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# Shifting Masculinities: Everyday Gender Practices among Informal Sector Workers in Urban Dhaka

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We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically, affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity.

(Raymond Williams explaining '*structure of feeling*' in Williams 1977: 132).

## Introduction

Men in Bangladesh society, in general, have for long been habituated to consider women as dependent to them. One of the central pretexts that provide validation to such asymmetrical positioning is the ideology that men are the 'main bread-earners' and 'providers' of a family, and women's role is of submissive 'home maker'. It is important to enquire if this ideological tenet still holds its grip or has been dislocated. Similarly, important is to investigate the ways in which men and women connect or react to the changes in their roles and statuses. To unravel the transformation in gender ideologies and practices in contemporary Bangladesh, we assume that special attention needs to be given as to how the discourses of male dominance are shaped, contested, and reinforced in diverse contexts within Bangladesh society. Is it so that the 'provider' men find themselves at an unease to accept the transformation that unfolds as women gradually take up income earning activities in both formal and informal economic settings? How do men react to the 'crises' and 'tensions' that emanate from their role change? Is it adequate to view the attitude and action only in terms of reproduction and reinforcement of dominant patriarchal norms and values? How to account for the multiplicities of men's reactions?

On the other hand, as the 'constructionist perspective' stresses that masculinity is not only a physiological state but a 'social construction' within a particular culture (Fuller 1996), attention is generally given to the ways in which the (re)making of masculinity is connected to the workings of major social institutions such as marriage, family or household. However, as we argue here, exploration of social construction *per se* is not adequate to explain the fluidity of the ways in which affect, emotion, feeling, aspiration, prestige, dignity etc. come strongly into play in everyday life, and disrupt the simplistic and linear narratives as regards hegemonic power of institutions and ideologies. Also, the challenges and resistances that are posed to the dominant masculinities are not similar or

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uniform across classes, social contexts, and locations; even within same context, it is likely that emotions, affects and feelings would be formed, manifested, and practiced in diverse ways.

This write-up aims to go beyond the dominant narratives that focus mostly on structures and patterns of 'classical patriarchy' and shed light on the 'legitimizing' and 'validating' discourses of gender inequality. Not undermining the importance of discourses and patterns, what we try here is to illustrate the quotidian ways in which dominant ideologies, norms, feelings, and emotions relating to femininity and masculinity come to be contested, negotiated, reinforced, and subverted in the context of extensive dispossession, uncertainty and precarity. By putting more emphasis on bodily experience, affect and negotiation of power, we account for the fluidity and plurality that unfolds in the everyday life world. There are heterogenous ways in which diverse forms masculinities are experienced, subverted or reproduced by both men and women of impoverished households located in the margins of in urban and peri-urban Dhaka.

As we highlight the everyday forms of the gender understandings and feelings, we bring forward narratives as regards the deeper senses of insecurities that come to the fore in the context of precarity emanating from exclusionary social setting, unfavorable state policy and 'adverse inclusion' by the market forces. We highlight that the ways in which gendered practices come into play have strong connection to the diverse ways in which exclusion, exploitation and inequality work in a particular context. Our emphasis on plural, fragmented, and contested ways in which masculinity is molded and remolded in the lived realities is an attempt to make ways for questioning monolithic narratives that are dominant in terms of understanding gender norms, ideologies and practices.

**A vignette: Contextualizing masculinity**

Once Sohrab Ali was a rickshaw-puller; however, because of chronic illness he now has become severely infirmed. Most of the time he stays in his family's one-room-home in a corner of a sprawling low-income settlement—popularly known as '*bastee'*—in older part of Dhaka city. For Sohrab, life generally is dull and doomed; however, since he depends fully on his wife's income, he feels more exasperated. His friends and neighbors view him as a person of good spirit and talk positively about him. He shows sincere love and affection to his wife and family; in the past when he was the only earning member, he worked hard to provide for them and make them happy. Now he is particularly distressed with the 'fact' that his wife lately has started to behave rude to him. She returns home too late, and food is not cooked in time. Sometimes he finds the situation unbearable even though he helplessly tries to cope up. On the other hand, Rupali, his wife, does her 'duties' with as much sincerity as possible. She would be happier if she could stay home; however, as she has got no alternative, she works in a factory in the neighborhood to meet the bare necessities of life. She tries to make her husband feel comfortable amid extreme hardship. However, Rupali realizes that Sohrab is gradually becoming impatient. Inability to earn income and depreciation of health condition has affected his mental condition – she thinks. He is not willing to understand that Rupali cannot return from work at her will– the employers have their rules and restrictions. Sohrab's comments about the nature of her job has led to fierce quarrels on a few occasions in recent time.

One evening, as Ruplai returned late from her work, Sohrab threw a piece of brick to her out of anger. He was hungry and because of her late return he remained unfed for long. Rupali was infuriated at Sohrab's behavior; however, she did not hit him back. It was not common for women in the slum to use physical force in reply to the hitting and beating unleashed by their men. The women would rather take recourse to verbal retaliation: trying to use quick-witted words to incite mental wound in exchange for physical attack. Teasing the man about his ability and action, reminding him as to how he owes a lot to her—that is, *khota deya* (reminding him about his weak points in a sarcastic manner)—is the practice that a woman generally opts for in such a situation.

Rupali did not ask Sohrab why he could not cook for himself; instead, she teased him by pointing out how he was helplessly dependent on her. She metaphorically reminded him that even though she was the only person to look after him, he had chosen to hurt her. She invoked a proverb: "*Biraler raag bera-r sathey*", that is, a cat can show its anger only to the fence. Like a fence she protects him by providing food and taking care, still he strikes her like a livid cat!

Rupali then directly pointed to the physical weakness and inability of Sohrab:

> How can a man show so much of anger like a 'real man' when he stays at home like a woman? Is he not worse than a woman?
>
> (*"Maiya mainsher moton ghore boiya thake je, tar abar purush polar moton goshwya kier? Se ki maiya manush thekeo kharap na?"*)

For Sohrab it was the biggest blow to his dignity and pride as a man. He was already deeply disappointed about the state of his life, and Rupali pointed the finger precisely to his grave weakness! He immediately stopped eating food and made the declaration: "If I am a true son of my father, I won't eat anything that comes with my wife's income". Sohrab then started to pull rickshaw again even though his physical condition was not suitable to do so. He decided to do the pulling half a day twice a week in a bid to earn enough to buy one *ruti (*hand-made bread) a day. This clearly was not adequate, particularly given his ill health; moreover, with the meager income, he was in no position to buy his medicines. His dignity was hurt, and he was punishing his body with an intention to chastise his wife.

Rupali could understand that Sohrab was trying to make an emotional statement as his self-esteem was badly wounded. She felt bad honestly. After all, he was not a bad husband. She asked for his forgiveness. "That day I was too tired as I returned home after long working hours. Then you threw me that brick piece; surely, I got crazy and said things that I should not have. I did not have senses as to what I was talking about" – she tried to explain and sincerely requested for apology. "You may punish me if you want. But please don't kill yourself" – she pleaded. Sohrab did not give a heed to Rupali's requests. She then made further requests via friends and children. Sohrab was approached even by their landlord who had known the couple for ten years. He ignored all requests and died within a couple of weeks.

Rupali's friends and relatives, who previously were sympathetic to her, suddenly started to blame her for the tragic end of Sohrab's life. Her rude way of reaction, choice of words, lack of patience, sudden harsh use of *khota* etc. are the things that came under much scrutiny. Questions were abundant: Was it because she was earning income that Rupali forgot her 'main' duty? Was she showing off her 'power' as an income earning woman? Should a woman undermine her responsibility as regards taking care of her husband and family? However, even though the friends and relatives apparently were castigating Ruplai for her 'irresponsible' behavior, they knew that the situation in the family was really stressed – it was perhaps beyond anyone's capacity to be as patient as they were expecting Rupali to be. Sohrab Ali was suffering a lot, and his 'illusion' about life already came to an end (*jiboner maya kete geche*). He perhaps was looking for an excuse to abstain from food and medicine so that a quicker relief from long endured sufferings was possible.

The deliberations, chitchats and gossips that followed in the community revolved around the questions as to how extreme hardship in the households put men and women under stress in diverse ways, how life is cruel and unkind to poor people, how their emotions and sentiments are deeply aroused, and how the honor and dignity is affected and afflicted in the process. Friends and neighbors reflected on how people needed to go for 'desperate measures' to claim and reclaim their pride. As they wondered about Sohrab's anger and rage amid despairing circumstances, their reminiscence zeroed in on making sense of the pressures, insecurities, and wounds that the men in the community went through as they lost the 'control' of their family as the 'bread-earner' and 'provider'. The tone was more sympathetic to Sohrab Ali; however, it was not difficult to hear men and women talking in compassionate ways about the plight of Rupali's life too. The interlocutions were replete with the annotations as to how both Sohrab and Rupali were prey to deep afflictions and sufferings that awakened their intense emotions. Material impoverishment and hardship were at the core of the crises; however, there were more at play: a person's senses and feelings as regards hope and aspiration, dignity and pride, endurance and suffering – all were affected by the strains emanating from the grievous course of life.

The 'explanations' weighed in by the community people clearly drew attention to how framing the experiences of Sohrab and Rupali only in terms of the structure of 'male dominance' or 'female subordination' would be inadequate. It is not merely about being 'victim' or 'perpetrator' of some fixed system or structure – focusing on the way in which a person's socially located subjectivity come to be formed, expressed or performed is important to grasp the messy reality and the behavior that unfold onto it. Since emotion, affect, disposition, and temper evidently act as important constituents of an actor's doings, there needs to be more focus on how the practices are embedded in the everyday lifeworld rather than being located entirely in the generic structures and patterns. This resonates much of what Raymond Williams termed as 'structures of feelings': affective elements of consciousness and relationships in the present forms (Williams 1977).

As it is epitomized by the story of Sohrab and Rupali, this write-up intends to ethnographically delineate the 'social situatedness' of gender relations and practices in general and intends to go beyond the 'deterministic explanation' that overstresses how dominant 'systems' and 'discourses' give way to forms of masculinities and femininities.

In what follows, we first briefly discuss the 'background' and 'aim' of the write-up and then we provide a 'conceptual framework' of our position. Then we shed light on the methodology that we employed while gathering the 'data' that we recount here. In a bid to elucidate how masculinity and femineity is dominantly 'constructed' in Bangladesh, we then focus of some aspects of 'socialization' and focus particularly on how the dominant ideology of 'responsible male' or 'man the provider' is passed on and reinforced intergenerationally. It is shown that socialization contains elements that provide with 'enabling logics' to exercise authority and power over those women who they 'provide for'. In the next section, we examine the responses of both men and women to the transformation that the relations and practices undergo as women engage in wage work. Further on, we highlight the complexity of the ways in which men react to highlight that the responses or reactions of men are not homogenous or linear. While exploring women's response to the ways in which men conduct themselves, we stress the dynamics of power relations that is shaped up from beyond household and delineate the ways in which women particularly take recourse to verbal resistance and make use of *khota* and other verbal expressions. In conclusion, we highlight how the widespread precarity creates the ground for men and women to act and react in diverse ways.

## Conceptual framework

Connell's theoretical concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 1995) has been identified as 'the single most influential, recognized and utilized contribution' to masculinity research (Christensen and Jensen 2014). The concept has played a significant role in studies of men and masculinity (Hearn 2004; Messerschmidt 2010). As Connell argues, hegemonic masculinity refers to those ideas and practices that are perceived as ideal for all men (Connell 1998: 5). Those ideals and practices have two key features: a belief of male superiority and dominance in relation to women; and, privileging of heteronormativity that structures relations between men and women, as well as among men. However, what is important to note is that not all men are able to achieve those ideals. Connell's discussion showed variation among men and illustrated that not all men equally enjoy the privileges that are offered by patriarchal social norms. As we have seen in our studies, men in the marginal economic conditions may have a very limited possibility to exert any kind of dominance towards both women and men in the greater society even when they may hold power over women in their own family or community. However, as we have already noted above, in case of Sohrab and Rupali, such 'incapacity' of a man may bring about affective crises with far-reaching consequences.

However, Connell's initial conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity faced strong criticism from the various academic fronts. Wedgwood (2007) has argued that three key elements of Connell's theory of masculinity have been largely neglected by other scholars: the crucial influence of psychoanalysis and subsequent use of the life history case study method; the importance of non-hegemonic forms of masculinity; and the concept of cathexis. As we see in the vignette about, cathexis—or emotional and affective aspect of gender relation—is a significant constituent of a person's subjectivity.

> 'Cathexis', in Connell's terms, refers to the structure that constrains and so shapes people's emotional attachments to each other. It refers both to the hegemonic 'limits' placed on practices that constitute emotionally charged social relationships in which the bodily dimension features and to the social practices which challenge such hegemony (Maharj 1995).

We argue here that the concept of 'cathexis' or emotional attachment deserves to have increase attention. Our exploration shows that the enforcement of hegemony – and challenges to that – can be grasped in full if you take the 'emotionally charged' ways of behaviour into account.

Another response to Connell's theory of 'hegemonic masculinity' has been the argument that masculinities have to be connected to the concept of intersectionality: 'intersectional approach may offer a theoretical tool for analyzing the complexities of differences and hierarchic power relations between men' (Christensen and Jensen 2014: 60). We make points here to support this argument. The cases and life histories that we present show that while everyday practices as regards gender-relations significantly draw on hegemonic ideologies and discursive formations, it is important to recognize how the associated ideologies (such as those of femininities and masculinities) come to be shaped and practiced in diverse ways according to socio-cultural settings as well as over time. Along with materiality of what is meant by being 'woman' and 'man', it is important to shed light on how 'spatiality' and 'temporality' shape ways for an individual to act as a 'person' and 'subject'.

Moreover, examination of intersectionality of diverse asymmetrical social processes is important: a human subject's gendered identity is interwoven with other identities and positionalities that are formed in socially situated ways. Intersectionality also recognizes how distinctive situatedness of social agents influence the ways they affect and are affected by diverse social, economic, and political processes.

Yuval-Davis (2011) has argued that belonging and the politics of belonging are located in the intersection of the sociology of power and the sociology of emotion. This observation might be extended and linked to Connell's concept of 'cathexis' to make sense affect comes into play with regards to masculinities. It is important to understand the forces and processes that lie behind aggressive or hegemonic masculinity. If anger, grief or violence are dominant constituents of masculinity that come to be expressed in certain contexts, then it needs to be asked: How was it so that the particular emotion was shaped and expressed in the particular context and in the specific way?

Another dominant way to view masculinity is to focus on the working of patriarchy. From this perspective, much weightage is given to the 'gender role' that patriarchal ideologies offer to a man. Salisbury and Jackson (1996) have raised questions about this 'gender role' model as they have noted,

> All this talk of 'internalizing dominant stereotypes' doesn't give any critical purchase on questions of boys' resistance, the variety of masculine forms, historical changes and the contradictions in the lives of most boys and men. It does not analyze boys and masculinities in such a way that allows them to accept active responsibility for their own changes. ….. Viewing boys as passive 'victims of gender socialization', where boys just slot into a sexist

> role or script, doesn't do justice to the complicated dynamic of boys' struggles and resistances in the processes of becoming masculine.

Kalle Berggren (2014) proposes to view masculinity as 'sticky'. He draws in particular on Sara Ahmed's innovative combination of poststructuralism and phenomenology (Ahmed 2004; 2006). By qualifying masculinity as 'sticky' the suggestion made here is to recognize that boys/men are positioned as 'gendered oppressors' in contradictory processes and, also that there is lived experience behind the taking up of particular cultural norms of masculinity by the actors; the path of transformation involves both contesting oppressive gender practices and ''[b]roadening out boys' feelings range'' (Salisbury and Jackson 1996: 221).

> Masculinity shapes the bodies it encounters as ''men''; it impresses on them, directs, and orients them. But at the same time, masculinity is not the only ''discourse'' positioning ''men,'' and so ''there is a conflict between the fiction of a fixed, 'real me', masculine self, and more fluid, alternative selves'' (Salisbury and Jackson 1996, 7). While there is flexibility and contradiction, this does not leave subjects unattached; the circulation of norms sticks to bodies, and the more masculinity is performed, the stickier it becomes.

Berggren (2014) thus argues that thinking about men's subjectivity by focusing on both discourse, norms, and power on the one hand, and bodies, emotions and lived experience on the other, is a more useful way to study men and masculinity. However, he further stresses that empirical analysis needs to be situated in relation to the intersection of inequalities such as race, class, sexuality, age, and ability (e.g., Hill Collins 1990; Yuval-Davis 2011).

Cornwall (2005) raises several questions about 'sex' and 'gender' which challenge taken-for-granted ideas about what it is to be a 'man' or a 'woman'. Her detailed and subtle ethnography locates processes of gendering in the interactions between actors in particular situations. These interactions establish the gender of the actors within different domains of discourse. Thus, she accentuates the importance of focusing beyond 'discursive formation' as such; actions and practices undertaken by the actors within the discursive hegemony that bear the potentials of subversion are important areas to investigate. It is in this spirit that we focus on *khota* and other expressional ways that could be termed as 'everyday forms' or 'minor genres' of resistance (Scott 1985; Pun 2005).

**Brief note on methodology**

This write-up is mainly concerned as to how the norms, values and behavior related to the ideology of 'man the provider' comes to be disputed, reshaped, or reinstated in diverse ways in the context of Dhaka city's working-class families and households, particularly as the neoliberal market order works as the dominant force to regulate both formal and informal domains. It draws on two studies carried out by the authors – one done in the mid-1990s and the other form in the late-2010s – with a view to unravel how the making and unmaking of norms and practices relating to masculinity continues, discontinues, or takes new forms in urban context of Bangladesh in recent decades.

To narrate how men and women interpret their behavior and action relating to 'newer' forms of compliance and contestation, we draw on our ethnographic studies and reflect in critical ways. The life histories and case studies that we present here are drawn from both the studies that were conducted in ethnographic ways.

**Socialization and social construction of masculinity**

The conventional social and cultural order in Bangladesh positions men as the 'providers' and 'protectors' who are socialized to take responsibility of women, children and aged members of the household. The fundamental notion underlying the social formation of masculinity is the view that a 'responsible male' would play role as the 'provider' for the household. Women, on the other hand, are conventionally viewed to be associated with homemaking and household works; from their childhood they are mostly taught to be dependent on men for their maintenance. However, a close look into the everyday life shows that there occurs moments and instances in which women – and in some case men too – question and ridicule many of the assumptions and norms that are stressed through socialization process.

Generally, the way a mother raises her son involves highlighting the point that he must grow up with some 'masculine qualities'. Both men and women subscribe to these norms: men should be physically and emotionally strong; men should not engage in household work; they should work outside, that is, in public domain; they are not responsible for nursing children or the ill household member; kitchen is not the place that they should go into; cooking is not the chore that should be concerned about. These hegemonic norms, in turn, create expectation and pressure on men to establish themselves as the bread-earners and 'guardian' of the families.

Men are identified with the public sphere in the visible activities of neighborhood or national politics, commercially arranged sports and leisure outside home. Travelling around and making friendship with men other than kin are perceived to be part of men's 'normal' development process. Thus, socialization itself reinforces significant asymmetrical norms as men are expected and trained to assume the role of 'responsible man' and to become providers of family, but they are not encouraged to develop much emotional attachment or feelings to their families. It is common that mothers discourage their sons to be involved in housework, especially if a daughter is around. Sons are encouraged to think about income earning as they reach the verge of adulthood; they are taught to think about earning wage through a work which is of public nature. However, in case of the study in Dhaka's suburban areas among garment workers in late 2010s, it was observed that along with boys, girls also were expected to be ready to engage in factory job to give support to their parents and siblings. However, although the girls are taking up factory jobs and contributing increasingly to family's income earning, they are not viewed as 'dependable' in case of old-age vulnerabilities of their parents. Parents still mostly hope to rely on their sons as the 'provider' of the future. As the mothers want the boys to grow with the 'pride' of being 'provider' and 'protector', they discourage them to be involved in cooking or food preparing tasks. Staying at home to do housekeeping chores is almost prohibited for sons once they reach adolescence. Sons reaching adulthood are expected and pressurized by their mothers to earn from wage work.

However, not all men and women appear to be too eager to go with the dominant narratives. Some tensions and unease in terms of going along the socialization 'playbook' was not difficult to discern for us as we conducted our research. On many instances we saw that young boys and girls were undertaking some housework, either because mother asked for it, or they did it willingly. Even though it may appear to be 'paradoxical' given the dominance of patriarchal norms, we saw that many of the mothers were proud of sons as they helped mothers and sisters on their own accord. In some cases, we saw sons and brothers to extend their hand to the female family members to carry out the everyday household chores – they did it as they felt that burden for their mothers or sisters were too much. It is important to recognize the empathy and feeling that are endangered in such ways and surpass the framework of dominant norms. We have also observed the behavior of many husbands who wash and clean the clothes of their wives; however, with the fear of 'stigma' they are unwilling to let it be known to the neighbors and other family members. In many cases, we have seen that mothers' give emphasis on moral education of their male children with a hope that they will not grow up as abusive, oppressive or irresponsible as their fathers.

**Masculinity and crisis of positionality**

Men's response to women's wage earning in the context of impoverished households is not fixed or unwavering. In the face of diverse insecurities and precarity, many men try to find a course of action and response that does not necessarily fit into 'patriarchal' frames. Because of extensive hardship, a man may fail to perform all the duties and expectations relating to a 'responsible' provider; this means that the image of 'man the provider' comes under threat. In such cases, men give way to this realization that carrying out all the expected duties in the family is not possible without taking help from other household members. It is in this context that allowing and encouraging female members of the household to engage in wage earning jobs in the factories has become rather common. In fact, the course of men's responses towards women's wage earning and employment is shaped depending not only on the views and expectations of the male members as such, the situation of the household's hardship as well as other external factors contribute significantly as to what decision is to be taken.

In many households in our both ethnographic sites we have observed that non-adult and unmarried sons sometimes share household responsibilities with their mothers even though such sharing at times causes tensions. Sons are seen to have sympathy as regards huge workload that their mothers have to carry on. This feeling of empathy is particularly evident in case of those mothers who are left behind by the irresponsible husband. Mothers are also sympathetic to their sons as they carry the workload which their fathers are supposed to shoulder.

However, in case of filial relationship, ownership and inheritance of property at times emerge to be most influential factor and it is where men's masculine crises come easily to the fore. In some cases, it was seen that brothers may even cut off all ties with their sisters because of tensions that arise as regards property ownership.

Dilu was working as an electrician until three years ago, but then he joined a group of men who do not believe in family ties, he left his wife, Arifa, and their five children behind to wander around in his own way. However, once in a month or two he would

come back to see his family. For Arifa it was quite agonizing; however, she still tried to convince him to resume his family responsibilities. Dilu agreed on the condition that Arifa should obtain her share from her brother as he was selling of their paternal residence. Although Arifa wanted to keep this as her last resort, she again wanted to give her husband a chance to restart a new business. She asked her brother for the share. Her brother was looking after their widowed mother, and he found his sister's behavior quite 'selfish'. On much insistence from Arifa's side, the brother gave her the 'share' of the property. However, as he was too shocked, he decided to cut off his relationship with Arifa.

On the other hand, as Arifa got the money from her brother, Dilu got hold of it and gradually squandered away on gambling. And it became clear that he was never going to be 'responsible' or 'provider' to his family as he was more into having fun with his peer group particularly through gambling. Now the situation for Arifa was that she lost on both the ends: not gaining in terms of capacitating her husband; and losing the last 'shelter' at her brother's place.

Arifa's sufferings took another twist as she became pregnant with the fifth child due to her husband's sudden visits. Her husband had never let her use any form of birth control, but subsequently she had to go for a 'ligation' (that is, permanent birth control) without asking his permission. When Dilu found this out, he became terribly angry, beat her with electric wire and threatened to divorce her. Arifa could not work for a week, and she was worried about the children and her future. She knew that if Dilu forced a divorce, she now had nowhere to go as her return to brother's place was out of question.

The ways 'masculine' features of Arifa's brother and husband came to be expressed was not similar – however, one could still find some uniformity as to how they tried to 'negotiate' the dominant ideology and had to 'give up'. Our discussions with Arifa's brother and husband bring forth how an interplay between subjective decision and systematic discourses takes place. Her husband highlighted that despite several efforts, he could not give away his fondness toward gambling whereas her brother explained how he felt 'betrayed' by Arifa's behavior even though he knew that she was legally entitled to have the share of the property. Two men's effort to do things in accordance with 'personal rationales' was overtaken by feelings and emotions which were more connected to the discursive aspects of hegemonic masculinity. The way the struggled to deal with the affects – even though unsuccessfully – needs to be recognized and considered.

Father's decision as to daughter's work, income earning, and marriage is another 'site' that shows confluence of patriarchal norms and situational negotiation. Mala was the only earning member in the family and her father was not willing to allow her to be married as he was afraid of losing her income. He even used physical power against Mala in a bid to stop her from getting married.

In the households where daughters work to contribute to the survival of their family, usually the total income of the daughters is handed over to the parents. In Mala's case her father would have control of all her earnings and then allocate a part of it to her. Therefore, letting Mala to get married would mean losing potential source of income forever.

The dominant ideology is that parents should not take financial support from their daughters after she was married off. However, the actual practice does not go along with this narrative. In many households we have found that married daughters continued to support their parents, while married sons withdrew such support using the excuse of poverty. In Mala's case the father presented himself as a well-wisher of his daughter who, in his opinion, could not see the weaknesses of choosing a marital relation. He tried to tell Mala that sooner or later her husband would be blaming her for her 'loose character' and will marry another woman. Through the whole process of Mala's decision to get married, her father never directly requested her to consider their household situation and to postpone the marriage until her younger brother could take over her financial responsibility. The fear of losing the prime income earner, the shame of spelling out the truth, and the fear of being taken as an irresponsible father made the reality unspeakable. By employing the tropes of 'pride' and 'well-wishing', Mala's father tried to inflict a sense of guilt into her. He continuously tried to say that what she was doing was irrational. Mala could understand why her father acted that way; however, she could not voice the truth as she had to be respectful to her father's 'self-esteem'.

On the one hand, this example of a father disguising his vulnerability and, as a result, showing anger regarding his daughter's 'choice' as a 'wrong decision' gave the daughter a remarkable shock. On the other hand, she had to accept her 'non-provider' status in her husband's house to prove that the challenge had been worth taking. A wife may lose the opportunity of being an economic contributor in a conjugal relation where the husband is establishing himself as the 'provider' for the family.

In Mala's case, the pride of her father helped to open the path for her husband to exercise his power over his wife through claiming his 'provider' status. Control of women's agency by the male 'guardians' of their family makes women stay away from exercising their agency.

**Dilemmas relating to patriarchal 'expectations'**

By the time, one of us (Islam) met Rabiul, he had been married to Jamila for 17 years; however, he never allowed Jamila to be employed outside house, although Jamila would go out every day to buy the groceries and other household essentials. She was also active in taking decisions about children's education and other important family matters. Rabiul was into plant selling business and could not earn enough to maintain the household. He acknowledges that his wife's income could be crucial for the wellbeing of their children, however, he was not ready to concede to the idea that she should go outside home to engage in wage earning activities. This attitude of Rabiul was due to a particular incident that happened in his family. His conviction was that a job outside home would make Jamila 'uncontrollable' – and she could get spoiled. Rabiul's thoughts and actions were mostly informed by what had happened in case of his two sisters. Had the incident not took place in the family, he claimed that he would not be so stubbornly negative as regards his wife's work or income earning.

By the time Rabiul married Jamila, his sisters were working as a 'cook' in a mess. He had good understanding with his sisters, and they shared the same house. Ten years ago, his elder sister married an Urdu speaking man and migrated to Pakistan. Later, the younger sister followed the same course and migrated to Pakistan. Rabiul came lately to be

informed that his sisters were engaged in sex-work in the foreign country. He decided to keep no contact with them, and he never says a word about the sisters to his fourteen-years-old daughter.

Rabiul rejected all the possibilities of his wife entering in a job outside home, even if it was better paid. To keep his wife 'in line', he even controlled Jamila's yearly visit to her parents' place and demanded that she always completed housework according to his preferred timetable. Above all, he made it clear that what mattered the most to him was a 'peaceful' atmosphere at home. He also would complain that his wife had crossed the line by adopting birth control measures after the birth of two children.

Men like Rabiul, who perform their responsibilities as father and husband, do achieve the respect and power to control their daughters and wife. The respect is paid not only by the society in general but also by wife and daughter. Thus, when women become involved in paid work, such men suffer from a sense of defeat. It may become a continuous source of anxiety and frustration, or a challenge and a threat when these men face the employment of daughters, mothers and particularly wife within the household in their everyday life.

The complicated emotional state of mind of these men usually shows themselves in diverse ways: most commonly, they resist their wife and daughter from taking up work outside home; they challenge them verbally or physically; distance socially and psychologically from women by ignoring them totally; and withdraw themselves from their responsibilities (Abu-Lughod, 1986).

A 'peaceful home' is one of the common demands of responsible husbands. This not only emphasizes competent and prompt completion of household tasks, but also puts stress on a women's skill at keeping children in order; most of all it requires that the woman do not go for making many claims or demands. They also want the women not to quarrel over household tasks. Such pressure is used by husbands to keep women under constant 'fear' and establishes husbands as empowered. Out of fear of losing their 'secured life', wives like Jamila try their best to maintain peace at home.

**Beyond hegemonic masculinity: Contestation and resistance**

Although the dominant social construction equates 'male' with 'provider', there are always exceptions to the perceived norm; for example, dislocated males who do not act as responsible men. Such men are looked down upon by the entire community, especially by their wife and unmarried daughters, and are referred to as *jinda-lash* (living cadaver), *Mofij* or *badaimma*. Due to their apathetic attitudes towards their families, or their physical absence from a family, they are depicted as synonymous to a dead person or useless one. They do not correspond to the dominant notion of 'hegemonic masculinity' and have proved that they fail to fulfil their responsibilities because of their unemployment, idleness, or unwillingness to work. The expression *jinda lash* is used about men who are *heronchis* (drug addicts), *neshakhor* (alcoholics), *juaree* (gamblers), *ailsha/kamchor* (lazy and unwilling to do any work), *dayiottyayheen* (irresponsible), *appadartho* (unworthy), *charitroheen* (involved in extra-marital affairs, the literal meaning is one without a character).

The term *Jinda lash* is never used in relation to old and ill male members of the household. Here it must be pointed out that men do not always enjoy being unable to

take responsibility for their family. Men who used to be very responsible about the economic wellbeing of their family become emotionally tormented when they have to give up playing the role due to forced unemployment. The case of Sohrab Ali narrated in the beginning of this write-up could be viewed to have correspondence to such making of jinda-lash in a precarious context.

The expression *jinda-lash* is a class and sub-culture-based term, which stresses the implication that it is not acceptable for any able-bodied man not to work and not to earn for his family. It is a derogatory term, emphasizing that non-earning, irresponsible men are considered to be dead for the women immediately related to them and for the household. An important point is that a man with a good income can be *jinda-lash* for his family if he spends his income on another woman (i.e., in an extra-marital relation). Whatever may the reason behind men falling into the category of dislocated male, the concept of *jinda-lash* itself puts these men in a degraded position, and in doing so it reaffirms the dominant social ideology of male provider. In all households with an irresponsible or dislocated male, the burden of earning a livelihood falls on the shoulders of the wife, unmarried daughters, and other minor members of the household. The responsibility of looking after the welfare of the family is entirely borne by women.

It might be expected that a man in the state of *jinda-lash* would accommodate social transformation more easily. However, what we have found is that they were particularly resentful or challenging their wife at different points in their working lives, demanding when it suited them that the wife either take or leave their employment, or behave like a full-time housewife even they are employed full time. They blame their wives over trivial issues and abuse them both verbally and physically to demonstrate/reinforce their authority over the women. They also create distance from their responsibilities by ignoring or avoiding the women. Ways to do this may range from not listening to their women, to rejecting the relationship by staying away from home, for either a short or a long period of time.

We have observed that men in such precarious condition generally goes into a state of denial. As they become conscious of the fact that they are not carrying out their responsibilities and losing their authority over the female members, they start to feel insecure. This feeling then causes diverse crises as it happened in case of Sohrab Ali.

*Khota: Minor genres of resistance?*

As mentioned earlier, *khota* (teasing or ridiculing) is a strong ‘verbal tool’ used primarily by women against their husbands when they fail to get their entitlement from their husbands. Commonly, women in Bangladeshi culture do not challenge their men directly but express their wishes through *khota*. Generally, *khota* means ridicule of an unbearable or undesirable situation, or, teasing a person about his/her power, which may or may not be based on legitimate grounds. *Khota* is used to provoke a person to change his ways of behavior and conduct. For women, it is an expression of ‘veiled sentiment’ where the unreliability, inability or irresponsibility of men can be managed, and their resentment can be brought out into the open. Usually, women and powerless people use *khota* to deal with their seniors or superiors. Therefore, within male-female relationships it carries a contradictory message. *Khota* gives a chance for women to speak about an unspeakable situation or relation; however, it is women who use it.

Men also give *khota* to other men and to women, and women use *khota* against each other. Although this section has touched on *khota* used by all parties, its primary concern is to analyze the concept of *khota* as a 'weapon of the weak', i.e., when poor women use *khota* to express their disappointments and frustration. In Bangladesh, women initiating physical abuse of their husbands are almost unheard of, but women do resort to *khota* as they have no other way of getting back at their husbands. Use of a similar verbal tool as *khota* in the form of poetry has been reported in another study (Abu-Lughod, 1986).

Our main argument is that women are not passive. They do at times challenge the dominant forms of masculinity, while at other times they comply with its hegemonic presence. This reveals two important aspects of women's lives: (a) acceptance or reaffirmation of their weak position in conjugal relations; (b) their frustration about constantly compromising with their situation. This is apparent from the fact that although women are verbally abusive towards their husbands, they do not necessarily conform to their abusive attitude and behavior; furthermore, the language of resistance or *khota* is developed around the concept of female dependency on men for maintenance and protection (Mukhopadhay, 1994).

In the impoverished households both men and women share a common vulnerability to some extent. However, as women critically rely on their family, intra-household politics puts them in a more vulnerable position than men. The points where women challenge men usually occur in response to men's unwillingness to earn for the family. While violent action by men against women is a common in poor households, women mainly resort to verbal abuse towards their men. I neither observed it, nor was it reported to me that women ever had initiated a physical attack on their husbands even if they have committed a significant offence inside or outside the household. On the other hand, the husband can take a women's late return from work as a serious offence.

As men and women's relationship is unequal, they use different strategies to deal with each other. For instance, Rabiul instructed his wife and daughter not to keep any contact or relationship with his sisters and stopped Jamila from doing work outside the house. Arifa's husband, Dilu, ordered her to demand the share of her parental house from her brother, and punished her for taking an independent decision about her sterilization. Mala was given a straight denial of her own decision to marry. *Khota* can however be a direct challenge to the roles of husband and wife. There is a possibility that the husband will become violent or leave the house or withdraw from the relationship because of the wife's uses of *khota.* The wife risks of losing the bargain as she loses the husband, she gets more physical or verbal abuse from him.

Taking all the risks into account, it appears that *khota* does not appear to give advantage to the women at all in a husband-wife relationship. However, the use of *khota* by nature is a spontaneous reaction to the tensions that mount up over a long period of time. The risk that such banter might involve is not likely to be calculated by the user in advance.

## Conclusion

We have highlighted how the widespread precarity creates the ground for men and women to act and react in diverse ways, and how their actions unravel diversity of the ways that might not be congruent to the expectations of a development practitioner or

social observer who views the things from 'outside'. We draw attention to the point that the socially and culturally informed forms of happiness and wellbeing – and the search for peace and stability in home and marriage – are far more complicated, contextually-informed, and vibrant than the enforcement of patriarchal ideology as such. There are no straightforward trade-offs between women gaining more economic capacity and men losing their control over things in the household and beyond, even though contestation, negotiation and making-unmaking process is always in flux.

Direct and indirect usage of language may in some contexts prove to be the evidence of social power of the speaker. Constant manipulation and negotiation by the women show how they deal with male power in a situation of confrontation or conflict. Aggressiveness or assertiveness of women might cost a total relationship; therefore, women strategically take indirect path of manipulation. Agency and resistance do not come to be expressed in straightforward way; however, it is important to recognize the minor or everyday ways in which power and hegemony is contested. It is a call for going beyond neoliberal development to make way for gender justice. Everyday life realities accentuate the point that mere market-incorporation or wage earing activities by women fails to create substantial ground for revising the gender practices even though there occurs instances and moments that question the coercive power of the hegemonic ideologies.

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