

An Anatomy of Patriarchy in Emergence¹

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The paper presents an overview of the gender perception of the boys working on the streets in Dhaka city in Bangladesh. It reflects on the mindscape of the boys regarding themselves and that of the girls.

Perception of the Boys:

The boys perceive the girls working on the street in many different roles and assess them with many different values and perspectives; many of these roles and perspectives are often conflicting. The findings reveal that the patriarchy is the dominating factor in defining the roles of the boys and girls and defining their relationship both in terms of values and power. The emerging men on the street have a demanding and less caring role towards the girls who are surviving together with them in the hostile street environment. However, there are certain roles of the boys, which, within the street context is very much crucial for a girl's survival. But such a protective male role costs a girl; a girl has to pay by being acceptable to the young males on the street.

This section presents the complex gender relation and its context for the girls and the boys, based on the testimonies of the boys who interacted with the research team over the period of the study.

The Judgments on Girls: Images of Patriarchy

“The girls are holly and innocent”, this is one comment that came out quite frequently while the boys sat and discussed on the girls. This has been further elaborated into such roles of the girls as sisters and co-workers. The boys in this regard have frequently perceived girls as “poor souls” who struggle in vain to ensure food and proper clothing. As vulnerable ‘creatures’ with restricted mobility and access who have a desperate need of protection.

It has been found that the ‘innocent’ features of the girls are strongly attached with the perception of the girls as the members of the “weaker-sex” and individuals with lesser power in social hierarchy.

¹ This paper is an extract from the study conducted by INCIDIN Bangladesh on the girls working on the streets titled, “Super Sisters on Savage Street: A consultative study on the girls working on the streets”. The study has been sponsored by Save the Children Sweden-Denmark.

“Girls working on the street earn an honest living with hard labor. Even then the rich despise them. They are neglected, ignored and abused by the rich. We, the boys on the street, understand the grievance and pain of the girls. We are also poor so we treat them as our own sisters. We consider them descent and treat them with care.”

The girls are also respected as devoted wives. The boys have described descent girls as those who pray, maintain “parda” (the veiled state as per the Islamic teaching) and retain their “satita” (virginity).

At the same time, it is critical to note that the boys consider the girls highly susceptible to “moral disgrace”. The girls are perceived to be highly vulnerable to moral ‘impurities’ and this is seen as a manifestation of their weakness and helplessness. The boys in this regard are quick to judge the girls and mark them as “fallen”.

“As the “poor” girls are exposed to the street and are unable to protect themselves; soon they loose their “chastity”. They accept men and establish sexual relationship with them, under survival pressure, out of love or simply because they are forcefully taken and raped.”

The boys expect that, withstanding all the pressure and force a girl should remain virgin till marriage. “Even if they need to die out of hunger”, boys in Rayer Bazaar explained, “The girls should not have sex for money, steal or beg for money to men”. Only if a girl remains “pure”, she is considered as a sister, niece or any form of in laws or distant relatives and subsequently worthy of good behavior. Thus the girls are exposed to a very strict moral scrutiny while they are expected to survive on their own.

The discourse of the boys, describing the girls in terms of moral standing, is highly loaded with sexual insinuations and detailed descriptions of sexual acts, bodily parts and sensual behaviors; the boys have described the so-called ‘fallen girls’ as “those girls who let the boys press their melons, who take off their clothes for boys and play with the sticks”.

“We consider the street girls even lower than the beggars. The girls in the market place are thieves. Although, it’s a pity to see them suffer, these girls in a short time are turned into whores. They have sex with men out of love and lust. These girls flirt; push and shove get into fight and eventually have sex with the shopkeepers, warehouse owners, truck divers and porters of the market. These girls are basically bitches.”

In some occasions the boys considered the girls as “kangali” (which is a slang for beggars of lower category) for the very fact that they are working outside on the street. In such a case, the boys identify the parents of the girls as irresponsible and idle. This however do not save the girls from guilt; the girls have to take blame of “coming from a disgraced family”.

Although the boys themselves are apt to curse and call names, they do not approve of that quality in a girl. The boys work along side the girls, play with them and share the same social space; still they do not approve the discourse of power (associated with use of 'obscene' slang and cursing) for the girls. This once again reflects that the girls are much more accepted as "fragile" and "innocents" to the boys than as "fighters" and "equals".

"The girls are not good as they often curse and use obscene language. It does not stop these girls to snap at the boys with mother fucker, son of whore or fuck your mother type of cursing."

It has been found that the boys are divided on their opinions regarding the basic causes that lead the girls to "ashtray".

"The girls are either forced into the life of sin or it is their own folly that leads them to that path. Some girls are spoiled by boys, who cheat them with sweet words of love. The criminals trap and sell some, because these girls lead a carefree life. While, others do it simply for the love of money. In some cases the parents, male relatives, pimps, traffickers, rich men and miscreants turn a girl into a whore"

While the majority of the boys find it as a fault of moral construction, there are boys who blame it on the powerlessness of the girls originating from their "weaker sex" and poverty status. In both cases, the girls are considered "inferior" to boys both in terms of moral strength and power. It is also important to note that although in few cases men and boys are held responsible for criminal acts against women, the boys always found that the girls brought trouble upon themselves by "being visible, accessible and amicable" to those men.

This reflects that the boys on the street are educated and equip with all the self-righteous presumptions of patriarchy. This may also be the moral defense for the boys; because only by having the monopoly over moral-judgment, can the boys ensure that they are protected from any scrutiny for their own acts of violence towards the girls.

Differentiating Girls from Young Women: Sexuality as Value

"The girls who are below the age of eleven" explains a group of boys, "Who have not developed breasts yet, who are very small (around three feet in height), have not started to menstruate, have not learned to talk of love, who do not flirt with boys, do not fall on the boys, do not touch or tease the boys; are the ones who can be referred as little-girls (children)." The boys also identify the smaller girls with little mental capacity and maturity regarding decision-making, social attitude and choice of association.

The boys identify the girls who have "reached the age of 12, developed hips and breasts, menstruated, learned to speak of love in secrecy to the boys as well as openly flirt with

the boys and tease them” as young women. The boys explained that these “bigger girls” were happy if they were proposed with love and marriage.

The boys also find that the smaller girls differ in their dress from the bigger girls. “While the smaller girls wear shorts the bigger girls wear salwar-camiz (i.e. traditional long dress of two parts) and cover their blossom with orna (i.e. a form of scarf)”, observed the boys.

The boys mark the girls to be “grown up” with biological transformation visible with ‘breasts’ and the mental transformation of the girls visible in terms of their sexual “attraction” towards the members of the opposite sex. It is highly questionable whether, the girls at the age of 12 show the sexual interest toward the boys or rather the boys find the girls of that age desirable and sexually appealing and therefore drag them into “early womanhood”. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the entire concept of ‘growing up’ is correlated with sexual appeal and attitude. It also reveals that for the boys the concept of womanhood is not solely related with age, it is mostly driven and defined by male sexual desire and ethics.

It is important to put the perceptions of the boys within the general gender context. In this regard, just as in case of the boys the mainstream perception of ‘early womanhood’ also sanctions the changed dress code for the adolescent girls (who began to develop breasts). This reveals that the perception of the boys on the street is not a deviation from the social values, rather a very common and often crude manifestation of those values.

The Dream Girl Dichotomy:

The girls and boys are found to be sharing the same space and having interdependency. The boys find that the girls are an indispensable part of their daily life. “We share food with the girls” said a group of boys. “We are in harmony with the girls who are in our group. The girls often curse us if we fail to bring what they demand.” said another group of boys.

“We treat some of the girls as sisters. With others we have fun. We kiss them, touch their breasts and pinch their hips. We fight with them as well as crease them. We push and shove them and fly high together with them. We love them and help them out with their work.”

The boys explained that they expect the girls to accept their proposals of love and their love cards. The boys expect the girls to go around with them in the parks, take off their cloths when demanded and enjoy cinema or pornographic video programs with them. The boys have said to appreciate girls who submit to these whims of the boys. If the girls do not accept their proposals, the boys may slander against them and can even “take them forcefully”.

While the boys have a long list of sexual demands from the girls, they also expect the girls to be “loyal” and “moral”. A group of boys explained that their preferred girls as prospective wife should be; “enchanted, virgin, well dressed and caring towards her

man”. The boys also expect the girls to be “lively and naughty”. These the boys perceive as feminine qualities. Interestingly, these qualities can hardly be reconciled with the sexual pressure the boys themselves exert upon the girls.

This becomes further clear when the boys show their preference towards girls who are pious and regular in their praying. The dream girls whom the boys expected to marry had to be “beautiful with a splendid body and pure character. She has to be of a good family and of gentle nature. She needs to have respect for the husband and for the elders. She has to be obedient and caring.” And above all, “Must not have any relationship any other man”.²

This stereotype image of the dream girls lies strikingly opposite to the image of girls the boys narrated as their girl friends. It in a way depicts the vulnerability of the girls as lovers; because the very fact of being a lover undermines a girl’s prospect as would be wife (as the boys explained, “having a pre-marital relationship with a girl is taken by many of the boys as an indication of moral impurity on the part of the girl”).

The double standard of patriarchy has defined two sets of dream girls; one as lover and one as wife. The images of girls are caught within this conflicting desires and values of male ego.

The Patriarchic Remedies for Girls:

The boys were consulted to give their opinions on how the girls whom they considered as “fallen” could be assisted to be “socially accepted”. This discussion was also an obvious and natural conclusion to their assessment regarding the moral standing of the girls. The research team was interested to have a further in-sight to the minds of the boys and their perception regarding right and wrong in relation to girls in specific and women in general.

The suggestions of the boys can be seen from two perspectives. *Firstly*, from the sex-based power relation that gives the boys a ‘natural’ authority and moral superiority over the girls; the gender perspective. From this angle the study shows that the moral construction of patriarchy, which the boys manifest, has recognized the girls to be living in “disgrace” and found men as their “angels of mercy”.

“We the boys can organize ourselves and rescue girls whenever they are attacked or abused. We can protect the girls from criminals. We can give them some money before they sale off their virginity and dignity. If a girl is raped we can show our sympathy and give some money. We can also arrange marriage for the girls who are in disgrace”

This role perception has to be understood given the facts that: the boys on the street themselves are abused, exposed to humiliation and placed at the lower rang of the power

² Only one boy in Lalmatia mentioned that he would like to marry a “whore” as she would be able to earn for him.

relation. Secondly, the only identity that gives them some authority is their sex; being men they identify themselves as superior to girls and feel some degree of authority. Lastly, they entertain their authority as men mimicking the authoritarian model of men they know from experience. Which in other words, teach them to be dominating and make them feel superior in relation to women.

Nevertheless, it is much more important to note that the boys see a positive role, albeit from a sexist perspective, regarding the girls. This should not be overlooked. The morality of the street boys have to be taken within the context and reality of the street, in which the insecurity of a girl is very much related with her sexual identity as woman.

The second stream of suggestions also scrutinizes the girls but provides livelihood related recommendations for ‘moral rehabilitation’. It is interesting to note some similarities between the so called ‘development approach to rehabilitation and reintegration’ and such recommendations put forward by the boys on the street.

The boys found that the girls who are in “prostitution” should be given alternate source of employment and “counseled” to be “moral”. The boys also suggested that the girls should be educated on religious values and taught to be pious. They opined that general education could also expand the opportunities for the girls and enable them to come out of the “sinful” life. They also found the need of training the girls on marketable skills and providing them with material and financial supports to find alternative employment. “The government has to place the girls in a better environment and help them to overcome the poverty that leads to corrupt them” suggested a group of boys in Osmany Uddayan. “The awareness of the parents also needs to be increased so that the girls are not exposed to risky outdoor employments”, was their concluding comment.

It is interesting to note that the boys also identified some initiatives that the girls themselves can take to protect themselves. “The girls can stay in groups and resist the risks of abuse and harassment,” suggested a group of boys, “Unity of the girls can work as a protection”.

“The men and adults need to watch out for the girls and guide them to avoid risks”, the boys observed, “the government also needs to frame laws to protect the girls and ensure their safety.”

The boys generally perceive the girls as “victims” and see their role as “protectors”. The way forward for a safer world for the girls, within this framework, thus lies mainly on the men and this may be the only conclusion that requires serious consideration for anyone who wants to work on the issue. Along with that, one may further analyze the psyche of the boys and internalize to what extent this role of men can be materialize without undermining the potentialities of the girls as active organizers of their own world and without being perceived and reproduced merely as “victims”.