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Construction of hegemonic masculinity: Violence against wives in Bangladesh

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SYNOPSIS

This study uses newspaper data to examine how violent men of Bangladesh validate their identity as men through their acts of violence. Prior research on violence against women in Bangladesh was based on economically disadvantaged wives in rural areas or megacities. Systematic applications of Butler's (1990) gender performativity theory and Connell's (1995) hegemonic masculinity idea to empirical data on violence against women in Bangladesh are rare. By applying these frameworks, I find that in a society that promotes violence against women violent men can use such acts as the most honorable way of being men. I explain that hegemonic gender norms relate to wife abuse, and suggest that the intersection of gender and age has seemingly had profound effects on violence against women, independent of other structural inequalities.

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Introduction

Rumana Manzur, now a faculty member of the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh, was a foreign student at the University of British Columbia, Canada. Married to Sayeed Hasan, she had a daughter. During her visit to Bangladesh in 2011, she was violently attacked by Hasan, who opposed her return to Canada, where he suspected her of having an affair with a man. The attack left Manzur blind and with a disfigured face. Hasan was arrested ([The Daily Star, 2011, 16 June](#)). According to Manzur, Hasan had physically assaulted her during their ten years of married life, and threatened to pour acid on her and kill her. Hasan complained that Manzur left their child in Bangladesh in his care and proceeded to Canada to pursue her studies. In his interview to the media, he used gender references to accuse Manzur of failing to meet her gender role:

She [Manzur] had an extra marital affair with a man from Iran in Canada... she betrayed me and our daughter... She left our child in Bangladesh with me and went to Canada for her studies... When I deleted the name of the Iranian man from her Facebook friends' list, she attacked me... My wife and the Iranian man lived like a married couple while I took care of our daughter as if I were the mother... She said that

the husband of her friend from Australia has been raising his kids. She wants me to take the role of that husband. She said that I cannot show my authority over her as her husband .

[[Boyshakhi News \(2011, 15 June\)](#)]

This account illustrates how the perpetrator justified his violence by insisting that his wife was responsible for his attack on her. This justification was based on a normative binary framework of gender and the patriarchal culture of Bangladesh. His account reflected a man's attitude that, by virtue of being a husband, he should have authority over his wife's body. He has the right to punish his wife whenever she fails to meet his sexual and emotional needs and her maternal responsibility. His account sought to reestablish his heterosexual male privilege as father and husband through denigration of any alternative identity ([Butler, 1990](#)), such as that of a father who would take care of a child or a man who would tolerate his wife's sexual intimacy with someone else. To Hasan, such tolerance symbolizes his wife's effort to emasculate him. In a society where masculinity is linked to aggression, it is unsurprising that Hasan presented himself to the media as a powerful man in control of his wife's body and sexuality.

This article takes into account feminist theoretical tradition to situate physical violence against intimate partner in Bangladesh.

Using Butler's (1990) performative theory and Connell's (1995) hegemonic masculinity idea, I explain that perpetrators, through their acts of violence, use Bangladeshi cultural norms to uphold and reproduce hegemonic norms, and show that physical violence against intimate partner is a form of performance by which violent men present their hyper-masculine identities. Researchers criticize Butler's theory of performance for over-emphasizing the agency and lacking structural and cultural constraint analysis on actors (Messner, 2000). This research shows that Butler's theory can be understood by analyzing how the violent acts of men are shaped by larger structural inequality.

Review of the literature

Researchers have used the term "intimate partner violence" differently depending on the historical context. In the 1970s, the term "family violence" referred to violence in the family. This gender-neutral term was replaced in 1980s by "violence against women," which in turn in the 1990s was replaced by the all-inclusive "intimate partner violence," referring to violence between heterosexual marital partners, same-sex partners, dating partners, and former partners. Here, I use the term "intimate partner violence" from a heteronormative standpoint to refer to violence in hetero-sexual marital or former marital partners.

The second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s focused primarily on ending physical violence against women. Emotional violence, sexual violence, jealousy, isolation, and intimidation were overlooked, but now they are recognized as important forms of violence. Although the meaning of violence varies across cultures and historical timeframes, research suggests that routine, methodical physical violence does not occur in isolation of other types of violence. Almost all cases of physical violence studied below combine different types of violence. Defined as aggressive behavior that targets a victim's body, physical violence includes pushing, hitting, choking, pulling hair, burning with corrosive materials, death, and attacks leading the victim to commit suicide. Here, physical violence against intimate partner is measured by incidents relating to the homicide and physical abuse of a wife or former wife by a husband that lead to the victim's loss of consciousness and hospitalization with severe physical injuries. It also includes pouring acid or other highly corrosive materials on the victim, burning with cigarettes, blinding and disfiguring the victim, gang rape, and physical abuse that lead the victim to commit suicide.

Connell (1987) first introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity to criticize the feminist oversimplification that powerful men experience masculinity in the same way, irrespective of cultural differences. It is "the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). There are multiple forms of masculinity (Connell, 1987). Hegemonic masculinity is the idealized form of masculinity that subordinates women, and excludes and debases gay-men. Toughness and competitiveness are ideal qualities of hegemonic masculinity. Other types of masculinities are measured against hegemonic masculine ideals. Men lacking such hegemonic qualities are marginalized (Connell, 2000). Hegemonic masculinity is achieved not only through violence, but also through

persuasion, culture, or institutions (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This form of masculinity is often underwritten by violence.

Analytical framework

According to Butler, "Gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always doing, though not a doing by a subject who may be said to preexist the deed" (1990, p. 25). Gender identity is an inter-subjective construction by self and others. By repetition of social rules, the subject enacts the socially constructed reality. This process allows the subject to perform in a specific way that reproduces the subject and facilitates the emergence of subversive identity. The subjects embody these rules in their acts and speech. Reiterative practices make gender rules natural. Gender performances are unstable and culturally formed. Through reiterative performance of gender gestures and gender roles, the subjects contribute potentially to the production of differences between the subject and the object. Reiterative performance reproduces the illusion of natural differences between gender identities. Gender performance also permits foreclosure that creates contexts for the subject to manifest and hide what the subject is not. Gender performativity often fails to radically change the normative logic of the existing system. However, it exposes the relationship between the object and the subject, and allows for radical transformation of the system. Any constitution or existence of subject is relational to the existence of the other object. Repeated representation of specific form of subjectivity is contingent. If specific performance of normative practices changes, the alternate form of subject may emerge. In addition to reiteration of hegemonic norms, Butler identifies exclusion as a strategy that shapes or troubles gender and sexual identities. Her theory helps us to see how sexual and gender identity have always been subject to historical and cultural forces; thus, they are subject to change over time.

Critics argue that Butler trivializes gender by reducing it to discourses and materiality of the body (Connell, 2000). Treatment of gender, in terms of performance, denies the real structural basis of gender oppression and provides no political perspective that challenges the real structure of oppression. Butler's theory is "strikingly unable to account for work, child care, institutional life, violence, resistance (except as individual choice), and material inequality. These are not trivial aspects of gender" (Connell, 2000, p. 20). A common misapprehension of Butler stems from downplaying her focus on organizational environment that serves as context to reiterative practices of hegemonic norms, and creates and controls subjects and relations among them. Butler's critics often reduce her ideas of performativity to her idea of performance.

Social scientists suggest that gender interacts with other socially constructed structural categories of differences within societies, such as class, race, religion, sexual orientation, and nationality. These categories shape different levels of power, status, and privilege and are related to variations in the meaning and experiences of gender (Collins, 1998). In black feminist thought, terms such as intersectional analysis (Baca Zinn & Dill, 1996) and matrix of domination (Collins, 1990) describe this interlocking oppression. For Collins (1998), these intersections of inequality are embedded in the national

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