

# Unpacking masculinity in the context of work from home



**T**HE Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have transformed virtually all aspects of work and life everywhere in the world. While the new reality called for new thinking, new approaches and new visions, it also

reinforced some of the old societal perceptions and stereotypes. The pre-existing masculine narratives label a woman who does not work outside home as "housewife" or one who "does not do anything", confining her gender roles to housework and domestic responsibilities only. Since paid work is commonly associated with outside work or public spaces, rigid and stereotypical gender roles in domestic spaces have become more evident in the context of Covid-19 lockdowns.

During the pandemic, there has been an unprecedented shift in the work culture towards Working from Home (WFH), prompting many to ask whether this shift has similar connotations for men and women. I assume the gendered implications of WFH vary depending on income class and/or nature of work, as well as on the degree of formality/informality of the work involved. Hence, we need to explore how the movement of paid work (previously outside) into the home interacts with unpaid work (always inside) and how men and women negotiate with their paid and unpaid work at home.

## Working from home

The lockdown in Bangladesh conveniently split the working age population into the working class and the work-from-home class. Families that were earlier dependent on domestic workers, predominantly women (commonly known as "bua"), for all sorts of household work suddenly found themselves doing the household chores, tending to the children, etc. The part-time domestic workers, all women (known as "chhuta bua"), were among the first to be told to not come for work because of the fears of being infected, since they work in different households to make a living. Even before the official announcement of the lockdown was made,

many families started sending their *chhuta bua* into forced leave to protect themselves from Covid-19.

Some studies show that during the WFH period, when most middle-class and affluent families have had to manage without domestic helpers, men tended to share the domestic work burdens more equitably than they have in the past, according to Prof Ashwini Deshpande of the Ashoka University (BBC). It would be interesting to see how the WFH culture fuels changes in the norms of sharing

infected by Covid-19 than women. I replied that the masculine dilemma of not being associated with home—the socially categorised "private" space—could be a reason: they found it difficult to negotiate with their masculinity or confine themselves within the boundaries of a home for the entire day, as women were culturally associated with home. This cultural construction also made it hard for many men to be accommodative with household work which they were not accustomed to doing. It was interesting to note that masculinities

## Burden doubled/tripled for women

There is no empirical evidence on the sharing of domestic work burdens in Bangladesh. However, working women had to take on additional roles on top of their usual household roles during the WFH period. As women are socially expected to be a home manager, their employee role from home at the same time and space invites conflicts between their dual responsibilities and increases their workloads. Since school from home or home schooling or online classes for children have become more "normal" in lockdown times, due to school closures in Bangladesh, primary and high school students are given lessons through television, while online classes for college and university students are conducted via internet platforms. It was no wonder that in households that have no computer of their own, women were more likely than men to give their mobile phones to their children so that they could attend online classes. This is because women's phones were generally considered less important. Besides, when children, detached from friends and in the absence of outdoor activities and recreation, felt bored at home, it was mostly the women's duty to keep them busy at home, manage their anger and make them cope with the new home routine. Thus, work from home did not necessarily reduce the pressure for women, rather they took on the "two-in-one" role at the same time and space.

The scenario was much more complex when households included external family members, which could increase distractions for women while doing employee and home tasks simultaneously. Their burdens could increase significantly if they had any elderly, disabled and/or persons with autism in the family.

The idea of WFH became popular after the campaign "stay at home and be safe", which emphasised that if people stay indoors, they would remain safe. In the context of the pandemic, access to safe home was the marker between life and death for many, whether they had been infected by the virus or not. But for many women and gender-diverse people, the directive to "stay at home" meant that they were stuck with partners or family members who were abusive and violent. The rate of such violence was higher in the case of gender and sexual minorities almost all over the world.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

domestic work.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made people confront the challenges of staying at home, doing household chores, as well as the suffocation of forced and voluntary confinement. As a result, we have seen in the social media (mostly in Facebook) pictures of men posing with mop and basket, washing dish, cooking meals, washing, ironing clothes, and taking care of children.

## Masculine dilemmas

One day, I received a call from one of my teachers who asked me if I could guess the possible reasons behind men getting more

manifested themselves in different, and sometimes contradictory, ways. Many men who did domestic chores would not want to admit it to friends or post such stories on the social media because of their fears of facing masculine backlash—they might be teased or seen by other men as feminine, or weak, or being dominated by their wives. It was also observed that some men who posted their personal stories that break the dominant gender norms on social media, and who claim themselves to be gender-sensitive, would hide this aspect of their life to their paternal family members because of what we can call "masculine shyness".

# Is Bangladesh missing the e-commerce bus?



**T**O understand what a well-developed e-commerce ecosystem can do for Bangladesh, you wouldn't need to look very far.

In the fiscal year 2017, Alibaba, the Chinese e-commerce giant, had a gross merchandise value of USD 547 billion, which would place it one position below in GDP ranking from the nation of Saudi Arabia (USD 639.62 billion) and one position above Argentina (USD 545.12 billion). If the company's gross merchandise value were to be treated as GDP, that would place it among the 21 countries with the highest GDP in the world.

Alibaba projected that with its current trajectory, it would create 100 million jobs and support 10 million profitable businesses on its platforms by 2036.

The most significant aspect of e-commerce that needs to be appreciated, first and foremost, is that buying and selling is simply one part of e-commerce. E-commerce allows for significantly reducing national inventory and distribution costs.

Imagine having to store and distribute every essential and non-essential product to every grocery store and local market across the country. Imagine the amount of system loss and the logistical nightmare associated with it.

For Bangladesh, there isn't much need for imagination. We are unfortunately stuck in the old system, as we fail to build up the e-commerce ecosystem that would eliminate these problems. Even though the landscape is changing, we are not doing it fast enough.

An e-commerce ecosystem, like the natural ecosystem, needs a lot of different components

to come together and support each other to sustain, thus creating a "system" which will serve a bigger purpose.

E-commerce marketplaces or platforms, which in simpler terms mean the website where consumers can see products and order, are certainly an important piece of the puzzle. But it cannot function without other essential parts such as a payment gateway (a digital mechanism that enables and ensures safe online transactions) and delivery infrastructures (which include efficient transportation systems for cargos), among other things.

For the first time, the pandemic forced consumers to rely on online shopping, resulting in the Bangladeshi e-commerce market to exceed one and a half billion US dollars. Bangladesh was ranked 46th in e-commerce revenue in the world in 2019, whereas it is the 8th most populated country in the world. This shows the gap between the reality and the opportunity that could be taken advantage of.

An e-commerce infrastructure naturally solves a slew of different problems. But without the infrastructure, e-commerce cannot grow. And to build the infrastructure, you need appropriate policies.

The neighbouring India achieved a lot in e-commerce. The recent involvement of Google in the country's e-commerce sector has been called a "game changer," and for good reasons. Even though the penetration of e-commerce is low in India compared to markets like the United States, and despite having the second largest user base in the world, it is nevertheless growing rapidly, with around 6 million new entrants every month.

So, Google's announcement in July this year about investing USD 4.5 billion into Jio Platforms, the digital business wing of India's mighty Reliance Industries, was really



An employee scans barcodes at a sorting centre of an e-commerce platform in Bangladesh.

PHOTO: DS

surprising-but-not-surprising. Surprising, because it's seen as a "bet," and yet not surprising, because it's easy to see why foreign investors would want a share in the massive one-billion-strong market that is India. But it is also not surprising because India has been working to build up its e-commerce ecosystem, and powerful corporations like Reliance put their weight behind it.

The tech giant will invest the money in Reliance's recently launched online retail business JioMart. And this came only two months after Facebook invested USD 5.7 billion in Jio Platforms in April.

Even though market share is the ultimate goal, it wasn't the primary objective of these massive partnerships. The apparent primary focus is acquisition of new customers as

evidenced by, among other things, the sharing of data between WhatsApp and JioMart. Immediately after the partnership was officiated, Facebook-owned WhatsApp began sharing its 400-odd million user data with JioMart.

In Bangladesh, E-valy seems to be following the same principles. In other words, the relatively new e-commerce platform focused sharply on acquisition of customers, which simply means connecting a wide array of consumers to its platform, with the ultimate objective of expediting migration from offline to online. Its aggressive customer acquisition, however, has been met with suspicion.

While any commerce environment should be subjected to appropriate and legal oversight, it is equally important to be open-minded

about the new ways of doing things. The radical cashback scheme by E-valy has raised eyebrows, and legal authorities must ensure that the law is not broken. But that should not mean acting callously and potentially derailing a successful endeavour.

The company's tremendous success in bringing in an unprecedented amount of customers on board in a minimally digitised environment may be exactly what Bangladesh needs at this point to jolt the country into an e-commerce ecosystem. If that happens, it will open up many opportunities, including the very real opportunities for foreign direct investment like India is getting right in front of our eyes. Bangladesh's tremendous asset is its population.

It goes without saying that key policy recommendations by relevant trade bodies such as the E-Commerce Association of Bangladesh (e-CAB) need to be implemented fully—which include affordable Broadband price with higher bandwidth, making banking and mobile payment interoperable, and encouraging domestic and foreign investors by making easy investment and dividend repatriation policy.

Experts have also urged the authorities to integrate the vast number of cottage, micro, and small industries spread across the country. China has successfully integrated their cottage and micro firms through e-commerce, and Bangladesh can study the success stories and formulate its own strategies.

Just like China and India are taking advantage of their huge populations, so should we. Ensuring the maximum penetration of e-commerce is the most important measure to take if we are serious about realising the massive potential that e-commerce offers.

Aftab Ul Islam is former president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Bangladesh, and Bangladesh Computer Society (BCS).

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**NHAT HANH**  
(Born 1926)  
Vietnamese Buddhist monk.

*The most precious gift we can offer anyone is our attention. When mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Poetry competitions
- 6 Wrong
- 11 Like dunce caps
- 12 Ship of 1492
- 13 Without aid
- 14 Short putt
- 15 Equestrian activity
- 17 What's more
- 18 Finished off
- 19 Sneeze cause
- 22 - relief
- 23 Perches
- 24 Decrees
- 25 Even
- 27 Freck consonants
- 30 Diver's place

**DOWN**

- 1 Egyptian emblem
- 2 Nabokov novel
- 3 Battery ends
- 4 Short skirt
- 5 Imagined sequences of events
- 6 Suitable
- 7 Soccer's Hmm
- 8 To some extent
- 9 Con games
- 10 Yellow-gray
- 16 Was an obnoxious winner
- 20 Womanizers
- 21 Twisty tum
- 24 Dandy
- 25 Painter Georges
- 26 Threat
- 27 "Parks and Recreation" town
- 28 Pants measure
- 29 Boat backs
- 30 Faucet problems
- 34 In the past
- 36 Kicker's aid
- 37 Mess up

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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

T	U	F	T	S	G	A	F	F	E
I	N	L	E	T	A	L	L	A	Y
M	O	O	L	A	B	R	O	K	E
C	A	R	Y	L	A	K	E	S	
R	U	T	P	A	L	E	R	M	O
A	R	O	S	E	A	R	G	O	N
B	A	R	T	A	B	S	A	L	E
T	E	L	L	T	R	E	L	L	
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I	G	L	O	O	S	E	N	S	E
T	O	A	S	T	A	S	S	E	T

**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott