

**A Study of Independent Middle Class Women: Accommodation Crisis,
Living Experiences & Negotiation Strategies in Dhaka.**

Thesis submitted by

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of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Social Sciences in Anthropology

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It is hereby declared that:

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2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
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5

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6

Table of Contents

Abstract 7

**Chapter 1 Introduction 8-10
& Theoretical Framework
11-18**

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Chapter 3 Methodology 19-23 Chapter 4 Demographic

Information 24-27 Chapter 5 The Struggle of Finding a

Home 28-35 Chapter 6 Lords of the Lands 36- 44

Chapter 7 A House or a Home? 45-52 Chapter 8

Conclusion 53 Bibliography 54-55

Abstract

As the economy expands its horizon, the number of citizens also populates a city, and Dhaka is no exception. Many of its inhabitants are women, including women who live independently in this city for numerous purposes. Some migrate from other parts of the country due to professional responsibilities, some move here for the better education it offers and some are city dwellers who move out of their family's homes. Nevertheless, these independent women have to navigate their way into the city with ample caution, which is omnipresent in every step of their daily lives. The height of their struggles reaches a new epoch regarding finding suitable accommodation for themselves. In this dissertation, I aim to explore the reason behind their residency crisis and how these independent, middle-class women negotiate throughout their daily lives to survive in this city. By looking into these women's lives, I attempt to comprehend their stories in a written form while highlighting aspects of patriarchy, survival strategies, struggles and the changing dynamic of relationships.

Key words: Independent women, middle class, urban space, accommodation crisis, patriarchy, struggle, negotiation.

8

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Statement of the problem

Over the past few centuries, cities have become a determining symbol of development. The modern urbanization process is rapidly taking over rural places, shaping them into the metropolis, thus, changing the nature of spaces. Dhaka is a city that has a long withstanding history, and like any other metropolis, it is inhabited by a large population that is only growing. "An estimated 2000 people move to Dhaka every day" (Mayor Migration Council, 2022), and many of this population are women. Due to the city's

better education and job opportunities, Dhaka attracts all sorts of people regardless of their genders and classes, especially women. "In recent decades, huge numbers of women are migrating to Dhaka for employment." (ActionAid, 2014). Many of these women choose to live independently, whether they are migrants from other areas or the locals of Dhaka city. Overall, most of these women who live here independently are not under the supervision of their immediate families. In most cases, they share a space with other women, but the dynamic differs from that established in blood-kin relationships. The difference also prevails in how they conceive the idea of safety, shared value, and responsibility.

I enjoy certain privileges as a woman born and raised in Dhaka with her family. Despite many setbacks, I feel like there is a particular kind of comfort, sense of belonging and safety net my family has provided me throughout my life. In this patriarchal society- the city, being under the shelter of a family primarily led by men, certainly works as a shield. However, some women do not necessarily enjoy the same privileges as mine as they live independently. I believe that cities such as Dhaka are unsafe for any woman and assume that the ones living here independently are always at a greater risk. During a casual conversation, my friends living in this city revealed how unsafe they feel, which is

9

unfathomable even though I somewhat assumed the probable difficulties. One of my friends shared an incident where she described how a neighbor constantly infuriated her with their inappropriate gestures day after day. Alternatively, she must always return to her home by 9 to live in that flat. This sense of insecurity shapes the experience of these women and forces them to tailor their everyday activities. However, the level of difficulties heightens when the discussion zones into the residency crisis of women in this city. Contrary to the general assumption that public spaces are dangerous while private spaces are safe, these women's statements only demonstrate how this dichotomy is much more nuanced and complex. Most of these women are self-aware, educated, and well established, yet this city fails to provide basic amenities like safe housing. Having no family or a male member to fend for her put them in vulnerable situations. They are already at significant risk when revealing such sensitive information to anyone, and the

same space they reside in heightens their chance of being at risk every day.

Thus, this research examines the lives of middle-class independent women of Dhaka city, their living experiences, the sort of struggles they encounter in the process of finding accommodation, the obstacles in their residences, and how they negotiate through these situations, as well as the changing dynamics of relationships in their lives.

1.2 Relevance of the research

Independent women's accommodation crisis in an urban setting is often an under researched topic that goes unexplored. I had quite a difficult time finding existing research that matches mine in a global or a local context. This particular area of research should be a key focus because the number of women choosing to live this way is increasing and will continue to increase with time due to various factors. Nevertheless, their experiences, residency struggles, safety, and crisis management methods are often overlooked. Thus, analyzing this phenomenon and how these women negotiate these spaces in everyday life is crucial. Space and people constantly shape each other; hence examining these layers and strategies is critical for a better understanding of the discourse of the urban space and gender in Dhaka. Furthermore, through exploring a phenomenon as such, it is possible to take approaches that may help mitigate the crisis.

10

1.4 Research Objectives

The broad objective of this thesis is to look into the overall conditions and experiences of the lives of the independent women who reside in Dhaka city. The specific objectives that I wish to investigate are stated below

1. To understand the challenges that occur while these independent women try to find suitable accommodation.
2. To explore the obstacles that occur at the homes they are inhabitants of.
3. To analyze their negotiation tactics with the factors that work as obstacles.
4. To inspect their experiences of living alone and with others in a shared space and if that leaves an opportunity to build new relations.

Chapter 2

Literature review and theoretical framework

Women's conditions under a patriarchal setting has been a key focus of sociology, anthropology and feminist studies for a substantial period of time. This chapter reviews existing literature highlighting the concepts of women, urban space, the public, and the private dyad, kinship arrangement, women's conditions under a patriarchal setting, and the negotiation strategies women apply in those settings. My work focuses on the lives of independent women who reside in Dhaka, their living experiences, their housing crisis, and how they manage and negotiate with the obstacles they face. It is worth mentioning here that I found very little existing literature that would help me understand the exact phenomenon I am looking into, neither in a global nor in the local context. I have tried to use some of the concepts from existing literature that I can utilize to explore the phenomena. I found them extremely helpful and these provide lenses to analyze the conditions I attempt to examine in context of my research. Moreover, I point out the gaps in my review of the literature and how my work attempts to overcome those. Furthermore, I attempt to discuss some existing theories, a few of which are not necessarily developed for the exact context that I am working on but help me create a theoretical framework for my research through which I strive to analyze the data I have gathered, as well as demonstrate my findings and their causes to an extent.

Shamma (2020) looks into working women's mobility and interaction in the public sphere, based in Dhaka. In her study, she examines three private service sectors: shopping malls, fashion houses, and beauty parlors, where more job opportunities are available for women, especially significantly less educated and indigenous women. A rise in job opportunities for women has created a jobless state for many men. Thus, the aggression towards working women is increasing highly, especially by lower-class men. She then analyzes how this fear of harassment restricts women's mobility in the public sphere in

the context of Dhaka. However, this research focuses on the issue of women's mobility in

12

the public space, it does not address the predicament women counter in a closed urban setting. Even the private sphere, considered feminine, and assumed to be safer, becomes precarious for these independent women, and the tension is amplified due to the absence of their families. Hence, my research aims to fill the gap by studying independent women residing in Dhaka and their ways of negotiation in the private sphere in an urban setting.

On the other hand, (Tabassum, 2015) aims to emphasize the reasons behind domestic violence in the context of Bangladesh, in both the urban and rural settings. She explains how spousal domestic violence against women in Bangladesh is caused by an accumulation of personal, economic, social, and cultural elements. In her writing, She also denotes that because of the conservative lens that Bangladesh uses to inspect women, even having an income source and autonomy can put her at risk of being violated, despite its positive outcomes. While this is more common in rural places, it also applies to the women in the cities, even though cities are perceived to be "less conservative." While Tabassum unveils women's horrific violence in the private sphere by their spouses and outlines the associated factors, my work focuses on a different familial setting that does not follow the typical family structures established in Bangladesh. As I have highlighted, the women I had focused on for my work either live by themselves or with flatmates, which automatically changes the rituals, dynamics, and negotiations that are practiced in such settings, which differ from the norms that take place in a more conventional family system.

Additionally, her work concentrates specifically on married women, whereas my research focuses on unmarried; and I argue that the status of being married or unmarried does not only shape a woman's identity but also her social status quo, both in the public and the private sphere. However, violence is an umbrella term covering an array of behaviour. Occurrences can take place against a person's will, crossing their boundaries; these behaviors can range from verbal abuse to neglect and everything in between. Furthermore, many acts of such violence are not always direct but rather subtle, a query I

seek to investigate in my research.

13

Sinha (2004) discusses how gender and nation have both influenced the shaping of one another. Her starting point focuses on how gender differences constitute nations. She demonstrates this by applying the analogy of a patriarchal heterosexual bourgeois nuclear family to describe a nation. Anything outside this is considered deviant or abnormal (constructs the other), constructing the idea of the pure versus the fallen women, generating a difference. Pure women then become the signifiers of the nation and naturally gain their subordinate status as daughters, wives, and mothers. Seeing the nation as a family legitimizes the gender differences within it, where the men are a part of the public sphere, and the women are excluded from it, just like in a typical nuclear patriarchal family. Maintaining this ideology of what is acceptable and what is not helps maintain the differences between nations. As a nation is built on gender differences, that same nation reinforces the gender differences that shaped it, where men are the agents.

In the nationalist discourse, women are always seen through their relation to men, which essentially emphasizes the gender hierarchy as natural.

Sinha's work helped me understand the deep-rooted patriarchy established in a nation and how it is practiced in everyday situations; the participants in my research are excellent illustrations of that, who are considered as the "fallen women," according to Sinha's work. Not wanting to rent a space to a woman or charging them more rent are only a few examples of the discriminations they face. The housing crisis for the independent woman in Dhaka captures how these gendered nationalist discourses only lead to more crises and create more patriarchal standpoints.

(Lefebvre, 1974) describes the production of space, which concerns the development of cities in which circuits of capitals exist. In a capitalist society, capital acts as means, and whoever owns space thus has leverage. Humans produce space, which recreates and molds them, and vice versa. However, in the capitalist mode of production, these spaces are controlled by the people with power. Not only do they own these spaces, but this dominant class also can control the norms and values practiced in that space, thus shaping and molding the people's lived experience. Spaces and beings mold each other constantly,

thus reshaping the urban spaces collectively and altering social relations.

14

However, Lefebvre's indifference towards determinant factors such as gender also puts women's inclusivity to space and their rights to the city to question. Gender is not an economical mode of production, but every economic mode of production exists in a gendered setting. While women are not necessarily an economic class in the Marxist sense, they are submerged in a capitalistic setting which only amplifies the bias and the existing power imbalance. Lefebvre's concept of hegemony of space helps me understand the power struggle between the independent women who are tenants and the landlords and other entities who can exercise power in my research's context and how these experiences mold them.

(Bourdieu, 1987) classified capital into several categories like social capital, cultural capital, and economic capital. The first concerns money and wealth, the second concerns one's social surroundings, community, and network, and the third concerns aspects such as intellect, styles, institutions and more. Bourdieu elaborates how these three types of capital come together and construct one's identity and way of being in the social class they belong to. One's position cannot be purely based on their economic capital. The dimensions and value of social and cultural capital must also be considered for clarity and adequacy. The accumulation or loss of the capitals can result in one's promotion or demotion from and to different social classes. As this shows the fluidity and flexibility of the members within classes, it also systematically reinforces the stratification among them.

Bourdieu's work is highly crucial to analyze the themes I am looking into as it helps me inspect how these independent women in my ethnography negotiate through their accommodation struggles using all forms of the capitals in various ways, and how the absence or presence of these capitals shape their overall experiences in this city while looking for a home.

(Kandiyoti, 1988) tries to guide our attention to the more scrutinized concept of

patriarchal bargain rather than the much broader concept of patriarchy as she believes that it would help us understand the intricate nature of the process that patriarchy tries to

15

establish to maintain the status quo and the various strategies women take up in order to improve their conditions. The focus on the patriarchal bargains highlights how the women perceive this attempt to control them and implement their own strategies accordingly. There are many cases where women find the existence of patriarchy unfavorable and show tendencies to resist them. However, there are also situations where women can deem patriarchy favorable for them, taking many variables into context. In these situations, she will implement strategies that ensure the continuance of patriarchy and its limited control within that setup. Her work is based on parts of Africa and Asia, and how women are subjected to different forms of patriarchy in these locations. She also explores the familial settings in those locations and how these women negotiate their ways in their unique, systematic styles. Her work also highlights how oftentimes such strategies can eventually perpetuate the concept of patriarchy.

While Kandiyoti's work is vital to explain some of the points I am trying to establish in my work, a way in which my research differs from Kandiyoti's composition is the difference in the structures of families. My research tries to look into the lives of women who live independently or in a more alternative family setting which does not strictly fall under the normative notion of how the family is perceived in our society. In a country like Bangladesh, women are almost always expected to be under the surveillance of a patriarchal figure and a patriarchal family. Just as anything outside of that established family setting is alternative, the strategies through which they negotiate within that setting are also alternative ways of bargaining, which is an aspect I intend to explore in my work.

Somewhat of an extension of Kandiyoti's work, (Feldman, 2001) reflects on the labor force of Bangladesh and women's participation in it while bringing forward the question of perspectives. In her writing, she illustrates how the generalized notions of patriarchy, development and modernity are problematic because not only does it limit the discourse of these concepts, but also it restricts and even rejects the multitude of ways of negotiations that affect and reconstruct the perception of women and gender relations,

without taking history, personal experiences, already existing negotiation tactics, familial configurations, and culture into account. Such one-dimensional processes assert that only

16

a few matters are responsible for any shift, and those shifts will be even and plain without considering existing circumstances. Feldman urges us to view these concepts from an angle that is more fluid and flexible, taking the historical placement, current circumstances, agencies of everyone and cultural context, and the existing negotiation process into account while measuring every intersection of realities rather than handpicking selective factors. This alternative system helps us evaluate the already ongoing bargain that is taking place in a particular context while discussing and observing the changes and shifts that have already occurred there alongside the bargain. Moreover, through this lens, we can view agency differently and see how power and power relations are not unlinear but multidimensional, and when it is taken into account alongside history, not only does it reshape the form and strategies of the relations but also reconstructs the understanding of institutions and their functions.

Although Feldman's research locales and my research locales have a drastic class and income difference, thus making their realities and strategies very different, her writing provides me with a model through which I can understand some of the phenomena I am trying to explore in my context. The hegemonic conditions of development, and patriarchy are ever existent even in the women's lives I am looking into; however, they are viewed as modern, educated, and capable, yet those conditions put an array of challenges in front of their ways where they negotiate with those using their own sets of tools and conditions. These challenges arise while they try to reassert their boundaries and meanings of the public and the private dyad.

Afsar (2000) focuses on the female labor migration and how they adapt in the urban space of Dhaka, where she brings forth their economic conditions, struggles, and living experiences that highlight their accommodation settings, crisis, and work environment climate. Most of these female garment workers migrate to Dhaka from rural areas because of the city's job opportunities. How they adapt in such a drastically different domain and what methods these women use to survive in such an urban setting are the

critical areas Afsar focuses on. She illustrates how migration, poverty, and low income have affected their economic life, living arrangements, and kinship style. She also shows how many migrant women have adapted to a family setting that is comparatively

17

different from the typical joint or nuclear families, which is branch family. Furthermore, such a family-based living arrangement performs as a negotiation strategy for these women to ensure their children's safety, as well as their own, to some degree. Afsar's work provides me with an essential insight through which I can perceive female migrant workers' struggles in their workplace and accommodation settings. It also gives me an understanding of their negotiation tactics and the alternative form of family style built in this city due to migration, economy, and development. However, her work solely focuses on the experiences of female workers in the RMG sector. They belong to the rural class, which is different from my research locales as they belong to the middle class and have different jobs, resulting in different lifestyles. Hence, I aim to look into the accommodation crisis and negotiation strategies that middle-class independent women apply to find a suitable residence in this city.

(Weston, 1991) brings forth the question of what is meant by 'kinship' and how the notion of that varies through different contexts and is reconstructed while considering different cultural elements. Her work is based on the gay and lesbian community of San Francisco during the 80s, where she looks into their lives through the lens of kinship. Her work is seminal in anthropology because it not only gives a new perspective but also challenges and reconstructs the existing idea of kinship established in society. The established perception of kinship is hegemonic and impels to emphasize and legitimize relations that are based on biology. However, Weston puts forth the idea of an alternative family that is not solely created based on blood ties and biology but on loyalty, resilience, friendship, attentiveness, and communication. She also asserts that these chosen families are not a replacement for the families based on biology but rather how they are established through certain factors while broadening the concept of kinship itself.

Almost all of the women in my research have shared a domestic space with one or multiple people, at least for some time, in which they have established ties to their

flatmates. In our societal setting, the only expected and accepted form of kinship is the one that is founded based on blood connection. While the experience of living with others (s) who are not connected through biology varies from person to person, it confronts the normative notion of family that exists in our society. Thus, Weston's work provides a

18

framework for me to analyze the relations between people who share a domestic space and how that leaves an opportunity to create an alternative domestic setting. While my work differs from Weston's work in multiple ways, making the variables and contexts discrete, Weston's work provides essential insight for me by helping me analyze their relationships and how they perceive the concept of kinship.

By using the theories of Sinha, Kandiyoti, Feldman, Lefebvre, Bourdieu and Weston, I attempt to illustrate the living experiences, accommodation conditions, crises, and struggles of the independent women as well as their negotiation methods who inhabit this urban space. Bangladesh's mode of production is capitalistic, and Dhaka is its locus; hence the middle-class women in my demography are all tenants. And the deep rooted patriarchy and its consequences are reflected in their everyday life, especially when it comes to finding a safe and flexible environment they can call home. Having the leverage, landowners and other entities control the physical space and the concepts of abstract spaces in these women's lives in various ways. Their ideas are constantly practiced over these women from a position of power, thus controlling their realities to an extent. Nevertheless, despite all the struggles, they find unique ways to cope. Moreover, the phenomenon of living independently, be it by themselves or with flatmates also influences their relations with others. Thus, I aim to look deeper into this matter using these theorists' established works and explore the lived experiences of the middle class independent women who aim to find a home for themselves in this city and how certain factors shape, and reshape their ways of being.

19

Chapter 3

Methodology

The idea of exploring the lives of middle class independent women of Dhaka city generated from casual conversations I would have with my friends; friends who already live independently in this city. Most of them had stated stories that not only moved me, but also concerned me to a great degree, and hence I wanted to seek, explore and portray such women's lives through my dissertation. Through this research, I attempted to explore the living conditions and residency crisis of the independent women who reside in Dhaka and what these women use as negotiation tactics to survive in this city. In order to understand the phenomenon better, I have used the qualitative approach methodologically.

Research Locale & Population

This research aims to bring forth the experiences of middle class women who have been living in this metropolis independently. Due to the city's developing nature, the number continues to only increase rapidly, of women who look for a shelter in Dhaka. The reason for choosing Dhaka as my area of research is mainly because the interlocutors are inhabitants of this city. Moreover, being a resident of this city myself also allows me to bring forth their experiences in a more comprehensible manner, as I understand and may even relate to their circumstances to a certain extent, if not fully. Having participants who have been living here also allows me to communicate with them through a face to face conversation in many cases, which helps me to perceive their ideas in a better manner. In order to look into the aspects I am working on, I have focused on women who all are currently residing in Dhaka at least for some years; renting spaces in areas such as Niketan, Bashundhara R/A and Mohammadpur. The reasons behind choosing these areas vary in nature, which can range from cheaper accommodation to an established mess culture where independent female tenants are more accepted, and so on. All of these

women belong to middle class families; currently, none live with the immediate families related to them by blood. Either they live alone or share a flat with one or multiple flatmates. Everyone is unmarried and has a source of income.

It is essential to mention that although I had specific criteria for choosing my participants, many of them had distinct identities, which range from having a difference in their income to belonging to different ethnic groups and having different reasons for living independently, thus making their experiences different as well compared to others. Based on above mentioned criteria I have chosen 9 interlocutors whose ages range from 24-33 years, who all pursued a bachelor's degree .I have also acknowledged how different variables can shape different experiences; hence, their struggles or negotiation strategies cannot be homogenized completely.

Sampling technique

In the beginning, I could only find four people who matched my criteria for interlocutors. As I started interviewing them, I was introduced to new people who fit my description by my initial participants and eventually introduced to more people whose interviews were then conducted. Thus, the snowball sampling technique has helped me immensely to find interlocutors and connect to them and bring forth their stories and eventually, I ended up interviewing nine women whose experiences I aim to look into.

Data Collection 1.1- Primary resources

Data was collected using primary and secondary resources. For the primary resource, I have used a semi-structured questionnaire to interview the interlocutors. The questions were thematically designed but also open-ended, leaving room to explore new information and themes from the interviews. Although I first attempted to take all the interviews in person, it was impossible due to the restricted time limit and the distance between the interlocutors' living areas and mine. Hence, some interviews were done in person, and others were done through phone calls. Each interview lasted for about 50 minutes to 3 hours, and the conversation was recorded with the participant's consent. They were given the liberty to quit the interviews at any given time. Hand notes were taken during their interviews, highlighting critical information, and all the data were

transcribed once all the interviews were conducted. The participants were placed in a comfortable setting where they could share their experiences. Some participants were rigid initially, but with the flow of the conversation, they opened up about their perspectives and living experiences. Since the questionnaire was semi-structured, multiple questions stemmed from the initial questions during the interviews, which later helped me do a better analysis and create new themes from the gathered data. Moreover, follow-up interviews were done whenever I could not clearly understand any of their answers, which were clarified later on.

Data Collection 1.2- Secondary Resources

The secondary resources included the journals, books, and articles I have reviewed, alongside the internet websites for statistics, to understand the phenomenon better. The existing literature, data and theories have helped me immensely in order to fathom and explain many of the crucial concepts of my ethnography.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was done following a more qualitative methodological approach, because in order to explore the living conditions of the independent women of Dhaka, a stronger emphasis was put on their experiences, which could be analyzed through a qualitative approach more efficiently. (Dey, 1993) points out that "the more ambiguous and elastic our concepts, the less possible it is to quantify our data in a meaningful way." Qualitative data are associated with such concepts and are characterized by their richness and fullness based on your opportunity to explore a subject in as real a manner as is possible." (Robson, 2002).

The primary data collected through the interviews was merged with the secondary data for comparison and to have a broader understanding of the phenomena. While the

interviews gave me an insight into these women's experiences, the secondary resources helped me break down the causes and explain them and their lived experiences. I attempted to learn about 9 women's living experiences in my interviews and although this research was done on quite a small scale, it helped me determine factors that were somewhat common in all those experiences, thus making those factors more frequent than can be found in all their stories, and that helped me put an emphasis on those factors and inspect the reasons behind those. Overall, I tried to quantify most of the qualitative data as much as possible to build a methodological framework that helped me understand the living experiences of these women. Later, the data was analyzed and curated thematically using the built framework and every individual household was a unit of analysis.

Challenges

While trying to shape this dissertation, I faced various challenges. The first challenge was finding interlocutors who matched my criteria for the interviews. Since I belong to the middle class, it was only possible for me to find participants with similar backgrounds, thus making it an auto-ethnography. Studying women in any other class would become difficult for me and defeat the purpose of focusing on middle-class women's experiences. The second challenge was finding 9 people whose interviews I could conduct because, at first, I did not know many people who fell under my description of participants. I had to reach out to friends, acquaintances, and even my initial interlocutors to help me connect to people I could interview. Another issue was the duration of the interviews. Sometimes they would get distracted talking about particular subjects and not focus on the questions that were asked, thus making the questions rephrased and repetitive, which was highly time-consuming. Furthermore, I also struggled with my secondary resources, as I could not find much similar literature in the global or local context; thus, coming up with a framework was also challenging.

Although I have faced my fair share of challenges while shaping this dissertation, thus

making it a limited research, the stories I learned about make up for that by miles.

23

Moreover, those limitations assert that further research should be done on this phenomenon. Since my sample size is limited to 9 people, a bigger sample size would help explore the conditions more efficiently. Currently, this research and its findings are highly relevant and essential. Hence, further research can help to explore the issue for a deeper understanding and, thus, come up with recommendations that can work towards mitigating the crisis.

24

Chapter 4

Demographic Information

The increasing number of independent women in Dhaka is creating changes in all forms, both subtle and acute, and everything in between. To look at the experiences of Dhaka city's independent women's housing crisis and strategies, I interviewed 9 middle-class women whose stories I attempt to bring forth. However, these stories were shared through participant observant methods/semi-structured interviews. In this chapter, I attempt to discuss these women's identities from their point of view and their status quo. These identities are constructed upon various variables, ranging from how they identify as a middle-class woman to what it means to be an independent woman in Dhaka. Their age, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, educational level, occupational institutions, and duration of living by themselves were also taken into account to demonstrate and address their realities.

Since my work focuses on the stories of the independent women of Dhaka, all of my interlocutors are residents of the metropolitan. They have lived here or migrated from

different parts of the country to pursue higher education or quality job opportunities. Their ages range from 24- 33 years old, and all are working women with at least an undergraduate degree.

Most of the interlocutors in my ethnography define themselves as middle class; the reasons behind this are their earnings, family status, and family wealth. All of them are unmarried, and 3 of them identify as part of the queer community. Most of these women have been living independently in Dhaka for some time due to various reasons, at least

25

for 2 years and at most for 12 years. In this time, they have shifted and moved into new houses multiple times.

As mentioned, all of these women hold at least an undergraduate degree, which gives them access and the privilege to communicate in a different language as well.

Interestingly, almost all of the people I interviewed could not only communicate in fluent English but also were able to understand and use specific sociological terms such as feminism and power struggle. This might be due to their educational level, and the fact that some of them studied different aspects of social sciences. This gave me an upper hand in communicating clearly and efficiently while asking them questions.

Not all of them were comfortable sharing their names publicly for a paper, so for some of them, I will use pseudonyms as per their request.

Below is a summary of the demographic information of my interlocutors

Sl no.	Name	Age	Religion	Ethnicity	Monthly income	Occupation	Education	Duration of living independently	Current area of living
1	Mehnaz	24	Muslim	Bengali	20 thousand bdt	Research Assistant	BSS	7 years	Mohammadpur

2	Moitree	27	Christian	Rakhine	50 thousand bdt	Telecom service	BBA	3.5 years	Bashundhara R/A
3	Inan	24	Muslim	Bengali	20 thousand bdt	Freelancer	B.A	2 years	Lalbagh
4	Arpita	25	Hindu	Bengali	25 thousand bdt	Business Analyst	BSC	5 years	Niketon

26

5	Tarannum	35	Muslim	Bengali	35 thousand bdt	Freelancer	BSS	12 years	Mohammadpur
6	Sadia	26	Muslim	Bengali	40 thousand bdt	Research Associate	BSS	5 years	Gudaraghat
7	Jun	27	Buddhist	Chakma	45 thousand bdt	Producer	BSS	8 years	Niketon
8	Dighi	30	Muslim	Bengali	40 thousand bdt	Researcher	BSS	3.5 years	Mohammadpur
9	Toma	28	Muslim	Bengali	30 thousand bdt	Freelancer	BBA	4 years	Bashundhara R/A

As this chart goes to show, 8 out of 9 women are in their 20s, and one in their early 30s.

All of them hold a university degree, and many of them have studied social sciences,

while the others are business and engineering majors. 4 of them work as parts of multiple research firms, while the others are in the business industry or work independently. They have been living independently in Dhaka for at least 2 years, and at most, 12 years. The average of each woman living independently is 5.5 years. And the frequently mentioned areas in which they have lived or are currently living are Mohammadpur, Uttara, Bashundhara R/A, Gudaraghat and Niketon. Aside from their family status, their earnings and chosen areas also hints their position in the society as the middle class women. All my participants have at least one person in their family as breadwinner. 8 out of 9 women rely entirely upon their earnings and take no money from their families. The average earning for this group of people is 35 thousand Bdt each month. Ethnically, 7 of them identify as Bengalis, and two belong to two different indigenous communities. Religiously, 6 are born in Muslim families, and 3 belong to religious minorities-

27

Hinduism, Christianity and Buddhism. However, not all identify themselves as religiously active persons or believers.

In many cases, their distinct identities have helped them to rent a house in this city, as well as created difficulties to find a home as well. It depended on the individual and their forms of capitals.

I have tried to utilize these demographic data to understand their lived experience and negotiation strategies as independent women in Dhaka city. In multiple cases, these variables, which at first glance present themselves as minute information, played an essential role in shaping their experiences and realities, for the better or worse, which will be discussed in the latter chapters.

28

Chapter 5

The struggle of finding a home

Dhaka has recently seen a massive rise in population over the past few years. As the population increases, a considerable rise of independent women is also noticeable in the city, yet their living conditions often go as topics that are not discussed. This chapter addresses the independent women's experiences of trying to rent a space for themselves in Dhaka city. Bangladesh is a developing nation, and Dhaka being at its center, is frequently considered more progressive than other places in the country. However, a country and a city's level of development cannot only be determined by its economic growth. How safe people, irrespective of their genders, but especially women feel is a monumental indicator of a developed place. Renting a space individually for anyone can be challenging, and the challenge is amplified massively when it is a woman.

Despite being considered developed, it is questionable how safe women feel in this city, holding their agency. Furthermore, the process of trying to find a suitable place in Dhaka can somewhat illustrate the level of hurdles they encounter as independent women.

Before conducting the interviews, I thought finding a suitable accommodation setting was difficult for women. Nevertheless, it transcended the limit I had in mind, which I realized once I was done with the interviews. On average, every person I interviewed reported shifting houses 7- 10 times, which only goes to show how finding an accommodation setting that is suitable and stable is a highly taxing job not only physically, but also emotionally, mentally and financially. Not a single woman had found a place easily or on their first few tries.

In Sadia's statement, she said, "*After finishing my work every day, I would go on a mission which I call house hunting. It might sound silly, but it is no less than a process of hunting. It took me 5 months to find where I currently live.*"

29

"No one is ready to rent a space to a bachelor woman. People think women do immoral things if they live without a conventional family." - said Toma.

In Bangladesh, there are conventionally two types of families. Joint families and nuclear

families. Any woman who tries to break that system is perceived in a different light. Sinha (2004) brings forth this issue in quite a fantastic way. She addresses the concept of pure versus fallen women; fallen women are those who break any of the established norms. Pure women are the signifiers of the nation, who are recognized as someone's mother, daughter, and sister, thus only having an identity concerning a man, thus making it acceptable in society. Similar ideology governs our society too, even though my interlocutors independent women have been challenging these ideas. In Dhaka, living as an independent woman completely challenges that established notion and yet every one of them is asked about their marital status. Moreover, that is why women face an array of complexities while trying to find suitable accommodation. Women are perceived as docile creatures, and marriage works like a certificate for their credibility, status, and character when they are adults.

Inan expressed, *"people cannot fathom that a woman can live by herself without a husband. Whenever I went looking for a flat, the first question that I got asked every time was, are you married? As if my achievements, income and status is not enough. No matter how responsible I am, I am always asked this, as if it would guarantee them a safe tenor."*

In my ethnography, all women have their own source of income, a credible degree, they are responsible and resilient beings. As Feldman (2001) points out, the rigid notion of development assumes it to be a unilinear process. Women's economic and educational participation are also determinants of that established notion. However, this is precisely where the dilemma arises because concepts like development, patriarchy, and modernity cannot be inflexible like they are viewed, as these discourses have to be fluid. I learned that these women might struggle, but their struggles cannot be put under one particular box. Despite being labeled as "modern" and "independent" women, who live in a

30

"developed" city, their living experiences often go unnoticed. Even if light is shed upon their circumstances, the absence of fluidity and the presence of heteronormative ideas restrain those events from unfolding in a multidimensional way.

As Jun said, *"People just wouldn't rent me a space at all, you know. They would ask all sorts of weird questions. Do you eat frogs? Do you eat insects? You must drink alcohol since you come from the hills. All of your cultures are haram. We cannot rent you a space."*

Being an indigenous minority puts a person in the face of an array of discrimination, and the situation worsens if it is an independent woman in Dhaka trying to rent a space. It puts her in a terrible mixture of racism, gender discrimination, and safety concerns. Because women are almost always fetishised, and even more so when they are considered "exotic."

"I am often fetishized. I have always been all my life. Many of the landlords I attempted to talk to gave me a weird smirk, which made me feel petrified. I instantly wanted to run away. My mother is always paranoid because she thinks she might get news of me getting raped. That is not rare at all for indigenous women in Bangladesh". – stated Moitree.

This statement reasserts how Moitree's indigenous Rakhine identity puts her in a position of vulnerability. While all the women in my ethnography have faced difficulties, their Bengali identity also gave them somewhat of an upper hand, which is not the same in my indigenous interlocutors' cases.

These women, belonging to primarily middle-class families, do not have the luxury to afford grandeur and highly secured houses for themselves. Often, they are forced to choose affordable housing, where they attempt to choose areas which are likely close to their workplaces/institutions; even in those accommodations, they are restricted by regulations that shape their sense of belonging.

31

Most of the women in my interview would rent the space depending on certain factors. One of the key priorities is the distance from their workplaces. Nevertheless, for many of them, it is not always possible because not everyone can afford to rent a place closer to

their workplaces due to various factors- starting from the high rent in those areas to simply being unable to find a space where female bachelors are allowed with necessary settings. For many, the distance from the office to home has become a struggle.

"I live in Mohammadpur but my work requires me to go to Banani quite frequently. Being a freelancer is not easy, because one day you are at one place and on the other, you are somewhere else. Traveling becomes exhausting. I tried looking for a place around the Banani area but the rents are too high. And a flat in Mohammadpur is somewhat affordable but I don't know how safe I feel about the area." - said Tarannum.

The struggle to find a suitable place is not enough. For most of these women, finding a place that ensures safety, flexibility, and affordability transcends the idea of the generalized struggle of finding a space. Moreover, the notion of accommodation is fleeting for them because they often have to move from one place to another. So finding a somewhat permanent and stable space turns into a big challenge.

"During covid, I have shifted houses 5 times. It was so difficult, there came a point when I had no place to live. I lived at a friend's home for 2 months, and with another friend for 3 months. If you don't have a permanent place to live, how are you going to do the rest of the things in your everyday life?" - asserted Dighi.

Not having a stable place to live is not only frustrating but also affects the other aspects of one's life; if one does not know where they are going to wake up the next day or week, that induces their anxiety to the point where they have a hard time coping in their work life, private life and their interpersonal relationships. Moreover, since these women are always on the move, it also affects the number of belongings they have.

32

Like Dighi said- *"Imagine having a shit ton of furniture and equipment but no roof in your house. What are you going to do? For bachelor women, it is not uncommon at all. I once rented a flat and after one month, the landlord came in and asked me to vacate the*

flat the next day. He didn't even give me any notice. And that's what I had to do."

In many cases, even if a woman can afford multiple belongings necessary for her living, such drawbacks prevent her from owning those belongings. They are forced to live a minimalist lifestyle not by choice but due to their circumstances.

One aspect I wanted to look into during this research is how these women find their preferred houses. All of them simply answered that you must keep looking physically for months. Many of the women have also reported being able to find a house through their friends and social media. Thus, their social and cultural capital increased their chances of finding a rental place in multiple cases.

"My landlord asked me to leave this flat in a month and it is hard to find a flat just in such a short amount of time, he didn't even inform me beforehand. But thankfully, I reached out to one of my ex-housemates, and she informed me about a place that is vacant which I can rent. I had also found flats through facebook groups." – said Mehnaz.

The above statement expresses how the use of social capital can help these independent women negotiate through their crisis of finding a rentable space. Multiple women in my ethnography have mentioned being able to find a place to live through their social circles, friends and acquaintances. A recurring approach that many of them had mentioned was learning about vacant spaces through other independent women, who are either their friends, acquaintances, or ex flatmates.

And like social capital, cultural capital also shapes these women's experiences in various forms. For many of them, their intellect, identity of institutions, and other elements of

cultural capital provides them an upper hand when it comes to finding a living space.

"Belonging to an indigenous independent woman in Dhaka city comes with its drawbacks, but my institutions always came in handy. I graduated from the top university in Bangladesh, and now I work at one of the top telecom companies. When people hear that, they are nicer to me. It elevates my image so much." said Moitri.

But it is solely not their social capital or cultural capital that is beneficial; rather a mixture of both that mold these women's experiences. Many of the interlocutors described how both their social and cultural capital merge together and impact their ways of being, as well as their endeavors when it comes to finding a place to live.

Tarannum shared,

"I have been working as a freelancer for a long time, and I have worked for multiple organizations, projects and NGO, so it was easy for me to build connections. Since my work required me to interact with a lot of people, I had the opportunity to work alongside foreigners who visit Bangladesh for work purposes. And with some of them I would get along greatly, share a friendship that goes beyond our work connection. I have lived with multiple foreigners throughout my journey of living by myself in Dhaka. This is the ultimate "totka", if you live with one or a few white persons, nobody bats an eye on you. Not the neighbors, not the landlords. It is easy for you to rent a space and practice your own lifestyle without much restrictions. Talk about the existing colonial mindset established in brown people."

Like Tarannum, a few other interlocutors have also discussed events, experiences and situations and how all the forms of capital worked as crucial determinants in their journey of looking for an accommodation.

According to Bourdieu (1987), capital can be categorized in 3 ways. Economic, social, and cultural capital. Furthermore, all three of these categories of capital work together to construct a sense and identity of one's social class. Bourdieu did not merely focus on economic class because he thought it was not the sheer power of wealth that determined one's position in society. This explains how some of these women could find a space for themselves through their social and cultural capital which shapes their sense of identity to self and society, despite many drawbacks.

Dighi shared how people are reluctant to rent her a flat when they hear that her family lives here. *"People just cannot take it when they know you have a home and a family in the same city and yet you're trying to live by yourself. They keep assuming the worst of things. So I told them I am outside of Dhaka, and I moved here for work purposes. I don't like answering this many questions. Especially to people who are not relevant."* - stated Dighi.

Although all the women in my research had faced an immense struggle with finding a space to live, surprisingly, it was easier for some of them to find a space when they took another person along with them, especially a male figure.

As Dighi would assert, *"I took one of my colleagues from work two times looking for a few places. Those are the smoothest experiences I have had in this matter. The landlords were so courteous, one even offered us tea. My colleague told the landlords that I am his sister. And interestingly, I hardly had to take part in the conversation. The entire negotiation was done between the two of them."*

Tarannum also has faced similar situations. In her words, *"I have been living alone for a long time. You pick up strategies that work for you, you learn to survive. For a long*

period of time, I would take a friend or my brother to go with me while looking for a flat. Makes it easier and gets the job done."

This reestablishes how women are always perceived through their relation to men, even in a developed setting; reflecting (Sinha, 2004)'s work. Moreover, we acknowledge that patriarchy is not solely limited to institutions such as the nuclear family, the state, or the mode of production but is much more nuanced and deeply rooted.

Following Kandiyoti's (1988) framework, I explored how these women can bargain through their situations in an existing patriarchal system. Their strategies might differ, but in the end, they are constantly reshaping, renegotiating, and bargaining their way through their lives to look for a home and find it in Dhaka city.

Through this chapter, I attempted to bring forth the impediments that independent women in Dhaka city encounter while trying to find suitable accommodation. I have also examined their negotiation strategies to navigate this phenomenon. Moreover, it was incredibly insightful to hear these women's stories and understand how struggles might differ for everyone. Hence, the remedies are also shaped in unique ways.

36

Chapter 6

Lords of the Lands

The fundamental human rights for any person include safety, liberty, freedom and shelter. Despite the large population of Dhaka city, basic amenities such as safe housing for independent women is still in question. This chapter attempts to bring forth the experiences of the women regarding their landlords as well as their surroundings, including neighbors and security guards. It focuses on the stories of these women, which highlights their encounters, struggles with the mentioned entities, and how they have

managed to negotiate through those events. It also paints an image of the accommodating settings in which they inhabit.

In the previous chapter, I attempted to establish how hard it is in Dhaka city to find shelter for an independent young woman. However, the struggle is not only limited to being able to find accommodation. The struggle transcends that boundary and continues to exist in their everyday life and space. Although Dhaka is often understood as a developed city, this city is also highly patriarchal in nature, which is often overlooked due to the established notion of development, modernity, and patriarchy. Once a woman rents a space, ideally, that would put an end to her residency struggles, but that is not the case. In many instances, their immediate surroundings would have a multitude of impacts on these women's ways of being. Landlords, security guards, and neighbors would be part of these experiences.

"One of the hardest things about finding a suitable home is also finding a suitable landlord. For some time, I lived with my sister and another guy. One landlord slut shamed my sister and me. He would often insert innuendo about how we do unethical things in our houses. When we rented the space, we mentioned that people of all genders would often visit, and at first, he said that was okay. But

37

then he started creating a lot of fuss about it. He would just behave in such an insane manner. He would scream and shout at us, humiliate us in front of people, and make our living conditions unfavorable. And ultimately, we were thrown away. We could not be there anymore, we wanted to live a certain way, and we left. In multiple houses, the caretakers were horrible. They would keep tabs on you all the time and tell the landlord about everything you do," - said Mehnaz during her interview.

Mehnaz's statement elaborates the struggle independent women face with their landlords. While many of these landlords agree with their tenants' demands initially while renting

them the house, it is hardly they keep their word. At some point they end up dictating these women's spaces of all forms, their mobilities and lifestyles. The dictation is not limited to solely controlling behavior, it goes up to being verbally abusive and intrusive, disregarding these women's identities and questioning their chastity.

"I was in dire need of a space close to my university and I had found a flat in Chankharpul, and I moved in. The landlord seemed alright at first, I told him that I am an architecture major so I would have to sometimes stay out for long hours. My work required a quiet space to finish my ongoing projects at that time, I also would have a lot of meetings with clients, either over zoom or in person. I would live in a chilekotha in that house. But on two consecutive days, the son of the landlord alongside his friends would just scream and shout right next to my gate. They were drinking, playing really loud music, saying all sorts of cuss words. I politely asked them to stop but they wouldn't. At one point they started breaking bottles in front my door. I was so scared of even opening the door. I could not do anything. I called the landlord and the caretaker but they acted in a completely reluctant manner, they didn't even consider that I was completely alone in my flat. At one point I decided to inform the police with the help of one of my university seniors. Even after that I had to struggle a lot. The police talked to me and started asking me all sorts of weird questions. I was telling them what's happening outside of my door but they didn't seem too bothered. But once I said I had

38

studied in BUET, their attitude completely shifted. They were cordial to me and sent some people to help me with the situation." - said Inan.

Inan's story expresses the sort of danger women are posed to in their own houses. The space that is supposed to ensure their safety becomes unsafe in many instances. The thought of being in danger is always persistent in their day to day lives, and despite their

struggles, the landlords are nonchalant about ensuring their safeties. The constant anxiety stems from the fear of being raped, harassed or tortured in any and every form. Oftentimes, the landlords and caretakers overlook these fundamental concerns, and their reluctance heightens when the harasser shares some form of a relationship with them, both personal and social. The male unity, resulting in misogyny, sculpts these women's lives and their notions of safety.

"All the landlords I had dealt with were crazy. Two, in particular, made my life no less than hell. They would ask me to come back home by 9 pm; they would not allow me to bring any guys over, or would always have this attitude that they are doing me a favor just by letting me stay in their fat. I would pay 1.5 times more than the actual rent of that place. I would still be there because it was closer to my workplace. My parents are well off, but they live in Narayanganj, and it is impossible to travel every day from there. My landlords still would act disgustingly; the flat I lived in was very dark with no ventilation system, and the water and gas lines would often stop working. The caretakers were not good. Nevertheless, I just somehow managed to live there until I could not and eventually left the place." - expressed Arpita.

39

Arpita's experience echoes most of the interlocutor's experiences to some extent. Despite paying a higher rent, these women's accommodations settings are not always very suitable. The landlords are also indifferent towards fixing any of the utility services to provide a better living experience for them. Despite so many drawbacks, the landlords also impose boundaries on their lives which hinders them from living in their own ways. By restricting others' entries in their own houses, as well as restricting their mobilities through a putting a time limit, the landlords continue to impose power over these female tenants.

However, not every woman would decide to shift their accommodation settings, even if it means dealing with unnecessary restrictions and an overtly assertive landlord. Some

would accept these phenomena despite their discomfort and struggle, because to them, these houses provide an extent of security, even if it is at the cost of their freedom, which they are willing to sacrifice.

As Sadia would state, “The current house where I live, it’s not really per my living standard. Back home, I had a life so much more comfortable, and compared to that, this is nothing. I cannot bring anyone to my current place. No men are allowed. The guards and the landlord are really strict. The landlord has a horrible temper too. But that is okay, as long as I feel safe here. At least I know that no one will break into my flat and try to violate me. And I cannot go through the house finding process right now either, it is exhausting.”

The above statement goes to show that even though these independent women are taking a step towards breaking the established patriarchal norm by their choices, yet due to circumstances, some of them take a step backward as well which perpetuates the established notion of patriarchy, and such occurrence reasserts (Kandiyoti, 1988)’s idea of how many women can deem patriarchy favorable for them taking a lot of variables

40

into context. In these situations, they implement strategies that ensure the continuance of patriarchy and their own limited control within that setup.

The indigenous women in my interviews also reported issues with their landlords and neighbors. Neighbors would complain about their lifestyles, clothing, culture, and even the smell of food. It is not even limited to racism; the problem takes a new toll when their surrounding beings fetishize them. Moitree and Jun's incidents regarding the neighbors are examples of that.

Moitree shared her story- "During Covid-19, I lived in a flat for 8 months completely alone. I would have a neighbor, a married middle aged man in his mid

40s. Whenever I would encounter him in the stairs or on the corridor, he would always give me a very weird look mixed with an evil smirk on his face. He would say "apa ashen cha khai" in a very subtle manner, but it was not difficult to understand what he's trying to indicate. It was more than a cha-er dawwat. When I informed my landlord about it, he gave me a very condescending look. He spoke to me in a reluctant manner and did nothing about the issue."

The expression of symbolic violence is clear in Moitree's story. As established, violence is an umbrella term, carrying multitude of behaviors. And moitree's experience demonstrates how men often use that as an instrument of power. The issue becomes further complicated when one is being fetishized due to one's ethnic identity. And such events illustrate how men make these women shrink, not only outside but even in their own homes.

All participants shared at least one experience with their landlords where they felt pressured and unjust. The active power struggle was not difficult to understand and amplified because the tenants were women. Lefevre's (1974) theory on space demonstrates the power struggle between the space owner and tenants. In my ethnography, the issue reaches a new height due to capitalism and patriarchy, controlling

41

not only these women's physical spaces but also their abstract spaces. To these women, these physical spaces hardly feel like their own because of the lack of ownership, which is closely tied to their safety. Imposing regulations regarding certain factors like restricting their time to enter and leave a house or who is allowed in these women's domestic spaces only show the hegemonic ideology of space, and patriarchy affects and molds their reality with another added layer. Moreover, the controlling entity of space is only not limited to landlords, as neighbors and security guards have also appeared as threats to these women in some instances. In those cases, the landlord's nonchalant attitude also vigorously shaped the women's overall experiences.

As I have learned through the interviews, women have different ways of navigating their situations. Some would submit themselves to the situation for what it is, some would leave the place and move to a new flat, even if it means paying more money, as long as it ensures freedom and safety, and some would lie and manipulate in order to have control over the situation. Appearing in a more feminine and polite manner while speaking with landlords and security guards was one method that multiple women reported using.

"I once rented a flat, and I told the landowner that I am married. I even made a fake marriage certificate from Nilkhet," - asserted Toma.

"You need to be the right amount of feminine in front of them. You cannot talk too much and be frank, and neither can you be too rigid. It is a slippery slope." – Said Mehnaz.

Dighi identifies as a queer person who does not like to specify their gender, yet they are perceived as women by the world. They also had a similar method while dealing with situations like these. Nevertheless, to them, acting in a feminine way feels burdensome.

"I have to feminize myself a lot while dealing with landlords. To an extent, it feels like a violation of my identity. Personally, I do not like wearing an orna. And yet whenever I talk to my landlords, I take one with myself. Appearing feminine through your body language is a must," -shared Dighi.

42

(Kandiyoti, 1988) indicates how different women negotiate differently within their boundaries, these independent women's actions reflect that notion perfectly. However, in multiple cases, it came forward that their negotiation strategies might create a confusion regarding their image of self, and feminization of self while dealing with landlords is an example of that. Such occurrences also reflect how these space owners control these women's spaces even in an abstract sense, and that again captures (Lefebvre, 1974)'s idea regarding hegemony of space to a certain extent.

According to many of my participants, security guards also play a significant role in this

discourse. Moreover, most of these accommodation settings either had stringent security rules, which put an obstacle to these women's liberty, or had almost no security, which made the environment unsuitable for feeling safe. So this constant flux of safety and liberty becomes an obstacle for many women who reside in this city independently.

3 of my 9 interlocutors found that not only the landlord but every man regardless of their class position were instruments of patriarchy and felt entitled to police.

"The security guards are very clever. They know they can have leverage over you. So they always observe all of your actions. Who comes into your house and who goes. It is very important to know how to negotiate with them. But it's also sad that you have to do such a thing because you are a woman. You want to know how to be on good terms with the security guards. They have the power to make or break it. Many people don't understand that. You have to insert power over them before they do that over you. One of my negotiation tactics includes helping the guards. These people are often financially in debt. So sometimes I try to help them with little money and food. But sometimes I also try to help them in a different way. If you help to pay for the school fees for their sons, or buy books for them, they feel very grateful. They help you in many ways. Even if you are late at night,

43

they will open the gates for you. Or help you pay the water or electricity bills, or even save you sometimes from being monitored by others," - said Moitree.

While all of these women had multiple bitter experiences with the surrounding entities of their homes, some also shared some positive experiences.

"The current house where I live, the landlady is such a nice woman. She doesn't ever ask me irrelevant questions, she respects my boundaries. Having a good landlord is a blessing and can give you a feeling of reassurance." – mentioned Dighi.

Toma, Mehnaz, and Tarannum also said similar things in their interviews. Their current flats are according to their taste with understanding landlords and security guards, ensuring their primary demands, which are feeling safe in their own houses and having the liberty to live their lives on their own terms.

Tarannum shared,

“My current landlady is a polite woman. She never acts in a disrespectful manner. She understands the sort of work I do. And she is always cordial. Also, I am 33 years old. That might be one of the reasons I am somewhat taken more seriously”

Mehnaz stated-

“I am not the first woman to live in this flat. Other bachelor women have lived here before too. Hence the landlord of this house knows what women are looking for while renting a space and how to behave with their female bachelor tenants.”

44

Mehnaz’s statement asserts that landlords and landladies who have been renting flats to female tenants for a while have a better idea of their sense of identity and boundaries. Moreover, it is not only that the land owners shape the tenants’ experiences and notions, it is a two way process. Through having multiple independent women as tenants, the landowners’ mindsets and strategies also evolve in many ways.

However, from the above statements it might sound like land ladies are more empathetic and understanding towards their bachelor female tenants compared to landlords. But that

is not always the case, as some of the same participants had faced hostilities from some of their previous landlords. In those cases, these landlords signified the bearer of patriarchy.

The experiences shared by my participants in these interviews highlight how they perceive their surroundings and how that shapes their reality to an extent. It also demonstrates how these women have struggles that are unique to each, thus making their negotiation techniques exclusive as well.

45

Chapter 7

A house or a home?

Being resistant to any existing structure means challenging that structure, and the independent women who choose to live separately are defying that fabricated reality by their choices. This chapter tries to delve into the experiences of these women in regards to living by themselves and living with other people, through which they confront the established concept of a heteronormative nuclear family. This chapter also tries to shed light on their struggles in doing so and how they cope with those matters.

In Dhaka, the nuclear family setting has been considered the most common type of family for some time. When a woman decides to be a part of anything else by stepping outside that family setting, she automatically transmutes the idea of family for how it is perceived in a generalized notion. This allows these women to refigure their agency and a room to explore an alternative domestic dynamic. How they bargain through these circumstances is also an aspect I tried to represent in this chapter. 7 out of 9 interlocutors in my ethnography had experiences of living alone at some point, and 8 out of 9 of them had experiences with sharing a space with another person at least once. This chapter

brings attention upon those experiences and how that had played an essential role in reshaping their realities.

"I always got really lucky with my flatmates. I have heard stories about people having horrible flatmates, but somehow I always ended up being very fortunate in this matter. All my flatmates were very cordial and helpful. We would share our chores, they were responsible people. I have never felt overwhelmed or violated in any way while living

46

with them. I also feel less lonely with them. I am still on very good terms with them, although I don't live with them anymore. They are like my sisters." – said Arpita.

Like Arpita, many other participants have also shared similar sentiments regarding some of their flatmates and ex flatmates. A shared space creates a bond between its inhabitants which can result in strong friendships and understanding. Such friendship is not limited to the time they spend living together but transcends that period. Even when they move out to different places, they always have a fondness towards the others, while also aiding them in many ways, such as informing them about job opportunities or availability of a rentable place. These friends turn into the chosen families, they become comfortable shoulders to lean on through alone and difficult times, while also becoming a support system which would bring practicality into account.

"Whenever we have to make a decision regarding our home, all of us gather together and discuss the issue. So the final verdict is always decided by all of us. Whenever a plumber would come to work, or the internet service provider would enter our house, we always make sure there are all of us present, so nothing bad can happen."- said Moitree.

Living with others also enforces these women to coexist with people outside of their families. While mutual views on similar things strengthen the bond, contrasting views also leave a scope to negotiate and unlearn many aspects and take other perspectives into account. Shared responsibilities among flat mates construct a sense of harmony and trust; such components are vital for friendships and in many instances, it is a very important instrument for safety in order to survive in a male dominated society for independent women. Like Moitree, multiple participants would also live with flatmates which would strengthen their sense of belongingness and safety in their own residence.

47

Not all of my participants have solely always lived with other females. 4 of them had shared a space with a male flatmate at some point, and that is a dynamic I wanted to look into.

“I had lived with one of my boyfriends for a year. We told the landlord that we are a married couple. Maybe it was easy living with him because we were partners. I did not feel unsafe. I don’t know how my experience would be if I lived with any other guy.”- shared Toma.

Dighi also mentioned living with a guy for 8 months. She shared,

“The guy I lived with was in his early 60’s, unmarried. He was cordial to me, and would not breach my privacy or boundaries. Would be clean and hygienic regarding the common space as well. But he was sometimes a little annoying, and would expect certain things of me.,not anything sexual or violating. In the end, for me it was the subtle indications that were directed towards me to play the role of a woman; caring, nurturing. But I never felt unsafe.”

Before talking to the participants who had experiences of sharing a space with a male figure, I assumed I would learn stories of some sort of violence or harassment, given how often it happens in our country. But surprisingly, not only were their experiences neutral, but they also had tried to express a sense of safety they felt as certain things would be easier to deal with because of a male presence. Dealing with landlords would be easier in such instances, because the male person would do it. Same goes for security guards. Overall, the men's presence would work as a form of negotiation strategy which would make their living experiences easier. And again, this reasserts Sinha (2004)'s idea, that how women are always viewed in their relation to men. While this strategy does work to an extent in this context, it also leaves a room for the perpetuated patriarchy, which exhibits Kandiyoti (1988)'s concept as well.

48

Weston (1991)'s idea of an alternative family makes us rethink the hegemonic notion of family. Throughout my ethnography, I have observed how these women can build a new domestic setting while challenging that rigid notion of kinship. These women's experiences illustrate the bonding created through a shared space. This bonding is based on friendship, mutual understanding, shared responsibility, and trust. Hence, even though the flatmates are not related by kin, such bonding helps to reconstruct a new form of a domestic setting over the normative form. However, gray areas are also an aspect I tended to notice while looking into the experiences of a shared space, which again reestablishes how experiences can vary from person to person.

In addition, not every woman I have interviewed always had good experiences with all of their flatmates.

"Once my mother visited me from outside of Dhaka, and she brought food that she cooked for all of us. When she offered the food to my then flat mates, the anguish in their face was visible. They did not respect my Rakhine culture. With them, I would have to use

separate utensils such as pans and plates even. Those girls were Muslims, and they would share their utensils, "said Moitree.

For an ethnically minor independent woman living in Dhaka, struggle takes many forms. It is outside of the generalized notion of what is viewed as struggle. There is always an added layer of friction when a minority's case is taken into account, hence their experiences cannot be homogenized completely with other independent women's living experiences. Feeling violated and disregarded due to one's ethnic identity is a direct form of racism which prevails in both of my indigenous interlocutors' stories. Moitree's encounter with her flatmates sharply signals how racial exclusions prevail and affect these independent women in their lives. And thus, the layers of "being the others" keep perpetuating in these women's lives in multiple dimensions. While women are viewed as the other in a general notion, for these indigenous women, being ethnically different to a

49

Bengali woman attaches many other surfaces while navigating through their situations. And this tension follows them everywhere, even in their own rented flats.

"I had a flat mate who would not respect any of my privacy or boundaries. Neither was she a responsible person. She once flooded the entire house by leaving the kitchen sink on for hours. That damaged so many of my belongings. That was dangerous because the water could reach the electricity lines and kill all of us." – said Mehnaz.

Similar to Mehnaz, many of the interlocutors had unpleasant encounters with their flatmates. It is really difficult to live with other people who do not have any sense of responsibilities, or personal boundaries. A huge difference in values also reduces the chances of creating a bonding and a safe space for many independent women. While living with other women might feel safer to some of them, that does not guarantee the possible hazards that can occur, and that affects their overall living experience to a great scale. Having to share a space with someone like that also creates a tension of moving out

and finding a new place again, which itself can be an extremely anxiety-inducing and taxing task.

2 of my interlocutors, Mehnaz and Sadia, lived with their sisters for some time. Generally, the assumption would be that living with one's own biological relatives would be a more sustainable and easier setting, which is something that can be observed in Afsar (2000)'s work; how living in a branch family works like a negotiation strategy. But interestingly, my participants did not like that experience. Both would report how their elder sisters would try to assert power over them and their choices. The dynamic between the sisters did not seem to be equal or fruitful; hence both of my participants eventually decided to live separately.

Moreover, such statements express that living with another person may not always be a pleasant experience, sometimes they come with hardships, disagreements, lack of respect

50

and understanding, and the same characteristics can be found even in biological relationships.

Currently, 5 of my participants live alone. When asked about their experiences living alone, they all had mixed reactions. Parts of it were positives, and the other parts, not so much.

"Living alone in Dhaka can be isolating. People have their own crew, and it is hard to be a part of that. It is depressing, anxiety-inducing in many cases. You have no one to come home to. People view living alone as an adventure, a fun thing. That is not always the case. They think there is no curfew, and one can do whatever one likes. But people hardly think of the loneliness and responsibility that comes with it," - Mehnaz shared.

Tarannum, Arpita, and Toma also shared a melancholic view of this notion. While all of them enjoy their agency and the feeling of empowerment, they also feel depressed and lonely from time to time in a lack of company and warmth. Through these conversations, we can comprehend how women perceive their experiences of living independently in this city very differently.

Living independently affects not only these women's private spaces but also their relationships with others. 4 of the participants shared some very similar experiences in this matter.

"People think if we live independently, they think we are easy to have sex with. If that is not the case, they think they can bring someone here and have parties and sex. As if our flats are hotel rooms. They don't understand that to us; it's not only a mere house, but it is also our home. And we respect the place where we live, we maintain boundaries that must not be crossed. I have lost friends because of this.

51

That's okay; I am glad I did. I do not need such people in my life. Some people directly asked me if they can bring girls over and have sex. They even offered to pay me. Hence, whenever I converse with other people and if this topic arises, I try telling them about my flatmates and how we live. I tell them what we cooked this morning for breakfast, how our maid did not come two days in a row, and what movie we watched together the other night. I try to mimic a traditional family setting in front of them so that they understand although we might be living independently, we are also like a normal family with normal functions. This is one of my negotiation strategies as well to feel safer and get a sense of belonging."-
said Moitree.

Sinha (2004) investigates how society establishes the distinction between women who are pure and those who are fallen. Any activity that deviates from the usual is regarded as a distasteful attitude that may only be committed by fallen women who are considered impure and lacking in chastity. Moreover, the initial responses of my interlocutors indisputably reflect how the society in which they operate perceives them as a result of their independence. They are regularly harassed as a result of their living circumstances. If not explicitly, then indirectly through oblique comments and hints. Their boundaries are frequently crossed, and their idea of a typical home is all but disapproved of. And hence, in order to continue their ways of living, they take up various forms of approach and strategies which work as instruments to navigate their circumstances.

I asked all the participants how their families viewed them since they started living independently, and I received an array of mixed reactions. Some families stopped talking to their daughters due to personal clashes and the choices they made, but most were proud of these independent women. Initially, the latter group of families did not have faith that these women could be independent, safe, and functional in a city such as Dhaka, but a changed outcome also shaped their perspectives; it established a form of trust, pride,

52

responsibility, and validation, which helped these women to feel empowered and more in tune with their agencies.

In this chapter, I have attempted to focus on the experiences of independent women in their domestic spaces, and it contains both stories of living with oneself and living with others. I have also tried to evaluate how those affect them and their relation to others in their lives, thus shaping their understandings and experiences of beings.

53

Chapter 8

Conclusion

This dissertation tried to look into these women's lives and struggles as well as their methods of negotiations, but many aspects were unexplored during this research. However, the themes that were inspected capture the current living conditions, experiences and struggles independent women face in this city while attempting to look for a place they can call home. Their stories bring a rather grim and melancholic reality into light which often goes unnoticed due to the facades of development and patriarchy. While it is impossible for me to completely understand their struggles due to my positionality and privileges, yet there were many notions that I could relate to because of my ties to this city, my class and my gender. The layered struggles of the lived experiences of independent women cannot be put under a single category. Each challenge has its stages, phases and differs from another woman's challenges in many regards. From finding a place to live in Dhaka, to finding another suitable person to live, these women experience varieties of barriers, and each of those shape their ways of being in certain ways. Similarly, their negotiation strategies and approach to problem solving are also distinctive, depending upon the context which they are in. While many of them are subjected to similar issues, realities might be different for every single one of these women. In a country where women are perceived as weak and docile, these independent women constantly deconstruct and challenge such notions through their choices and refusal to comply.

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