She was spending most of her time with the photographers. She began copying other girls in the group and started wearing jeans and t-shirts instead of a *kameez*[15], smoking cigarettes, and using *gali* (swearing, using obscene terms) that are generally used by men and boys. Together they organised a couple of street photo exhibitions, which received coverage in newspapers and on television. After six months she was in regular attendance at school again. By that time, she was already famous and had obtained multiple awards as a young photographer. She still maintains her friendship with this new group of friends because it gives her social protection. No one dares to say anything bad to her at school anymore because they know she is now very well-connected with an elite group or because she has upper-class friends.

> *That's how I got my reputation back. I had to change my look, I am well accepted in my school again, but they see me in a very different way now! I went back to my school, made a handful of good friends who really think I am 'cool' […] Somehow I now became one of the 'coolest', 'free spirited' girls to them. (Lamiya, 16-year-old, IDI)*

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[15]   A long tunic worn by girls/young women in South Asia after reaching puberty, typically with a salwar (loose pants) and orna (long scarf).

Lamiya thought none of this would have been possible if her parents had found out about the Facebook conversation between her and her boyfriend. Lamiya and her parents live quite far from her school and therefore they do not get to socialise with other parents or students. She considered herself lucky for that. When I asked her whether she smokes in front her parents, her response was:

> *Are you crazy! They will kick me out of home. I don't do it in front of my family or teachers. In front of them, I am a very pleasant, normal, bhodro meye [modest girl], but as you see now I am a beyadob [arrogant, boastful], oogro [antisocial], obhodro meye [immodest] to all of them [indicating other people around us in the restaurant].(Lamiya, 16-year-old, IDI)*

Lamiya mentioned that she might change her physical appearance in the future after she gets into a university. She said that she might go back to a 'normal girl' image, the one she used to have before, being 'girly' and 'hot'. She expressed her desire of having a 'normal life' in university, and that she thought this 'cool' image, particularly smoking cigarettes and wearing jeans, might pose a problem for her given her social and economic background and coming from a middle-class family. By 'normal life' she meant a life that will make her family proud, one with a decent career and a good husband.

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4.5 Discussion

4.5.1 New girlhood

The findings presented in this chapter reiterate what Chowdhury (2018) has pointed out about the Bangladeshi new womanhood. She suggested that contemporary constructions of the Bangladeshi *new woman* are shaped by discourses of development and modernisation processes that rely on the logic of neo-colonial capitalism, such as the notion of women's empowerment through education and entry into the labour market. However, what I would like to add based on my closer analysis of the findings presented in the previous section is that it is a two-way process. Girls are shaping these discourses too. Inclusion of certain phrases often used by NGO's, such as *shoman odhikar* (equal rights), *purushtontro* (patriarchy), 'career', 'economic freedom' or 'change maker' do show the influence of development discourses in their everyday negotiations of gender and sexuality. They did not understand these concepts as empty concepts. Instead they located them in their real lives, reflected on them, and co-constructed their meanings. Their understanding of unequal rights or patriarchy are shaped by witnessing their mothers living a dependent, vulnerable life within marriage, and their own experience of encountering societal gendered expectations. I want to argue that they are embracing social changes because they want those transformations to come, and hence are actively shaping them by participating in that process.

My research findings demonstrate a remarkable consensus in how all these girls share their broader goal of living a violence-free, dignified life and how they were consistent about it throughout our conversations. Findings presented in the first two subsections show that the girls notably have critical capacities and political consciousness around issues on gender, patriarchy and rights. They skilfully unpacked the power relations using their observations about their everyday social encounters. The final subsection shows how girls make strategic choices to get what they think will lead them towards their desired 'good future'.

4.5.2 Navigational strategies: constructing the boundaries of feminine respectability

Findings indicate that in the face of these emerging ideas of womanhood, girls constantly encounter societal expectations that are contradictory. They are expected to find their own marital partner while staying a virgin until they are married. On the one hand, girls are expected to attain an 'equal' status, while on the other they are expected to follow the imposed norms of virginity and sexual modesty. Parents want them to remain sexually innocent, yet among their peers 'sexy', 'hot' looks are

desirable as these help to draw peoples' attention – something girls consider crucial in their competitive world. However, 'too much' hotness or sexiness can jeopardise a girl's reputation among her peers. Girls' aspirations get shaped within these very contradictory notions of feminine respectabilities. As discussed below, they have to carefully navigate through their available options and reconcile all these clashing ideas.

In the narratives of three girls, we see them making strategic choices in order to steer towards their aspiration. Dahlia's choices to invest in her beauty – that is, going to beauty parlours and wearing makeup – comes from her desire to find a good husband in the future. She chooses to stick to her 'sexy', 'appealing' looks as she fears that she might not have a great, successful career ahead of her. She reflects on her capacity and makes these strategic choices with the hope that her looks will help her secure a good marriage. Dahlia actively seeks out opportunities to exhibit her 'appeal' to others, particularly to boys, and she remains careful of avoiding cultural repercussions of being 'too sexy'. She uses Facebook and posts her photos in order to uphold her 'sexy' image, but she remains cautious of not looking 'too sexy' or 'slutty' by avoiding wearing too revealing clothes.

Unlike Dahlia, Ramisha dissociates 'ideal beauty', although temporarily, from the social norms of looking pretty and feminine. She is aware that the job market is highly competitive and that she needs to use all her time and energy effectively to attain her aspiration of becoming an 'independent', 'successful' woman. She is also aware of gender inequalities and issues such as violence against girls and women in society, seeing academic and career success as instrumental towards equality and a violence-free life. Her strong belief that she has the capacity to reach her aspiration is the main driving force that keeps her going, which emerges from her access to education, extracurricular activities, and mobility outside her home. She sees these opportunities as resources and tries to make the most use of them by scoring top grades in exams, participating in various academic, social, and political activities, and claiming her place in public spaces through joining protests and being part of the news. She decides to invest in attaining a 'confident' look because she thinks it is the most beneficial for her age. Ramisha sees the social transformation of early-marriage towards delayed-marriage as another opportunity which gives her leeway to set aside the thought of gaining a feminine, beautiful body for now and invest all her time and energy in building her future career.

Lamiya's responses reflect her overarching aspiration of securing a respectable position in society. She juggles between different 'ideal bodies', depending on the

context. For instance, when she is home she becomes a 'normal', 'modest' girl, and when she is with her peers or in public places, she becomes the 'cool' girl. Unlike Ramisha she did not draw hierarchies between different bodies, instead she constructed and embraced multiple bodies in order to fit social norms and fight the stigma she experienced, and to restore her respectable position in society. This latter aspiration led her to go out and seek alternative strategies and techniques to get her out of a difficult situation. She created a completely new social network, one stronger than the previous one since members of this new network belong to the 'elite' section of society. Using her membership of this network, she created a new 'cool' appearance, participated in and won photography contests, and made news headlines, thus successfully restoring her to a respected position in her own previous middle-class network.

All three narratives clearly show that these girls are not merely passive recipients of the societal prescriptions about feminine respectability, rather they are active agents in the construction of those. Both Dahlia and Lamiya have experimented with their bodily presentations after their bodies became objectified by boyfriends and peers respectively. They have found their ways out of shame by reinventing and reconstructing their looks, transforming them from 'simple' to 'sexy', or from 'hot' to 'cool'. This also shows that they saw 'attractiveness' as temporal notions that are subject to change based on how they experience them socially and emotionally.

All these findings demonstrate that adolescent girls' navigational capacity is very much linked to their location in the social hierarchy, which shapes their access to resources such as to beauty parlours, education, or photography clubs. Dahlia's ability to go to a beauty parlour to change her look and her access to Facebook to post selfies of her new 'trendy' look helped her to overcome her feeling of shame. Similarly, Lamiya's access to the photography club is very much linked with her access to the upper-class group, through which she could overcome her trauma and remove the stigma. I argue that capacity to aspire is embedded in one's class position. This supports Appadurai's (2004) claim that better-off people have 'thicker' and clearer maps, with more options and surer routes which help them to better navigate towards their desired goals. All three girls have a relatively clear idea about their aspiration. They have made careful choices of strategies and were able to implement them. However, findings caution that this may not always be the case, and the following section will explain the reasons why.

4.5.3 Navigational challenges: living bodies in between, surviving competitions

Although these girls demonstrated clear ideas about their aspirations and their abilities of making strategic choices to negotiate boundaries of feminine respectability, based on the findings presented here I argue that it posed certain challenges for them too. All three narratives reveal that whatever choices these girls make must be made within certain boundaries – boundaries which are gendered. Girls can express and practise their individuality, but only within the boundaries of what is deemed to be socially acceptable. Girls position their bodies between certain categories that are socially defined, such as 'sexy' and 'too sexy', between '*pichchi'* (kiddo) and '*khalamma'* (aunt), 'cool' and '*oogro'* (antisocial). Ramisha mentioned that while Joyeeta's gender-neutral look is what she perceives as an ideal beauty and what she dreams to practice, in reality she has to curb her desire more towards what is accepted in broader society. This is reflected in her choices of posting photos on Facebook to replace her image of '*pichchi'*, while simultaneously being cautious of not looking too old like a '*khalamma'*.

These findings suggest that the boundaries between these categories are thin and therefore can easily be transgressed. On one hand, this offers opportunities to reach their aspiration of being attractive and deal with shame and, on the other, it poses great risks for girls to lose their reputation and be considered a 'slut' within moments. Lamiya's story is an example of this. Her experience of crossing the boundary between 'hot' and 'too hot' caused her tremendous anxiety and social exclusion. She survived and could fight her stigma successfully because fortunately her parents did not know about the Facebook message that had exposed her to ridicule. If they had found out she probably never would have been allowed to step outside her home without being escorted by her parents, and would not have joined the photography group that has proven so influential and life transforming for her. Middle-class society in Dhaka is a relatively conservative and bounded, closed space, and therefore the fear of shame is higher. A few studies that have conceptualised girls beyond the 'victim' category suggest that girls in Dhaka slums have relatively higher capacities to avoid shame about premarital sex. An ethnography conducted among 153 young women in Dhaka slums found that an unmarried girl can get pregnant without losing face and can get the man marry her with support from her neighbours and community leaders if her socioeconomic status is higher than the man. The study also shows that many girls elope and get married without their parents' approval (Rashid 2006). Another study found that since slums provide anonymity to women it is easier for them to hide their past marital history, and to relocate and remarry without facing stigma (Jesmin and Salway 2000). These findings can help us to understand the

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vulnerabilities that middle-class girls experience. Although they have better access to material resources than those who belong to a lower socioeconomic group, middle-class girls have to carefully walk on a fine line and might suffer from higher stigma if that line is crossed.

There is another set of challenges I see in the narratives presented here, which results from the very notion of the 'New Womanhood'. While this idea does sound liberatory, it can also be experienced as a restrictive phenomenon in real life. These three girls seem to have relatively increasing control over their lives, but they use this control to scrutinise and regulate their bodies in order to attain standards of modern, independent, successful womanhood. Their aspiration of seeking respect through becoming one of these Bangladeshi New Women is not easy to attain considering the growing competition over scarce resources and the social pressure to reach it.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter sheds lights on the links between young women and Bangladesh's sociocultural transformation and shows that aspirations for good looks constitute an important element of the construction of a 'new girlhood' among Bangladeshi middle-class girls. Girls use their looks and set them to work as a navigational capacity to deal with shame and stigma and attempt to sail towards what they perceive as a 'good future'. This chapter unpacks the ambiguities of middle-class feminine respectability and the thin line between respect and shame that girls must carefully navigate. While middle-class girls have the capacities to draw specific maps in their mind of where or how to go and can make strategic choices using the resources and skills available to them, they have more to lose if they transgress that line. This chapter highlights the unique vulnerabilities that Dhaka middle-class girls experience in the face of urbanisation and a fast-changing socio-technological realm. It argues that belonging to a higher socioeconomic group does not necessarily mean one will have higher capacities to implement her navigational plans. The capacities are determined by a combination of one's class position, gender, age, sexual norms, the sociocultural significance of marriage, as well as modernised discourses of women's empowerment.

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Chapter 5

Juggling masculinities: Being a middle-class young man in Dhaka[16]

Abstract

To date, South Asian masculinity studies have largely investigated the construction of masculinities at the structural level, while subjective experiences have received little attention. This paper analyses data gathered from ethnographic research conducted among 40 adolescent boys living in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and asks: how do middle-class adolescent boys in Dhaka construct different ideals of masculinity and negotiate those in their everyday life at home and among peers? Which ideas about sexuality are involved? This analysis provides in-depth insights into the ways in which different models of masculinity are (re)constructed and embraced or resisted at the subjective level by adolescents in their everyday negotiations of sexuality. We will argue that this younger generation of men encounter unique gendered vulnerabilities in the contexts of fast urbanisation, an increasingly uncertain labour market and a lack of support in negotiating their emotional and social wellbeing.

Keywords: Masculinity, Sexuality, Adolescents, Middle-class, Bangladesh

5.1 Introduction

During 2016 and 2017, I interviewed 40 middle-class adolescent boys in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and asked their views on and experiences of shame about sexuality. One of them was 17-year-old Raihan, whose name had been brought up by several research participants as a popular figure in his school and neighbourhood. Before meeting Raihan, I examined his Facebook profile. He had over 1200 friends and 3000 followers. His timeline was full of photos of him with his friends, and all his posts received numerous positive comments. The next day, however, after receiving several angry messages from unknown young men in Dhaka via Facebook Messenger, I realised that Raihan was not universally popular. These youngsters claimed that Raihan had boasted to his peers about being interviewed for a Dutch research project, and had shared my Facebook profile link with them as proof. Some of them cautioned that Raihan is 'misogynistic' and 'too conventional,' and does not represent young men in Dhaka. They insisted that the researcher should also interview young men who are more 'liberal' and 'open-minded' to elucidate the broader spectrum of masculinities in Bangladesh.

Some of them sent links to others' Facebook profiles that differed considerably from that of Raihan. Strikingly, these profiles all showcased affiliations with multiple local and global youth organisations and networks. While Raihan's posts were mostly about his own or his friends' educational successes and sexual jokes or memes, these other young men's posts were more focussed on prevalent social issues such as gender inequality, critiquing the government's political views and Islamic interpretations of sexuality. Some shared strong messages against sexual harassment, victim blaming, cyber bullying, body shaming and LGBTQ+ discrimination. Like Raihan, they had thousands of followers and hundreds of friends on Facebook, and their posts also received support and positive comments. This incident indicates the co-existence of a variety of gender positions related to sexuality among middle-class adolescent boys in Dhaka. This study highlights the importance of investigating how they (re) construct and negotiate diverse models of masculinity in their Facebook posts and everyday lives.

The middle-class society of Dhaka is diverse in terms of both economic and social positioning. While some families are affluent, many struggle to maintain middle-class status in the context of the competitive labour market and increasing living costs. Moreover, some families, while not being affluent, may still have a more secure middle-class position because of social networks. Because of a lack of the latter, first-generation migrants are worse off than other middle-class families. Despite some

consensus in how (young) people associate middle-classness with maintaining a cosmopolitan lifestyle and academic success, there is great diversity in their views and their everyday understandings of 'proper' or 'ideal' masculinity.

In this paper we ask: how do middle-class adolescent boys in Dhaka construct different ideals of masculinity and negotiate those in their everyday life at home and among peers? Also, which ideas about sexuality are involved? We examine these issues with a sample of 15–19-year-old boys in Dhaka. This group is particularly interesting from a gender equality perspective, as earlier research ascribed a more inclusive and less patriarchal account of masculinity to younger men in Bangladesh due to access to media, education and global discourses (Hasan et al. 2018, p.357). As this chapter will show, however, such access provides the research participants with unique opportunities for creating influential peer networks, policing one another and using cosmopolitan language to claim progressive masculinities.

While previous scholarship on South Asian masculinities has mostly explored the construction of masculinities at the structural level (Boyce 2014, Chopra et al. 2004, Collumbien and Hawkes 2000, Hasan et al. 2015, Khan 2006, Osella 2012, Osella and Osella 2006, Srivastava 2010, Srivastava 2004), we argue that subjective experiences of masculinities among South Asian men have received little attention, particularly in Bangladesh. The subjective, as we show, is yet another domain in which gender hierarchies are negotiated, and as such requires specific analytical work to unravel the gendered power relations that are sometimes refuted and sometimes reproduced in intimate (inter)subjective spheres.

This paper contributes to the emerging literature focussed on the subjective experiences of masculinity among sexual minorities (Hossain 2022, Karim 2012) men in slums (Biswas et al. 2020), and transnational migrants (Pande 2017) in Bangladesh. We add to this knowledge by elucidating the views of middle-class, heterosexual, adolescent boys (i.e., members of the sexual majority). We argue that adolescent boys encounter unique gendered vulnerabilities in the context of fast urbanisation, an increasingly uncertain labour market, alongside a lack of support in negotiating their emotional and social wellbeing. Rejecting a linear understanding of 'progressiveness,' we show that this younger generation of men navigates contradictory and competing models of masculinities in their close relationships. Before presenting our findings, we first discuss our conceptual framework for analysing the subjective experiences of our research participants.

5.2 Experiences of masculinity: a discursive-embodied approach

Often inspired by the highly influential work of Raewyn Connell (e.g. 2000, 2005 [1995], 2011, 2012), research into masculinity in the South Asian contexts over the past two decades has emphasised the importance of an approach that focusses on the constructions of masculinity as conditioned in specific historical, political and social structures (Boyce 2014, Chopra et al. 2004, Collumbien and Hawkes 2000, Hasan et al. 2015, Khan 2006, Osella 2012, Osella and Osella 2006, Srivastava 2010, Srivastava 2004). This approach is characterised by an understanding of gender, and by extension masculinities, as plural, contextual and internally hierarchal rather than innate and static. Furthermore, by investing in the complexities of masculinity, this social constructionist research aims to provide an alternative for what has been noted as two tendencies in research on gender in South Asian societies or non-Western contexts more generally: men are often either invisible or portrayed as oppressors (Hasan et al. 2015, Kimmel 2000).

Among the most relevant of these studies in terms of the present article was conducted by Hasan, Aggleton and Persson (2015), who performed an in-depth analysis of the constructions of masculinity across three generations of men with different socio-economic backgrounds in Bangladesh to investigate men's perspectives regarding work, religion and sexuality. Heterosexual marriage, sexual prowess, being a good provider, and being a good Muslim were among the most important values underlined by the oldest generation (aged 53–75 years). The same values were also stressed by the middle generation (30–46 years old), with the difference that, for this group, concerns about social inequality and hierarchal masculinities against the background of an urbanising society were much more prominent. Urbanisation adds to the pressure experienced by men in their thirties and forties, a context that also characterises the life circumstances of our research participants. Comparatively, the accounts of the youngest group (19–27 years old) were characterised by references to the cultural experiences of living in the city, diverse lifestyles and the influences of Westernisation, including partying, drinking and drugs. In all three groups, however, the ability to provide for the family, having regular paid work and showing sexual competence were seen as crucial components of 'being a man,' an observation confirmed by other research in Bangladesh (Imtiaz 2012, Muna 2005).

The aforementioned research is important and illustrates the structural privileges of men in the larger society, the hierarchal relationships between groups of men,

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and the plurality and contextuality of masculinities. This approach is less helpful in highlighting subjects' complex negotiations with ideals of masculinity and the everyday processes of appropriating or rejecting those ideals, as emphasised by others (Berggren 2014, Charsley and Wray 2015, Chattopadhyay 2011, Hasan et al. 2015, Langa 2010, Nilan 2009), including an understanding of the contradictory, situated and inconsistent positioning of the self (Aboim 2016, Beasley 2008, Berggren 2014, Demetriou 2001, Hearn 2004, Howson 2006). Although the importance of work that focusses solely on oppressive gendered practices by men against women through a structural perspective cannot be underestimated (e.g. Anwary 2015), a more thorough analysis of the lived experiences of masculinities is also necessary to understand the workings of the patriarchal systems. For this, we need a concept of subjectivity that implies both agency and constraint, assuming that the subject is simultaneously attached to dominant (and sometimes contradictory) discourses, while enjoying a certain level of flexibility depending on positionalities related to sexuality, age, class, religion and race.

According to Berggren (2014), combining insights from feminist post-structuralist and feminist phenomenological accounts of subjectivity is useful for taking this next step in research on masculinities. Feminist post-structuralist studies point to the formative role of discourses and feminist phenomenological perspectives emphasise the embodiment of gender and lived experiences. Together, Berggren (2014) argues, they provide a theoretical framework that allows for both a firm critique of oppressive masculinities alongside an in-depth understanding of how the ideals and practices of masculinities emerge in everyday life. In this paper, we follow Berggren's suggestion to integrate the central aspects of post-structuralist and phenomenological theoretical discussions. Like Berggren, however, rather than specifically engaging with a comparison of the two theoretical approaches, our goal is to employ three of their main complementary elements, enabling us to focus on the subjects' position in intersecting and conflicting discourses as well as the lived and embodied experiences of masculinities among young men in Dhaka.

To achieve this, we employ an analytical lens entailing three aspects. First, we trace the diverse and potentially conflicting dominant norms and discourses of masculinity in participants' narratives about gender and sexuality. Second, we illustrate the importance of the situated and embodied experiences of the research participants by intersectionally examining their specific gendered positionings in relation to other axes of difference. In this way, we avoid using totalising discourses of masculinity by highlighting how experiences, situations and intersecting inequalities are involved in the (re)productions of specific configurations of masculinity. Third, we are interested

in the subjects' strategies and negotiations when dealing with gendered conflicts and decision making. This allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how the self is oriented towards certain thoughts, norms, and feelings to maintain a coherent gendered sense of self. Using this conceptual framework allows us to present an in-depth analysis of the lived, reproduced and transformed masculinities among the research participants.

These three complementary aspects guide our analyses in the empirical analysis, structured around two contexts: at home and among peers. These are settings where concerns related to gender identity occurred most explicitly and elaborately in participants' stories. Moreover, structuring the findings in this way highlights the importance of relationality in understandings of masculinity. Specific relationships help us to trace the ways that these relationships create and/or limit opportunities for appropriating or rejecting dominant (contradictory) discourses of masculinity. This focus also allows us to extend agency beyond the individual, including several actors who play significant roles in participants' everyday lives and decision-making. In short, combining insights from post-structuralist and phenomenological studies and focussing on relationality will elucidate what is at stake for the research participants in their lived experiences of masculinities.

5.3 Methods

To capture the diversity in experiences of masculinity, I collected data from 40 middle-class adolescent boys between 15 and 19 years of age living in different middle-class neighbourhoods (popularly known as 'affluent' middle-class as well as 'typical' middle-class neighbourhoods) and from different schools (high, average and low performing) in Dhaka, Bangladesh, during 2016 and 2017. At the beginning of the fieldwork, I felt hesitant to approach young men directly, since discussing sex between opposite sexes is taboo in Bangladesh; however, while engaging in small talk with two 17-year-old key informants, I noticed how openly they spoke about their sexual experiences with me, a married Bangladeshi woman much older than themselves, who was an anthropology PhD student in the Netherlands. Prior to the fieldwork, a significant amount of time was spent learning these young people's vocabularies and seeking their advice on how to approach potential participants to ask sensitive questions. Through interacting with them, I trained myself to get over my own shame about discussing sex and sexuality with young men. Before interviewing participants, I offered them the choice of being interviewed by myself or by a man (research assistant). With the exception of two boys, everyone said

they felt more comfortable talking to me about intimate issues, which we further discuss in the following section. Those two boys later declined to participate due to their exams.

Most of the middle-class high schools and colleges in Bangladesh are single-sex institutions, and even when they are mixed, men and women are separated either into different shifts or buildings. Initially, some participants were accessed through personal networks; Facebook youth groups; multiple youth-led organisations; and photography, sports, writing, filmography, music, debate and art-based networks. These individuals then connected me with their friends. Following the university's rules for consent, permission was sought from parents before interviewing participants under 18. In total, 22 in-depth interviews were conducted with young people, and four focus group discussions were held with 21 participants (including three boys who later participated in the in-depth interviews too) in groups of five or six adolescents. Data were also collected through small talk and participant observation throughout the year while socialising in malls or restaurants; chatting on Messenger; or attending parties, family dinners, or youth festivals. The participants' Facebook posts were also analysed to understand how different ideals of masculinity are constructed and practised in this digital space. The interviews, group discussions and small talk were conducted in 'Banglish,' a combination of Bangla and English, commonly used among this group. This English element, as well as the identification of the researcher as being trained in Europe, helped me to create some distance from my own generation (which was the same generation as participants' parents), helping participants trust her and speak comfortably about sexual experiences (Driessen and Jansen 2013).

Interviews and discussions were transcribed verbatim. Simultaneous coding and memoing were done to identify new topics for further exploration. A constant comparison between codes, as suggested by the grounded theory approach (Anselm L. Strauss and Juliet Corbin 1994), was employed to identify emergent themes and concepts. For instance, a comparison between the open codes 'good son' and 'cool boy' indicated these are contradictory ideals of masculinity, which prompted further investigation into how these ideals are negotiated at home and among peers.

5.4 Juggling competing and conflicting masculinities

As mentioned above, participants usually chose me (a woman) over a man (research assistant) to discuss the sensitive issues of sexuality, gender and identity. '[I] would

not have spoken to you if you were a man,' said 17-year-old Sajid. He continued, '[w]omen are better listeners and are not as judgemental as men… There is stuff that we do not want to discuss with our own sex.' Several other participants shared similar opinions, indicating that they did not want to 'expose' their perceived weaknesses, failures or shortcomings to other men. Discussing the issues of sexuality and gender were seen as 'emotional' talk, a perceived weakness and a potential threat to manliness. While walking towards his best friend's house, Rafid, another 17-year-old participant, asked me not to mention his family's financial problems in the presence of his friends (other young men). When asked why, he explained:

> There is this thing…a competition among us. It is a boys' thing. If they find out about [my family's financial situation], they will look down on me. I will feel inferior to them. (Rafid, 17-year-old, small talk)

Rafid's family was experiencing financial difficulties after his father had lost his job due to illness. He shared that he sometimes feels very distressed, but only talks about his feelings with one of his best friends, who is a young woman. He considered financial problems to be too shameful to discuss with other young men, and avoided it to protect his sense of masculinity.

From conversations with Rafid and others, it became evident that a lot of *juggling* is involved when it comes to masculinity. Young men work hard to negotiate when, where, and how to be a man. In the following, we focus on two contexts in which these negotiations take place: at home and among peers. All participants identified their parents and peers as the most important people in their lives. They valued their relationships with their parents and peers in different ways and for different reasons in relation to their sense of masculinity. As we show, the importance of the parent–child relationship centers on respect, family reputation, independence and responsibility, while the significance of peer relationships mainly revolves around popularity, experimentation, and competition.

5.4.1 A 'good son' at home
During fieldwork, while discussing the participants' experiences at home, the 'good son' emerged as a dominant ideal, albeit contested. Whether (partially) embraced or rejected, this image figured prominently in how the research participants spoke about their parents and masculinity. In this section, we discuss what being a *good son* meant to different participants and how they sought to embody or resist this ideal in their everyday lives within the context of the home.

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Consistent academic accomplishments, sexual abstinence, and obedience towards one's parents were identified by the participants as the three most important criteria for being considered a 'good son' at home. The centrality of education in maintaining a respectable middle-class status for young men and women in Bangladesh has been discussed elsewhere (Blanchet 1996, Karim 2012). According to participants, their educational expenses constituted almost one-third of their parents' income, ranging from 10,000 BDT to 40,000 BDT (100–400 Euros) per month. Many participants witnessed their parents experiencing financial difficulty at different points in their lives. Among the 40 participants, five reported that their fathers had no employment or income. Dhaka has the highest cost of living among all the South Asian cities (Mercer 2020). The youth unemployment rate doubled between 2010 (6.4%) and 2019 (12.13%) and is projected to get worse in coming years (ILO 2017, World), particularly as there are more graduates than available jobs (Rafi et al. 2019). Maintaining a middle-class lifestyle while financing one's children's education is becoming increasingly difficult, particularly for urban middle-class parents facing fierce competition over limited employment opportunities and high living costs in the city.

Against this backdrop, there is an enormous pressure on middle-class young people to remain focussed on education and obtain a grade point average (GPA) of 5 (A+) on all public exams. Without this, it is very difficult to be accepted into public universities, which are cheaper and considered of better quality than private universities. While parents put equal emphasis on their sons' and daughters' education, it is usually sons who are held responsible for maintaining the family's middle-class status and becoming the future 'ricewinner.' Both young men and young women are strictly advised to remain focussed on education and stay away from distractions, such as sexual and romantic relationships. When it comes to securing a prosperous future, however, the dominant 'ricewinner' model puts extra pressure on boys to be 'good.'

All the participants were well aware of these expectations, and many went to great lengths to embody them. For instance, Taz, 17 and an only child, said, 'It feels too much at times… Sometimes I feel like I am missing out on all the fun but then again I tell myself that I need to prioritise my future. I can't let my parents down.' Taz keeps himself busy with educational activities and is often anxious about his grades. He added that his friends make fun of him for being 'nerdy' and not hanging out with friends. Taz indeed feels isolated, but rationalizes his emotions by reminding himself of his responsibility to be a 'good son.' When asked if that eases his stress, he replied, 'Not exactly. But it keeps me on track.' Taz's case points to a paradox: on one hand, he wants (and is expected) to remain focussed on his education; on the other hand, he expects and is expected to enjoy life. For Taz, the importance of education seems

to weigh heavier, which he explains by appropriating a rational attitude. Throughout the fieldwork, many young men relied on a discourse of rationality when reflecting on their choices and strategies to deal with competing masculinities. When faced with (emotional) difficulties as part of juggling with contradictory norms of how to be a man, they resorted to a rational approach to explain away emotions and justify their situation. Avoiding romantic engagements was part of that calculative rational approach.

Rafid, a 17-year-old, had a similar response when asked if he ever considered being in a romantic relationship. According to him, romance is 'unproductive' as it involves emotional struggles, and is therefore to be avoided. Rafid's parents are first-generation migrants to Dhaka from a smaller town, with no social network in the city. Educational success is the only way through which Rafid believes he can secure a middle-class status. Young men like Rafid and Taz tend to rationalize their (romantic) emotions as irrelevant or as obstacles to overcome, and instead choose to keep themselves busy with educational and other 'productive' activities, such as engaging with (inter)national youth organisations or participating in various extracurricular competitions.

These two cases show what the 'ricewinner' model may imply in everyday practice in a country with limited economic opportunities. The burden of internalized masculine responsibilities in the context of increasing living costs and a shrinking labour market meant that many participants wanted to 'get out' of the country. Rafid, the eighth grader we introduced above, expressed his worries about job security in Bangladesh, saying:

> The job market is so competitive and it's hard to build a career here unless you have connections. My brother already left the country and is now studying in Canada, and I want to go there too after finishing high school. Then we will try to get our parents out of here as well. (Rafid, 17-year-old, IDI)

During fieldwork, many participants sought my advice on undertaking higher education in Europe. Consistent academic accomplishment is seen as extremely important for enhancing their chances of applying for scholarships to a foreign university. The pressure to perform well at school combined with job insecurity in Bangladesh orients some towards imagining a prosperous future outside the country, providing them with some peace of mind and a sense of hope.

Although educational success does play a central role in achieving a 'good son' image at home, it is not the only way. 16-year-old Rabbi shared that, despite being an average student, his parents considered him a 'good son.' He said:

> *My parents used to scold me a lot [for not obtaining good grades] but they don't do it anymore. I think they have realised by now that I tried enough and it's not my fault. I do whatever they ask me to do and never confront them. I never miss prayer and go to the mosque with my father. I do not talk to girls. I do not watch porn or spend unnecessary time on the Internet like my friends do. (Rabbi, 16-year-old, IDI)*

Rabbi's statement suggests that, when educational success is not possible, an alternative model of a 'good son' is also possible through practices that convey respect for one's parents. Rabbi suggests that piety and obedience towards his parents, as well as abstinence from sexual thoughts and activities compensate for his lack of educational success. Rabbi shows that, although there is pressure to conform to the ideal of being a 'good son' through educational success, there is some room for young people to manoeuvre around this configuration. This space and possibility for manoeuvring, however, also interacts with other social factors. Rabbi belongs to a Dhakaiya (old Dhaka resident) family, the original residents of Dhaka, who are more conservative than other families. Dhakaiya families live in a closed-off community and maintain a distinct cultural and linguistic identity. Many of these families are wealthy and own big family businesses. To them, education is not the most important marker of social status, as it is for the educated migrant non-Dhakaiya families who represent the majority of Dhaka residents. Rabbi mentioned that he and his brother were the first generation of men expected to go to university. His father has his own business, and he expects his sons to join him once they graduate from university, providing Rabbi and his brother with employment insurance. These family business connections relieve Rabbi from the harsh competition of the labour market, allowing him to secure a 'good son' image through respectability in ways potentially less possible for young men not in Dhakaiya families.

Indeed, another participant, Orko, revealed that obedience and religiosity are not always enough for parents to accept sons' lack of educational success. Orko, a 16-year-old ninth grader, said he wants to become a musician and has no interest in performing well at school. Like Rabbi, he goes to the mosque with his father, takes Quran lessons, and always follows his parents' instructions concerning modest behaviour at home regardless of what he thinks about those instructions. His love of music notwithstanding, Orko's father is a doctor, and wants Orko to become a doctor

too. Despite being obedient and religious, his parents are still very disappointed with him and continue to pressure him to perform better at school. While religiosity might provide many (young) people in Bangladesh with social status, among secular middle-class families such as Orko's, religiosity's currency as a status symbol is more limited. In Orko's case, being religious is clearly not enough to compensate for his perceived deviation from the 'good student' norm. Certain professionals, such as doctors, university professors, engineers and government officials, enjoy a higher social status among the middle class, which means their sons encounter more pressure to follow in their parents' footsteps and have more limited access to alternative models of masculinity than others. Moreover, unlike Rabbi, who can rely on his family's business, Orko's aspirational music career is less likely to provide similar financial security. By looking into the specific positionality and concerns of the family, it is possible to see why the same approach may or may not work to embody the ideal of a 'good son.' Moreover, this illustrates that 'middle class' is not a homogenous category in Bangladesh, and that different ideals and achievements are pursued, creating different possibilities for the constructions of masculinity among young men.

Orko said he would not give up on becoming a 'good son' and will keep trying hard to improve his school performance at his parents' insistence. Parental pressure is one of the major concerns for young people generally, and young men specifically. Even those research participants who appeared to reject the ideal of being a 'good son' to their parents still nevertheless seemed to envision becoming one in the future. Rumman, a 17-year-old, shared that he accepted that he is 'mediocre' and will never be able to obtain a GPA of 5. He encounters strict policing at home, a common experience among participants who repeatedly failed to meet academic expectations. In such cases, parents often suspected their sons of having romantic relationships or sex, and restricted some of their freedoms.

Rumman's parents caught him watching pornography. He mentioned that his father knew that his son steals condoms from him and frequently moves his condoms from one secret place to another to prevent it. His parents do not allow him to close the door of his room or speak with his friends over the phone. This makes him angry, and he continues to 'annoy' his parents by doing what he is advised not to do, such as watching pornography, masturbating, and having sex with his girlfriend. He said he does not care about being called a 'shameless' child, however, he later contradicted himself when he revealed that he wants to become an army officer in the future to make his father, a police officer, proud. Rumman said, '[M]y father wanted to join the army, but he could not pass the exam. If I can pass the exam and become an officer, I can prove that I am not as bad as he thinks.' Rumman imagines proving his worth by

fulfilling his father's dream. He is already an active member of Bangladesh National Cadet Corps, a youth organisation run by the Bangladesh Army, and participates in various capacity-building activities run by the organisation.

A few participants did resist the 'good son' ideal altogether. For instance, Simon refused to listen and show respect to his father. He called his father a 'failed' parent for not being able to secure a middle-class position due to his illness and gambling. After his father lost his job in a pharmaceutical company, his mother set up a tailoring shop with her sister. Instead of supporting her, Simon emphasized, his father often yells and swears at her:

> *She works so hard for our family when it should have been him. I feel so angry and helpless. I volunteer for an organisation where we talk about bringing positive changes in society all the time by being respectful towards women and [promoting] gender equality. And then I come home and see my father humiliating my mother all the time and cannot do anything about it. It just kills me. (Simon, 16-year-old, IDI)*

Simon was an active member of the YMCA, through which he participated in several workshops, training courses and campaigns on the issues of toxic masculinity, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination. He felt ashamed of his father because he did not have a job, and felt guilty for not being able to protect his mother. However, his assumption that it is his father who is supposed to be the 'ricewinner,' a responsibility he fails to fulfil, also reveals that patriarchal beliefs can coexist with embracing the ideals of gender equality. Nevertheless, by not showing respect to his father, Simon threatens his father's authority while risking his own status as a 'good son.'

Participants frequently mentioned the words 'gender equality,' 'patriarchy,' 'male chauvinism,' 'toxic masculinity,' and 'feminism' during discussions. They learned about these concepts from various sources, such as staff members of the affiliated NGOs or youth networks, the Internet, Hollywood and Bollywood movies, and television. Many confessed that the perspectives and views they learned about in these contexts often contradicted what they observed at home, as Simon illustrates.

The findings presented in this section show that young men negotiate and (re) construct an ideal of the 'good son' in diverse and complicated ways at home. Primarily, the 'good son' is supposed to do well at school, which many research participants adhere to, although some are more successful than others. In some cases, if educational achievements are unattainable, alternative (though less-valued)

moral registers are employed, such as acting modestly and obediently towards parents. As we showed, however, whether this works depends on the specific positionality of the young man and his family. Those few who reject the ideal either postpone their perceived duty to be a 'good son' to the future or find support in NGO-inspired gender equality discourses that they partially appropriate at home. The majority of middle-class young men experienced enormous pressure to become the future 'ricewinner' of the family, which entails constant effort to do well in exams, rationalize away emotions, discipline oneself, and rethink one's aspirations to fit parental expectations. For these young men, a lot is at stake if they fail or refuse to comply with the 'good son' ideal, attesting to important gendered middle-class vulnerabilities and anxieties among young men in Dhaka.

5.4.2 Construction of a 'cool' image among peers

Among peer groups, another ideal, that of being 'cool,' emerged as a dominant model. In this section, we discuss how the participants defined 'coolness' and how they negotiated it in their everyday lives among their peers. Our findings reveal that the ideals of being a 'good son' and being 'cool' among young men in Dhaka are very different and sometimes contradict each other.

Educational success, sexual abstinence or obedience towards one's parents do not grant young men a 'cool' identity among their peers. Quite the contrary, these characteristics may jeopardise 'coolness.' Similarly, failing to be a 'good son' may contradictorily provide one with the cultural capital to claim 'coolness' among friends. For example, Rumman, who reported having a very bad image at home for failing his exams and stealing condoms from his father, is considered 'super cool' by friends. He is admired and envied by his friends for his good looks, guitar skills, popularity among girls, and having a 'hot' girlfriend. He is six feet tall, has an athletic build and speaks English fluently. When I observed him attending one of his friend's birthday party as part of the fieldwork, it was clearly him and not the birthday boy who was the centre of attention, with several girls taking selfies with him. Later, when asked how he feels about being popular, Rumman smiled with content, replying, 'How do you think I feel? My parents think I am worthless. If I did not have them (friends), I would probably have ended up lonely and depressed.' His reply indicated that his friends' admiration gave him a strong sense of self-worth and belonging, which he lacked in his relationship with his parents. In Rumman's case, good looks and the financial ability to afford a cosmopolitan lifestyle through attending parties, taking guitar lessons, and wearing nice clothes help him to avoid the shame of not being a 'good son' at home and potential social isolation, while securing status as 'cool' among friends.

While young people value educational success, a person who only focusses on education and avoids talk about sex or shows no interest in sex is often seen as 'uncool.' Many participants looked down upon such individuals, labelling them 'nerds' or 'boring.' During a group discussion, participants referred to Jimmy as the coolest guy among their friends. 'He is a top-grader, but he is not a nerd. He is fun and fearless. He knows so many [dirty] jokes. He also has a huge collection of porn. He can approach a girl without any inhibition,' said one participant, who thought Jimmy was 'super cool.' Jimmy's assumed knowledge about sex prevented him from being a 'nerd' despite his high grades and made him the 'coolest' guy among his group of friends. As this group discussion indicates, demonstrating heterosexual interest, participating in discussions about sex, having sexual knowledge and experience, and being desired by the opposite sex are viewed as core attributes of being 'cool' among these young men in Dhaka.

However, a follow up on Jimmy's case revealed that 'coolness' is defined and practised differently in different contexts. Jimmy's reputation was at risk after a screenshot of his conversation with a young woman (one of his friends) went viral on Facebook. There he stated, '[I]f girls walk half naked on the Dhaka streets, don't blame men if their dicks come out of their pants.' The post received hundreds of angry reactions and comments. Many called him 'misogynistic' and 'shameless,' and demanded that he apologize to the young woman in public. These outcries even came from two of the friends who had previously called him 'super cool' during the focus group discussion above. During a one-on-one conversation a week later, Jimmy said he felt sad about losing hundreds of Facebook friends and followers overnight. Many had 'unfriended' him after seeing his post, and his timeline and messenger were flooded with angry messages. He said, '[I]t is a shame that some of my close school buddies have unfriended me, […] because they feared losing their girlfriends. It's not that they think very differently; they just didn't want to lose popularity among girls. […] On social media, everyone wants to be trendy.' Besides questioning the integrity of the critiques he received, Jimmy's reflections included the difficulties of knowing when, where, and how to act 'cool.'

Another relevant factor in determining 'coolness' is the difference between the two contexts of school and Facebook. In Jimmy's case, his school is a closed gender-segregated space where hierarchical relationships are shaped around sexual (im)maturity within a relatively small group of friends (all young men). By contrast, Facebook is a much more open space that includes a potentially large number of men and women from different age categories, classes and backgrounds, who Jimmy may or may not know personally. This makes impression management more difficult.

Jimmy had to post an apology stating he was ashamed of himself, even though during the interview he revealed that he had no remorse about his post and his apology was strategic. This shows the slipperiness of being 'cool' in an open online space as opposed to the relatively manageable 'coolness' in a school environment with clearer norms. As an ideal, 'coolness' is therefore plural and contextual. One's position in the hierarchy depends on how well one knows the rules in each context and can juggle between different norms in relation to different groups and spaces.

Facebook appeared to represent and facilitate progressiveness in the stories of several participants. In particular, those who experienced bullying and isolation at school shared their alternative views on sex, relationships, and gender on Facebook. For instance, Sahil and Raad, both routinely bullied at school for being 'chubby' and not participating in discussions about sex, opened an online art studio together on Facebook. There, they regularly posted paintings containing messages about bullying, body shaming, sexual harassment of girls, victim blaming, and gender equality. Their page had more than 15,000 followers, and each of their paintings received thousands of likes and hundreds of positive comments. For some who rejected or failed to construct a 'cool' masculinity at school, Facebook provided an alternative space and a feeling of sociality and belonging to a 'cool' progressive masculinity, based on (gender) equality rather than hierarchy and domination.

For some of the participants, however, neither school nor Facebook created possibilities for belonging or 'coolness.' For instance, 16-year-old Rabbi was unable to make friends at school, and whenever he wrote or posted something on Facebook, he was labelled as 'khet' (a person with working-class taste) and 'conservative' for his allegedly restrictive religious views towards sexuality and for his Dhakaiya (old-Dhaka style) dialect and accent, understood as distinct from the 'educated' middle-class Bangla and often mocked on local television dramas. Similarly, 17-year-old Kafi, who grew up in a small town called Bhola outside Dhaka, shared being bullied by his school mates and called 'mofu' or 'mofiz' (a dumb person). Kafi moved to Dhaka two years ago after he had been accepted into one of the best public schools in the city. He said he is never invited to birthday parties or social events organized by his classmates who grew up in Dhaka. The stories of Rabbi and Kafi show that the progressiveness celebrated on Facebook to enable the constructions of 'coolness' among young men in Bangladesh has class-based and language divides (rural versus urban) also prevalent in schools and universities. Embodied class-related characteristics, such as accent and appearance, may reveal an ethnic and religious minority status, including a perception of lower economic status, and can limit one's access to belonging, progressiveness, and 'coolness.'

Not being able to claim 'coolness,' as we found out, may result in social isolation and other psychological and emotional challenges. Nior, for instance, was bullied at school and had visited a psychiatrist several times. During a one-on-one conversation, he kept asking, 'Do you think I am abnormal?' seeking reassurance that there was nothing wrong with him. Out of the 40 participants, three were on antidepressants and one had been diagnosed as bipolar. Taking sons to psychiatrists appears to be an emerging practice among middle-class parents in Dhaka. Seeking mental health support in Dhaka, however, remains a taboo, and participants who visited psychiatrists hid it from friends to avoid shame. This shows how, on one hand, the underlying structural problems, specifically the economic and cultural pressure to uphold certain models of masculinity, remain unaddressed through the psychological approach of helping individuals to become more resilient. On the other hand, receiving psychological help is considered taboo, putting young people in a difficult position regarding their mental health.

During the fieldwork, it was striking how many participants mentioned that they felt 'lighter' after sharing their feelings and stories that they felt they could not discuss with their parents and sometimes even their friends. Boys like Nior, who felt isolated, shared that participating in this research and speaking about their experiences of being a young man helped them regain more of a sense of their self-worth. When the fieldwork ended, many participants wanted to say goodbye in person, and came with small tokens of appreciation such as chocolates, flowers, notebooks, and pens. Some of them have continued to keep in touch through Facebook while I have written this manuscript. As I have shown, juggling different middle-class ideals of masculinity is often stressful and sometimes harmful. There seems to be a lack of discourse surrounding the vulnerabilities of young men in Dhaka when expressing their gendered experiences of emotional and social hardship.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter masculinities were explored as lived and embodied experiences among middle-class young men in Dhaka, focussing on the contexts of two of their most important relationships: with parents and peers. To grasp subjective experiences as simultaneously discursive and embodied, I combined feminist post-structuralist and phenomenological perspectives to (1) trace the diverse and potentially conflicting norms of masculinity; (2) shed light on specific situated and embodied experiences of masculinity in the intersection with other relevant axes of difference, such as class, religion and sexuality, and geographical location;

and (3) analyse the strategies employed by the interlocutors when navigating between different norms of masculinity in specific contexts. In short, I analysed how masculinities are embodied, negotiated, appropriated, and resisted by middle-class young men in Dhaka within their relationships and interactions with parents and peers.

I identified the dominant norm of being a 'good son,' specified in terms of academic achievement, showing respect to parents and sexual abstinence, in the constructions of masculinity at home. This norm is partially in direct conflict with being considered 'cool' among one's peers, which requires engaging in discussions around sex and performing a macho-like masculinity at school. Sexual activity and masculinity, in other words, can be mutually exclusive (sexually abstinent 'good son') or co-produce one another (sexually active 'cool' peer). Moreover, middle-class masculinity involves two contradictory characteristics, one of which demands respectability in the eyes of one's parents to secure the social status of the middle-class family, while another orients the subject towards the value of gender equality. As a consequence, correcting one's father when he fails to adhere to the principles of gender equality at home goes hand in hand with compromising the respectability norm *and* appropriating a progressive attitude. Furthermore, being considered 'cool' among one's peers depends heavily on context, with offline homosocial context of school differing dramatically from online and more open digital spaces, like Facebook. In the former, one might pass as 'cool' by showing off about active engagement in sexual relationships, while in the latter 'coolness' entails finding the right balance between sexual assertiveness and sensitivity to gender equality.

Additionally, my approach allowed me to illustrate how masculinities are enacted in and through situated and embodied practices. Conflicting masculinities are produced by focussing on prayer, concentrating on studies, and abstention from sex on one hand, and talking and joking about sex and girls, wearing trendy clothing, and appropriating cosmopolitan tastes and cultural sensibilities on the other. Some of the young men appeared more successful than others in juggling these norms and navigating between them using specific social and emotional skills. In the context of the home, they used strategies of compliance (focus on studies and 'the future'), choosing less ideal yet achievable goals (piety), faking compliance (living a double life), or withdrawal from family expectations (investing in relationships outside the home, notably with peers). Among peers, they mostly sought 'coolness' in online and offline spaces, an engagement that appeared risky if one stepped over the gendered boundary between a macho and a progressive self. Combined, these findings attest

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to the importance of relationality between actors and spaces in understanding the experiences and practices of masculinity.

The individual stories in this paper show that, both socially and emotionally, a lot is at stake in the constructions of masculinities in the everyday lives of the participants, both in terms of recognition (as a responsible or a pious son), and inclusion (as cool or progressive), or exclusion (misogynistic, boring, nerdy, or *khet*). Even those with a more reluctant attitude still appeared to be concerned about their parents' high expectations to be a 'good son' by envisioning a future in which they would improve themselves. In addition, health issues, including depression and insecurity, were not uncommon among these young men, who work hard to juggle (contradictory) ideals of masculinity. The stories also demonstrate that masculinities are constantly produced and transformed in relationships between different actors (parents, peers, religious authorities), and in discursive-material spaces (school, home, Facebook). Strong feelings of shame, anxiety, isolation and courage reflect, prolong and disrupt the dominant norms of masculinity at the micro-level. Shame and anxiety are mainly experienced when one fails to meet the patriarchal and middle-class 'ricewinner' ideal, particularly at home. Shame works in complicated ways in the constructions of masculinity. At times, it was used by some of the research participants to blame their peers for 'old-fashioned' gender ideas. Shame could also be employed to disavow financial and mental problems. Less commonly, shame works as an internalised mechanism to discipline sexual behaviour. Isolation results from failing to meet the requirements of 'coolness' among friends, as well as the inability to practice a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Simultaneously, we witnessed courage when interlocutors explicitly distanced themselves from certain dominant norms, such as opposing gender inequality at home or calling out misogyny among peers.

Confirming other research (Hasan et al. 2018), the anticipation of having to provide for the family through regular paid work and the need to show sexual competence are indeed central components of successful masculinity among young men in Dhaka. Like Hasan *et al.* (Hasan et al. 2018) however, we also found that less patriarchal models of masculinity were growing in popularity among the younger generation. Alternative models are actively depicted through paintings and discussed on Facebook, and lapses into sexist thinking are criticised within peer groups. In addition, my analyses of the lived experiences of the research participants showed how 'successful masculinity' is contextual, ambiguous, relational, and plural. In other words, these analyses reject linear progressive conceptualisations of change in the sexuality culture among young men in Dhaka. Not only is progressiveness context-dependent, progressive ideas and practices are sometimes entangled with

heteronormative and patriarchal notions of gender and sexuality. Finally, the findings imply that the possibilities for young men to express shame and vulnerability are limited, except in conversations with a female researcher identified as cosmopolitan and considered a safe refuge. This reading of the researcher's positioning might have limited my access to other masculinities that are more prevalent in societal margins, including indigenous and more religious young men. Future research on alternative spaces and the relationships in which young men's vulnerabilities can be shared may lead to imagining and creating a broader range of masculinities than currently seems to be available.

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Conclusion

Adolescent sexuality in Bangladesh, like in many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), has been mostly explored through a lens of public health. Research following this lens is focused on identifying sexual and reproductive health problems and needs of socioeconomically disadvantaged young people. In these studies, some of which are mentioned in Chapter 1, adolescents, especially those of lower socioeconomic strata, are almost exclusively understood as victims of oppressive social norms and sociocultural shame and in need of sexual and reproductive health information and services. Little attention has been paid to exploring the changes happening in society, particularly in urban landscapes, and what this means for the perspectives and positioning of adolescents in the domain of gender and sexuality. This thesis aims to gain more insight in how now more than ever gender and sexuality norms are shifting for and because of youngsters due to urbanisation, digitalisation and globalisation in Dhaka, and many other big cities of Asia.

In my research, I focused on middle-class adolescents in Dhaka, aged between 15 and 19 years old, who are an interesting cohort for studying social changes in the country. Bangladeshi urban middle-class youths have been experiencing complex transitions in the context of rapid economic growth over the past two decades. I was interested in exploring young people's experiences of sexuality in their dynamic middle-class context where paradoxical norms and social realities coexist and interact with each other. On the one hand heteropatriarchal sexual and gender norms prevail while on the other hand young people are exposed to and co-construct alternative (feminist) norms of sexual pleasure, premarital intimacy, free choice of life partner, independent sexual decision making, queer sexual identities, and gender equality through Facebook, Google, YouTube, Hollywood-Bollywood movies and novels. This thesis presents in-depth emic perspectives gathered over a year between 2016 and 2017 during my ethnographic fieldwork in Dhaka. It provides important empirical evidence about how social norms and identities are created and modified by young people in their everyday lives and thus offers material for new theoretical insights on reconceptualising sexuality, social norms and shame. Findings presented in this thesis also shed light on young people's emerging concerns in their rapidly changing context which might be useful for practitioners and policy makers in the domain of sexual and reproductive rights in the country.

In this final chapter, I will consolidate key findings discussed in the empirical chapters (chapter 2,3,4,5) of this thesis with regards to the research questions posed in the introduction, and reflect on the significance of the findings for policies and interventions regarding youth sexuality in Bangladesh.

6.1 Key findings and answers to the research questions

The overarching question this thesis intended to answer was: How are middle-class young people (re)constructing norms of sexuality in their everyday life in Dhaka? This main question was answered through three sub-questions: 1) Which norms and identities do they (re)construct in which contexts? 2) How are these (re)constructions shaped by their middle-class gendered positioning? 3) What role does shame play in their reconstruction of norms and identities?

Inspired by the framework of positive sexuality, as I discussed in chapter 1, I avoided having a prior fixed definition of sexuality and took the agency of young people seriously. In this way, I could capture how young people themselves define sexuality and which aspects of sexuality matter to them. I spent several days with a group of four middle-class young people, who became the key informants of my project, before beginning my fieldwork to learn how they talk about sexuality. I have discussed this process in detail in chapter 1 under the methodology section. During interviews, my conversations with research participants usu ally began with broader questions like how they learnt about love and sex, with whom they did or did not discuss about it and what their views and concerns about these topics were. My analysis of these conversations about sexuality led to the identification of four themes that seemed to matter most to them. These were: exploration of body and sexuality, intimate relationships, aspirations, and social belonging. Hence, the above-mentioned research questions were answered in relation to these topics.

6.1.1 (Re)construction of sexuality and norms by middle-class youths

Across all the empirical chapters of this thesis (chapter 2,3,4,5) it is evident that middle-class young people's understanding of sexuality is shaped by a range of positive experiences such as looking for and experimenting with intimate relations, pursuing pleasure, aspiring to look attractive, seeking friendship, maintaining social status, and constructing alternative gender and sexual identities beyond the existing dominant ones – all of which constitute a fundamental part of being a middle-class youth. As discussed in the introduction, youth sexuality has been largely conceptualised as a health matter and these positive social experiences have so far not received much attention in research. This thesis brings in middle-class adolescents' perspectives and demonstrates that sexuality to them is not only seeking information on sexual health but also about doing and being. Their concerns rarely involve sexual and reproductive health problems and their understandings and experiences of 'dangers' are quite different from the dangers many previous researchers have described. Their worries and concerns, rather, centre around a

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motivation for gaining a respectful middle-class status. As I will discuss next, young people constantly juggle their gendered responsibilities of maintaining a respectful middle-class status and navigate through different norms in different contexts. This becomes tangible by employing an emic perspective – that is the perspective of the research participants – and going beyond the dominant public health framework.

Findings presented in the empirical chapters (chapter 2,3,4,5) show that young people's understanding of different spaces play a significant role in how they (re) construct norms. At home, they largely conform to the existing dominant norms and ideals to protect their family's reputation and ensuring their family's upward mobility, which is deemed crucial for maintaining a respectable middle-class position by them. Young people go to great lengths for upholding an identity of a good son/daughter in accordance with dominant social ideals of 'ricewinner men' and 'sexually pure women' within this space. They try hard to obtain good grades and keep their online and offline whereabouts private. Young people's conformity to 'ricewinner men' or 'sexually pure women' ideals, however, cannot be understood as 'oppression' or 'imposed'. Through practising these ideals, they secure their bonding with their parents and their middle-class position which is necessary for having a strong sense of belonging. They value their parents' constant efforts and sacrifices for ensuring a good future for their children and see it as their responsibility to maintain the family's social status and supporting parents to improve upward class mobility by upholding a good son/daughter image. The coproduction of these ideals with parents therefore needs to be understood as reciprocal, not 'forced'.

School is another context where young people reinforce certain dominant norms and ideals of masculinity and femininity. Schools are closed all-male or all-female spaces where they socialise in smaller groups of peers who usually are socially connected through their neighbourhoods and extracurricular activities. This means that managing a good reputation within these peer groups is crucial for maintaining a respectable position in their respective neighbourhoods and other educational places. Moreover, reputation management in a school does not only involve young people but also important adults such as parents and teachers. Within this space the widely practised ideals, such as macho-like masculinity and sexually pure women, remain dominant and are reinforced through bullying, labelling, and maintaining strict policing over each other's looks and intimate lives (chapter 4,5).

The transitioning urban context, however, also provides totally different spaces where youngsters can explore sexuality. Young people view Facebook as a global and cosmopolitan space connecting them with people from higher social classes

and from across the globe, and exposing them to cosmopolitan ideas of gender and sexuality. To them, Facebook is a more protected space where they can bypass their parents and can control who can view their profiles and comment on their posts. Here they openly criticise existing macho-like masculine practices, discriminatory gender norms such as women's virginity, violence against women and LGBTQ+ communities, while actively engaging in discussions about where and how to seek intimacy and sexual pleasure. Adolescents on Facebook are in photos hugging and kissing their romantic partners and socialising with opposite sex, which they consider inappropriate in the context of home and school. Girls pose with cigarettes, wear red lipstick and low-cut tops to boost their self-esteem and confidence. Engaging in discussions about sexual progressiveness and posting provocative photos on Facebook suggest a breach of the normative public/private boundary and a sign of newly emerging norms in the Bangladeshi middle-class context. Both texts and images contradict and criticise existing norms and practices and bring into the open issues like premarital relationships, sexual abuse, or same-sex desire that are generally considered taboo topics in other spaces. There women's respectability is still defined by sexual modesty; wearing revealing clothes or getting intimate with men in public is considered promiscuous, which applies to married women too. As I have discussed in the empirical chapters, these alternative representations of sexuality need to be understood in relation to the adolescents' middle-class aspiration to become cosmopolitan. Research participants perceive constructing a cosmopolitan progressive identity on Facebook as necessary for gaining a middle-class status among selected peers outside the family's gaze.

Certain restaurants and cafés appeared as another space where they can practice cosmopolitan norms of gender and intimacy. Restaurants offer safe physical spaces for dating, cross-sex socialising, and transgressing gender norms such as smoking of young women and openly discussing taboo topics with friends as well as with certain adults like me. My research shows that in the context of a growing middle-class and booming restaurant business young people are normalising a dating culture and premarital intimacy in semi-public spaces like restaurants and cafés. Restaurants are often dimly lit and include private cabin-like spaces to ensure the privacy of visitors. In addition, owners regularly bribe police and local political leaders to protect their young clients from being harassed, practically facilitating the construction of a cosmopolitan youth culture. Young people view restaurants and cafés as safe, more private and less public than Facebook, where they spend a significant amount of time to socialise with friends of both sexes and meet their intimate partners.

I do not intend to imply that home or school are spaces for reinforcing tradition and Facebook and restaurants for constructing modern identities. As I will discuss in the next subsection, young people reproduce and reconstruct norms across all these contexts. Here I wanted to highlight three important aspects of social norms that emerged from the data. First, *there are different norms in different spaces*. What is considered appropriate at home with parents may be experienced as the opposite on Facebook with peers and vice versa. Norms also vary across gender and one's middle-class position which I will elaborate in the following subsection. Second, there are *continuities and changes in norms* over time. Certain ideals, such as 'ricewinner man' and 'sexually pure woman' pass on from one generation to the next through young people's reproduction of those ideals. Simultaneously new norms and ideals emerge through normalising premarital intimacy, and constructing cosmopolitan identities of progressive masculinity and femininity. Third, young people do not simply adhere to these norms but *work with and around* them. They live these norms on a daily basis and inventively construct new norms or reproduce the existing ones as they see these fit for securing a respectable middle-class status and a sense of belonging. These three aspects together offer an analytic framework to investigate the shifting norms. It also enables to gain an in-depth, nuanced understanding of how paradoxical norms emerge and coexist, and are negotiated by young people in their day-to-day lives.

6.1.2 (Re)construction of middle-class gendered identities

My research shows that young people do not only (re)construct norms but also their middle-class gendered identities. Based on findings, I make three contributions. First, I have shown that middle-class adolescent girls are participating in the process of (re)constructing 'new womanhood'. A growing scholarship on middle-class in Bangladesh has indicated the emergence of a 'new' womanhood among middle-class professional women who are highly educated and constantly challenge the discourses of gender and sexuality (Azim 2010, Hussein 2018a, Hussein 2018b, Karim 2022, Sabur 2014). My research adds to this scholarship by showing that adolescent girls are also participating in the process. All the female participants rejected the ideal 'stay-home housewife' and aspired to become a financially independent 'modern' woman and live a violence-free life. My research shows that they (re)construct new ideals of beauty by embodying different looks. Some embody a 'sexy and appealing' image among peers through wearing make-up and fashionable revealing clothes and posting selfies on Facebook. Some think that wearing make-up shows a lack of confidence and construct a 'confident and changemaker' identity through enhancing their bare natural looks, participating in women's' rights protests, and studying hard. My research thus shows that how they view and practise the 'new' womanhood

therefore is diverse. It depends on a combination of multiple factors such as one's aspiration, access to resources, or academic accomplishments.

Second, my research reveals that it is not only girls but also boys who are (re) constructing gender, in this case masculinities in their urbanising middle-class context (chapter 5). Similar to Hasan et al. (Hasan et al. 2018), I observed that more inclusive and less patriarchal ideals of masculinity are becoming more popular among middle-class boys. While many participants conformed to the ricewinner model, some participants risked their images of being a good son, for instance by criticising their fathers for being abusive towards mothers. Many participants supported ideas of gender-equality on Facebook. In there, they constructed alternative models of masculinity through paintings, and critically reflecting on bullying, body shaming, sexual harassment of girls, victim blaming and women's oppression. Participants who rejected or failed to construct a macho-like masculinity at school, sought to create an alternative space and a sense of belonging on Facebook based on claims of gender equality. Exploring and expressing elements of progressive masculinity through art or posts on Facebook helped participants seek support from their like-minded peers.

Third, based on findings, I argue that young peoples' construction of new womanhood and progressive masculinity cannot be conceptualised either as linear progress or as liberatory as it might seem. Findings demonstrate that multiple competing ideals of masculinity and femininity are constantly produced and transformed in relationships between different actors and in different spaces. Girls embody competing ideals from being a 'modest' sexually pure' girl at home to a 'sexy and appealing', 'cool and free-spirited' girl in online and offline spaces. Similarly, boys cultivate the image of 'good boys' at home, emphasizing focus on studies and preparation for 'the future,' while concurrently pursuing a 'cool' image in online and offline contexts. Young people juggle between these ideals for maintaining a respectable middle-class status and belonging. Middle-class identities can be experienced as restrictive phenomena too. Whatever choices girls make, those must be made within the boundaries of what is considered socially acceptable. For instance, when girls want to look sexy, they remain concerned that they do not look sexually promiscuous. When someone decides to go without make up, she needs to be careful that she still looks youthful and pretty. Thus, while middle-class girls are able to make choices and act accordingly, they use their ability to scrutinise and regulate their bodies in order to attain standards of 'new' womanhood. Boys' stories reveal that the progressive masculinities they construct reproduce the existing class-based divide that values urban over rural, Bengali Muslim identities over non-Bengali or non-Muslim identities. To claim a progressive masculinity, one must demonstrate

an urbanised cosmopolitan affluent Bengali Muslim middle-class image. Accent and looks that may reveal an ethnic and religious minority status, or a lower economic status, limit one's access to progressive masculinity.

Finally, based on the findings, I argue that middle-class young people's (re) construction of gendered identities should not be understood as a mere 'agentic' or 'oppressive' process. It needs to be understood in relation to their rapidly changing context, where one's belonging to middle-class relies on how skilfully one can juggle multiple identities. While they do benefit from this, findings indicate that it involves constant hard work and is often experienced as stressful and sometimes harmful. Girls have to constantly walk on thin and slippery lines between different ideals (sexy and promiscuous, confident and unattractive). A girl can lose her reputation within a moment and be considered promiscuous or unattractive and suffer stigma. Hiding their whereabouts from parents involves constant work and sometimes causes anxiety and affects education. A participant in chapter 4 shows how her experience of transgressing the boundary between hot and promiscuous after her semi-nude photos got leaked caused her tremendous anxiety and social exclusion. She thought she could not survive the stigma if any of her parents had found out the incident. For boys too, a lot is at stake in the constructions of masculinities. The emotional pressure and struggle to live up to various expectations were evident in their stories. Failure to juggle between different ideals met with social isolation for boys too, and sometimes caused psychological problems. Based on findings, I argue that young people's role in their (re)construction of gender identities cannot be understood in an agent/oppressed binary. They are neither complete agents nor absolute victims of gender norms. Their motivations for (re)constructing contradictory norms only make sense if we understand them in relation to their motivation for securing belonging to middle-class, which is gendered and socially, economically and culturally diverse.

6.1.3 The role of shame in the construction of norms and identities

My research found that 1) young people's experience of shame is mainly not about their own body or sexuality but about losing middle-class status; 2) whether or what someone feels shame for is context-dependent and cannot be universally defined; 3) young people do not perceive shame as always bad.

As discussed in the beginning of this thesis (chapter 1), shame is regarded as a major problem in the existing literature on youth sexuality in Bangladesh and other low- and middle-income countries. In my discussion there of the existing literature I showed that previous research conducted in Bangladesh suggested that adolescent girls feel shame about their body and see premarital sex, dating with boyfriends

and menstruation as shameful. Young people would also feel shame in seeking information and support from parents. Findings presented in this thesis demonstrate that while young people indeed experience shame, it is, however, not so much about their body or sexuality but mostly about losing reputation in the family or among peers. Young people do discuss porn, masturbation, or romantic relationships and do not feel ashamed about it, but they avoid such discussions at home in order not to harm their own and their family's reputation (chapter 2). I have demonstrated that middle-class have the capacity to transform their bodies from ordinary to sexy with make-up and trendy haircuts or from damaged to cool by wearing jeans, smoking cigarettes, and hanging out with elite youths (chapter 4). Even when their boundaries of privacy are breached, such as when private photos are publicly exposed, they do not feel shame about their body but about losing their social status. They do enjoy dating and seek sexual pleasure as long as their sexual reputation remains unharmed (chapter 3). Across all the empirical chapters, it is evident that both boys' and girls' concerns and experiences of shame mainly involve losing social status in their respective families and among peers which is key in their sense of belonging to middle-class.

My research shows that young people's experience of shame is context-dependent and involves a wide array of emotions and therefore cannot be universally defined. Shame is experienced as fear and anxiety of destroying family's reputation or failing to meet familial expectation which young people consider their responsibility and crucial for securing their belonging. Shame is also experienced as a feeling of isolation when someone does not or cannot comply with the dominant ideals of masculinity/femininity. Young people experience shame as a feeling of awkwardness when mothers initiate discussions about intimacy or watch romantic movies with their son. It also occurs as emotional empathy when they see their mothers' embarrassment in answering their questions about the penis. Shame consists of feeling low when others call them names or criticise their looks. Therefore, shame refers to a wide range of emotional experiences in different relationships where specific concerns are at play, which is far more nuanced and complex than negative evaluations of self, and merely a hindrance in young people's lives to seek information on sexual health as generally assumed in existing literature. Findings demonstrate that the widely used universal definition of shame as 'negative evaluation of self' (I am a bad person) (e.g., Benedict 1967, Lewis 1971, Tracy and Robins 2006) does not make much sense for my research participants. The distinction between different emotions, such as shame and guilt (Benedict 1967, Lewis 1971, Tracy and Robins 2006) do not seem to have any relevance in participants experience of shame. My research demonstrates that a relational conceptualisation of shame is more relevant that acknowledges

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that shame can have different meanings in different contexts and cannot always be distinguished from other emotions.

Finally, my research shows that young people do not always perceive shame as a negative emotion. This is evident in their reinforcement of silence with parents about sexuality (chapter 2). Young people value that sociocultural shame exists between parents and children about sexuality and do not want to breach that. As findings show, even when their mothers initiate discussions about taboo topics such as romantic relationships, they deliberately remain silent. They prefer to preserve the shame and see silence as liberatory as it enables them to get what they need without offending parents or jeopardising their own reputation. They think their views of sexuality are very different from their parents. They defer to their parents out of respect and do not think it is necessary to talk to them as they can access information through the Internet. Findings therefore challenge the monolithic understanding of shame as always negative and that it hinders young people's access to sexual and reproductive health information and services. My thesis shows that shame does not only drive young people to reinforce norms, but in fact sometimes motivates them to deviate from the dominant norms and create new ones. Chapter 4 shows how girls' experiences of shame motivated them to reconstruct the norms of sexual modesty. The stories presented in this chapter demonstrate that their experiences of shame encouraged them to reinvent new norms and identities by going to beauty parlours, and posting 'sexy' photos on Facebook wearing makeup and trendy clothes, socialising with the opposite sex, smoking cigarettes in public, participating in feminist activism. Hence, shame cannot be understood as a superior force that controls young people's choices or actions. Rather it should be understood as a mechanism through which young people (re)construct norms and identities.

6.2 Significance for policies and practices

Based on this thesis's findings, I propose the following policies and interventions to address the evolving landscape of adolescent sexuality among middle-class youth in Bangladesh.

- First, develop and promote online sexual health resources to provide accurate information and support regarding sexual and reproductive health, intimacy, and gender equality.

- Create safe spaces, both online and offline, for young people to discuss and explore their sexuality without fear of stigma or shame, offering confidential and non-judgmental support.
- Initiate media literacy programs to help young people critically analyse media information and resist harmful stereotypes and influences from media platforms.
- Encourage youth participation and empowerment by involving them in policy development and implementation concerning their sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Provide mental health support and counselling services to address the emotional pressures and stress young people may face while navigating shifting norms and identities.
- Lastly, prioritise continued research and evaluation to monitor and adapt policies and interventions based on emerging trends and attitudes in adolescent sexuality in Bangladesh.

6

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Summary
Samenvatting

Summary

This thesis aims at building a critical understanding of adolescent sexuality in the context of Bangladesh, focussing on middle-class youth in Dhaka. Unlike prior research that primarily examined adolescent sexuality from a public health perspective, this study explores adolescents' negotiations of sexuality and gender norms in a middle-class context in which they have to deal with paradoxical messages about sexuality and gender. On the one hand heteropatriarchal sexual and gender norms prevail, with expectations of purity, abstinence, gender segregation, arranged marriage, and male authority. On the other hand, through Facebook, Google, YouTube, Hollywood-Bollywood movies and novels, young people are exposed to alternative (feminist) norms of sexual pleasure, premarital social contact and sex, free choice of life partner, independent sexual decision making, alternative sexual identities and gender equality. The overarching question of this research was: how are Bangladeshi urban middle-class young people (re)constructing norms of sexuality in their everyday life? This main question has been answered through three specific questions: 1) Which norms of sexuality and identity do they (re)construct in which contexts? 2) How is this reconstruction mediated by gender and class? 3) What roles does shame play in reinforcing those norms?

Chapter 1 laid out the foundation of this thesis. It provided an overview of the research context, explained why middle-class adolescents are an important cohort to understand the social transitions happening in the urban landscape of Bangladesh, introduced the research questions and conceptual framework developed for this research and described the methodology.

Chapter 2 investigated the significance of the cultural practice of 'silence' on sexuality in youth-parent relationship, which has been globally and locally understood as a barrier for implementing youth SRH in the low and middle-income countries (LMICs). Findings presented in this chapter showed that young people see silence on certain topics as a strategy to negotiate their reputation as well as an expression of respect for parents' views which is different from theirs. Young people's exposure to global ideas through internet and Facebook has led them to view sexuality very differently from their parents. They use these sources to learn about modern, progressive ideas about their sexual body, dating, premarital sex, women's virginity, porn, masturbation, and homosexuality. Disclosure on these activities would endanger their identity as a good girl/boy in front of parents, while causing shame for both parties. In this chapter I argued that silence on sexuality rather than a sign of oppression, in fact, serves as a strategy to balance a respectful parent-child relationship with the

freedom to engage in societally contested practices of sexuality and intimacy. It enables them to get what they need and claim personal space without offending parents or jeopardising their own reputation.

Chapter 3 focused on intimacy, a theme that emerged as an important concern yet remained a silent topic at home as discussed in chapter 2. This chapter demonstrates that in the context of increasing access to global ideas of sexuality, young people are reframing intimacy beyond marriage, heterosexual relationship and sexual and reproductive health problems. Pleasure, desire to maintain their social status and aspirations to become modern and cosmopolitan remain central in how they understand and experience premarital sex. Their views regarding passionate love, sex, women's sexual desire, virginity, victim blaming, and same-sex relationship is shifting. They openly engage in discussions on Facebook about these topics. They are drawing ideas and ideals from Hollywood-Bollywood and are engaging in dating, holding hands and kissing in public, are in photographs together and openly talk about intimacy with peers and trusted adults. This chapter demonstrated that norms and practices of intimacy are changing from limited social interaction with the other sex, sexual abstinence, virginity, and passionate but imaginary love towards exploring and establishing a relationship, dating and having premarital sex. Young people are co-constructing and negotiating new public/private boundaries and co-creating safe spaces for themselves with peers and adults by showing intimacy in semi-public places such as on Facebook and in restaurants. However, this chapter also shows that while middle-class young people have access to resources which allows them to challenge existing boundaries, their capabilities of reconstructing the norms are mediated by their familial responsibilities that are rooted in middle-class position and the larger societal boundaries of masculine and feminine respectability. These continue to be based on unequal gender expectations. Men feel the pressure to be economically and academically successful and not emotionally involved while women are supposed to be romantic, caring and sexually pure. Young people walk a fine line. Their middle-class positioning reinforces patriarchal gender norms to protect a respectable reputation while it simultaneously facilitates access to ideas and ideals that trouble that very patriarchal set of rules.

Chapter 4 investigated another theme that emerged from the data: aspirations for good looks. The pursuit of a good look was fundamental to middle-class girls' understanding of who they are and their envisioned 'good future'. This chapter shed light on the connections between middle class young women's everyday life and Bangladesh's sociocultural transformation, showing how aspirations for good looks constitute an important element of the construction of a 'new girlhood' (that is,

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becoming a modern cosmopolitan woman). The data showed girls are redefining notions of feminine respectability, gender equality, and their gender role in line with their aspiration of becoming modern and cosmopolitan. This chapter revealed a shift in perception, where being a stay-at-home housewife is no longer deemed a respectable identity by middle-class young women. Their understanding of marriage and gender roles is shaped by witnessing their mothers living dependent and vulnerable lives, juxtaposed with their own encounters with societal gendered expectations. While securing a good marriage remains important, becoming an economically self-reliant woman is now considered crucial for obtaining a respectable middle-class position. In the pursuit of both goals, good looks are deemed important. This chapter reveals that middle-class adolescent girls negotiate their appearance in diverse ways, depending on their access to resources and individual aspirations. Some aspire to a 'sexy' look while others aim for a 'cool' or 'confidant' appearance, which indicates the presence of competing ideals of beauty. The chapter also emphasised the influence of space and actors involved in this negotiation. At home upholding a modest look is important, yet among the peers and on Facebook a 'sexy' or 'cool' look is desirable. Girls can express and practise their individuality, but only within the boundaries of what is deemed to be socially acceptable. They position their bodies between certain categories that are socially defined and walk fine lines between those categoties, such as 'sexy' and 'too sexy', between '*pichchi*' (kiddo) and '*khalamma*' (aunt), 'cool' and '*oogro*' (antisocial). In this chapter I argued that the 'new girlhood' is simultaneously experienced as liberating as well as restrictive by girls. They have relatively increasing control over their lives, but they embody this control to scrutinise and regulate their bodies, striving to meet the standards of modern, cosmopolitan womanhood.

Chapter 5 investigated the significance of different dominant ideals of masculinity, at home and among peers. It showed how boys have to juggle between different ideals of masculinity in order to negotiate their sexual desire while maintaining their social status at home and among peers. At home, their negotiations centre the dominant ideal of the 'good son' who emphasises academic success, respect for parents and sexual abstinence. Among peers, however, they are expected to be 'cool', which requires engaging in sex talk, performing a macho-like masculinity at school, defending gender equal masculinity on Facebook and maintaining a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Data showed that boys have to constantly juggle between contradictory expectations and that one's position in the hierarchy depends on how well one knows the rules and can juggle between different norms in relation to different groups and spaces. Not being able to do so leads to social isolation and shame. This chapter also showed that for boys the possibilities for expressing vulnerability are

limited. It argued that this younger generation of men encounter unique gendered vulnerabilities in the contexts of fast urbanisation, an increasingly uncertain labour market and a lack of support in negotiating their emotional and social wellbeing.

Findings presented in this thesis shed important light on how middle-class young people themselves perceive sexuality. It reveals that their perspectives on sexuality are shaped by various positive experiences, including knowing about bodies, pursuing pleasure, aspiring to look attractive, seeking social bonding, maintaining social status, and constructing identities – all of which are integral to their middle-class identity. The research findings highlight that t young people's concerns are less about lack of information and sexual and reproductive health problems as the focus of most studies and more about gaining a respectful middle-class status and securing a strong sense of belonging in the family, among their peers and in larger society. These motivations influence how they (re)construct norms in different contexts, such as at home, school, and on social media platforms like Facebook. At home, they conform to dominant norms to protect their family's reputation and uphold a good son/daughter image. Similarly, in the sex-segregated space of school, they reinforce certain ideals of masculinity and femininity within smaller social groups. In contrast, on Facebook, they engage in discussions with a more diverse group of peers about sexual progressiveness, challenge traditional norms, and embrace cosmopolitan ideas of gender and sexuality. Certain restaurants and cafés provide spaces for socializing with friends and dating intimate partners outside the scrutiny of family and society. Norms vary across these different spaces, and young people reproduce, reconstruct, and negotiate norms in their daily lives, based on their aspirations for a respectable middle-class status and a sense of belonging. The thesis emphasises three key aspects of social norms: the existence of different norms in different spaces, continuities and changes in norms over time, and the active agency of young people in working with and around these norms. These aspects form an analytical framework to understand the shifting and coexisting nature of norms as young people navigate their identities and relationships in the middle-class context of Bangladesh.

The research demonstrates that middle-class young people actively (re)construct both gendered identities and norms. Adolescent girls are participating in the (re)construction of femininity. They aim for a 'new womanhood', challenging traditional ideals and aspiring to become financially independent and live violence-free lives. Girls embody diverse ideals of beauty, from a 'sexy and appealing' image with makeup and revealing clothes to a 'confident and changemaker' identity through natural looks and activism. The research shows that middle-class boys are also (re)constructing masculinities. Some boys challenge patriarchal norms and embrace more inclusive

and progressive ideals. They confront abusive behaviour towards mothers and advocate for gender equality on social media, where they create alternative models of masculinity. Thus, multiple ideals of masculinity and femininity are produced and transformed in relationships and competing spaces. Young people navigate these identities to maintain their respectable middle-class status and a sense of belonging. However, this process can be restrictive and stressful, with young people constantly juggling between different ideals and facing potential stigma or exclusion. Therefore, this thesis argues that the (re)construction of norms and identities should not be seen as solely agentic or oppressive but needs to be understood as a complex set of practices in the context of rapidly changing social environments. They are neither absolute agents nor absolute victims of gender norms, but rather active participants in a intricate and challenging process.

The research findings highlight three key aspects of young people's experience of shame in the context of youth sexuality in Bangladesh. Firstly, shame is mainly related to concerns about losing middle-class status rather than a feeling directed at their own body or sexuality. Young people fear damaging their reputation in the family or among peers and take great care to maintain a respectable image. Secondly, the experience of shame is context-dependent and involves a wide array of emotions. It cannot be universally defined as a negative evaluation of self. Young people experience shame differently in various relationships and situations, such as fear and anxiety about family expectations, feeling awkward in intimate discussions with parents, or empathy for their mothers' embarrassment. Lastly, young people do not always perceive shame as a negative emotion. They may value the sociocultural shame between parents and children about sexuality and deliberately choose to remain silent in discussions. In some cases, shame motivates them to deviate from dominant norms and create new ones, leading to the (re)construction of norms and identities. Chapter 4 shows how girls' experiences of shame motivated them to reconstruct the norms of sexual modesty by posting 'sexy' photos on Facebook wearing makeup and revealing clothes, socialising with the opposite sex, smoking cigarettes in public. This thesis argues that shame functions as a complex mechanism through which young people navigate and negotiate their identities and norms in the middle-class context. It does not solely hinder their choices or actions but can also drive them to transform their identities and challenge prevailing norms. The research provides a nuanced understanding of shame's role in shaping young people's experiences and behaviours related to sexuality and identity.

The thesis proposed policy and intervention recommendations to address adolescent sexuality among middle-class youth in Bangladesh. The recommendations include

developing reliable online sexual health resources, creating safe spaces for discussing sexuality, challenging traditional gender norms, initiating media literacy programs, empowering youth in policy development, providing mental health support, and prioritizing ongoing research and evaluation to adapt policies based on emerging trends.

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Samenvatting

Dit proefschrift wil inzicht geven in de opvattingen en praktijken van seksualiteit van adolescenten in de context van Bangladesh, met een focus op jongeren uit de middenklasse in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In tegenstelling tot eerder onderzoek waarin seksualiteit van adolescenten voornamelijk vanuit een volksgezondheidsperspectief werd onderzocht, onderzoek ik in deze studie de onderhandelingen van adolescenten over seksualiteit- en gendernormen binnen een middenklasse context waarin zij paradoxale boodschappen krijgen over seksualiteit en gender. Aan de ene kant heersen er hetero-patriarchale seksuele en gendernormen met meer rechten en autoriteit voor mannen, strenge normen van maagdelijkheid, weinig interactie tussen jongens en meisjes en gearrangeerde huwelijken. Aan de andere kant worden jongeren via Facebook, Google, YouTube, Hollywood-Bollywood films en romans blootgesteld aan alternatieve (feministische) normen van seksueel genot, voorhuwelijks contact en seks, vrije keuze van levenspartner, onafhankelijke seksuele besluitvorming, alternatieve seksuele identiteiten en gendergelijkheid.

De overkoepelende vraag van dit onderzoek was: hoe (re)construeren Bengaalse stedelijke middenklasse jongeren normen van seksualiteit in hun dagelijks leven? Deze hoofdvraag is beantwoord aan de hand van drie specifieke vragen: 1) Welke normen van seksualiteit en identiteit (re)construeren ze in welke contexten? 2) Hoe wordt deze reconstructie gemedieerd door geslacht en klasse? 3) Welke rol speelt schaamte bij het versterken van die normen?

In hoofdstuk 1 werd de basis gelegd voor dit proefschrift. Hier gaf ik een overzicht van de context van dit onderzoek, legde ik uit waarom adolescenten uit de middenklasse een belangrijk cohort zijn om de sociale transities in het stedelijke landschap van Bangladesh te begrijpen, introduceerde ik de onderzoeksvragen en het conceptuele kader en beschreef ik de methodologie.

Hoofdstuk 2 onderzocht de betekenis van de culturele praktijk van 'het zwijgen' over seksualiteit in de relatie tussen jongeren en ouders. Het niet bespreekbaar zijn van seksualiteit, dat voort zou komen uit een wederzijds gevoel van schaamte tussen ouders en kinderen, wordt wereldwijd en lokaal gezien als een barrière voor het implementeren van seksuele en reproductieve gezondheidsmaatregelen voor jongeren in de lage- en middeninkomenslanden (LMIC's). De onderzoeksresultaten in dit hoofdstuk toonden aan dat jongeren het zwijgen over bepaalde onderwerpen zien en gebruiken als een strategie om zowel hun reputatie als 'moderne' jongere veilig te stellen als om respect te tonen voor de opvattingen van ouders die anders zijn dan

die van hen. De blootstelling van jongeren aan wereldwijde ideeën via internet en Facebook heeft ertoe geleid dat ze seksualiteit heel anders bekijken dan hun ouders. Ze vinden er informatie over, en ontwikkelen een kritische blik op onderwerpen als lichamelijke ontwikkeling, dating, seks voor het huwelijk, maagdelijkheid van vrouwen, vrije huwelijkskeuze, bescherming tegen zwangerschap of seksueel overdraagbare ziekten, porno, masturbatie, en homoseksualiteit. Openheid over deze activiteiten tegenover de ouders zou hun identiteit als het 'goede' meisje/jongen in gevaar brengen en tegelijkertijd een gevoel van schaamte veroorzaken voor beide partijen. In dit hoofdstuk betoogde ik dat zwijgen over seksualiteit in plaats van een teken van onderdrukking in feite als een strategie fungeert om te balanceren tussen een respectvolle ouder-kindrelatie en de vrijheid om aan maatschappelijk bestreden praktijken van gender en seksualiteit deel te nemen. Het stelt hen in staat om te krijgen wat ze nodig hebben en persoonlijke ruimte te claimen zonder hun ouders te beledigen of hun eigen reputatie in gevaar te brengen.

Hoofdstuk 3 richtte zich op intimiteit, een thema dat in hoofdstuk 2 naar voren kwam als een belangrijke bron van zorg voor jongeren, maar wat thuis een verzwegen onderwerp bleef. Hoofdstuk 3 toont aan dat in de context van het hebben van toegang tot wereldwijde ideeën over seksualiteit, jongeren de normen rondom intimiteit herformuleren tot iets dat verder gaat dan hetero-normativiteit, dan iets wat exclusief binnen het huwelijk plaats vindt, en wat alleen seksuele en reproductieve gezondheidsproblemen betreft. Plezier, de behoefte om hun sociale status te behouden en aspiraties om modern en kosmopolitisch te worden, staan centraal in hoe jongeren hun intieme relaties voor het huwelijk begrijpen en ervaren. Hun opvattingen over gepassioneerde liefde, seks, het seksuele verlangen van vrouwen, maagdelijkheid, *victim blaming* en relaties tussen mensen van hetzelfde geslacht zijn aan het verschuiven. Ze gaan openlijk in discussie op Facebook over deze onderwerpen. Ze putten ideeën en idealen uit Hollywood-Bollywood films en houden zich bezig met daten, handen vasthouden en zoenen in het openbaar, samen selfies maken en posten, en discussiëren over intimiteit met leeftijdsgenoten en vertrouwde volwassenen. Dit hoofdstuk toonde aan dat normen en praktijken van intimiteit veranderen van gender segregatie, seksuele onthouding, opgelegde maagdelijkheid en dromen van gepassioneerde liefde naar feitelijke ontmoetingen, voorzichtig daten, het vormen van liefdes relaties en aangaan van seksuele contacten. Jongeren co-construeren en onderhandelen over nieuwe publieke/private grenzen en co-creëren, samen met leeftijdsgenoten en sommige volwassenen, veilige ruimtes door intimiteit te tonen op semi-openbare plaatsen zoals op Facebook en in restaurants. Dit hoofdstuk laat echter ook zien dat terwijl jongeren uit de middenklasse toegang hebben tot middelen die hen in staat stellen om bestaande

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grenzen op te rekken, hun vermogen om normen te reconstrueren en deze nieuwe normen in praktijk te brengen mede bepaald wordt door hun verantwoordelijkheden ten opzichte van hun familie. Hierbij staat het handhaven van hun middenklasse positie en het voldoen aan de globale maatschappelijke grenzen van mannelijke en vrouwelijke respectabiliteit centraal. Deze blijven gebaseerd op ongelijke genderverwachtingen. Mannen ervaren druk om economisch en academisch succesvol te zijn en niet emotioneel betrokken, terwijl vrouwen worden verwacht romantisch, zorgzaam en seksueel zuiver te zijn. Jongeren balanceren op een dunne draad. Hun middenklassepositie versterkt patriarchale normen om een respectabele reputatie veilig te kunnen stellen terwijl het tegelijkertijd toegang geeft tot ideeën en idealen die dezelfde patriarchale normen omver willen werpen.

Hoofdstuk 4 onderzocht een ander thema dat uit de data naar voren kwam: 'aspiraties voor een goed uiterlijk'. Het streven naar 'mooi' zijn verscheen als een fundamenteel element van hoe meisjes uit de middenklasse zichzelf zagen en hoe ze hun beoogde 'goede toekomst' voor ogen hadden. Dit hoofdstuk belichtte de verbanden tussen het dagelijkse leven van jonge vrouwen en de sociaal-culturele transformatie van Bangladesh. Het toonde aan dat schoonheidswensen onder meisjes uit de Bengaalse middenklasse een belangrijk element vormen van hun constructie van zichzelf als een 'nieuw meisje', dat wil zeggen iemand die een moderne onafhankelijke vrouw wil worden. Meisjes gebruiken hun uiterlijk om met schaamte en stigma om te gaan en veilig te stellen wat zij als een 'goede toekomst' zien. Onze analyses toonden aan hoe meisjes betekenissen van vrouwelijke respectabiliteit, gendergelijkheid en hun genderrol reconstrueren in overeenstemming met hun ambitie om moderne en onafhankelijke vrouwen te worden. Hun visie op huwelijk en familie is gevormd door getuige te zijn van hun moeders afhankelijkheid en kwetsbaarheid binnen het huwelijk, en hun eigen ervaringen met het moeten voldoen aan maatschappelijke genderverwachtingen. Dit hoofdstuk ontrafelde de dubbelzinnigheden van vrouwelijke respectabiliteit uit de middenklasse en de dunne lijn tussen respect en schaamte waar meisjes zorgvuldig doorheen moeten navigeren. Terwijl meisjes uit de middenklasse toegang hebben tot middelen om te investeren in hun uiterlijk en te onderhandelen over hun reputatie, worden hun keuzes beperkt door het idee van vrouwelijke respectabiliteit uit de middenklasse. Meisjes kunnen hun individualiteit uiten en oefenen, maar alleen binnen de grenzen van wat als sociaal aanvaardbaar wordt beschouwd. Meisjes positioneren hun lichaam tussen bepaalde categorieën die sociaal gedefinieerd zijn, zoals 'sexy' en 'te sexy', tussen '*pichchi*' (kiddo) en '*khalamma*' (tante), tussen 'cool' en '*oogro*' (asociaal). Dit hoofdstuk liet zien dat het 'nieuwe meisje-zijn' door meisjes tegelijkertijd als bevrijdend en beperkend wordt ervaren. Ze hebben relatief meer controle over hun leven, maar ze gebruiken deze

controle om hun lichaam te onderzoeken en te reguleren om te voldoen aan de normen van moderne, onafhankelijke, succesvolle vrouwelijkheid. Een moderne, onafhankelijke vrouw worden is niet gemakkelijk gezien de groeiende concurrentie om schaarse middelen en de sociale druk om die te bereiken. Er werd betoogd dat hoewel meisjes uit de middenklasse het vermogen hebben om te streven naar een mooi uiterlijk en een goede toekomst, ze meer risico lopen om schaamte te ervaren vanwege de repressieve seksuele normen en een verhoogde druk om moderne vrouwen te worden.

Hoofdstuk 5 onderzocht de betekenis van verschillende dominante idealen van mannelijkheid, thuis en onder leeftijdsgenoten. Het liet zien hoe jongens moeten jongleren tussen verschillende idealen van mannelijkheid om recht te doen aan zowel hun seksuele verlangens als aan het behoud van hun sociale status thuis en hun imago onder leeftijdsgenoten. Thuis blijven hun onderhandelingen gericht op het dominante ideaal van 'goede zoon' dat nadruk legt op academisch succes, respect voor ouders en seksuele onthouding. Daarbuiten, onder leeftijdsgenoten, wordt van jongens verwacht dat ze 'cool' zijn, wat vereist dat ze zich bezighouden met sekspraat, een macho-achtige mannelijkheid op school vertonen, gendergelijke mannelijkheid op Facebook verdedigen en een kosmopolitische levensstijl handhaven. De onderzoeksdata toonden aan dat jongens voortdurend moeten jongleren tussen tegenstrijdige verwachtingen, en dat iemands positie in de hiërarchie afhangt van hoe goed men de regels kent en kan schipperen tussen verschillende normen in relatie tot verschillende groepen en ruimtes. Dat niet kunnen leidt tot sociaal isolement en schaamte. Uit dit hoofdstuk bleek ook dat voor jongens de mogelijkheden om kwetsbaarheid te uiten beperkt zijn. Dit hoofdstuk betoogde dat deze jongere generatie mannen unieke gender-gerelateerde kwetsbaarheden tegenkomt in de context van snelle verstedelijking, een steeds onzekerder wordende arbeidsmarkt en een gebrek aan ondersteuning bij het onderhandelen over hun emotionele en sociale welzijn.

De bevindingen in dit proefschrift werpen een belangrijk licht op hoe jongeren uit de middenklasse zelf seksualiteit ervaren. Het onthult dat hun perspectieven op seksualiteit worden gevormd door verschillende positieve ervaringen, waaronder kennis over hun lichaam, het nastreven van plezier en genot, het streven om er aantrekkelijk uit te zien, het zoeken naar sociale binding, het handhaven van sociale status en het construeren van identiteiten - die allemaal een integraal onderdeel zijn van hun middenklasse-identiteit. De onderzoeksresultaten laten zien dat de zorgen van jongeren minder te maken hebben met gebrek aan informatie en seksuele en reproductieve gezondheidsproblemen als de gebruikelijk focus van eerdere

studies, maar juist vooral betrekking hebben op het verkrijgen van een respectvolle middenklasse status en het veiligstellen van een sterk gevoel van verbondenheid in het gezin, met leeftijdsgenoten en in de samenleving. Deze motivaties beïnvloeden hoe ze normen (re)construeren in verschillende contexten, zoals thuis, op school en op sociale mediaplatforms zoals Facebook. Thuis conformeren ze zich aan dominante normen om de reputatie van hun familie te beschermen en een goed zoon/dochter-imago hoog te houden. Op dezelfde manier versterken ze op de gesegregeerde ruimte van school bepaalde idealen van mannelijkheid en vrouwelijkheid binnen kleinere sociale groepen. Op Facebook daarentegen gaan ze discussies aan met een veel diverse groep jongeren over seksuele progressiviteit, dagen ze traditionele normen uit en omarmen ze kosmopolitische ideeën over gender en seksualiteit. Bepaalde restaurants en cafés bieden ruimte voor gezelligheid met vrienden en dating met intieme partners buiten het kritisch oog van familie en samenleving. Normen variëren in deze verschillende ruimtes en jonge mensen reproduceren, reconstrueren en onderhandelen over deze normen in hun dagelijks leven, gebaseerd op hun streven naar een respectabele middenklasse status en een gevoel van verbondenheid. Het proefschrift benadrukt drie kernaspecten van sociale normen: het bestaan van verschillende normen in verschillende ruimtes, continuïteiten en veranderingen in normen in de loop van de tijd, en de actieve keuzevrijheid van jongeren in het werken met en rond deze normen. Deze aspecten vormen een analytisch kader om de verschuivende en naast elkaar bestaande aard van normen te begrijpen terwijl jonge mensen hun identiteit en relaties vormgeven in de middenklasse context van Bangladesh.

Het onderzoek toont aan dat jongeren uit de middenklasse actief zowel hun eigen identiteit als gendernormen (re)construeren. Adolescente meisjes nemen deel aan de (re)constructie van vrouwelijkheid. In hun streven om een moderne, onafhankelijke vrouw te worden dagen ze traditionele idealen uit, bereiden ze zich voor om financieel onafhankelijk te worden en een leven vrij van geweld te leiden. Meisjes belichamen verschillende schoonheidsidealen, van een 'sexy en aantrekkelijk' beeld met make-up en onthullende kleding tot een 'zelfverzekerde en changemaker' -identiteit door natuurlijke looks en activisme. Uit het onderzoek blijkt dat ook jongens uit de middenklasse mannelijkheid (re)construeren. Sommige jongens dagen patriarchale normen uit en omarmen meer inclusieve en progressieve idealen. Ze veroordelen de vernederingen die hun moeders moeten ondergaan, en pleiten voor gendergelijkheid op sociale media, waar ze alternatieve modellen van mannelijkheid creëren. Zo worden meerdere idealen van mannelijkheid en vrouwelijkheid geproduceerd en getransformeerd in verschillende relaties en ruimtes. Jongeren navigeren door deze identiteiten om hun respectabele middenklasse

status en gevoel van verbondenheid te behouden. Het proces kan echter beperkend en stressvol zijn, waarbij jonge mensen voortdurend jongleren tussen verschillende idealen en geconfronteerd worden met mogelijk stigma of uitsluiting. Daarom stelt dit proefschrift dat de (re)constructie van normen en identiteiten niet alleen als vernieuwend door het individu of als onderdrukkend door de maatschappij moet worden gezien, maar moet worden begrepen als een complexe set van paktijken in de context van snel veranderende sociale omgevingen. Jongeren hebben geen absolute *agency,* noch zijn ze uitsluitend slachtoffer van gendernormen, ze zijn actieve deelnemers aan een complex en uitdagend proces.

De onderzoeksresultaten belichten drie belangrijke aspecten van de ervaring van jongeren met schaamte rondom seksualiteit in de context van Bangladesh. Ten eerste heeft schaamte vooral te maken met de zorgen van jongeren over het verliezen van de middenklasse status, in plaats van met een gevoel van schaamte over hun eigen lichaam of seksualiteit. Jongeren zijn bang om hun reputatie in de familie of onder leeftijdsgenoten te beschadigen en besteden veel zorg aan het behoud van een respectabel imago. Ten tweede is de ervaring van schaamte contextafhankelijk en brengt het een breed scala aan emoties met zich mee. Het kan niet universeel worden gedefinieerd als een negatieve evaluatie van het zelf. Jongeren ervaren schaamte anders in verschillende relaties en situaties, zoals angst en bezorgdheid over familieverwachtingen, zich ongemakkelijk voelen in intieme gesprekken met ouders of het voelen van empathie voor de schaamte van hun moeder. Tot slot ervaren jongeren schaamte niet altijd als een negatieve emotie. Ze kunnen de sociaal-culturele schaamte tussen ouders en kinderen over seksualiteit waarderen en er bewust voor kiezen om te zwijgen over seksualiteit. In sommige gevallen motiveert schaamte hen om af te wijken van dominante normen en nieuwe te creëren, wat leidt tot de (re)constructie van normen en identiteiten. Dit proefschrift stelt dat schaamte functioneert als een complex mechanisme waardoor jongeren kunnen navigeren en onderhandelen over hun identiteit en normen in de context van de middenklasse. Het belemmert niet alleen hun keuzes of acties, maar kan hen ook aanzetten om hun identiteit te transformeren en de heersende normen uit te dagen. Het onderzoek biedt een genuanceerd inzicht in de rol van schaamte bij het vormgeven van de ervaringen en gedragingen van jongeren met betrekking tot seksualiteit en identiteit

Het proefschrift stelde beleids- en interventieaanbevelingen voor om adolescente seksualiteit onder jongeren uit de middenklasse in Bangladesh aan te pakken. De aanbevelingen omvatten het ontwikkelen van betrouwbare online bronnen voor seksuele gezondheid, het creëren van veilige ruimtes voor het bespreken

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van seksualiteit, het uitdagen van traditionele gendernormen, het initiëren van mediageletterdheidsprogramma's, jongeren actief laten meedenken en meewerken in beleidsontwikkeling, het bieden van ondersteuning voor geestelijke gezondheid en het prioriteren van lopend onderzoek en evaluatie om het beleid op basis van opkomende trends voortdurend aan te kunnen passen.

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Curriculum Vitae

Curriculum Vitae

Suborna Camellia was born in Bogura, a northern region of Bangladesh, in 1977. She earned her bachelor's degree in Anthropology and master's in Cultural Anthropology from Jahangirnagar University in Dhaka. As an anthropologist, she has a passion for delving into taboo topics within the realms of sexuality. This PhD thesis represents her commitment to contribute to the field of gender and sexuality.

Before beginning her doctoral journey in 2015, Suborna worked as an anthropologist at the James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, and a few other research organisations in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her work has focused on studying marginalised communities in Bangladesh. As part of her job, she has developed several ethnographic research protocols and tools, interviewed young people living on the margins that included slum residents, people with disability, survivors of violence, sex workers, sexual minority people and children affected by HIV/AIDS.

In 2018, Suborna relocated to Australia, where she has continued her research journey and actively engaged with marginalised communities in Australia, including migrant and refugee communities, indigenous people, mental health patients and victims of disaster and climate change. She has worked with a government public health institution, the South Eastern Melbourne Primary Health Network, and two not-for-profit organisations, Red Cross Australia and The Water Well Project.

CV

Abstract

Abstract

Middle-class youngsters in Dhaka, the quickly developing capital of Bangladesh, are facing contradictory demands. On the one hand they live in a patriarchal society marked by gender inequality expressed in gender segregation, sexual purity, sexual harassment of women and a focus on the male breadwinner. On the other hand, profiting from economic developments and schooling, they have the financial and intellectual resources to explore new spaces and to buy the appliances that can connect them with the views and images of the whole world, including those on gender and sexuality. In this thesis, adolescent sexuality of middle-class girls and boys is explored from their own perspective, and it is studied how these young people navigate in this situation of conflicting demands at home, at school, in Love Lane and on the Internet.

The research sheds light on how their concerns diverge from the usual focus on 'dangers' in scholarly depictions of sexual and reproductive health issues. It challenges the traditional binary view that conceives of adolescents as either passively reproducing or deliberately transgressing dominant norms. Instead, their negotiations of sexuality and gender are intricately tied to their aspirations for modernity and cosmopolitanism, as well as their desire to attain a respectful middle-class standing within their families, peer groups, and society at large. For practitioners and policymakers in the field of sexual and reproductive rights within the country, adopting an emic perspective can prove valuable in understanding the complexities of adolescent everyday experiences and concerns of sexuality, gender and belonging.

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