

## Masculinity in Transition or Patriarchy Reasserted? A Study of Construction Workers in Sylhet, Bangladesh

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**ABSTRACT** Globally, understandings and experiences of masculinity have drawn significant attention and critique, generating lively academic debate and scholarship over the past several decades. However to date there has been relatively little such debate pertaining specifically to constructions and experiences of situated masculinities in Bangladesh. Going some way towards filling this lacuna, in this article we explore and articulate constructions of masculinities among and within the households of construction workers in Sylhet, Bangladesh. These workers – both male, and, to an even greater extent, female workers – are particularly situated in a relatively marginal position within Bangladeshi society in terms of their socio-economic, educational and cultural capital. Based on ethnographic research carried out with 40 female construction workers and 20 male construction workers and husbands of female construction workers in Sylhet, Bangladesh, we investigate constructions of masculinities in a patriarchal context which is undergoing rapid socioeconomic transformations.

### INTRODUCTION

Globally, understandings and experiences of masculinity have drawn significant attention and critique, generating lively academic debate and scholarship over the past several decades. Indeed, masculinities have been theorised and conceptualised in a range of ways, with emphases variously placed on diverging forms, definitions and typologies (Hearn and Morrell 2012). Whether favouring concepts of, for example, hegemonic, inclusive or orthodox masculinity (Anderson 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) these debates have occupied an important place in gender and social sciences literature, particularly since the 1980s, and have generated a rich literature (see for example, Kimmel 1987; Brittan 1989; Connell 1983, 1985, 1987, 1993, 1995, 1998, 2000, 2005, 2014; Siedler 1989, 2006; Brod and Kauffman (Eds.) 1994; Messner 1997; Whitehead and Barrett (Eds.) 2001; Hearn 2015). However to date there has been relatively little such debate pertaining specifically to constructions and experiences of situated masculinities in Bangladesh. That is not to say no such research exists, and two notable such studies are those of Haque and Kusakable (2005) who ex-

plore changing masculine identities and gender relations in working class Bangladeshi households, and Hossain (2012, 2017) whose recent work focuses on forms of effeminised and subordinate masculinities in Bangladesh. Here we add to this developing field of analysis through an exploration and articulation of constructions of masculinities among and within the households of construction workers in Sylhet, Bangladesh. These workers – both male, and, to an even greater extent, female workers – are particularly situated in a relatively marginal position within Bangladeshi society in terms of their socio-economic, educational and cultural capital. This article develops from a larger study exploring women's experiences of working on urban building sites in Sylhet (Choudhury 2013), and, while the focus here remains on men and masculinities, we necessarily consider constructions of femininities as relationally positioned alongside the masculinities of their male kin and co-workers.

Based on ethnographic research carried out with 40 female construction workers and 20 male construction workers and husbands of female construction workers in Sylhet, Bangladesh between 2009-2013, we investigate constructions

of masculinities in a patriarchal context which is undergoing rapid socio-economic transformations. Here we focus on particularly situated Bangladeshi masculinities through an analysis of these men's perceptions of women's paid employment, the exercise of power in the domestic sphere, the sharing of the provider role and how these men feel about depending on wives for provisioning. We consider the ways in which male participants construct, reassert and renegotiate their masculine identity through everyday activities and interactions with their wives and female co-workers. We also explore women's perceptions of gender role-relations in the context of their day-to-day experience as the main providers of their households. While not negating shifting patterns of gender relations, ultimately we argue that within this persistently hierarchical and patriarchal social context men continue to retain greater power and authority over women's lives, regardless of who contributes what to the household. Among these participants, even where women make visible financial contributions or emerge as the key contributor to the family economy, they continue to be subject to forms of masculine domination. Indeed, many men continue to cling to prevailing gender power relations and enforce even greater overt authority in the home to obscure their wives' economically dominant role. This is not to say that, in the increasingly globalised context of 21<sup>st</sup> century Bangladesh, a more nuanced and positive reading of shifting or transitional masculinities can and should be applied, but we suggest that, on the basis of this study, it is important not to overstate a case for emancipatory gender equality as a prevailing norm.

What is also important to understand here is that these men, as a group, constitute a particularly situated class-based position, one which accords them few avenues for achieving masculine occupational status and prestige. In other words, these men have limited socio-economic or cultural capital upon which to draw and, as such, their masculinity and status is bound up both within their role as providers and the corollary public perception of being visibly able to secure and support their households and preserve women's dependent position as wife and mother. While of course many women do engage in paid employment and are household providers throughout Bangladesh, this public role neither enhances women's gender status posi-

tion in the same way as for their male counterparts, but nor does it pose such a threat to masculinity for all men. It is most of a threat to men with little recourse to other forms of socio-economic or cultural capital, for those men whose main or sole claim to masculinity is as breadwinner provider for their household.

### **Cultural Norms and Reconstructions of Masculinities**

In many cultures perceptions of hegemonic or orthodox masculinity revolve around physical and emotional strength, competitiveness, courage, and ability to dominate and control others (Anderson 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). A social constructionist perspective further posits that definitions of masculinity and femininity vary both across cultures and within cultures over time (Sampath 1997; Baobaid 2006; Kimmel 2004; Seidler 2006). As our identities are both socially constructed and fluid, masculinity similarly varies among men, across socio-economic class and contextual backgrounds and over one's life cycle (Kimmel 2004; Beynon 2002). There have nevertheless been certain commonalities and consistencies across particular constructions of masculinities evident in a range of research. Studies conducted in Latin America, for example, found that violence against women is perceived by many men as a means to demonstrate masculinity (Gutmann 2006; Vigoya 2001). Annie George (2006) observed in an Indian context that men generally tend to uphold their masculine identity by fulfilling their provisioning role and exercising authority over their wife's body and mind. Several scholars have similarly observed that, notwithstanding cultural differences and personal circumstances, in many contexts men's masculine identity is closely associated with a dominant provider role (White 1997; Hearn 1999; Dolan 2002; Kimmel 2004; Morrell and Swart 2005; Conway-Long 2006; Qayum and Ray 2010). Bangladeshi society bears close resemblance to this observation and, as a 'classic patriarchal society' (Kabeer 2011: 501), normative femininity usually revolves around a woman's domestic responsibilities and perceived virtues, and a man's masculine identity is structured around his ability to discharge responsibilities as a provider and reliable earner for his family members, especially women and children. In concurrence, Haque and Kusakabe (2005),

identified two types of Bangladeshi masculinity among their working class participants: public masculinity, whereby men socialise with other men, and household masculinity, whereby they maintain their status through their breadwinner role.

As Connell (2005: 78) observes 'work is culturally defined as men's realm', and the public sphere in Bangladesh indeed continues to be heavily male dominated and segregated along gender lines. However, in Bangladesh almost 25 percent (24.3% in 2016) of the population live below the national poverty line (World Bank 2017) and this widespread poverty has increasingly challenged the normative understanding of the ideal type family system where men are the sole breadwinners and women are secluded and dependent on men for their maintenance. As such, increasing numbers of women, particularly from poorer households, are now joining paid employment outside the home as a matter of course (Khatiwada 2014). While we would suggest that much of this movement of poorer women into the world of paid work in the public sphere is driven through economic necessity, it is important to acknowledge the complexity both of motivations and consequences for women themselves at play here. While engagement in paid employment can in many contexts contribute to women's well-being and empowerment, some scholars have argued that, as men's masculine identity tends to be relational to women's, what is empowering for women can be simultaneously disempowering for men (Cleaver 2002; Vera-Sanso 2000). Studies have also demonstrated that men of poorer households are particularly less inclined to allow their wives to enter into the labour market as they consider it a powerful threat to patriarchal domination and fear that access to an income might confer women the confidence to challenge the basis of such control (Gordon 1996; Kabeer 1997, 2011; Salway et al. 2005). As Haque and Kusakabe have asserted, while differently situated men, 'define their masculine identity differently in response to their personal crises, they are all determined to maintain that identity. [...] In a situation with limited resources, men give up [public masculinity] and uphold [household masculinity]' (2005: 185).

Hence, poor men command less socio-cultural and economic capital than their wealthier counterparts and as such may be less able to

claim respect and exercise power as an (orthodox, or hegemonic) 'real man' in the public sphere and may want to compensate for this 'lack' by exercising greater power within their households, a site where they actually can practice this power (Seidler 1989; Pyke 1994, 1996). Restricting women from paid work may be one of the means through which some poorer men are able to uphold their position in the domestic sphere, and in this way they find some consolation that they are 'real men' who have the power to control their social world. In certain cultural contexts, such as in Bangladesh, women's paid employment can be perceived as bringing shame on their husbands' status to an extent that, despite their levels of extreme poverty, men feel under pressure through culturally contextual patriarchal gender norms to restrict 'their women' from accessing work outside the home (Agarwal 1997; Katz 1997; Haque and Kusakabe 2005).

Here it is critical to note that the dynamics of gender regimes (Walby 2011) or structures of patriarchy, and working class men's precarious positions therein, are not fixed but rather continually made and re-made. They are re/produced through this very process of exerting control over women in the domestic sphere and reaffirming public/private dichotomies including through, for example, the strategic and selective deployment of religious based ideologies. Men's capacity to respond in more positive ways to changing gender roles and relations, to the destabilising of patriarchies, is constrained by the lack of other available resources or ways to affirm their gender status and identity. These men may not perceive that they have access to other models or expressions of masculinity. However this is not always the case, in some situations where men have had to relinquish the role of provider they have sometimes found other forms of masculinity making that they can embrace. Alicia Pingol's (2001) study of househusbands in the Philippines whose migrant wives are the main breadwinners provides an insightful example of the potential ways that men may negotiate alternative models of masculinity.

While men draw on their masculine capital to resist challenges to their social status, women were also seen to use what Scott (1987: 419) calls the 'weapons of the weak' to resist unfavourable situations. In his classic study of peasant resistance Scott argues that 'relatively powerless people' use different forms of resis-

tance, which 'do not require planning, they often represent forms of individual self-help, and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority' (1987: 419-420). Similarly, Abu-Lughod's (1990: 43) study of Bedouin women reveals that women use different unconventional forms of resistance, such as defying different types of restrictions placed on them by elderly men in their community. We also contest that in a socio-cultural milieu where women's ability to exercise their agency is often constrained, such as in this context within Bangladesh, women use indirect and personalised forms of resistance. Moreover, we argue that women's resistance brings with it transformation; albeit transformations that are not always equivocal or apparent, but change that nevertheless can be very important in achieving greater gender equality.

### **Profile of the Participants**

In order to obtain a broader picture of understandings of masculinity and femininity among construction workers this study incorporated men and women who belonged to different age groups, ranging from late teens to mid-50s. A total of 60 male and female participants were selected for this study. Of those 40 were female construction workers and 20 were men, a combination of male construction workers and the husbands of female construction workers. Construction workers were drawn from three purposively selected construction workers' congregating points of Sylhet city. These three meeting points were selected because of the heavy concentration of both male and female construction workers. Participants were selected purposively guided by the criteria of participants' place of origin, age, marital status, religion, and, of course, their willingness to take part in the research. Data regarding the participants were generated through a combination of life histories, in-depth interviews, ethnographic observation and field notes, supplemented by available secondary sources. In-depth interviews lasted for 2 to 4 hours, while the majority of life histories lasted for 6 to 8 hours over the course of several repeated sessions. All the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The study was approved and complied with recognised ethical guidelines (that is BSA,

ASA) and a feminist methodological approach underpinned the study.

All female participants had been married at least once. Their marital status varied during the data collection period. Over half of the women (24 of 40) were married at the time of the research and the majority (70%) lived in households that were perceived as conventionally structured, headed by husbands. The husbands of 4 married female participants had been living in their village homes and another 3 participants' husbands had been living with their first/second wives. Regardless of their dwelling arrangements, husbands had been able to maintain substantial control over the lives of their wives. The rest of the female participants were either widowed (7), separated from or had been deserted by husbands (2). The majority (70%) of the 20 male participants were married, twenty-five percent were single and five percent were separated. All were from resource poor households with limited formal education and so had a relative lack of opportunity in the labour market.

### **Masculinities and Femininities amongst Construction Workers in Bangladesh**

The intention here is not to make any claims to portray a comprehensive picture of diverse masculinities and femininities existent in Bangladeshi society among different classes and generations. Rather we consider the constructions of gender identities among this particular group of construction workers and the husbands of female construction workers. Similar to other studies of masculinities, in this study we found that men's masculine identity is largely constructed through their ability to provide for their dependants. All the female participants expressed their belief that their husbands' masculine identity rested upon their ability to emerge as adequate breadwinners for their family members and maintain their wives in seclusion. This is not to say that other aspects of masculinity, for instance, marriage and fatherhood, are not relevant or deemed unimportant in the construction of masculinity in Bangladeshi society. Nevertheless, these female participants rarely focused on those aspects in our conversations and here we draw on their perspectives. Those male participants who were able to provide financially for their family members and who did not permit their wives to enter the labour market,



were keen to verbally assert and claim absolute authority within their households, and felt that in so doing they were able to obtain social recognition as 'men'. Conversely, men who were unable to fulfil their masculine responsibilities, were less inclined to talk about men's provisioning role as the central aspect of their identity. Men who were dependent on their wives for their livelihood overtly or covertly conveyed the message that they nevertheless retained control over their wives' decisions and we suggest that this was one strategy in their attempts to maintain their masculine identity.

Men who shared the breadwinning role with their wives were inclined to hide the reality about wives' waged work from friends and extended family members to protect their masculine image. Women were also seen to maintain secrecy about their paid employment outside the home to support the maintenance of their husbands' masculine identity and preserve social norms. All the married male participants were keen to assert that they were the main and ultimate decision-makers in their respective households. Unmarried male participants also expressed the desire to have an absolute authority over their envisioned future wives' body and mind.

However, and more anecdotally, among middle or upper-class Bangladeshi men we have found that it is not as common in contemporary contexts to openly admit that their wives are expected to abide by their desires, even if they actually do enforce strict control over their wives within the private sphere. We would suggest that fear of implicit (or explicit) social disapproval and being perceived as 'unsophisticated' within a wider (and higher) social spectrum restrain middle and upper-class men from public manifestations of masculine domination. Middle and upper class men, however, have less at stake here. They have greater socio-economic and cultural capital to draw on. This concern to display modern (also perhaps read neoliberal) *morés* of socio-cultural and educational capital was not a preoccupation for the male participants of our study. Neither was men's marital infidelity considered a grave offence by either our male or female participants, rather they considered it as a 'natural' male trait and both male and female participants seemed to believe that faithfulness is only applicable to women.

We found that these male participants also tried to maintain their masculine identity and public image through distancing themselves as far as was possible in their given circumstances from doing anything in the public realm that could be translated as 'feminine'. One illustration of this was that relatively better off male participants who were working as *rajmistris* (head construction workers) did not like to carry a lunch box to their workplace as they found it feminine. Men who were more socio-economically marginalised and thus not able to display a customary public manifestation of masculinity through a breadwinner role, aimed to compensate for this lack by doing so in the private sphere. One participant, Khason, for example, who was completely financially dependent on his construction worker wife, was extremely disinclined to share housework as he believed by not doing "women's work", he was safeguarding his image as a 'man'. Similar to Khason, a great majority of dependent men were reluctant to share housework to, as they expressed, protect their masculine image. Conversely, some men whose wives were *not* involved in paid employment said they did 'not feel too bad' if they had to share some housework as they believed by being a successful provider of their dependants they had already fulfilled the condition of being a 'man'. Sending one's wife to the labour market was perceived by these male participants to be another indication of failed masculinity among the construction workers. Indeed, we found that *Rajmistris* usually did not allow their wives to enter paid employment in the public sphere.

Femininity, amongst our participants, was perceived as dichotomous to masculinity. The majority of our participants believed, at least overtly, that femininity is associated with altruistically performing all productive and reproductive tasks for the family, taking special care of husbands, and incontestably accepting hierarchical gender power relations in the household. Along conventional lines most of our female participants said that they believed home was the right place for women, although they also seemed to consider that earning a livelihood for the whole family, including the husband, was imperative on the part of a 'good wife'. A significant number of female participants expressed their conviction to continue with paid employment, focusing on the necessity of earning for themselves and their family, but also as a means

to uphold their hard earned self-esteem. Some of them were seen to negotiate domestic power relations by posing direct or indirect challenges to their husbands and all of them implicitly, if not explicitly, wanted their husbands to shoulder some of the domestic chores. Most female participants were complicit in upholding masculine identities, for example some were seen to help their dependent husbands in the maintenance of their masculine image by not challenging their authority in the home; others were seen to protect their husbands' masculine image in public through buying them consumer goods, such as a cell phone, though they themselves did not possess one. As one female participant explained;

*"It does not look good if a woman of my class keeps a cell phone and walks on the street while talking on the phone. You can keep one since you work in an office. I have bought a cell phone for my husband as he had a long desire for one. You know these things look good in a man's hand"* (Aleya, 35, married, mother of 5, construction worker).

This comment illustrates how women themselves differentiate between notions of femininity 'appropriate' for different classes. Some female participants had bought themselves their own cell phones, but when talking about that they sounded somewhat apologetic, as if they were confessing to a transgression of a boundary of femininity by possessing a phone. A few women, however, were more confident about the necessity of owning their own mobile phone, and did not appear to feel apologetic or guilty about doing so. This was an interesting illustration of the ways in which constructions of masculinities and femininities can and do shift over time: and no less so among these female participants. Through our conversations and their life history narratives, it became apparent that many of these hard working, but still marginalised, women had shifted their perceptions about what is acceptable for a woman to be, to do, and to possess, on a gradual trajectory towards greater equality with men.

#### **'Women Are Like Shoes. If You Do Not Want To Wear Them Anymore, You Can Throw Them Out': Presenting a Male Perspective**

Men's overall control in the public sphere, especially in the economic domain, in conjunc-

tion with the persistence of the belief of male dominance in Bangladeshi society, assigns them such a higher status that, irrespective of their personal circumstances, men often believe that they are superior as a gender and thereby should have power over women. This description was befitting to all the male participants in this study, who seemed to feel proud to be a 'man' and maintained that men and women are "naturally" different.

However, a large number of these men were unable to perform their culturally delegated role as providers, rather, they became heavily dependent on their wives to meet their personal and household financial needs. Consequently, these men struggled to maintain their status as a 'real man' both inside and outside the home. Nevertheless, they still believed they held the absolute right over their wives' decisions and continued to act upon this belief. We also found that men seldom agreed that men and women should have equal rights in all spheres of life. Despite having experienced changes in men's and women's role in the home and the workplace, they struggled to believe women were as good as men in terms of their ability to work outside the home. Women's visible contribution to the household economy appeared to have little overt impact on men's negative attitudes towards women's capacity to live an independent life, run a family and make their own choices about their lives. Most men continued to believe that in any circumstances women should obey their husbands' commands on all matters. One male participant depicted the following scenario;

*"If I can find an autorikshaw owner who agrees to rent out his autorikshaw to me on a daily basis, I will not allow my wife to work in construction anymore. A man's ability to keep his woman inside the home is his status marker. If she still insists on going to work, I will tell her, "you cannot stay in my house anymore, you leave my house, go wherever you want, and earn your living". Women are like shoes. If you do not want to wear them anymore, you can throw them out"* (Kajol, 41, married to a *beti jogali*).

Kajol's point of view was further reinforced by Mahbub who contended *"if a woman dares to raise her voice against her husband's desire, it is nothing but the husband's failure."* According to Mahub, women in conjugal relations must not be given the liberty to confront their hus-

bands' decisions or intervene in their husbands' affairs. Most male participants of this study shared Mahbub's feelings and seemed to believe strongly that husbands should have absolute authority over their wives' choices and decisions. However, one of the male participants, in Kacha, felt that this authority came with certain conditionalities, and that men's authority over their wives' body and mind can only be automatically ensured if they can prove themselves to be successful providers and protectors of their wives. These perceptions of the male participants in this study are illustrative of the continued importance of breadwinning in the construction of men's masculine identity in Bangladeshi society.

In Bangladeshi society, norms of male guardianship persist whereby throughout her life a woman, regardless of her education and class position, is perceived to be under the guardianship of her father, husband or son (Chowdhury 2000). This power structure within the household accords men decision-making powers over his female kin, and it was indeed the case that all married female participants of this study said that they had to negotiate with their husbands, regardless of whether their husbands earned an income or not, before joining the labour force. Even after taking up paid employment, they were in constant negotiation, and despite these men now being accustomed to seeing women - including their wives - working in the public sphere to share the provider role for their families, they were still a long way from contemplating the possibility that women and men should be considered as equals. Here it seemed that men's deep rooted, patriarchal gender ideology and corresponding prevailing notions of male superiority prevented them from accepting the reality that women are no less able than men, or from contemplating that men and women could or should have equal rights and opportunities.

#### **Men Refrain from Taking on Arduous Tasks: Are They 'Men' Enough?**

There is a patriarchal myth that men as a group are stronger and tougher and accordingly that they are more suited to physically demanding work, whilst women, on the other hand, are deemed to be fragile, weak and unsuitable for such labour intensive work (Weston 1998). Bangladeshi female construction workers stand

as powerful myth busters and exemplars of women's strength and ability to effectively perform all responsibilities associated with hard physical labour. Moreover, the majority of male construction workers did not appear to fulfil the stereotype of the 'tough muscular man'. Despite this, a fine line was maintained between male and female labourers underpinned by the fictional but persistent conviction that men are more productive than women. In reality, we found that husbands of female construction sector labourers, who were engaged in construction or other manual work, often tried to gain respite from arduous physical labour. Some of these men openly admitted not only that they did not wish to perform laborious work themselves but that did they 'not feel bad' when their wives were engaged in a similar kind of exhausting, arduous work to earn a living for the whole family, and in fact, they wanted their wives to do more labour intensive work as this was more financially beneficial.

One male participant, Ayub, for example, who worked as a *jogali* in construction, often tried to secure less physically demanding forms of work despite knowing that physically demanding jobs earned more in terms of financial reward. Instead he preferred to send his *jogali* wife to secure these more arduous but financially beneficial jobs, such as roof making, to earn more money. Although this was the reality of Ayub's household, in public he was not ready to accept the fact that his wife worked harder than him and earned more as he perceived it would reflect negatively on his image as a 'real man'. In order to protect his masculine image among relatives and acquaintances he always tried to hide the fact that his wife had been working as a construction worker. Ayub was also seen to prevent his wife from going out to work when they had visitors at home and told her to tell them that she was a stay-at-home wife. This example clearly elucidates how some men not only try to maintain control over their wives but also go to significant lengths to present an appropriate display and performance of hegemonic masculinity to avoid potential embarrassment in front of others. Female construction workers' narratives also revealed that they were fully aware of the ways in which their male counterparts, including their own husbands, often try to avoid gruelling work if they really can. One female participant, Bilkiss, for example, described how her work helped her husband to withdraw from hard labour:

*“In the construction sector a helper is required to climb the stairs while carrying heavy loads. My husband cannot do such heavy work, though I do not hesitate to do this work. Since I also earn money by working on construction sites, he can take breaks on and off and does not need to do the painstaking work; he now values me for this reason”* (Bilkiss, 27, married, mother of 2, construction worker).

Thus, contrary to the widely-held belief in Bangladeshi society that women are weaker and therefore need male protection, we found that, on many occasions, women are protecting men by performing more demanding labour, and providing them with food and shelter. Notwithstanding women’s visible roles and contributions to both public employment and private household income, in our discussions, men continued to express the belief that men are superior to women and tried to maintain their power base both inside and outside the home, even if they failed to make tangible and substantial contributions. However, it also appeared to be the case that some women in this study believed it was a man’s right to push their wives into the labour market and be financially dependent on their wives’ earnings if they so wished. Moreover, despite their - and also importantly because of their - significant contribution to the family economy through engagement in non-normative labour in the public sphere, several female participants felt obliged to pay additional attention to their husbands’ needs and comfort at home. This struggle to maintain normative gender codes on the part of both men and women is a testament to the power of hierarchical gender relations and the resilience of hegemonic patriarchal ideals pertaining to men’s and women’s relative status in society.

### **Women as Reinforces of ‘Masculine’ Domination**

Studies conducted both in the context of Bangladesh and elsewhere, reveal that women rarely claim the due respect they deserve for the contribution they make in/to the household (Safa 1995; Kabeer 1997; Jesmin and Salway 2000; Haque and Kusakabe 2005). As Chowdury (2000) argues, historically Bangladeshi women are socialised to follow their husbands’ command in all aspects of their lives. For White (1997), women comply with their husbands not only through

the power of gender role socialisation, or ‘processes of gendering’ (Clisby and Holdsworth 2016: 5), but do so as a strategy to eschew marital discord. We similarly found this to be the case in this study. In addition to the desire to maintain peace in the home, women also tried to abide by the cultural expectation of their society by performing the role of an apparently docile, consenting wife whose duty it is to maintain the marital relationship. As Ambia explained, she felt she should obey all the orders of her husband, although there was no such need explicitly expressed on the part of her husband. She believed by being her husband he had been awarded the right to establish control over her life. Ambia was not alone in this understanding, another female participant, Muleda, who had joined the labour market due to extreme poverty and was pleased with her recently achieved financial independence, maintained she would not continue with her work in the construction sector if her husband asked her to quit. She was ready, though with a heavy heart, to forgo her newly found economic independence and return to her previous life of chronic poverty and dependence if that were required in order to act in accordance with her husband’s wishes. Both Ambia and Muleda supposed that one’s husbands’ word was final, that wives need to comply with their husbands’ wishes, and that this is how conjugal relations work. Women’s commitment towards conjugal relations is not limited to listening to their husbands and following them without demur. Minara continued to perform the role of a ‘good wife’ while her husband, even after losing his status as a provider, remained in a higher position;

*“If I do not find work, I take care of my husband after getting back home. I bring water for him to take a shower, wash his clothes and serve him food. I clean his feet, oil them and also massage his head. I do it myself; he does not need to ask”* (Minara, married, 28, mother of 4, construction worker).

She was keen to explain how she was extra careful in her behaviour with her husband and restrained herself from doing or saying anything that might hurt his male ego. Ambia also took extra care of her husband - giving him cool air with a hand fan in hot weather, pressing his legs, and serving him hot food, were but a few of the services she performed for him. She claimed to do this only to comply with the role of a ‘dutiful



wife'. Sajeda also seemed to accept the domination of her husband partly because she thought taking care of her husband would earn her the reputation of a 'good woman' among her relatives and neighbours; and partly because of her religious belief that fulfilling a husband's desire is her religious duty.

However, this is not to say that all women behaved in the same way. A different reaction towards a husband's irresponsible and apathetic behaviour was expressed by Rokeya, who was the primary breadwinner of the family. Rokeya narrated her discontent about all the times when her husband demanded extra care and attention or tried to enforce authority over her. However, it also emerged from her accounts that although she sometimes vented her frustration on her husband, her deep rooted and internalised cultural values of male supremacy often restrained her and made her feel that expressing anger and frustration on her husband is not 'right' for a woman;

*"When I get angry, I lose my cool and shout at my husband. However, when I get back to my senses, I apologise to God. He is my husband, my heaven lies under his feet. Shouting at him is tantamount to breaching the divine law, but you know when people are angry, they do many things that they would not have done in a normal situation"* (Rokeya, 43, married, mother of 6, construction worker).

Baobaid (2006) observed, in the Yemeni context, cultural values and practices have been imbued with religious teachings and Islam has been adopted in a way more consistent with the cultural practices of the inherently male biased society. Similarly, in Bangladesh, although Islam accords women equal rights to men, women who lack formal education and religious teaching often fall victim to the male propaganda that the Quran accords men power over women. We are not suggesting that poorer women are ignorant, lack agency, or are unable to understand their religion, rather that poorer women can be less able to access their own Islamic teaching and texts and may have to rely on second hand interpretations of religious 'rules'. The lower value accorded to Bangladeshi women *qua* women, an understanding of which tends to become internalised, coupled with being given, what we would suggest are, very particular interpretations of Islamic rules, can act as a barrier to women in challenging their subordinate position in

the household while simultaneously supporting and reinforcing the patriarchal maintenance of male supremacy.

### **Depending on Wives' Earnings: Failure or Reinforcement of Masculinity?**

It emerged from the narratives of the married female participants that initially their husbands were less willing to let them work outside the home, however gradually they not only became accustomed to it but also became heavily dependent on their wives' earnings. Nevertheless, it seemed that for some men, once they had 'allowed' their wives to take paid employment and they had become fully or partially dependent on their wives' wages, they felt that they were less able to claim respect as 'men' from their own social environment (see also Fuller 2000). We found that several of the husbands of female construction workers in this study believed that they had little left to lose in the public sphere as they had lost the status of being a provider and a husband to a woman who is able to maintain seclusion. This frustration of being 'emasculated' and the fear of being undermined in the domestic sphere led some of these men to increase the enforcement of their authority within the home. Noorjahan's husband was very much against her paid employment at the beginning, but when acute poverty pushed her to take paid work, he not only became accustomed to the new situation but he also gradually started to withdraw his financial support. Eventually he became both habitually financially dependent on Noorjahan and increasingly demanding as a stay-at-home husband. Noorjahan explained that this situation was not unique to her household, narrating that in the slum where she lived most women were engaged in the labour market and performed the breadwinning responsibilities, regardless of whether they had husbands or not. Indeed, we found that it appeared to be increasingly common, at least in this small sample, for these wives' incomes to be seen by their husbands as an escape route from arduous physical toil. This was taken even further by several of the men in this study who had withdrawn entirely from paid work since their wives began working on building sites, despite continuing to live in relative poverty.

Sajeda and Mahmuda, for example, explained how their ability to earn incomes allowed their

husbands to become more, in their view, irresponsible and arrogant. Both recounted that they did not believe that their physical well-being mattered to their husbands. They said they thought that their husbands just wanted their wives to earn money so that they could lead a 'relaxed life'. If Sajeda or Mahmuda were unable to secure work one day, or felt physically unfit to go to work, they said that their husbands tried to initiate a fight with them, called them names and beat them and/or their children to release their frustration, as Mahmuda narrates here:

*"As long as I can earn money my husband is happy. He just roams around tension free and gets back home during lunch and dinner time. If I can earn well, he is fine. The days I cannot find work, he gets mad at me, he initiates a fight with me, calls me names and beats me up. He says, "if you do not want to go to work, then why did you come to Sylhet? Since you are here, you have to work to earn money" (Mahmuda, 35, married, mother of 6, construction worker).*

Hasna and Assia described that their husbands not only wanted them to work hard to earn money that their husbands were able to spend, but they also wanted detailed accounts of their earnings. Most of the married female participants felt obliged to give accounts of their earnings to their husbands to avoid conflict. Most husbands of female construction workers tended to believe that they had an inalienable right over their wives' income. However, this is not to say that husbands always gained straightforward access to their wives' money as these women also had strategies of resistance to maintain some control of their earnings.

The majority of those female participants in this study with dependent husbands echoed parallel experiences of being humiliated and subjected to accusations and blame by their husbands. Sajeda, Ambia and Begum, for example, narrated how their husbands often humiliated them by accusing them of being too friendly with, and sometimes even of sharing a bed with, their male co-workers. These sorts of accusations on the part of husbands generally do not go unanswered. Wives also speak back and remind husbands about their inability to keep them in seclusion. Drawing on Scott (1987) and Abu-Lughod (1990) we were similarly able to observe that this subtle form of resistance is widely used by these relatively powerless women and that

women's resistance sometimes enabled them to manoeuvre the situation in their favour, although sometimes not.

Afia and Mahmuda narrated that their husbands expressed a derogatory attitude towards their employment in construction. Mahmuda's husband appeared to be authoritarian about her mobility and mingling with others and always wanted Mahmuda to follow the code of conduct set by him. In line with George (2006) we suggest that by asserting control over his wife's sexuality, movement, and access to and control over productive resources, Mahmuda's husband maintains some male power - a gaining of honour as a 'man' from a conventional point of view. Female construction workers' husbands were not ready to lose control over their wives, as Joynul's account illustrates:

*"My wife works as a jogali. She goes to work if both of us can find work with the same recruiter. I do not allow her to go alone. I do not want her to contravene the norms of purdah. I will not like it if my wife works with other male construction workers in my absence. The majority of construction workers flirt with each other. I neither like people flirting in workplace nor do I" (Joynul Mia, 54, beta jogali<sup>2</sup> and married to a beti jogali).*

These observations find resonance with Atkinson et al. (2005) who also note that when men fail to reinforce their masculine identity through normative familial activities, they may experience feelings of inadequacy, which can result in their exercising authority through violence. It has been well documented that many men resort to violence as a way of dealing with issues such as economic stress, low self-esteem, or to reassert domination (Cleaver 2002). Unemployment has also been identified as an underlying factor in situations of domestic violence (Kimmel 2004). Fear of being ridiculed and being viewed as less than a man may also provide justification to resort to violence against their wives (Foreman 1999: 20 cited in Dolan 2002). In this study we similarly found that men's struggle to uphold their masculine identity can result in increased levels of violence against women. Moreover, and for complex socio-cultural and gendered reasons, women can also be complicit in attempts to maintain male dominance.

As Brittan (1989) noted almost three decades ago, the breadwinner role is usually associated with some privileges, power and authority, of-

ten over other family members. His observation stands today, however, and certainly in the context of this study, this privilege tends to be gender specific whereby this provider role affords only men a real position of power and does not extend in the same way to comparable power and privilege for breadwinning women (Tichenor 2005). In other words, women's provider role does not simplistically correlate with a commensurate corresponding increase in their power and authority within the domestic sphere. In this study, for example, there were specific instances where men remained in the position of domestic authority without discharging their financial responsibilities. This does not mean that men are unaware of their situation in relation to employment and their inability to emerge as a 'real man', and women similarly are able to comprehend that their labour power is being used by their husbands for their own personal benefit. Nevertheless, women rarely overtly confronted men's superior position. Although several studies (see for example, Pineda 2000; Fuller 2000; Chant 2000) have found that women's paid employment and their husbands' corresponding unemployment contribute to a perceived emasculation of men, at least to some extent, here we cannot lose sight of the social structure of Bangladesh. In this context it seems the notion of male supremacy and appropriateness of the dichotomous hierarchical gender relations remain highly resilient and resistant to such challenges. This in turn becomes a barrier to overt shifts within the familial micro structures of society.

#### **Transitional Masculinity in the Making? Renegotiating Normative Gender Relations**

As we have illustrated through this research, men who feel that they are unable to conform to the ideal of 'real man' by their functional role in family and society, may attempt to uphold their masculine image through diverse, including unfair and even violent, means. Men are aware that there is a 'lack'; and that in order to claim the status of 'real men', they have to discharge the gender responsibilities entrusted to them *qua* men by society and family. However, a few male participants of this study were keen to assert that they did not push their wives into the labour market, rather, as they narrated, their wives were keen to shoulder some of the financial responsibilities and accordingly they merely sup-

ported their wives' decisions to work outside the home. Nevertheless they continued to expect to impose their authority over their household, and admitted that while on most occasions they were successful, sometimes they faced resistance from their construction worker wives. Here we consider whether we can see instances of masculinity being renegotiated, transitioning towards a more accommodating position vis-à-vis positional gender power relations. We found that, even if the reasons for renegotiation and transition might be due rather more to economic necessity than an ideological shift, there were nevertheless changes afoot in both men's and women's understandings of their masculinities and femininities as a result of women's encroachment into the masculinised public space of the building site.

Kajol, for example, did not want his wife to work in construction, hence he asked her to quit construction work and take up what he perceived as more acceptable domestic work. However his wife continued to work in construction, where her earnings were higher, demonstrating her resistance through non-compliance with his desire and further tacitly challenging his masculine status by saying she would withdraw from the labour market altogether if he so wished if he earned an adequate income to sustain their family. Although Kajol was angry, he did not attempt to force her to stop working in construction, however, this did not appear to emanate, at least overtly, from an agreement that she had the right to make decisions about her own career, rather it was expressed as stemming from both economic necessity and a fear of being challenged. Nevertheless, through this illustration and other glimpses within this study, we could see that a man's inability, or in some cases, unwillingness, to discharge normative gendered financial responsibilities could render a discernible dent in their patriarchal masculine value system and lead men to negotiate with these ongoing transformations, as Kajol indicates here:

*"I cannot force her to leave construction work because if I do so, she will say, "feed me and keep me at home, I do not have the desire to go out if you bring home what we need". Her income is a great help for my family and this is why I cannot say anything. I feel bad to see men and women working together, joking, and laughing on construction sites. If I were able to*

*feed her, I would not let her go to work. But now I am unable to provide for her so I cannot make a fuss about it”* (Kajol, 41, *beta jogali*, married to a *beti jogali*).

Another male construction worker, Kacha, whose wife worked as a domestic helper, perceived that once men lose the provider status, they lose the respect of their wives. Although he managed to prevent his wife from taking construction work and compelled her to take domestic work, he knew the basis of his authority was fragile, hence he commented:

*“If you can earn enough money to fulfil the needs of your family, you will get respect as a man and as a husband. However, if you cannot earn enough, you are neither a man nor a husband (kamai korle jamai). If you cannot earn an adequate income to meet the basic needs, your wife will not respect you, rather she will tease you”* (Kacha, 56, *beta jogali*, married to a domestic helper).

Poverty sometimes requires men to renegotiate their patriarchal values by allowing ‘their’ women to take on waged work. Among these participants in such a situation, there were a range of evident attitudes towards their wives’ employment. The majority of men expressed reservation and even resentment when their wives considered engaging in paid employment for the first time, particularly on construction sites. Some of the female construction workers’ husbands initially either showed indifference or opposed their wives’ decision; some eventually appreciated their wives’ decision to support their family through such labour, while others just became dependent on wives without overtly acknowledging their contribution. It seemed that some men refused to acknowledge their wives’ input, even to themselves, as they perceived it as a threat to their authority in the private sphere. However, and in accordance with Safa (1996) and Zaman (2001), we also found that women’s access to an independent income and emergence as a main provider sometimes allowed them to negotiate with their husbands by posing a challenge to their breadwinner status:

*“I tell my husband since you are not feeding me, you do not need to know with whom I am speaking or smiling. If you do not want me to mingle with unfamiliar men, keep me at home. If I need to earn my own living, I have no choice but to speak and smile with men”* (Hasna, 28, married, mother of 2 daughters, construction worker).

Although the relationships are complex, studies conducted in different parts of the world have demonstrated that women’s increased contribution to the family economy and men’s concomitant inability to discharge their breadwinner roles have in some cases led to important shifts in the domestic balance of power (Kabeer 2000, 2011; Pingol 2001; Francis 2002; Salway et al. 2005; Holvoet 2005). In Bangladeshi society, the relationship between women’s material contribution and their concomitant status in conjugal relations is not straightforward. Although Hasna seemed to confront her husband by questioning his authority, it was not her usual stand. Similarly, Rokeya’s role as the principal earner of the family did not enable her to negotiate housework sharing with her abusive husband; but she did manage to reduce the amount of extra care she had to pay him. It appears that women are more likely to employ subtle forms of resistance, subtle forms of ‘weapons of the weak’. Married women migrating alone to urban centres without husbands; women continuing with construction work despite husbands’ disapproval; women occasionally casting shame on husbands for their inability to earn enough money to support their family; or wives not offering extra care to economically inactive husbands, are only a few examples of these participants’ ways of showing resistance to patriarchal control in the home. It becomes evident that poverty, changes in the socioeconomic system, men’s manifest inability to fulfil the role of breadwinner and women’s increasing participation in paid employment have placed considerable strain on men’s masculine identities (Clever 2002). Even though most of these men did not appear to feel completely ‘demasculinised’, the response of many of these men to women’s waged work and new gender roles conveys the message that they experience to some extent what Mookerjea-Leonard has called a ‘crisis of masculinity’ (2011: 31). Do the processes and responses among these participants also indicate a shift in normative gendered power relations, a transition from hegemonic or orthodox masculinities to a renegotiation of their understandings of masculinity and femininity? These processes are nuanced, complex and contested, but we would suggest that shifts are indeed afoot.

## CONCLUSION

Men, as a gender, in Bangladeshi society, are undoubtedly located in a relatively powerful



position vis-à-vis women and that among our participants, despite a considerable increase in the number of female providers, patriarchy and masculine domination was remarkably resilient. Indeed, we also found that a wife's breadwinning role does not necessarily translate into greater and certainly not unmitigated power and control for her within marriage. The dominant societal discourse or normative processes of gendering within Bangladeshi society shape women's perceptions in such a way that they may not feel able to claim the status which is usually associated with the breadwinner role.

Nevertheless, while in this study neither men nor women were seen to be redefining the notions of masculinity and femininity unequivocally, we would argue that some transition in gender roles, norms and relations were evident. Both men and women were adjusting their responsibilities outside the home in response to their changing situations. Paid employment for men continues to be understood as a key source of masculine identity, whether they have access to employment or not, while being a virtuous and dutiful wife in the home, but *in addition* to earning an income for the family, serves to constitute the basis of femininity for most of these women. In most cases conventional notions of femininity were adhered to the, at least visibly and within the confines of the home. However, this is not to say that women showed no resistance to patriarchal practices at home, they did, but their strategies of resistance were generally relatively clandestine. The embedded tolerance for the subordination of women, the male biased macro social structure, the existing powerful socio-religious myth of male supremacy, the lack of social support, and weak welfare structures in society create a situation that not only normalises the lower status of women but also limits the possibility of questioning prevailing norms.

Patriarchy is resilient, and women's increased visibility in 'male' spheres, on building sites, in paid employment, and men's complete financial dependence on women do not seem, as yet at least, to have had a transformational impact on gender power relations in Bangladeshi society. The current socio-cultural system remains inherently exploitative for women, and, although to a lesser extent, for particularly situated men. On the one hand it constrains women from challenging male superiority and locates them within a subservient female role, and on the other, it places an enormous pressure on

men to perform as 'real men', leading them to reassert their masculine identity, sometimes through nefarious means, which can expose women to further vulnerability. Nevertheless there were important glimpses in this study of shifting gender roles, relations and challenges to normative masculine power. The subordination of women in Bangladesh is secured and perpetuated through the blood and sinew of society, not only by ideologies that support the dominance of a culture of masculinity and male privilege, but also through social practices that reinforce the dominant position of men over women.

But, and importantly, just as blood is fluid, masculinity in Bangladesh is neither monolithic, nor immune to shifts and transformations over time, space, individual experiences and within people's lifecourse. Men were renegotiating their understandings of the boundaries and parameters of their masculinity in their changed circumstances, albeit in limited and at times violent ways. It remains to be seen whether ongoing changes in household structures will lead to an increasingly rapid pace of change, whereby society at large, and men and women as individuals can no longer ignore these shifts in power, autonomy and control over highly gendered domestic and public spaces, but we would like to remain cautiously optimistic.

## NOTES

- 1 Female construction sector helper
- 2 Male construction sector helper

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