

Hegemonic Masculinity in the Marginal Societal Context

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Abstract: The concept *hegemonic masculinity* developed by R.W. Connell is considered as the most commanding tool to analyse the power dynamics in gender relations. But the discursive notion of the Western model of hegemonic masculinity falls short apart to deliver extensive conceptual and practical implications in the complicated context of marginal society. Although there are obvious ideals of hegemonic masculinity in the marginal societal context, several complications are also associated with this concept. I critically examine the implications of a few cross-currents of marginality such as migration, poverty and unemployment in relation to men's situatedness and positionalities in the context of Bangladesh. As men in this marginal society are in constant negotiations with their livelihood means, the conceptual version of Western hegemonic masculinity seems unpersuasive to express men's real-world situations. It is imperative for non-Western (Global South) scholars involved in research and analysis of men and masculinities to embrace the local context and cultural realities more conspicuously in order to get rid of conceptual imperialism.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity, marginality, poverty, migration, unemployment, Bangladesh

AGAINST THE CONCEPTUAL IMPERIALISM OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

In this conceptual paper I critically assess the implications of R.W. Connell's (1995) discursive notion of hegemonic masculinity in a marginal social context namely Bangladesh. R.W. Connell, an Australian sociologist, is regarded as the most dominant theorist in men and masculinity studies (Wedgwood 2009).

R.W. Connell (1995, 77) defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and

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the subordination of women”. The core appeal of Connell’s theorisation indicates that masculinity is a socially constructed phenomenon—contrary to essential or sex role perspective which views gender as fixed and inherent characteristics of individuals (Everitt-Penhale and Ratele 2015). By hegemony, Connell refers to an expression of the culturally most worthwhile means/standard of being a man or boy, and against which all other men and boys measure their practice in a particular place and time (Ratele et al. 2010). Connell placed hegemonic masculinity at the apex of a hierarchy of masculinities: hegemony, subordination, complicit, and marginal (Connell, 1995; Wedgwood, 2009). Hegemonic masculinity is the normative/idealised pattern of masculinity and nurturing this kind of masculinity is the most honoured way of being a man (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

Since inception, the concept has been widely endorsed, used, debated, and also reformulated/refined (Ibid.). For example, according to Hearn (2004), hegemonic masculinity is unclear, burdened with contradictions and eventually fails to demonstrate the autonomy of the gender order. It also seems to be a fantasy, and not embodied by all men (Plester 2015). Broadly, such masculinity appears to be associated with the white, Western, rational, calculative, individualist, violent, and heterosexual configuration of practice and not to be infected by non-hegemonic/subordinate elements such as black, non-Western, irrational, effeminate, or non-violent (Demetriou 2001). As specific social identities such as Western, rich and heterosexual are attached to the privileged ones, there is a likelihood to deliberately exclude some groups of men from the hegemonic position on the basis of their devaluated group memberships. That is to say that being a man of colour, gay, and working-class or poor creates various obstacles to accessing the full range of male privilege/hegemonic masculinity (Hurtado and Sinha 2008). Sketching a consistent pattern of hegemonic masculinity towards analysing power and gender relations is always difficult (Groes-Green 2009). Undoubtedly this concept has academic acumens, but its implications must be critically assessed in terms of societal, cultural and transnational contexts (Hearn and Morrell, 2012). This problem is about the inappropriateness or limited conceptual and analytical value of Western models of knowledge and ideals of masculinity in Eastern and African and, more generally, Global Southern context. Suggestions have been made of ridding ourselves of *conceptual imperialism* or *the tendency of replication*,

critically and reflexively delve into local expressions of manhood and womanhood, and develop questions and lenses generated from within specific cultural and social contexts (see Louie 2002; Hibbins 2003).

While writing this note I am tempted by the important call of Kopano Ratele (2014), an influential scholar from the Global South, who expresses serious concern regarding work on men and masculinities. He suggests researchers on men and masculinities must pay closer and reflexive attention to history, local flows of life, to power in context. Some new questions stimulated include: Are poor men in a country like this ideologically and psychosocially more dominant – or less dominant – than poor women, or rich men ideologically and psychosocially more dominant – or less dominant – over richer women? How are we to define and examine men's gender power in such a country? If there is more than one way to consider men's power, what are the many definitions and concomitant approaches to men's power? Ratele (2014) also observes that while there are common ideas about the life of power between men and women and the power among men, the idea of hegemonic masculinity is challenged when we have a large number of men living on the margins within a country. Therefore, he suggests, it might be best for researchers of masculinities outside of the rich countries to start to think about how hegemonic masculinity operates within zones of marginality. An assumption made here is that there is a potential disjuncture between theory and lived reality in marginal societies. I consider Bangladesh as a marginal case example to travel with my arguments. My choice to include this country is both personal and political. As a writer from Bangladesh, I reckon such effort will add a new outlook to the existing (limited) Bangladeshi knowledge base.

MARGINALITY, MEN AND BANGLADESH

The meanings of marginality and marginal regions have been applied in a broad variety of disciplines and have also generated substantial academic debates (Chand, Nel and Pelc 2017a). In some cases, marginality is regarded as a fixed entity referred to different regions, groups and individuals (Cullen and Pretes 2000). In other cases, it is a multidimensional and interdisciplinary concept integrating poverty, discrimination and social exclusion. A marginal population only finds limited access to resources, assets, markets, technology and services (von Braun and Gatzweiler 2014). Broadly, it is a state of complicated impediments which individuals and communities experience as a result

of vulnerabilities regressed from unfavourable environmental, cultural, social, political and economic factors. Thus, it makes negative impacts on the abilities of many people and societies in the wake of improving their human conditions (Chand, Nel and Pelc 2017b). It is noteworthy that no single definition provides any objective and precise demarcation between marginal and non-marginal areas (Pelc 2017).

Nonetheless, critical socio-economic indicators provide substantial evidence to label Bangladesh in the global marginal socio-economic economic order. Bangladesh falls into the South Asia region of the Global South. South Asia is the second-lowest growth rate region in the world (United Nations Development Programme 2018a). The region has 40% of the world's poor, and 399 million people in the region live under \$1.25/day (2005 purchasing power parity), living in extreme poverty (World Economic Forum 2016). The United Nations Human Development Report 2019 confirms that Bangladesh falls into the Medium Human Development Index (HDI) category, positioning it at 135 out of 189 countries (United Nations Development Programme 2019). The World Bank's Human Capital Index (HCI) which comprises the knowledge, skills and health that people accumulate throughout their lives shows that Bangladesh ranks 106 among the 157 countries with an HCI score of 0.48, fall short of the global average HCI (0.57) score (World Bank Group 2019). The snapshots captured above provide substantial evidence about the pervasiveness of marginality of Bangladesh on the global order.

Among others, migration is a critical indicator of marginality for men in Bangladesh. There are two trends of migration in Bangladesh: internal and external/international. Bangladesh is the 5th largest country with approximately 7.5 million people living outside the country (United Nations 2017). Since many incumbents opt for unofficial/illegal channels to cross the border, real figures are likely to be much higher than the official sources (Erling et al. 2015). International migration is predominantly a male-centric approach in Bangladesh. Men are expected to support the family economically. Therefore, they attempt to migrate to earn money, leaving their families behind (Brichall 2016). Widespread poverty, unemployment and underemployment, natural disasters, climate change, youth age structure, and various socio-cultural factors act as dominating push factors influencing the people to migrate (Kibria 2011). Outbound/international migration has been a long livelihood strategy for the poorer households in Bangladesh despite the high cost involved

in the process (Afsar 2009). Households of the prospective migrants bear the burden of financing the process through borrowing loans, selling land, personal saving, selling precautionary asset and mortgaging land for money (Moniruzzaman and Walton-Roberts 2018). Under such a context, prospective migrant men can be placed in the nexus of both masculine privilege and social marginality. Households deplete their valuable and limited resources to finance their male members' (masculine privilege) costly livelihood strategy since no other better alternative (social marginality) is available for men. Under such a context men's marginality can only be renegotiated if they remit money home. Remitting money helps Bangladeshi men to preserve their masculine role as providers and allow them to maintain status and honour as respectable men (Stevanovic-Fenn 2014). The perceived hegemonic role, status and expectation might likely invite long-term effects on the poorer households. Research confirms that it usually takes several years to completely repay the migration-related costs and debts by migrant men. Migration-related debts and burdens make a devastating impact on the households and resulted in complex, unsuccessful and unsustainable livelihood strategy (Moniruzzaman and Walton-Roberts 2018). Therefore, migrant men's hegemonic position tends to fall into the vicious cycle of migration episode.

Women who are receiving remittances from their migrant husbands might find good ways to change their social position. Women in absence of their husbands become enabled to enjoy higher autonomy, independence, freedom and decision-making power. They enjoy *de facto* position of the head of the family and shoulder on familial responsibilities; women in this way contributing to redefining the patriarchal norms through maintaining roles both inside and outside the home (Islam, Parvin and Kalam 2013). Several questions may be asked in this connection. How does migrant men's hegemony negotiate with household control and decision-making process? Does physical distance preclude men performing hegemony? Do men unproblematically accept the transformed roles of women?

Migration is a risky and dangerous behaviour as well. In order to conform to the role model of real men, men take various life-threatening risks to reach high-value destination countries. For example, Bangladesh emerged as the single biggest country of origin for refugees on boats arriving in European shores crossing the deadliest Mediterranean Sea passage were dying by drowning, hypothermia, and suffocating is so common (Dearden 2017). Most

migrant male workers from Bangladesh are engaged in dangerous, life-threatening, dirty and demeaning jobs abroad as well (Islam 2017). More than 33,000 migrant workers' dead bodies were received between 2005 and November 2017. Ironically, the number of deaths is believed to be higher as many workers are buried abroad (Chaiti 2017). Knowing the risks and troubles associated with their occupations they continue to perform their duties as men.

The post-migration episode is also a complicated terrain. Most migrant workers do not have a plan of their post-return stage, instead, they return under unplanned or emergency circumstances (forced return). They are not aware of the avenues and options for savings, investments and productive use of remittances since most of the remittances sent by them have already been spent by the family members. Their effort to reintegrate into the local economy and the community is far more challenging (International Organisation for Migration 2018). For example, the recent Covid-19 pandemic has added fuel to the complexities associated with migration. All preliminary sources confirm that many Bangladeshi migrants are expected to return home as they have lost their source of income. Understandably, they will only be able to return to work abroad until the global labour market recovers from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (International Organisation for Migration 2020). At the same time, urban to rural migration is also underway as people are losing their jobs disproportionately due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, migrant returnees might find it difficult to negotiate with their hegemony after returning home. The ideal image of manhood created by migration most likely to be seriously downgraded once they return home forever.

Since the 1990s, as an alternative to traditional reproductive role, Bangladeshi women have moved forward to avail overseas occupations (International Labour Organisation 2014). Female outbound migration from less than 1% in 1990 rose to 6.14% in 2012 and 13% in 2013 of the total flow (International Labour Organisation 2014). The social acceptance of women's employment, education, women's autonomy within households and decision-making power stand as motivating factors for women to migrate (Bélanger and Rahman 2013). Usually, remittances sent by female migrants are utilised by their family members; if married, by their husbands, and if unmarried, by their parents or elder siblings (Women in Migration Network 2015). Are men in the households able to negotiate their

hegemonic domination with women who already have transgressed gender norm through migration? Is there any hegemony in true sense for men (father or husband) when they are dependent on the (remittance) earnings of female family members?

Bangladesh encounters serious problems with poverty and unemployment. According to *Bangladesh Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016*, present Head Count Rates (HCR) of the percentage of people living below the poverty line is 24.3% for upper poverty line and 12.9% for lower poverty line (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2017). The Gini Coefficient Index during that period was calculated 0.32 (World Bank 2018a). In terms of international poverty lines based on 2011 Purchasing Power Parity (USD 1.9 a day), 14.8% Bangladeshi (24.1 million) used to live under the international poverty in 2016. But the poverty limit goes up to 52.6% (86.2 million) in the same year when the international poverty limit for lower-middle-income country status is calculated based on 2011 Purchasing Power Parity (USD 3.20 a day) (World Bank 2018b). According to the UNDP's Multidimensional Poverty Index, 41.07% Bangladeshis were living under the multidimensional poverty line in 2014 (United Nations Development Programme 2018b). Upsettingly, experts warn that the current Covid-19 pandemic will further worsen the poverty situation in Bangladesh. There is a likelihood of an increase of national (upper) poverty rate to 35.0% in 2020 from 24.3% in 2016. At the same time, the Gini-coefficient might rise from 0.32 in 2016 to 0.35 in 2020 (Khatun et al. 2020).

Unemployment is a serious indicator of inefficiency for an economy. As per *Bangladesh Labour Force Survey*, during 2016-17, the overall estimated unemployment rate was 4.2% for age 15 or older with an estimated 2.68 million people. The absolute number of unemployed females (1.33 million) is almost the same as male counterparts (1.35 million). There are far more unemployed persons in rural areas (1.81 million) than in urban areas (0.87 million). It might indicate that unemployment is not a serious issue of marginality in Bangladesh. It should be noted that most of the labour force is engaged in informal low productivity and low-income jobs. At the national level, 85.1% of the employed population engaged in informal employment/sector during 2016-17. In this sector, 91.8% of females are employed in comparison to 82.1% of males (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2018). Men find it particularly difficult to transfer from informal jobs to formal employment in Bangladesh (International

Labour Organisation 2013). The huge scale of informal employment in Bangladesh includes a challenge for maintaining a stable and sustainable development as a workforce since they are engaged in activities which are unregulated, unrecognised and low in productivity (International Labour Organisation n.d.). Moreover, 57.45% employed labour force in Bangladesh are involved in vulnerable jobs. Vulnerable employment includes jobs that are least likely to have formal work arrangements, decent working conditions, adequate social protection and safety to tackle economic shocks, and thereby, least likely to generate savings to counterbalance these shocks (World Bank 2018c). Overall, the unemployment scenario sketches a very complex picture of marginality in Bangladesh. It further moves from bad to worse due to the impact of Covid-19 pandemic.

THOUGHTS TO MOVE FORWARD

Considering the marginal situation of Bangladesh based on a few indicators, a correlation may likely be drawn with the implications of hegemonic masculinity - which embodies a currently accepted/normative strategy of maintaining the social relations between men and women (Connell 1995). In order to enjoy the dividend of hegemony in a given society men must conform to the accepted/normative strategies of such masculinity that are deeply embedded in the patriarchal system. What might likely happen when men's (also women's) lives are invariably troubled with some complications as illustrated here? Is it possible for men to practice the ideal version of the hegemonic model of masculinity? Can all men perfectly and unproblematically achieve and practice hegemony in the same manner? For example, demonstrating hegemony requires men being the breadwinner and provider as the ability to earn income provides a symbolic and practical power of manhood. Men might feel marginalised if they fail to afford to provide their families due to the structural complexities surrounding them (Ichou 2008). Without having material goods and sufficient money men cannot fully present their power and force. As such, their self-esteem also decreases greatly (Matlak 2014). Under these circumstances, men might try to defend/guard their hegemony through any means as a valuable asset (Silberschmidt 2001). With a lack of power, men might adopt an aggressive and macho identity as a means to counterbalance their powerlessness (Haque and Kusakabe 2005).

No social science concept is ever fixed, and no social science scholar has a monopoly of its correct use (Messerschmidt 2012). Although the concept hegemonic masculinity has some academic acumens, its implications must be critically assessed in terms of societal, cultural and transnational contexts (Hearn and Morrell 2012). It is important to reframe the concept in the context of marginal societies. Such concept needs to be (re)shaped in line with men's constant negotiations with day-to-day experiences and realities. As hegemonic masculinity does not precisely represent most men (Plester 2015), it should not be taken as a yardstick of men's performance. Since the notion of hegemony masculinity under the Western model has limited explanatory power to grasp the complexities of marginal societies, we must build upon our own body of knowledge by reformulating the existing research approach. It is necessary to develop an alternative construction of the hegemonic masculinity for a non-Western marginal society taking to note of the local context or home traditions. That version masculinity can be theorised as *hegemony in marginality* or *marginal hegemony*. Such masculinity needs to be tradition-sensitive, culturally intelligent scholarship and activism, on men and with men in their locatedness in their marginalised worlds (Ratele 2014).

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