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Sexuality in Everyday Life in Bangladesh: Documenting Social Class and Generation through a Gender Lens

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Abstract

In this paper, paying attention to age and class differences, I reflect on women's narratives of their lived experiences of sexuality. Sexual inequalities are rising at an alarming rate globally, and studies in Bangladesh reiterate that these inequalities have a gender dimension. The contribution of this study is to provide cross-class and cross-generational analysis of "gendered sexuality" in Bangladesh. Based on 36 in-depth interviews with women from three social classes and three generations from rural as well as urban sites, this paper analyzes to what extent gender appears as a binary power relationship in the process of "knowing" and "experiencing" sexuality across the diverging age groups and class identities. Through a critical feminist analysis of women's narratives, the paper reveals that heterosexuality in Bangladesh operates through a deeply rooted system of institutionalised patriarchy. But there are multiple other determinants: the Bengali tradition of sexual morality; notions of trust between husband and wife; an affective realm of fear, shyness and shame around sexuality; and a social vulnerability and wider insecurity for women. All these factors influence everyday heterosexual relationships differently, and some even open up spaces to allow women to negotiate and have agency in sexual practices.

Keywords: Sexuality, gender, generation, class

Introduction

Inquiries into the politics of a gendered sexuality¹ in Bangladesh would often raise questions such as how necessary is it to study sexuality in the context of a poor country like Bangladesh. Such a question is usually asked to dismiss the legitimacy of sexuality research in any context (Rashid, Standing, Mohiuddin, and Ahmed, 2011) and questioning the necessity of sexuality research implicitly points to taboos that discourage public discussions of sexualities.

As a native of Bangladesh, I grew up within this same context and learned that there were several matters that children were not allowed to know about. Bodily changes, menstruation, love, romance, marriage, and sexual intercourse were considered part of such knowledge that one should not explore – a "forbidden knowledge" – as long as one was not "adult enough". But I further realized that the entrance to this "adult knowledge" was more flexible for boys than girls. My socialization process also informed me that girls needed to be careful about boys, because boys are "bad", naturally inclined to explore adult knowledge, and act "badly", as if they were like adults.

I was privileged to start sharing these experiences with my friends and roommates during university life. We felt that a middle-class upbringing had been nearly the same for all of us, despite the fact that we were from different places. Social disapproval of acquiring information on sexuality before marriage made us more curious, and we discovered that we shared a common experience of "not knowing much". My roommate further told me: "I even wash my brother's undergarments but my undergarments should always be kept far from his gaze; this is what society expects from me". This made me begin to challenge the double standards that society creates for men and women. As

soon as I started to recognize my “secondary position” in a very rigid, male dominated social structure in Bangladesh, it pushed me to dig deeper into exploring different institutions to understand their role in creating and reinforcing women’s subordinate status in society.

Studies in Bangladesh in the context of sexuality have identified that strong gender inequalities regarding “ideal sexual practice” have always existed, and to a large extent, still exist. The construction of sexuality in Bangladesh is shaped by particular social structures and specific cultural ideologies regarding masculinity and femininity. Such ideologies propagate ideas such as the “natural” uncontrolled sexual desire of men, whatever their status; while for women, marriage is the only approved context in which expression and practice of sexuality is deemed appropriate. However, the normative assumptions in these studies maybe contradictory, as “[...] sexuality is not experienced and lived out in a uniform manner” (Huq, 2014, p. 84) and the “real” practice of sexuality can be completely different from an expected “ideal sexual behavior”.

In this paper, paying attention to age and class differences, I reflect on women’s narratives of their lived experience of sexuality and, how gender permeates into these experiences.² The paper considers the processes through which women are informed about “sexual knowledge” and the variations in this process by class and generation. It particularly interrogates, in the process of “knowing” and “experiencing” sexuality, to what extent gender appears as a binary power relationship, and whether there is any change in the degree of power across the varied age groups and class identities. Through a critical feminist analysis of women’s narratives, the paper argues that even though gender exists as a form of polarized power, women may not always identify it as the most oppressive. Understanding gender as the only power relationship between the sexes in fact simplifies the other ways through which power, in its complex forms, is at play in women’s everyday life. Power is multifaceted, and hence, a polarized view of gender may rather obscure other forms of oppression women encounter in their everyday experiences of sexuality.

The Current State of Sexuality Research in Bangladesh

Globally, studies on sexuality can broadly be divided into two streams. In developed countries, there are numerous contributions with regard to sexuality and queer studies; but the exploration of sexuality is much more limited in developing countries (Magar and Storer, 2006). In Bangladesh, there is a vast body of demographic literature that views sexuality solely from the perspective of reproduction, and considers it in the context of population control. Such recognition of sexuality only in relation to procreation is problematic, as it does not give sufficient credence to sexual preferences and rights.

Despite this paucity, there is scholarly literature³ addressing heterosexuality in the context of sex work⁴, gendered expectations of heterosexuality, sexual norms and heterosexual practices in Bangladesh. Most of these studies on heterosexuality have been conducted since 2000. In the majority of these existing studies on sexualities⁵, the portrayal of gendered sexuality is depicted in a similar manner. An example is Rashid (2006b), who, in her ethnographic study of teenage married women in the slums of Dhaka, comments, “the norm is that men are expected to be unfaithful and by nature ‘have uncontrollable urges’ and young women are expected to be loyal and faithful”. Apart from sexual norms, chronic poverty, unfavorable power relations, unpaid dowry demands and reproductive illness due to early marriage make these women vulnerable in conjugal life; they need to fulfill any sexual demand by a husband: “he wants sex all the time and I can’t say no” (Rashid, 2006b, p. 73).

Similarly, Khan, Townsend, and D’Costa (2002) find that the husband usually initiated discussions about sex. The women in their study consider it a culturally appropriate sexual norm to have the husband show his desire, while the wife submitted to his wishes. This study also shows the influence of social change on the sexual behavior of women. Of the 54 women interviewed, 23 agree that they do express sexual desires to their husband in a covert way. Even though the study includes women from a mix of urban and rural sites, with different age patterns, class backgrounds, and education, it does not offer any analysis of the similarities and differences of responses across these differences.

Cash et. al. (2001) focus on the limited source of knowledge regarding sexuality among rural adolescents in Bangladesh. Despite a silence about issues related to sexuality and the strong stigma surrounding premarital sex, they identify that a significant proportion of rural youth are engaged in premarital sexual activities. There are cases where girls may have premarital pregnancies, and the associated social stigma leads many to commit suicide (Huq, 2014; Khan et al., 2002). White (1992, p. 154) in her anthropological study in Kumirpur village of Bangladesh refers to the existence of extramarital sex as “quite common”, as early as 1985-86. Nonetheless, the consequences of getting “caught [having sex]” is much more damaging for a girl than a boy (Cash et al., 2001, p. 227; Huq, 2014, p. 69).

Cash et al. (2001), drawing a connection between age and sexual behavior, argue that people’s sexual behavior and perspectives around sexual morality differ more across generations, than between a boy and a girl within the same generation. Huq’s study (2014) of urban young women⁶ notes that premarital sexual relationships are on the rise, although none of the woman she interviews supports such an argument. The study identifies that the sexual norms these women uphold are constructed socially, enmeshed in both cultural as well as religious beliefs, even though, the degree of attachment to the latter varies. Nonetheless, there may be a difference between what women believe that they are supposed to do, and what they actually do in real life. Which is why the study points to the need for a more intensive investigation of every day sexual practices of women, and this paper contributes to addressing this gap.

Moreover, the majority of these studies focus on the urban middle class with a few on rural as well as urban poor.⁷ To my knowledge, there is no scholarly study that has focused on the experiences of sexuality in the upper class in Bangladesh. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to build upon previous work and put forward a research agenda to further scholarship in cross-class and cross-generational dimensions of sexuality from a gender lens. In this connection, Foucault (1998) suggests, the discursive production of sexuality and subjects is socially constructed, unstable and historically situated. To allow a larger period of time in understanding the shifting changes in sexuality, I have chosen the generations keeping in mind that at least one generation can reflect on the earlier decades of post-independence Bangladesh.

The Research Journey

This study is broadly based on “feminist research methodology.” According to Gorelick (1996, p. 23), “Feminist methodology grows out of an important qualitative leap in the feminist critique of the social sciences: the leap from a critique of the invisibility of women, both as objects of study and as social scientists [...]”. In this paper, I view social relationships from a feminist perspective, from where I maintain that subjugated gender relations are not naturally obtained, rather produced and reinforced by age-old patriarchal notions and our day-to-day practices of such beliefs. Therefore, the selection of instruments for this research was also influenced by such feminist perspectives.

According to Harding (1987) and Hammersley (1995), feminists are often critical of traditional theories, as these have been applied in ways that make it difficult to understand women’s participation in social life. They argue that traditional social science begins its analysis only with men’s experiences. It has asked questions about social life that appear problematic only from a man’s perspective. Therefore, feminists insist that there needs to be theories that better reflect the perspectives of women. Hammersley (1995, p. 46) argues:

To address women’s lives and experience in their own terms, to create theory grounded in the actual experience and language of women, is the central agenda for feminist social science and scholarship [...]. To see what is there, not what we have been taught is there, not even what we might wish to find, but what is.

As a result, feminists emphasize methods that permit the analysis of social phenomena from the perspective of women’s experiences. In keeping with such methods, this paper is based on 36 in-depth interviews conducted in 2012 with women from three different social classes and three generations; they also belong to different rural as well as urban sites. Selection of the respondents involved both purposive and snowball sampling. The idea behind choosing women from different generations was to enable a particular age group to reflect on their knowledge and experience of sexuality with regard to the corresponding socio-cultural context in a particular decade. I assumed that women aged above fifty (older generation, who were born before 1961) are more likely to be able to focus on the first two decades (1970s and 1980s) of post-independence Bangladesh.⁸ Similarly, women aged between 35 and 49 (middle-aged generation, who were born between 1962 and 1976) may better remember the decades of 1990s and beyond; and the younger generation, aged below 35 would be able to reflect on more recent time periods beginning in the year 2000.

As in other contexts, there are many debates around “class” and its application in Bangladesh and there is no consensus regarding labelling people in terms of specific classes. This is reflected in various key sociological and anthropological studies.⁹ Although I decided to follow my respondents’ self-identified class status, their class patterns could also fall in the categories developed by Lewis (2011) and Feldman (2009). Lewis describes three class patterns in post-independence Bangladesh: the elite, the middle class, and the poor who own little or no agricultural land. He also brings into discussion how the political, socio-cultural, and economic transformation in Bangladesh contributed to changes in each class. For instance, he identifies the transformation of Kolkata-based urban cosmopolitan “national elite” into a Bengali-speaking, lower middle class “vernacular elite”. This group further transformed following the liberation war of Bangladesh to include party leaders and political activists around the father of the nation – Sheikh Mujibur Rahman¹⁰, political appointees and a few Bengali army officers who had held rank in the Pakistan Armed Forces. With the further advancement of the country, this elite class broadened its boundary to include highly educated landed groups and a growing business community, both of which possessed international connections and were able to influence the country’s bureaucracy, politics, and economy. Lewis (2011) further identifies new characteristics in the middle class, dividing it into the older “professional” middle class, the urban middle class, and the less educated, local, and business-oriented middle class. Then, there is a shift from the land-based, poor peasant class to the leased farmers who work on others’ land; moreover, rapid urbanization and migration have created a large group of urban “floating” workers (i.e. casual workers such as day laborers, rickshaw pullers, and garment workers) since the 1980s. They, too, belong to the poor social class, and a major part of these floating workers are women. Feldman (2009), in addition, divides the upper class into the elite and the well-off categories, further mentioning two other social classes: the middle class and the poor, the latter mostly referring to women working in the garment industry, as domestic help in wealthy and middle-class homes, or in other urban low-wage employment.

In this paper, “upper class” women refer to those who are from well-off urban families in Dhaka, highly educated¹¹, and mostly belong to the well-established elite class. “Middle class” women are from urban areas, including Dhaka, and from families who possess less wealth than the upper class. Few from this class are highly educated, but the rest have only completed primary school or high school education. Women identified as being from the “poor class” in this research are from rural as well as urban poor families; only a few have attended primary schools, the rest cannot read or write, but can often sign their names. A few of them have some agriculture land, but all of the poor women have to earn wages from low paying jobs so as to manage daily family needs. I have referred to them as the “poor class”, without specifically mentioning whether they are urban or rural, because they originally migrated from villages, and most of them keep moving back to their villages every now and then.

In addition, I thought that selecting women from different geographical locations¹², in addition to the capital city of Dhaka, would allow me to address regional variations in the experiences of women. Hence, among the 36 interviews, 25 were held in Dhaka city, nine were in different semi-urban areas and two were in the Bagunda village in Mymensingh, and Gokarna village in Brahmanbaria. Considering the sensitivity of the research topic, I interviewed the respondents directly without any intermediaries. We were in close proximity during the in-depth interviews, and together explored their memories of growing up, learning about sex, getting married, and undergoing their post-marital sexual life.

Knowing and/or “Getting Used to” Sex

When women were asked to reflect on how they became aware of their bodily changes and “*sharirik shomporko*” (literally “physical relationship” implying sexual interactions, including intercourse), their responses indicated many different sources and processes. Women referred to reading romantic novels and watching English movies, growing up with satellite television, contraceptive advertisements and HIV/AIDS campaigns, overhearing adult relatives’ discussions (*phish phish kore jana*), as well as biology lessons in high schools and sex education curriculum in English medium schools. Both of the latter is a relatively recent phenomenon. They also learned about these matters from conversations with friends in their neighborhood, cousins who were of the same age, as well as other relatives – including husbands, elder sisters, parents, and grandmothers. In addition, insights were gathered from their surroundings – a source mostly applicable to women from the poor class, as discussed below.

The specific processes of acquiring sexual knowledge were distinctive, varying across social classes, generations, and women’s upbringing.

Sexual Awareness and Post-Marital Sexual Life – Women from the Upper Class

Of the four older women in the upper class, three did not have any idea about sexual relations prior to marriage and their husband was the first source of such knowledge. For example, Selina (u/o)¹³, married at the age of thirteen, says:

It was more of how I became used to it. I knew nothing. So, when I was married to your *chacha* (uncle)¹⁴ he did not touch me for months. I was so immature! I used to get scared and shout if he touched me. I hardly had any idea of what a husband is, and what he is for. What to tell you! Even I had no idea of what a kiss is, or that, it also happens in real life. No, nothing. I thought it happens only in English movies, in theatre houses (*chobi ghor*). But actually, it is a part of life! I never thought, never knew before marriage. I rather asked my husband about it, probably he thought, *Ya Allahu!* What would happen if I touch this girl! Then [...Pause]. Then slowly, slowly, day by day, I became more used to the family life (*songsari hoye gelam*). Afterwards, when I become a wife from a girl, and a mother from a wife, I myself do not know.

Selina's reference to being "used to the family life" or becoming "a wife from a girl", is a euphemism used to indicate her first sexual intercourse, also suggests that sex in conjugal life is a wife's responsibility to her husband. For Musarrat (u/o), the whole experience was rather embarrassing:

We did not have any such kind of advertisements then. I did not have any idea. What else can I tell you? I mean, I mean, the whole thing was shameful for me. I felt very bad. I used to think what is this? What has he done to me, oh God! Where am I? The whole feeling was like that.

Contrary to Selina and Musarrat, Nazneen (u/o) despite being from the same generation, knew about physical relationships in a conjugal life. She believes that her natal family environment was unconventionally modern in not posing any restrictions on her reading of romantic novels in high school, from which she became aware of a sexual life.

Restrictions posed on sexual curiosity seemed to diminish, at least relatively, for the middle-aged generation. Women from the upper class in this generation had prior ideas of sexual relationships. Although such knowledge was not derived from any formal sex education, while going through puberty and adulthood, these women became aware of sexuality and sexual expectations from science lessons in high school, through reading novels and watching films, and having discussions with friends and cousins. My conversation with Humaira (u/m) illuminates this:

It was during 1971, I recall consciously, because we still chat about it. I was eight years old then. We used to visit *nanu's* (maternal grandmother) place often. The time was very unstable (*osthir*), if you understand.¹⁵ Our parents were not overseeing us at all. We had a detached room at *nanu's* where my maternal uncle used to live, but was not there for some reasons. So, we used to go and spend time in that room. While we were sitting there one day, one of our maternal brothers¹⁶ who lived at *nanu's* brought us a copy of *Penthouse*; it had a photo of a completely naked girl. We – four or five cousins aged seven to nine – glanced through it, and hid it under the bed mattress before anyone saw us. It was a big thing for us, as if we were on a secret mission! This was the first time I saw a fully naked body. And we had an elder cousin brother, my first door to sexual knowledge, who also joined us there. He told us that he knows who loves whom, and who sleeps with whom. But what people actually do while sleeping together – we did not have any clue about that. He also said he had seen someone kissing. The whole thing was very hush, hush, and this was the start.

Humaira's family was relatively more open towards this type of discussion. After she completed high school, she was allowed to participate in such conversation with her parents and other adult family members. When she studied at the university during the late 1980s, she had a circle of friends that included both females and males, with whom she could speak freely about any matter; this included making explicitly sexual jokes.

The process of sexual awareness became more flexible for women of younger generations; three had sex education from their family and an English medium school curriculum. Bondhon (u/y) reminiscences:

I had a proper sex education from my family when young. When I was in my early eleven/twelve, I was introduced to the idea of the differences between male sexuality and female sexuality, and its psychology. Just before and during my puberty, I had a long session with *baba* (father). He explained what physical and psychological changes happen after puberty, what would happen to me, what happens to boys, and why I should be careful about certain things, what love is, what kinds of touch are permissible and which are not, all these, and I was eleven then. I think, afterwards when I had my first period, I had a conversation with *ma* (mother).

Discussion of post puberty physical changes and sexual issues with one's father, as referred to by Humaira and Bondhon, are not common in Bangladesh. If it ever happens, it takes place only in very "progressive families". Both Humaira's and Bondhon's parental families are well-known in Bangladesh for their progressive thinking and activities. In contrast, Farha (u/y), despite being of a younger generation and from the upper class, did not get any sex education at home. Rather, biology lessons in college life and novels were her eye-opening sources, which, with a bit of imagination on her part, helped her form her ideas about sex. She explains:

There are certain things that do not need explaining, rather, we learn from situations. That is how I became aware [...Pause], I think I guessed, a physical relationship happens between a man and a woman after marriage.

Conversations with these younger women further reveal that it was not unusual for them to learn about sex and associated details in their adolescence. In addition, they have friends of the same age and class for whom the situation was similar, indicating that restrictions on acquiring sexual knowledge has declined among the upper class from the older to the younger generation. Since there is no scholarly literature researching the process of sexual awareness in the upper class in Bangladesh, this trend has remained unnoticed.

Sexual Awareness and Sex Among the Middle Class – Women's Experience

Discussions with women from the middle class revealed that compared to women from the upper class, the scope of sexual awareness in this class was relatively restrained, and again – the restrictions lessened slightly from the older generation to the younger. Among the four older women, Nazu (m/o) and Nasima (m/o) was not aware of sex before marriage. As is obvious in Nazu's (m/o) response:

I knew nothing. Ha..., ha..., ha... [Laughter]. I just got married, and that was it. I was very young then. Moreover, women were not as clever (*chhalak*) as now. Women were too simple, and so was I. I could not understand; neither had I heard of such things. Actually, as I was a wife (*bou manush*), Allah did not teach me these things. And people back then were shy. Not shameless like these days. We were too shy! We bathed early in the morning! So that no one can understand, nobody could ever figure out. And now! Does anybody consider a proper time for these things? (*Ekhon ki kono somoy ache naki esober?*) Does anybody care even what others may think?

Nazu thinks that for a woman, staying sexually naïve is natural and divinely ordained. Her reference to bathing in the early morning denotes the socio-cultural practice of having a shower after sexual intercourse, therefore becoming pure before one enters again into everyday activities. Hence, "bathing" as a symbol that one has had sex, used to be completed early while other family members were asleep. Nazu's objection towards couples from the present generations for having sex at any time of the day, echoes a particular social ethos: sex is a private matter, and should be performed with secrecy. Among the other two women, Ferdous (m/o) had some vague ideas, yet understood the sexual part of life only after marriage. She is very critical about sexual knowledge before marriage as it may encourage pre-marital sexual practice. Such sex does not fit her understanding of "proper" sexual behavior:

Things were not that open before, at least there was some sort of shame. Oh God! What happens in our *Dhanmondi* Lake! I wonder from which family these girls are? They sit there with boys as if they are glued to each other in such an embarrassing way that you will have to take your eyes off. Physical relationship (*sharirik somporkow*) before marriage is not right. It is sinful. And I have seen these relationships do not lead to marriage at the end. They break up.

Ferdous's understanding of "proper" sexual behavior further unveils the gendered social order of sexuality; I come to this point later in the paper. Lili (m/o) is the only woman from the older generation who was informed about sexual relationships after puberty. Lili recalls:

We started chatting about menstruation among the same age(ish) friend circle and with married sisters. Then it moved to pregnancy – after marriage a husband and wife make relations (*biyer madhdhome shami stri er somporkow hoy*) which may result in pregnancy.

Saida (m/m) and Barnali (m/m), both from the middle-aged generation, became somewhat aware about sex as a result of discussions with friends, watching movies, glancing at advertisements for condoms, and HIV-AIDS campaigns. Yet, both confirm that after marriage they formed clearer ideas through practical experience. Doli (m/m) and Tamanna (m/m) on the other hand, state that they had no idea of physical relationships before marriage, and both were informed by their husbands after marriage. As is evident in Doli's words below:

I first came to know (about sex) from my husband. I did not know before. I could not know because the family I grew with, my *ma*, my *baba* they were very busy, always stayed out. I did not understand much.

Similarly, Tamanna explains:

To tell the truth, I was from a very simple family. I lost my father long ago. My mother was a person with strong ideals. I had five siblings, all very busy. So, I did not know anything. I came to know after marriage; he explained to me. [...]. There are guys who become annoyed at such ignorance, I know. But he wasn't. Moreover, he made me understand what to do, and how to do it. He said, "Go wash your body, use water". It happened this way, just happened. Slowly, slowly I got used to it.

Compared to these two generations, all four women from the younger generation knew more about these topics and they thought sexual intercourse happens between a husband and a wife after marriage. Whereas Champa (m/y) was informed by novels and her *bhabi* (elder brother's wife), Manila (m/y) had discussions with friends of the same age. She grew up in a semi-urban town and recalls one newlywed female neighbor who had come to visit her natal family with her husband after marriage. Relatives and neighbors were making "sexual jokes" (*rosheer kotha*) with her. Manila believes these jokes contributed to her understanding. It is important to mention that such sexual humor is widely practiced in rural areas, as was revealed through my conversations with poor women; I come to this later in the paper. Lucy (m/y) was exposed to some ideas during her late teens from a female cousin, who was studying biology. She does not believe the media gave her any clear message that contributed to her sexual knowledge. Rather, during her stay in university residential halls, one of her roommates got married. This opened up some scope for discussions about sexual relationships with her roommates, and within her circle of friends. But she also recalls a funny memory from her childhood:

There was a wall calendar in my *mama*'s (mother's brother) place. It had a picture of a condom in it with the word condom written beneath. I asked my aunt what is a condom? She laughed! She then said, "You won't understand now. When we marry you off, your husband will make you understand".

Unlike Lucy, Koni (m/y) refers particularly to the media as having enriched her knowledge. This is evident in her account below:

Umm...I think, actually in school life the whole thing was forbidden. I was not even allowed to express any interest about these issues. And you know social expectations from girls are different. Boys of the same age were watching blue-films [Porn movies] [...], but we were not allowed. That is why I did not know in my school life. I did not even know how a baby is born. I thought [Big laugh], when a woman wants a baby her belly opens up, and then the baby comes out from her tummy [Big laugh]. Then when I started college, there was a sketch of a male and a female body in the biology book, but it was not very clear. By that time, I had grown curious about physical relationships, what happens and how, but I could not ask anyone about it, right? When I started going to university, there was a turning point: there were light-hearted discussions (*halka kothabarta*) with roommates or friends, and I started watching English movies on the computer. So, then I thought, ok, it starts with a kiss and then goes on to something else. But still they do not show the entire thing. I guess, the first time I got a clearer idea from a movie, what it was called...umm...*Basic Instinct*...Yes. The girl¹⁷ was on top, and doing this and that, I got sort of ideas, but still was not very sure. Then I had taken a course called *Reproductive Health Issues*, which had a big picture of that [indicating penis] which further clarified it. Then gradually as I watched more English movies it became more obvious, then after practical experience, yes, everything became clear.

Koni's account also points to the different social expectations towards boys and girls with regard to "ideal" sexual behavior (also echoed by Humaira).

The Poor Class and Sexual Awareness: Rural vs. Urban Upbringing

Experience of sexual awareness is significantly different for women from the poor class. I found from those whom I interviewed that the process of sexual learning did not vary according to generation, but was instead, determined more by the location where they grew up.

Of the twelve women interviewed, ten¹⁸ grew up in rural villages, and knew about physical relationships before their own marriage. Among them, Razia (p/o) and Sokhina (p/y) obtained sexual knowledge from their *bhabi*, Khadiza (p/y) from her elder sister, Shamsunnahar (p/o), Minu (p/o) and Rina (p/m) from their maternal grandmothers, who used to make sexual jokes about marriage and a husband's love. Minu recalls:

When I became adult (*sabalika holam*) my playmate (*khelar sathi*) was leaving me one day, as she got married, and I was crying about her leaving. My grandmother (*nanu*) was laughing. She made fun of me, and told me "soon you will too be going to your *shamir ghor* (husband's house). *Shamir ghor* is great fun (*onek moja*). He will adore you, and then, you will never want to come back".

Shamsunnahar, Minu, and Khadiza's reference to sexual humor as a way of engaging in a dialogue regarding sexual intercourse and male genitals, is largely practiced by rural people. An indication of this appeared in an early study by White (1992, p. 153) who calls it "sexual joking", implying that such jokes were largely used by rural women to ridicule male sexual organs. But in my research, they seemed to be used differently, with other connotations. The manner in which they were referred to by the women I interviewed implied that they had been present in rural culture for a long time. Perhaps this is why, Rabeya (p/m), Hena (p/m), and Tushar (p/y) could not speak explicitly about how they became sexually aware. All they mentioned is that they learnt (about it) from their surroundings "in the process of growing up". While it is possible sexual jokes in rural culture may have contributed to their knowledge, from my observation of the context, another source predominates. Poor people living in rural huts (or urban slums) have only one room in which to dwell. This is usually partitioned temporarily with a big piece of cloth or *sari* or large furniture to arrange some privacy for the married couple in a family. Sometimes, it is just the married couple that gets a chance to sleep on the only bed in a hut, with other family members sleeping on the floor. Sexual privacy, thus, is a rare occurrence in poor families, where children grow up seeing or hearing sex taking place. For instance, Rina (p/m) mentioned that she saw her parents sleeping together several times. Even though she did not mention any explicit sexual activity, she admitted that her knowledge developed from seeing her parents sleeping together, in addition to her grandmother's sexual jokes.

The two poor women who did not have any prior sexual knowledge before marriage are Parvin (p/m) and Eti (p/y). As a child, Eti migrated to Dhaka with a woman who was her neighbor, someone whom she used to call *Apa* (elder sister). There was no one to tell her about marriage and sexual life. Eti was married before her puberty; she recalls:

So, the first few times when we used to have [...Pause], I mean *Apa* told me everything. *Apa* told my husband that I was too young to understand everything. So, he has to help me understand. I did not even see my first menses yet. It started one year after my marriage. Afterwards, gradually everything became fine.

However, with more conversations between us, at one point, it seemed that she started feeling more comfortable, and started unveiling her intimate sexual experiences. She reflected:

When I was with my husband for the first time, I recall, I was left unconscious for two days. I was too young! Even my menses had not started yet. He was a bit older than me. When we became close, for the first time my blood broke¹⁹. I was unconscious for two full days. Then *Apa* got us a doctor, she brought the doctor into our home, I guess she did not want anyone to know about this. The doctor said I was too young, inexperienced, and he was a bit old for me. So, his *chahida* (sexual demand) was to some extent unendurable for my body. On top of that, I had not had my first menses yet. So, the blood broke, which further added to the problem. I had very painful times. And he also got scared, and did not try to come close for six months. He said, “you get well first, and the day when you will tell me ‘today I like you, I want to be with you’, only then I will. Otherwise, I won’t come closer to you”. But my husband used to adore me a lot. And also, I would listen to his every word. You know, my husband was very good looking! I mean, film star Shahrukh Khan²⁰ is nothing to his beauty.

The above narrative thus suggests, Eti, in the absence of any sexual knowledge, had her first intercourse with her husband. Quite similar to Eti’s experience, Parvin was sent by her parents during her childhood to serve as a live-in worker to urban families. One of the families she worked for married her off to a man who already had a wife and a child, yet concealed the information. Becoming sexually informed was not possible for her before marriage, as evident in her following conversation:

I did not even start menstruating (*shorir kharap*) then²¹. So how could they tell me? Moreover, they are not my relatives. Why would they care for me? But they were really kind, and so they thought of my marriage. They thought he has a good job, earns well, and I will stay well with him. But secretly he had another wife and a child from her; that they did not know.

She further adds:

A husband and wife live together. I used to go to our room (*ghor e dhuktam*). But I did not understand. He slept on the *chouki* (bed), while I slept on the floor. This is how we lived. Afterwards I started sleeping with my *shashuri* (mother-in-law). When he used to try coming close to me, or utter sweet words (*bhalo kotha*), I used to get afraid, and stayed with her. She told him “When she understands, she herself will come to you. Do not force her, you have another wife”. Meanwhile, many days have passed. Then one day my *soteen* (co-wife) went to Bhola²². My *nonod* (husband’s sister) and *shashuri* left me with him for the night, and slept in another place. Then what else! I cried and screamed, and from then my life started. I mean, I got it, and I felt from there: what a husband is and what it means to be a wife, and what a husband’s love is. After that he loved me a lot, took good care of me, and told me to stay with him. But still [...] [Pause] I could not stay more. My *soteen* came back, and so did my anger for him. I did not feel like staying anymore, I left. You know what I mean, we cannot force our mind.

Parvin therefore left her husband and started living as a live-in worker for another family in Dhaka, where this interview took place. Despite being a poor woman, Parvin was bold enough to take such a decision. As discussed in Rashid (2006b), the physical insecurity of living alone, socioeconomic deprivation, and a fear of marital instability, all widespread concerns among poor young women, makes many of them submit to sexual double standards that allow a man to have polygamous sexual relationships, while demanding that a woman should live a controlled sexual life.

Unlike the ten poor women who spent the major part of their life in their rural natal home, both Parvin's and Eti's experiences suggest that even though they are from the poor class, their upbringing in urban areas far from their natal families did not help to create sexual awareness. The narratives discussed here indicate that women have a diverse range of insights into sexual knowledge and different ways of learning about sex, before and in marriage, where their experiences also vary.

Gender, Power and Sexuality – What Do Women's Narratives Tell Us?

What connotations do these narratives bear in relation to gender, power, and sexuality? While attempting to analyze the connections among these varied experiences, I also want to be mindful not to reduce their complexities. On this note, White (1992, p. 37) seems particularly relevant:

Class can only be a simplifying construct which reduces rather than expresses the complexity of experience. It can never present drawstring categories into which empirical cases can simply be bundled.

Nevertheless, the influence of gender, class, and age on matters related to sexualities, and heteronormativity in particular, are important and need to be subjected to critical investigation. Karim (2014, p. 54) writes, "Gender, class and age are significant factors in creating hierarchies, discriminations and exclusionary spaces that are new but influential, especially in sexual politics". In that vein, my intention here is to open up the key focus of the paper: to what extent gender, and its associated power relations, shape women's experiences of sexuality. Jackson (2006, p. 107) provides a noteworthy insight in this regard:

...the empirical connections between them [gender and sexualities] require exploration and should be neither presupposed nor neglected. They are important in order to appreciate the ways in which sexual practices, desires and identities are everywhere embedded within non-sexual social relations ..., most, if not all, of which are gendered.

In my discussions with the women interviewed, there are two distinct areas where a man in Bangladesh occupies a relatively more privileged position with regard to sexuality than a woman does. Firstly, the socio-cultural boundaries to exploring sexual knowledge are relatively more open for boys than for girls. It is also evident in Koni's (m/y) and Humaira's (u/m) view that most social restrictions do not apply to boys. Rather, boys are thought to be naturally inclined to explore sexual knowledge. This is further evident in the interviews, as many of the women across different social classes and generations lacked clear knowledge about sexual intercourse. For them it was a man as husband who was their first access to such knowledge. Having said that, the conversations outlined in this paper also suggest that over time, with women's increased opportunity for education, and access to global culture via satellite TV channels, romantic novels, movies, and other media, there have been socio-cultural transformations, creating shifts in family values with regard to sexuality across different social classes. Consequently, the aforesaid gendered restrictions were different for women, based on their distinct class and generational identities, an aspect which existing sexuality scholarship has not addressed. Sexuality studies that address the gendering of sexual awareness need to incorporate the complexity and heterogeneity of their interconnections.

Despite the experience of gendered sexuality, Koni and Humaira, both graduates in Gender Studies, are the only women to question the gendered double standards of the society. Other women (for example, Selina (u/o), Nasima (m/o), Doli (m/m), and Eti (p/y), to name a few) instead appreciated their husbands by referring to them as "smart" and educated, conferring on them knowledge of the practices and experiences of sexuality, as well as the ability to make their wives sexually aware. Tamanna (m/m), whose husband was not disappointed at her sexual naïveté, unlike other men who become annoyed at their wife's "ignorance", considers herself lucky. Moreover, Musarrat's (u/o) feeling of embarrassment about sex in the initial few days after her marriage and Parvin's (p/m) as well as Eti's (p/y) recollection of their first sexual experience may sound much like "forced sex" i.e. rape from a Westernized viewpoint;

but these women retrospectively do not see it in this way. According to them, the discomfort arose because they did not have prior idea about sexual intercourse, but they consider what happened to them sexually as an expression of their husband's love for them.²³ Women in Khan et al.'s (2002, p. 252) study similarly consider such practices as an indication of husband's love: "[...] though forced sex is bad, they take it as a sign of love from their husbands; to them it indicates that they cannot live without having sex with their wives". Several women in my research recall the absence of displeasure in their husbands at their wives' sexual ignorance with respect and gratitude, thereby indicating that sexual practices and sexual experiences must be thought of in terms of the specificity of a particular society and within its particular cultural context. Despite this, the irony that we note from the interview responses is that on the one hand, Bangladeshi society expects a woman to know less about matters related to sex, while, on the other hand, from the moment that she is married, a key wifely obligation is to satisfy her husband sexually. Such sexual norms point to ambivalent social expectations towards women: while sexual ignorance before marriage is a sign of a "good woman", ensuring husband's sexual satisfaction is considered a prerequisite to being a "good wife".

The right to sexual pleasure is another area revealed by my research, demonstrating that a man holds a privileged position with regard to this matter, as compared to a woman. In most of the women's narratives, sexual pleasure and satisfaction is identified as a "manly" requirement. Women are expected to adjust to their spousal needs and their own sexual pleasure is rarely mentioned. This is also noted in other studies²⁴, which conclude that in Bangladesh in the name of "ideal" sexual behavior a gendered standard prevails, approving uncontrolled sexual desire by a man, and positing that sex for a woman is essentially passive, marital, and procreative. Contrary to this notion, the women's narratives in my research further suggest that this gendered divide is neither rigid nor clear cut. This is evident in the fact that some of the women interviewed possess some negotiating power with regard to sexual intercourse. For instance, Saima (u/m) referred to her newly married life, when she too enjoyed pleasurable sex with her husband, Lucy (m/y) discussed with her husband what types of sexual acts make her happy, and Parvin (p/m) managed not to sleep (i.e. have sex) with her husband despite the fact that he wanted to. As examples challenging a discourse of "women-as-victim"²⁵, they indicate that women are not entirely powerless in their sexual encounters. The power balance may tilt depending on different situations and which particular among women's multiple identities come into play.

Nevertheless, Nazu's disparaging comment that married couples nowadays (indicating the younger generation) engage in sex at any time including daytime, points towards the disappointment in failing to live a culturally approved "ideal" sex life. There are also local religious beliefs that sanction male supremacy. Such beliefs do play a role; as is evident in several responses from women who referred to religiosity for the purpose of disciplining the young generation, especially young girls, against "sexual immorality". For instance, Ferdous's understanding of "appropriate sexual behavior" seems not to apply to men – she does not comment on the boys who are with the girls at *Dhanmondi* Lake. Her comments bring attention to how religious views are deployed to justify sexual and gender morals. Although Ferdous is not a strict follower of religious doctrines, she draws on it to validate an everyday moral order. As White (2012, p. 1442) describes: "[w]here things do not just come naturally, however, religion may be brought in with society to ensure proper behavior [...]". For Ferdous the forfeit for such "sexual immorality" is the failure of such relationships to ever culminate in marriage, which according to her is the ultimate goal of love. Ferdous not only advocates for a moral sexual life, but also encourages the construction of female "docile bodies" (Foucault, 1995), "not through punishment, but by teaching [women] to accept those expectations as their own and to live as if they might be punished at any moment" (Foucault, cited in Bartky, 2010, p. 76).

Consequently, there is an oppressive power that women encounter in everyday experience of sexuality, but is it only exercised by a man over a woman? What about cultural norms, and traditions that legitimize hegemonic sexuality, what about patriarchal ideologies that are even largely carried forward by women themselves? These questions and the discussions drawn above in this paper signify that there is no single source of power that controls heterosexuality and regulates heteronormativity. Whatever it is – perhaps it is oppressive gender relations, culture, or norms – they operate through a system of institutionalized patriarchy where multiple sources of powers are at play.

Rethinking “Gendered Heterosexuality” in Bangladesh – Concluding Thoughts

The class-based and intergenerational narratives in my research reveal that heterosexuality in Bangladesh operates through a deeply rooted system of institutionalized patriarchy, where the dominant traditional belief is that sexual exploration as well as sexual pleasure is a masculine trait. But if sexuality is acutely gendered, as is also suggested in the existing sexuality scholarship on Bangladesh, my research suggests two other important aspects. Firstly, a cross-class and cross-generational analysis of women’s narratives reveals that this gendering varies based on the time of upbringing as well as class. These considerations, contributing to more nuanced accounts of gendering of heterosexuality, have not hitherto been addressed in the existing sexuality scholarship on Bangladesh.

Secondly, the degree to which a woman might embody male dominance within a heterosexual relationship can be different based on multiple determinants which shape their everyday lives. These determinants include – the Bengali tradition of sexual morality which applies to both a man and a woman, albeit in varied forms; notions of trust between married couples; an affective realm of fear, shyness and shame around sexuality; and a social vulnerability and wider insecurity for women. Thus, the preferred situation for a woman is to sustain her conjugal relationship at any cost rather than live alone.²⁶ These factors influence everyday heterosexual relationships and some open up spaces to allow women to negotiate and assert their agency in sexual practices. For instance, whereas for upper and middle-class women from older generations, sex was considered an extension of marital obligation towards a husband, for several women who were middle-aged and younger, there were examples where women believe that sex is for the enjoyment of both partners. These examples call for the need to move away from a simple articulation of gender and heteronormativity in terms of a polarized power relation between a man and a woman, and instead acknowledge the many other influences on everyday heterosexual practices. Accordingly, in the analysis of heterosexuality and normativity, my findings make the case for why it is necessary to explore how the social, cultural, and political intersect with binary gender power relations to produce variations in women’s understandings and practices of sexuality.

Endnotes

¹ In this paper, my application of the term “sexuality” refers to (but is not limited to) the embodied sexual experiences of the body, whether male or female, from forming specific identities to practicing sexuality, social relationships of power, and their ideological and symbolic framing.

² This paper is derived from my doctoral research at the University of Sussex, 2011-2015. I am highly indebted to the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, UK for awarding me a generous scholarship to pursue my PhD at Sussex, UK.

³ See for example, Ahmed et al. (1987), Caldwell et al. (1998), Cash et al. (2001, pp 225-227), Duza (1989, p. 127), Huq (2014), Karim (2012), Khan et al. (2002), Rashid and Michaud (2000), Rashid (2000; 2006b), Rashid et al. (2011), Sultana (2011), and White (2012).

⁴ See for detail, Huq (2008), Karim et al. (2008), and Rahman and Sultana (2012).

⁵ Ahmed et al. (1987), Caldwell et al. (1998), Huq (2008; 2014), Kabeer (2000), Khan et al. (2002), Karim (2012; 2014), Rashid and Michaud (2000), Rashid (2000; 2006b), and Rashid et al. (2011).

⁶ Factory girls, university students, and women with religious training.

⁷ See for instance, Caldwell et al. (1998); Cash et al. (2001); Karim (2012; 2014); Khan et al. (2002); Rashid and Michaud (2000), and Rashid (2000; 2006a and 2006b).

⁸ After nine months long liberation war against Pakistan, Bangladesh earned independence on 16th December, 1971.

⁹ See for instance, Feldman (2009), Haque (2002), Lewis (2011), and White (1992; 2012).

¹⁰ The first elected Prime Minister in post-independence Bangladesh.

¹¹ Excluding a few who were married and therefore could not continue education after high school or college.

¹² These locations were selected based on my professional and kin networks; initial informal contact was made with different women through my networks to approach them for taking part in the in-depth interviews.

¹³ The first initial letter next to each woman's name stands for her class status, and the last letter indicates her generation category. For example, "u", "m", and "p" stand for upper, middle, and poor, respectively; "y", "m", and "o" indicate younger, middle-aged, and older generation women, respectively.

¹⁴ Although Selina's husband was not my uncle, her application of this relational term is a "traditional way" of referring to one's own husband when talking to others, instead of using his name. Such practice is largely influenced by traditional religious beliefs in the region: pronouncing one's husband's name is a shameful act.

¹⁵ As stated before, 1971 is the year of Bangladesh's (then East Pakistan) independence war against West Pakistan.

¹⁶ maternal cousin

¹⁷ Indicating Catherine Tramell (starred by Sharon Stone) in *Basic Instinct 2*. She acted nude in several erotic shots in this movie that include explicit sexual intercourse.

¹⁸ Although these ten women grew up in villages, nine of them migrated to urban areas later, either in search of employment or due to marriage. However, six out of the nine women go back to their villages every now and then. During my interviews these nine women were staying in their urban locations.

¹⁹ Eti's reference to "blood broke" indicates the tear of hymen, resulting in pain and a blood shed. As in many Islamic countries, in Bangladesh a belief persists that a woman should bleed during her first sexual intercourse after marriage, which is a proof of her virginity.

²⁰ A very popular Indian film star.

²¹ "*Shorir kharap*" or being unwell is a locally used term for menstruation.

²² A coastal district, situated at the lower southern part of Bangladesh.

²³ Although these women retrospectively considered "forced sex" as a symbol of their husband's love, anecdotal evidence suggests that there are women who find such experience traumatic and even run away from their marriage as a result.

²⁴ Caldwell et al. (1998), Cash et al. (2001), Karim (2014), Khan et al. (2002), Rashid and Michaud (2000), Rashid (2000; 2006b), and Sultana (2011).

²⁵ A common manner of describing the Third World women, present in various development discourses, characterizes them as absolutely powerless with respect to sexual matters (Undie, 2013).

²⁶ Obviously, there are anomalies; for instance, Saida (m/m), Eti (p/y), and Parvin (p/m) chose divorce rather than putting up with what they perceived to be their husbands' oppression.

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