



ILLUSTRATION: ALIZA RAHMAN

The 'P' in Moral Policing Stands for Patriarchy

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Being an English major, I had to read *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. It revolves around an extremist puritan society's obsession with shunning Hester Prynne for her "immoral acts". The moral policing in this novel later turns into a full-fledged witch hunt, as the puritan leaders dehumanise Hester and her child every step of the way.

A novel set in 17th century colonial America couldn't have anything to do with 21st century Bangladeshi society, right? I thought so too, until I saw this pattern of patriarchal moral policing orchestrated repeatedly.

From the woman who was berated by random strangers for what she chose to wear, to a public figure who is being dragged through the mud for "immoral" personal choices she made — moral policing has become an extension of patriarchy in its attempt to forcefully fit every woman to the Madonna image.

Moral policing affects people of all genders, but women are more subjected to this euphemised form of harassment. The origin of this pattern is debated, but a moral high ground and subsequently the duty of being the moral guardian of women has been bestowed on men through everything from media to patriarchal social institutions. This notion of men being the morally superior protector of the morally vulnerable women who just so happen to carry the burden of "family or society's honour" is what legitimises extensive moral policing of women.

Is it legal? Absolutely not.

Constitutionally, moral policing compromises our civil rights and privacy rights as Bangladeshi citizens. In the case of women, Article 28 of our constitution promises

women equal access to public spaces and institutions. Although moral policing itself is not a legal offence that can be tried, its impact on the person being policed violates our constitutional rights.

From overzealous relatives who try to regulate what women in the family post on social media to self-acclaimed moral protectors expressing "concern" or straight out harassing women in both online and offline spaces for their appearance or action, do so under the pretence of protecting the collective morality of our society. But as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie puts it, "If you criticise X in women but do not criticise X in men, you do not have a problem with X, you have a problem with women."

Everyone is allowed to have their subjective understanding of morality. However, to impose it as the objective standard in a way that compromises someone else's rights is questionable. And if that subjective notion happens to be rooted in misogyny or internalised patriarchy, it is simply unacceptable.

References

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Sugar and Spice and Everything Not-So-Nice

The case of subtle sexism at our dinner tables

ERINA MAHMUD & NALIFA MEHELIN

We have witnessed Meena trying to equalise her domestic workload by swapping roles with Raju. Meena probably takes pride in knowing that at present Bangladesh is the most gender-equal country in South Asia, closing 71.9 percent of its gender gap. In 2019, an estimated 36.37 percent of women constituted the labour force in Bangladesh, hitting an all-time high. These numbers are worth celebrating, although we should ask if they reflect greater equality in household work sharing.

Let's look at our dinner table today. Have practices around our dinner table changed much? Or, does subtle sexism still creep into our communication and convention in our dinner tables unconsciously?

In most households, women prepare the table and invite family members to dine. While they serve dishes to everyone, their plates remain the last ones in line. Women serve more and are comparatively served less in daily dining. The plates are also left to be picked up by women after everyone is done with their meals. Male participation in all this remains voluntary, often saying that it is women's work. The whole process harbours misogyny as well as toxic masculinity.



What's wrong with doing household chores? The problem is not in *doing* the chores rather in the unfair and unequal participation, and in romanticising it in the name of affection, hospitality, and culture towards one specific gender. Women are not the sole flag bearer of affection, nor do they have to adhere to practices that seem to cost them more. The problem also lies in the presumed hierarchy of men and in behaviour that discourages burden-sharing with women in our families.

Most importantly, the problem lies in its banality. We forget sexism starts small, in intimate spaces, before it spreads like wildfire in our society. We condemn sexism, misogyny, and mistreatment towards women in the public sphere, but do not evaluate or question our participation in these in the private sphere. Largely unaware, many of us tend to hold ourselves in a morally superior position and mask day-to-day subtle sexism behind affection for women in our lives.

The key to addressing this inequality lies in behavioural changes. Behavioural changes happen slowly and gradually, where acknowledging the problem remains the first step. Without recognising the unfair, sexist and imposing nature of the practices, the risk of sustaining and reproducing them through generations remains. Breaking this cycle requires greater sensitisation, along with stepping out of designated gender roles.

In pondering viable ways to address misogyny and sexism that plague our lives, we often wait for grand opportunities. This time, let's start small by trying to identify the pattern of our behaviours. We rectify this by *participating*. Irrespective of our gender, we serve the one who has served us all along, we ask them if they need more, we take our plates to the kitchen and wash them. Because the most crucial of changes start at home.

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