



Undergraduate Thesis: Anthropology

Insight into Decision of Marriage by Late
Teens and Early-Twenties Women in
Dhaka Middle Class: Their Agency,
Respectability and Role of External
Factors.

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Abstract	3
Introduction	4
Research Framework	6
Familial Norms, Agency and Respectability	9
Social Status, Expression in Social Media and the Use of Respectability as a Tool	14
Marriage, Autonomy and Religious Norms	21
Conclusion	25
Bibliography	28

Abstract

Women in the 21st century have made an insurmountable amount of progress in terms of education, employment, decision making power and overall autonomy over themselves. In the context of Bangladesh where this paper is based, this progress is very visible on paper as well as on sight. More and more women are attaining higher education and joining the workforce and taking control of their lives. Women are no longer bound by the tradition of marriage as soon as they become adults but have now the opportunity to further their careers, education and excel in different previously male dominated fields. However, given all of this progress and opportunities now available for women in this country, many women are still voluntarily opting into the custom of marriage before graduating from university or immediately after. This paper will investigate why women are making this decision and justify this phenomenon from social, religious and various other perspectives.

Introduction

This paper concerns marriage in middle class urban women in their early twenties residing in the city of Dhaka. When we think about early marriage in the context of Bangladesh, our mind automatically paints a picture of the poor rural class. With a lot of previous literature written on the issue of early marriage among girls in the rural areas it is not that surprising. Research papers and literature on this include the decline in child marriage and the changes in its effect on the reproductive outcomes in Bangladesh (Kamal 2012), changes in the prevalence of child marriage in South Asia (Raj 2012), time-series analysis on education and girl child marriage in South Asia (Raj, McDougal, Silverman, Rusch, 2014), the situation of dowry and investigation into the fact that girls receive less schooling because of the social pressure to get married (Field, Ambrus, 2008) and many more. However, this paper investigates early marriage in a different sense and in a different hemisphere of the Bangladeshi population. The operational definition of early marriage in this paper is marriage of legal adults between the ages of 18 to 23. While most papers have dealt with the rural class concerning the agency of the girls, the concept of dowry and other phenomenons relating to marriage, in this paper I will be talking about marriage in the context of the urban, middle-class adult women in Dhaka.

I was born into and have grown up within and as part of the Dhaka middle class. Growing up, I very quickly started to understand how marriage was expected to be treated differently by men and women. The expectations women could have out of marriage was quite different from that of men. It also became clear that when women and men were expected to be married also had its vast differences. Women were expected to be married at an age lower than that of men on an average. In fact among a lot of my relatives and other acquaintances (mostly the elders) the words “the earlier the better” were not uncommonly heard in the matter of a woman’s marriage.

The involvement of families within the marriage was and is extremely vital. It was a decision that was ultimately taken by the elders or guardians of the prospective bride and groom in question. The bride and the groom were considered children and were expected to have no interest or competence in the matter (Klass, 1966). While this used to be the phenomenon, winds of change have taken effect within these middle class communities. The first priority given to girls like myself from this particular strata of society was education and it was given just as much importance as to our male counterparts. This is how I, along with my cousins and friends have grown up. My family gave a lot of importance to my education. Where my parents hardly ever brought up the topic of marriage with me, it was however frequently touched upon by extended family

both paternal and maternal.

Going back to the concept of marriage in Bangladesh, I would again like to point out that with the literature present on rural underage marriages, it is usually easy to reach the conclusion that the agency of the girls being married is next to nothing in this scenario. However, in the urban middle class, the concept of agency of the women is more diverse and contentious in the face of the existing patriarchal social system. Marriage is still an extremely important part of this system but women are slowly garnering more agency by negotiating their space and presence within the social system and having more say in their marriage than they did two decades ago. To me it felt like a woman getting married by twenty three would be accepted and would be cause of no surprise a decade back whereas the same phenomenon now raises questions like “so soon?” from her friends, acquaintances and other people belonging to her middle class age strata.

However, even with these social advancements, recently women my age and younger have been voluntarily engaging themselves in marriage before they have graduated from university or almost immediately after. This observation prompted this research and all the findings that followed. It started with one school friend and then slowly over two years there were several others classmates from school and university, friends of friends and relatives of friends alike had all gotten married at or before they hit twenty three years of age. My facebook newsfeed would notify me of someone or the other of my age group getting married. This seemed to me to be a bit out of place against the backdrop of the rising empowerment of middle class women. This phenomenon made me ask questions like what marriage actually meant to these educated women? Exactly how voluntary were their decisions even though that is how it appeared to be on the surface? Were there any other factors affecting their decision like societal norms, family, religion or the media? Did it have any relation to their education? And if at the end of the day, their marriage could be linked to their agency and autonomy as young women in the middle class or if the marriage phenomenon was an independent factor in their lives altogether?

To answer these questions I studied the literature previously written on the Dhaka middle class and reached out and interviewed several of the women around me who had gotten married voluntarily before graduating. I tried to dissect the patriarchal system prevalent in the society and ingrained in the religious and family values by linking the interviews to the literature and coming to my own analysis which are all further explained in detail through the rest of the paper.

Research Framework

The broad objective of this paper is to understand why women at this day and age are voluntarily opting into early marriage and in the process this paper will also explore the specific objectives as to how the different external factors like, society, family, religion etc could have had an effect on the woman's decision to get married and if and how these women are negotiating their agency in the face of these factors.

Since the idea of this research came from my own observations around me, I took the decision to interview the women I knew or got connected to other women who people around me knew. So in other words, the women I ended up interviewing were not complete strangers. I found out about the fact that they had gotten married through social media (mainly Facebook). A lot of them were connected with me directly via Facebook and many others I found out through mutual friends. Almost all of these women were either University students or fresh graduates during the time the interviews were conducted. Some other were a little older, however they too had gotten married during the time they were enrolled in University undergraduate degree. My research population stood at 20 women.

My preferred method for data collection for this research has been interviews. I decided that interviews would be the best way to collect information because these women were familiar with me and my work and would be more willing to open up about their experiences if we spoke face to face. The interviews were carried out in conversation on different platforms besides face-to-face for example through messaging on social media or through recorded messages on social media. But all of the interviews took place in a conversational setting. The interviews I conducted were not structured. Although I had a structured number of questions made, during the interviews I had to forgo this rigid structure and encourage the women to answer and share in any way they deemed comfortable. The questions I asked were also mostly open ended questions leaving that space for women to answer as they pleased. This method has helped me greatly because I ended up learning more than I had sought out to initially. The interviews turned out informal and more like conversations that made the interlocutors very comfortable in their surroundings. Furthermore, the expressions and behaviour of the women contributed greatly to my findings besides their direct answers.

The main problem I faced during this process was that some women were uncomfortable to open up about their personal experiences. Mostly because many did not want to vocally say anything against their families or decisions taken by their parents or family elders. This gave me the impression that to most of these women the bond that they shared with their families were very important. This phenomenon have also been mentioned in another article by Samia Haq (2010) where she stated that women are usually held back in many instances by their belief that they should foster good relations with their natal families. I tried to mitigate this problem by ensuring their

anonymity in this research and proposing the use of pseudonyms where necessary. The second problem I faced was that during this process of interviews, some of the interlocutors were confused and unable to explain properly their stances and decisions regarding this issue. The search for clarity led to longer interviews which at times agitated the interlocutors.

This would be an auto-ethnography (Kirin 1993; Srinivas 1972) since I, the ethnographer is familiar with the society having grown up in it and also familiar with the phenomenon of marriage that this paper explores. Given I know most of the women I have interviewed, there is always the risk to not be able to be objective when writing the paper and unconsciously sympathize or empathize with the research population. However, having been brought up in the same society as them it is in my advantage to be able understand these women better and hence be able to respect their choices and write about them as objectively as possible. Just as Clifford Geertz (1973) said how the ethnographer is central to the study yet one must maintain the separation of one's own opinions from the study itself. The advantage of me knowing these women and growing up in the same society as them will hopefully allow me to properly analyze and understand their situation without being in any way biased about them.

At this point it is important to mention that literature written on middle class women in Dhaka was quite limited (Hussain 2010; Lewis 2011) and those concerning Dhaka middle class marriage were even less. The literature I read were mostly on women in Bangladesh of various class backgrounds although I concentrated on those that concerned the middle class. The expansion of the middle class has been quite the phenomenon in the past decades which was initiated by economic reforms of the 1970s and the 1980s (Shahidullah 1985). The literature on the middle class women mostly explored concepts of religiosity and the women's constant negotiations with society in this backdrop (Haq, 2014; Hussain, 2010; Shehabuddin, 2008) while others explored concepts like sexuality (Azim, 2000) and nationalism and state (Kabeer, 1991). Sabur (2014) however, was even more relevant to my research because she talked about the marital mobility in the middle class. Van Schendel (2009) explored the middle class even more and investigated their role in the formation of a Bengali cultural identity, their involvement in the political and the economic spheres and their investment in education. With high monetary, temporal and effortful investment into education, women in the middle class gained access to higher education, high-fee english medium education and highly paid employment that follows it. That brought about their capital investment in goods, concerted cultivation of children, foreign tourism. With all of these aspects in play, these women are able to change their gendered roles within the family and society (Hussain, 2017).

The literature read however does give a clear enough picture of the middle class in

Bangladesh and helps us better locate these women. The families these women come from are usually affluent or moderately affluent. Their earning comes from different sources, like small or medium sized businesses, service sectors (Rashid, 2012; Hussain, 2017) and government service institutions. These women in my research are well educated with their access to expensive and higher education. All the women in my research population have had expensive education and come from well-off families with an average household income of around 1,00,000 BDT or more per month. The families of the women are also well-educated with both or either parents having completed education till honours at least or masters at most.

Most of my primary findings have been found through interviews and a few secondary findings through participant observation. I had the opportunity to interview twenty very cooperative women between the ages of nineteen to twenty-three. Seventeen of them identified themselves as Muslims, two as Hindu and one as Christian. They all belonged to families of the middle class in Dhaka city.

Marriage to almost all of these women were important and a necessary part of society. It was an expression of love and commitment for them and an opportunity to start a new chapter in their lives. With that being said the main question to be answered at the end of this paper will be why they decided to marry at this age and not later, after for example securing a job or building professional careers first.

Hence, the first and foremost question that I had asked and they had answered was if the decision to get married was completely voluntary and their own. To this question one hundred percent of the women in the research population had answered in an affirmative “yes”. However, as they went to describe to me the details of how their marriages happened and under what circumstances, the strong consent in the “yes” started to get a little blurry. I found out that some key factors like society, family, religion and the media (social) had a very important role to play in the decision making process of these women.

I have divided this thesis paper into three main segments, each dedicated to exploring how each of these factors had a contribution in the decisions taken by the respondents.

I will use the concept of habitus and doxa from Bourdieu and draw on Hussain’s (2017) work on respectable femininity where she discusses how urban middle class women’s changing pattern of the household have an impact on their negotiations with respectable femininity¹ within the family to explore why in this fast reforming society, women are

1 Taken from Nazia Hussein’s work (2017) “Negotiating Middle Class Respectable Femininity: Bangladeshi Women and their Families” where she says a gendered power lies in women’s ability to legitimize which status claims are respectable in what context.

voluntarily opting into marriage at such an early age as opposed to conforming to recent trends and joining the workforce first and concentrating on building their professional careers. This paper will further go on to explore how respectable femininity is ingrained in the habitus and doxa of the affluent middle class and what factors contribute to this and how the women negotiate their space within this box. I will also draw from Sabur (2014) and Kandiyoti (1988) to investigate the existing patriarchy within the habitus of this section of the middle class and what impact this patriarchy could have on the decision making process of these young women.

Familial Norms, Agency and Respectability

Middle class families in Dhaka are usually very closely knit. There are three main kinds of families in Bangladesh namely Joint, Extended and Nuclear (Chowdhury 1995)². Nuclear families tend to stay together which includes the parents and sometimes grandparents and children. Children tend to live with their parents even after they are adults. The women I have interviewed for this paper have come from close knit nuclear families. None of them belonged to joint-families or extended families (families consisting of paternal/maternal aunts/uncles and cousins as well). The aim of this chapter is to determine the influence the families have on women's decision making process, with particular focus on women's agency in the face of family values and their idea of marriage in general. I will use Bourdieu's concept of habitus to reveal the norms that are existing within the bubble of the family and how that contributes to the reproductions of the same norms/values from generation to generation.

Historically, the family was the key decision maker in issue of the children's marriages since marriage was not considered to be the concern of the bride and groom in question. They were among other reasons, considered to be children with little interest or competence in the matter and hence marriages were arranged for them (Klass 1966). However, there has been considerable progressive changes since then.

Over the decades, advancement with regards to the freedom and empowerment of women belonging to Dhaka's middle class has been remarkable. Access to higher education, highly paid employment and capital investment of goods has all been instrumental in bringing this change forward (Hussain 2017). The term freedom is used to explain greater mobility, the power to choose, the power to express and vocalise thoughts and opinions. Empowerment is overcoming structures such as marriage,

² Anwarullah Chowdhury (1995) explains in his article "Families in Bengal" the three main types of families found in this region. Joint family is the kind of family where the kin of three or more generations live under the same roof and share all land and property. The family is headed by the eldest male member of the family or by some other responsible male member. In the extended families, a group of nuclear families along with some other relatives reside in the same household. A nuclear family consists of husband and wife with or without children.

family, societal stigma, etc that have traditionally held women back in Bangladesh (Blanchet 1984; White 1992). All the women I have interviewed have voiced their opinions on how their families have given them the opportunity to access higher and more expensive education and encouraged them to build a career of their own. However, some norms and values that are taught within the family threshold demand respect and are expected to be followed by the younger generations. These expectations limits the agency of these women to make a decision that is purely their own. This limitation of their agency will be explained further by scrutinising what the women themselves have said. Some families were extremely rigid in their beliefs in the norms and values and even though they gave the women the liberty to choose their husband, the time of the marriage was however decided by the family.

Anima (pseudonym), one of my interlocutors had gotten married at the age of twenty-two while still enrolled in her undergraduate program. She said,

“Even though we were in a love relationship, the decision of marriage was taken by our parents based on their personal choice. If for instance I had the authority, I would clearly choose to marry late. My family by definition is conservative and values family customs highly. Even though my husband and I do not consider ourselves to be overly religious we do like to keep our traditions alive.”

Here, despite the urge to defy the norms, Anima decided to conform to her family values and marry early. Family bonds are extremely important to most of these young women just like Anima. Maintaining ties with their natal families is a cultural and religious obligation (Huq 2010). Adhering to their parents' wishes is a part of their habitus where it is believed to be the respectable thing to do. These values are taught from an early age with the aim of internalising them to the degree that they themselves believe that there is no other alternative to this custom. Sometimes these values do not manifest as clearly as it did with the respondent quoted above. They manifest behind the shadows of love and affection of their parents. For instance, Rasha and Naila, two of my interlocutors had gotten married at the age of twenty-three before graduating and their decision to get married had been brought about because their fathers were ill and wanted to see their daughters married, given their unpredictable predicament.

Rasha shared, *“I couldn't say no to him in that condition. He wanted me to be independent and pursue my postgraduate degree before getting married but I knew he really wanted to see his daughter married and settled and I really wanted to make him happy.”*

Naila too said something very similar. *“My father had a mild heart attack some months earlier and it brought some things into perspective for him. Having tasted his mortality*

through that heart attack he has now requested me to get married because it's his wish to see his daughter get married before he dies. I love my father and in that condition I couldn't say no to him."

Thus, while the families do wish their daughters to be independent and highly educated, marriage is still a very important and respectable institution for them (Sabur 2014). The love the women feel for their parents and the respect that are demanded off them by their elder generations are inextricably linked. The love these women have for their parents here is directly manifested through their decisions and actions of upholding the familial values and *doxa*.³ It is a way that these women feel like they can make their parents happy and repay them for the labor and capital that their parents have poured into them throughout their lives.

Capital is another very important factor that comes to play when talking about families and marriage in the middle class. Capital is a set of common properties, money and assets (economic), resources gained through networks and institutionalized relationships (social) or a set of embodied practices such as clothing, intellect etc (cultural) (Bourdieu 1992). Expectations of women in the middle class are not irrespective of their capital contributions in the households. Historically, women were seen as liabilities since they did not bring in much economic benefits within the households and were given an unequal and inferior status, that eventually led their families to swiftly marry them off and the women throughout their lives were dependent on a male financially (Khondokar and Jahan 1989).

However, in contemporary Bangladesh, middle class women are expected to contribute to household income and/or bring bridal wealth or inherited assets to reinforce the family's affluent class status, thus investing in the family through economic capital (Sabur 2014). Although such shifts enable women to have careers and enter the public realm, their families remain a dominant factor in their lives (Hussain 2017). Such capital gains are not only applicable in the face of the in-laws family but also in the women's own families themselves. In my findings, it was largely apparent that a lot of the women were marrying for financial security among other reasons. It was considered a good marriage and commended by her family if the groom was financially stable and would be a financial support for her and her family in tough times. It was clear that through the expectations on the women, their husbands were subject to familial expectations too. Iris, a twenty-three year old fresh graduate talked about how her marriage seemed like

³ *Doxa*- Pierre Bourdieu, in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, used the term *doxa* to denote what is taken for granted in any particular society. The *doxa*, in his view, is the experience by which "the natural and social world appears as self-evident". It encompasses what falls within the limits of the thinkable and the sayable ("the universe of possible discourse"), that which "goes without saying because it comes without saying".

a good idea at this time because her partner could be a safety net for her. She said, *“Marriage at this point is feasible because my partner is economically stable, so I hope to be able to have that safety net at the back of my mind. At a time when both my parents don’t have jobs anymore and I am having to also try and find a job, that sense of security is something I would like to have.”*

Whereas, in another scenario, even though the main reason for marriage for Zaira was not the economic stability of her partner, this factor was certainly appreciated by her parents and gave them the confidence to marry their daughter to this particular person.

“My parents were very happy that he was financially stable,” Zaira said. “As you know you can have couples schemes and the reckless spending is something you stop doing on your own. Now you have joint bank accounts, your expenses are their expenses. In my case I’m more dependent financially on my husband and that’s because I don’t have a full time job but he does. So in terms of economic returns in my case for the next five years I will have economic returns. My husband invests in me so he pays for some of my university tuition and some of my travel. So there may be a time in the future when he would wish to take a career break and I might be the one then taking over the responsibility of expenses. This will give him an opportunity to take a back seat and relax a bit. The economic return in my opinion goes both ways.”

The concept of marriage is not irrespective of economic returns gained by the union. Women in the middle class household even though not directly told, are often expected to marry well in order to gain financial security for themselves and extensively for their family’s well being. This idea of marrying well is also a part of the family values and customs that were treasured by most of the families.

Hence, the main analysis to take away from this chapter can be divided into three main aspects of how the family norms and affection dictate the women’s agency consciously or unconsciously. The first are the norms that the family strongly follows and expect their children to follow. These norms get reproduced from generation to generation and the women internalise and adhere to them limiting their own agency. Secondly, the norms not only dictate a strict set of rules but also demand deep love and affection from the women which the women are quite happy to deliver on their own. This love and the duties expected as a product of love also confine the women’s agency to some degree. And thirdly, economic well-being is a common expectation of families for their children and marriage is brought about as a result of that.

However, even though the habitus and doxa within the family construct a kind of respectable femininity, the women themselves wilfully adhere to certain aspects of it in order to negotiate their space within the family. While it is true that families remain a

dominant factor in the lives of these women just as Hussain (2017) says, it is imperative to understand that these women were conforming to marriage not out of complete submissiveness but in order for themselves to be able to negotiate their agencies. Women, like those mentioned above use feminine respectability in order to operate and manipulate their agencies within the confines of the family habitus. They do so by conforming to the doxa and habitus and using marriage as a tool to change further bring about a change in the habitus surrounding them. For example, where before marriage there was a constant pressure of expectation from the family to be married and settled well, after marriage these women are able to renegotiate their agencies and carry on working to make their personal goals come true without having to disrespect their family ties.

In conclusion to this chapter, it can be established that family ties are extremely important and consequential to these women. This is true for all the women in my research population and women belonging to all religions. Families impart on their children norms which are valuable to their specific families and the children are either expected to uphold them or are willingly eager to do so since they have internalised these values and these values are reproduced like this through generations. The respectability that the women negotiate and earn within their own families is glaringly obvious in their decision to get married early in order to please their family or bring financial and psychological security for themselves and their families. Due to all the reasons and analysis stated above, it can be deduced that women's agency is limited due to their families and that ultimately results in their decision to marry early. However, the key conclusive finding here is that the women bargain within the habitus of their families by conforming to specific ideals in a way to create their own space within their family spectrum. Where Hussein (2017) argues how professional careers and capital investments add respectability, making it acceptable for a women to be allowed autonomy and live life in her own terms in Bangladesh, I further argue that while those are true, the women through their decisions and actions like that of getting married early are using the respectable femininity as a tool to further their autonomy. They do so in order to keep their family habitus intact and to later bring changes to their own as we saw in this chapter. For if they could not live life on their own terms before marriage due to the constraints put on an unmarried women by their families, they try to do so after marriage. They also use respectable femininity in order to create a social safety net for themselves in order to live by their own terms after marriage.

Social Status, Expression in Social Media and the Use of Respectability as a Tool

Bangladesh's society is identified as patriarchal. Distinctive and stereotypical societal

gender roles are prescribed to both men and women (Chowdhury 2009). Men are considered 'providers' and women 'managers' of the household and this remained dominant even after the increased participation of women in the wage market in the late twentieth century (Sabur 2014). Over the past decades, however, education and the participation of women in the workforce has caused shifts in the power structures within couples and families (Sabur 2014). Two decades ago, even with the rise in education for women in the middle class Dhaka, this education was only seen as a stop-gap until the woman was married off to a suitable groom (Ahmed 1987). This phenomenon while still applicable to many families was not the case in the families of the women that I had interviewed. The families of all my interlocutors gave the education of their daughters the highest form of importance and encouraged them to utilize the education given to them later by building a career of their own.

Families of some of the interlocutors were even against the decision of their daughters to want to get married so early. But these women had still opted for marriage against their family's wishes. Raima, a woman who had gotten married during early years of her university education at the early age of twenty said,

"There wasn't enough freedom at home. As a young, unmarried woman, I had a lot of restrictions at home and it was suffocating me. I wanted to travel and stay late outside past 7 p.m. I figured with marriage there would be a change in that and I would be able to do the things I wanted. After marriage, I have travelled a lot and have to constantly stay late out for work and nobody really says anything anymore."

Here we see a stark contrast in the changes in respectability of women from her state of being unmarried to married. Being seen alone at night without her husband is considered unacceptable for married women in South Asia (Fernando & Cohen 2014). While that may be the case, this is not any different for unmarried young women either. Although eating out and hanging out with friends in cafes (Sabur 2010; Janeja 2010) and attending western styled parties which includes the consumption of alcohol and dancing are coming to be considered part of the lifestyle of the younger middle class people in Bangladesh (Sabur 2010), it is still frowned upon for unmarried women to be taking these liberties after nightfall. Their participation in such parties and hangouts are usually done without the knowledge of their parents. Hussain (2017) pointed how in earlier generations this kind of a lifestyle for women was not acceptable and hence there is a generational difference in how feminine respectability is deemed by both generations. While the young generation of women is still negotiating their own respectability within society, the situation is not easy for them when their own parents belong to the generation that has contrasting beliefs and values. In this case, many of my interlocutors have made a value judgment as to whether fighting for their space as unmarried women was more important or to buy into their parents' belief and quickly get

that freedom they always wanted.

Therefore, all the otherwise unrespectable practices become respectable within the confines of matrimony for women. Marriage is seen as a coming of age and a rite of passage for these women where after their marriage these women are taken more seriously and their judgements and decisions are valued by their families and societies alike. Both Iris and Zaira shared with me their new-found level of freedom after marriage.

Zaira: *“You see how society looks at you completely changes from when you are unmarried to when you get married. It’s like you have finally joined the adult club. This is not right. But it is how it is.”*

Iris: *“After my engagement I had more free rein on how I chose to experience my relationship with my partner and how public I could be about it. Sure I am operating within a system that makes me submissive to certain norms, there’s no denying that. But I look forward to the greater power I may have over myself.”*

Furthermore, romantic relationships are something that is expected of young women in the contemporary middle class. With shifts in society women are now encouraged to look for their own partners instead of having to agree to arranged marriages. A romantic relationship is expected to blossom between the couple regardless of the mode through which the marriage was made (Sabur 2014, Pg 2). Supporting this claim I have found out that women are encouraged to look for their own partners because love is considered an integral part of matrimonial relationships and choosing one’s own partner makes this come easier for most women. Women are however given the values to choose wisely and are advised against choosing grooms that would cause a downward social mobility for herself. Almost 90% of my interlocutors were involved in relationships before marriage. They had decided to marry their romantic partners because while choosing their partners was encouraged the relationship out of the confines of the marriage was still frowned upon. Zaira told me that her husband used to be her co-worker and that raised a lot of issues within her family.

“I was in a relationship with my co-worker for some time and the relationship was like an open secret in my family. My parents knew about it at the time and so did his. But my parents did hurry me a little bit into this marriage because they were concerned with how closely we spent time together at work and we weren’t married. They were bothered by the notion of “what would people say”. They kept bringing it up so to relieve them of the stress I listened and agreed to marry my partner. I figured it was something I was going to do anyway so a little early didn’t make a difference.”

Another of my informants who faced a similar issue was Proti, a twenty-one year old student currently enrolled in university. She said,

“There weren’t any external pressure for us to get married, but then again we weren’t also allowed to go on dates like before once both the families knew about our relationship, hence to spend time with each other we decided marriage was the best for us.”

The notion of “what would people say” is extremely common in most Bengali middle class households. Many of my informants made similar claims as to have that phrase reiterated to them. Growing up in a middle class family myself I’m personally not new to this concept either. This is directly linked to how the parents deem and negotiate their own class and respectability within the society. Suitably married daughters bring about for the parents increased respectability and standing in the society while unmarried daughters in a relationship decreases their respectability and social value. Zaira, who’s parents pushed for her marriage because she was in a relationship with her co-worker further went on to say,

“My marriage also brought about a kind of social pride for my father in the sense that he had successfully managed to marry off both his daughters and it is important for parents to see children doing well. So in that respect I think my father has succeeded well.”

This is a direct example of social status that families value and earn through their children which works to reassert their class position within the middle-class strata. Much like how highly educated children bring about a degree of social wealth into the family, in this research I have found out that marriage of daughters into suitable families (often involving an upward shift in social mobility) can also be considered one of those key factors that bring about the same degree of social acceptance and respectability to the parents. |

The concept of social status is further magnified by social media and the way the marriages and weddings are posted on it. Social media serves as a platform for people to showcase their moments of happiness and their grand weddings as a sign of their social status. Weddings that previously occurred through a maximum of three events that were publicised have now extended to more than seven functions in an attempt to gain greater social media spotlight. This is further carried on by honeymoon pictures from exotic places from all over the world. All these events are highly decorative and publicised and allures the middle-class unconsciously (both the younger and the older generations) to engage in events of marriages in order to display their social wealth. The market capitalised on this with online make-up studios and lucrative honeymoon destination offers popping up all over facebook and instagram which contributes to this

situation of people wanting to attain these to make their weddings and marriages seem grand on social media and for people to see their social prosperity. The women themselves admitted to the fact that the trend social media is creating of bengali weddings is a good one since it's steering it towards a more cultural set-up. When asked about social media portrayals, Anima told me that she liked the fact that the trend was being set which reflected the bengali culture.

"I do not possibly agree to all the concepts (social) media comes up with these days but what I appreciate the most is the re-emergence of the culture what we often refer to as "deshi". I think marriages in our country should be reminiscent of our roots."

In my research one of the key new finding is that social media perpetuates in people the want to project their social worth and that is now done mostly through wedding extravaganzas.

In this patriarchal set up, women's gender roles are still heavily reliant upon their ability to be mothers. Women are expected to follow traditions and customs which are the definition of femininity in the context of Bangladesh like preparing oneself to take the role of the wife and mother (Khondker & Jahan 1989). This leads the pathway to my third set of findings under this topic which is concerned with women and their "biological clock"⁴. Since the prime objective of womanhood in this society still revolves around motherhood, women are sometimes let known about the urgency of their having children quickly because in later years women are subject to questions of her fertility if she was unable to conceive. This issue was a driving factor for marriage for only one of my respondents. To her it was not because her parents or relatives pushed her into it but because she held similar beliefs as that of her family when it came to childbearing age. She wanted children and did not want to risk it and voluntarily agreed for marriage. Even without the "biological clock", one of my informants, Sama, who got married two months ago at the age of twenty three before completing her undergraduate degree shared with me how she felt it was important for mothers and children to not have a vast age difference. She said,

"It's better to minimize the Age Gap between mom-children not because of the biological clock but more of the emotional and physical energy of the mother. For westerners, the biological clock seems to be less of a concern as they take babies much later. It strengthen bonds as couple and helps to keep you busy for a long time while they are growing up. Best to take them early by 25."

My last finding when investigating social agents is also strongly associated with societal

⁴ Biological clock (Leader. A) - Age related fertility decline for women (also men to an extent) that is feared when women reach closer to menopause.

gender roles and expectations from women. The case of one informant, Luna who had gotten married right after she started her undergraduate at the age of nineteen had gotten married because she had experienced a harsh societal reality through her the experiences of her elder sister greatly contributed to this part. She said,

“I saw my sister get married in her late twenties and have a child. When she had her child she had to take a long break from her career because at the end of the day, she was the only one who had to take care of her child. Society dictated as such. After her child was a little grown and she tried to go back to work, a lot of the workplaces including her previous one refused to take her saying she was gone too long and was out of touch. Being a career oriented woman is something I always wanted to be. But the social pressure and expectation of having kids and being a mother was still there and I didn’t want to go against those either. So I married when I was in university, had a child and joined the workforce as a fresh post graduate student with my already somewhat grown up. I faced no such barriers as my sister.”

This translate directly to the importance that motherhood is given in the society which can be further proved by how women are always expected to put family above any other professional priorities and this is the way by which a woman’s respectable femininity is measured (Radhakrishnan 2009, 2011; Fernando & Cohen 2013; Sabur 2010). Women engaged in the global economy of work and consumption must affirm her cultural and social status through the “assertiveness and autonomy afforded by her education and earnings” and this at the end of the day must still be focused on serving her family and nation first (Gilbertson 2011; Radhakrishnan 2009; Mankekar 1999; Rajan 1993; Hussain 2017). In order to fulfil the society’s expectations and desires as well as their own wishes and desires women are having to constantly calculate a balance between the two. A woman’s role as primary caregiver remains intact so she faces discrimination in the job market both in the manner of securing a job and discriminatory pay (Arendall 1987)⁵. Unlike a lot of other women, this respondent was aware of this phenomenon and hence voluntarily chose marriage at an early age so she could avoid this while also fulfilling society’s and her family’s expectations at the same time.

In this part of my research, there were three main aspects as to why these women chose to marry early. The first was the agency and the level of freedom that came with the label of a married woman. These women in order to create their own space in society, establish their own authority and to enjoy the new freedoms granted to them chose to marry early instead of fighting it out with the existing societal norms. Second came the respectability and the social status of the parents. It was found that being in relationships out of marriage decreased the respectability of the parents in society and

⁵ Terry J Arendall wrote this in the context of the United States in his article “The Economy of Divorce in the United States” but this phenomenon is also very much applicable in the South Asian society.

marrying their daughters to suitable grooms who caused them to have an upward social mobility increased their respectability. In order for them to not lose face in their social circles and maintain or increase their current social worth, marriage of their daughters were a necessity. This social status is further exhibited through social media. The concept of respectability of the parents and the social status definitely is a key factor in the decision making process of these women. Third is the importance society gives to motherhood. For most women, motherhood is a strong expectation. Some women are happy to deliver to this expectation willfully since they too adhere to the same beliefs and marry early while others see it is a demand they cannot get out of and yield to it in the hopes of building an uninterrupted career later. And therefore, decide to get married. All in all, these societal aspects play a crucial role in the decisions of the women to marry early, despite the decisions seeming completely voluntary on the surface.

The above were the findings as to *why* the women chose to marry. Their lives before and after marriage displays a striking difference. It can be clear that due to the existing concept of feminine respectability that construes the social habitus in this particular section of the middle class, the women are subject to various kinds of social barriers whether that be a restriction to their movement or the various expectations pushed upon them. However, the way the women use the respectability is important to understand. In order to maximise their agency, the women use marriage as a tool to negotiate their place, their voice and their opinions within society. Marriage makes the battle to strengthen their agency easier. They do not only conform to the ideologies of respectable femininity because they have to. In fact they use respectable femininity as an instrument to accomplish what they want without disrupting the societal habitus.

In conclusion to this chapter, it can be said that middle class women have to constantly negotiate their respectability as well as their family's through marriage. Sometimes the family itself negotiates there status in the society through their daughters. Symbolic status in society for the brides and her family is brought about through early, well matched marriages. These marriages were strategical for these women who considered their own autonomy, fertility and societal obligations. This proves Bourdieu's theory of marriage strategies where he said they were not to be seen as abstract but as an accumulation of all strategies related to biological, social and cultural reproduction⁶. My main contribution in this chapter was to show how in the existing societal habitus, the respectable femininity and marriage are both a part of the women's strategy to extend their agency. Where Nazia Hussain in her paper argued that women are able to

6 Pierre Bourdieu (1972) "*Les stratégies matrimoniales dans le système de reproduction.*" In this excerpt he said "Marriage strategies as such must therefore not be seen in the abstract, unrelated to inheritance strategies, fertility strategies and even pedagogical strategies. In other words, they must be seen as one element in the entire system of biological, cultural and social reproduction by which every group endeavours to pass on to the next generation the full measure of power and privilege it has itself inherited".

negotiate boundaries of respectability (Hussain 2017, Pg 14), it was made to seem like the respectability itself was quiescent. In this regard, I further argue that not only do women negotiate the boundaries of respectability, but the existing feminine respectability is an active tool they use to negotiate their agency and space.

Marriage, Autonomy and Religious Norms

Bangladesh is Muslim majority nation. Even though Islam is constitutionally the state religion of the country, Bangladesh still prides itself in being secular. In the last few years, Bangladesh has been host to an increase in religiosity within its people (Haq 2010). This can be seen through the increase in veiling my women (Rozario 2006) specially in headscarves. Around 60% of the respondents wore headscarves in a manner of expressing their religiosity. In this chapter I will explore the effect of religion on the decision making process of the women. I will incorporate the extent of religiosity of the women's family and determine to what extent that has an influence on the women as well as take into account other religious factors like motivational religious speakers and how much they invoke religiosity within these women. Lastly I will investigate the religious rules and regulations that the women are expected to follow in this society and how much that factor influenced their decision for marriage.

Islamic leaders of the country (leaders of the political group Jamaat-i-Islami) regularly invoke women's privileged status as mothers. This includes examples like Saidi, one such leader preaching that there are three stages in a woman's life - daughter, wife and mother (Shehabuddin 2008). While this was found to be rarely influential in the middle class affluent strata, this helps paint a picture of the socio political environment in the country and how big a role religion plays in it. In the middle class, the families of the women interviewed were mostly religious. Religious values were important to them and it was hard to alienate their religious values from their familial and social values. Just like relationships outside of marriage was frowned upon, this particular phenomenon had its religious roots. As written in an article, "sex outside of marriage is considered highly sinful for girls, Muslim parents feel personally responsible to God for an aberration by their daughters and therefore try to marry their daughters off before they lose their virginity" (Miah 1992). While this may sound archaic, this is something most of my interlocutors' parents felt even though this concern was not outright vocalised. To get children married well is a primary responsibility of parental guardianship and the focus of major personal and cultural anxiety. "The arrangement and celebration of marriage is a collective enterprise, in which Allah or the gods are honored and bonds of kinship and community are animated and extended, well beyond the individual couples involved" (White 2012)

The older generations of the middle class were/are exposed to different forms of religious preaching and ideologies. There is a considerable difference between

generations where religious and social norms are concerned (White 2012). This generation who learned their religious values from even older generations hopes to invoke in their children some form of religiosity. It was quite a common statement from most of the informants when they said that they all had their parents request or demand them to pray and dress in a manner suitable to their religion. Iris told me,

“Both my mother figures constantly tell me that I have to be quiet and well mannered and I have to dress appropriately and always be veiled/half veiled.”

Religious ideals are valued in most households to such an extent that these religious values are reproduced within the women. As they are brought up within the bubble of the values, they tend to internalize them to the extent that they can no longer distinguish their parents' values from their own. Maria, a twenty three year old, who was married as a fresh graduate told me how religious norms in her family played a big role in her marriage.

“I was told from a very early time that I would be married right after graduation. They kept saying it so from a very early time I was ready for this.”

Maria came from a religious family and was taught religious values and norms from an early age. The concept of early marriage was reiterated to her as something that was religiously right and respectable. Although she did confirm that she was in no way pushed or forced into marrying early because she was warned and ready for this event, she however did also state that she probably might not have married so soon if things were different in her family. This clearly manifests the confusion she had in trying to alienate her own values from that of her family's.

However, in many of the interlocutors there has been a dramatic shift in how they personally view religion than that of their older generations. In recent times, for the younger generations there has been a break from the “traditions” of the past where dissemination of religious knowledge occurred within the home/family or through a religious teacher who was not credited with much textual knowledge. Women now feel more confident to cut out the old intermediaries and relate with religion more independently and personally which gives them more control over their own religious persuasions (Haq 2010)⁷.

The informants who veiled and wore headscarves had all done so because of their own piousness irrespective of the degree of religiosity within their families. They were all

⁷ Samia Haq (2010) discusses how with increased education women are trying to understand and unravel the religious texts themselves directly and what degree of freedom and empowerment these women are enjoying with this new found knowledge.

exploring the religion on their own and invoked piousness in them on their own. In an era where social media and video platforms like YouTube are so rampant among the younger generation, many of these from this generation seek information from notable speakers and televangelists through sharing their videos on Facebook or following their religious educational videos on YouTube. Speakers as such are noted for abandoning archaic methods of preaching religion and incorporating in their speeches a modern context with which they are better able to connect with the younger generation and make them relate more with their views. Many of my respondents and a lot of other people around me of my generation either shared, followed or listened to these speakers' videos at some point in their journey to find their religious self.

The concept of early marriage is also strongly encouraged by these “new generation” religious speakers. While they do encourage parents to accept the partners their children choose for themselves, they however strongly recommend immediate marriage so that the relationship cannot take place out of the confines of marriage which is considered great sin and a destroyer of the individual's *iman*⁸.

“My first plea...I’m begging you. I’m pleading with you. The most important asset you have, the most valuable thing you will have in this life is a clean heart. Because that is the only key to Jannah⁹. And when you give your heart prematurely to a relationship that is illegitimate that heart starts getting dirty. And when a heart starts getting dirty it is no longer suitable for Allah.”

This is a quote directly taken out of an educational video by Nouman Ali Khan¹⁰ one such “modern” televangelists where he encourages young people to not get involved in relationships and to never directly approach the people they might like but rather to do this indirectly through a friend or to meet in the presence of a chaperone and marry quickly when they think that person is suitable for them. With so many people buying into his and a few others' “fun” and “informed” way of teaching Islam, this can be considered one of the key determinants by which women seek religious knowledge and confirmation on what is to be expected of them from their religion. This invoked in some the discomfort of being in a relationship out of marriage for too long and they decided to get married earlier than later because those were the beliefs they conformed to.

Two of my informants conformed to Hinduism and the situation was slightly different for them. While in Islam marriage is a civil contract, in Hinduism marriage has been considered a ritual and a sacramental union from ancient times (Ahmed 1986). Marriage

8 *Iman* in Islam closely translates to faith/belief in Allah in English. This often relates to a person's degree or strength religious conviction and religious respectability.

9 *Jannah* in Arabic directly translates to Heaven.

10 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCxE2eSoSII>

in this religion (much like in Islam) is considered an irreplaceable and mandatory part of a person's life. Both the respondents belonging to this faith had similar responses that they had their options restricted by their religious values and dictations. Lata, who was married by the age of twenty-three told me about the restrictions that were placed on her by her religion. She explained,

"In our religion we follow a birth chart which is called Kushthi in bangla for marriage. There is a certain age revealed in this chart for everyone to get married and mine was revealed to be either 23 or 31. My parents were not ready for me to sit unmarried till I was 31 so they were in a hurry to get me married."

These two informants were bound by the beliefs they held and their families held on the outcome of their birth charts. Besides these rules, the religious respectability and expectations came into play in both their lives because even though they claimed to be liberal women and considered themselves to be moderately pious, they both said they were against disrespecting the wishes of their parents and ignoring some highly valued rules in their religion.

"To be honest, I wouldn't want to wait till 31 either," Lata continued. *"For me the suitable age would've been 25-26. I could have finished my studies including my masters by then and then gotten married. But oh well."*

Given the choice, these women would have preferred to marry later but the religious restrictions put on them convinced them otherwise. Furthermore, they conformed wholeheartedly to the notion of not disrespecting, disappointing or causing any kind of emotional pain to the family (specifically the parents) so in a manner of speaking their decision to get married was voluntary in nature.

Religious beliefs of the family elders have a certain role to play in the decision making process of the young girls whether that be of Muslims or Hindus. Even when in some cases where the push of religion itself was not very strong in the women themselves it was still important for them to uphold them as a way of showing respect to her family. The religious values in the families have more often than not, in some way coagulated themselves with the family norms and they both act hand in hand. In this chapter I explored how the religiosity of the older generation influence and invoke religiosity in the younger again going back to Bourdieu's theory of reproduction of values where it gets difficult for these women to alienate their beliefs from that of their family's. I have also contributed by exploring how the younger generation of women are looking for ways to find religion by themselves where besides seeking refuge in their religious texts they also turned to modern preachers on the internet. And conformed to the values and norms that were taught on those platforms because they could relate to them more.

Lastly I talked about religious restrictions and tied that together with the expectation on women to always put their family first and to not disappoint or hurt the sentiments of their parents. Putting all these findings together, religion's role in the decision making processes of these young women to get married early cannot, if anything else, be overlooked.

Religious values and norms are intrinsically linked to the expectations of the women's families. And while to some women religious values in and off itself played a more important role in their decision to get married, to many it boiled down to the family expectation and respectability that was born out of religiosity of the family. These women again negotiated their place within the habitus of society and family through marriage by conforming to the existing respectability and then used this to restructure their own space, autonomy and habitus after marriage in order to live they way they wish to. In this way they are neither putting any strain on their family ties or family belief systems nor are they inflicting distress to their own set of religious beliefs.

Conclusion

The findings that have been gathered from this research population were both profound and fascinating. On the surface the decision to get married for these women seem like something they choose to do completely on their own. However with this research it was proven how big a role external factors play in shaping these decisions on the layered levels. Society shapes the family and the family dictates the rules and values. Some women internalized these teachings and accepted them as they are while others questioned them but chose this as a battle to forgo and fight more important ones.

The barriers present within the family, the neighborhood and the workplace makes it difficult for women to advance themselves on their own limiting their agency and movement. Marriage makes all of these difficulties easier. A new kind of respectability is achieved with marriage which is alluring to these young women.

The primary objective of this research paper was the ascertain why women were

voluntarily opting into marriage so early at this day and age. It was to find out how the doxa and habitus present within this section of the middle class were contributing into the decision-making process of these women to marry and whether the marriage as a result was contributing to construe a certain kind of respectability for women. It can be safely concluded after this research that the decision to get married for these women are not completely voluntary. Because in the absence of these restrictions, almost all of these women said they would choose to marry later because at this point of their lives they were not completely ready. However, the story of the findings does not end here. It can be further concluded through this research, that the women use the respectability as a tool to negotiate with patriarchy. This ties in with what Deniz Kandiyoti says about how women strategize within a set of concrete constraints that reveal and define the blueprint of of the patriarchal bargain¹¹ of any given society. These bargains influence both the potential for and specific forms of women's active or passive resistance in the face of their oppression (Kandiyoti 1988, Pg 275). This was proved correct in this research where based on the findings I argue that women are in fact resisting to patriarchal oppression by turning the respectability around them as an active tool to reinforce their agency and their motility.

My main contribution in this paper was to show how within the habitus and doxa of familial norms, societal expectations, religious norms and class mobility respectable femininity is construed and all of that is further reflected in the construct of the marriage of these women. I showed how feminine respectability is not passive as was displayed in Hussain's paper, but that it is active and dynamic and a weapon for the women to continuously bargain and negotiate with the habitus and doxa existing in society.

The society of Dhaka city is going through slow, organic changes. With female education and career opportunities on the rise, many women from the middle class now have the option of furthering themselves in their own fields of expertise and postponing marriage until they are ready or have finished their education or engaged in their careers till a certain level and a lot of women are doing just that. However, even with these opportunities on the rise and the independence of women increasing, it is interesting to see how family norms, the want for class status and religious beliefs are

11 In the words of Kandiyoti, "Like all terms coined to convey a complex concept, the term patriarchal bargain represents a difficult compromise. It is intended to indicate the existence of set rules and scripts regulating gender relations, to which both genders accommodate and acquiesce, yet which may nonetheless be contested, redefined, and renegotiated. Some suggested alternatives were the terms contract, deal, or scenario; however, none of these fully captured the fluidity and tension implied by bargain." Taken from "Bargaining with Patriarchy" (1988, Notes, Pg-286).

still able to dictate and influence important life decisions for them and how even in these scenarios women are still being able to find ways like using respectability to reinstate and expand their agency and achieve their expected outcomes.

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