

Mapping Out Factors That Shape Narratives of Bodily Autonomy for Bangladeshi Youth

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Economics and Social Sciences in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Social Sciences in Anthropology

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Declaration

It is hereby declare that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
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.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Abstract

The discourse of consent, specifically the consent of our bodies is hyper-focused on situational narratives of consent breach. While the scope of this discourse fills a crucial role which formulates preventative guidelines and suggests disciplinary measures, it overlooks the uniqueness of subjective experiences for the sake of extracting objectivity. As a result, current discourse fails to take into account the nuances and ambiguities that come into play when shaping these narratives. Firstly, it homogenizes the capability of individuals to effectively understand and communicate their boundaries, and how their personal experiences with bodily autonomy and agency in the past affect their psyche. Secondly, it presents boundaries as rigid peripheries defined as required by negating their malleability and adaptability. Thirdly, it does not concern itself with how individuals negotiate the boundaries of their body to navigate experiences where their autonomy is challenged. This thesis is an autoethnography extended towards a peer group- it explores narratives of bodily autonomy of upper-middle class Bangladeshi youth with the aim of mapping out factors that shaped their experiences.

Keywords: Bodily autonomy, Consent, negotiating boundaries, Body agency, Communicating boundaries, Bangladeshi youth

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Sexual consent as a topic enters public conversation from two directions. Firstly, with the knowledge that consent breach is a serious issue present around us; the conversation preemptively tries to form a guideline of dos and don'ts to prevent such incidents. This guideline is formed both informally through public opinion, day-to-day discussions and social norms and formally through institutional interventions and reform. Secondly, following incidents of consent breach, the conversation attempts to identify how consent has been breached, verify and analyze available narratives and come to a consensus regarding the legitimacy of the accusation and potential consequences. Either way, the scope of the conversation focuses on situations of consent breach and defines its periphery with disciplinary and preventative measures. So, the discourse of sexual consent serves a specific purpose. One that, I must clarify, is not without crucial significance but limited regardless of the role it fulfills. The purpose of this discourse is to solve the problem of recurrence of consent breach. It does so by promoting clear, transparent communication between all parties involved. This communication is as much about the boundaries of our bodies that are being expanded, solidified or reduced as it is about the presence or absence of consent.

The understanding of consent cannot be separated from the understanding of boundaries. On a fundamental level, the communication or acknowledgement of consent is explicitly required as our boundaries are being challenged, pushed and crossed. It is consent, when given or withheld, that presents the crossing of boundaries as acceptable or unacceptable. The

communication of consent is the communication of boundaries. The ideal outcome being that individuals will communicate their own boundaries accurately and respect the boundaries of others when they do the same. It goes without saying that the ideal outcome is rarely the average outcome.

A glaring limitation of public discourse's hyper-focus on consent breach is that it homogenizes the ability to understand boundaries and communicate them. It generalizes this monumental task of setting boundaries, being aware and perceptive of one's own boundaries (and others') and communicating them in the moment at face value and simply expects that individuals will execute these functions to their best because the guideline of exercising consent requires so. This reduces the overarching narrative of bodily autonomy and agency formed throughout their lives to a situational narrative for the favor of extracting objectivity. This reduction serves a purpose but does not account for the full picture. Situational narratives negate personal history as a defining factor in how they understand, negotiate and communicate boundaries in the present. So, this paper takes a step back to accommodate the uniqueness of individuals' sense of boundaries, bodily agency and autonomy by exploring what has affected and shaped these in the past for said individuals.

Amidst the conservative social sphere I've called home in Bangladesh, I've grown up as a fat, queer person in an abusive community. Comments about my body and how I should feel about it are ingrained in my mind because I've heard them again and again all my life. I know I shouldn't eat what I want because I'll develop a body no one likes. I know I shouldn't feel good about the shape and weight of my body and be hyper-aware of it because it has always been pointed out explicitly at different places by people who either know me well or strangers who know nothing about me. So, I've learnt to feel guilty about taking up any space. I feel

comfortable wearing clothes that accentuate my shape. I've been physically abused throughout my teenage years. As an adult, as I transitioned into my queerness, rarely have I felt the freedom to be open about it at home or publicly. I can't express my sexual preferences because they are social taboos and I can't present myself the way I want to because they go against social norms. My body has been policed and my bodily autonomy has been challenged and negated in numerous ways till now. As a result, developing my sense of bodily boundaries, how to feel about them, and how to communicate them to the world has largely been a process of learning about myself. An important part of that process has also been unlearning and reframing what I've taken for granted and considered definitive. As I talk to my peers who share the same conservative social space and come from families and spaces with similar social, cultural and religious underpinnings, I find experiences that are widely different. But these experiences intersect at the challenges faced in negotiating bodily autonomy throughout their lives. The challenges mentioned range from communicating consent to body image issues to uncertain and problematic self-perceptions of boundaries to traumatic experiences of abuse and boundary breach. Furthermore, these challenges have been imposed on them through space, food, clothing, interpersonal dynamics- verbally, emotionally and physically.

Currently, no academic literature exists that explores the narratives of bodily autonomy as experienced by Bangladeshi youths. As a result, there's a gap to be bridged in terms of mapping and analyzing the factors that shape and transform ideologies of bodily autonomy for Bangladeshi youths. Mapping these factors are important to understand where to intervene and what to change in the education of consent, parenting methods and how to teach upcoming generations about their own boundaries and how to navigate them effectively. Without the findings of such research, we remain in access of a partial narrative that only looks at incidents

where sexual consent has been breached but not the history of the multitude of factors that shaped that very moment.

This paper aims to explore and frame the narratives of bodily autonomy and consent experienced throughout their lives by eight Bangladeshis in their 20s from an upper-middle class background. Concerns of this research are primarily to map out the factors that shaped and affected these experiences and secondarily to verify the hypothesis that these are gendered experiences. Employing Bourdeiu's habitus, Butler's performativity and embodiment theory, this study is an auto-ethnography expanded towards my peers.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework

My theoretical framework is based on three concepts: habitus, embodiment and performativity. I will also clarify my framework's phenomenological standpoint in terms of agency and subjectivity.

This paper builds on the idea that the modalities of the boundaries of our body and how we communicate them are products of our habitus. Pierre Bourdieu believes that habitus is a “system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures...” (Bourdieu 72). These structures in question are the structures that make up a certain environment. Our environment, the world we grow up in, the social sphere we inhabit, the systemic structures that define this social sphere, the material conditions and constraints of our class, the overarching impositions of systemic oppression of patriarchy, the capitalist structures that encompass our lives are all structures that form our environment, our very existence. These structures affect social norms, gender norms, our taste, our mannerisms, how we use our language, how we view our bodies, how we act, how we interpret interpersonal dynamics. Most importantly, these structures define what we consider acceptable and unacceptable. They define what we say, do, can do and will say. Bourdieu believes that these structures and how they interact with us, creates dispositions ingrained in us. These dispositions determine how we will act in certain situations and how we will react to what is happening to us. Our habitus has determined through these dispositions that we will act a certain way. These

dispositions can be cultural, religious, social. These can also be gendered dispositions. He states these dispositions are transposable because they do not function independently. “Fields” as he frames them are objective conditions which can be considered sites for these dispositions, for our habitus to manifest and function. Our habitus reacts and adapts to the objective conditions of these fields. It does so through “practices” or habits and repeated actions. On these topics, Judith Butler writes,

“The habitus maintains a constrained but non-casual relation to the practices that it informs. Composed of a set of dispositions that incline subjects to act in certain ways, the habitus does not determine that action casually. These dispositions may be said to motivate certain actions and, to the extent that these actions are regularized, to compel a set of practices. But practices are not unilaterally determined by the habitus; they emerge at the site of conjuncture between the habitus what Bourdieu will call specific social “fields”. (Butler, *Performativity’s Social Magic* 114)

These practices include how we communicate, how we engage with situations where our agency is being challenged and pushed, how we exercise our bodily autonomy. Butler states that Bourdieu sees the body “as a form of engagement with the world, where this engagement is understood as a kind of regularized activity that conforms to the ‘objective’ demands of a given field.” (Butler, *Performativity’s Social Magic* 115).

This paper believes: (1) how we have navigated our bodily autonomy throughout our lives in different scenarios can be encapsulated as “practices” we have adopted, (2) the “objective conditions” mentioned are the objective factors that define the peripheries of our experiences with bodily autonomy and (3) “fields” are the amalgamation of both the objective and subjective modalities of the very experiences we go through and the experience itself as a

whole with its triggers, stimuli and shapers which are of course, intertwined with its objective conditions.

This study aims to map these fields that come into effect during experiences surrounding bodily autonomy and consent. It is my target to analyze my findings through a discussion of the objective and subjective modalities (as mentioned) of these fields and how they correspond, correlate and interact with the embodied habitus of my interlocutors.

Butler views these practices as an enactment of memory incorporated into the body (Butler, *Performativity's Social Magic* 115). Surely, these memories are of past experiences and how we act perpetuates in one way or another what has happened to us in the past. Therefore, it must also perpetuate the very structures that defined our past experiences through these practices. So, we return to our starting vector- our habitus defines what we do in relation to the field that requires us to do.

This notion of incorporated memories can be synonymously used with embodiment. Embodiment theory in the field of Anthropology claims that our bodies hold the very ideologies and perceptions of our world in a way that manifests through the functions and operations of our bodies. Thomas Csordas describes,

“In effect, embodiment is our fundamental existential condition, our corporeality or bodiliness in relation to the world and other people. For research in the human sciences, embodiment is “an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world” (Csordas 1994: 12).”(Mascia-Lees 137)

This paper claims that individuals embody not only their habitus and the structures that produce that habitus but also the emotions and reactions that are associated with experiences that require the practice of their habitus. So, if past experiences are being recreated, it will trigger embodied practices and the psychological modes connected to those practices.

It is at this point that I ask if there is a place for subjectivity and agency alongside embodied practices that have been ingrained by pre-established structures? Through the lens of Judith Butler, there is. Firstly, the body that embodies and defines this embodiment through perceptual experience is fundamentally a gendered body. Butler writes, "...the' body is invariably transformed into his body or her body, the body is only known through its gendered appearance." (Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 523). Secondly, Butler suggests that it is within this gendered perception of the body, the subjectivity of the self exists. This subjectivity does not precede gender "as if a disembodied agency preceded and directed an embodied exterior" (Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution " 521). But instead, according to Butler's claim, gender is a performative act and it is through this performance that subjective agency is formed and exercised. This subjectivity is a fiction formed out of the performance that is gender but it is a fiction that the self becomes immersed in. On this note, Butler writes,

"As a consequence, gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self,' whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority." (Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 528)

This psychological interiority is the sense of self and the subjectivity that is produced alongside it. Butler does not see this construction of self-fiction as a compromise on agency. The

body as Butler sees it holds possibilities for how to be and act. These possibilities are modalized by history and overarching structures but these are possibilities for newness regardless. It is through the performance of gender and the possibility of action, agency is employed. Butler believes that there is space for gender transformation within these possibilities, within the relations between gendered acts. Even if these acts are characterized by repetition, there are possibilities of a different sort of repetition, “in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style”. (Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 520). Furthermore, gender performances are never devoid of subjective agency and enactment of such agency does not negate its status as a product of habitus. Butler writes,

“My situation does not cease to be mine just because it is the situation of someone else, and my acts, individual as they are, nevertheless reproduce the situation of my gender, and do that in various ways.” (Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 523)

It is important that we address Butler’s mention of Merleau-Ponty’s perception that the body is not a merely a reenactment of historical structures and ideologies set in stone but a “set of possibilities to be continually realized” (Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 521). This paper also claims that this continual realization of possibilities of the body is how individuals transform their boundaries throughout different experiences in their lives.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This research was an ethnographical challenge. The subject matter was sensitive and required access to memories that are emotionally charged and often traumatic. Recollecting incidents where their agency had been taken away or their consent had been breached can be stressful, distressing and overwhelming. Moreover, my interlocutors might not feel comfortable opening up completely about what they went through and asking them to constantly think and share their experiences in the span of an hour or two would also be an exhausting affair for them. I wanted to avoid creating a dynamic between me and my interlocutors where they simply answer questions for the sake of it. The requirement in terms of ethnography were these: (1) They have to feel comfortable enough to share personal and intimate details, (2) They cannot feel alienated by the interaction between me and them and from the research itself, (3) Their experiences cannot be reduced to answers to rigid questions and instead needs to have the space the branch out organically as they share or else, I risk losing genuineness of the narratives.

I gathered information from eight individuals. I chose these individuals as my peers from my immediate social circle. All eight of them are students of BRAC University. They come from upper-middle class families and are currently living in Dhaka. According to the sex and gender assigned at birth, four of them are men and four are women. However, the gender spectrum that identifies the reclaimed genders of these individuals is broad and diverse, inclusive to cisgender and queer identities alike.

I have a pre-established dynamic of mutual respect and correspondence with all of them. This removed one barrier in ethnography since they have previously shared a lot of these experiences with me and already feel comfortable enough to talk about intimate details. I decided to have one-on-one conversations with them in a setting that would put them at ease. This meant having these conversations at either their home or mine or in spaces that we're both acquainted with. I had points of discussion fleshed out previously which I brought up during these sessions without breaking the flow of thought. I also had to navigate these discussions in a way so that my interlocutors don't feel pressured or pushed to respond in a certain way. This required me to drop certain points of discussion with some when they did not have much to say while others responded enthusiastically to the same points. Asking for time from these individuals for this research was a challenge as well since they were busy with jobs and academics and not always available near me. I overcame this by accommodating their convenience of time and place.

I consider this ethnography an invaluable experience. In several instances, my interlocutors shared memories of traumatic events and experiences that they had forgotten over the years. During the conversations, a few of them visibly experienced intense emotions towards people in their past. At times, they also connected dots in their narratives they hadn't made before. Regardless of our pre-established dynamic, I had to guide my interlocutors through these conversations without making it feel like an imposition. There are moments when I found them hesitating. They would take breaks to consider what to say and how to phrase their experiences. I shared my personal stories and shared the other interlocutors' stories (anonymously) to both create a sense of solidarity that put them at ease and to exemplify the type of narratives I'm searching for.

At the start of each session, I briefed them about my thesis in full transparency, told them what I expect out of this and asked for their consent for recording the conversations. I made sure to take breaks whenever they were struggling with sharing particular experiences to let them know that they have a choice to skip and move on. Words of encouragement that they're doing well and I'm happy with our conversation also helped them nudge in the right direction without really asking them to. I found that being able to redirect and reframe conversations on the fly without breaking the flow was an important skill that helped me tackle this ethnography effectively. My interlocutors laughed, cried, smiled, became angry and sad during these sessions. I found the genuineness of their emotions to be rewarding and appreciated the level of comfort they extended towards me. This added a depth to my ethnography I only hoped I would achieve.

Chapter 4

Findings and Analysis

4.1: Space, Temporality, Pretext and Context

The spaces we occupy never exist independently of meanings. These meanings can either be assigned through pretext, as a form of fictional narrative progressively developed and played out by the agents involved to serve a purpose that is not being explicitly stated or through a subjective interpretation of the objective context. The context preceding an experience can be shaped through the pretexts assigned to it by participating individuals. Similarly, context can trigger the formation of pretexts as individuals often internalize the synonymization of specific pretextual narratives with the certain objective conditions that define a context. The spaces we occupy also bring out embodied emotions tied to the perception of the modalities of the space. Furthermore, the rigid limitation of certain spaces pushes us to extend our bodily boundaries within the malleable limitations of other spaces.

Mrittika recalls a traumatic experience she had in a movie theater. She was meeting a man who she had gone on two dates with till then. Their relationship had been taking an intimate turn and they mutually agreed to engage. But when they met, she didn't feel comfortable about it anymore. "At that moment, I knew I was scared. I knew I wasn't okay with what was happening", says Mrittika. The public nature of the space added to her anxiety. Her body language was visibly resistant. She said out loud as well that she was scared. But she was forced and pushed by him to continue. She went along with it regardless because firstly, she didn't want to make a scene in a public place given that she herself was participating and because they had

previously agreed to it. Mrittika felt like she owed the other person this encroachment on her boundaries because “he didn’t live nearby and he came a long way to meet me”. The physical space traveled by this person therefore became a factor in Mrittika questioning her own boundaries. Her embodied anxiety of intimacy in a public place was pushed aside to accommodate the added rigidity formed through the context of space.

Temporal factors play a crucial role in malleability of bodily boundaries. Spontaneity and choices made “in the moment” are recurring in the narratives I recorded. During intimacy, Sarah was taken aback when she couldn’t withdraw in time after she felt grossly uncomfortable. When confronted, both (Mrittika and Sarah) of their partners said they got caught up in the moment so they didn’t pick up on body language cues. Infact, Sarah says, “We definitely had conversations about this. I remember telling him that there’s one thing I’m not okay with. When I asked him about it, he acted like he was surprised. He said, ‘Oh, why didn’t you tell me you weren’t comfortable when it was happening?’ But I did. I was trying to move away. He wouldn’t let me.”. Sarah’s boyfriend negated the pre-existing context of established bodily boundaries claiming spontaneity of the moment as a justification.

Coming back to the aspect of space, it’s important to note that the status of a space as either private or public also plays into the pretextual interpretation of contexts. Sarah shares another experience where she was looking for a friend to come over and help her clean. Someone she knew from before, offered to help. He also asked her if she wanted to drink because he could bring over a treat. Sarah was excited about the free offer and replied, “If that’s the case then you don’t even need to clean. Come over.”. He assumed this invitation to her home, her room, a private and intimate space alongside the acknowledgement that they would be drinking as a sign that she might be interested in something more than just socializing. Sarah froze that day after

hearing certain comments he made about her body boundaries. I'll elaborate on this incident in the upcoming sections. But the addition of a pretextual narrative to the context is also present here. The objective realities of what they would consume together, where they would spend their time and pre-existing dynamic between them were all interpreted differently by the parties involved.

Space can also be used to not necessarily impose on individuals' body boundaries but to restrict their autonomy. Cultural and religious dispositions combined build up a conservative mindset for Bangladeshi families and it is portrayed through the ways they regulate their spaces. Through the lens of this conservative mindset that takes monogamous heterosexual relationships as a given, two unmarried individuals of opposite sexes spending time behind closed doors comes is tied to the implication that they might be engaging in sexual intimacy. Therefore, Bangladeshi parents limit their children's spaces by not letting them have friends from opposite sexes over or to close the doors to their rooms in such scenarios. Some parents keep a close eye on where their sons and daughters are going and expect them to not be out and about alone with someone from the opposite gender. Even stricter regulations include not allowing them to roam publicly at all, expecting them to be homebound for the majority of the time and only going out with friends from the same gender.

There is a strong gendered aspect to the restrictions of these spaces. Women face stronger regulatory impositions and expectations than men. Bareesh recalls, "My sister wasn't allowed to bring guys over. My parents never forbid me, though. I remember she would secretly go out with her then boyfriend and hide her actions entirely from our parents.". This genderization of spaces starts not only at home but also heavily at schools. Bareesh remembers that boys and girls were separated at school and the general consensus on opposite sexes talked was that it's frowned

upon and something to mocked or ridiculed. Bareesh says, “I felt awkward talking to girls in front of everyone. They were seen as separate and almost ‘alien’. We wouldn’t interact with them. They mocked us. They thought we were disgusting.”. The use of the word “disgusting” caught my attention. This strong feeling of repulsiveness towards the opposite sex is often embedded in Bangladeshi youth by implying that regular interactions are in some way sexually charged and therefore to be considered taboo and to be refrained from. This creates a skewed perception of opposite sexes that can transform into exaggerated boundaries between them.

4.2: Food and Intoxicants

The consumption of digestible items, be it food or intoxicants such as marijuana or alcohol has been a point of discussion with all my interlocutors. Several of them recalled emotional experiences tied to food where their body agency was imposed upon. While sharing his stories, Bareesh, at one point, got visibly angry towards a person from his past. His uncles had forced him to eat “dherosh bhorta” during lunch. “I hate dherosh. I felt like puking. And when I did, he picked me up, threw me on the bed and locked me in a room.”, Bareesh says as he sits up enraged. Aritra wasn’t allowed to complain about the food served to her at home. She couldn’t express her dislike with what she had to eat or else her meal would be taken away for her to stay hungry. Sarah’s story is perhaps harder to process as she tells me that whenever she would vomit out food her body just couldn’t take in, her mother would make her eat that expelled vomit.

Intoxicants both allow individuals to expand their boundaries and form contexts that justify pretexts or contribute to the extra malleability of boundaries. Aritra went through two experiences surrounding consent while she was intoxicated. She forced herself on someone in an inebriated state. “It was really hard for me to process because I don’t remember any of it. And I

can't relate to the person who would do that. I don't think I know myself as someone who would do that. But I did.", Aritra shares. Interestingly, she was accused a second time that very night conducting inappropriate behavior. But Aritra strongly feels that she was being accused of something she didn't do. Adeeba complains that he should've known her intentions were harmless since they had been friends for a long time.

Coming back to Sarah's experience with intoxicants- she mentions that he waited for her to reach an inebriated state to ask her if they could be intimate "I went back and read all our texts and in no way did I lead him on to think he had that dynamic with me.", says Sarah. Through these narratives, we find that intoxicants play a role in shaping contexts that encourage the questioning of body boundaries and allow the space to spontaneously challenge these boundaries through these contexts.

4.3: Ritualized Practices, Games, Playfulness

A rather intriguing finding was that individuals collectively engage in activities that push their body boundaries through rituals that take the form of games and act out with an implication of playfulness. Within these rituals, encroachment on boundaries that would otherwise not be okay, are considered acceptable. But this acceptance doesn't necessarily negate the embodied anxieties and repulsions of body boundaries being violated. But it's a violation that is agreed upon without explicit acknowledgement.

"Pungi", Bareesh describes is when someone playfully pinches your chest area to hurt you without your consent when you're unaware of what they're about to do. This playful action is one that happens between friends and companions, initiated by both girls and boys alike and

turns a gross violation of one's body into a game of teasing. Pungis are given in public and banks on the amusement caused by the utter surprise and shock of the person receiving it.

“Lift rules” is another game where a group of guys riding an elevator are all expected to do or say a pre-established action or phrase and the one failing to do so before others will get hit in their private areas.

Bareesh mentions another interesting phenomenon. He and male friends are not comfortable with displays of affection that might be interpreted as “gay” in public. But they regularly engage in tussle and a mockery of “gayness” by playfully acting out physical intimacy amongst them. It is a joke, a playful exchange between friends for them. But only achieves a game-like status when it is being exaggerated through pretend sincerity which itself contributes to the pretense and irony it wants to achieve and a lack of explicit acknowledgement. This lack of explicit acknowledgement is justified through spontaneity as well since part of the pretense of the game is to act out a lack of consent as well. This violation of bodily boundaries through physical intimacy is seen as playful and allowed. “Asking them would ruin it. That would make it too gay.”, Bareesh responds as I ask him how they initiate these games.

4.4: Communication

The modes of communication choices taken by individuals when faced with confrontations surrounding bodily autonomy is an unavoidable part of the process of situating these narratives pragmatically. Individuals can communicate their boundaries, their consent, their embodied feelings, their lack of cooperation. From the narratives I heard, it has become clear that rarely do communication of these aspects occur explicitly in clear, transparent terms with no space for ambiguity and subjective interpretation. Some individuals communicate through entire

disengagement from the situation and the parties involved. Such was the case with Aritra. The first time she was intimate with her boyfriend she wasn't comfortable with it. "I came up with excuses to not do it. But I never said it directly that I don't want to. Afterwards, Aritra's embodied resentment of this experience manifested in the form of disengagement. She distanced herself from the person and stopped wanting to spend time with him alone. But she never told him what was wrong. "I didn't even make the connection in my head, you know? I didn't know that's why I was avoiding him. I stopped seeing him the same. But I never told anyone, not even my friends that this had happened. I bottled it up and became cold and distant without an explanation.", Aritra tells me. In fact, I was the first person she ever shared this experience with. We can learn a lot from this particular incident. Firstly, individuals don't always directly express their boundaries directly even when there is negotiable space to do so. Secondly, individuals aren't always accurately perceptive of their own boundaries and therefore don't communicate them accurately. Thirdly, individuals don't necessarily process their embodied anxieties instantaneously to understand how and why they are acting a certain way and instead act out in irregular ways to get to a desired state of comfort by avoiding communicating at all.

The lack of communication is not always about a lack of comfort. At times, it is an active mode of communication itself based on mutually implied contexts and pretexts. Bareesh shares another story- a friend was coming over to his place. They never talked about what this meeting will entail. But they both knew that's why they were meeting. They both wanted the same outcome. This mutual agreement, without ever really asking it out loud, is formed around the reading of cues. Reading cues or reading the room are both aspects of interpersonal experiences that hold significant space for ambiguity and subjective interpretations. What one individual considers to be a cue can be entirely devoid of meaning for another. Body boundaries are often

challenged through a misreading of cues. But on the other hand, an accurate reading of cues by all parties in other scenarios, legitimizes the symbolic status of these cues as communication templates. These cues that become templates allow individuals to exercise consent without having to go through awkward confrontations. It is a safe mode of communication for individuals in a way because it banks on plausible deniability. This act of play-pretend gives them the ability to test out boundaries and form a pretext through mutually implied consent.

4.5: Body Image

Self-perception of their own bodies is embodied by all my interlocutors. It shapes how they move, act and behave. It triggers mannerisms that become a defining factor of their identities and how they function with their bodies. Body image is formed through both the commentaries and perceptions they have noticed repetitively forming surrounding their body and also through the expectations they consider to be standards for a body they view as desirable. I asked everyone I talked to about the patterns of comments they've heard about their bodies. For Bareesh it's how short he is and his stuttering, for Faisal it's the shape of his body, for Aritra it's her height. Aritra mentions that she has been pointed out in almost every place she goes to that she's so tall for a girl. She has heard it through mockery and jokes and direct verbal abuse. This has ingrained in her a feeling of discomfort with the space she occupies with her body. She has developed a set of mannerisms as a response to this guilt and shame now embedded in her. "I crouch and hunch my shoulders when I walk and sit. I keep my head down. My tendency is to always make my body smaller so that I'm taking up as little space as possible", Aritra tells me, saddened by her reality.

This embodiment of discomfort with one's body and a sense of alienation regarding the very mode of being in a space, manifests not just through mannerisms but through mental health,

aesthetic choices, clothing, photographic representation and through self-narratives. Aritra and Faisal tell me they don't like how they look in photos. For Faisal the intensity of this dislike is carried onto his relationship with the mirror. "I hated looking at the mirror. I used to avoid looking at myself.", says Faisal. Aritra mentions, "I just can't recognize myself in photos. It doesn't feel like me.". Aritra elaborated how uncomfortable she felt when her friend took photos of her from an unflattering angle. But she couldn't communicate this because "taking photos is such a normal thing. I didn't want to make a big issue out of it. It's just a photo, right?". Aritra elaborated on the feeling of dysphoria that is triggered when she sees herself in photos. Since she has grown up being at the center of attention because of her height, it has made her choose items of clothing that don't stand out and are "safe". She says that they are safe because "no one would talk about them. They're basic. There's nothing to talk about.". She reclaimed this adopted fashion style later on. She clarifies that it feels like a part of who she is now and she's proud of how she dresses even if it was born out of a need to avoid attention.

Furthermore, it's crucial that we connect a thread between body image and space. Based on what I've learnt from my interlocutors, body image fluctuates from space to space. Mrittika tells me that her mother looked at her body as "pure and clean" as long as she stayed within the regulations imposed and wasn't too open to intimacy with men. She questions Mrittika's choices in clothing whenever she's going out, deeming certain choices as unhealthy and inappropriate. As a result, Mrittika feels the need to hide and take the clothes she actually wants to wear when she's going out. Instead, she wears something her mother would approve till she can change later for a more inclusive space. These regulations specific to certain spaces, creates a restrictive and conservative body image that are specific to these spaces. As my interlocutors move in and out of these spaces, they also adapt their body image and modes of expression accordingly.

4.6: History of Abuse

A history of abuse is recurring in the narratives I recorded. Extreme violations of their bodies in the past have left many of my peers suffering from life-long trauma. Sarah was severely abused by her mother. Sarah clarifies that she specifically characterizes this as sexual abuse. Faisal was molested as a child. He remembers a distant relative, an uncle taking him away to a room when they would meet. He didn't understand what was happening to him back then because it was all played out like a game. Arshad and Hasib went through similar experiences in their childhood. Hasib tells me that he was inappropriately touched by their house-help. He tried to tell his mother about it but she disregarded his narrative as false.

Abuse of the body happens in many forms. Experiences of verbal abuse is common among my interlocutors. Sarah mentions that she has been body-shamed by her mother for the majority of her teen years. She would be verbally abused if she put any effort behind her self-expression or in her clothing. One of her boyfriends would express disgust and be repulsed by the acne on her face. She was compared throughout her life with other bodies and how she wasn't as good as them. This history of aggressive verbal abuse regarding her body has shaped her body image and insecurities.

Overall, each of the experiences shared by my interlocutors contains some degree of abuse exercised by the parties involved. This abuse is not necessarily physical abuse exercised on my participants but also an abuse of space, context, interpersonal dynamics with the purpose of creating room for crossing boundaries.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This research aimed firstly, to find out the factors that shape narratives surrounding bodily autonomy and secondly, to understand if these experiences are gendered. Studying the narratives shared by interlocutors has allowed me to extract these factors and present them in clusters based on how they've functioned. Moreover, it is this paper's conclusion that these experiences are indeed gendered and that this genderization is inescapable as much as the formation of subjective identity is inevitable. One aspect that has resonated repeatedly throughout the conversations I've had is the malleability and transformability of body boundaries based on the factors I've identified.

One must ask why this body of work is important for our day to day lives. I believe that the data extracted from studies such as mine can be directed towards interventions presented both institutionally as reforms and as social campaigns as a means of aligning public perception with our goal. The goal is a world without gross violations of bodily autonomy. The ideal points of intervention for the fulfillment of such a goal could be at schools and universities. But it is of utmost importance this intervention touches not just the youth but the generations that precede them. Parents are not born parents; they learn and they can be taught. If they can be taught how to be better parents then surely, an unavoidable part of that process needs to be education of the linguistic and behavioral tools for effective negotiation and navigation of body boundaries for their children. The formation of these tools needs to be the subject of another in-depth study but they cannot effectively come to fruition without the findings this paper has discussed.

Our bodies never exist independently. They are shaped and transformed by the conditions of their reality. These conditions can either limit the abilities of one's psyche or restrict the

corporeal materiality of their being. But our bodies are not merely docile receivers of imprinted modalities, they are agents who exercise their autonomy in relation to these conditions. The relation between these conditions and our bodies, molds our sense of self which equips us with our subjective perception. Recording the narratives of my Bangladeshi youth, dissecting their experiences surrounding bodily autonomy, has provided invaluable data. This data contains the unseen, the undiscussed, the unacknowledged and the undermined details and nuances of what the body and its agency has meant to them and what it has meant to the world around them. Situating this data in practical fields will allow us to build a compendium of factors that come into play when one is asserting their boundaries and consent. This is crucial for building a safer future for us and for upcoming generations- a future built fundamentally built out of a better understanding of ourselves and how to live in harmony, negating the ignorance and deficiencies in knowledge that hold us back.

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