

## Repressions Occurring to Women's Body: Exploring the Body Politics of the Society

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**Abstract:** Women of Bangladesh are coming out of domestic spaces and getting themselves engaged in different economic, social and other forms of development sectors. Sometimes this involves managing their family without the involvement of any male member. But still societal perception regarding the status of women is connected with their bodies and women struggle to attain any sort of control over their own bodies. Rather patriarchal state and society control their bodies through different types of laws, regulation and violence. These oppressions occur not only among households or within marriage but also workplace, educational institutions, and different public places. State and society validate these oppressions through their laws and regulations. However, women are not accepting these rather resisting through their everyday actions and sometimes bargaining with those by accommodating another patriarchal ideology.

### 1. Introduction:

"Good girls go to heaven"- this widespread narrative morally cautions females to be 'good girls' by performing cultural ideologies and values. Gatens (1999: 224) explains this as a political body where societal ideologies and regulations are interlinked in the process. The normative understanding of "good girl" is perceived, enacted, and resisted differently among different cultural groups. Among Muslim women in Bangladesh this means wearing a veil or head covering, limiting mobility to within the domestic household sphere, industriously engaging in household chores, sacrificing personal educational and career ambitions, repressing one's own sexuality - yet remaining forever receptive to a husband's advances, accepting culturally mandatory bodily modifications, and acquiescing to sets of rules that offers undue advantages to other male or female members of the family. Women's bodies are 'disciplined' in terms of cultural rules for clothing, marriage, childbearing, and other responsibilities (Alam 2018). According to Turner (2008), culture imposes its rules and regulations to the people and represses its member. Various kinds of violence are the way or outcome of these repressions. Violence against women in Bangladesh is a result of multiple intersecting cultural, political and economic factors which position women as expendable bodies. These are mostly done by their husbands and intimate partners, which is widely pardoned (Schuler and Islam 2008). In rural areas of Bangladesh, domestic violence is very usual (Bates et al. 2004), just like everyday matter in women's lives (Rahman 2018). Here most of the women have experienced spousal violence (Johnston and Naved 2008: 375). Gender roles and male authority portrayed social and cultural regulations

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trigger such oppression to women in household and societal level (Rahman 2018). But that sexual oppression against married women goes unreported because of no legislation against criminalized sexual oppression within marriage. Even though forced sex, or rape occurs within marriage, laws deny addressing domestic violence if there is no injury (Johnston and Naved 2008). Besides, repressions do not occur in isolation; ideas and practices related to the family, community, and nation, along with structures of religious, economic and political practice are interconnected in this process. Also, patriarchal social norms jointly repress women and validates those that eventually repress women's body continually.

Comprehending the nature of repression as well as the intersectional relationships that influence its forms are more significant in this stage to be able to put a stop to the intergenerational transfer of violence against women in Bangladesh, and gender inequity more generally. Intersectionality stipulates a lens to examine individual's experiences of privilege, oppression, and resistance they have gone through for their intersecting identities, and also the structures that generate these identities (McCall 2005). These intersecting identities are institutionally rooted and multilayered in case of women's subordination (Cho et al. 2013). Moreover, the patriarchal social system, religious norms, capitalistic social structure are intertwined behind validating male domination, and peripheralizing women in Bangladesh (Rahman and Khanam 2008). As women among patriarchal society are not always silent and keep bargaining with it (Kandiyoti, 1988), women in Bangladesh do not think themselves powerless or without agency. Rather they do have power which is different than man (Alam 2018). For example, divorce rate has increased now a days because of spousal violence. One divorce takes place every hour in Dhaka, and most of those are coming from women (The Daily Star 2020). I take this as women's agency too, as these are the outcome of their empowerment and decision-making capability.

My article is based on secondary sources. Through these secondary sources, I have tried to explore different types of women's bodily oppressions, societal perceptions to these, and women's agency within the patriarchy. I have also tried to connect my writing with Public Anthropology by explaining its impact on Public Anthropology.

## **2. Off-stage commentaries:**

Women are subordinated and inferior to men in every known society because of their patriarchal structure (Ortner 1972:70). Women are expected to be subordinated than men in both public and private places (Ahmed et al. 2004). Ortner (1972) helps to explain the reason of this universality of female subordination. According to her, there are three universal cultural fact drives women's subordination universally; i) cultural ideologies that devalue women, also devalue their roles, tasks and products, ii) symbolically attributing them as impure, and iii) socially and culturally excluding them from highest power of the society. Patriarchy restricts women's mobility, reject their liberty over themselves and their own property, and control them from getting legal rights (Sultana 2010:

7). Cultural interpretations of religious doctrine and certain religious practices have also historically been mobilized to control women's bodies. Cultural and religious categories of purity and impurity continue to be relevant among Hindu and Muslim community in Bangladesh. Here, Muslim women are not allowed to pray, or Hindu women are not allowed to join to worship when they are menstruating (Deb et al. 2015). This notion of pure or impure is not relevant for male bodies though. Talking about women's body is also a taboo in Bangladesh. Sometimes patriarchal society target their body to silence them or bring them back to private space (Gama 2018). But "Scenario was not always the same, rather in pre-modern societies, body was the base to carry social status, family position, tribal affiliation, age, gender and religious condition" (Turner 1991: 4). Turner (1991: 4) insists that body metaphors remain present today, but these are more "obvious and direct".

Being a part of patriarchal society, women in Bangladesh go through gender disparities, discrimination, oppressions, physical, psychological, and economic violence also, which drag them into suicide and even homicide (Ahmed et al. 2004). Among many societies including Bangladesh, these violence and oppressions remain unreported and unheard to anyone because of the patriarchal norms, values, victim blaming, shame, fear, guilt, social taboo connected with victimization (Ahmed et al. 2004). Sometimes women's mobility is also being limited from going outside to work or forced to practice purdah (Seymour and Peterman 2018). These patriarchal norms and violence are connected with women's bodily oppression, are being attributed using their body and also oppressing their body repeatedly. In my paper I attempt to examine how different kind of violence occurring to women and patriarchal socio-cultural norms are interlinked simultaneously repressing women's body. On the other hand, they are using these bodily notions to oppress women's body and validating those by using same bodily notions which provoke and reproduce women's bodily oppression over and over. But various research has not always focused this, rather they have focused on a specific violence and the reason behind this. My paper is very relevant in this context because I have tried to explore the connection of violence against women occurring to Bangladesh and their connection to women's bodily oppression. Women have specific strategies to deal with the oppression which also remain unexplored by most of the research which is another relevance of my paper.

### **3. Connection with Public Anthropology:**

According to Borofsky (2019), the aim of public anthropological research should be to benefit others, including research communities. Public Anthropology suggests going beyond field, beyond academy and address other's problems and concerns that would help them not just ourselves (Borofsky 2019: 218). Public Anthropology is also socially relevant, theoretically informed, and politically engaged ethnographic scholarship which deals with public and real-life problems and issues (McGranahan 2006: 256). Moreover, Public Anthropology is concerned with improving the life circumstances through research, capacity

development and policy change and works to relieve human suffering (McGranahan 2006: 264). Gender discrimination, violence against women and women's bodily oppression is a critical concern for women in Bangladesh, these are not isolated rather interconnected, validate each other, which reproduce these oppression and violence again and again. I have tried to explore these interconnected bodily oppressions occurring to women in different names, different ways but create further possibilities of the same violence. My paper aspires to contribute to a better understanding of the ways in which women in Bangladesh are bodily oppressed, might work to overcome the repression they endure, and to realize their Human Rights. Thus, it would impact on Public Anthropology by dealing real life problems of my research community.

#### **4. Bodily oppressions to women:**

Bangladesh is a culturally conservative patriarchal country with controlled privilege for women (Biswas et al. 2017). Gender disparities against women existing in the society inferior them and violates their basic human rights (Sultana 2010). Patriarchal social norms, values, and customs of our society subordinate and at the same time validate male authority over them which provoke violence against women (Biswas et al. 2017). "Male domination and women's subordination are the basic tents of Bangladeshi social structure which destroys women's self-respect, self-confidence and self-esteem and sets limits on their aspirations" (Sultana 2010: 11). This is not just occurred within marriage or by in laws rather in public and private both places, among household by the family members or male members from workplace, even random unknown men also. Sometimes women are being controlled or violated by other women from in laws (Kandiyoti 1988). There are various types of violence occurred to women in Bangladesh, including physical, psychological, financial, sexual harassment, rape, acid throwing, dowry, death etc. Garcia-Moreno et al. (2005: 16) have divided violence occurring to women in Bangladesh according to their type, such as-physical violence (slapping, hitting, kicking, and beating), sexual violence (rape, sexual harassment), and psychological violence (scolding, intimidation). Another way to define violence is connection between victim and perpetrator, such as- intimate partner violence, incest, sexual assault by unknown, date rape, or acquaintance rape (Garcia-Moreno et al. 2005: 16). They also have considered limiting women's mobility and jealousy towards them as oppression. In 2001, 44% urban women and 31% rural women have faced psychological violence in Bangladesh (Garcia-Moreno et al. 2005). Zaman (1999) on the other hand explains that violence against women occurs in innumerable forms in Bangladesh including sexual harassment, rape, acid throwing, dowry, child marriage, wife abusing, sexual slavery through international trafficking, and these occur beyond the boundary of class, caste, age, education, and religion and occurred by the social, economic, political structure, the state laws, policies, which control women in every phase of their lives. Where, "One form of abuse tends to flourish and feed off others" (Zaman 1999: 37).

Sexual harassment among above mentioned violence occurs not only in workplace (which was thought before) rather in public space, educational institutions, and even at home (Iftakhar 2020). In workplace, sexual harassment is mostly occurred by male supervisors asking for sex or sexual favor, otherwise they can lose their job. Sometimes this is considered by few misogynists as the price which women should pay for stepping into male dominated workplace territories (Iftakhar 2020: 126). #Me Too survivor stories of Bangladesh have revealed that these happened because women are perceived as second sex, as inferior, and patriarchal socio-cultural norms validate and condone this continually (Iftakhar 2020). That is the reason sexual harassment is connected to women's bodily oppression straight away and they remain in fear of facing sexual harassment whenever they step into public space. The human rights and legal services program of BRAC, have found that violence against women and girl has raised about 70% in March and April 2020 comparing to previous year (Human rights watch 2020).

Likewise, several researchers have worked on the oppressions Bangladeshi married women going through and tried to define oppression and violence in different ways. Sultana (2010) explains identically that women's oppression starts from their own family in Bangladesh where they are perceived as burden and marriage is another source where they enter as a subordinate. Johnston and Naved (2008) sequentially have focused on a very neglected phenomenon in Bangladesh which is sexual oppression to married women and presented that relevant data is very few because of the legal perceptions regarding it. According to the law of Bangladesh, sexual violence to wives is not criminal offence, that is why many research are found on domestic violence but not on sexual violence occurred by husbands (Johnston and Naved 2008). Authors have also emphasized frequency of domestic violence against women which occurs over and over again but still laws do not count it as violence without having serious injury. This further prevents women from reporting those. Even though domestic violence can drag women into death, social stigma prevents them to seek for help and again these are hard to prove (Johnston and Naved 2008). Merely 2% women from rural and urban areas searched institutional help who were injured by their husbands, but only when the violence was life threatening for them or their children (Johnston and Naved 2008: 374). ICDDR,B's Health and Demographic Surveillance System has conducted a study at Matlab, Bangladesh from 1992 to 1998 on death from intentional injury to women who are among 15-44 years age range and from verbal autopsy data they found that 10% of homicides occurred by husbands and/or other relatives (Johnston and Naved 2008: 368). Bangladesh human rights group Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) reported that 235 women were murdered by their husband or his family in just the first nine months of 2020 (Human rights watch 2020). Schuler and Islam (2008) in addition have found that ex-husband or boyfriend are also physically and psychologically abuses women very often. Rahman (2018) have worked on another violence against women within marriage- dowry and related other physical, psychological violence and how it oppresses married women in our country. According to Rahman (2018), dowry is a widespread phenomenon in Bangladesh and wife's family pay the

dowry money to husbands; if they fail to do so, wives go through various physical, psychological violence and even femicide by their husbands or other family member from husbands' family.

Unwanted birth and pregnancies are another kind of bodily oppression to women of Bangladesh which is validated by religion (Roy and Sing 2016). Khan and Raeside (2007: 2) have explored that in rural areas of Bangladesh married women normally have children before age 20, who are followers of Islam mostly. This is not thought as violence even though it has lots of negative health impacts on women's body but validated by the religious notion. This comprises women's bodily oppression where they have merely right to decide about their own body. Islam et al. (2017) illustrate that spousal age gap, lack of education, place of residence and decision-making capabilities are also connected with adolescent motherhood in Bangladesh. Age is an important matter herein as women are expected to be less powerful than husbands, and for the same reason adolescent wives cannot take decisions to use contraceptive (Islam et al 2017: 11). Seymour and Peterman (2018) have consequently explored the connection of decision-making strategies and women's empowerment in Bangladesh. They have presented the scrutiny of decision making within family where it is thought that sole decision making would empower women within marriage rather than joint decision making but the problem is lied within the process of decision-making, because woman's voice remains unheard in the intrahousehold decision-making procedures, only male and adults are being prioritized (Seymour and Peterman 2018: 5). Decision making capabilities make someone powerful, but most women do not have that in Bangladesh across rural or urban Dhaka and that triggers different kinds of oppression, including women's bodily oppression.

Intersectionality is another way out to examine patriarchy and women's inferior position which are institutionally rooted (Cho et al. 2013). As, "Gender moves across the braided story of ideological, material, social, and psychological oppression and resistance - in schools, communities, and prisons - in dynamic interaction with race, ethnicity, class, and political life" (quote from Michelle) (Guidroz and Berger 2009: 63). It creates overlapping systems of subordination to women (a quote from Kimberlé) (Guidroz and Berger 2009: 65), also brings the social force and dynamisms in front of us to explain the reason of the systematic and overlapping subordinations of the women (MacKinnon, 2013). Intersectionality also accelerates bodily oppressions against women within household such as the wives who are adolescent, not much educated are being faced much more violence (Islam et al. 2017). Women are being treated badly sometimes by their husbands and in laws if they are incapable of giving birth a son, are being divorced by their husbands if they fail to give birth (Alam 2018: 119). Childless women face different kind of social, economic, and emotional difficulties in Bangladesh, including stigma, guilt, abandoned by the family, social isolation, and impoverishment (Nahar and Richters 2011). Thus, intersecting identities create further bodily oppressions to the women of Bangladesh.

According to Deb et al. (2015), the socio-cultural and institutional obstacles against women in Bangladesh work into triple layers- a) Patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal construction of women, b) religious norms and traditions controlling women and c) limited access to resources and decision-making process. So, violence against women is not occurring by the unknown person only, rather intimate partners, family members, colleagues are also instigating these, not only occurring in one place rather in workplace, in educational institutions, in public space and even at home. These obstacles and violence repeatedly invisible women, validate male domination over women, deny women's autonomy and accelerate different kinds of violence which eventually drag women into bodily oppression. Women's bodily oppression and violence sometimes get more intolerant that women commit suicide and killed by the perpetrator sometimes.

##### **5. Societal perceptions to bodily oppressions:**

Bodily oppression and violence against women occurring among patriarchal societies are also being validated by the patriarchal norms and values, which deny women's autonomy and establish male domination over women at the same time. Sometimes women themselves validate violence they have experienced and explains as the right of the men to correct them using violence. According to Bates et al. (2004) violence against women is the outcome of child marriage where women are not adult enough to raise their voice rather remains powerless in rural Bangladesh. Another reason they have found behind domestic violence is socio-cultural norms of male domination in the early years of marriage. It is thought that men need to 'control' their wives from the very beginning of the marriage. Dowry is another economic factor and the reason of violence against women, which is thought as the economic security by their parents and that is how they validate this system (Bates et al. 2004: 193). But in actuality the economic burden brings more vulnerability to women (Bates et al. 2004). Schuler and Islam (2008) have conducted their research among three villages of Bangladesh and examined few reasons of violence against women. Husbands think it is reasonable to use physical violence to their wives in four situations: a) wife do not listen to her husband or destroying money, b) wife is neglecting to be intimate or suspected to be unfaithful, c) going out without husband's permission, and d) talking back to the husbands (Schuler and Islam 2008: 53). Wife-beating is also justified if wives are being rude or disrespectful to their husbands and in laws (Schuler and Islam 2008). Sometimes women themselves justify these oppressions or they blame their fate for having a cruel husband (Schuler and Islam 2008: 53). These also validate the oppression occurring to women or bodily repressions they are experiencing through. Schuler and Islam (2008) have found this validation impulse even in developed countries where women are ashamed to share the violence occurring to them and these are thought as normal matters to experience (Schuler and Islam, 2008: 56).

Schuler et al. (2011) have found out few more validation processes of women's oppression from rural villages of Bangladesh, where wives are

predicted as similar to property of their husbands, who are their owners, so husbands can do whatever they want with them. According to a 40-year-old respondent from their research- "He is my owner in all aspects, he supports me ... My life depends on him, so it is right for him to beat me" (Schuler et al. 2011: 24). Muslim religious regulations are other ways to validate violence against women they found, where it is thought that wives who are beaten by their husbands will go to heaven (Schuler et al. 2011: 24). Also, when researchers have asked about violence, immediately respondents thought of any kind of fault of the women or wives behind those. This is another reason which validates women's bodily oppression authors have mentioned. Johnston and Naved (2008: 374) on the other hand explored that 64% urban women and 86% rural women have validated intimate partner violence at some points (irresponsibility, refusing sex, violating husbands, disloyal), who have gone through these experiences also. Biswas et al. (2017: 1) have presented three survey result of Bangladesh about the validation of violence occurring to women. They have presented that three nationwide survey of the most vulnerable households in Bangladesh were analyzed (2007, 2011, and 2014) where 31.3%, 31.9% and 28% women were justifying intimate partner violence occurring to women. Jewkes (2002) has also explained that in many societies women's oppressions are socially accepted and violence are used to dominate women and to express their masculinity. Thereby, societal perception regarding women's bodily oppression is accumulated with gendered constraints that validate those oppressions, even women themselves tend to validate those which create the scope of further bodily oppressions.

#### **6. Women's agency within patriarchy:**

Women are being faced different types of constraints, disparities, discriminations and oppressions by their male counterparts, households, patriarchal society, and from the state. But at the same time, they continue bargaining with patriarchal systems (Kandiyoti 1988). That means they have few strategies to deal or communicate with these systems to continue their bargaining within the patriarchal structures. This is the source of their agency, and their power. Kandiyoti (1988) has mentioned different types of obstacles faced by women within patriarchy, but at the same time how they gradually deal with it, which is also different among different class, caste, and ethnicity. Women resist oppression on them actively or sometimes passively she explained. According to her, patriarchy creates new obstacles for women through historical transformations and women also renegotiate and changes their bargaining strategies. Sometimes women resist openly to patriarchy and sometimes use symbolic strategies, such as accommodation of purdah/veiling to come out from home and engaging themselves with income sectors (Kandiyoti 1988). Through this, women are being loyal to patriarchy by covering themselves and at the same time exposing them in the public space to engage them with workplace. Many women in urban areas like Dhaka city are also seen to bargain with patriarchal system by accommodating these symbolic strategies and that is how they are engaging themselves with different income sectors and educational



institutions. Scott (1985) has also explained symbolic resistance of peasants which seems different, but I feel relevant because women are also thought as second gender and inferior among patriarchal societies (Ortner 1972). Rammamurthy (2010) has drawn a scenario of bargaining strategies of working women who worked in cottonseed farms in Andhra Pradesh, India has different strategies to deal with the patriarchy. The women oppose and resist traditional cultural norms and reproduce social relations to accumulate more capital. They keep their extended families together to get more unpaid labor and to take care of their children (Rammamurthy 2010). This sort of agency is mostly seen among the married working women in Dhaka city who have kid and need someone to take care of their kid whenever they are in workplace. I see this as a bargaining strategy of women in Dhaka city.

Alam (2018) found out that perceptions of power and agency are different among different sex, age, education, income, and interest groups. Becoming mother and accomplishing household duties are also thought as women's agency by the informants (Alam 2018: 119). Alam (2018) has presented that in rural Bangladesh men's authority can be the source of women's power and agency. Women have their own interpretation of this ownership and management of land, the primary source of a man's power to negotiate their own sphere of power and agency, women are often empowered by exercising their father, brother, and husband's power (Alam 2018). Besides several steps from government and NGOs also provide agency to rural women in Bangladesh to bargain with traditional patriarchal constraints, such as- free education to girl till 12<sup>th</sup> grade, entrepreneurial skill developing training to rural women, NGOs provide loan to poor women especially (Alam 2018: 141). These opportunities provide agency to rural women to argue with traditional discriminative patriarchal norms.

Even though divorce is perceived as restricted, as taboo in Bangladesh but the divorce rate has increased (Afroz 2019), and I see this as the source of women's agency too. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the divorce application rate has raised 34% and 50,000 divorce application filed in Dhaka North and South City Corporation in the past six years, means one divorce application filed in every hour on average. And 2,532 applications have been already filed in Chittagong City Corporation in January-July this year (The Daily Star 2020). I want to translate this as a strong agency and bargaining strategies of the women to come out from bodily oppressions occurring within marriage.

Consequently Gama (2018) have worked on women's political mobilization in Bangladesh based on *Gonojagoron Moncho*, has taken place at Dhaka city in the beginning of 2014. According to the author, women's bodily repression and silencing process continue together in Bangladesh which disempower women. It also happened at *Gonojagoron Moncho* by making naked pictures of the women activists, sending pornographic messages to personal webpages to dishonor, harass, threatened them and to push them back into home (Gama 2018: 19). But women activists instead remain silent to these and let their

follower to answer using social media, eventually the harasser lost interest to harass them, but other women inspired by them to join in the movement (Gama 2018: 20). Even though Gama (2018) has presented unusual type of agency and resistance of women, but it is directly related with the bodily oppression of the women which occurs frequently in patriarchal society of Bangladesh. But at the same time as Kandiyoti (1988) has fueled the idea, women among patriarchal discriminative societal structure in Bangladesh do not remain silent always, rather they continue their attempt to change it through their passive and active bargaining. Sometimes they cope up or accommodate with those patriarchal ideologies to bargain, or sometimes they use those as the source of their own power and agency. Sometimes their resistance to patriarchy is symbolic and sometimes very open, such as divorce. Even though patriarchy always tries to confine women by exercising violence and bodily oppression to them, but they keep arguing with it continually to change their bodily oppressions.

## 7. Conclusion:

Women's subordination is universal among patriarchal societies and all the societies are patriarchal worldwide (Ortner 1972). Similarly in Bangladesh women go through different types of violence within household, society and the state, by their intimate partners, family members, colleagues and by the state law. These violence or repression to women are seemed to be segregated but they are interconnected in oppressing women and their body continually. Explanation of universal women's subordination of Ortner (1972) is also pertinent to explain women's bodily oppression occurring in Bangladesh. Patriarchal societies validate this violence using patriarchal values and norms, sometimes women themselves validate that violence they have gone through. But at the same time women are taking various attempts to come out from this situation and changing their position. Government and Non-government organizations are also taking various steps to empower them and enhance women's agency to overcome bodily oppressions.

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