

# From Panoptic Control to Quiet Resistance: Navigating Gendered Childhoods and Emerging Agency in Rajshahi, Bangladesh

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study moves beyond documenting gendered disparities to examine the intricate interplay between patriarchal structures and children's agency in shaping childhoods in Rajshahi, Bangladesh. Through fieldwork that involved 45 in-depth interviews with children, parents, teachers, and participant observations across urban, peri-urban, and rural settings, the study reveals how a powerful architecture of gender inequality is reproduced. This architecture is sustained through a gendered division of labor that functions as a tacit curriculum, an economic rationale framing sons as "appreciating assets" and daughters as "symbolic capital," and a panoptic system of honor (*izzat*) that enforces female conformity. However, to complicate a straightforward deterministic view, our research identifies one primary locus of tension: media consumption. The paper argues that television and social media constitute a contested terrain wherein patriarchal norms are simultaneously reinforced and subverted. Counter-narrative exposure breeds a critical agency in children that manifests not as overt rebellion but as "quiet resistance" in the form of clandestine aspirations, negotiated identities, and inconspicuous acts of non-conformity. The study concludes that Rajshahi childhood is not only a site for social reproduction but a dynamic and contested space wherein structures of inequality are actively negotiated and, in nascent ways, challenged.

**Keywords:** Gendered childhoods, children's agency, social reproduction, media and socialization, Bangladesh.

## INTRODUCTION

Childhood is a socially constructed life phase that is highly influenced by the culture and society in which one grows. In Bangladesh, which is struggling with fast-capitalist development and thick-rooted cultural beliefs, patriarchal power remains the dominant shaper of children's experienced worlds in gendered terms. Although national policies have ceaselessly enriched educational attainment, especially for female children (Asadullah & Chaudhury, 2016), household-level inequalities that exist in the nation's psyche erupt time and again and happen to be the major site where gendered responsibilities are designated and internalized during childhood (Kabeer, 2015). A huge number of studies have mapped macro-level gender differentials in education and child marriage in Bangladesh (UNICEF, 2019). However, an unexplored area remains in qualitative, micro-level analyses that reveal the everyday mechanisms through which these inequalities are reinforced. Significantly, contested within the household and community.

This research closes this divide by examining the everyday experiences of children in Rajshahi, Bangladesh. Although the literature has successfully chronicled the what of gender disparity (e.g., the valuing of boys' schooling and the limiting of girls' movement), less is known regarding the how: the exact social mechanisms that underpin these tendencies, and how children themselves accommodate them. This paper questions: How do patrilineal formations and children's developing agency mutually construct gendered childhoods in everyday life, and what is the role of the media in this dynamic?

The research argues that childhood in Rajshahi is architected by a powerful, interlocking system of gendered socialization, economic rationalization, and panoptic social control. Yet, it is also a dynamic and contested space. Crucially, the work contends that modern media (television and social media) have become a critical arena of

contestation, simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal norms and providing the resources for children to develop a critical agency that manifests in forms of "subtle resistance." This focus on the dual role of media and the subtle manifestations of child agency provides a novel contribution to the literature on gendered childhoods in South Asia, moving beyond a narrative of passive socialization to one of negotiation and nascent transformation.

The paper is structured as follows: After outlining the theoretical framework and qualitative methodology, the researchers first delineate the architecture of gendered inequality, examining the division of labor, economic prioritization of sons, and the operation of honor (*izzat*). The researchers then analyze the contested role of media as a site where this architecture is both fortified and weakened. The discussion consolidated these results, focusing on the tension between structure and agency, followed by a conclusion that indicates the implications for research and practice.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INTEGRATING STRUCTURE AND AGENCY IN GENDERED CHILDHOODS**

To analyze the complex social world of children in Rajshahi, this study employs a triangulated theoretical framework. This perspective goes beyond the lone standpoint to both the dominant structures that limit children's existence and the subtle agency children negotiate in the midst of such limitations. Here, the paper brings together feminist constructions of gender as performance, Bourdieu's ideas of capital and habitus, the sociology of childhood's centering of child agency, and the standpoint of postcolonial feminism in order to scrutinize the critiques of the reproduction of, and resistance to, gendered inequality.

### **The Social Construction of Gender and the Patriarchal Field**

The article's starting point is the foundational feminist principle that gender is not a biological given but a social institution that is actively constructed and performed (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This "doing gender" perspective allows this work to analyze the everyday interactions (such as the division of chores, the control of mobility, and the language of expectations) through which boys and girls in Rajshahi learn to perform masculinity and femininity. However, these performances do not occur in a vacuum. The paper situates them within what Pierre Bourdieu would term a "patriarchal field," a social arena with its own specific rules, power relations, and distributions of capital (Bourdieu, 2001). In this field, the family and community operate as primary institutions where patriarchal norms are legitimized and enforced.

### **Bourdieu and the Mechanics of Reproduction: Habitus and Capital**

Bourdieu's theory of practice (1977) provides the tools to understand *how* this gendered order is reproduced so seamlessly. The concept of habitus, the ingrained, often unconscious set of dispositions and perceptions, explains how gendered expectations become internalized as "second nature." A girl instinctively reaching for household chores or a boy asserting his right to play freely are manifestations of a gendered habitus, a "feel for the game" of patriarchal life.

This reproduction is rationalized through the logic of capital. As studies in the South Asian context have shown, parents often make calculated, albeit culturally embedded, decisions about resource allocation (Kabeer, 1999). In the Rajshahi context, this article examines how sons are frequently seen as long-term investments for family security and as accumulators of financial capital. Daughters are considered to be stores of symbolic capital, whose worth is correlated with their honor (*izzat*), and whose union raises the social status of the family. With the use of this framework, the analysis shifts from viewing parents as purely discriminatory to viewing their behavior as a strategy that fits into a particular socioeconomic and cultural framework.

### **Panoptic Control and the Gendered Body**

To understand the intense regulation of girls' bodies and mobility, the study draws on Michel Foucault's (1977) concept of the panopticon. The system of honor (*izzat*) functions as a panoptic mechanism, where the constant

possibility of community surveillance and gossip leads girls to internalize the patriarchal gaze and police their own behavior. This internalized self-discipline is a powerful and efficient form of social control, making the constraints on girls appear as a matter of personal responsibility and familial necessity, a phenomenon noted in other honor-based societies (Welchman & Hossain, 2005). This theoretical lens helps explain why direct coercion is often less visible than the self-regulating practices that maintain gendered boundaries.

### **The Sociology of Childhood and Postcolonial Feminist Agency**

A framework that only addresses social reproduction and structure would be lacking and run the risk of presenting kids as passive cultural objects. The Sociology of Childhood, which views children as active social agents who influence the structures in their environment, is thus incorporated into the study (James & Prout, 1990). This is essential for examining the study's findings of "quiet resistance" and negotiation.

The study, however, refines this concept through a postcolonial feminist lens to avoid applying a Western-centric notion of agency as overt rebellion (Mohanty, 1988).

This perspective makes us more aware of the unique, situation-specific ways that agency manifests itself in the Global South (Southwick, 2021). The hidden transcript, the covert dream, the small act of non-compliance, or what James Scott (1985) refers to as "everyday forms of resistance," are some examples of how agency may appear in Rajshahi instead of public protest. Recent research on Bangladeshi youth has started to draw attention to these nuanced compromises, especially when using digital media to balance modernity and tradition (Hossain & Sultana, 2022; Abdullah et al., 2022). According to this study, children's critical agency development is most important where global media flows (Appadurai, 1996) provide "resources for the imagination."

### **Synthesis: A Structure for Adversarial Childhoods**

By integrating these theories, this study constructs an analytical model that views gendered childhoods in Rajshahi as a contested terrain. The patriarchal field, with its mechanisms of habitus, capital, and panoptic control, seeks to reproduce a specific gendered order. Simultaneously, children, as active agents, navigate this field. They interpret, bargain, and resist, using tools like media to envision alternative possibilities. This theoretical triangulation allows the study to capture the core dynamism of our findings: childhood is not a passive state of being molded, but an active space of *becoming*, where structure and agency are in constant, everyday conversation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design and Philosophical Approach**

This study was based on an interpretive phenomenological approach and used a qualitative research design. This method was employed to learn about people's lived experiences from their own perspectives and how they interpret their social environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative design was thought to be the most suitable for gathering rich, contextual, and detailed data because the goal of the study is to investigate the complex, everyday mechanisms of gendered socialization and children's agency.

### **Study Area and Participant Selection**

The study was carried out in the Rajshahi District over a period of six months. The research area was chosen using a method that identified a region in northwest Bangladesh that best represents the dynamic interaction between fast socioeconomic change and traditional norms. The study used a multi-sited approach across three different settings to guarantee contextual diversity: 1. Urban: The neighborhoods in the Rajshahi City Corporation; 2. Peri-urban: The Yusufpur union of Charghat Upazilla, which represents transitional areas on the outskirts of the city; 3. Rural: Two villages in Godagari Upazilla, which capture the perspectives of the riverbank and agrarian communities.

A purposive sampling technique was used to choose participants in order to guarantee that cases with a wealth of information pertinent to the study questions were included (Patton, 2015). To help with recruitment, certain standards were set:

**Children:** ages 10 to 17, from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, with a balanced representation of both genders, enrolled in or dropped out of school.

**Parents:** To offer intergenerational viewpoints, the participating children's mothers and/or fathers.

**Teachers:** To provide an institutional perspective, they are from schools in the corresponding urban, peri-urban, and rural settings.

Initial contact was made through local community leaders and school headmasters or teachers. Snowball sampling was then used cautiously to identify further participants, while continuously monitoring for diversity against the selection criteria. The final sample consisted of 45 participants, detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Category	Sub-Category	Urban	Peri-urban	Rural
<b>Children</b>	Boys (Aged 10-14)	4	3	3
	Girls (Aged 10-14)	4	3	3
	Boys (Aged 15-17)	2	2	2
	Girls (Aged 15-17)	2	2	2
<b>Parents</b>	Mothers	2	1	1
	Fathers	1	1	1
<b>Teachers</b>	Primary School	1	1	0
	Secondary School	1	0	1
	Madrasa	0	1	1
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>		<b>17</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>14</b>

## Data Collection Methods

To facilitate triangulation and increase the reliability of the results, data were gathered using two main techniques.

**In-depth Interviews:** There were forty-five semi-structured interviews, each lasting forty-five to ninety minutes. For kids, parents, and teachers, different, adaptable interview guides were created. Children's guides addressed everyday routines, goals, household duties, and media habits while using language that was appropriate for the child's age. Adult guides delved into ideas of honor (izzat), educational investments, and gender roles. To maintain confidentiality, all interviews took place in private settings using the participants' native Bangla language. Interviews were recorded on audio with informed consent.

**Participant Observation:** In each of the three study locations (rural, peri-urban, and urban), three concentrated participant observations lasting roughly four to five hours were made. Interactions took place in the courtyards of homes, at tea stalls that boys visited, and in public areas where girls gathered. The practical division of labor, spatial dynamics, and non-verbal cues were all documented in detail in the field notes, which provided vital context to support the interview narratives.

## Data Processing and Analysis

The data analysis was conducted using the six-phase framework for reflexive thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). NVivo 12 was used to manage the data in an iterative and collaborative process.

**1. Familiarization:** The research team carefully verified the accuracy of the audio recordings by transcribing them verbatim in Bangla.

**2. Initial Coding:** The codes (such as "mobility restrictions," "izzat talk," and "media aspiration") were created collaboratively by the lead authors.

- 3. Theme Development:** To guarantee coherence, the initial codes were categorized into possible themes, which were then examined and improved upon in comparison to the complete dataset.
- 4. Finalizing Themes:** Four key themes emerged from this process: 1) The Gendered Division of Labor as Social Reproduction, 2) Economic Rationalization and Male Capital Priority, 3) Izzat as a Panoptic Mechanism, and 4) Media as a Contested Terrain for Agency.
- 5. Reporting:** The analysis was synthesized into a narrative, supported by carefully translated participant quotes that reflect the original meaning and context.

### Ethical Considerations and Researcher Positionality

All participants who were older than 18 years old provided written informed consent. Both the child's and their parent or guardian's written informed consent were required for child participants. Each participant was informed of their right to withdraw from the activity at any time. To protect confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used in all publications and transcripts. Because the writers were Rajshahi scholars, their insider status made it easier for them to communicate in terms of language and culture, and the researchers actively engaged in reflexivity to lessen any potential biases. The researchers documented and discussed how their own subjectivities, including their gender, educational background, and urban upbringing, might affect how they interacted with participants and how they interpreted the data in a collaborative research journal they kept throughout the fieldwork and analysis. When interviewing girls who expressed limited aspirations, researchers purposefully took into account their own privileged educational journeys in order to avoid forcing their narratives onto the experiences of participants.

Researchers were able to pay closer attention to the participants' lived realities and meanings through this ongoing process of critical self-reflection.

## RESULTS: THE ARCHITECTURE OF A GENDERED CHILDHOOD

The field data show that gender is not just a factor in Rajshahi childhood; it is a fundamental aspect of its architecture. This construction produces two separate, parallel experiences of growing up, driven by a strong logic that gives girls' symbolic value as the heirs to family honor and boys' future economic potential priority. The following findings describe the fundamental elements of this architecture, the systems that support it, and the new fissures that are appearing in its base.

### The Pedagogy of Social Reproduction: Gendering Space and Labor

According to the data, children are methodically socialized into their expected adult roles through the gendered division of labor, which serves as a kind of unwritten curriculum. Spatial segregation, a pedagogical distinction in chores, and a discourse of naturalization are the three interconnected mechanisms that define this process. Table 2 summarizes the core patterns of this division.

Table 2: The Gendered Division of Labor and Socialization

Dimension	Boys' Socialization	Girls' Socialization
<b>Spatial Domain</b>	Public, outward-oriented (markets, fields, streets)	Private, home-bound (homestead, courtyard)
<b>Nature of Tasks</b>	Episodic, non-core, "helping" (errands, repairs)	Immersive, core household, "duty" (cooking, cleaning, childcare)
<b>Stated Rationale</b>	Training for economic and public life	Training for marital and domestic roles
<b>Pedagogical Frame</b>	"Learning to be a man" / Building confidence	"Real education" ( <i>Asol Shikkha</i> ) / Protecting honor

### Spatial Segregation and the Gendered Map of Mobility

A pronounced disparity in spatial freedom was a foundational finding. Boys were actively encouraged to inhabit and navigate public spaces, with their domains extending radially from the home to markets (*haats*), playing



fields (*maidans*), and streets. This mobility was explicitly framed as essential training for future economic independence and social confidence. A father's justification on this issue: *"How will he learn to deal with people, to bargain, to be a man, if he is always inside the four walls of the house? He must visit outside the home."*

On the other hand, girls' lives were meticulously circumscribed within the boundaries of the homestead (*bari*). Their movements were strictly controlled, requiring both express authorization and a "legitimate" reason, like going to school or seeing close relatives. Under the pretext of protection, unsupervised mobility and aimless socializing were strongly discouraged. A rural village's ethnographic notes eloquently depicted this division: a rowdy group of boys was playing cricket on a dirt road, while their sister, who was about the same age, was sitting in the courtyard, quietly sorting lentils, her eyes occasionally straying to the game outside.

### ***The Pedagogy of Chores: "Helping" versus "Duty"***

The system's reproductive logic was further exposed by the qualitative character of the tasks that were given. For boys, chores were usually episodic, unrelated to the day-to-day operations of the home, and presented as "helping" with a clear, time-bound objective (e.g., buying groceries, helping in a family shop). Domestic work was immersive, continuous, and essential to the main functions of the home for girls. Their training progressed smoothly from early small-scale duties to primary accountability for crucial tasks: cooking (*ranna*), cleaning (*ghor poriskar*), and sibling care. This was not perceived as temporary assistance but as crucial, lifelong preparation. A mother's explanation to her daughter was telling: *"If I do not teach her these things now, what will her in-laws say? They will say she is from an uncivilized house. This is her real education."* This process naturalizes the female identity as inherently tied to caregiving and domestic competence.

### **Rationalizing the Divide**

This systemic division was consistently justified by parents and community members through a powerful discourse of natural aptitude and future utility. The phrase *"meyeder ei jinish gulo shojjo"* (these things are appropriate for girls) was routinely invoked to essentialize domestic competence. Concurrently, boys' exemption from these duties was rationalized by their presumed need to focus on academic and future professional pursuits. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle: boys receive no domestic training, their subsequent lack of skill is taken as proof of their innate unsuitability for such work, and the burden of labor falls to girls by "natural" default. This pedagogical architecture ensures the intergenerational reproduction of a gendered family structure with minimal friction.

### **Economic Rationalization: Sons as Assets, Daughters as Liabilities**

Parental decisions on resource allocation are governed by a patrilineal economic logic that rationalizes inequality through a calculated, yet deeply gendered, risk-and-return analysis. This framework explicitly values sons as long-term economic endowments, while positioning daughters as symbolic capital and managed financial liabilities. Table 3 contrasts the underlying economic perceptions driving these investment strategies.

Table 3: Gendered Economic Logic in Household Decision-Making

Dimension	Perception of Sons	Perception of Daughters
<b>Primary Role</b>	Future breadwinner & social security ("pension plan")	Bearer of family honor & marriageable asset
<b>Type of Capital</b>	Economic & Social Capital	Symbolic Capital
<b>Investment Rationale</b>	Appreciating an asset	Managed liability; investment enhances marriage prospects
<b>Response to Scarcity</b>	Protected at all costs; education prioritized	Expenditure curtailed; early marriage considered

### **Sons as Appreciating Assets and Social Security**

Investment in a son is universally perceived as a strategic investment in the family's long-term advancement and old-age security. Expenditures on his education, nutrition, and healthcare are viewed as direct investments in the

family's future earning capacity. This perception effectively transforms a son into a form of human capital expected to yield high returns. An unemployed father articulated this with stark clarity: ***"If I spend one taka on my son's education, it is an investment. When he gets a good job, he will repay it ten times over. He is our pension plan (pension scheme)."***

This statement vividly illustrates the Bourdieusian logic where the son is perceived purely as a form of "economic capital", an investment with a calculable future return.

This rationale creates a powerful imperative to safeguard the son's development, even during economic hardship. Families reported making significant sacrifices (such as withdrawing daughters from school or reducing household food quality) to ensure uninterrupted funding for their son's educational expenses. His success is a collective family asset, and his failure represents a profound economic risk.

### **Daughters as Symbolic Capital and Managed Liabilities**

Conversely, investment in a daughter is primarily conceptualized in terms of enhancing her value in the marriage market, a form of symbolic capital centered on reputation (*izzat*) and domestic competence. Education for girls is often valued for its signaling effect, indicating the family's modernity and producing a more "desirable" bride, rather than for fostering autonomous income-generation. When asked why a girl's education was valuable, one mother replied, ***"An educated girl can marry into a better family. It brings us respect and ensures she will be treated well. We always want our girl to be happy."***

Here, the daughter's education is framed not as building her "economic capital" but as enhancing the family's "symbolic capital," its honor (*izzat*) and social standing within the community. Simultaneously, daughters are frequently perceived as a financial liability, a perception fueled by the ongoing costs of their upkeep and the pervasive, though illegal, institution of dowry (*joutuk*). This perception encourages a strategy of risk mitigation. During financial strain, the most direct way to reduce this perceived liability is to curtail investment in her human capital by withdrawing her from school or expediting her marriage. Thereby transferring the economic responsibility to her husband's family. A teacher's observation highlighted this stark calculus: ***"We see families take out loans to keep their son in a good private school while they take their daughter out of the free government school to save the cost of her uniform and exam fees. It is not about the amount of money, but about where the future return is believed to come from."***

### **The Negligent Cycle of Rationalization by Gender**

A self-sustaining cycle is produced by this economic reasoning. Parents guarantee their daughters' continued financial dependence by consistently underinvesting in their education and future earning potential. The initial notion that sons are the only trustworthy financial investments is subsequently supported by this fostered dependence. The system thus reinforces its own logic: boys are constructed as future sources of economic support, while girls are channeled toward economic security through marriage, not independent work. This circular reasoning normalizes inequality, framing exclusionary decisions not as prejudice, but as rational economic necessity within a closed patriarchal system.

### **Izzat (Honor) as a Panoptic Mechanism of Social Control**

Family honor (*Izzat*), developed as a pervasive and coercive system of social control that had a significantly different impact on the lives of boys and girls than just being a cultural value. This system works panoptically, where girls self-police their behavior to conform to patriarchal norms because they internalize the constant threat of social censure. Daughters bear a disproportionate amount of the burden of preserving this symbolic capital, which dictates their social behavior, mobility, and sexuality. The main workings and gendered effects of this system are described in Table 4.

Table 4: The Architecture of Honor (Izzat) as Social Control

Mechanism	Description	Gendered Impact
<b>Gendered Burden</b>	Honor is tied to female purity and family reputation.	A boy's transgression is an individual fault ( <i>gunah</i> ); a girl's transgression is a familial stain.
<b>Familial Surveillance</b>	Female relatives (mothers, grandmothers) act as primary enforcers of modesty ( <i>lojja</i> ).	Direct control over dress, speech, and social interactions from a young age.
<b>Community Gossip</b>	Fear of public opinion (" <i>Loke ki bolbe?</i> " - What will people say?) acts as a powerful deterrent.	Justifies severe restrictions on girls' mobility and social participation to avoid shaming the family.
<b>Internalized Self-Surveillance</b>	The external gaze is absorbed, leading girls to self-censor and self-discipline.	The most efficient form of control, where compliance appears voluntary.

### The Gendered Burden of Izzat (Honor)

Izzat (Honor) serves as a type of symbolic capital that is inextricably linked to ideas of modesty, feminine purity, and the moral standing of the family. The glaring disparity in the penalties for transgression was one of the main conclusions. A girl's actions are viewed as a clear reflection of the moral character of her entire family, whereas a boy's misbehavior may damage his reputation.

### Mechanisms of Surveillance

This control is enforced through a multi-layered system of monitoring. Firstly, a direct Familial Monitoring. Mothers, grandmothers, and other female relatives serve as the frontline enforcers, responsible for instructing girls in norms of modesty and directly regulating their conduct, attire, and associations. Secondly, Community Gossip, the fear of becoming the subject of neighborhood gossip "*Loke ki bolbe?*" ("*What people will say?*"), remains a powerful tool for policing behavior. Girls' activities are curtailed not necessarily due to immediate family belief, but to preempt any talk that could diminish the family's *izzat*. Thirdly, Internalized Self-Surveillance. Over time, the panoptic gaze becomes internalized. Girls learn to police their own behavior proactively, anticipating social judgment and modifying their actions to conform, thereby making external enforcement increasingly unnecessary.

### Control of Mobility and the Body

The most visible manifestation of this control is the stringent regulation of girls' bodily autonomy and freedom of movement. Their presence outside the home is permitted only for sanctioned purposes (school, essential errands) and often requires chaperoning. In contrast, boys' movements are rarely scrutinized through the lens of honor. Furthermore, girls' clothing, speech, and interactions with non-related males are subject to strict surveillance to signal modesty and purity, which are the core components of family *izzat*.

### The Differential Application of Consequences

There are harsh and clearly gendered consequences for violating these codes of honor. Perceived transgressions by girls may result in harsh and quick penalties, such as dropping out of school, increased domestic stress, or pressure to marry young to "resolve" the threat to the family's reputation. Given that their actions do not pose the same symbolic threat to the family's fundamental identity, boys who exhibit similar behaviors usually receive lighter, more tailored reprimands. Fundamentally, *izzat* functions as a strong disciplinary tool that methodically restricts daughters' liberties, normalizing their subordination by presenting control as a necessary defense of the family's most prized symbolic possession rather than as oppression.

### Media as a Contested Terrain: Reinforcement and Quiet Resistance

The study finds that the media simultaneously reinforces and subverts conventional understanding of gender. This two-role functionality transforms media from being merely a source of leisure to a significant field of



ideological battle, creating room for critical consciousness and agentic capacity among a section of young people in Rajshahi. Table 5 summarizes the dual role of media and the forms of agency it enables.

Table 5: The Dual Role of Media in Gendered Socialization

Media's Function	Impact on Gender Norms	Manifestation in Children's Lives
<b>Reinforcement of Hegemonic Scripts</b>	Patriarchal values are echoed and naturalized through local dramas, ads, and music videos.	Provides a template that aligns with parental and community teachings, making traditional roles seem "natural."
<b>Window to Counter-Narratives</b>	Exposure to alternative gender models (women leaders, athletes, professionals).	Fosters cognitive dissonance and allows children to imagine lives and possibilities beyond local prescriptions.
<b>Platform for Quiet Resistance</b>	Media-inspired "resources for the imagination" enable subtle, non-confrontational acts of defiance.	Manifests as furtive aspirations, secret online activities, and small negotiations of identity.

### Reinforcement of the Hegemonic Script

A significant portion of popular media consumed, particularly local dramas (*serials*), music videos, and advertisements, acts as a powerful echo chamber for patriarchal values. These media forms circulate what Appadurai (1990) termed "*mediascapes*" that sentimentalize and naturalize traditional gender roles. Women are primarily depicted as good wives, self-sacrificing mothers, and competent homemakers, their worth being subordinated to domesticity and beauty. Men are depicted as chief breadwinners, firm decision-makers, and public figures of power.

One teacher noted, "*The serials (drama) they watch with their families show them a world in which the compliant good daughter and the compliant good wife swallow all in silence. It reinforces what already comes from their parents.*"

This ongoing reaffirmation produces a hegemonic script that legitimates the prevailing dominant social order.

### Media as a Window to Counter-Narratives

Paradoxically, the same technological access provides a portal to other imagined worlds. Children come across

conflicting messages of womanhood and manhood through international films, sports channels, news channels, and social media influencers. Girls watch Bangladeshi women cricket players playing for their country, female news anchors discussing politics, and independent, career-focused internet personalities. The reason this exposure to what Bandura (2001) would call "symbolic models" is powerful is that it shows that these roles are achievable outside of the boundaries of regional patriarchal norms. One 17-year-old city girl revealed her secret aspirations: "*I subscribe to a software engineer girl from Dhaka on YouTube. She roams about, lives independently, and answers to nobody. My family would never believe that I spy on her. They would say it's fantasy to me, but it is a possibility.*"

Her experience illustrates how media can serve as a resource for reconfiguring notions of personal agency, a pattern noted in other studies of Bangladeshi youth (Abdullah et al., 2022).

### The Rise of Critical Agency and "Quiet Resistance"

The intersection of localized norms and globalized media scripts fosters a newly critical agency among some youth. This agency is typically expressed not in open rebellion but through what Scott (1985) identified as "*everyday forms of resistance*," subtle, disguised, and non-confrontational acts of non-compliance. The data revealed several manifestations of this "everyday negotiation":

**Aspirational Retooling:** Girls secretly nurtured career ambitions inspired by media figures, even while publicly conforming to familial expectations. This included studying "unsuitable" subjects in secret or saving tiny amounts of money.

**Negotiated Identities:** Some boys began to question rigid gendered competencies. One participant said, *"I don't see why knowing how to cook is a girl's thing,"* after being influenced by global vloggers. She also added that, *"I could learn how to make an omelette from YouTube if I could learn physics. It's only a skill."* This organization is still brittle, unequally distributed, and severely constrained. It represents new cracks in the system's foundation rather than a complete rejection of it as of yet. Because of the media's ability to help them imagine different lives, these young people can cognitively inhabit a space outside of their immediate reality, causing a critical dissonance that is a necessary precondition for social change. In this way, the media environment turns into a crucial battlefield where the transmission of gender norms from one generation to the next is being contested and negotiated more and more.

### **Inequitable Access and Differentiated Interpretation**

It is important to note that the media's role as a terrain of contestation is not uniform. The study explored significant disparities in access and interpretation shaped by socioeconomic location. Boys who are from middle-class urban families often have greater and more unsupervised access to mobile phones and the internet. They can explore a wider range of content. On the other hand, girls from rural and peri-urban areas primarily accessed media through shared family TV or heavily monitored and borrowed devices. This access inequality directly influenced media literacy and interpretive strategies. Participants from the city area with greater exposure could more critically deconstruct gender representations in both local and international media. For many girls, restricted access to the same media content (e.g., a progressive Bangladeshi vlogger) became a potent but isolated source of aspiration, whose interpretation remained a private, "Quiet" act due to a lack of a supportive and discursive society to validate their critical thoughts.

## **DISCUSSION**

The study offers a complex vision of gendered childhood in Bangladesh's Rajshahi, with a strong structural system that performs inequality while also revealing children's own agency in operating with such a system. Our findings strongly confirm the theoretical conjecture that childhood is socially constructed through gendered processes of socialization. Differential partitioning of space and labour functions as a powerful curriculum to socialize children for their future adult roles in a patriarchal order. This result is consistent with studies on South Asian environments where gender hierarchies are primarily established within the home (Chowdhury, 2021). West and Zimmerman (1987) define "doing gender" as the ongoing performance of gendered roles that reinforce social norms. This pattern of boys being oriented toward public action while girls are confined to domestic spaces is an example of this.

A convincing application of Bourdieu's (1977) ideas of capital and habitus can be found in the economic reasoning that underlies household decision-making. The cost-benefit calculus within a patriarchal framework, where boys represent economic assets and girls symbolic capital, explains why parents disproportionately invest in sons' education. This finding corroborates prior research on educational disparities in Bangladesh (Asadullah & Chaudhury, 2016) while adding qualitative depth to the study of the household-level decision-making processes behind these differential investments. The perception of daughters as financial burdens due to dowry expectations and marriage costs creates a self-perpetuating cycle of underinvestment in female human capital.

The operation of *izzat* (honor) as an effective mechanism of social control resonates with Foucauldian (1977) concepts of panoptic surveillance. Girls' self-monitoring of behavior and mobility to protect family honor reflects patterns documented in other patriarchal contexts where female bodies become sites for maintaining community reputation (Siddiqui, 2022). The gendered application of honor codes, where boys' transgressions remain individualized while girls' actions reflect upon the entire family, demonstrates how moral frameworks can legitimize structural inequality.

Most significantly, the research identifies media as a contested terrain where dominant norms are both reinforced and challenged. Television and social media's simultaneous reinforcement of stereotypes and provision of alternative role models offer what Appadurai (1996) calls "resources for the imagination," enabling children to envision different futures. The emergence of "everyday forms of resistance" (Scott, 1985), personal

aspirations, critical media consumption, and small acts of negotiation, complicate narratives of children as passive recipients of socialization and align with recent works on children's agency in South Asia (Southwick, 2021).

### Limitations and Future Research

It is crucial to acknowledge certain limitations, even if this study provides insightful qualitative information about gendered childhoods. The Rajshahi District geographic focus offers a thorough contextual knowledge, but also limits the findings' generalizability to other parts of Bangladesh. There is no claim of statistical representativeness, even though the sample size is appropriate for qualitative research. Even with rigorous translation processes, it's also probable that certain nuanced cultural meanings were lost during the Bangla-to-English translation process. These limitations indicate promising directions for further research. Comparative research conducted in various parts of Bangladesh would shed light on how regional economies and cultures influence gendered socialization. Longitudinal research could trace how early "quiet resistance" manifests in adult life choices regarding education, career, and marriage. Finally, a focused investigation into how specific digital platforms shape gender identity formation would provide valuable insights into rapidly evolving socialization processes.

### CONCLUSION

This study has shed light on the complex and widespread ways that gender influences children's experiences in the Rajshahi district of Bangladesh. We have documented a strong, mutually reinforcing system that prioritizes sons as economic investments and controls daughters as bearers of family honor (izzat) through qualitative investigation of daily routines, economic decisions, and social norms. This system continues to fundamentally structure current and future opportunities. This system is maintained by several interrelated mechanisms, as the study has shown: a gendered division of labor that serves as a tacit curriculum for future roles; an economic rationale that encourages investment in male capital; and a widespread surveillance system that controls female mobility and behavior to preserve family reputation. These mechanisms collectively reinforce boys' access to public space and economic opportunity while methodically limiting girls' freedoms and futures.

A key contribution of this research lies in revealing that this system is neither absolute nor static. Particularly through the dual influence of the media and children's silent resistance, we were able to identify important points of tension and transformation. Some teenagers can question and reinterpret their assigned roles because of the seeds of critical consciousness that are cultivated by exposure to alternative possibilities via social media and television. This evidence of agency casts doubt on ideas that children are passive socialization recipients and indicates that gender norms are being passed down through generations in a more contentious way. This study highlights the need to view childhood as actively negotiated and socially constructed. According to this study, interventions aimed at promoting gender equality should be firmly anchored in local contexts and should go beyond addressing structural obstacles such as school access. In order to be successful, they also need to take on the entrenched cultural and economic rationalities that maintain inequality by dealing with both the material conditions and the religious beliefs conditioning parental decisions and children's ambitions.

The results of this research also carry significant applications in practice and policy. (1) Critical media education needs to be made part of the national curriculum in education beyond mere enrollment. This would equip all children, but particularly girls, with the skills to question and dissect the gendered stereotypes with which they are bombarded in the mass media. (2) Media regulation requires policies that encourage the production of more progressive local content that shows women in a variety of empowered roles that go beyond the stereotype of the selfless mother or wife. (3) Parental and community influencer-focused gender sensitization programs are essential. To frame gender equality as a pillar of sustainable national development rather than as a Western import, these initiatives should specifically engage and debate the panoptic logic of honor (izzat) and ingrained economic rationalities (like son preference) that underlie daily decisions.

In the end, Rajshahi's childhood is varied and vibrant, yet it is nonetheless strongly gendered. Although strong patriarchal systems still exist, new avenues for imagining futures with different genders are opening up.

Supporting everyone who is silently working for change requires an understanding of both the limitations of structure and the possibility of action in this intricate social environment.

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## AUTHOR DECLARATION

According to the responsible authors, this essay is completely unique and has never been published before. It is also not being considered for publication by any other peer-reviewed journal at this time. The authors helped with the design and conception of the study, the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data, as well as the manuscript's drafting and critical review. All authors have given their approval to the submitted final version of the manuscript. All subjects provided their informed consent, and we have all the ethical approvals required for the study. As far as we are aware, there are no financial or other conflicts of interest that would have affected the research presented in this study.

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