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# Beyond the talking imperative: The value of silence on sexuality in youth-parent relations in Bangladesh

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## ABSTRACT

Research conducted in various parts of the globe suggests that young people who can openly communicate with their parents about sexuality benefit in many ways. Correspondingly, in Bangladesh, the lack of an open communication on sexuality in the youth–parent relationship is considered a barrier to ensuring young people’s sexual and reproductive health and overall well-being. Taking ‘silence’ as a core concept, this paper investigates what silence on sexuality means to Bangladeshi young people in their relationship with parents. It draws on findings from an ethnographic study conducted among 72 middle-class boys and girls aged between 15 and 19 years and 18 parents living in Dhaka over a year between 2016 and 2017. The findings suggest that silence is not always perceived as problematic by young people, and this is particularly true for topics related to sexual pleasure. This paper challenges the monolithic understanding that silence is necessarily bad and hinders young people from getting what they need. It offers an additional conceptual understanding to silence for studying sexuality among youths and designing interventions for their sexual and reproductive well-being.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Sexuality; youth; silence; middle-class; Bangladesh

## Introduction

Boy: Father, when and how did I arrive on this earth?  
Father: (smiles) Your mother and I brought you from a hospital 12 years back.  
Boy: How did you arrive?  
Father: (remains silent for a few seconds) Your grandparents found me at their backyard.  
Boy: What about them? I mean my grandparents? How did they come?  
Father: (much annoyed) Their parents got them from relatives as gifts.  
Boy: Wow! I am so proud of my family! No one has ever had sex!

A Bangladeshi anthropologist film-maker told the first author this popular joke when he heard that she was doing a PhD research on the sociocultural construction of shame about sexuality among Bangladeshi urban middle-class young people. The joke makes fun of the absence of open communication between children and adults about sex in Bangladesh. Often adults assume that children do not know about sex and feel embarrassed to give information or answer their questions. The shame of talking about sex by children and adults is frequently mentioned in literature on Bangladesh (e.g.

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Gani et al., 2014; Nahar et al., 2013; Waldman et al., 2018) and in other contexts (e.g. Ashcraft & Murray, 2017; Ayehu et al., 2016; Newton-Levinson et al., 2016).

The first author, a Bangladeshi urban middle-class woman anthropologist working in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for the past 10 years, was confronted with her own assumptions about child–adult communication on issues of sexuality at the very beginning of her fieldwork. She recalls:

I had anticipated that having an open conversation about sexuality with young people would be very challenging. Hence, I was focusing on building rapport with Sajid [all names are pseudonyms], an 18-year-old boy and my first research participant. I was going slow to create an enabling environment so that he would openly talk with a woman researcher 20 years his senior. We were talking about our families, friends, hobbies and favourite films, and I could see him getting impatient. At one point he stopped me and said, 'Hey, I learned from my friend that we are going to talk about love and relationships. So aren't we? You can ask me any question you want. I only have one and a half hours before going to my class, so you better ask what you really want to know'. I almost choked on the water I was drinking and went completely blank for a few seconds. I finally managed to gather my thoughts and pose my questions. (Field notes, 14 December, 2016)

From the meetings with Sajid and 71 other boys and girls between the ages of 15 and 19 years, it became clear that silence on sexuality in youth–adult relationships is not complete among the middle class in Bangladesh. The ways participants shared their sexual fantasies and experiences in this research indicate that there can also be openness. However, what did seem stagnant was youth–parent communication about these issues. Topics they could openly discuss with a woman almost their mother's age were considered as unspeakable in their relationship with parents. Silence in youth–adult relationships therefore seems to be more complex and nuanced than how it has been understood in the existing mainstream literature on sexuality of young people.

The main research question this paper addresses is: what does silence on sexuality in youth–parent relationships mean to young people? This main question will be answered through three more specific questions: (1) when and on which subjects does silence manifest itself according to young people; (2) in which contexts and on which topics is silence experienced as limiting or enabling by them; (3) how do young people perceive silence in relation to their increasing access to the Internet and social media?

## **Rethinking the public health approach to youth sexuality and the problem of silence**

Mainstream literature across the globe has largely conceptualised youth sexuality as a health matter and viewed youth–parent communication as beneficial for young people's Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH). Open communication has been linked with increased knowledge of young people about the body and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), as well as with their enhanced positive attitudes towards delaying sex and using condoms (e.g. De Looze et al., 2015; Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2012; Kamangu, Magata, & Sylvester, 2017; Silk & Romero, 2014). Parental monitoring and control has been understood to have contributed in decreasing the rates of unprotected sex and early sexual debut among young people (Wight & Fullerton, 2013).

Against this backdrop, silence on sexuality in a youth–parent relationship has been identified as a major barrier for effectively implementing youth SRH interventions particularly in the low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Denno et al., 2015). This is echoed in a recent review (Newton-Levinson et al., 2016) of peer-reviewed articles published between 2001 and 2014 focusing on young people's utilisation of SRH services in 15 LMICs. The authors show that young people in these countries are reluctant to utilise the existing SRH services due to societal and parental disapproval of premarital sex. Seeking SRH services is considered by parents as evidence of sexual behaviour and evokes the risk of damaging the reputation of their child. Based on this review, the authors suggest that young people need to be able to talk openly with their parents. Open communication is

thus generally seen as enabling for young people, and many international experts recommend including parents in youth SRH interventions particularly in the LMICs (Ayehu et al., 2016; Chandra-Mouli et al., 2015; Kennedy et al., 2013). This philosophy is reflected in numerous ongoing SRH interventions targeted at developing parental awareness by different non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs).<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the absence of open communication has been framed as a problem in previous research initiatives on youth SRH in Bangladesh. Parents are often mentioned as gatekeepers who withhold access to essential information on SRH from unmarried boys and girls out of fear that having knowledge will encourage them to be sexually active (Gani et al., 2014; Nahar et al., 2013; Van Reeuwijk & Nahar, 2013; Waldman et al., 2018). Parents' reluctance to openly discuss sexuality discourages young people from sharing their concerns about menstruation, contraception, masturbation, size and shape of penis, STIs/STDs and sexual harassment (Gani et al., 2014; Nahar et al., 2013; Waldman et al., 2018), which leaves many of them without information or support.

Although silence on sexual issues has been noted and problematised, it has not been a central research topic for researchers yet. What we know from the existing literature is that (1) there is silence; (2) this silence is considered problematic, as it hinders young people from getting what they need. Yet, little is known about what this silence means to young people. We do not know whether there is always silence or whether it is always perceived as a barrier by the young people themselves. Previous studies that identified silence as a barrier conceived youth sexuality as a health topic and thereby mostly focused on the dangers, such as STIs/STDs or sexual harassment. An important part of young people's lives, however, encompasses pleasurable aspects of sexuality, e.g. romance, intimate relationships, sexual adventure and excitement (Cornwall, 2006; Cornwall & Jolly, 2006; Naezer, 2018a, 2018b; Naezer & Jessica, 2019; Van Reeuwijk & Nahar, 2013). Young people's sexual behaviours are significantly shaped by their motivation for seeking pleasure (Ott et al., 2006; Parsons et al., 2000; Tschann et al., 2002), their desire for intimacy (Gebhardt et al., 2003; Ott et al., 2006) and social status, such as respect from peers (Ott et al., 2006). We know nothing about the links between silence in a parent-youth relationship and these pleasurable and positive aspects.

This paper will focus on the voices of middle-class young people living in Dhaka who have received far less attention than young people living in poverty (e.g. Ainul et al., 2017; Amin, 2015). The scholars who have focused on the growing middle class in Bangladesh have indicated that sexuality and gender norms are strongly connected to this social status (Hussein, 2017; Karim, 2012), which suggests that this group has more to lose when those norms are transgressed. On the one hand, middle-class young people have increased access to SRH education at school and global information on sexuality through the Internet and social media. On the other hand, silence between parents and young people continues while the government tries to restrict young people's access to internet and pornography.<sup>2</sup> How young people deal with this contradiction we do not know. Based on the findings presented in this paper, we will argue that, in the context of rapid urbanisation and digitalisation, middle-class young people's views on silence are much more nuanced and complex than have been understood in previous studies. While in some contexts and on some topics they experience silence as a barrier, in other contexts and on other topics they frame it as enabling and liberating.

## Reconceptualising sexuality and silence

Going beyond the mainstream public health approach that Cornwall (2006) calls the 'doom and gloom approach' (p. 280), this paper will use the 'positive sexuality' framework (Cornwall, 2006; Cornwall & Jolly, 2006) to conceptualise youth sexuality. The links between sexuality and silence will be explored in relation to pursuit of knowing about their body, pleasure and intimacy.

Our conceptualisation of silence as contextual and potentially enabling is inspired by the feminist debate on the concepts of 'voice' and 'agency'. In the field of gender and development and feminist

literature, a woman's ability to speak up about her concerns and to make her own choices are predominantly understood as synonymous to women's empowerment (Gilligan, 1982; Klugman et al., 2014; Olsen, 2003). In the same vein, silence is mostly conceptualised as a 'symbol of passivity and powerlessness' (Gal, 1991, p. 175). This fails to acknowledge that meanings of silence vary across contexts and get constantly constructed in social relationships (Gal, 1991; Kabeer, 2010; Parpart, 2010; Sheriff, 2000). Silence can be imposed or one can choose to remain silent (Sheriff, 2000). One can 'be silenced' by someone else or one can 'be silent' (Fivush, 2010, p. 88).

Indeed, based on empirical findings, researchers argue that silence can be used as a strategy to avoid social stigma around HIV/AIDS (Parpart, 2010), homophobia (Lorde, 2007; Sarda, 2008), infertility (Allison, 2011) and racist remarks against women (Lorde, 2007). It can also be embraced as a survival strategy in conflict (Armstrong, 2002; Hans, 2004) or post-conflict societies (Kelly, 2000). Silent acts can also be performed as a form of resistance to oppressive social norms, for instance, wearing make-up and western clothes under the veil as silent challenges to Taliban rules in Afghanistan (Armstrong, 2002; Hans, 2004). Against this backdrop, feminist researchers in the field of gender and development have called for a critical reinvestigation of 'silence' in women's everyday lives (Kabeer, 2010; Parpart, 2010).

This paper attempts to bring this alternative framing of silence in theories on women's empowerment into the field of youth sexuality. Inspired by them, the point of departure for this paper is (1) the meanings of silence in a youth-parent relationship about sexuality can be diverse and context dependent; and (2) silence can also be experienced as enabling and liberating in certain contexts by the young people. As such, it will criticise the existing literature on youth SRH in Bangladesh and neighbouring countries that has understood silence in a youth-parent relationship mainly as a barrier to healthy sexual development and framed it negatively. This paper will critically investigate the meanings of silence to see whether it has alternative meanings to young people themselves.

## Research participants and methods

This paper draws on findings from an ethnographic study conducted among 72 (40 boys and 32 girls) self-identified middle-class young people between 15 and 19 years old in Dhaka during 2016 and 2017.<sup>3</sup> Young people defined their middle-class position in terms of belonging 'in the middle' between rich and poor. By urban, they meant being part of the cosmopolitan youth culture, i.e. feeling connected with the rest of the world through the Internet and social media, having access to a cosmopolitan lifestyle, (e.g. eating at Pizza Hut or Nando's, watching Hollywood blockbuster movies in the Cineplex) and aspiring to go to a western country for higher studies. In addition to regular school work, they saw participating in extra-curricular activities, such as debate/art/photography competitions and film/science festivals, as important for developing skills and building social networks. All the participants owned mobile phones with internet access and said they spend 3-4 hours daily on average on Facebook and YouTube.

Prior to the data collection, ethical approval of this study was obtained from the BRAC University research ethics committee. Initially some participants going to different schools (schools where students come from middle-class families) were accessed through the personal networks of the first author. Then, those participants linked her with other potential participants through Facebook. After making contact with each potential participant through Facebook and having exchanged small talks (Driessen & Jansen, 2013), a face-to-face meeting was arranged at a place of his/her choice to seek informed oral consent. At this meeting, the first author explained the purpose and nature of the study, why and how the participant had been selected and what was expected from the participant. Participants were also informed that privacy, anonymity and confidentiality would be respected by using pseudonyms, leaving out revealing data and keeping source data confidential; further, they were told of the expected benefits of the study and future use of the data. It was explicitly stated that they had the right not to participate and to withdraw at any time from the study if they so

wish. After that, their consent was explicitly asked and noted down. For participants below 18 years old, parents' permission was sought face-to-face or by telephone prior to interviewing participants.

Diversity was ensured by including teens from different schools and different neighbourhoods. Participants were 6th grade–12th grade students from 14 Bangla-version and English-version secondary schools<sup>4</sup> and from 21 different middle-class neighbourhoods<sup>5</sup> across the city. Altogether, 40 in-depth interviews (IDIs) were held with 18 girls and 22 boys and seven focus group discussions (FGDs) with five or six participants each. In addition, 12 mothers and six fathers encountered at the school gates were engaged in small talk to understand the context better.

During IDIs, the first author focused on understanding what shame about sexuality means to young people by asking broader questions such as how they learnt about love and sex, as well as in which contexts participants wanted or did not want to discuss their concerns. As a result, the paper mostly draws on findings on silence that naturally emerged during the conversations with participants rather than in response to a specific question on silence. From the conversations, it emerged that there is silence about sexuality in a parent-child relationship, and she tried to understand young people's perception on that. FGDs were conducted with similar questions to see if any additional insights came up in group conversations.

All the interviews were conducted face-to-face in Bangla and, except for six IDIs, all IDIs, FGDs and small talk were conducted by the first author. Those other six interviews, with two boys and four girls, were carried out by a 22-year-old Bangladeshi middle-class woman anthropologist who was recruited as a Research Assistant (RA), assuming that she would have easier access to the participants because of her younger age. However, as soon as we started approaching potential participants, this assumption proved to be wrong. While the RA experienced frequent rejection in the field because of her 'insider' status, the first author's strategic positioning as an 'outsider' by her introduction as a Dutch PhD researcher helped her to gain access and build rapport without much opposition.

The first author's dual position as both a middle-class Bangladeshi woman familiar with the language and middle-class culture and a professionally trained anthropologist working on a Dutch PhD provided a good balance between proximity and distance to explore in depth the perspective of young people and uncover an unexpected and underexplored side of silence on sexuality.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was read multiple times by the first author, and simultaneously coding and memoing were done in order to see what new topics are emerging. Interview/group discussion guidelines were constantly adjusted in light of emerging codes, in order to investigate those new areas. Constant comparison between codes was carried out in order to understand the relationships between different codes and identify themes. For instance, the open codes such as 'discuss menstruation with mothers' and 'no talk about romance with parents' indicated that there is silence in a parent-youth relationship. These codes then lead the first author to further probe what this silence means to young people. Then a series of more specific codes for 'silence' such as 'respectability', 'age', 'gender' and 'topic' emerged. Concepts, codes and topics were discussed during this process with the other authors and members of the larger research group. The second and third author initiated, acquired funding for and supervised the larger research programme on shame and sexuality in Bangladesh and provided thematic and theoretical context, as well as supervised and participated in the analysis and writing process.

## Findings

First, we will outline when, why and how silence occurred and was experienced as a problem by the young people (Questions 1 and 2). Second, we will present the findings on young people's positive understandings of silence (Question 2). Last, we describe how young people perceived silence in relation to their access to mobile phones and internet (Question 3).

## Experiences of silence

In response to the question if the young people had ever wanted to discuss something their parents did not want to talk about, participants commonly reflected on their puberty. Many recalled asking parents about physical changes, which, according to them, is a major concern for young people going through puberty. Whereas girls generally expressed satisfaction about the ways mothers had explained menstruation or breast development, boys felt differently:

I was so scared when I first had wet dreams. I thought I had peed in my pants. I told my mother, but she didn't say a word. A few days later, I had it again and asked her to take me to a doctor. She advised to speak with my father first. When I told my father, instead of saying anything, he handed me an Islamic book and suggested reading a particular chapter. (Rumman, 16-year-old boy, IDI)

Rumman added that his mother's silence made him think that he had a disease. From the Islamic book, he learned that it was not a disease, but his fear increased when he read in the book all the punishments for touching or looking at his penis. He had many questions but did not ask any because, by that time, he knew that this is an embarrassing topic for parents. Like Rumman, boys commonly shared that while parents could speak with them about growing a beard or change in voice, they felt embarrassed answering questions concerning the penis, such as wet dreams, erection and its shape or size.

During small talk, mothers explained why they feel uncomfortable discussing these topics with their sons:

I can explain menstruation to my daughter because I know about it. How am I going to explain the *chheleder bepar* [male stuff] when I know almost nothing about it? Also, in our society, women are not used to talk about this stuff, so it's better that fathers do it. (Mother, small talk)

While explaining their reasons for silence, mothers tended to avoid mentioning the words 'wet dreams' or 'penis'. Instead they used indirect phrases such as *chheleder bepar* or *oisob bepar* [those matters], which can be read as a sign of embarrassment. It indicates that they also felt shame in discussing those topics with another adult. However, there were a few exceptions. Two mothers mentioned that they 'had to' answer their son's questions, as their fathers were absent or worked abroad or the parents were divorced.

According to participants, fathers generally do not discuss sexual issues. Fathers viewed sexual education as a part of child care and hence as a mother's responsibility. Moreover, boys preferred speaking with their mothers, as they felt distance in their relationship with their father. 'I hardly see my father as he is always outside home for his work' or 'we only talk with our fathers about our education' were words with which most participants described their relationships with fathers. Snigdho (16-year-old boy) explained why this is the case: 'Once I read somewhere that hugging a father is very difficult for a son. It is so true! Fathers have to be strong in order to discipline their children.' Boys saw the distance in father-child relationships as a manifestation of societal expectations that fathers are the "rice" winner 'of the family and need to discipline children. While silence in mother-son relationships occurred due to the mother's shame, in father-son relationships it happened because of the physical and emotional distance. In both cases, boys viewed silence as a problem:

At that age [during puberty], we didn't have access to the Internet. Our school introduced these topics at grade seven, long after we had experienced wet dreams or erections. We only could discuss those with friends and always ended up being more confused and scared! (Sam, 16-year-old boy, FGD)

The other participants endorsed this statement that boys during puberty lack access to information.

These findings confirm that there are cultural taboos on talking about sexuality between parents and young people. However, the silence is not complete. Communication depends on the sex of the young people, with girls and mothers finding it easier to talk with each other than sons and parents. It also depends on the age, as young people only experience silence to their questions in early puberty

when they have no or less alternative sources of information. And it depends on the topic, with the penis, for instance, being considered a sensitive topic. As we will see below, certain topics were also kept silent by the young people themselves.

### **When silence is not a problem**

The answers to the question whether there were moments when young people did not want to discuss certain topics with parents yielded interesting insights. Participants distinguished differences between their concerns during puberty and post-puberty. As puberty passed, their concerns shifted from physical changes towards love, heartbreak and sexual pleasure. ‘I like a girl but am too scared to approach her’ or ‘I broke up with my boyfriend but can’t stop thinking of him’ were some of the most common concerns participants shared during our discussions.

With this shift in concerns, the dynamics of silence change and take new meanings. Whereas silence on physical changes during puberty occurs due to parents’ embarrassment, once puberty has passed, it is young people themselves who prefer not to discuss their new concerns:

We can talk about period cramps or concerns regarding being overweight but not love or topics that have any relation with sex. We can’t discuss them because that’d be just awkward. Also, there is no need. These are fun topics, not problems and can only be enjoyed with friends. (Naira, 17-year-old girl, FGD)

Seeking pleasure is thus considered as an important part of young people’s exploration of sexuality during post-puberty, which they saw as unnecessary to discuss with parents.

‘Awkward’ was a common English phrase that participants used to express their feelings about the idea of having a conversation with parents on pleasurable aspects:

The thought of speaking with parents about love or sex feels simply awkward. We are not even comfortable watching kissing scenes on television in the presence of our parents. When I was a kid, my mother used to tell me ‘Close your eyes’ during such scenes. Now she does not do that anymore. Instead, she seems absolutely okay watching romantic scenes in my presence, which makes me feel even more uncomfortable. (Rafid, 17-year-old boy in FGD)

This quote exhibits how Rafid’s internalisation of societal shame has shaped his understanding of youth-parent communication about romance, love and sex as embarrassing. Young people viewed any direct or indirect communication not only as unnecessary but also as shameful. ‘These are our private matters and we do not want to talk about them, at least not with parents’ said another participant in the group.

Participants made it clear that they do not want certain boundaries to be transgressed in their relationship with parents:

Some topics should never be discussed with parents. Sex and porn are the ones. For instance, my mother knows that I smoke and I know that she knows but I will never ever confess that ... because if I do that, the *chokher porda* [boundaries of shame] that we have between us will go away. A confession will prove that I have consciously disrespected her values and beliefs. But doing things behind her back means I am aware that what I am doing is not right. Porn or sex are also like that. (Sahil, 16-year-old boy, IDI)

At one time, Sahil’s mother accidentally found him smoking with a friend on the street. Later, when his mother confronted him, he completely denied it by saying, ‘you saw someone else, ma’. Sahil used this incident as an example to explain the importance of not trespassing the boundaries of shame in order to maintain a respectful relationship with parents.

Against this backdrop, young people often use silence as a strategy to keep these boundaries intact and do not appreciate their mothers’ attempts to initiate a conversation:

Sometimes my mother tries to be very friendly. She asks me if I like someone. The other day she saw me talking to the girl next door. After I came home, she was being very nice and asked me if I like that girl. Whenever I am on the phone, my mother thinks I am speaking with a girl or about a girl. Imagine what will happen if I tell her



that I like that girl. She won't be able to sleep at night. She will think I am not doing my studies properly. (Nafis, 16-year-old boy, IDI)

Nafis explained that, even though his parents are open-minded and allow him to socialise with girls, he never wanted to talk with his mother about girls. By consistently attaining good grades, he earned the reputation of being a 'good son'. However, Nafis feared that sharing his feelings for a girl with his mother might spark suspicion and lead to policing of his whereabouts. He thought it would jeopardise his reputation as good son. Nafis and many other participants saw their mother's friendliness and willingness to talk as 'a trap' for imposing more control on their lives. They thought that revealing romantic relationships would trigger parents' suspicion that their son/daughter was sexually active and thereby will put their reputation at stake. They kept silent to protect their good boy/girl image as well as to be seen as someone who shows respect for their parents' values.

Maintaining the image of a good boy/girl through academic accomplishments and sexual abstinence was generally considered as important by the young people, not only to protect one's own reputation or to avoid policing, but also to uphold the family's respectability:

Our parents have done better than their parents and they expect us to supersede them. Whatever we do [love, sex], we cannot do it openly. That will destroy all our and our parents' hard work. And our [family's] reputation will be damaged. After all, we do live in an Islamic society which bans premarital sex. (Rimi, 16-year-old girl, FGD)

Participants thus saw themselves as the bearers of their family's reputation. In order to maintain a respectable middle-class position, it is expected that young family members remain focused on their education and do not break the social norms regarding sexuality. These considerations and the internalisation of the importance of upholding the family's reputation, as this FGD attests to, are translated into silence on their romantic and sexual experiences and desires among older young people.

The findings show that young people go a long way in protecting their parents from embarrassing communication and seeing silence as a form of adaptation to cultural norms. This absence of communication, however, only concerns their parents and not other adults or the world at large. Some participants who lived with joint families explained that they can talk about their concerns related to love life or masturbation with older cousins or young and friendly uncles/aunties who they can trust. However, joint families are not a common phenomenon in Dhaka anymore, and most of the participants were from nuclear families and did not have their extended families around. In such cases, they mostly sought a way out through the Internet.

### ***Silence in relation to access to mobile phones, Facebook and the Internet***

The findings showed a strong link between silence and access to mobile phones and the Internet. Parents said they buy mobile phones with internet for their sons and daughters at the age of 13 or 14 years, as children need access to the Internet for educational purposes. Mobile phone operators offer free access to Facebook, which has opened new communication and information opportunities for young people on SRH: 'We have Facebook and Internet these days. We do not need our parents.' was a common response to the question whether they feel the need to talk with parents:

There are videos on YouTube almost about everything ... some of them are really good, for instance, Birds and the Bees. In no way our parents can explain sex better than those videos. They will die out of shame. (Ankur, 16-year-old boy, FGD)

Participants in general perceived Internet as a more effective source of information than parents. They use Google, YouTube and Facebook to learn about relationships, contraception or anything else they do not discuss with parents. Participants also saw the Internet as a source of pleasure:

Reading articles or watching videos about romance or sex is fun ... we use internet not only for information but also for our enjoyment. (Ramisha, 16-year-old girl, IDI)

Ramisha and many others see access to Facebook and the Internet as a gateway to autonomy. These are the spaces where they can navigate without parents' surveillance.

In response to the question how young people know which website is reliable, Sajid (17-year-old boy) said 'sometimes too much information can be confusing, but it can be worked out using common sense and verifying with other friends'. Boys in general thought Internet has helped them clarifying their misconceptions about masturbation or porn:

When I first started masturbating and watching porn, I was very scared and felt guilty. I kept thinking I am letting my parents down by not being a good Muslim. Then I looked up on the Internet and talked with friends who are religious but open-minded and realised that there is nothing wrong in doing these things. (Rumman, 16-year-old boy, IDI)

Rumman shared that he now has different views on premarital sexuality than his parents. Similarly, many other participants said that their opinions about porn, masturbation, homosexuality and virginity have changed after they read about them on Google or on Facebook. Luna, for instance, said:

After having sex with my boyfriend, I was so afraid thinking I am no more a virgin. I couldn't stop worrying about what will happen when my future husband will find out that I have lost my hymen! Then I googled and learned that all this hymen stuff is nonsense! (Luna, 18-year-old girl, IDI)

Like Rumman and Luna, participants thought Facebook and the Internet have played an important role in changing their views about premarital sex, and that they no longer share the views from their parents' generations. They identified themselves as the 'Facebook generation' and their parents as the 'television generation'. Facebook to them is an interactive medium, constantly evolving and connecting them with 'modern' ideas of romance and friendship, whereas television keeps their parents fixated on traditional ideas. They said that their parents mostly watch local and Indian soap operas/movies where traditional ideas are reinforced, such as that marriage is the ultimate goal of romance or that good girls have to remain a virgin until they get married. Participants thought that exposure to global ideas such as 'feminism', 'girl power', 'victim blaming', as well as 'friends with benefits', sex with 'no strings attached', 'group sex', 'anal sex' and 'orgasm' through Facebook and Internet has led them to view love and sexuality very differently from their parents. They see sexual pleasure as an entitlement both for boys and girls.

Ramisha, and some of the other participants, said: 'We don't need parents unless we face problems, such as sexual harassment'. However, further inquiry showed that, even regarding problems such as sexual harassment, they would indeed need their parents but still would not want to speak with their parents about such problems. Boys thought talking with parents would not bring any positive result, as people in general think sexual abuse happens to girls only and there is a lack of awareness about sexual abuse against boys. Girls thought they would lose their image as a 'good girl' after reporting such incidents. Reporting sexual abuse could expose the girls as being sexually or romantically active. A number of girls shared their experiences of being misunderstood and blamed by their mothers after reporting such incidents. Again, they saw Internet as a better and more effective alternative than speaking with their parents. To support this claim, participants showed Facebook posts where girls had disclosed the abuser's name and Facebook ID and received huge support from other Facebook users.

For young people, Facebook and Internet are thus liberating, enabling them to explore their sexuality and develop their own ideas about sexuality. Silence with parents about this liberating force is crucial. They remain anxious that their parents will find out what they know:

We know many things about sex and pretend that we are ignorant. We don't want our parents finding out what we know because that will be embarrassing for us and for them also. (Raisa, 17-year-old girl, FGD)

In this FGD, the girls mentioned that they carefully maintain an innocent image by not showing any interest in sex and avoid talking about it in the presence of their parents. They saw silence as

productive in avoiding embarrassment and upholding their reputation as sexual innocents to their parents.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The findings presented in this paper support the mainstream literature's claim that there is silence in youth-parent relationships on sexuality and that this limits young people's access to information about their bodies (Denno et al., 2015; Gani et al., 2014; Nahar et al., 2013; Newton-Levinson et al., 2016; Van Reeuwijk & Nahar, 2013; Waldman et al., 2018). However, our findings also show that the experience of silence is context dependent and is not always perceived as problematic by young people. It can be experienced as a barrier but also as enabling and liberating.

A closer analysis of the findings shows that whether there is silence depends on a variety of factors including age, sex and topic at stake. Silence on physical changes is experienced negatively at the onset of puberty, particularly by boys. Against the backdrop of a sociocultural taboo on cross-sex (mother-son) communication on SRH and lack of sufficient knowledge by mothers coupled with father's absence from child care, it is mostly boys who encountered silence on physical changes during puberty and found this problematic. As puberty passed, young people's concerns shifted from physical changes to more pleasurable aspects of sexuality, and speaking about them with parents was not perceived as a necessity, as they gained access to other sources of information and support. In contrast to their earlier-felt need for information from their parents, during post-puberty they viewed communicating with parents about romance or sex as shameful and jeopardising their own and the family's reputation, as they are expected to focus on studies and stay away from any sexual thoughts/activities. Whereas during early puberty, parents were more often avoiding communication with their children, during post-puberty young people themselves kept silent.

Findings also demonstrate that silence is multifaceted. Silence was perceived *as a barrier* by young people when they needed to speak about physical changes but received no answers. However, in the context of their positive experiences with sex in post-puberty, they viewed silence as productive. Silence was understood as *an expression of respect* for parents' views towards sexuality, which they thought is very different from their own views. Speaking up was seen as disrespectful, as it might challenge parents' views and disclose behaviour considered disgraceful for their and their family's respectability. In order to uphold a 'good' boy/girl image in the family, young people kept silent about their pursuit of pleasure and information on the Internet. Silence thus was also perceived *as a strategy* to rework the existing restrictive norms of sexual innocence and abstinence from premarital sex. Despite the restrictive norms and parental vigilance, by keeping silent about their life as well as their use of Internet, participants skilfully managed to get what they needed.

Finally, this paper reiterates the feminist call mentioned earlier for building a critical understanding of silence and for re-emphasising that silence needs to be understood in its specific context (Kabbeer, 2010; Parpart, 2010), here in the participants' urbanising, middle-class context. Participants' motivations for silence were rooted in the middle-class notion of respectability, based on the importance of youth's education and sexual abstinence before marriage. Respectability has long been understood as an important element of the construction of middle-classness in South Asia (Chatterjee, 1989; Donner, 2011; Hussein, 2017). Young people's responses indicate that they value respectability, as it is an important element of middle-class identity. They see it as their responsibility to improve their families' upward mobility through obtaining good grades and protecting their sexual reputation. They are aware that disclosure of their sexual thoughts and activities will not only destroy their reputation to their parents, but will also damage their parents' reputation in their respective families and communities. Yet it is the same middle-class positioning that helps them to explore sexual thoughts and activities beyond those of their parents. Economically, they are in the position to have mobile phones and free access to Internet. Moreover, their education has provided them with the required English language skills to search and understand information on international websites, as there is little available in Bangla.

This paper thus destabilises the predominant understanding in the mainstream literature on youth SRH that silence is always problematic and oppressive. Based on these findings, one might argue that Internet is contributing to the silence and thereby increasing the distance in youth–parent relationships on issues of sexuality. However, a closer analysis suggests that young people think this distance is necessary for a harmonious relationship. They defer to their parents out of respect and do not think it is necessary for parents to take the role of a friend. They think discussing topics relating to pleasure with parents is inappropriate and unnecessary as they can access information from the Internet. An in-depth understanding of all these structural elements of silence needs to be taken into account when researching youth sexuality. Improved insight enables the avoidance of overly generalised assumptions that silence is a serious problem and always bad and oppressive and, for health workers involved in SRHR education – or anthropologists studying youth sexuality – knowledge about when, on which topics or for which sex or age internet communication is more effective than parental communication.

## Notes

1. For instance, *The World Starts With Me* by RutgersWPF, Netherlands, implemented in 10 countries in Africa and Asia that include Bangladesh. Other examples include *Me and My World* by UBR Bangladesh Alliance and *Generation Breakthrough* by UNFPA Bangladesh.
2. <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/human-rights/the-irony-restricting-access-internet-digital-bangladesh-1386799> <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/govt-blocks-510-porn-websites-1336600>
3. This research is part of the research program *Breaking the Shame: Towards Improving SRHR Education for Adolescents and Youth in Bangladesh*, funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research.
4. Bangla- and English-version schools follow the same national curricula but in different languages. Expensive private English medium schools were not included to avoid the risk of including youths of a higher socio-economic background.
5. Class-based segregation of neighbourhoods is a prominent phenomenon in Dhaka. Slum areas or upscale neighbourhoods were excluded.

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