

Traditional Marriage in Rural Bangladesh: An Ethical Consideration

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ABSTRACT

One of the common arguments to justify the traditional arrangement to marry off daughters in rural Bangladesh is that through this procedure they get a secured life under their husband's supervision. It is a well-known proposition that if parents really care about daughters, searching for a bridegroom from a well-off family is the best option. Typically, daughters' families mainly the father arrange such marriage, and the girl's consent is hardly taken into account. However, I argue this traditional system values only girls' caregiving and reproductive roles, ignoring all other life-affirming values. If daughters are not free to decide whether to marry or not to marry, their autonomy as human beings are violated. Moreover, considering marriage as a responsibility shifting process could objectify and commodify women in such a way that would destroy potentials to flourish life and make them a victim of violence. There are strong theoretical and empirical reasons to believe that the entire procedure of marriage is ethically blameworthy and detrimental for women. Sufficient ground can be found to put more priority on developing daughters' competency to make them economically and socially independent so that they can choose when to marry, whom to marry or not to marry.

Keywords: Marriage, Objectification and Violence

INTRODUCTION

Marriage, a recognized union between a man and a woman, also connects two families, which is well accepted all over the world. However, marrying off daughters with an intention to transfer responsibility is typically observed all around Bangladesh but the situation is severe in the middle-class family of rural areas. Before proceeding further, I must admit that this middle-class identity is a self-proclaimed socio-cultural construct irrespective of per day income. In such a class, men are the sole earners and other members of the family are completely dependent on that income. Consequently, per family income is very less to meet the basic needs. Marriage arrangement is a responsibility shifting procedure, this psychological paradigm profoundly exists in the middle-class family of the villages. Bruce Cardwell critically evaluates marriage in Bangladesh as a union between two families instead of individuals. It is widely accepted that early marriage makes women more flexible and accepting to cope with the new environment where they will be raised by husbands and in-laws. Another fact behind early marriage is the belief that before marriage girls should be in charge of their father and after marriage the husband will take over the father's position. Therefore, a large age difference is expected to ensure the bride's subordination to her husband (1). Another important fact was

pointed out by Kotalova. She states that “a daughter is a debt of honor and there is hardly a more shameful failure for a man than the inability to marry off his daughter/sister” (2). She truly understands that in Bengali culture premarital sexuality is strongly prohibited and as a part of prevention women are expected to maintain social distance while meeting the same age or adult male. For the family, it would be a matter of extreme dishonor if a daughter gets involved with any premarital sexual activity. Due to the fact that unmarried adult women are not destined to be independent to move around and to make male friends, such imposed restrictions to keep girls far away from any sort of sexual activity also motivate parents to marry off daughters earlier.

Considering the cultural context of rural Bangladesh, it is so evident to assume that the existence of patriarchy inevitably harms the entire society (3). Because of this, by arranging marriage daughters are given away into a family which is basically headed by the husband's father and controlled by other members of the family. In that family, the wife becomes subordinate not only to men but also to women of that family (4). In such a context girls' main responsibility is to satisfy others' desires and this scenario is visible everywhere in rural Bangladesh. As poverty exists, therefore, classic patriarchy can play a very important role to motivate parents to ponder marriage as a safe way to transfer daughters' responsibility and thus to marry off their daughter instead of making them self-dependent. However, there is strong ground to believe that such marriage can cause different kinds of violence against women and make the situation worse than poverty. Subsequently, this act can work as a stumbling block for girls to contribute to their parents. Therefore, the best way for parents could be to make daughters capable of self-determination and mature enough to choose the right decisions in life. I use the term self-determination to mean the ability to manage livelihood and maturity to lead life by herself, where the marriage will never be required to manage basic needs. The main objective of this paper is to examine the traditional marriage system and its impact on women's life.

HOW DOES TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE MIGHT HARM?

Marriage is the safe haven for girls, the long-held assumption is strongly indefensible as due to this system sometimes a number of bad consequences might be obvious (5). Violence against women widely exists in Bangladesh, as we do not find a single day when features on violence against women never come in the daily newspapers. Therefore, it is rationally justified to examine each and every social event and as a part of that marriage, the arrangement system is crucial. I do not argue that this system would necessarily harm women but my point of view is the possibility is much higher that such practice would objectify women and that could necessarily produce different kinds of violence.

Objectification of Women

Fredrikson and Roberts define objectification as the procedure of transforming a human being into an object with an intention to satisfy others' desires (6). After marriage, if women are assigned to fulfill husbands' family members' interests, that would necessarily objectify them and undermine their individuality. Moreover, limited or no opportunity to develop life-affirming skills would worsen women's quality and eventually this incompetency will auto objectify them. Changed perception about themselves makes them psychologically weaker and consequently, they become very much dependent on others. Objectified women instead of quality, start assessing themselves on the basis of their physical and social environment. Their

feelings depend on others' approval or disapproval. (7). By and large, they evaluate themselves on the basis of their appearance and they undertake all other activities with weaker or no confidence (8).

Commodification and Dehumanization:

The term "commodification" generally implies putting a price level on something which will be sold or commercialized. However, Kopytoff used the term in a broader sense. According to him, a woman is transformed into a commodity when she is controlled by others (9). If a girl is treated as other's property, that usually occurs in slavery, which also falls under commodification (10). Needless to say, through the objectification process, women lose individuality and become others property subsequently, transforming into a commodity. Such transformation slowly desensitizes her existence in the family. Dehumanization is not only a process of negative assessment but also can be rooted in the cognitive processes of culture (11). Due to the fact that objectification and commodification could gradually dehumanize women in society. In such a society women devalue their wishes, choice, feelings and thoughts, subsequently, the fact of individuality or human autonomy becomes unrealistic to them (12). Considering the above-mentioned accounts, it is needless to say that objectification and commodification lead women to dehumanization.

METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

For this study as the main source of data collection, I arranged an in-depth one-to-one type discussion with ten married women in a village of Tangail district in the month of November and December 2020. In order to make the discussion diversified ten women were selected from ten different families. The topic of the discussion was the cause and effect of marriage on their life. To create a comfortable zone for participants it was promised that their names would never be disclosed.

Participants profile:

SL No.	Pseudonym	Age (years)	Husband senior to wife (years)	Marriage Arranged by	Educational Status before marriage	Educational Status after marriage	Present Status
1	Fahmina Akter	58	14	Elder brothers	Student of secondary level	Importance of her education was overlooked by husband	Housewife
2	Mina Khan	40	16	Father	Student of higher secondary level	Importance of her education was overlooked by husband	Housewife
3	Hamida	55	12	Elder brothers	Student of secondary level	Willingly decided to discontinue her study	Housewife
4	Rabeya	42	8	Father	Student of higher secondary level	Did not get the opportunity to continue study	Housewife
5	Shimu	35	10	Father	Student of secondary level	Did not get the opportunity to continue study	Housewife
6	Poli	38	26	Father	Student of undergraduate level	Husband's economical condition was not conducive for her study	Housewife
7	Ayesha	38	11	Father	Student of higher secondary level	Did not get the opportunity to continue study	Housewife
8	Rozina	28	8	Father	Student of secondary level	Willingly decided to discontinue her study	Housewife
9	Nasima	25	10	Father	Student of higher secondary level	Did not get the opportunity to continue study	Housewife
10	Rekha	24	16	Father	Student of secondary level	Willingly decided to discontinue her study	Housewife

FINDINGS

The discussion revealed the impact of traditional marriage arrangement and their myriad involvements to objectify women in the self-proclaimed middle-class family in rural Bangladesh. Furthermore, marriage is considered as a responsibility shifting process that is not only detrimental to girls but also dehumanizes them by ignoring individual autonomy. Needless to say, such a marriage system plays a very important role to deform girls' mental state even before getting married.

Fahmina Akter, Mina Khan, Poli, and Ayesha confidently claim that if they had the chance, they would continue their study, complete higher education, and work in any organization. They blatantly asserted that before marriage it was tough to study for several reasons but after marriage, it became impossible as husbands and other family members wanted them to manage family activities. After getting married they had to take over the responsibility of a new family. Within a few years, they conceived a baby and subsequently, child-rearing and other household issues made them extremely busy. However, others' reflection was completely different, they did not even think of becoming self-dependent. They thought it is natural for girls to become a housewife and thus to manage the family. Although they acknowledged that due to poverty, they did not get enough opportunity to study, they also agreed that, as they could assume the obvious life after marriage, therefore, they did not feel the importance of becoming self-dependent. All of the ten participants hold parents' financial inability responsible for their early marriage. Therefore, they think if they could earn money, they would help their parents. Although all of them have the desire to help their parents, they cannot do that as they are fully dependent on their husbands.

Surprisingly all of them approved that the husband plays the higher role of a family as he alone earns and manage family expenses. He is naturally knowledgeable and superior to his wife; therefore, a good wife should obey him. As a reference, they shared reflections on their parent's family which was headed by their father. While talking about the possibility of having equal dignity of husband and wife in a family, all of them said that it would be indefensible as God created husband as the guardian. Such a mentality could be the result of long held objectification. This objectification has deformed their personality in such a way that they are not comfortable outside the family. In such male-headed family, female members are extremely dependent on male to go outside of the home. Unlike others, Poli and Mina Khan went to the city alone several times for shopping whereas, the other eight members are fully dependent on their husband or adult male person to move from one place to another, even though the distance is very short. They are not comfortable talking to unknown adult male therefore, they prefer to go outside with their husband or other male members of the family. Insecurity is also a major concern in this regard as eve-teasing and other kinds of violence are prevalent.

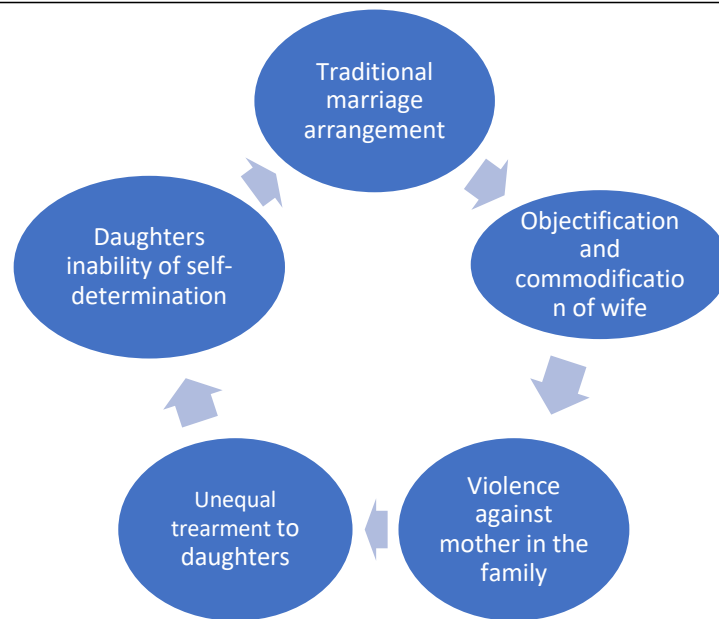
Mr Aziz, Lecturer of a private Girls' college of that place, shared that the college was established in 2016 with a view to educate girls but a good number of girls are getting married and stop studying without completing the higher secondary level. Around 500 girls are enrolled in higher secondary level, undoubtedly this number makes anyone optimistic but marriage during this two-year period is prevalent and after marriage hardly some students can continue to study with the same performance. He demands a social movement to stop such early marriage. Poverty is one of the reasons however, culture is mainly responsible for such marriage arrangements. Based on his experience, he dictates that just after sending daughters to college,

parents start searching for a suitable bridegroom, and as soon as they can manage, they marry off daughters ignoring their interest in the study.

OBJECTIFICATION, COMMODIFICATION AND SPOUSAL VIOLENCE

The aforementioned discussion illustrates that women in rural Bangladesh are objectified in such a way that they have accepted subordination and subsequently their individuality has been suppressed by psychological weakness. They are highly controlled by husbands and this dominion has made them a commodity. Objectified and commodified women can never be thought of without violence. Research shows that spousal violence against women is high in Bangladesh. The findings of a survey conducted in 2006 show that 86 percent of rural women who have ever experienced spousal violence reported that a husband has the right to beat his wife under certain circumstances. The circumstances could be not completing housework adequately, being unfaithful, disobeying her husband, and so on. In contrast, of women who have never experienced spousal violence, 73 percent of rural women agreed that violence was sometimes justified (13). The findings of the research show the real-world image of objectified women in rural Bangladesh. If we critically analyze the circumstances, it is straightforwardly noticeable that somehow, surprisingly women accepted objectification against them. Such acceptance has not happened suddenly, it is the result of a long process of dehumanization by patriarchal society.

Violence against women is highly prevalent as we see in the month of January and February of the year 2021, a total of 567 women reported to the police station being experienced violence (14). This data represents the scenario of violence partially as in most of the cases women are not comfortable going to police stations. Objectified women can be confined by shame or embarrassment and which can continuously stop them from raising voice against any kind of violence to them. This is a common experience shared by women all over the world but in a country like Bangladesh, the situation is severe. Values and norms of society hold them responsible for any kind of act which tarnish their family reputation (15). Behind such violence objectification of women is one of the most important factors and that is cultivated by traditional marriage arrangements. The effect of such objectification can be presented in a cycle as follows:



Impact of marriage in the middle-class family of rural Bangladesh

The aforementioned cycle depicts the impact of traditional marriage arrangements in the middle-class family of rural Bangladesh. Through the objectification and commodification process, a wife becomes the victim of violence in her family and such an environment psychologically objectifies daughters. Moreover, this family pattern reinforces daughters to internalize such social constructs as a natural process. Needless to say, in such a family daughters experience discrimination in each and every sphere of life and due to the fact that they cannot become independent. This is one of the facets which makes them unconfident and immature. Unfortunately, due to this incapability or immaturity of parents, mainly fathers decide to marry off daughters instead of making them self-dependent.

MORAL CONSIDERATION OF TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE

One of the common views on parents' role to marry off daughters is that girls are not mature enough to make a better decision regarding marriage. In Bengali culture, being well-experienced parents arrange marriage and that is accepted by society. The argument may be presented more explicitly as follows:

P1- The rightness or wrongness of an action depends on the approval or disapproval of the concerned culture.

P2- It is well accepted in Bengali culture that families have sole rights to marry off daughters. Therefore, it is morally justified for family members to ignore the daughter's preference while marrying off.

The aforementioned argument is an example of cultural relativism, in which theory claims morality is relative. This kind of argument is well used by some people but from a logical point of view, it is not acceptable as the conclusion does not necessarily reduce from the premises. The premises are concerned about what practices exist in society whereas the conclusion is concerned about the rightness or wrongness of that action. Any bad practice that exists in any society can be easily justified by this kind of argument.

Can This Arrangement Violate Girls' Autonomy?

German philosopher Immanuel Kant provided a stringent notion of human autonomy. According to him, a person acts autonomously when s/he acts according to a law she gives himself not being influenced by family values or social convention (16). In traditional marriage when parents decide to marry off daughters that necessarily violates girls' autonomy. Moreover, in this process girls are treated as an object instead of a subject.

Even though girls agree to their parent's decision, such an arrangement is still morally questionable. In this regard, girls act freely or they want to satisfy their preference through their act. When somebody wants to satisfy her preference, she is not acting free rather she is acting according to a force that is imposed on her. Having freedom or to act autonomously does not mean to make the best decision for a given end; rather it is to choose the end for its own sake (17). When a girl decides to marry for the sake of marrying not for the sake of some interest or social convention then she is not acting autonomously. Therefore, considering Kant's point of view this is so evident to say that traditional marriage arrangement violates girls' autonomy.

Can Daughter's Consent Justify This Arrangement?

Some might argue that traditional marriage arrangement is morally justifiable if daughters' consent is taken. However, I argue, in the case of such a context daughters' consent is not truly voluntary, it is rather obvious exploitation. Patriarchy took advantage of a dominated daughter who does not have any better option except marriage. Michael J Sandel's view can be an appropriate response in this regard as he states consent is not a necessary condition of moral obligation. The moral claims of reciprocity should get the sole priority and may be held irrespective of the act of consent (18). He mainly focused on the mutual benefit which should be clear in a moral act. In the case of marriage if girls are not aware of her benefit, if she does not have any other option or limited option then consent does not make any moral acceptance. If girls have the option to lead a life without getting married which is ensured by society and family only then daughters' consent matters. Therefore, from the context of a middle-class family of rural Bangladesh, it is so evident to claim that daughters' consent cannot justify the act.

What Could Be the Alternative

The cultural context must be taken into account when we think of any change in any social norms or values that hinders women's progress, otherwise, the change would not sustain. Therefore, initiatives must be taken to make girls' independence culturally acceptable (19). Strong patriarchy exists in Bengali culture and due to the fact that girls are objectified in numerous ways. In such circumstances, all the facets of violation should be taken into account while talking about social justice.

If daughters are not treated as a burden to their family then marriage will never be a must or urgent. Having the equal opportunity and ownership in the family will make daughters more confident to flourish their full potentials. Instead of two families, marriage is expected to be arranged between two individuals where both of them are mature enough and self-dependent. In this regard, parents are expected to raise daughters with a view to developing their competency so that they can become self-dependent.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this paper helps to understand that traditional marriage arrangements in the middle-class family of rural Bangladesh and objectification against women are entangled in a variety of ways. Based on the discussion it is so evident to claim that the importance of rethinking traditional marriage arrangements should never be ignored. Due to the fact of patriarchy, this system is playing a very influential role to objectify women which could necessarily boost up violence against them. Therefore, a change in the existing marriage structure might create a congenial environment for daughters to flourish their potentials.

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