Are girls safe while going schools and returning home? Looking through a gender lens in Bangladesh perspective

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Abstract - *This qualitative study aims to explore how safe and secure the adolescent girls in Bangladesh are while going school and returning home by highlighting the ways in which such securities are ensured. Fifteen school going girls, their parents and three educationists were chosen using voluntary participation approach, convenience sampling and purposive sampling technique respectively. Questionnaire for the students and semi-structured interview guidelines for both parents and educationist were used as data collection tools. The concepts of street as a public space, patriarchy and gender relations serve as a lens to triangulate and analyze the data. The study revealed that, some problems i.e. lack of transport facilities, and guardians' fear of road accidents and unavailability are common in some extent for both boys and girls but create more anxieties among the guardians of girls due to the patriarchal structures. Bullying, unwanted talks, whistling, unnecessary touches and collide, and being followed by local men were the types of gendered experiences that the girls face frequently. To ensure daughters' safety, parents were found to spend extra money for caregivers and home rents. A clear gender power dynamics also revealed through the mothers' sacrifices in professional life. This study would therefore hopefully lead to raise awareness among the teachers, parents and school authority on the safety and security aspects of school going girls. Apart from that, the paper has a bearing on how changing the stereotyped gendered mind-sets are vital to ensure girls' independent movement in their proper development as a human being.*

Key words: *School girls, safety and security, public space, gender*

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays Bangladesh has achieved notable progress on women's political, economic and social participation by taking significant policies and strategies from both government and non-government levels. Women's participation in different fields, starting from garments to the national parliament, is noteworthy in understanding the context [1]. There has also been significant recent growth in new areas such as public sector employment, as teachers or health workers, and in self-employment and household enterprises [2]. For improving social and economic condition and reducing the gender-gap, both public and private organizations of the country has prioritized on education sector, especially for girls' education, since education is one of the most important tools to develop human resources [3]. As a consequence, the rates of enrollment of girls in the primary and secondary institutions are certainly gender-equitable. At the primary level it is 50.5% and at the secondary level the girl's enrollment shows a higher percentage (53.31%) compared to that of the boys [4].

Despite the fact that girls' participation in education has improved and they are engaged in almost all sectors in the development of the country as an active citizen, they have to face immense problem to survive in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh [5], [3]. In global-local context of public places, some incidents like eve teasing, bad comments, violence or sexual harassment by men is not very uncommon for a wide range of women [6]. Becoming victims of such incidents can effect on women's performance which ultimately will hamper the overall development of a country. Bangladesh government has taken this issue under consideration by being a signatory to the international instruments, i.e. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to ensure social security for upholding dignity of women [7].

Under section 10 of the Prevention of Women and Children Act 2000, a person is punishable with rigorous imprisonment of three to ten (3 – 10) years for touching the sexual organ [7]. Even a person making erotic gesture towards women will get punishment according to section 10(2), which has abrogated through the amendment in 2003 [7]. Moreover, if a woman commits suicide by being harassed sexually, the criminal will get punishment of imprisonment of five to ten (5-10) years [7].

In spite of such laws and support, different studies showed that women from all ages including school going adolescent girls often face such problems in the streets [8]. Since the development of a country depends largely on the formal education of an individual, it is important to explore students' gendered experiences in this regards. The secondary students of Bangladesh have to spend about six hours at school in average [9], during this long time they need to be under the responsibility of both their parents and the school authority who should be aware of how the students experience their travels. The focus of this paper is thus an analysis on the experiences that girls deal with transport and public streets while going to school and returning home. By portraying the situation from a gender lens, this study will hopefully lead to raise awareness among the teachers, parents and school authority on the safety and security aspects of school going girls.

Research objective and questions

The objective of this paper is to explore how safe and secure the adolescent girls in Bangladesh are while going school and returning home by highlighting the ways in which such securities are ensured. To achieve this objective, three research questions (RQ) are posed:

RQ 1. How the school going girls experience their travels from home to school and vice versa?
RQ 2.What are the parents' perspectives about their school going girls' safety during school hours?
RQ 3. Who are ensuring girls security and how?

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative method was chosen for this study to understand the lived reality of the participants rather concentrating on the numerical realities known as 'methodological universalism' [10]. Such method guided us to tease out the nuanced cause and fact of the research problem where we use some numerical data to strengthen the qualitative analysis [11]. To

offer a glimpse into the stark realities of the lives of urban school going girls, we utilize evidence gained through research done in June 2016 to September 2016 in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. The reason behind choosing Dhaka among several big urban cities in Bangladesh was to ensure diversity of participants since research showed that the city attracts many families outside Dhaka by offering better urban life-style [12].

We selected fifteen (15) school going girls, aged twelve to fifteen (12-15), from several government and non-government schools based on their voluntary participation [13]. Each of them filled in a questionnaire followed by an informal conversation which facilitated us to hear their own voices regarding the safety issue. After collecting data from the school going girls, we conducted semi-structured interviews with fifteen (15) parents (either father or mother) using 'Convenience sampling techniques' [14] to understand their perspective. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with three (3) educationist of the country by using purposive sampling technique to understand the broader picture of school girls' safety in urban areas. The following diagram, **Figure 1**, illustrates the steps of collecting data for this study.
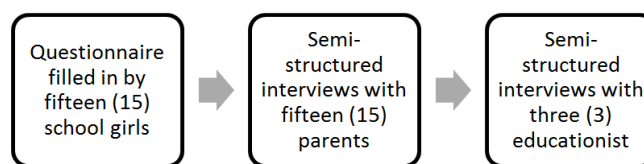
Figure 1: Steps of data collection

Finally, we triangulated the data from all the different sources to ensure the validity of the findings [15]. Apart from that, this paper took attempt to highlight several narratives about school going girls; largely coming from middle-class families for the credibility of the work [11]. It is noteworthy that, the ethical issues were considered in all the steps of this work. We started collecting the data with proper permission of the participants and proceeded for tape-recording of the conversation only after getting their consent. Moreover, pseudo names were consciously used in this paper to ensure the confidentiality of the respected participants [11]. However, it was challenging to collect real life-based data from young participants like school going girls due to the cultural setting where girls are often not willing to open up. In that case, we made an effort to build rapport with the girls before providing the questionnaire. Furthermore, listening to the parents was a critical aspect of this study as it enabled them to articulate in their own

words how their daughters face gendered experiences. This was preferred as a way of enabling the parents, especially mothers, to "tell their stories" so as to get firsthand information on their lived experiences which is consistent with Rogers [16].

Conceptual framework

This research seeks to highlight the street experiences of adolescent girls on their ways to school and to understand how safety measures are taken for them. In doing so, it is important to provide a conceptual framework that serves as a lens from which the experiences of school going girls and their parents can be viewed and analyzed. The following discussed concepts and/or key findings from the broader literature on women and public space deemed to be important to do this study.

Street as a public space and girls' safety

In urban areas, women's or girls' relationship to public spaces has examined by researchers in global-local context [17] – [19]. Many scholars like Day made responsible to women's historical exclusion from public spaces for the violence towards women [20]. As a result, it can be observed that some public spaces were not designed considering women's or girls' safety. According to Gardner [16], women can still be found to experience the public spaces differently from men. Their safety is therefore needed to analyze in ensuring gender equality. In this paper, we argue that streets connecting home and schools in Dhaka are "public spaces" and should be researched and understood as such. If streets towards school from home are viewed as a type of public space, we believe that a careful examination of how school girls experience their travels could be seen as a logical extension of the existing research on women's/girls' relationship to public spaces.

Research showed that women's fear of violence becomes more prominent while they are alone [20]. Based on such earlier research, we hypothesized that school going girls can have a kind of fear while alone. Nasar & Jones [18] support the hypothesis that such fear has been found mainly among girls than boys since they experience unwanted sexual conduct more. Such experiences are defined as sexual harassment by Koman which can be occurred in different forms like, verbal, non-verbal, visual and psychological [21]. Studies claim that, girls and women experience human insecurity differently from men and are subject to gender hierarchies and power inequities that exacerbate their insecurity [22]. Because of their lower status, girls and women are less able to articulate and act upon their security needs, as compared with boys and men.

Patriarchy

The term patriarchy was coined to emphasize on 'The rule of the father' in a family by ancient Greeks [23]. Welby [24] conceptualizes it as 'a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women', here six categories of structures can be observed, for instance, 'the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, in the state, male violence, sexuality and cultural institutions'. According to her, this patriarchy can also be looked as private and public. The private one is constructed within the household settings whereas public patriarchy can be understood by the structures outside the household [24]. Since this paper focuses on the experiences of girls on their ways to schools and to return home, the concept of public patriarchy will allow us to probe the findings related to the streets in the patriarchal context like urban Bangladesh. Apart from that, the definition provided by Millett [25] will facilitate us to understand girls' safety condition who defined patriarchy as the domination of women by men in all 'avenue of power within society'. Overall, this concept is relevant to understand the decision making process as well in ensuring the safety for the girls.

Gender relations

Gender relations refer to relations and interaction between men and women which emphasizes on their social power relations [26]. Such relations have been carefully constructed over time in most societies [27]. Their interactions have both 'material and ideological' dimensions which are visible in 'ideas and representations-ascribing to women and men of different abilities, attitudes, desires, personalities' [28]. In ideological level, public and private spheres are considered as separate domain which is associated with gender. Where women's private sphere is linked to the household responsibilities, public sphere is aligned with masculinized traits [29]. This concept will facilitate the analysis of the gendered experiences of school going girls and the actions taken for their safety by highlighting their lived realities and stereotypical social norms in patriarchal context.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

To answer the research questions by adopting the conceptual framework, we design this section in three

broad categories derived from the data: a. common problem of school going children, b. gendered street experiences of adolescent girls: means to affect schooling and c. girl's safety: in cost of what? Here in presenting the results and discussion, a thematic analysis facilitated to bring in the crucial narratives of the participants which create a forum for them to articulate their views and experiences under several themes [11].

Common problem of school going adolescents
The study revealed some problems similar in some extent for both boys and girls while going to school and returning home.

Transport to go school: waste of time and energy
Data revealed that the students suffered a lot to get public transports in working hours since all the schools do not provide transport facilities. Lack of public transport facilities is not very uncommon in the urban context of Bangladesh [30], which is why both students and their parents in this study expressed their demand regarding school bus system which can save their time and energy. One of the educationists opined on the other hand that, introducing school buses is still challenging for many of the schools in Bangladesh due to financial and infrastructural instability. Apart from this, the service that public transport system is providing via buses is not sufficient for the adolescents, especially girls, according to both parents and students of this study. One of the parents affirmed, 'it takes time to get a rickshaw (a local transport) sometimes and I often fail to find seats in the public buses while taking my thirteen (13) years old daughter to school' (Shefali, a mother, aged 34). This situation made both the parents and their children insecure. Data also depicted that,it is quite difficult for girls to compete with men for grabbing a seat in running buses which is consisted with Rahman [30]. Here our argument is supported by Harding [29] who notes that public spheres are associated with masculinized traits. This ultimately leads the school going girls to struggle more to get a public transport than a boy which portrays the gender power relation in a society to some extent [26]-[27].
Traffic jam, on the other hand, revealed as one of the key elements in wasting valuable time and energy of school going children. Both boys and girls were found to be equally victimized regularly due to the excessive traffic at Dhaka before and after the school hours. Due to this traffic jam, the working parents in this study expressed that they start their morning a little early than others since they had to attend office after dropping their kids at school. This is supported by Mahmud, Gope & Chowdhury [31] who notes that people on an average spend about 2.35 hours in the traffic of which 1.30 hours are due to traffic jam. Thus the experiences that the school going children faced before and after the school hours waste both their time and energy which can have effect on their schooling process on Koman's view [21].

Going school without a guardian?
In the urban context, students were found to depend on their guardians in going schools. Such dependency was established by the guardians considering the fact that the public street is not safe for the adolescents. In interviews most of the guardians expressed that they were fearful of sending their children to school all alone since the number of being robbed and mugged increased in many areas at Dhaka which is accord by the educationists of this study. Data also revealed, if the guardians could not manage to take them to schools for some reasons i.e. illness, household responsibilities, workload outside home etc. they had to miss attending schools. Though this problem deemed as a common one for both girls and boys, the parents reported that girls usually suffer more,

> 'Since my husband works outside home, it's my responsibility to take both my son and daughter to take their individual schools in different schedules. But if I fall sick, my daughter cannot go to school alone. She depends a lot on me and I even cannot think but to keep her at home that time' (Rokhsana, a mother, aged 40).

By drawing on Gardner's [17] concept on public spaces, data illustrates that the experiences that both boys and girls face in a particular issue can be different due to their gender. Since the exploitation of women visibly exists according to Walby's [25] idea on patriarchal context, the social structure can play an essential role in adolescents' life to experience their school journey. In this structural setting, girls automatically feel insecure in going school without any guardian which is consistent with Day [20].
Road accidents were found as another tension that lead the parents to keep their children at home if they could not manage to take them to school. One of the guardians' stated,

> 'My home is near to my daughter's school. She has to cross the main road for school but her mother and I do not allow her alone. Traffic

system is not followed by anyone. People drive aggressively in the road to reach their destination' (Bormon, a father, aged 56).

This was supported by the data collected from the questionnaire with the students where they mentioned how difficult it was for them to cross busy roads alone. While asking about the reason behind this situation, one of the educationists of this study affirmed that, 'Dhaka is expanding rapidly without a holistic plan. Thus we can see lack of infrastructure which ultimately fails to ensure road safety'. Such insecurities did not allow a majority of the parents to send their children alone to school which can also be associated with the fact that road accidents are the leading cause of deaths for ten to fourteen (10-14) years old children in Bangladesh [32]. This scenario is visible in developed countries as well [33]. Thus, guardians' fear and unavailability revealed as a vital issue for adolescents in going schools.

Gendered street experiences of adolescent girls: means to affect schooling

Multidimensional gendered challenges were experienced by the adolescent girls on their way to schools and returning home. The study revealed these unwanted gendered experiences occurred by local men aged twenty to forty-five (20-45) which were associated with bodily matters mainly. Some of the mostly found data is illustrated through a graphical presentation below in Figure 2. By drawing on Koman's [21] definition on sexual harassment, data depicts that verbal harassment was experienced by most of the girls in this study where they often were bullied and got comments (67%) regarding body shape and skin tone. Whistling, another form of verbal abuse according to Koman [21], was experienced by about 46% girls in this study on their way to schools which also posed girls on insecure position regarding their appearance. This is how girls tend to experience more psychological distress than their male counterparts which is consisted with Pipher [34].

About 46% of the participant girls experienced unknown local men trying to talk with them randomly in front of schools which are supported by Kelly [35] who found that the tendency of occurring such harassment is very high near school gates. In such situation, the girls try to avoid contacting eyes and/or listening to any unknown person. One of them have written on the questionnaire that, 'I try to keep an angry facial expression so that no one can disturb me by any word' (Lamia, aged 13). About 20% of the girls experienced being followed by those local men near schools who sometimes showed bad gestures which is supported by the data from the interviews with parents. Such visual harassment affect largely on their learning skills since adolescence is considered as a crucial learning development period of life [34].
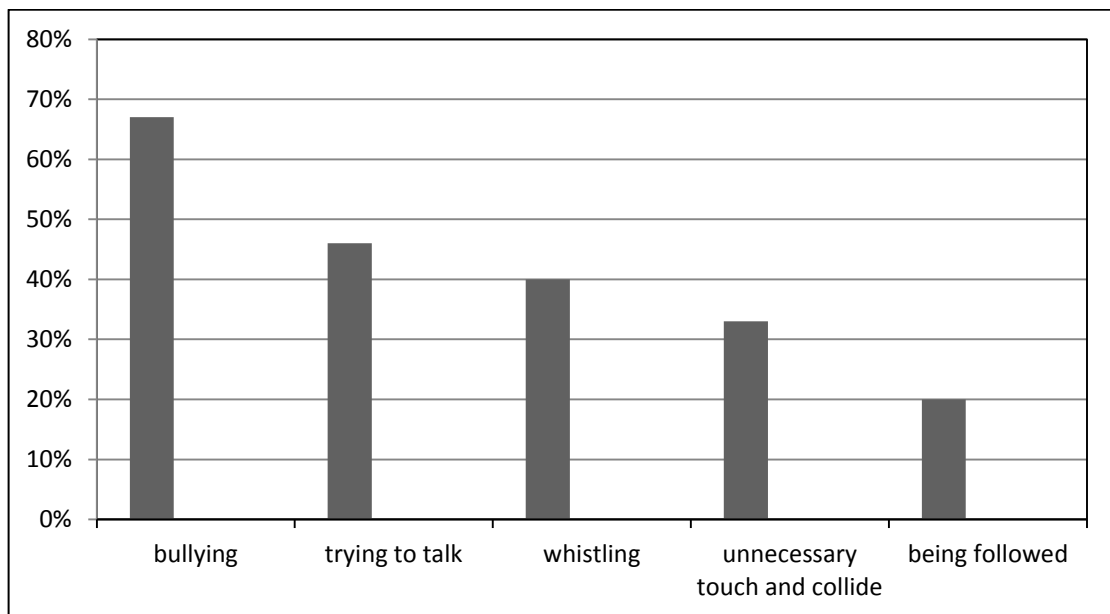

Figure 2: Types of gendered experiences of adolescent girls on their way to schools

Data revealed that some of the girls (33%) experienced unnecessary touch and collide on their way to school. It occurred in different places i.e. in front of school, while crossing roads, busy footpaths and inside bus. Such harassment is termed as non-verbal violence by Koman [21]. Research showed that the percentage of this sort of violence is very high at public transport and road side [35], [30]. Larkin [36] considered such unwanted touching as a major physical sexual harassment which interfere adolescents' school life.

By drawing on Walby's [24] concept of public patriarchy these findings reflect in what extent a girl can feel insecure to go school being oppressed by men. Studies in global context also showed that girls in high school encounter such experiences in a regular basis [37]. Our argument here is consistent with Kynch [26], who notes that such unwanted ways of interaction between men and women leads to establish unequal gender power relations. Therefore, Berman et. al [38] stated that, 'for boys, harassment tends to be a jockeying for status among peers, whereas for girls it is a matter of being put in their place, of inferiority and subordination'. This in turn, may results in low performances of girls at school which is accord by one of the educationists of this study. Apart from that, parents are often found to stop education of their daughter due to such occurrences having the burden of marrying off them in a patriarchal context [8].

Girl's safety: in cost of what?

Data revealed parents' sacrifices in ensuring daughters' safety while going schools and returning home which was not meant for the boys of same age group. Such discriminatory steps were taken by the parents considering the fact that adolescent girls need more protection in public spaces like street where they have more possibility than boys to experience harassment and violence. This view of parents in a patriarchal society is consistent with Hoque [32].

The parents were found to assign a caregiver in taking their daughters to school and/or rent a house near their daughter's school to make the travel towards school comfortable. Parents affirmed,

'As a working mother, I have to depend on a caregiver for my daughter's school duty. Wish I could send her alone! But having a caregiver after paying a lot of money still cannot give you the guarantee that your daughter is safe. I do not have any option but to trust on my caregiver' (Afia, a mother, aged 46).

'I have shifted my home near my daughter's school. It's a kind of relief now but I am paying a very high rent which is certainly a pressure' (Nazmul, a father, aged 47).

The above quotations reveal the anxieties of parents regarding their daughters' safety leading to pay extra money which they could have avoided in case of their son. By drawing on Snyder & Tadesse's [27] concept on gender relations, data depict that the existing societal structure is nourishing the stereotypes that women's movement should be restricted in relation to men because women are not meant to be in public spaces.

The sacrifices of some of the mothers regarding their professional life unveiled another dimension of gender power relation. One of them stated,

'I resigned from a reputed government job just to take care of my daughters. Now I have chosen to work part-time in a non-government organization which allows me to give my daughters enough time in taking them to schools and for tuitions. I cannot compromise my daughters' safety' (Shefali, a mother, aged 42).

Data illustrates, despite having the potentials to build a professional career, women has the tendency to nourish their gender identity as a mother which is consistent with Mahtab [5]. Two of the mothers in this study were also found to join as school teachers by leaving their corporate jobs so that their timing of work and holidays can be synced to their children. Apart from the fact that such decisions can fully be taken by the mothers themselves, a cultural constraint regarding women's gender role can exist here where they are often oppressed due to the fathers' decision making role in the societal structure which is supported by Millett's [25] concept of patriarchy. By drawing on Agarwal's [28] idea on patriarchy, additionally, such gendered steps regarding girls' safety clearly portray how the socio-cultural fabrics normalizing women oppression is considering their stereotypical gender roles. Ultimately, this oppression as a whole tends to demand more protection of girl in public places where they have the possibility to be oppressed and harassed by the men.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study set out to disclose school going girls' experiences while going to school and returning

home. In doing so, it revealed that girls often feel insecure while traveling because they experience verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment at the public places like road. Bullying, whistling, unwanted touch, stranger trying to talk or follow on the road found as some common patterns of sexual harassment by local men. Different studies showed that these insecurities hinder girls to live their life independently and affect in their lifespans [39]. In the context of patriarchal society, these issues put restrictions to girls' mobility outside home and as a consequence lead to early marriages by constructing the gender identities in a way that girl child is recognized as a woman not a child. Sexual harassment, thus, violates the dignity of girls which not only have negative effects on their socialization, but also disturbs them physically and mentally.

Apart from the gendered experiences of adolescent girls, the findings highlighted on some issues like poor transport facilities, lack of public infrastructure, lack of foot-over-bridges and foot-paths. Such situation leads to cause road accidents and unbearable traffic jam which not only create anxieties among the parents but also hamper schooling of adolescents by wasting their valuable time and energy of studying. Moreover, the fear of guardians about children being robbed and mugged was found largely. The participants of this study, therefore, argued to have school transport facilities provided by the government so that all the urban children can be safe from such unwanted situations. Educationalist emphasized to introduce private school transport facility by private sectors within relevant price since as a middle income country the school and government are not sufficient enough to provide transport to students.

Moreover, to ensure the safety of adolescent children, parents were found to sacrifice a lot regarding money, accommodation and jobs. Mothers were especially found to sacrifice their career by either leaving jobs or doing part time works. They were even encouraged by their family to choose teaching profession than corporate jobs because of the timing matched to the school going children which allow the working mother to spend enough time with their children. This also portrays the gender power dynamics which can be associated with girls' mobility against the cultural constraints. However, these mothers highlighted on the fact that the government should not only encourage campaigning for social awareness regarding girls' safety but also should work to rigid and implement the law enforcement against

harassment at public places. On the other hand, it is very important for girls to raise their voice against public harassment. Sometimes girls feel insecure to share any harassment related incident with their family or school authority because they think society would blame them. Guardians here can play a crucial role by talking freely about street experiences to their daughters. According to Haidar [40], even the urban Bangladeshi families are very conservative where the origins of gender bias are social norms and traditions. Therefore, changing the stereotyped gendered mind-sets is vital to ensure girls' independent movement in their proper development as a human being.

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