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Being a Middle-Class Young Man in Dhaka

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Juggling Masculinities: Being a Middle-Class Young Man in Dhaka

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Abstract

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

Keywords

Masculinity, Sexuality, Adolescents, Middle-class, Bangladesh

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Introduction

During 2016 and 2017, the first author¹ interviewed 40 middle-class adolescent boys in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and asked their views on and experiences of shame about sexuality. One of them was 17-year-old Raihan, whose name had been brought up by several research participants as a popular figure in his school and neighbourhood. Before meeting Raihan, the first author examined his Facebook profile. He had over 1200 friends and 3000 followers. His timeline was full of photos of him with his friends, and all his posts received numerous positive comments. The next day, however, after receiving several angry messages from unknown young men in Dhaka via Facebook Messenger, the first author realised that Raihan was not universally popular. These youngsters claimed that Raihan had boasted to his peers about being interviewed for a Dutch research project, and had shared the first author's Facebook profile link with them as proof. Some of them cautioned that Raihan is "misogynistic" and "too conventional," and does not represent young men in Dhaka. They insisted that the researcher should also interview young men who are more "liberal" and "open-minded" to elucidate the broader spectrum of masculinities in Bangladesh.

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

The middle-class society of Dhaka is diverse in terms of both economic and social positioning. While some families are affluent, many struggle to maintain middle-class status in the context of the competitive labour market and increasing living costs. Moreover, some families, while not being affluent, may still have a more secure middle-class position because of social networks. Because of a lack of the latter, first-generation migrants are worse off than other middle-class families. Despite some consensus in how (young) people associate middle-classness with maintaining a cosmopolitan lifestyle and academic success, there is great diversity in their views and their everyday understandings of "proper" or "ideal" masculinity.

In this paper we ask: how do middle-class adolescent boys in Dhaka construct different ideals of masculinity and negotiate those in their everyday life at home and among peers? Also, which ideas about sexuality are involved? We examine these issues

with a sample of 15–19-year-old boys in Dhaka. This group is particularly interesting from a gender equality perspective, as earlier research ascribed a more inclusive and less patriarchal account of masculinity to younger men in Bangladesh due to access to media, education and global discourses (Hasan, Aggleton, and Persson 2018, 357). As we show, however, such access provides the research participants with unique opportunities for creating influential peer networks, policing one another and using cosmopolitan language to claim progressive masculinities.

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

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

Experiences of Masculinity: A Discursive-Embodied Approach

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

invisible or portrayed as oppressors (Kimmel 2000; Hasan, Aggleton, and Persson 2015).

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

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

According to Berggren (2014), combining insights from feminist post-structuralist and feminist phenomenological accounts of subjectivity is useful for taking this next step in research on masculinities. Feminist post-structuralist studies point to the formative role of discourses and feminist phenomenological perspectives emphasise the embodiment of gender and lived experiences. Together, Berggren (2014) argues, they provide a theoretical framework that allows for both a firm critique of oppressive

masculinities alongside an in-depth understanding of how the ideals and practices of masculinities emerge in everyday life. In this paper, we follow Berggren's suggestion to integrate the central aspects of post-structuralist and phenomenological theoretical discussions. Like Berggren, however, rather than specifically engaging with a comparison of the two theoretical approaches, our goal is to employ three of their main complementary elements, enabling us to focus on the subjects' position in intersecting and conflicting discourses as well as the lived and embodied experiences of masculinities among young men in Dhaka.

To achieve this, we employ an analytical lens entailing three aspects. First, we trace the *diverse and potentially conflicting dominant norms and discourses* of masculinity in participants' narratives about gender and sexuality. Second, we illustrate the importance of the *situated and embodied experiences* of the research participants by intersectionally examining their specific gendered positionings in relation to other axes of difference. In this way, we avoid using totalising discourses of masculinity by highlighting how experiences, situations and intersecting inequalities are involved in the (re)productions of specific configurations of masculinity. Third, we are interested in the subjects' *strategies and negotiations* when dealing with gendered conflicts and decision making. This allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how the self is oriented towards certain thoughts, norms, and feelings to maintain a coherent gendered sense of self. Using this conceptual framework allows us to present an in-depth analysis of the lived, reproduced and transformed masculinities among the research participants.

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

Methods

To capture the diversity in experiences of masculinity, the first author, a Bangladeshi woman from Dhaka and anthropology PhD student in the Netherlands, collected data from 40 middle-class adolescent boys between 15 and 19 years of age living in different middle-class neighbourhoods (popularly known as "affluent" middle-class as well as "typical" middle-class neighbourhoods) and from different schools (high, average and low performing) in Dhaka, Bangladesh, during 2016 and 2017. At the beginning of the

fieldwork, she felt hesitant to approach young men directly, since discussing sex between opposite sexes is taboo in Bangladesh; however, while engaging in informal conversations with two 17-year-old key informants, she noticed how openly they spoke about their sexual experiences with a married woman somewhat older than themselves. Prior to the fieldwork, a significant amount of time was spent learning these young people's vocabularies and seeking their advice on how to approach potential participants to ask sensitive questions. Through interacting with them, the first author trained herself to get over her own shame about discussing sex and sexuality with young men. Before interviewing participants, she offered them the choice of being interviewed by herself or by a man (research assistant). With the exception of two participants, everyone said they felt more comfortable talking to her about intimate issues, which we further discuss in the following section.

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

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

Juggling Competing and Conflicting Masculinities

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

“There is this thing...a competition among us. It is a boys’ thing. If they find out about [my family’s financial situation], they will look down on me. I will feel inferior to them.”

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

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

A “Good Son” at Home

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

Consistent academic accomplishments, sexual abstinence, and obedience towards one’s parents were identified by the participants as the three most important criteria for

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

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

All the participants were well aware of these expectations, and many went to great lengths to embody them. For instance, Taz, 17 and an only child, said, “It feels too much at times. . . . Sometimes I feel like I am missing out on all the fun but then again I tell myself that I need to prioritise my future. I can’t let my parents down.” Taz keeps himself busy with educational activities and is often anxious about his grades. He added that his friends make fun of him for being “nerdy” and not hanging out with friends. Taz indeed feels isolated, but rationalizes his emotions by reminding himself of his responsibility to be a “good son.” When asked if that eases his stress, he replied, “Not exactly. But it keeps me on track.” Taz’s case points to a paradox: on one hand, he wants (and is expected) to remain focussed on his education; on the other hand, he expects and is expected to enjoy life. For Taz, the importance of education seems to weigh heavier, which he explains by appropriating a rational attitude. Throughout the fieldwork, many young men relied on a discourse of rationality when reflecting on their choices and strategies to deal with competing masculinities. When faced with (emotional) difficulties as part of juggling with contradictory norms of how to be a man, they resorted to a rational approach to explain away emotions and justify their situation. Avoiding romantic engagements was part of that calculative rational approach.

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

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

“The job market is so competitive and it’s hard to build a career here unless you have connections. My brother already left the country and is now studying in Canada, and I want to go there too after finishing high school. Then we will try to get our parents out of here as well.”

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

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

“My parents used to scold me a lot [for not obtaining good grades] but they don’t do it anymore. I think they have realised by now that I tried enough and it’s not my fault. I do whatever they ask me to do and never confront them. I never miss prayer and go to the mosque with my father. I do not talk to girls. I do not watch porn or spend unnecessary time on the internet like my friends do.”

Rabbi’s statement suggests that, when educational success is not possible, an alternative model of a “good son” is also possible through practices that convey respect for one’s parents. Rabbi suggests that piety and obedience towards his parents, as well as abstinence from sexual thoughts and activities compensate for his lack of educational success. Rabbi shows that, although there is pressure to conform to the ideal of being a “good son” through educational success, there is some room for young people to maneuver around this configuration. This space and possibility for maneuvering,

however, also interacts with other social factors. Rabbi belongs to a Dhakaiya (old Dhaka resident) family, the original residents of Dhaka, who are more conservative than other families. Dhakaiya families live in a closed-off community and maintain a distinct cultural and linguistic identity. Many of these families are wealthy and own big family businesses. To them, education is not the most important marker of social status, as it is for the educated migrant non-Dhakaiya families who represent the majority of Dhaka residents. Rabbi mentioned that he and his brother were the first generation of men expected to go to university. His father has his own business, and he expects his sons to join him once they graduate from university, providing Rabbi and his brother with employment insurance. These family business connections relieve Rabbi from the harsh competition of the labor market, allowing him to secure a “good son” image through respectability in ways potentially less possible for young men not in Dhakaiya families.

Indeed, another participant, Orko, revealed that obedience and religiosity are not always enough for parents to accept sons’ lack of educational success. Orko, a 16-year-old ninth grader, said he wants to become a musician and has no interest in performing well at school. Like Rabbi, he goes to the mosque with his father, takes Quran lessons, and always follows his parents’ instructions concerning modest behavior at home regardless of what he thinks about those instructions. His love of music notwithstanding, Orko’s father is a doctor, and wants Orko to become a doctor too. Despite being obedient and religious, his parents are still very disappointed with him and continue to pressure him to perform better at school. While religiosity might provide many (young) people in Bangladesh with social status, among secular middle-class families such as Orko’s, religiosity’s currency as a status symbol is more limited. In Orko’s case, being religious is clearly not enough to compensate for his perceived deviation from the “good student” norm. Certain professionals, such as doctors, university professors, engineers and government officials, enjoy a higher social status among the middle class, which means their sons encounter more pressure to follow in their parents’ footsteps and have more limited access to alternative models of masculinity than others. Moreover, unlike Rabbi, who can rely on his family’s business, Orko’s aspirational music career is less likely to provide similar financial security. By looking into the specific positionality and concerns of the family, it is possible to see why the same approach may or may not work to embody the ideal of a “good son.” Moreover, this illustrates that “middle class” is not a homogenous category in Bangladesh, and that different ideals and achievements are pursued, creating different possibilities for the constructions of masculinity among young men.

Orko said he would not give up on becoming a “good son” and will keep trying hard to improve his school performance at his parents’ insistence. Parental pressure is one of the major concerns for young people generally, and young men specifically. Even those research participants who appeared to reject the ideal of being a “good son” to their parents still nevertheless seemed to envision becoming one in the future. Rumman, a 17-year-old, shared that he accepted that he is “mediocre” and will never be able to obtain a GPA of 5. He encounters strict policing at home, a common experience among

participants who repeatedly failed to meet academic expectations. In such cases, parents often suspected their sons of having romantic relationships or sex, and restricted some of their freedoms.

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

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

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

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

Participants frequently mentioned the words "gender equality," "patriarchy," "male chauvinism," "toxic masculinity," and "feminism" during discussions. They learned about these concepts from various sources, such as staff members of the affiliated NGOs or youth networks, the internet, Hollywood and Bollywood movies, and

television. Many confessed that the perspectives and views they learned about in these contexts often contradicted what they observed at home, as Simon illustrates.

The findings presented in this section show that young men negotiate and (re) construct an ideal of the “good son” in diverse and complicated ways at home. Primarily, the “good son” is supposed to do well at school, which many research participants adhere to, although some are more successful than others. In some cases, if educational achievements are unattainable, alternative (though less-valued) moral registers are employed, such as acting modestly and obediently towards parents. As we showed, however, whether this works depends on the specific positionality of the young man and his family. Those few who reject the ideal either postpone their perceived duty to be a “good son” to the future or find support in NGO-inspired gender equality discourses that they partially appropriate at home. The majority of middle-class young men experienced enormous pressure to become the future “ricewinner” of the family, which entails constant effort to do well in exams, rationalize away emotions, discipline oneself, and rethink one’s aspirations to fit parental expectations. For these young men, a lot is at stake if they fail or refuse to comply with the “good son” ideal, attesting to important gendered middle-class vulnerabilities and anxieties among young men in Dhaka.

Construction of a ‘Cool’ Image Among Peers

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

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

clothes help him to avoid the shame of not being a “good son” at home and potential social isolation, while securing status as “cool” among friends.

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

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

Another relevant factor in determining “coolness” is the difference between the two contexts of school and Facebook. In Jimmy’s case, his school is a closed gender-segregated space where hierarchical relationships are shaped around sexual (im)maturity within a relatively small group of friends (all young men). By contrast, Facebook is a much more open space that includes a potentially large number of men and women from different age categories, classes and backgrounds, who Jimmy may or may not know personally. This makes impression management more difficult. Jimmy had to post an apology stating he was ashamed of himself, even though during the interview he revealed that he had no remorse about his post and his apology was strategic. This shows the slipperiness of being “cool” in an open online space as opposed to the relatively manageable “coolness” in a school environment with clearer norms. As an

ideal, “coolness” is therefore plural and contextual. One’s position in the hierarchy depends on how well one knows the rules in each context and can *juggle* between different norms in relation to different groups and spaces.

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

For some of the participants, however, neither school nor Facebook created possibilities for belonging or “coolness.” For instance, 16-year-old Rabbi was unable to make friends at school, and whenever he wrote or posted something on Facebook, he was labelled as “*khet*” (a person with working-class taste) and “conservative” for his allegedly restrictive religious views towards sexuality and for his Dhakaiya (old-Dhaka style) dialect and accent, understood as distinct from the “educated” middle-class Bangla and often mocked on local television dramas. Similarly, 17-year-old Kafi, who grew up in a small town called Bhola outside Dhaka, shared being bullied by his school mates and called “*mofu*” or “*mofiz*” (a dumb person). Kafi moved to Dhaka 2 years ago after he had been accepted into one of the best public schools in the city. He said he is never invited to birthday parties or social events organized by his classmates who grew up in Dhaka. The stories of Rabbi and Kafi show that the progressiveness celebrated on Facebook to enable the constructions of “coolness” among young men in Bangladesh has class-based and language divides (rural vs urban) also prevalent in schools and universities. Embodied class-related characteristics, such as accent and appearance, may reveal an ethnic and religious minority status, including a perception of lower economic status, and can limit one’s access to belonging, progressiveness, and “coolness.”

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

masculinity, remain unaddressed through the psychological approach of helping individuals to become more resilient. On the other hand, receiving psychological help is considered taboo, putting young people in a difficult position regarding their mental health.

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

Conclusion

In this paper, we explore masculinities as lived and embodied experiences among middle-class young men in Dhaka, focussing on the contexts of two of their most important relationships: with parents and peers. To grasp subjective experiences as simultaneously discursive and embodied, we combined feminist post-structuralist and phenomenological perspectives to (1) trace the diverse and potentially conflicting norms of masculinity; (2) shed light on specific situated and embodied experiences of masculinity in the intersection with other relevant axes of difference, such as class, religion and sexuality, and geographical location; and (3) analyse the strategies employed by the interlocutors when navigating between different norms of masculinity in specific contexts. In short, we analyze how masculinities are embodied, negotiated, appropriated, and resisted by middle-class young men in Dhaka within their relationships and interactions with parents and peers.

We identified the dominant norm of being a “good son,” specified in terms of academic achievement, showing respect to parents and sexual abstinence, in the constructions of masculinity at home. This norm is partially in direct conflict with being considered “cool” among one’s peers, which requires engaging in discussions around sex and performing a macho-like masculinity at school. Sexual activity and masculinity, in other words, can be mutually exclusive (sexually abstinent “good son”) or co-produce one another (sexually active “cool” peer). Moreover, middle-class masculinity involves two contradictory characteristics, one of which demands respectability in the eyes of one’s parents to secure the social status of the middle-class family, while another orients the subject towards the value of gender equality. As a consequence, correcting one’s father when he fails to adhere to the principles of gender equality at home goes hand in hand with compromising the respectability norm *and* appropriating a

progressive attitude. Furthermore, being considered “cool” among one’s peers depends heavily on context, with offline homosocial context of school differing dramatically from online and more open digital spaces, like Facebook. In the former, one might pass as “cool” by showing off about active engagement in sexual relationships, while in the latter “coolness” entails finding the right balance between sexual assertiveness and sensitivity to gender equality.

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

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

explicitly distanced themselves from certain dominant norms, such as opposing gender inequality at home or calling out misogyny among peers.

Confirming other research (Hasan, Aggleton, and Persson 2018), the anticipation of having to provide for the family through regular paid work and the need to show sexual competence are indeed central components of successful masculinity among young men in Dhaka. Like Hasan et al. (2018) however, we also found that less patriarchal models of masculinity were growing in popularity among the younger generation. Alternative models are actively depicted through paintings and discussed on Facebook, and lapses into sexist thinking are criticised within peer groups. In addition, our analyses of the lived experiences of the research participants showed how “successful masculinity” is contextual, ambiguous, relational, and plural. In other words, these analyses reject linear progressive conceptualisations of change in the sexuality culture among young men in Dhaka. Not only is progressiveness context-dependent, progressive ideas and practices are sometimes entangled with heteronormative and patriarchal notions of gender and sexuality. Finally, our findings imply that the possibilities for young men to express shame and vulnerability are limited, except in conversations with a female researcher identified as cosmopolitan and considered a safe refuge. This reading of the researcher’s positioning might have limited our access to other masculinities that are more prevalent in societal margins, including indigenous and more religious young men. Future research on alternative spaces and the relationships in which young men’s vulnerabilities can be shared may lead to imagining and creating a broader range of masculinities than currently seems to be available.

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Note

1. This paper is based on the first author’s fieldwork. Both authors were substantially involved in analysing the data and writing this paper.

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