Sheltered: A thesis exploring the link between bhodrota and the sexual subjectivities of Bangladeshi middle-class new adults

By

Zahra Mayeesha Lateef

15217002

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Declaration

It is hereby declared 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.

Zahra Mayeesha Lateef
15217002

Approval

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Zahra Mayeesha Lateef (15217002)

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Examining Committee:

Supervisor:
(Member)

_____

Dr. Samia Huq
Professor
Department of Economics and Social Sciences
Brac University

Program Coordinator:
(Member)

_____

Dr. Shahidur Rahman
Professor
Department of Economics and Social Sciences
Brac University

Departmental Head:
(Chair)

_____

Dr. Wasiqur Rahman Khan
Professor
Department of Economics and Social Sciences
Brac University

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Abstract

‘Sheltered’ explores the cultural taboo about sexuality among the urban middle-class in Bangladesh, i.e. the bhodrolok, and the way it shapes sexuality and sexual norms/expectations. This taboo exists to maintain and reproduce the concept of bhodrota (i.e. respectability) as a part of the bhodrolok’s middle-class identity and neoliberal aspirations. My thesis defines ‘bhodrota’ as the cultural capital of respectability of the bhodrolok class, and includes the embodied practices that reproduces and legitimises it as symbolic capital through a language of normativity and assures the hegemony of the middle-class. But this cultural taboo is also challenged and remixed by new adults from the bhodrolok growing up in a globalised world; thereby, the concept of bhodrota is also challenged and changed as neoliberal aspirations of the bhodrolok are articulated by the new members of their ton. The chosen demographic of my thesis is specifically new young adults from urban middle-class families in their first year of university (ages 19-20). I conducted six in-depth interviews with new adults from this demographic, as well as a key informant interview with the director of KOTHA, the only existing sexuality education programme aimed at middle-class adolescents. Using both secondary research into existing SRH programmes, their evaluations and reports, and primary data from these interviews, I illustrate how the ‘bhodro’ landscape and habitus of middle-class sexuality is created and enacted through the tension of defining and redefining the class identity of the bhodrolok, within structures of heterosexual marriage normativity and homosociality. My thesis demonstrates and explains the burgeoning need for a cultural ‘speakable sexuality’ for the middle-class, as opposed to the existing silence of the taboo, to help adults navigate the anxieties and ambiguities of their sexual subjectivities and discourse in a society burdened by its patriarchal rape culture and its stigmatisation of sexuality.

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This journey has been a long one–and complicated. There have been so many unexpected struggles in my path to complete this thesis, I'm fairly surprised and proud of myself for getting to the end of it. I take this opportunity to name those who have been integral to that journey.

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Finally, this thesis is dedicated to my Nana and Nanu who lived to see me flourish and succeed academically. My life's goal is to keep making you proud of the woman I become.

Chapter One

Introduction

A friend once said to me, “People in Asian countries stay teenagers well into their twenties.” We had been discussing the discrepancy in the fact that my friend had just begun her first romantic relationship, at age 23, while my cousin was getting married that weekend, at age 22. Both being examples of their first experiences of sexuality and intimacy, it was an apt equation she’d pointed out. Sexual maturity and adulthood have always been linked in human society. How culture interprets that connection dictates the norms and practices of sexuality in a society.

In Bangladesh, adolescents’ sexual expression, norms, and identities are formed under a blanket of silence, ignorance and fear due to the largely conservative and patriarchal culture. Not only does this pose various health hazards but the lack of conversation about sex, consent, and boundaries contribute to a disturbingly opaque culture around sexual harassment and assault.

My target demographic for this thesis is the urban middle-class youth. Secondary research reveals that there is little known and studied about adolescents in the context of the Bengali urban middle-class, a socio-economic group considered a marker of social grace and privilege, and a generation constantly in negotiations between tradition and modernity. In Bangladesh, most research and programmes regarding sexuality focus on adolescents from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Thus, ironically, the ‘privileged’ youth of the urban middle-class do not receive formal sex education.

My own experiences involve private schools for this demographic going out of their way to *remove* access to subjects even skating the topic of sex, such as human reproduction in the school syllabus. My first encounter with any formal sex education was upon joining university: in the residential semester at BRAC University, a sex-ed seminar led by faculty from the James

P. Grant School of Public Health. There were two odd—and therefore memorable—aspects: firstly, the male and female students were separated and given two different seminars, covering different topics. Male students received a lecture on sexual pleasure, STDs in summary, and contraception with a demonstration; whereas the female students learned about menstruation, reproductive health, pregnancy, and a more in-depth presentation on the various STDs, and some contraceptive methods (but with no demonstration).

Secondly, the lecturers spoke of sex in the hypothetical, i.e., the information was meant to be useful after marriage, when we will hypothetically be sexually active. The possibility of premarital sex was not mentioned, despite the audience's average age being over 19; by default, the lecturers preached abstinence. Therefore, there was no space for sexually active adults to express anxieties or questions about their sexual activities without shame, decreasing the effectiveness of a sex-ed seminar purportedly aimed at *adults*.

Literature produced by NGOs that conduct sex-ed programmes in Bangladesh reveal that much of the sex-ed curriculum taught to trainers and teachers comes out filtered by such cultural biases. An excerpt from Roodsaz (2018) reveals how "[w]hen we visited the training session, we noticed some problems; they [trainers] had learned a lot of things, but still they were not comfortable talking about it with children. They would skip issues related to the body and sexuality. However, they did discuss other topics, such as health and hygiene."

In the cases where trainers and teachers *are* willing and able to deliver the full curriculum, parents and school administration complain about the perceived vulgarity and inappropriateness of the lesson content, despite the benefit to the students.

Besides being a public health issue, sex education plays a central role in adolescent emotional development and gender relations. Censorship of what little formal sex education is offered removes subjects dealing with the body, sexuality, and intimacy, which are all integral for

healthy development of people's sexualities. Additionally, the unrealistic insistence that unmarried youth and young adults are not being sexually active on the institutional level results in genuine anxieties and shame.

While my original proposal centred on investigating the role/lack of sex education in the formation of such sexual subjectivities, in the process of collecting data and conducting literature review, I found my focus reorienting towards the conceptualisation of class and cultural identities and the ways sexual subjectivities of this particular demographic is articulated.

Thus, 'Sheltered' explores the existence of a cultural taboo about sexuality among the urban middle-class, i.e. the bhodrolok, and the way this cultural taboo is enacted and shapes sexuality and sexual norms/expectations. This cultural taboo exists to maintain and reproduce the concept of bhodrota (i.e. propriety, respectability) as a part of their class identity and neoliberal aspirations. But this cultural taboo is also challenged and remixed by new adults growing up in a globalised world; thereby, the concept of bhodrota is also challenged and changed as neoliberal aspirations of the bhodrolok are articulated by the new members of their ton.

Research Questions

1. What is life like for urban middle-class adolescent with the lack of sex education? How does it affect their sexualities, negotiations, understanding of consent?
2. How does their class identity influence the norms, expectations, knowledge, myth, and behaviours about sex?

Methodology

Six (6) in-depth interviews were conducted with nineteen open-ended questions in a pre-determined interview guide. The questions cover the thematic aspects of my thesis: family, relationships, culture, and sexual subjectivities. The interviews averaged on one and half hours.

I used snowballing sampling to obtain my respondents: I asked two of my initial respondents to recommend other participants and send them a sign-up form if they seemed interested. Though there was an issue of anonymity, the form ensured that only I receive the agreement of the respondent to participate, and they were asked whether they prefer a pseudonym to be used before the interview.

Additionally, I conducted one key informant interview with the founder and director of KOTHA, the only existing source of high-school level sex education in Bangladesh.

I chose the in-depth interview as my methodology because I wanted to avoid generalized data. Most of the secondary research I conducted used broad strokes when it came to analysing the data on the sexuality of youth in Bangladesh, concluding that the traditional society of Bangladesh disallows conversation and exploration of sexuality due to cultural or religious stigmatization. I wished to provide greater contextualisation to this discomfort and stigma.

Justification

What can understanding the concept of bhodrota offer? For one, I believe that my thesis may be among the very few that engages the concept of respectability as more than a strategy to navigate patriarchal norms. Respectability, in my work, straddles the trepidatious line between tradition and modernity in post-colonial Bangladesh in a way that informs identity, subjectivity, knowledge and norms regarding sexuality. Respectability influences the sensitivities and problems that arise when SRH programmes attempt to deliver their content to adolescents or young people. It is the pivotal centre of sexuality discourse for people growing up and living in Bangladesh; thus, engaging and understanding respectability and its role in shaping sexual subjectivities/class identity within sexuality discourse on an development level may prove useful in tackling its broader goals of ‘progress’.

Theoretical framework

I use Pierre Bourdieu's class theory to analyse the construction of the middle-class cultural identity of the Bangladeshi Bhodrolok, my target demographic, and how the concept of 'Bhodrota' (trans. manners, propriety, civility) functions both as their symbolic capital *and* as cultural taste that reproduces cultural capital of the Bhodrolok. The four central concepts to Bourdieu's social theory of class are: capital, habitus, fields, and symbolic power. I also employ Beverly Skegg's location of gender in Bourdieu's class theory and Saba Mahmood's conceptualisation of agency to make up for the theoretical gaps in Bourdieu's theory.

Capital

Capital, briefly, is resources. For Bourdieu, there are three species of capital that provide different forms of power; power which, in turn, depends on the structure of the fields in which the capital is activated rather than the volume of the capital possessed by the individual. Economic capital includes income, accumulated wealth as well as property and productive assets (for example, businesses, investments). Social capital is the network of associations and relationships one gains from different social avenues.

Cultural capital is "competence in some socially valued area of practice" and can be separated into three subspecies. To quote Sallaz and Zavisca (2007), cultural capital includes:

> an embodied disposition that expresses itself in tastes and practices (an incorporated form), formal certification by educational institutions of skills and knowledge (an institutional form), and possession of esteemed cultural goods (an objectified form) (p. 23)

Any form of capital becomes symbolic capital if people recognises its unequal distribution as legitimate; this legitimisation comes from the misrecognition of the privileged taste and capitals of the dominating class as a part of one's "natural capacity" leading to a "valid truth of the social order" (Bourdieu, 1999). Symbolic capital both generates and is generated by

symbolic power. Bourdieu (1999, p. 105) defines symbolic power as "control over the perception which social agents have of the social world." The legitimisation of principles of the social world defined by a dominant group produces, then, a normativity that is consequently reproduced within the shared cultural capital of a dominant class. In essence, social agents of the privileged classes choose the rules of the game, and the rules of the game always cater to their interests. When the pervasive idea of these rules become a "natural" part of the social order, that is where symbolic power is generated.

Thus, the concept of what is "normal" and normative is key to symbolic capital. For the bhodrolok, what is "normal" is what is "good", as social order is concurrent with moral order for them. This binary of natural/unnatural, normal/abnormal, good/bad is essential to their reproduction of symbolic capital and social identity.

Habitus

The concept of habitus is theoretically loaded and thus, much contested in sociological thought. While it is a powerful demonstration of embodied social practices, the internalisation of social structure, and most importantly, of the mechanisms of social reproduction, it is so theoretically versatile that the effectiveness of it as an empirical tool to identify "cultural taste" and "cultural competence" can be difficult. Despite its complexity, his social theory remains a cogent resource to understand how class identity is formed and maintained.

So, for my thesis, I will follow Sallaz and Zavisca's definition of habitus as "a system of durable, transposable dispositions". As a disposition, habitus is an embodied sense of one's structural conditions and one's own positionality within that—a tacit "feel for the game" (Bourdieu, 1990); it is durable (but not absolute) because of the internalisation in individuals through early socialization in the family or primary group; and it is transposable in that people carry their dispositions with them into any new setting (Sallaz & Zavisca, 2007, pp. 24-25). As

habitus becomes embodied practices, it gains a history and the dispositions reproduce even when the objective structures that gave rise to those practices change or disappear, thereby giving the impression of "natural dispositions". Thus, what social agents consider normal/abnormal for people of their station comes from their habitus: it fuels their aspirations and social practices and norms. Bourdieu (1990) says that,

> agents shape their aspirations according to concrete indices of the accessible and the inaccessible, of what is and is not "for us", a division as fundamental and as fundamentally recognized as the sacred and the profane (p. 64)

So here we see again, that social identity is fundamentally referential and oppositional, existing in a binary state of contestation and conformity. These constant recalibrations and reproductions happens in the social lives in what Bourdieu conceptualises as "fields of power". Fields are arenas of struggle for legitimisation, in Bourdieu's language, for the right to monopolize the exercise of "symbolic violence" (Swartz, 1997), i.e. the symbolic power to control the dominant principles of a social world.

Fields

Bourdieu's definition of fields relies on the conceptual understanding of social life being inherently conflictual and social practices being weakly institutionalised with vague boundaries (Swartz, 1997, p. 120). Fields are structured spaces of dominant and subordinate positions organized around forms of capital. For my thesis, the concept of fields as arenas of struggle for legitimisation is what is important. Swartz (1997, pp. 123-126) posits that fields are "tightly coupled" relational configurations where a change in one position shifts the boundaries along all other positions; this dialectical logic of fields help create the "misrecognition" of power relations and thereby continue upholding the maintenance of social order. I would be looking at the household and the school as fields of power.

However, Bourdieu fails to elucidate on the role of agency in his theory of social and cultural reproduction. The way he conceptualises agency is simply in the actions of social agents in carrying out their habitus within these fields of struggle through social practices and norms; seemingly, Bourdieu's concept of agency follows the liberal formulation of agency as the expression of individual autonomy within social structures of power, but does not engage further than the dialectic of reproduction and resistance.

Agency

Here I bring in Saba Mahmood's concept of agency (2006) "not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create." Mahmood problematises the universality of the desire for emancipation from the relations of subordination that underpins the liberal concept of agency, which she explains in her text as "understood as the capacity to realise one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)." The liberal topography of freedom holds individual autonomy as central to the idea of agency, with the "concomitant elements of coercion and consent [being] critical to it". Mahmood acknowledges the genuine emancipation enabled by the liberal discourse of freedom; but her work importantly calls for the decoupling of idea of self-fulfilment from that of autonomous will, and of agency from prescriptive binary terms of resistance and subordination. I too would like to avoid presupposing that the "progress" of the new adult of the bhodrolok towards an expanded imagining of their rights and lives is based on the neoliberal goal of being an Individual—but rather is born from the specific cultural and moral discourse that the agent lives in.

Agency as a capacity for action that are made possible by the relations of subordination does not necessarily mean the resignification of hegemonic norms; Mahmood tells us that instead, if we are to understand agency as constructed within historically and culturally specific

relations, both in terms of what kind of social change is possible and how the social change is incurred, the meaning of agency must come from an analysis of the particular "modes of being, responsibility and effectivity" (p. 42). If an individual's subjectivity is formed within particular conditions and relations, then their agency can only be understood from within that discourse, so that agency can be understood as a capacity not only for acts that resist norms but also "the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms." This understanding of agency will help my thesis specifically in how new adults from bhodro poribar (trans. households) rearticulate the sexual norms and practices inculcated from their habitus to better fit their own positionality—leading to a slow but sure social transformation of the bhodrolok identity.

Gender

Finally, we come to locating the role of gender and family in this theoretical framework. Skeggs (2005) finds the explanatory power of Bourdieu to be in his metaphorical model of social space in which social agents "embody and carry the volumes and compositions of different capitals" and which allows social agents different types of values and mobility. The internalisation of habitus begins with the early socialization that occurs within the family: therefore, family is the central site for normalization and naturalization. I follow Bourdieu in seeing family as a field in which normativity or the ability to constitute oneself as the natural dominant in a social order is capital, and also "a form of symbolic capital that represents accumulated privilege in other fields" (p. 22). Access to this "normalcy" capital is gendered.

I must pause briefly here to mention more specifically how habitus becomes embodied practice.

> The body experienced is always a social body made up of meanings and values, gestures, postures, physical bearing, speech and language. It is through the body that the child learns intimately to experience wider structural features, which are never *just* an experience of the structural but always entwined with the child's physical and sexual presence, with its bodily

> relation to others. This is a dialectical process involving objectification in which some features become objectified over time and form the habitus. (Skeggs, 2005, p. 21)

For Bourdieu, embodied gender dialectic takes place in stringent hierarchies of difference. Social identity is inextricably linked to sexual/gender identity, shaped through early experiences of social and gender roles in the family. Bourdieu sees gender as hidden beneath structural categories (occupations, art, types of education) which leads to the misrecognition of gender—i.e. the naturalisation of gender coding.

But Skeggs takes that further and argues that gender can be a form of cultural capital, if it is symbolically legitimised (in the case of the bhodrolok, legitimised by bhodrota). So gender can be "a range of things; it can be a resource, a form of regulation, an embodied disposition and/or a symbolically legitimate form of cultural capital."

Bourdieu's conceptualisation of gender is heteronormative by definition. For my work, this will not prove to be a limitation as heteronormativity is one of the primary ways the bhodrolok maintain their symbolic capital. To quickly define the heteronormative perspective: it is the belief in the gender binary of two distinct and complementary categories of male and female; that sexual and marital relations are 'normal' only between people of these "opposite sexes"; and that gender roles have certain 'natural roles' and the (hetero)sexuality of the sexes constitute part of them.

Heteronormativity constitutes the discourses, practices, and institutions that legitimise and privilege heterosexuality as fundamental and "normal" within society (Siddiqi, 2009). "The concept naturalises and valorises the patriarchal monogamous marriage as the fundamental core through which the family, community and nation are constituted" (p. 58) and accordingly, marriage normativity is baked into heteronormative hegemony.

Chapter Two

Contextual background

Adolescence is an important transitional time period in which the formation of identity proper begins, amidst social changes and expectations in a young human's role and responsibilities in society. But here, in a culture that places limited autonomy in the hands of adolescents, access to knowledge and conversation vital for the growth of an adolescent's sexual selfhood and understanding is held in a chokehold of perceived cultural propriety, ignoring real and sustained harms to our society.

Like much of Bangladesh's social welfare systems and civic structures, sex education in this conservative Muslim country is intrinsically tied up with the development sector. Sexual healthcare and education are provided by the government and non-governmental bodies in concert, but the scope of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) programmes continues to be limited. Most existing programmes in Bangladesh focus their efforts on rural lower socioeconomic demographics; most were also created out of the need to address gender inequality of women, particularly to address female illiteracy and maternal mortality (Khan, 2015). Though the 2017 Child Marriage Restraint Act updated the age of marriage for women to 18 years and men to 21 years, the existence of the 'special provision' allows indiscriminate marriage of minors, provides no age of consent, nor any legal and social recourses for victims. Seemingly updated in paper only, the law and its lax enforcement merely reflect the values of our strict patriarchal culture (Yasmin, 2020).

Adolescent experiences, as a result, are highly gendered when it comes to sexuality. Girls are controlled by expectations and norms around marriageability and childbearing, cultural notions of virginity and social purity (the company they keep) shaping their sexual selves to be repressed, unexamined and even feared. Boys are socialized to understand their sexuality in

terms of consumption and expressions of male-centred pleasure, cushioned by a broad social understanding of male sexuality as “inevitable” and “animal”.

The religious and sociocultural norms that perpetuate these gender inequalities carry into young adulthood. Young, unmarried adults in Bangladesh continue to be denied access to even basic information and services on sexual and reproductive health. This stigma informs and shapes behaviours around sexuality, creating a societal silence and discomfort, even among adults. This leads to the perpetuation of a vicious cycle where adolescents demonstrate limited or improper understanding of sexual and reproductive health and rights due to a lack of information from parents and school teachers.

(I want to point out, however, that this stigma is not unique to the country or culture. Globally, providing access to SRH information and services to adolescents has been affected by cultural bias and stigma. This thesis seeks to contextualize the taboo to our society, but does not claim or state that it is uniquely perpetuated here.)

SRH programmes

Sexual and reproductive health programmes in Bangladesh are generally aimed at adolescents (10- to 19-year-olds, though some programmes include youth up to 24). These programmes aim to raise awareness and increase knowledge of SRH among adolescents, and they view the needs of adolescents as distinct from those of adults. Many also seek to improve or provide services for adolescents related to maternal health, STI prevention and care, HIV/AIDS prevention and care, menstrual hygiene and management, and family planning (Khan, 2015) This particularly is what these programmes focus on, with rudimentary sex ed as a secondary component.

The Evidence Project (Ainul et. Al, 2017) identified and assessed 32 existing SRH programmes (primarily aimed at the previously mentioned age group). Of these, 21 were co-ed, 11 were

female-only, and none were male-only. Programmes are also not geographically consistent: the review found that there were 9 or more programmes in Khulna, Sylhet, and Chittagong; 6 or more in Dhaka, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Mymensingh, Bogra, and Rajshahi; and little to no programmes in other districts. The duration of the programmes also varied significantly, with 48% lasting less than three years and 29% lasting less than five. This is a noteworthy problem, as the only effective SRH interventions are long-lasting ones, in terms of impact and also for evidence-gathering for future planning/projects. The review also noted that there were higher concentrations of programmes in rural areas compared to urban, with urban slum areas only having two programmes, SAFE and SHOKHI (SAFE Bangladesh is still active, but SHOKHI, a consortium of four NGOs, completed their programme in 2017).

Many of the NGOs running these programmes are funded by Dutch donors, some directly by the Embassy of the Netherlands. I note this because the sex ed in Bangladesh is based on Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) as formulated and its promotion in Bangladesh is funded by the Dutch government. The politics of the 'universality' of Western-European framework shapes the creation of a middle-class sexuality education, but which are at odds with the existing culture.

The most common models are community-based ("help" centres or clubs for a wide age range that focuses on involving at a community level) and peer educators (similarly aged, older peers provide knowledge to other peers after voluntary training). School outreach is wholly ineffective and difficult to assess for impact: they are generally limited in scope and ineffectively implemented, most of the time only having single sessions. BRAC University's sex education seminar, hosted by James P. Grant School of Public Health, follows the outreach model, providing a single seminar during the semester on the residential campus.

The school-based model builds the programme into students' schedules as a class/course and are generally held on school campuses. The Evidence Project found only five programmes, in the whole country, to follow this model. KOTHA, founded after the publication of this report, is another school-based programme but one that specifically targets the urban middle-class. The advantage of this model is the broader access (more students receive sex ed) and sustained participation (the curriculum is revisited over time like any other course and thus has greater opportunity for lasting impact).

The disadvantages are proved by the low rates of implementation of the model. Because it involves the school management, teachers, the Ministry of Education, the complexity is on a larger scale. And because the model is adolescent-focused, the taboo comes into play: these programmes may face censoring of their curriculum and are barred from providing other adolescent SRH (ASRH) services such as referral to health services, which further limits a positive outcome. The children cannot be learning about sex!

In the programmes where school teachers are trained, their personal discomfort and bias influences their delivery of the SRH curriculum. Even when ASRH content is mandated in schools by the government, students are requested to "read these chapters on their own" because of "teachers' reluctance to teach these topics in the classroom" (Ainul et. al, 2017).

Sexuality education covered by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) is included in the Physical Education & Health section. The topics available are puberty, HIV/AIDS, child marriage, pregnancy, gender-based violence, and menstruation. However, delivery of the topics differs from school to school and, again, depends on the biases of school faculty and administration. For example, discussion on sexual harassment does not address the causes or social context, but instead reinforces gender norms by stressing 'girls dressing appropriately'. Furthermore, the varying of information from school to school leads to

adolescents mistrusting the reliability of the information received in the textbooks (Sabina, 2016). This shows how deep-rooted the taboo is and that sex education is not only an adolescent issue. Community mobilization is an SRH strategy that targets that and aims to sensitize gatekeepers and leaders—i.e., parents, teachers, religious leaders, community leaders—on ASRH topics and their importance, to gain more understanding and acceptance for adolescent-aimed programmes. However, these tactics often exclude the adolescents themselves and do not involve them or their perspective in decision-making. More recently, there has been a shift, initiated by organisations as Unite for Body Rights Alliance and Kotha.

This demonstrates that access to information is important to change minds and norms, but only effective in conjunction with the availability of safe spaces to discuss and explore sexual matters healthily. Sex education needs to be a cultural movement in Bangladesh.

Sex education in the internet age

The primary "source" of information about sex in Bangladesh is oftentimes pornography and the internet, though access here is also gendered. My interviews reflected this as well: most young people tend to encounter the topic of sex through their friends and cousins, who in turn get their "facts" from pornography.

This non-access to legitimate information has been the first barrier identified by NGOs working to offer sex education to Bangladeshi youth. With the high penetration of mobile technology in Bangladesh and growing usage by young people, information and communications technology (ICT) is becoming more prevalent and is increasingly used as a conduit for reaching adolescents. BALIKA, Generation breakthrough, UBR, and Tarar Mela and SRHR-E have all employed ICT to reach adolescents with ASRH information. Generation Breakthrough engages a youth audience in a range of social and health related topics through a weekly radio show 'Dosh Unisher Mor,' which takes adolescents' comments and questions via SMS. SHRH–E,

UBR, and Tarar Mela all use toll free mobile phone services to provide ASRH information to adolescents through tele-counselling. The digital Q&A and forum service Maya Apa is also a popular source for sex education, being accessible and anonymous.

For adolescents who face active gatekeeping of information about sex, the internet offers the advantage of easy, anonymity, and informality. Among the urban middle-class, where internet is easily accessible for the most part, adolescents can get their information from social media. Exposure to international media about sexuality (TV shows, music, books) as well as internet culture itself, which inculcates very neoliberal performances of sexuality and gender identity, means most middle-class youth gain a liberal understanding of sexuality through their virtual environ. Additionally, access to the internet means most middle-class teenagers have online lives. Many conduct their romantic and sexual relationships over social media. However, cyber harassment remains a strong barrier to safe discussions on these online platforms.

With so much bombarding of images of sexual freedom and rights that does not necessarily match the lived experience of being in Bangladeshi society, adolescents and then young adults continue in a fraught existence without the tools or space to deal with gender or sexuality issues. With such little refuge to safely discuss and learn about such an important aspect of life, is it any surprise that young people harbour confusion and anxiety about gender and sexuality?

Chapter Three

The Bhodrolok (literal translation ‘gentlemen’) is the Bengali name for the hegemonic cultural identity of the Bengali bourgeois. This identity came from a progressive, nationalist class of the ‘indigenous’ population in Colonial India, a class of somewhat economically mobile middle-class that positioned themselves culturally closer to the British by putting their children in British schools, emulating concepts of “civility” and refinement through behaviour, dress codes, politics. In its post-colonial iteration, transnationalism and the neoliberal economy has deeply affected both economic and lifestyle choices of the middle-class.

The contemporary bhodrolok is a self-identified cultural identity defined more by their self-perceived ‘civilised’ manners and morals, carried by the individual bhodrolok as part of family legacy. This self-identification also juxtaposes the bhodrolok against the two “Other” classes, the elite and the working class; therefore, its middle-classness is integral to the bhodrolok identity, but there is no delineation of what middle-class means economically. Instead, the economic aspect comes into focus with their neoliberal aspirations (rather than their income bracket), i.e. “good education” (higher education) and “good jobs” (white collar careers). The bhodro life trajectory holds these as inevitabilities, followed by marriage and procreation, “shongshar” (trans. household).

The social performance of bhodrolok are defined by markers of dress code, associations, religiosity, education and are judged by the middle-class framework of morality and propriety—“bhodrota”. Their class identity is a social construction built upon accumulated cultural capital but which is ultimately always in danger of delegitimization if their symbolic capital, i.e. their bhodrota, fails to be reproduced.

Bhodrota, trans. respectability

A direct translation of the Bangla word means ‘manners’, but like most Bangla words, the word carries a variety of nuances. Bhodrota encapsulates modesty, civility, propriety; it denotes “good breeding”. For my work, I conceptualise bhodrota as the cultural capital of respectability, which includes the moral values of modesty and propriety as held by the bhodrolok. Bhodrota is also the embodied practices used to regulate and reproduce its cultural capital. Specifically, bhodrota is accumulated through the expressions of sexuality, gender norms and relations. Bhodrota is actively legitimised through the language of normativity, and is the symbolic capital that assures the hegemony of the bhodrolok. Respectability has always been a discourse to differentiate between the middle and working classes (Skeggs, 2005).

The life trajectory of the bhodrolok is in pursuit of reproducing this cultural capital: first by getting a “good education”, then by beginning a white-collar career, and finally by entering a marriage to someone of another bhodro poribar. We see in their aspirations how their class identity remains trapped in the colonial (and now post-colonial) discourse of tradition and modernity. With globalisation, this discourse came to include the neoliberal subject and the invasive presence of media. Bhodrota, then, encapsulates both the pursuit of modernity and the maintenance of traditional values that gives them their “Bengaliness”. This “Bengaliness” is constantly conceptualised and practiced in negotiation with the matrix of culture, religion, and modernity. Women, as always, hold a complex position in this class formation, simultaneously guardians of tradition and bearers of modernity. These aspirational values become embodied practice and then dispositions within the household, where gender and sexuality norms and practices are given meaning.

The making of bhodrota

Shuchi Karim’s (2012) work *Living Sexualities: Negotiating Heteronormativity in Middle-class Bangladesh* explores how the bhodrolok class identity is maintained and reproduced

through the sexual practices/norms formulated within the heteropatriarchal, marriage-normative structures. Her work comes to the conclusion that the sexual lives, subjectivities, and norms of men and women from bhodro bari (trans. proper households) are reformulated and negotiated constantly in the ambiguities created within the contradictory nature of said structures (of normativity).

There are two concepts central to Karim's critique and formulation of heteronormativity: homosociality and marriage normativity (p. 89). As she summarises, "…heteronormativity is established, instilled and enforced on its members through the concepts of privacy, homosociality and heterosexualization, and, above all else, marriage normativity" (p. 83). Access to adulthood and the entitlements that come exclusively with that in Bangladeshi society, like agency, respect and privacy, is only available through (heterosexual) marriage.

The social restriction of children in Bangladeshi society is inherently tied to the bhodrolok's sensibilities of heteronormativity and sexual morality. The rights of children in Bangladesh are close to non-existent: they are not conceptualised as agentic beings, but rather carriers of a family's cultural capital. Bhodro bari'r children are expected to remain 'innocent' and under their parents' control for as long as possible—meaning, until marriage, regardless of age. Marriage, then, automatically grants children adulthood. The household is thus an arena of struggle where cultural competence of bhodrota provides symbolic power, wielded differently by the hierarchies of age.

Heteronormativity and marriage normativity

In middle-class consciousness, shongshar (trans. household) means a home life built through marriage between a man and woman (Karim, 2012). Gender roles within the shongshar are fixed: men shongshar chalae (trans. runs the household) and women shongshar kore (trans. perform the household). This formulation of the household came to be in the early 20th century, when, within

the discourse of nationalism, reformism, tradition and modernity, the need for a 'respectable middle-class' arose in opposition to the 'immoral feudal elite': sexuality norms and attitudes became attached to heterosexual marriage, which was prescribed as the only moral site for sexual expression (Ahmed and Chowdhury, 2000, as cited in Karim, 2012). Thus, tight control over sexuality became the "defining characteristic of middle-class consciousness" (ibid).

But this formulation is also tied up with the neoliberal female subject. Bhodromohila are economic participants, getting higher education, holding careers, and living urbanized "progressive" lives. For all three of my female respondents, their parents wanted them to "get established" as a primary goal—which meant holding a bachelor degree and finding employment (though not necessarily being financially independent). Lamia, 21, moved away from family (in Chittagong) to attend university in Dhaka while living in a female hostel; her mother planned on sending both her younger sisters to follow. However, marriage is still considered a second priority, regardless of gender; the only difference being in the timing and levels of familial pressure.

Two male respondents spoke of marital pressures as a hypothetical concept. Sadman, 21, said his parents want him to be married and have a family as a general rule for happiness. His experiences with his girlfriend made him aware that marriage is a more immediate reality. He believed that the parental worry to marry off daughters has more to do with financial security; he did not link it to sexuality. Shomapto, 20, was the only male respondent who felt a sense of marital pressure. He identified as asexual, but still exploring his sexuality in terms of romantic preference, i.e. whether he wants to end up with a life partner at all. His recent candour about not wanting to marry made his mother, in turn, increase the marital pressure.

The others explained the pressure as a consequence of religious conservativeness: marriage is farz (religious duty) and an inevitability. Ifar, 21, explained parental fears to be about social

capital: “People will say bad things about [unmarried children], will gossip that they had a bad relationship, or that there’s some problem with them. In all these scenarios, it diminishes their societal respect […] It’s just normal, like eating rice.”

All of the respondents were aware that it was an expectation of their parents for them to end up with people from a bhodro bari. Sabrin, 20, told me her parents are okay with love marriages, “if my partner’s family background is decent, from a good educational institute.” Bhodrota is cultural capital, then, that increases and decreases a family’s social capital—the romantic lives of the children of bhodro poribar remain under parental scrutiny so that they maintain heteronormative and marriage normative trajectories, and any deviance is seen as a mistake needing correction.

For my female respondents, for whom the reality of inevitable marriage was ever-present, the negotiations they made to keep the pressure at bay varied depending on their own level of cultural competence. The more bhodro lives they lead, the more negotiating power they had; but relatedly, the more confidence they showed in their economical pursuits (doing well in school, planning careers), the more they challenged the authority of their parents’ expectations. The youngest sister of three, Sabrin found it difficult to contend with her mother’s extremely conservative views and buckled against their rules—coming home late at night, being outspoken and ‘brazen’—but it is also the fact that she challenged them and still inhabited her bhodro reputation through modest dress code and social associations that let her get away with it. She said, “They think the things that made them happy would make us happy as well. But they don’t consider that maybe we want different things.”

The female respondents had a very structural awareness of their parents’ biases, specifically their mothers. ‘They don’t know any better’—they saw their parents’ attachment to traditional values as unquestioning, as a result of social conditioning, and therefore *worth* questioning.

Lamia said, “I’ve tried to push Ammu to talk about the real reasons but she never says it. She’s always, of course people have to get married. I would say, Why do they have to get married? She will never say it outright but… it’s a huge part of sexuality. It’s about sex and I know now, as an adult, how important that is.”

Sexuality and homosociality

As with heterosexual marriage normativity, homosociality is a part of the gender training in the middle-class household, but each means different practices depending on gender. Karim quoting Connell (1987) and Bird (1996) puts it cleanly,

> Homosociality is centred around a hegemonic ‘masculinity’ and “the maintenance of practices that institutionalize men’s dominance over women and is constructed in relation to women and to subordinate masculinities” shaping the overall framework of gender relations. It also refers to a generic understanding of the relations as non-sexual while ‘it promotes clear distinctions between women and men through segregation in social institutions; and also promotes clear distinctions between hegemonic masculinities and non-hegemonic masculinities by the segregation of social groups’ (p. 93).

As a norm, homosociality provides boys with more privileges in navigating their sexual subjectivities, queer or straight. Homosociality for girls is a more direct form of control: to restrict their knowledge of sex or sexualities, to monitor the spaces and associations they have access to, by minimising contact with the opposite sex. Girls are sexualised and seen as inherently meant for sexualisation and so the effort to keep them the asexual child results in stronger forms of control/discipline. Simultaneously, boys are seen as naturally sexually curious, but does not present direct threat to their cultural capital of bhodrota while they are still children. “The gender discrimination between daughters and sons regarding space, privacy and freedom of choice is stark” (Karim, 2012).

Lamia saw this reality the most with her gender non-conforming sister. “Her thing was, all these natural things that her body was supposed to go through, they were obstacles for her. She can’t play because of this. Actually, her [struggle] affected me more than my own. In my case, I haven’t seen that much change. […] But with her, when I saw how much she was hating herself for being herself… Being a girl was this [bad] thing to her.” From her own experience, she spoke of how her aunts would criticise her mother for allowing her to wear shirts and pants, and hangout with boys—they would discourage their daughters from socialising with her.

Dress code, sexuality and homosociality are all linked for women. Lamia’s mother told her she would grow an internal sense of modesty. “I used to ask like, are you saying if I wear my orna this way and that I will be more comfortable? Because she used to say that occasionally. And I realized that I didn’t feel comfortable. […] I don’t like being looked at. One thing she didn’t mention was that that [the looking] is not my fault.” This feeling of injustice was reiterated by the other girls too. Maiesha, 20, said she dressed differently in Bangladesh in comparison to outside without prompting from her parents; but she also resented if her parents ever *did* comment on her dress. Bhodrota becomes an embodied practice to counter sexual attitudes of the ‘obhodro’—but in not practicing bhodrota, one becomes in danger of also becoming obhodro and then ‘deserving’ offensive behaviour.

Sadman recognised the pragmatic need of women for modest attire to avoid being harassed in Bangladesh. In reference to men who sexually harass, he said, “I mostly believe that the person has to have… It’s more like they have a lacking of moral education […] from their family.” This is poignant because Sadman located his sense of morality in his religiosity, instilled in him by his grandparents.

Religiosity

The initial conceptualisation of my thesis assumed very important roles for religion and education, considering that the sexuality taboo takes literal shape in schools, as censorship, and is often defended with religious reasoning. I was forced to reframe, however, while doing my fieldwork, when I realised that although religion came up frequently, it didn't hold a huge part in the sexual subjectivities of my respondents. Religion informed their understanding of their culture's traditional values and even their understanding of bhodrota, but it did not play a conflictual role in their sexual subjectivities.

However, their relationships to religiosity and religion affected their trust in sources and figures of authority—and in this way, impacted the shaping of their sexual norms. Lamia struggled with her faith; she lived with the guilt of not living religiously, but simultaneously mistrusted the lessons of her religious education. She also found no reason in the moralising she was subjected to: "Like you know how there's propaganda, to sell something. Here [in heaven] there are this and that, there are women untouched, gardens, etc. This kind of stuff never made sense to me even before. I used to think, like, where does niyat (intention) come from? If you're just trying to get something, then what is the difference between this world and that world? How does inner peace come through this?" Her inner faith made her mistrust the authority of adults and their religious values.

Sabrin and Shomapto, both agnostic, took direct issue with the teachings of their religion. Shomapto spent his time reading various holy texts and came to the conclusion that religion was a hoax, even if spirituality might not be: "It made sense to me that all these are kind of a delusion because I was done with reading Bible, Gita, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Veda, everything. And nothing made sense to me." Sabrin was offended by the moralising of gender roles in religion: "Obviously [my hujurni] was portraying women as submissive. Girls are

supposed to do this, do that. I was feeling then, religion cannot divide the roles of boys and girls in such a manner that girls have to do exactly this and boys have to do exactly that."

Sadman was the only believing and practicing Muslim among my respondents. He studied the Quran as religious practice, but most of his internal faith was informed by his grandparents' moral teachings. Very few of his worldviews did he interrogate; and he genuinely believed in the moral order he grew up in.

The making of unspeakable sexuality

The school is also a field of struggle in which the principles of bhodrota, and bhodrota as cultural capital, define the "rules of the game". Students, parents, teachers, administrative staff, and even the support staff—all these various members of the school community are social agents that participate in the constant negotiations of reproducing and reinscribing bhodrota. It might seem that the students, as children in a community controlled by adults, are the subordinate agents that are socialised with the hegemonic values of the dominant agents; but I will show through my data that when it comes to sexual norms and practices, students are far from being helpless in the discourse of bhodrota.

One of Bourdieu's main theories is about how schools performs the active "legitimation of family acquired habitus"; however, Bourdieu specifically sees schools as the central site for habitus reproduction (Nash, 1990). For young children, the household and the school are certainly the primary sites in which their habitus is formed. But as they grow into adolescence, they engage and challenge the rules of the social structure and, often, rearticulate cultural dispositions in their own social world. To understand this, we must learn to think of the school not as a holistic field, but a field made of separate but interconnected social worlds, the boundaries of which are defined by relations of authority.

Authority and legitimacy

What is almost universal, from both my secondary research and fieldwork, was the insistent discomfort of middle-class adults to verbalise sexuality in front of or around younger people—not even necessarily adolescents. Karim (2012) points out that the language around sexuality in Bangla is considered 'vulgar': she compiles a short appendix of sexual terminology to showcase how sexuality is discussed mostly in 'crude slang'. Language is an essential part of modesty for bhodrolok; all of my respondents confirmed their parents don't tolerate swearing or 'vulgar language', even in emotional moments. Teachers in SRHR programmes trained to deliver comprehensive sexuality education cannot cross this barrier due to the lack of 'proper' language of sexuality. Roodsaz (2018) links that to respectability as well: "Because they are not part of a cultural setting in which social capital can be gained through disciplinary regimes of sexuality, rural people are less concerned with the appropriation of a 'proper' language of sexuality." We can see, then, that for the bhodrolok, 'proper sexuality' is an unspeakable one—born out of religious respectability, in which sexuality is natural, but shameful. For the Bangladeshi middle-class, "sexuality is perceived and practiced within a tension of the traditional perception of guilt and shame, and the urban-modernized-global Western cultural influences of desires" (Karim, 2012, p. 57).

Children learn this unspeakability as a part of the habitus in the household and it becomes a transposable cultural disposition that they bring into school, where the pattern of shaming continues. Lamia said, "[The school] would be very passive aggressive. [...] They would not explain explicitly," and Shomapto reiterated that rules about sexual practices were always "unsaid. It's like we all knew that it's wrong."

There is no such thing as formal sex education in middle-class schools. So omnipresent is the fear of adolescent sexuality that schools have been known to remove chapters on reproduction (human and plant) from biology books, until it was absolutely unavoidable, i.e. in their final

year before board exams, students are finally allowed to study the topic. The discomfort of adults in school communities can range from awkwardness to abusive policing. Lamia relates an incident in high school where students brought in cake to celebrate a birthday and it evolved into a food fight. The teachers' response to it was unnecessarily sexualising as, in Lamia's words, there were guys present. Otherwise "the most they would say was that we yelled a lot, you created nuisance, that. But since there were guys, it was more vulgar."

So heterosociality is sexualised in adolescence. Moreover, the fact that children now have greater access to internet and an invasive media environment that constantly projects sexual imagery and information has increased this sexualisation of heterosociality: even pre-teen students are policed stringently and punished for any display of affection. Instead of offering *guidance,* the solution seems to always be more discipline. And although young people are under constant pressure to be 'innocent' and asexual by adults, their discourses of discipline are always hypersexualised.

The combination of these attitudes and the complete lack of information about sexuality result in adolescents assuming ignorance on the part of adults, as a consequence of their 'backward' attachment to traditional values. As custodians of tradition and as authority figures who consistently display a lack of knowledge *and* confidence about what people consider a 'normal part of life', it is their very role of authority that delegitimises them as reliable sources when it comes to sexuality. Maiesha said, "People who had questions wouldn't ask the teachers. Because everyone already knew. Like, you know, how I got to know gradually on my own? Everyone kinda did that too."

Homosociality as spaces for reauthorisation

Sexuality and its meanings are embedded in historically and culturally specific contexts, and therefore, it must be understood relationally (Siddiqi, 2009). Children may learn unspeakable

sexuality as a part of their habitus, but it is not an immutable disposition. Certainly, the gendered worlds children live in then result in varying introductions to sexuality. Sexual subjectivities differ so greatly across genders because of the homosocial spaces that children's sexual norms and experiences take place in.

My fieldwork demonstrated that there is seemingly no primary source of information when it comes to sexuality and sex. As Sabrin put it succinctly, "No, I Googled things myself and gathered ideas from people's experiences. That's it." Sexuality is so embedded in every social structure that we inhabit, exposure to it comes automatically, no matter how carefully adults try to keep it hidden through control or censorship. Media plays a huge role: most of the respondents were exposed to implicit sexual knowledge through television, film and social media. If we assume that children will become curious about sexuality regardless of their context, to understand how sexual subjectivity might form we must look at how adolescents negotiate with the cultural disposition of unspeakable sexuality in their homosocial spaces.

All of my respondents, regardless of gender, encountered their first source on sexuality or associated topics in older cousins and friends—older adolescents, not adults. For the male respondents, an older cousin (in Shomapto's case, older brother) took it upon himself to 'educate' his younger sibling about sex—usually through showing them porn and explaining the mechanics of intercourse. They would then talk to the cousin, and friends, about sex-related topics: masturbation and sexual acts for the most part. If confusion persisted, and it did for the most part, they would turn to the search bar and simply Google specific things they wanted to know about. As a result, their knowledge was sporadic and basic at best. Despite this, the male respondents all seem to have a self-assurance about their understandings about sexuality, despite not demonstrating much practical or exact knowledge at all when I questioned them more deeply.

The female respondents had a similar trajectory; they would either encounter the topic at puberty, with their mother awkwardly and shamefully attempting to give them information about their bodies, as in the case of Lamia and her sisters; or they heard about it from friends. Maiesha lived in Singapore in her childhood and her school abroad gave her and her parents a sex ed workshop in third grade; she attributes her nonchalance about sexuality to this early introduction. In contrast, Sabrin was incredibly sheltered throughout her childhood and only encountered sex in college, when her sexually active friends would talk about their experiences. The attitudes in which they encountered the subject deeply affected each of their subjectivities in various ways—where Maiesha found sex or sexuality not particularly something she needs to worry about, trusting that she will know what to do when she needs to, Sabrin telegraphed her sex negativity born out of hearing about the non-consensual experiences of her friends.

In both genders, respondents felt no impulse to go to adult sources for information or guidance. The men felt secure in the knowledge they thought they had; Ifar said, "I never thought [of talking to parents] because I thought that I was getting enough information." While the women actively mistrusted the information the adults offered: Lamia forced her mother to be more thoughtful when she speaks to her and her sisters about sexuality or menstruation; Sabrin felt it was completely unnecessary because, in her words, "because, whatever I may ask her, the answer will always come from a religious perspective or from their perspective, which I don't think is right. That's why I never feel the necessity to ask these things to my parents." The unwillingness to talk about sexuality in pragmatic terms—as all these new adults felt that it was simply a normal pragmatic part of life—made adult authorities ignorant (as in, literally without the knowledge) and unreliable in their eyes.

New adults learn cultural competence as a strategy to negotiate their sexual subjectivities: bhodrota becomes a tool to work around the limitations set on them by figures of authority in their lives. So, the bhodrota they embody are rearticulated depending on their personal contexts

and sexual subjectivities—the bhodrota they carry as cultural disposition is not necessarily one they are reproducing, nor even necessarily one they are challenging.

I would like to point out some commonalities in this shifting of disposition about sexuality, across genders. Firstly, the mother is expected to be the parental figure to deliver cultural and practical knowledge. This is true for the men as well: Ifar's doctor mother gave him SRHR in strictly medical terms; Sadman's mother regularly talks to him about his romantic life.

Secondly, regardless of their sources, the knowledge the new adults have about sexuality comes with various cultural baggage—and this cultural baggage is used to fill the large gaps in their actual knowledge, as they form self-narratives about sex and sexuality. This in itself is not inherently a bad thing—sexuality is not to be prescribed after all—except that thirdly, they also don't engage in any critical dialogue about consent, boundaries, rape and harassment—all very important realities for sexually active new adults. I think that this combination of sustained vagueness, fragile certainty in their self-formed ideas, and the unspeakability of sexuality makes the actual practice of sex and navigating romantic lives an endeavour filled with ambiguity new adults feel ill-equipped to deal with. Because despite all that they know, they continue to demonstrate a longing for more clarity and guidance.

Chapter Four

Karim (2012) illustrates in her chapter 'Making of the Sexual Private: Ambiguities of Family and Household' how sexuality is placed in an extremely fraught, ambiguous and contradictory context in the bhodro poribar:

> What stands out from the narratives as a pressing issue of sexuality placed within households is the middle-class idea of an 'innocent, asexual' youth that seems to be simultaneously idealized as a concept or belief but that is also problematic as an ever-present threat to the otherwise moral-stable gender-age hierarchy of the family-household unit. (p. 91)

The belief in the "asexual child" who must remain 'pure' and 'safe' from the treacheries of the adult (read: sexual) world lies at the core of the middle-class anxieties that construct young people's ideal sexualities and genders. What this also means is that the "danger" is conceptualised to be inherent to the public world—i.e. ghor'er baire (trans. outside of the home)—but also inherent to the "asexual child's" 'pure' body. These contradictions blur the possibilities of danger inside the family or household… and also leads to the protection of abusers at the cost of their child victims. The consequences of this ambiguity, however, is crucially that sexuality of the youth is thus developed through both exploration and abuse—and that the line between exploration and sexual abuse is blurred.

Asexual child versus sexual married adult

The cultural shift from traditional values about marriage towards more modern values has been slowly transforming middle-class expectations since the aughts; younger generations of parents, i.e. those married in the 80s or 90s, are more open to the idea of love marriages for their children. That being said, the expectation has not necessarily translated to more autonomy for children, but rather more burden—there seems to be a parental expectation that children will self-educate on matters of love lives and sexual norms, all the while maintaining their

bhodrota capital. Maiesha complained about their unfair expectations, “My parents had this rule that I can’t kiss… They were like, ‘Don’t date until you are 17.’ And I followed it [...but now] they were talking about life partners and my phuppa comes up to me and goes like, ‘If you don’t find a guy you like by the time you graduate!’ So I honestly have no idea what they want. And my parents were onboard with that. They were like, ‘No, you gotta find a guy you like and you wanna marry by the time you graduate.’ So I was like, okay, what do you want from me?”

I would like to pause here to explain the importance of the narrow category of my respondents: I interviewed men and women who had just graduated high school, in their first year of university, and were either single or in their first relationship. Only one of my respondents was sexually active at the time of my interviews, the rest were self-described virgins. My respondents’ specific character profile offered me the particular lens of what new adults who *only* had the exposure to sexuality education from their haphazard sources and any formational sexual experiences in their childhood to form their sexual subjectivities, not active sex lives. This was particularly illuminating because, for the most part, the respondents understood sex and sexual norms in vague, ambiguous terms, with very little practical knowledge and expectations. Their sexual norms and expectations were entirely formed within the cultural scripts they inherited—and were highly gendered as well.

I observed, also, a gradual change in countenance during the interview section that tackled sexual realities/practices. When the questions enquired into their opinions and beliefs about sexual norms, consent, boundaries, etc., the respondents spoke assuredly, with an air of “this is common sense” pervading their discussion. When I probed about their actual knowledge about safe sexual practices, sex acts, sexual communications, and contraception, their attitude changed slowly towards confusion and uncertainty. They would finish their answers with questions to me, who they perceived as more knowledgeable as the researcher (and the older/senior student).

Lamia: Contraceptives, condoms, um… I was actually… I'm kind of confused about this. Do girls wear condoms?

Interviewer: Do you and your friends know what safe sex is?
Sadman: I would like to think so.
Interviewer: So what is it?
Sadman: Using… contraceptives?

Interviewer: Do you know details like what makes [contraception] risky? The best place to use it? That sort of thing.
Maiesha: No… I should though, right?

Shomapto: Safe sex?
Interviewer: Yeah.
Shomapto: With a condom, maybe?

Parents maintain the boundaries of their children's lives to produce this ignorant (i.e. 'innocent') 'asexual child', through regulating their homosocial spaces and restricting their mobility. The salient point here is the importance of spaces and the relationships of agents within them. Karim (2012, p. 100) says: "Places, spaces and an individual's experience in those locations shape the way h/she perceives him/herself sexually and interprets and rationalizes his/her position in it, based on the norms and rules of those locations." The subject of asexual space for keeping the 'asexual youth safe' is salient; it is also gendered. Sons are automatically less sheltered than daughters, even in conservative houses. The social order of gender impacts their sexual subjectivity as girls are consistently made more aware of the boundaries and dangers of their sexuality, despite not being acknowledged as a sexual agent. Sadman noted this discrepancy, "They don't even talk about, you should behave like this with girls, they don't talk about anything like that. I think girls are more educated about this kind of stuff. Like they are told more about this than boys. But I don't know why that kind of boundary exists."

Parents view their sons' (hetero)sexuality as "natural"—a trait of their masculinity. Therefore, when sons gain more mobility in their adulthood, they don't face the same level of censure as

daughters, because their sexuality is expected to be more 'active'. Instead, they locate the danger in women's inability to fall prey to masculine sexual urges. When Ifar joined university, his college-educated mother advised him that "mohila'ra kharap" (all women are bad) and to stay away from them, instead of a dating ban like Maiesha's parents gave her.

Inevitably, this leads to men's sexual subjectivities resting on the understanding of their sexuality as 'uncontrollable' and 'dangerous'. Lamia's ex would frequently tell her to "not worry, she is 'safe' from him" as a joke; Sabrin's ex felt that *his* sexual frustration was *her* responsibility. In contrast, women's sexual subjectivities would form around resisting negative sexual experiences and navigating their social relations with male friends and companions carefully. All three female respondents spoke about the importance of body language—and the failure of men to either recognise or respect body cues. Lamia said, "The matter of comfort is actually important, consent is important. [...] And whenever it does, one like, either you understand that you are making that person uncomfortable or the other person also has to be knowledgeable and have to let you know that [they] are feeling uncomfortable." She added, "There's one thing, we have this thing culturally where guys are like this, guys will do this. Like, yeah, men lose control because they are sexually frustrated. I mean, man, if you're sexually frustrated, I'm also sexually frustrated." Lamia and Sabrin frequently found that men they interacted with romantically would not be good at sexual communication, neither being able to articulate themselves nor provide the space to their partners to point out their inappropriate behaviour. Interestingly, they said their male friends were better at listening to criticism.

As I illustrated in Chapter Three, sexuality education for middle-class teens is sporadic and basic at best. Their information comes from filtered sources, older adolescent siblings with their own misconceptions and cultural beliefs, and the internet and social media. Despite this, there is a sense of confidence in the knowledge they have. Sadman never questioned the validity

of the sources he ‘learned’ from, porn and YouTube videos: “I’ve never thought about it like that. But it’s a general thing. I don’t think people will fake about that.” The pervasiveness of sexuality in media and daily lives creates this idea of “common sense” about sexuality—that this common sense is heteronormative, allosexual and patriarchal is not interrogated. The new adults have this confidence that they will know what to do when the time comes. It is when people are put in active sexual situations that they are suddenly bereft, anxious and lonely, i.e. when their cultural ideas of sexuality does not match their experiences of sexuality.

My two ace-identifying respondents, Ifar and Shomapto, felt their asexuality took place in a vacuum, surrounded as they are by heteronormative allosexual norms—norms they had internalised and reproduce themselves. Ifar was afraid of his asexuality keeping him from having a fulfilling long-term relationship because he expected his inability to have sex like allosexual people to inevitably become a problem; Shomapto had sex out of obligation in a relationship, but did not enjoy it, either physically or emotionally. “I don’t even know what being good at sex means. [...] It’s just that, some use their mouth more and some do not,” he said.

As the only sexually active respondent while being asexual, Shomapto was an interesting case. Sexual norms, for him, were matter-of-fact scripts that he took part in, but did not necessarily understand or care for. He had a greater understanding of the dubiousness of consent in sexual interactions. Where I had to probe the others for their understanding of consent beyond enthusiastic verbal consent, Shomapto noted himself that there is a lot of ambiguity when it comes to sexual communication. Sometimes body language is unclear: he shared an anecdote of a sexual partner crying during sex, and when he stopped, she told him that she was “crying out of pleasure”. Sometimes your partner is not clear: a girl can give verbal consent while projecting non-consent through body language, and the onus would be on her partner to figure out what she means—this follows the patriarchal sexual script that we are taught in our society.

Thus, he echoed the female respondents' want for clearer forms of sexual communication and mutual respect.

What this demonstrates to me is that sheltering of adolescents combined with the expectations of parents for their children to be sexually confident adults 'when the time comes' leads to a dangerous ambiguity and lack of clarity when it comes to sex, sexual practice and behaviour.

Ambiguity, the sexualised household and "endangered capital"

The prerogative of middle-class parents is to shelter their children: not for their own good, but to keep them from being endangered in sexualised spaces, i.e. the outside world. Their response to children experiencing assault is greater forms of control and sheltering. There is a constant conflict between power, agency and sexual subjectivity. Karim (2012) breaks down this concept of a 'safe home':

> Child 'asexuality' versus 'sexualization' of household spaces and its actors brings out the paradoxical nature of a 'safe home' or household which is *a site of unequal power, exploitation, and social control*, and is highly sexualised, both physically and symbolically. Therefore, the lack of safety for children's sexuality is not only due to the lack of physical space, but also due to the opportunity for exploitation to the fact that the concept of 'safety' is obscured within family-household space. […] The family-household is at the same time a private space, culturally 'shielded' from the outside world, and still *open to scrutiny*. (pp. 109-110, emphasis mine)

Each of my female respondents had stories of assault to share, both theirs' and of friends or family. Shomapto was the one male respondent who spoke of a history of experiencing sexual abuse at the hands of multiple household and family members. But the commonality across all the stories was: the family's inability or unwillingness to do anything. Lamia said about her cousin's assault: "And I was very angry about it because she had told her family about it and they didn't do anything. [...] There's no confrontation. Taking steps is beyond them."

Shomapto lived an army kid's life: frequently switching schools as his parent's government job took the family from region to region, the ingrained importance of family ties above all else, and the strict gender performance of masculinity, these shaped his childhood. He experienced sexual molestation at the age of 4, at the hands of male cousins in their teens; this molestation would frequent any time the cousins came over even as they aged. Being young, Shomapto "didn't really have a label to explain to my mom what bad is happening to me. It was just happening and I didn't know what to say. I didn't even know if it was bad or good." What instead took hold was the intense fear of being homosexual and the consequences of that transgression. When he finally confided in his mother, he did so with the wish to see a psychiatrist so that he may be 'fixed'—this became the all-encompassing focus of his family's response too. However, the cousins were never held accountable for molestation; 'til date, Shomapto was forced to go to their houses and treat them like 'brothers'. The fear of being thought to have a gay son if word of the molestation were to spread meant that the family never acknowledged the event beyond trying to 'convert' Shomapto. The scrutiny and sexualisation landed squarely on Shomapto and his 'transgressive homosexuality'.

Sabrin spoke of a repeat offender in her family: a blood-related uncle who first molested her eldest sister and then her middle sister when both of them were 14 years old. "Everyone used to call my eldest sister a whore because this happened to her. That's why my eldest sister has to shift to the USA. It was spread so widely in the family that my eldest sister couldn't face anyone here." The response of the family to the first assault was to shelter Sabrin's eldest sister, curtail her movement until she was old enough to be sent abroad; the assaulter was never charged nor banned from the house. When Sabrin's middle sister aged to 14, she too was assaulted—and her response was informed by the experience of her elder sister. Not only did she initially hide the incident until it began to affect her mental health to a debilitating extent, but even when she disclosed it to her parents, she begged her family members not to say a

word. Her elder sister also advised her "not to share it with anybody because the consequence would be dire and she wouldn't be able to show her face to anybody as everyone will blame my middle sister instead. So maybe that's why nobody knows. It has been kept a secret very strictly." Only after Sabrin and her middle sister frequently demanded that the molester be distanced from their family did the parents comply.

Families protect their reputations, not their children. Moreover, social capital takes precedence: if a bhodro bari'r children gets assaulted, they are no longer 'pure, innocent, asexual' but tainted with sexualisation, endangering the family's cultural capital of bhodrota. Families pivot to maintaining their social image and associations to curtail loss of any further bhodrota, even if the consequence means their children are retraumatised. They continue to locate the threat in the bodies of their 'asexual children', now sexualised and 'awakened' to their active sexuality—control translates to shaping their sexuality towards strict respectable heteronormativity.

"Speakable" sex and the equipment of 'proper' sex language

If we understand agency as Saba Mahmood explains it, as the capacity to act in ways that both resist norms and inhabit them, born from the particular modes of being and relations in which an agent is situated, we move closer to understanding the anxieties and desires of new adults in the bhodrolok ton. Their subjectivities are formed within a cone of silence born from a deep-rooted unease with the idea of sexuality while simultaneously confronted with the modern expectations (of their married 'sexual' agency) and perceptions (from exposure to global allosexual imagery and media) of sexuality as "natural and inevitable". For these new adults, bhodrota is a strategy to navigate the ambiguities of sexualised households and maintain the familial social capital rather than a cultural capital that they think they need the way their parents do; but subsequently, bhodrota is reproduced in their embodied dispositions and keep them locked into their bhodrolok identity, transforming it.

I locate this transformation in their treatment of "speakability". The older generations of bhodrolok treated sexuality as "unspeakable" because of its inherent vulgarity; thereby making it "speakable" would be to challenge their bhodrota and become obhodro. The new generation, however, believe in the "speakability of sex", equipped as they are with English and global terminologies of sex and sexuality. Their formal education in Bangladesh being mostly medical information about the scientific aspect of biological reproduction also distanced them from the idea of sexuality as "vulgar"—because their language for sexual organs and acts were not slang, but from legitimate sources like media and 'science'. Making sex "speakable" is how they *maintain* their bhodrota, differentiating themselves from the clueless, ignorant obhodro who rape and assault with no moral compunction.

Ifar said, "Communication is important. Are you feeling pain, or should I stop? I think asking these things is important. Because most of the time the people are not experts, most of the time. […] Consent is something… it's not naturally understood. I think it needs to be taught." Lamia stressed the importance of TV media in giving her the knowledge and language skills to first recognise assault when it happened to her, and then talk about it, "I was actually telling [my cousin] my experience of sexual assault. Then she was telling me that she might have had similar kinds of experiences. I was like, what do you mean you *might* have had?" Maiesha said, "Consent can, you know, doesn't have to be verbal. But I think it should be verbal. Not just limited to only verbal but verbal consent is very important."

We see again and again their belief in the necessity of sexual communication, their understanding of sexual spaces and practices as inherently confusing and ambiguous, and their insistence that it is the equipment of language that allows them to navigate sex. Their responses regarding their eventual sexual lives implied their anxieties about sex more than direct questions did: all the respondents believed in the power of knowledge and communication in facilitating their sexual lives in healthy ways.

Sexual communication is very contextual and there is a possible lack of clarity in it when sexual partners are not matched in knowledge, maturity, or shared goals. Moreover, the understanding of sexual pleasure and the 'goals' of sex is heteronormative and allosexual. Three of my respondents linked sexual maturity to emotional maturity: Lamia, Sadman and Ifar. Lamia thought emotionally immature people should not be sexually active. She did not believe age necessarily decides that line, but rather knowledge and mutual respect. Ifar feared his inability to have sex to be a hurdle because he believed that "making oneself vulnerable [through having sex] creates another level of connection. I think that's why people want it. That I feel so close to you, I want you to be vulnerable with me; that message they give physically through sex. Sexual pleasure comes from that. It's an emotional thing." For Sadman, romance and sexual pleasure went together, so any small forms of casual physical intimacy undercuts sexual frustration: "I would say what a lot of what people do that is considered inappropriate stems from sexual frustration. And [laughs] all they need is some love and affection." Their fears stemmed not from anxiousness about performance or ignorance of acts, but from anxiousness about the *experience* of sex. And what they felt would be a negative experience is one riddled with obfuscation of feeling and intent, being unable to converse with their partner about how they feel, and feeling lost and bad as a result.

Maiesha described sex as an ongoing conversation and self-education: "I feel it's more about, it's like a two way street, giving and receiving. So, if you do have a partner, I feel like you learn anyway, what works for them. They would learn what works for you." Lamia reiterated that "I don't think it's important to be good at sex [laughs] but I think it's important to be able to discuss if you're good or not." For these new adults, "speakable sexuality" is a necessity and a sign of their maturity as bhodro adults. Their idea of bhodrota precludes "unspeakability" as ignorance and, therefore, a lack of the cultural capital their middle-classness affords them.

Moreover, they locate non-consensual sex as a direct consequence of a lack of these language skills. Sabrin, speaking about her friends' sexual lives, said, "Everyone says that either they were forced, or they gave their consent at first and then regretted it." Lamia expressed the ambiguity of sexual scripts, "At times you feel like you can't differentiate if it is rape or is it just affection…? Is it supposed to be normal, or you're being abnormal? There is a… conflict."

Sadman, in being probed about if he thought men can get raped, expressed his belief in sexual communication: "If the guy is protesting, if he really doesn't want it to happen, I think he should be able to find a way out of the situation. A guy should be able to do that. I know that's probably a bit sexist but um. [...] well, it leads me to believe that deep down he wanted it." His response, unlike the other respondents, excluded the idea of emotional manipulation from the sexual partner—force was integral to his understanding of rape, and in his eyes, force resulted from a lack of proper sexual communication.

There is a desire and a need, then, for "speakable sexuality" in Bangladesh. Adolescents and young adults crave the ability and spaces to articulate and normalise sexuality discourse and actively resent and mistrust the adults who deny them that. They also view their guardians as thrusting the values and expectations of their culture upon them without allowing them the space to negotiate the traditional customs they grew up with. This does not mean that new adults resist or despise tradition and culture; rather they resist the control that excludes them from inhabiting their culture with their own agency.

While my thesis manages to highlight the intrinsic and important role of language in sexuality subjectivity and practices, it is unfortunately beyond its scope to engage with it in a way that does it justice, with an in-depth look at Bangla and English terminologies and the role of media in transforming sexual language. I would like to point out that it is a pressing research concern;

Karim's work is a decade old and her respondents were older, sexually active adults, and yet her thesis *also* highlighted the language aspect.

Chapter Five

In Chapter Two of my thesis, I cover the secondary research I conducted on the existing SRHR programmes in Bangladesh, their various pitfalls, limitations and the insights their evaluation provides. To reiterate the observed common limitations:

(a) programmes are often workshop/outreach-based, which are inconsistent and ineffective;

(b) all the programmes face a level of censorship of the SRH content they attempt to deliver, regardless of the model, as well as receiving pushback from adult community stakeholders if the content is perceived to be too direct (about the practicalities of sex and reproduction);

(c) the programmes often failed to include adolescent perspectives and their needs, as requested by them; and

(d) the lack of access to accurate information led adolescents to seek inconsistent information on the internet, further exposing them to the vulnerabilities inherent in the cyberspace, that of sexual harassment.

Lastly, but not least, there was no SRHR programme for the urban middle-class—the demographic of my thesis study. There is, however, one begun by the organisation KOTHA, launched in a pilot programme in 2018, that has continued its work ‘til date. For my fieldwork, I conducted a key informant interview with Umama Zillur, the founder and director of KOTHA.

KOTHA at School

‘KOTHA at School’ is a school-based primary intervention programme that offers comprehensive sex education to urban middle-class schools, the neglected demographic. KOTHA develops and teaches their own curriculum, unfiltered and uncensored by individual

school administrations. Their classes are integrated within the school curriculum and schedule; for example, if a school has an Ethics class or a free period for extracurricular, KOTHA provides Peer Mentors (i.e. teachers trained by KOTHA in their own curriculum and methodology) to go teach the class according to a schedule, perhaps two days per week. Their programme model is built with one of the goals being delivering consistent and helpful classes, instead of sporadic, inaccessible workshops.

CSE-based curriculum

KOTHA's syllabi covers six topics: Gender, Consent, Sexual Health, Relationships, Bullying and Cyber Harassment, and Bystander Intervention. The curriculum was mostly developed in the early stages by the founder of KOTHA, Umama Zillur. During her research in the early development stages of the pilot programme, she worked with her university Mount Holyoke's Health Education department and the Amherst Center for Women and Community who work in sex-ed in America for high school kids, to develop a Comprehensive Sex Education-based rubric which included the first four topics on the curriculum. Zillur spoke about her earliest goals in formulating a programme was to tackle the problem of gender-based violence and establish systematic change; once she decided her method would be to develop and deliver a sex education programme, her research and mentors at Amherst and Mount Holyoke led her to focus on comprehensive sex education as the base of her syllabi.

Her motivation was deeply rooted in her experiences growing up in Dhaka city: "Hearing about the really unsafe way people were taking part in sexual activities, just around me, either friends, peers, or people I heard about through them." Realising the lack of guidance in dealing with these inevitable situations that adolescents find themselves made Zillur determined to focus KOTHA's curriculum on practical tools and discursive spaces within which students can actively engage with the concepts of gender and sexuality, and related topics. The last two subjects, 'Bullying and Cyber Harassment' and 'Bystander Intervention', were added after

focus groups with the target demographic, schoolteachers of the demographic, and team member feedback. Zillur aimed to have a pragmatic curriculum that stood out from what existed already, "Talking about bullying, cyber harassment, relationships, bystander effect, all under the same umbrella program? That approach, I've seen, is not really widespread. It's mostly either specifically the biological aspects of it or standalone awareness programs on menstruation, or how to combat cyber harassment."

The curriculum attempts to—and so far, seemingly succeeds in—addressing (c) and (d) of the common limitations mentioned earlier: it provides practical application-based learning based on empirical evidence on the social and cultural lives of middle-class youth. 'Consent', 'Relationships', and 'Bystander Intervention' are subjects developed to give teenagers tools and the language to navigate the social realities of their sexual lives. 'Bullying and Cyber Harassment' is developed to address the digital landscape of today's world, and the rape culture in Bangladesh that results in online gender-based violence so frequently. The subjects are arranged so that the course/class undergoes a natural progression from topic to topic over the course of the semester. Moreover, the curriculum is built around interactive learning and the creation of a safe discursive space that allows for student input and feedback; KOTHA, as a result, encourages students to have casual and frank conversations about these sensitive intimate topics. This, alone, makes KOTHA's work invaluable in our society.

Peer education model

KOTHA's "peer mentors" are generally of a young age range (roughly 19-26 years), which itself is a unique feature of KOTHA's work, as most sex-ed programmes assign teachers much older than their students. The organisation trains young adult volunteers rigorously in a six-week course covering the curriculum, gender and sexuality sensitivity, an introduction to feminism and feminist education, and vets them before allowing them to work as Peer Mentors. This they refer to as their Peer Education Model (still under development); an effort to address

common limitation (b): in KOTHA's words, the model is used to "break the communication barriers between student and traditional teachers, ensuring a safe space and creates greater engagement from students" (kotha.org).

When talking to Zillur about the reception of the students to the peer education model, she said: "[We got] a lot of disclaimers like, they'll laugh and stuff, or won't talk; but it's not true at all. It's definitely up to the trainers or facilitators to set the tone, that you know, talking about sex and what I'm saying, sexual activities and relationships, I don't have a problem saying it in front of you guys and you should also just immediately feel comfortable. So I think that plays a big role in setting the atmosphere for talking about these kinds of things, which I think previously and in general what's done, is… It's presented by traditional teachers. So it's automatically just more awkward and leaves more scope for people to giggle and laugh and not really engage with the content. So none of that was there at all. And people had a lot to talk about. Whether it was about masturbation or menstruation or consent or… people just had a lot to say." The effectiveness of this model is displayed in the increased engagement of students with the course material, but the effectiveness of the course itself is still difficult to evaluate. "We do a very basic level pre- and post-course survey, but because people start off with not having any formal sex education, it's very difficult to show… It's very difficult to assess how their level of understanding has changed. It's mostly 'I didn't have the information and now I have the information'." With the understanding that the work is beginning from ground zero, the goal is to eventually include a rigorous evaluation process within the model that can then incorporate feedback and evolve the syllabi as time grows.

This freedom to share, on the part of the students, of course also depended on the level of surveillance the classes would be in. During the pilot programme, Zillur was able to use her connections at her alma mater Sunbeams School to establish that no teachers need to be present

during the classes. Moving forward, the negotiations to establish this in other schools depended on each school and their administration's attitude towards KOTHA and their work.

Community stakeholders

The institutional barriers to KOTHA's syllabus comes from the adult stakeholders: namely, the school administration who purportedly represent both parents' interests and the school's. Zillur specifically noted that they approached the "well-reputed schools first, since, because the government doesn't really play a role in curriculum design for English medium schools" they could effectively act as trailblazers in introducing sex education into 'middle-class schools'. She acknowledged that if KOTHA had to deal with the government, and national curriculum schools, that would involve another level of negotiation and manoeuvring that the organisation was not yet equipped for.

In Chapter Three, I demonstrated how the unspeakable sexuality forms within the interconnected social worlds of the figures of authority (teachers and parents) and adolescents and their homosocial spaces; and in Chapter Four, I elucidated how young adults and adolescents have need of and actively seek out ways to make their sexualities and subjectivities more speakable—not only to their friends and partners, but with their parents. By its very name, KOTHA signals its mission to do just that; by default, the organisation's main challenge would be to tackle this tension.

What new adults and adolescents have expressed over and over again, reflected in existing research (James P. Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University & Mayalogy Pvt. Ltd., 2018) as well as my own fieldwork, is the need to have the ambiguities about their bodies, feelings, relationships and social worlds be explained to them from trustworthy, accessible and legitimate sources of information. *Guidance* over *instruction*. And the guidance they seek is rooted in their cultural and social contexts, not ones that disregard their cultural context.

However, adult stakeholders and institutional reps stay fixated on the idea of ‘modesty’ as the “correct” avenues of introduction and discourse about sexuality.

Zillur, describing the negotiations with the heads of administration at Aga Khan School in establishing KOTHA at their school, said, “Initially they just wanted us to go and do a session on cyber harassment and be very ‘this is why you shouldn’t do this’ [I: Prescriptive.] Right. So then we had to work to make them understand why that would not be effective at all, and then what I said about building up concepts that would be relevant for that (gender, consent, etc.) that’s how we pitched the whole thing. That unless you do this whole thing together, it will not be effective at all. And so we understand that you care about cyber harassment, but in order to care for that you need to care for all these other things as well.”

The pushback is very clearly articulated to be about the values they believe is inherently antagonistic to “Bangladeshi culture”. Zillur mentioned how the vice-principal protested the subject of ‘Gender’ with her cause being “we are a conservative society, we do not know what you will be teaching the children”. These biases are institutional not only in schools, but in the healthcare industry as well, with medical professionals often acting as institutional barriers to unmarried adults seeking sexual health services. Zillur explained the ways in which her team had to adapt their language to better reach the admin: “We have sexual health as our topic, but when we talk about our programme, initially to get through the doors, we say comprehensive education and… this type of stuff. It’s a lot of tiptoeing around the exact terms. […] And so everything they have perceived to be a connection to sex or traditional sex-ed had to be explained and re-explained to appease them.” In other words, sexuality as a speakable concept needs to be explained in terms of modesty to reach the older gatekeepers. The practicalities of teaching students about, for example, consent and boundaries, need to be broken down into discourses of bhodrota, distancing from the topics of sexual intercourse and sexuality.

KOTHA's work reflects that, when it comes to sexuality, there is still an ongoing struggle to tackle this paradoxical tension between tradition and modernity, between religious-conservatism and secular-liberalism; and it highlights that this tension centres around the articulation of what constitutes a proper middle-class identity.

How to be bhodro 2.0: In creating a 'proper, speakable, middle-class' sexuality

The developmentalisation of sexuality education in Bangladesh leads to an unresolved tension between the traditionality of conservative middle-class Bangladesh and the secular normativity of the comprehensive sexuality education framework. This tension means that SRHR/sexuality education discourse in Bangladesh is shaped by powerful transnational and local processes of Othering (Roodsaz, 2018). The fallout of this developmentalisation is, then, the continued alienation of certain perspectives and baggage of Bangladesh's cultural context within the discourses that shape adolescent sexuality education, a project seen as a pathway to emancipation and the solution to gender-based violence in Bangladesh. The fallout is, critically, what Saba Mahmood points out as the secular-liberal feminism in 'emancipating' Islamic societies: that the commitment to the ideal of equality does not necessarily mean we are endowed with the capacity to understand and realise what emancipation and freedom looks like for everyone (Mahmood, 2006).

The relation between sexuality and class is historically linked to the concept of modernity, or in other words, sexuality as a modern concept has class implications; Michel Foucault interrogates this relation in his *The History of Sexuality* and illustrates how sexuality is a social construction, how sexuality discourse has developed in Western society, and specifically how sexuality has been treated in the wake of capitalism and colonialism. We must not forget that sexuality, its control, depiction and prescriptivism has a specific history in this subcontinent, a direct relation to its colonial past. Sexuality in Bangladesh is tied up in our postcolonial existence, and the way we experience and articulate sexuality is also tied up accordingly. My

goal with my thesis has been to interrogate this tension and illustrate the ways in which it continues to shape our sexuality and sexuality discourse in our society.

While my thesis, and the SRHR programmes and reports in my secondary research, reiterates the need for pragmatic and practical information, what is pragmatic and practical is not universal. This is not to problematise comprehensive sex education or suggest that it is not effective or driven by useful emancipatory ideals. I personally hold the opinion that CSE is currently the most flexible among existing sexuality education curricula, that is capable of being adapted to various cultural contexts. But that is the key here: it must be considered that sexuality education be adapted to each cultural context and the specificities of its targeted demographics; moreover, it must be considered that interlocutors, programme directors, educators, etc. need recognise that not questioning their epistemological biases (of Western liberalism and developmentalisation's goals of 'progress') and positionality may influence and put them at odds with community stakeholders. KOTHA negotiates around these barriers by representing their curricula to be desexualised and health-oriented, but still attempts the task of reaching the adult stakeholders in their positionality, by explaining their rights-oriented holistic approach.

This, to me, highlights the way forward towards creating a 'bhodro' speakable sexuality. This concept of 'bhodro' is the one I encountered in my fieldwork and analysed through my Bordieuan framework. The discourse remaining locked at the policy and development level means that sexuality education will fall into its own trap of assuming secular-liberal prescriptivism which assumes that the characteristic for sexuality in Bangladesh is vulgar and ignorant and therefore requires contention with the 'dominant norm', that being rights-based approach (Roodsaz, 2018). But, as I've demonstrated, Bangladeshi adults, old and new, conduct their own discourse on sexuality and its relation to their bhodrota and class identity is articulated in manifestly different ways. I would suggest that eschewing what bhodrota means

to our culture, both its importance and its problematic aspects, keeps sexuality education discourse from truly imagining what could be helpful and true to people's lives *here*. To engage with the concept, its fault lines, and the possibilities that lie within in, would allow sexuality education to include how bhodrota morphs and includes speakable sexuality in ways that are different from the Western 'universal' and are more specific to our cultural context. If SRHR and CSE is meant to succeed in their emancipatory goals in Bangladesh, in tackling rape culture and patriarchal norms, the approach needs to consider where the gaps in understanding lie—and where the gaps in misunderstandings may be bridged.

Finit.

Appendix

IDI Questionnaire

Respondent Profile

Education Level of the family	O & A Level, SSC & HSC, year in university
Profession of Parents	
No. of siblings if any	
Medium of school	English, Bangla, English version, Bangla version
Religious orientation (yours & family)	Believing, Observant, Agnostic, Atheist
Religious influences in family	Any religious education
Parental goals for children	Education, job, marriage, children
Any romantic history	No specifics needed / Have you dated?

Questions

1. Did you get any kind of information about sex, or sexuality, or related topics (menstruation, masturbation, circumcision)? Who gave you that information? When and how?
    a. If yes:
        i. Did you have any questions after that talk? How did you feel?
        ii. Was it a dialogue? Did you ask for more information later on when you thought of it?
        iii. Were there any euphemisms used? Do you remember what terms were used in that conversation?
        iv. Was religion invoked (or religious reasoning given) when the talk happened?
        v. Are you now comfortable discussing love and sex life with this person? (Probe: parents' attitude)
        vi. Where did they get their information? Did you ever go online to fact-check?
    b. If no:
        i. Where did you first encounter these topics? How did you feel?
        ii. Did you ever think of approaching your parents? (Probe: parents' attitude) Do you think religion may have prevented the conversation?
        iii. Did you go online for more information? Did you talk to anybody else?

2. Is marriage very important in your family? Why?
    a. Why do you think parents push their children to get married as soon as they are able? (Probe: does it have anything to do with sexuality in your opinion?)
    b. Is your family alright with premarital relationships? To what extent?
3. How is the issue of 'modesty' treated in your family? Is it gendered (only girls are meant to be modest, boys don't have to worry)?
    a. In what ways is modesty important to your parents? Dress/behaviour/habits etc. (probe: ask about hijab, western clothing)
    b. Do you agree/disagree? Why?
    c. What would your parents consider 'vulgar' and 'inappropriate'? Cursing, smoking, drugs, dating etc.
4. What are your feelings towards sex and sexuality? What is your opinion on it? (Probe: how do they feel about virginity, modesty, immodesty, premarital sex, premarital romantic relationship)
5. Do you know what safe sex means?
    a. Do you know what goes into the practice of it? Why is it important?
    b. Where did you get this information? Why (that source)?
6. What is your understanding of consent? Of rape? (Probe: boundaries of consent, marital rape, victim blaming "she made herself vulnerable so it is to be expected")
    a. Do you consider conversation about consent, affection and intimacy a part of sexuality education? Is it "naturally" understood, or something you learn/are taught? From where did you gain your understanding of these boundaries?
    b. Have you ever encountered or heard of a situation where you were confused about if there was consent from either person? Could you elaborate?
    c. Have you or anyone you know experienced a sexually uncomfortable situation from family members. Friends like family or domestic staff? What made you uncomfortable? Were you/the person affected able to report this incident? Why or why not? What was at stake in reporting or not reporting?
    d. Is it common to be flattered by others' complimentary observations of your body? What is off limits or inappropriate? What kinds of compliments/comments/remarks are distasteful and why?
    e. Have you heard of someone "chasing after" someone they like, or trying to "convince" someone they like? What did you think of that?
7. What is sexual pleasure? Is it important? What is the "goal" of sex?
    a. What is a good age to be sexually active?
    b. Is there a difference between ideal and practice?
8. Is it important to be "good" at sex? Or is it more important to be sexually inactive? Why?

a. Does it make you feel good/bad to be "good/bad" at sex? Why? Does it affect you in any way (probe: socially)?

9. Do any of these—the thought of having sex or the thought of abstaining—make you anxious? Why or why not?
10. What do you think sex education is? Did you receive any formal sex education at school? When? To what extent did it cover SRH topics? Tell me of an interesting anecdote from that time, if you remember anything.
    a. How did your school address reproduction/human reproduction as part of general education? Did students ask questions about reproduction/human reproduction? Why or why not?
11. Was your school's environment conservative? Strict? Liberal? Describe.
12. Does your school allow co-ed friendships? Does it allow PDA between friends (probe: of the same gender, of opposite genders)?
    a. What kind of restrictions are placed on friendships or interactions between co-ed friendships/relationships?
    b. Are the restrictions the same for students of all ages? If not, what are the differences in restrictions for teenage students?
    c. What were the punishments for rule-breaking in this respect? What actions would be taken? Who would take them? What would be said (to students or otherwise)? Can you give an example?
    d. Why did the school say these restrictions exist? Did they define "appropriate" behaviour? Could you elaborate? Or was it just policing?
    e. What do you think would be a more effective method?
13. Were there any teachers in your school you and your friends felt most comfortable with/liked the most? Could you confide in them, for help with studies? What about personal issues?

<u>Wrap-up</u>

14. What is your sexual identity (you can opt out of answering)? How did you come to understand your sexuality? What did you do when you first had sexual or romantic feelings?
15. Do you feel that parents should talk to their children about sex? Why or why not? What should they discuss, in your opinion (if yes)?
16. Do you feel that schools should include sex education into the curriculum? Why or why not? How do you think they should do this (if yes)?
17. What do you think you would like to know about sex or sexuality (as an adult, as an adolescent)? What would your preferred medium of learning about this be?
18. Why do you think schools or parents do not discuss sex with children or adolescents?
19. Do you feel that lack of formal and/or informal sex education has affected your life in any meaningful way?

KII Questionnaire

1. How did Kotha come about? What was the inspiration for its cause (personal anecdote)?
    a. What made you think sex ed was necessary for middle class Bangladeshi youth?
2. What is covered in Kotha's sex ed syllabus? What rubric is it based on, if it is based on any?
    a. What went into the creation of the syllabus? Why was importance given to the topics covered; what made it relevant to be taught to students of this culture?
3. Why does Kotha value comprehensive sex education?
    a. What does comprehensive sex education entail in Bangladesh?
    b. How does Kotha deal with cultural discomfort or backlash with CSE?
4. Which schools have worked with Kotha so far to provide their students with sex ed? Would you say there's some commonality between the schools that have worked with Kotha so far?
    a. If so, what would you say that is? (In terms of style of administration, school's principles or values, curriculum, demographics of students of these schools, etc.)
5. What kind of reactions/responses from students have you gotten during the courses? Anything of note/that struck you? Perhaps recurring questions, particular areas of interest (segregated by age and gender if possible), areas considered particularly taboo by students, etc.?
6. How does Kotha qualitatively appraise the effects/impact of the courses offered? Could you share what your findings from such appraisals have been?
7. What are some of the most important lessons and takeaways you've gleaned from your work with Kotha?
8. What would you say has been the most critical challenge in doing the work Kotha does? How have you navigated around that?

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