



Surveilled Girlhoods and the Patriarchal Bargain: The Price of Education for Bangladeshi Women

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Abstract

This paper examines the complex intersections of surveillance, patriarchy, and higher education in the lives of Bangladeshi women, theorizing how girlhood and marriage become sites of negotiation within oppressive structures. Drawing on Michel Foucault's notion of the panopticon and Sandra Bartky's analysis of gendered discipline, it explores how surveillance of women's mobility, bodies, and voices is internalized from childhood, producing docile, compliant subjects in the name of familial honor. Yet, for many young women, access to higher education often comes through Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of the *patriarchal bargain*: marriage becomes both a condition and a constraint for academic pursuit. While marriage offers a temporary escape from parental control, it reinforces a deeper entrapment—expectations of domestic labor, reproductive coercion, and the “triple burden” of student, wife, and mother. The paper further employs Judith Butler's theory of performativity to analyze how “good girlhood” is enacted through repetitive acts of obedience across familial and academic spheres. Despite these constraints, women continue to resist through everyday acts of perseverance, education, and intellectual pursuit, revealing how feminist, reproductive, and economic justice remain intertwined. By centering these lived contradictions, the paper highlights the structural costs of women's education in Bangladesh and reimagines resistance within patriarchal contexts.

Keywords: *Patriarchal Bargain; Surveillance and Panopticon; Girlhood in Bangladesh; Triple Burden; Women in Higher Education*

Introduction

I remember growing up in an urban, middle-class home where my father constantly reminded me to read as much as possible, as the walls were lined with bookshelves; however, my mother made sure

that the doors of the house were always kept open. I have always viewed my father as a progressive and wise man, as he was smart enough to teach me that the only way to become successful in life is to become independent, pursue higher education, hang a map of the world above my desk, or get a job to fulfill all my dreams. However, at this point in my life, when I look back and remember my mother's harsh voice like a locked gate, who was afraid of me getting out after evening, I realize her voice was inherited, internalized, and shaped by a world that could not afford to have a "wilful girl". I think what my mother feared was me being wilful, which Sara Ahmed has defined as being "disposed to assert one's own will against persuasion, instruction, or command; governed by will without regard to reason; determined to take one's own way; obstinately self-willed or perverse" (Ahmed, 2024, p. 66). As a result, whenever I wished to attend a co-ed gathering, the only reply that I would get from my mother was "You are not allowed; What will people say?". At the age of 15, I was able to identify this dualism or stifling contradiction: the path of universities, careers, and independence that my father helped me to dream of is ultimately restricted by my mother's narrow corridor, where my freedom of movement, freedom of speech, and dreams are selectively managed, controlled, and approved. Echoing Sara Ahmed's Wilful Girl, I gradually discovered that my curiosity was a flame that threatened to destroy the carefully assembled façade of familial honor, and my wishes, impulses, and movements were an issue that needed to be controlled. Although my body, time, and voice, basically my way of life, were controlled by a dormant wing of patriarchy, I will still consider myself lucky enough that my dream to pursue graduation and postgraduation from the University of Dhaka came true without any interruption. However, when I stepped into Dhaka University, I became a witness to a quieter, more insidious, and cloaked form of patriarchy, the one that changed my view about the interrelationship of marriage, higher education, empowerment, and patriarchal bargain.

University of Dhaka, being the most prestigious university of Bangladesh, has a higher number of students from the rural areas of Bangladesh (Aminuzzaman & Islam, 2015, p. 10). In the bustling lecture halls of Dhaka University, where dreams are being woven, I met girls in their early twenties who migrated from rural areas to pursue their higher education; however, many of their stories revealed that their "ticket to higher education" was achieved through marriage. In my first year of university, when I used to identify as a random student without any familial pressure, these female students had some other identities as well, identities as wives, mothers, and girls from villages and small towns who had traded vows for visas into academia. I remember talking to a girl named Monira who shared how her parents only approved of her migration to Dhaka by being married to her cousin, so that she could be spied on properly even after her marriage. That conversation made me realize I was somehow privileged that I did not have to pack my textbooks along with my wedding attire. I did not beg my professors to extend my assignment deadlines because I did not have to spend sleepless nights soothing my infant. However, it is also true that I had to beg my parents to go on a tour or to go to a protest. This is the lived reality of thousands of women of Bangladesh, where one can save herself from the ultimatum of marriage; on the other hand, one has to tie her hands to the patriarchal bargain of marriage, however, none of us can escape the prison' Michel Foucault might call the "panopticon of patriarchy": a system where surveillance persists even when the surveillant is absent, where we internalize the gaze of society and police ourselves. Our experiences of girlhood were different than each other to some extent; I was struggling with understanding what might be wrong if I went to university tours, whereas my married friend's girlhood was wrapped with another type of bargain, which Deniz Kandiyoti has theorized as the "Patriarchal Bargain," where women actively or passively resist different faces of their oppression, however, end up opening new areas of struggle and renegotiation (Kandiyoti, 1988). In terms of Bangladeshi women, they try to escape the constant surveillance of their parents by negotiating marriage; however, they find themselves in a bigger panopticon after these heterosexual marriages, where their husbands constantly check their GPS locations, so the bargain comes at a steep cost. Within a year, they are expected to perform multiple roles: students, wives, daughters-in-law, and often mothers—all at once. This "triple burden" makes them not only victims of several challenges, gender discrimination, and inequality, but also makes them realize that their mobility has come at the price of domesticity (Shuvra et al. 2019).

In this paper, I attempt to name and theorize this bargain. Growing up within the same cultural fabric, I want to argue that this surveillance to control women's freedom of movement, their body autonomy, and way of life is not a pattern of personal stories but a structural issue. At the same time, the patriarchal bargain in the form of marriage that these women are doing is also submission to another patriarchy, one cage for a larger, more elaborate one.

Caged in Care: The Panopticon of Girlhood in Bangladesh

The surveillance of Bangladeshi girls' freedom of movement, bodily autonomy, and way of life can be found in Michel Foucault's theory of the *panopticon*, which he first introduced in the book *Discipline and Punish* (1977), where he argued that disciplinary functions are not enforced merely through force, but through the internalization of surveillance. Foucault's panopticon was inspired by Jeremy Bentham's prison design, where the prisoners always exhibit their best behavior and constantly regulate themselves because there is a possibility that, in that circularly structured panopticon, they are constantly being surveilled. At this point, when I look back on my early life, my house seems no less than a panopticon, and I am not alone in this journey. What mattered the most for many of us was not the actual observation that was being done by our parents, older siblings, relatives, or someone from our community, but the belief that we could be observed at any time in houses, on roads, in schools, universities, or even at jobs. Surveillance, in this schema, not only became a tool to discipline us, but also a mechanism for producing female docile bodies—bodies that obey everyone, conform to gender norms, and self-discipline themselves. Whenever girls in Bangladesh turn to puberty, they know that their home is close to a localized gendered panopticon, where they become prisoners without doing anything wrong, and the punishment they receive is constantly following all the orders that are being made by their parents, relatives, and everyone who is around them. We are being told that our virginity, movements, friendships, digital lives, and even the tone of voice, are scrutinized only to protect us. In contrast, after a certain period, it becomes obvious that all these arrangements are being done to protect the honor of the family. We are being told that our value lies in our "modesty." If we are unable to perform these gendered and moral regulations, then this will not be considered as personal deviation only, but also as an affront to the family honor. In contrast, our brothers are never told to be this docile and obedient.

Sandra Lee Bartky, in her article "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power" (1988), pictured this social panopticon, where she argued that disciplinary power is deeply gendered. In the context of Bangladesh, our bodies are rendered "docile" through rituals of control that masquerade as care: curfews, dress codes, and the constant refrain. Bartky has pointed out these regulatory practices by arguing "practices aim to produce a female body of a certain size and general configuration; those that bring forth from this body a specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements; and those that are directed toward the display of this body as an ornamented surface" (Bartky, 1988). To ensure these practices of docility, we are told from an early age to lower our gaze, be prohibited from establishing any kind of romantic relationship with our male classmates, self-regulate ourselves even when we are alone, and silence our opinions. I have witnessed and experienced how such power becomes insidious through its internalization. Girls begin to self-police. They adjust their clothing before stepping outside, silence their laughter in public, or suppress their desires out of fear of being labeled "bad girls" or "wilful girls". A student from Dhaka University shared her fear of becoming this willful girl, which could bring shame to her family, as she argued, "Since my childhood, I have always tried to be a good girl. I knew any disobedience would make me a bad girl whose parents would not like it. Their wish became a command for me to lead my life". This guilt, Bartky would argue, is the triumph of patriarchal discipline: the external watcher becomes an internalized conscience.

The stakes of this moral disobedience are not merely social—they can be fatal, even in some scenarios, where disobedience turns into violence against girls. For instance, in Pakistan, this violence can

take the form of honor killings, where girls are killed by male relatives when they think any activity of the girl has brought shame to the reputation of the family. The reasons can be women marrying without the permission of the male members, eloping, or simply being suspected of a romantic relationship, and the price the women have to pay is giving up their lives. According to the statistics of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, around 470 cases of honor killing, most of them women, were reported in the year 2021 in Pakistan (Huda & Kamal, 2025). However, this violence against women is not evidently a “cultural anomaly,” but rather a notion of heteropatriarchal control, legitimized through discourses of family honor and moral purity (Abu-Loghud, 2001). As a result, the home, which is considered the safest place for women, becomes the first institutional place to sustain this disciplinary power. How the home becomes the locus of terror is evident in feminist writings as well. For instance, in the book *Exile and Pride: Disability, queerness, and liberation* (2015), Eli Clare has discussed how he has faced different forms of violence from his immediate kin because of his physical challenges and disobedience. As he writes, “Throughout my childhood and young adulthood, my father, along with several other adults, severely sexually and physically abused me, tying me up, using fire and knives and brute force on my body” (Claire, 2015, p. 35). Sara Ahmed has also talked about facing the consequences of being the willful or bad girl, as she goes on, “Disobedience is not given content because disobedience as such becomes a fault: the child must do whatever her mother wishes. She is not willing, whatever” (Ahmed, 2024). In such circumstances, girls do not just encounter patriarchy—they are forced to negotiate with it. As a result, when girls are at the age of leaving their home for higher studies, parents are often in fear of losing control or power over them. This fear becomes so intense that they wish to relinquish this power to another male, who is their husband. The calculated decision that these girls’ parents make is “Let her study, but only if she gets married,”; “Let her go to the city, but only with her husband.” The girl might step her feet to a big city like Dhaka, but she is not free—she is merely transferred from the authority of her father to the authority of a husband. Over the years, what has troubled me deeply is how even the older female members of the house often teach us to negotiate with these systems rather than challenge them.

Freedom in Chains: The Beginning of Married Students’ Bargain

Here comes the hardest part of the story. Home, which has worked as a panopticon for many of us, marriage makes it a prison factory for those students who agree to get married to access higher education. This prison factory in the form of marriage works as a less visible, more insidious, and cloaked in the illusion of social success and upward mobility. I have witnessed hundreds of married girls in the corridors of Dhaka University who bargained for freedom, higher education, and progress in exchange for marriage to finally step outside their homes for higher education. They consider this a way of escaping surveillance; however, they are unaware that they are simply exchanging one power regime for another. Deniz Kandiyoti’s seminal concept of the *patriarchal bargain* (1988) provides a framework to understand this lived contradiction of married Bangladeshi female students- a theory that continues to speak with alarming consequences to the perplexing negotiations women perform within oppressive systems. According to Kandiyoti (1988), women are not merely passive victims of this system, but rather strategize their lives within the boundaries of male dominance by adopting tactics, compromises, and performances so that they can secure their social positions, security, and survival. Focusing on the cultural perspectives, Kandiyoti also argued that the nature of this bargain is not universal but shaped by the demands of the local patriarchy. In the context of Bangladesh, women are encouraged to pursue higher education; however, it is encouraged to that extent that does not disrupt the traditional gender hierarchy. I remember a girl from my peer group shared her story, which goes, “My father let me study because he thinks education is important for me to raise educated children in the future.” This is not liberation, but rather a process to sustain traditional gender roles, patriarchy, and exploitation. As a result, whenever these women attempt to assert autonomy, all the patriarchal negotiations or bargains that they had made earlier begin to rupture. For instance, if a girl wishes to delay motherhood while continuing their education, or if she starts disobeying their husbands or in-laws, or prioritizes her internship or thesis over household chores, that is not appreciated in her in-laws’ house. Then the tale of compromise starts. Most

of the girls shared that they believed they were making a rational decision or negotiating wisely before entering the marriages, as they were told that the in-laws would support their education after marriage, and many of them would see it as an opportunity to escape the surveillance that they experienced from their childhood in their natal families. The childhood trauma of constant surveillance became so intense that they consider marriage as a gateway to greater freedom; however, they fail to realize that this is the alluded point of patriarchal bargain—offering the illusion of agency while reinscribing control over women in new forms. Nonetheless, once these girls get married, they can feel the trap or prison where education is not considered the primary responsibility, but rather something that is conditional and disrupts the responsibilities of married life. The invisible taglines that girls can see in their in-laws' faces: *"Do not neglect your domestic duties. Do not delay pregnancy. Do not outperform your husband. Do not use your education to challenge norms."* They can sense the chilling weight of patriarchal bargain in their bone, where they are both subjects and enforcers of patriarchy. I have seen many girls in my university who carry this cold imprint of the patriarchal bargain by coming late to class, making painful compromises, submitting assignments after the deadline, performing roles they never wanted, and smiling through suffering because this is the only way that their parents chose for them, and they somehow believed this is the path of liberation. I have seen this suffering dressed as love, as care, as tradition, and as protection in many places.

Not only the material dependence of the women but also the emotional investment is associated with the patriarchal bargain, which makes it even more difficult to break the ongoing practice. Many women try to pacify themselves by thinking that all the sacrifices that they are making or the restrictions they are facing will bring comfort or respect in their later life. As a result, they often identify these restrictions as protection or care. I have heard many women justify their husbands' anger or restrictions as, "He is just worried about me; whatever he is doing is for my own good." However, there are times when these false justifications turn into exhaustion; the exhaustion from carrying the weight of their own dreams while also fulfilling everyone else's expectations; the exhaustion of fulfilling their parents' demands, or the exhaustion of not being able to satisfy their in-laws by doing everything possible. Ultimately, these students start questioning their ability, the ability to become a good mother, a good wife, or a good daughter-in-law. The fear of failing these roles constantly makes them shrink themselves, suppress their ambitions, and sacrifice their academic pursuits to preserve the fragile balance of expectations that define their worth in the eyes of others.

From the Frying Pan into the Fire: The Triple Burden of the Married Girl Student

In the social and cultural fabric of Bangladesh, marriage is considered one of the most important social institutions. Hence, both society and parents want women to get married as it does not welcome single, divorced, or separated women. (Biswas and Mukhopadhyay 2018). Even women who marry late are not considered an ideal form of a bride in the community. Both women and their parents have to face persiflage from their kin, neighbors, and society if they decide to marry off their daughter after a certain age. As a result, parents often live under excessive social pressures to marry their daughters off early. Even women's education, job, or career is considered a less essential factor in life. It is an established social norm that a well-off marriage can only bring dignity to their daughters' lives in the context of Bangladesh. Although it is anticipated that marriage makes women's lives more secure, studies show that women are less likely to make career advancements past their husbands and less likely to prioritize their career goals (Elizabeth, 2020). One of the main reasons behind this is the "triple burden" that female students have to face after marriage: the roles of wife, student, and mother. The pursuit of higher education cannot help them get rid of all the responsibilities that are associated with households. Instead, they are exposed to another layer of responsibilities to an already burdened existence. Their in-laws expect them to get up early in the morning to prepare meals, clean, and fulfill their duties as wives and daughters-in-law before they focus on their academic work or go to the university. Even after spending

long hours at university, when these students return to their houses, they are expected to carry out the second shift of unpaid labor, which includes cooking dinners, washing dishes, and all other household chores. Weekends, which are often considered a time for students to catch up on assignments or rest, become fully occupied with hosting guests, deep cleaning, or fulfilling traditional roles in family events. In Bangladeshi society, women are expected to perform all the unpaid care duties. Cooking takes up the majority of women's unpaid labor, with the average woman devoting 12 years of her life to unpaid care work (Byron and Mahmud 2022). According to research by Action Aid that polled 316 people in the rural north, women spend an average of 6.45 hours per day performing "care work" at home, compared to men's average of 1.2 hours. However, the problem that is associated with women's unpaid labor is that they never get the due recognition, nor do they get appreciation. Heidi Hartmann, in her essay "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism Towards a More Progressive Union" (1981), has pointed out this dilemma where she argued, "men benefited from not having to do housework, from having their wives and daughters serve them, and from having the better places in the labor market" (Hartmann, 1981). The essentialism of women's association with household chores has been focused on in other feminist writing as well. For instance, Silvia Federici in her manifesto "Wages against Housework" (1975) has pointed out, "Not only has housework been imposed on women, but it has been transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character (Federici, 1975). When all the domestic works are considered the responsibility of women only, then their academic efforts are seen as secondary, a "luxury" they are allowed so long as it does not interfere with their "primary responsibilities." This constant juggling of roles leads to exhaustion, mental fatigue, and in many cases, delayed graduations, poor academic performance, or emotional burnout. According to a recent study conducted in Pakistan, several important antecedents are crucial in preventing women from participating in the workforce after graduation. These include economic decision-making, ongoing marital pressure, women's mobility, the role of society, objectification of women, and overt discrimination and violence (Anjum, Kamal, & Bilwani, 2019). These social and cultural antecedents make women get married early, and often, women are discouraged by their husbands, in-laws, and even their parents to pursue a career in the future. Their intellectual labor is rendered invisible, while their domestic labor is demanded without question. In those prisons which is disguised as houses, and with the demand of gendered division of labor, these students' dreams must quietly coexist with dirty dishes, diapers, taunts, and the unspoken pressure to never let their ambition disrupt the order of the family. I have seen this with my own eyes—friends, cousins, classmates—brilliant students, who once used to dream of achieving something on their own or building a career with their intellectual independence, have struggled to find some time to complete a small assignment.

One of the most brutal aspects of this situation, which comes as the last burden, is the reproductive coercion that these students face. One of my juniors in the university shared that as soon as they are married, their bodies become a site of familial investment to their in-laws. In-laws and extended relatives, even the parents of the students, often question them euphemistically about when the good news will come. Many of the students wish to delay their pregnancies, considering the workload in higher education, or wish to finish their degree, build a career, or, many times, just wish to spend some time with their partners; however, in most cases, they are denied that choice. Loretta Ross, in her work on Reproductive Justice (2005), reminds us that true freedom lies not only in the right to abortion or contraception but in the ability to parent, or not to parent, in safe, dignified, and empowering conditions. Nonetheless, this right to or not to parent is a nonexistent concept for Bangladeshi female students. Moreover, Loretta Ross's Reproductive Justice (2005) framework helps to understand how a shift from individual "choices" to structural conditions has happened, which does not allow these students to choose their rights regarding pregnancies. The issue is not merely about these young women's lack of access to contraception or safe abortion, but about the absence of a safe and sound environment that respects young women's careers and future aspirations beyond their reproductive and domestic roles. In this scenario, the

demand to bear children becomes not just a familial expectation but a disciplinary tool that ensures their compliance with the broader gendered order.

The Gendered Performance of Being “Good”

All the pressures that a girl has to go through from her childhood to her early life to her old age are somehow associated with the gender roles that society expects from her. Whoever performs her role rigorously is considered an ideal woman. My paternal grandmother used to say: *“A girl must learn to bend like bamboo so that she can get used to every situation that comes in her life”*. If my grandmother ever met Judith Butler, they might have told her to end the gender performativity (1988) that my grandmother, mother, or aunt has been doing for years. Their roles are not innate but are enacted repetitively under constant surveillance. A good wife wakes early, cooks for her husband and in-laws, dresses modestly, speaks softly, and always obeys. A good daughter listens to their parents, does not stay outside for too long, and gets married whenever their parents want. A good student arrives at class on time, completes assignments, speaks in seminars, and stays focused. A good mother must be endlessly patient, nurturing, and devoted. As Butler argues, “gender is in no way a stable identity of locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 1988, p. 353). What is overlooked is that these roles are often mutually exclusive and demand competing energies.

When a married student comes to class late because she had to feed every member of her family, cook three or four curries, and put lunch on the table, the institution does not accommodate her struggle. When she misses a deadline because of her child's fever, the professor does not offer extensions; instead, they question her commitment because educational institutions do not need to understand the dilemmas and constraints that exist in an institution like a family. When she is exhausted and fails to smile in front of her husband, she is labeled “neglectful” or “cold.” And when she expresses frustration at any of this, when she dares to say “I am tired,”—the family reminds her that this was her choice. But was it really? Many try to negotiate within the system—sacrificing their leisure, their friendships, and sometimes even their dreams—in the hope that if they perform well enough, they will earn peace. But peace never comes. The goalpost keeps moving. First marriage, then motherhood, then child-rearing. And somewhere along the line, her academic aspirations became an indulgence she could no longer afford.

Conclusion

Despite all this, these women resist. Their resistance may not always look radical. It may come in the form of staying up late to finish a paper after nursing a sick child. It may come in skipping a family dinner to attend a lecture. It may come in the form of secretly applying for scholarships to study abroad. However, these small acts are also revolutionary. In the quiet corners of their rooms, after the household has gone to sleep, they read the works of Audre Lorde, Gayatri Spivak, and Sara Ahmed. They mark the passages that speak to them. They imagine lives outside these walls.

And I, too, find strength in their stories. I have listened to their pain, their hope, and their exhaustion. I have sat with them through miscarriages and thesis defenses, heartbreaks and dissertations. I carry their voices with me in my work because their lives expose the contradictions of development, empowerment, and modernity. They remind me that gender justice cannot be separated from reproductive justice, from economic justice, from emotional justice. They show me that the revolution does not always arrive with a bang. Sometimes, it comes quietly—one stolen hour, one published paper, one whispered “no.”

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