

Gender and Sexuality in Contraceptive Advertising in Bangladesh (1972-2011) – An Audience Perspective

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Abstract

‘In our time sex outside marriage was a taboo. But now it is increasingly happening [...]. In today’s context [...] it is very important to build awareness.’ Such perspective from Mitiis indicative of a contemporary phenomenon with regard to portraying pre/extra marital sexual intimacy in condom advertisements (ads) in Bangladesh. Drawing from research findings of 36 in-depth interviews, this paper interrogates women’s responses to new-old (non)normative presence of sexuality in these ads, across three social classes and three generations. The paper reflects how social class, age and other identities might shape mediated conversations about normativity vs. shifting “realities” of sexuality in contemporary Bangladesh. The discussions suggest although some women want to see a reflection of the “real”, which is, the increasing practices of pre/extra marital sex, many like to see the “ideal”, the “traditional” forms of sexuality depictions in these ads. What seems significant – with regard to the portrayal of sexual intimacy, a majority of the women talk at a much-generalised level: not always tying into their experiences or their own families. They continuously engage with a dialogue with the ads, and often compare an idealised earlier period with “now” which they consider problematic.

Key words: Gender, Sexuality, Advertisement, Audience, Representation, Patriarchy, Women.

Introduction

Let me tell you from my experience of “love”. We also loved, had good times together before marriage. But that is different from what happens now. Now it is very dirty, it is all about sex. Love in this generation is very much sexual.

The above perspective from Sopna, an upper-class older generation woman, is indicative of a contemporary phenomenon with regard to portraying pre/extra marital sexual intimacy in advertisements (hereafter, ads) for condoms in Bangladesh.¹ Since the mid-1990s there has been a major change in depicting “intimate relationship” in these ads.² Whilst ads for birth control pills continued to present birth control within a marriage framework, condom ads are increasingly portraying sensuous sexual

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¹ U.B.F. Sultana, “Representation of Gender and Heterosexuality: A Study of Contraception Advertisements in Bangladesh – 1971 to 2011”, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh Humanities*, Vol.63(2), 2018, pp. 205-245.

² *Ibid.*

moments, and in most cases the marriage frame remains absent.³ Hence, drawing from the research findings of 36 in-depth interviews of a large research project, this paper interrogates women's responses to new-old (non)normative presence of sexuality in these ads, with regard to their own/lived experiences of sexuality across three social classes and three generations. A selection of respondents from these different social categories and their intersecting perspectives allows this paper to reflect how social class, age and/or other identities might shape mediated conversations about normativity vs. shifting "realities" of sexuality in contemporary Bangladesh. Audience media studies⁴ have pondered upon the necessity to shift our attention from ad contents to audience's everyday lives, to explore how they make meanings of the ads 'with very different sorts of interests'.⁵ Therefore, this paper deliberates women's interpretations of contraceptive ads advertised in Bangladesh with regard to their lives and experiences of sexuality, and thus, it contributes to the knowledge of audience media studies with regard to addressing sensitive issues, like sexuality.

The paper brings forth three significant issues. The first highlights the different situations that limit women's opportunity to watch these ads in daily life. This is important in making visible the practicalities of investigating women's reflections on contraceptive ads. The second issue outlines women's views about the ads: what they particularly recall, what they like about the images, jingle or content of the ads, as well as how they challenge or identify themselves with regard to the representations in the ads. Whereas this issue mainly focuses on how women talk about these ads, in the remaining final issue women discuss how contraception is experienced in everyday life, partly in relation to the ads. Here women discuss the changing morality around sexuality through the lens offered by contraceptive ads. This outlines the tensions, emotions and disappointments of women about the contemporary public display of sexual intimacy. The paper further investigates whether there are any differences in women's interpretation of the ads according to their social class, generation and other intersecting identities.

Gender, Sexuality and Contraceptive Advertising – Reflection from Literature

Studying audience participation in ads is a growing significant area in global media research, despite the fact that there are considerable debates surrounding the

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See for instance S.E. Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World*, (London: Routledge 2003); P. du Gay, S. Hall, L. Janes, H. Mackay and K. Negus, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, (London: Sage 1997); S. Moores, *Interpreting Audiences: The Ethnography of Media Consumption*, (London: Sage 1993) and R. Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life*, (e-Library: Taylor & Francis 2003).

⁵ *Ibid.*, S. Moores.

audience's active or passive engagement in creating and/or changing meaning in the ads.⁶Danesi (2002)⁷emphasises the power of audience reception: audiences may decide to accept or reject a particular ad based on the representation showcased in the ad. Since the late 1970s, what Moores (1993)⁸ broadly identifies as an “ethnographic turn” has taken place in audience research. Among these studies, Bird (2003)⁹, Du Gay *et al.* (1997)¹⁰, Moores (1993)¹¹ and Silverstone (2003)¹² for instance, shift the audience reception approach from “audiences” to the “audience in everyday life”. This latter refers to the ways media, including advertising, provides cultural frames for thinking and talking about aspects of everyday life. In this regard, Silverstone's (2003)¹³ reflection on television viewers who may come up with very different meanings of a media content, depending on their varied socialisations and diverse experience of everyday life provides a useful analytical perspective for the various interpretations of contraceptive ads that women in this paper offer.

Nevertheless, in the global field of media and cultural studies, there is hardly any substantial scholarly work that considers issues around contraceptive ads from a feminist point of view. Moreover, little attention has been devoted to exploring the audience reception and responses towards these ads. Among the available studies, Jobling (1997)¹⁴ unveils what he refers to as the politics of “racist heterosexuality” in Britain in the context of contraceptive ads. He discusses condom advertising in Britain from the 1970s to 1993. Related to Jobling's research, Agha and Meekers (2010)¹⁵ measure the success of a social marketing programme by analysing the

⁶ C. Carter and L. Steiner (ed.), *Critical Readings: Media and Gender*, (Maidenhead: Open University Press 2004); D. Deacon, M. Pickering, P. Golding & G. Murdock, *Researching Communications: A Practical Guide to Methods in Media and Cultural Analysis*, (London: Hodder Education 2007); M. Horkheimer, and T. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (New York: Seabury Press 1972); J. Kim, S.J. Ahn, E.S. Kwon and L.N. Reid, ‘TV Advertising Engagement as a State of Immersion and Presence’, *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 76, 2017, pp. 67-76; V. Nightingale and K. Ross (ed.), *Critical Readings: Media and Audiences*, (Maidenhead: Open University Press 2003); R. Silverstone, *Op.cit.*

⁷ M. Danesi, *Understanding Media Semiotics*, (London: Hodder Arnold 2002).

⁸ S. Moores, *Op.cit.*, 1993, p. 1

⁹ S.E. Bird, *Op.cit.*

¹⁰ Du Gay *et al.*, *Op.cit.*

¹¹ S. Moores, *Op.cit.*

¹² R. Silverstone, *Op.cit.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ P. Jobling, ‘Keeping Mrs Dawson Busy: Safe Sex, Gender and Pleasure in Condom Advertising Since 1970’, in M. Nava, A. Blake, I. Macrury and B. Richards (ed.), *Buy This Book: Studies in Advertising and Consumption*, (London: Routledge 1997).

¹⁵ S. Agha and D. Meekers, ‘Impact of an Advertising Campaign on Condom Use in Urban Pakistan’, *Studies in Family Planning*, Vol. 41(4), 2010, pp. 277-290.

impact of a condom campaign in Pakistan. They conducted two advertising impact surveys among urban married men to study their attitudinal changes after the condom ad was broadcast on private TV channels and on radio stations for three consecutive months, in 2009. However, the study gives heavy emphasis to numbers and measurement, whereas such social phenomena are more likely to be revealed through talking to people directly, asking for in-depth opinions or sharing everyday experiences.

With regard to Bangladesh, Harvey (1984)¹⁶ focuses on two market studies, to examine the impact of family planning ads to encourage people for birth control. Needless to mention, the respondents were only from well-off families, educated, and urban. Analysing the direct responses from the consumers the study notes that the ads addressing the son's future and family needs are more popular compared to those ads that gave importance only to a wife's wellbeing. In fact, the latter was the least mentioned theme even by female consumers. The study does not investigate the reasons behind audience preference towards a particular form of representation, rather concludes that family planning ads are more successful whilst associated with a family rather than with a woman as individual. An analysis from a feminist perspective perhaps could have provided a different analytical perspective to these findings. Moreover, the scope of the study was also restrictive, as poor people with no literacy and non-readers of newspapers were not considered for taking part in this research.

It is thus essential to study attitudes to contraception in a more comprehensive way, taking into account different generations, social classes and different demographic areas and include women's responses towards contraceptive ads. This is what this paper intends to do.

Research Methodology

This paper is based on feminist qualitative research. 36 in-depth interviews were conducted across three social classes and three generations to explore and understand women's interpretation of contraception advertisements that appear in different media of Bangladesh; to what extent women identify with the portrayal of sexuality, intimacy and birth control by the various advertisements for contraception.

Women who had viewed or might remember contraceptive ads and were willing to discuss their views about these ads with regard to their lived experience of sexuality

¹⁶ P.D. Harvey, 'Advertising Family Planning in the Press: Direct Response Results from Bangladesh', *Studies in Family Planning*, Vol. 15(1), 1984, pp. 40-42.

were selected as respondents for in-depth interviews. Selection of the respondents involved both purposive and snowball sampling, as my intention was to select women from three different social classes: ‘upper’, ‘middle’ and ‘poor’ and from three different generations. The idea behind choosing women from different generations was to enable a particular age group to reflect on a particular decade of contraceptive ads and the corresponding socio-cultural contexts. Hence, I assumed that women aged fifty plus (older generation, who were born before 1961) are more likely to be able to focus on the contraceptive ads which appeared in the first two decades (1970s and 1980s) of the post independent¹⁷ Bangladesh. Women aged between 35 and 49 (middle-aged generation, who were born between 1962 and 1976) may better remember the ads that appeared in the 1990s and onward, and the younger generation, aged below 35 would be able to reflect on the ads published in the decade from 2000 onward. Apart from class and generational position, attention was paid to selecting respondents from urban as well as rural areas. I thought that selecting women from different geographical locations¹⁸ in addition to the capital city Dhaka would allow me to include diverse women’s experiences. Hence, among the 36 interviews, 25 were held in Dhaka city, nine were in different towns and two were held in two villages (one in Bagunda village in Mymensingh, another in Gokarna village in Brahmanbaria).

With regard to “social class”, in Bangladesh there is no unique way to label people in specific class terms, and there are huge debates around “class” and its application. This is reflected in some key sociological and anthropological studies.¹⁹To avoid complexities, I decided to follow my respondent’s self-identified class status. Therefore, in this paper my reference to “upper-class” indicates women from the well-off urban families in Dhaka, highly educated (excluding a few who could not

¹⁷ After nine months’ liberation war against Pakistan Bangladesh made its victory on 16th December, 1971.

¹⁸ These locations were selected depending on my professional and kin networks; initial informal contact was made with different women through my networks to approach them for taking part in the in-depth interviews.

¹⁹ See for instance, N. Kabeer, ‘The Quest for National Identity: Women, Islam and the State in Bangladesh’, *Feminist Review*, Vol. 37 (Spring),1991, pp. 38-58; D. Lewis, *Bangladesh: Politics, Economy and Civil Society*,(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011);S. Feldman, ‘Historicising Garment Manufacturing in Bangladesh: Gender, Generation, and New Regulatory Regimes’, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, Vol.11 (1), 2009, pp. 268-288;T. Haque, ‘Body Politics in Bangladesh’, in B.S.A, Yeoh, P. Teo and S. Huang (ed.) *Gender Politics in the Asia-Pacific Region*, (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.41-60;S.C. White, *Arguing with the Crocodile: Gender and Class in Bangladesh*, (London: Zed Books, 1992); and S.C. White, ‘Beyond the Paradox: Religion, Family and Modernity in Contemporary Bangladesh’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 46 (5), 2012, pp. 1429-1458.

continue education after high school or college, due to marriage) and mostly with high social capital. “Middle-class” means the families who possess less wealth than the upper class, urban (but not necessarily based in Dhaka) women. A few from this class are highly educated, but the rest have only completed primary school or high school education. Women from the “poor class” in this research are from rural as well as urban poor families; only a few attended primary schools, the rest cannot read or write (except being able to write their names for signature). A couple of them have their own small agriculture land, but all of the poor women have to earn through low paid jobs to manage daily family needs. I commonly refer to them as the “poor class”, without specifically mentioning urban or rural, because originally, they migrated from villages and most of them keep moving back to their villages every now and then.

Viewing Contraceptive Ads – the Scope of Memory

It becomes harder to specify exactly where media audiences begin and end. The conditions and boundaries of audience hood are inherently unstable.²⁰

During my interviews, I asked if they could recall any specific contraception ads or anything they remember from a particular ad. Many women remember brand names of different pills and condoms but not what the ads were about. Again, some women mention incidents from government sponsored family planning ads and commercial contraceptive ads, yet had forgotten the specific brand name. Several women recall the popular jingle ‘*Aha mistiki je misti amader choto songsar*’ (‘Oh wonderful, so wonderful our small family!’) from *Maya* ad, and ‘*budhdhiman houn thik kajti korun*’ (‘Be wise, and act right’)— a key slogan. This slogan was used in the state sponsored family planning ads and in some of the *Raja* Condom ads, during the 1980s and the early 1990s and broadcast many times on BTV during those decades. They remember these, as they appeared many times in different forms of print and electronic media. For instance, Bondhon (u/y)²¹ says:

If I can recollect correctly, the first thing I remember about family planning ads, is a symbol. I was three or four years old. There was a sign that appeared in these commercials, a father and a mother with their two children with a message ‘small family is a happy family’. This is my earlier recollection of the idea of family planning. Then there was another very interesting advertisement I remember, that used to say ‘*budhdhiman houn thik kajti korun*’ (‘Be wise, and make the right decision’). This was in

²⁰ S. Moores, *Op.cit.*, 1993, p. 2.

²¹ The first initial letter next to each woman’s name stands for her class status, and the last letter indicates her generation category. For instance, in this case, ‘u’ indicates upper class and ‘y’ indicates younger generation. Hereafter, I indicate each woman’s class and generation category next to her name, by the initial letter of her class and generation.

early eighties, I think. We did not have so many TV channels then, and it was advertised many times, so I remember this clearly.

Bondhon's recollection of the symbol and the two messages appeared many times in state sponsored contraception ads, as well as in the *Raja* Condom commercials between the 1970s and the 1990s.²² Her childhood memories, indicating the process of how a child becomes informed about contraception, further indicate that there are very specific things women remember from different family planning ads, if not the complete ad. Her recollections also highlight the period when BTV was the only TV channel, so that women were more likely to see these contraceptive ads.

Other situations also influence women's chances of watching these ads. For example, Soma (u/m), Saima (u/m) and Koni (m/y) indicate that satellite television brought opportunities to view more channels, reducing the likelihood of sticking to one channel for long, and perhaps limiting the chance of seeing TV commercials including those for contraception. Barnali (m/m) believes that there are so many TV channels; she might have missed out on some commercials. Furthermore, as her husband lives abroad, she does not find it necessary to think about contraception implying that she might not register some ads. Similarly, Nasima (m/o) and Nazneen (u/o) explain that they do not pay much attention to these ads, as they no longer need to use contraceptives.

For Musarrat (u/o) and a few other women, there were particular constraints that limited the possibility of watching TV. Musarrat lived in a joint family, and as the eldest of the daughters-in-law with huge family responsibilities, did not have enough time to watch TV. For others family conventions were a constraint, as Farha (u/y) describes,

I grew up in a very conservative environment. My parents bought a TV when I was in class ten. If there was any ad of this kind, we, I mean, the young used to leave the room.

For Farha the restriction was religious, and also for Sopna (u/o), who seldom watched contraception TV commercials before marriage. Restrictions were even stronger in the case of Nazu (m/o), whose husband disliked watching TV as she makes explicit:

We were never allowed to watch TV in front of our uncle.²³ I used to be busy with our children, their studies; all of them were at a growing up age. And he was a man of temper (*ragi*). Very bad tempered. When he was around, I stayed far away from TV, because he

²² U.B.F. Sultana, *Op.cit.*

²³ Although he was not my uncle, Nazu's application of this relational term is a traditional way of referring to one's husband when talking to others, as she believes that pronouncing her husband's name is a sinful act.

disliked watching TV. And he hardly turned on the TV. By the time it was ten/eleven in the night, kids had finished studies, and we all went to bed.

Nazu's narrative indicates how gender as a relationship of power operates at any stage of everyday life, including women's scope for watching TV. Press (1991:69)²⁴ in the context of American middle-class women stresses:

Since television watching is an activity that often occurs in conjunction with one or several others in the family, [...] or for women, in bedrooms they may share with husbands, the act of negotiation what show to watch, or when to watch television at all, can be a fairly tricky power negotiation.

Although Press²⁵ did not clarify whether such "negotiation" of American women involves giving up, certainly this was the case with Nazu; she gave up on watching television due to her husband's bad temper. As Silverstone (2003)²⁶ opines, 'Watching television [can be] a highly gendered activity, gendered in relation to hierarchies of domestic politics, and in the consequent different qualities of time-use and control over space'. These experiences also point to the many ways which may restrict women's viewing of TV and contraception ads in particular.

Unlike women from the upper and middle class, for poor women, the constraints are more materialistic. As Shamsunnahar (p/o) explains: 'I cannot recall, nor do I remember much now. I leave for work in the morning, return at night, neither do I get time to watch TV'. She further adds that she does not have a TV or electricity in her house. However, she watched a few TV contraceptive commercials whilst working as a domestic help in someone else's house; yet she cannot remember very clearly and she cannot understand print ads because she is illiterate. It is clear that Shamsunnahar and many other poor women cannot watch TV as most of their time is spent on making ends meet for their families, with illiteracy further curtailing access to print ads and to understanding. Therefore, some women remember that there was *Raja*, *Maya* and *Femicon* advertised on TV but cannot recall the ad content, as is apparent in Hena's (p/m) comment: 'Am I that educated? No! I do not understand these'. Hena's inability to talk about contraceptive ads makes her explain that women like her who are less educated, cannot understand let alone remember the ads. Minu (p/o) too says that she cannot read and that is why she cannot understand or remember these commercials. However, she does recall that ads for *Mayapill* used to mention that if a woman takes this pill, she can prevent pregnancy. That is how she

²⁴ A.L. Press, *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class and Generation in the American Television Experience*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ R. Silverstone, *Op.cit.*, p. 151

understood the ad was about birth control. Thus, even though these women blame their own education level, Minu's case indicates, it is also that these ads are not very clear in their contraceptive information— a concern raised by some women from the upper and middle class too.

One of the issues arising from this discussion is how, given these difficulties, these women managed to have opinions regarding the ads. During our conversations, I showed them the ten 'sample ads'²⁷ which helped to jog their memories of contraceptive ads and to reminisce. But it is in the context of the constraints, which I have discussed above, that women's interpretation of the ads needs to be considered. Ang²⁸ and Silverstone²⁹ rightly argue audience participation takes myriad forms: not only interpreting meaning of texts but also relating these meanings to personal experiences.

Representing Sexual Intimacy: Women's Responses

[W]hat is sexual (erotic) is not fixed but depends on what is socially defined as such and these definitions are contextually and historically variable. Hence sexuality has no clear boundaries – what is sexual to one person may not be to someone else or somewhere else.³⁰

Women's discussions on sexual intimacy in the ads do not necessarily stay within the bounds of contraception ads. Rather, the women continuously shift between "reality" and "media representations" largely articulating that media should not encourage the moral decay of the younger generation by visualising intimate sexual moments. A view most of the women in my research shared about contraceptive advertising is that ads for female methods of contraceptives are based on a post married life whereas those for condoms are vague in terms of birth control information and seem to show pre/extra marital sexual intimacy. Koni (m/y) puts it this way:

Usually, they show a man and a woman walking together holding hands. Or sometimes they present intimate scenes, for example, a couple embracing each other, and then the brand name of the condom appears on the screen.

Humaira (u/m) and several other respondents argue that condom ads always try to convince the audience that their brand ensures pleasurable sex, and that there is

²⁷ To help women to recall memories, I chose ten ads from the electronic and print media, covering all the decades. In this paper, I refer to these ads as "sample ads" (the images of these ads are available in Sultana, 2018).

²⁸ I. Ang, 'Culture and Communication: Toward an Ethnographic Critique of Media Consumption in the Transnational Media Realm', *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 5, 1990, pp. 239-260.

²⁹ R. Silverstone, *Op.cit.*

³⁰ S. Jackson, 'Interchanges: Gender, Sexuality and Heterosexuality: The Complexity (and Limits) of Heteronormativity', *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 7(1), 2006, pp. 105-121.

always suggested sexual content in these ads. Some women, pointing to some of the sample ads mention that in the condom ads it did not occur to them that the couple was married. Accordingly, a major discussion point was whether the ads should portray pre/extra marital sexual intimacy and, if so, how explicitly. The women expressed four different viewpoints represented in the diagram below:

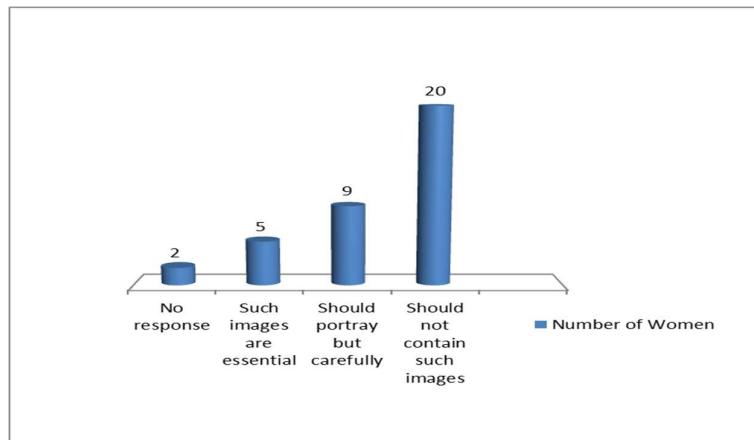


Figure1: Graphical Presentation of Opinions on Pre/Extra Marital Sexual Intimacy

The first group of women (20 out of 36)³¹ believe that depictions of pre/extra marital relationship in condom ads are problematic: firstly, it gives a *baje shikkha* (bad education) to the young generation by encouraging immoral sex. The concerns expressed are about what attitudes are morally “right” and “wrong” in relation to sexuality. In this connection, pre/extra marital sex and pregnancy are identified as *ultapalta* (disorder), a breach of the “proper”/“right” sexual behaviour as defined by social norms and religion. In this context White’s³² observation adds further significance: ‘sex represents a defining, negative motif in Bangladesh society, it stands for chaos, disorder, and loss of control’. Even though sexual relationships outside of marriage exist in the society, a portrayal of them in ads is believed to influence the young generation; as is claimed by some of the women I interviewed. For example, Shamsunnahar’s (p/o) understanding is influenced by a moral code

³¹ Among these 20 women: 2 belong to the older and 1 to the younger generation, in the upper class; 2 belong to the older, 2 to the middle-aged and 4 to the younger generation, in the middle class; and 3 belong to the older, 3 to the middle-aged and 3 to the younger generation, in the poor class.

³² S.C. White, *Op.cit.*, 1992, p. 152.

defining a “right” sexuality. She calls premarital sexuality a “new problem” for the young generation.

Times have changed now; girls go with unknown guys and friends. Unmarried girls make love. Then they roam shamelessly with an illicit baby bump (*pet badhaiya nia ghaira beray*)! What a chaotic time! Everything is so *ultapalta* (disordered) now! This is not right. Advertisement should show the right thing – they should always show husband and wife.

Shamsunnahar’s application of the term “*pet badhano*” has a very negative connotation in Bangla. It is applied to indicate a pregnancy which is out of wedlock, hence unexpected and “unglorified”. Social expectation towards such pregnancy is to keep it hidden, and be ashamed of it. Hence, when she sees such women walk around in public, out of surprise and frustration she calls it a “chaotic time”. Likewise, Eti (p/y), whose husband had an extramarital sexual relationship and abandoned her for that woman, used sarcasm to express her anger:

It is a chaotic age *Apa*(Sister)! Now what means a husband, and what a friend? Everything is a complete *ultapalta* (chaos). Such relationship before marriage is not good. And advertisements should not show it. But things happen still. We cannot deny it, *duniyatai nosto hoiya gese* (rather, it is a sign that the world has gone spoilt).

But Farha’s (u/y) position emerges from her religious belief; she stresses:

Premarital sexual relationships exist, and I think 90% male-female engage in premarital sex. On this matter I am totally religious, I do not support this. And if I know someone is doing this, I suggest her to end it.

Nasima’s (m/o) opinion brings to light a second reason for women opposing such representation:

I think commercials should be based on a country’s context, shouldn’t it? Our country is not that liberal, is it? I know nowadays some young girls and boys get closer before marriage. They should be careful. But ads should always show marriage, family. Whatever the situation is now, by showcasing unmarried couples they cannot reach the mass of people.

The way to “reach the mass of people” became evident in Champa’s (m/y) contribution (also echoed by some of the poor women):

If they show family, there is no problem in watching together with family members. Sometimes they show a guy taking a woman in his lap, or they cuddle (*japtaiya dhore*) each other, how can we see this in front of our growing children?

Champa’s and others’ apprehension indicates that viewing sexual intimacy in front of other family members is embarrassing, as well as shameful in front of growing children. Therefore, they either change the TV channel, or start doing something else in an attempt to demonstrate that they are not concerned about what is being displayed on the TV; or the young usually leave the room, and thus consciously act

to “passively engage”³³ with these kinds of representations. Moreover, for poor women with little/no literacy, representing a family and the contraceptive packet bears particular connotations. For them these are the signs through which they understand that this product is to be used for birth control. For example, Khadiza (p/y) explains that the image of marriage or a family on a pill or condom packet communicates clearly to people like her who cannot read.

The second group of women (9 out of 36)³⁴ suggest that ads may display sex between unmarried couples, but the message should be carefully communicated, so that it does not encourage “immoral” sexual activities. For instance, Humaira (u/m) thinks that there are many young boys and girls who become sexually active before marriage. However, ideologically this is not accepted in the society. For boys, to some extent there has been flexibility, but for girls, society would never accept a girl who had sex before marriage. Even if sexual relationships exist outside marriage, they are in secret; they are not open or encouraged. Therefore, she thinks that the ads should contain a message of birth control for those engaged in sex before marriage. But she also believes that if they encourage premarital sexual activity there will be a backlash against such representation: ‘Because, I believe we are not in a situation yet to pronounce that contraception is for all adults, for all, whoever is sexually active! No, it is not the time yet’. Although Humaira considers such representations as a timely requirement but she further points to the necessity for a “responsible depiction”. Pointing to sample ad 10 (*Panther Dotted* condom) she complains that the new bride has been portrayed as a “sex slave” in this ad.

Sopna (u/o) and Ferdous (m/o), argue for the necessity of such depictions, albeit they are highly critical about sexual love prior to marriage in the young generation. Such emotional reaction from an older generation woman to the transformation of asexual love before marriage to an overemphasis on the sexual is not limited to Bangladesh. Langhamer (2013),³⁵ drawing on the Mass-Observation archive in Britain noted one woman writing in 2001, who commented:

[...] now sex comes much earlier on. Living together, even in the sixties, generally meant you were going to get married. But not now. Even being engaged doesn't seem to mean you're going to get married.

³³ M. Danesi, *Op.cit.*

³⁴ Among these nine women: two belong to the older and four belong to the middle-aged generation in the upper class, one belongs to the older and one belongs to the middle-aged generation of the middle class and the last one belongs to the older generation in the poor class.

³⁵ C. Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 209-210

Therefore, Sopna thinks that ads should portray unmarried couples, because it is a demand of the times, but not in a way that encourages premarital sexual activity. For an example, she refers to a TV ad for the *Hero* condom (aired in 2009), where the end statement boldly asserts:

Do not take risk. Ensure self-security first. That is why, advanced quality condom *Hero* – protects you from unplanned pregnancy and severe sex diseases including HIV/AIDS. As long as you have *Hero*, there is no risk. *Hero!*

According to Sopna, such depiction is problematic as it encourages promiscuous sexual behaviour by showing a young, unmarried couple, and including the visual command ‘As long as you have *Hero*, there is no risk *Hero*’. According to her, this suggests that with a condom any unmarried couple can engage in any kind of (immoral) sexual activity. To her, “risk” in sexual activity for a man connotes having sex with someone other than his wife. However, Ferdous (m/o) thinks that contraceptive ads published these days are suitably “modern”. Looking at the sample ad 7– *U & ME* condom she points to the girl’s Western outfit and to the couple having fun, to confirm her viewpoint: ‘it is not clear whether they are husband wife; it does not need to be. They do not need to present married couple always, as sex beyond marriage exists now’. Her idea of a “modern” ad is interchangeable representationally with “modern sexuality” and this modernity, she believes, increases contraceptive awareness. Nonetheless, she is very critical about the existence of such sexual practice, as it does not fit her understanding of “proper” sexual behaviour:

Things were not that open before, at least there was some sort of shame. Oh God! What happens in our *Dhanmondi* Lake! I wonder from which family these girls are? They sit there with boys as if they are glued to each other in such an embarrassing way that you will have to take your eyes off. *Sharirik somporko* (physical relationship) before marriage is not right. It is sinful. And I have seen these relationships do not lead to marriage at the end. They break up.

Even though Ferdous’s understanding of “right sexual behaviour” seems not to apply to men – she does not comment on the boys who are with these girls – her comments bring to attention how religious views are deployed to justify sexual and gender morals. Like Farha, however, Ferdous is not a strict follower of religious doctrines, but still draws on it to validate an everyday moral order. As White (2012)³⁶ describes: ‘[w]here things do not just come naturally, however, religion may be brought in with society to ensure proper behaviour [...]’. For Ferdous the forfeit for such “sexual immorality” is the failure of such relationships to ever culminate in marriage, which

³⁶ S.C. White, *Op.cit.*, 2012, p. 1442.

according to her is the ultimate goal of love. Ferdous thus, not only suggests for a moral sexual life, but also encourages the construction of female “docile bodies”³⁷, ‘not through punishment, but by teaching [women] to accept those expectations as their own and to live as if they might be punished at any moment’.³⁸

Further conversations with Ferdous and several other women reveal that it is not only the depictions in contraceptive ads that they are worried about. They are also reluctant to accept other changes, such as many young girls’ “Western” clothes, lifestyles and sexual behaviour, which they consider are the upshot of a Westernised modernity. These women consider that premarital sexuality is a new phenomenon, an outcome of socio-cultural changes brought by modern technologies like the cell phone, satellite TV, and the internet. The approach in condom ads especially to background marriage and family but highlight sexual pleasure seems to them to bestow approval on promiscuous sexual behaviour. This makes these women particularly concerned about such ads. Importantly, displaying sexual intimacy in public space as well as pre/extra marital sexuality, are understood as an influence of Westernised sexuality and a non-Bengali attitude. Their critical but arguably partial understanding of “Westernised sexuality” reduces “Westernised sexuality” to a monolithic category. But perhaps such perceptions emerge from a postcolonial consciousness: an effort to saving “Bengali culture” from the Western cultural invaders.

A third, but small group of women (5 out of 36)³⁹ propose that considering ongoing social realities, it is essential that the ads include pre/extra marital sexual relationship. For instance, Miti (u/y) suggests:

In our time sex outside marriage was a taboo. But now we cannot control it. It is happening and increasing in new generation, and you cannot stop that. Better it is wise to use protection. It is better to be safe than sorry. In today’s context, it is not necessary to portray married couple; rather, I think it is very important to build the awareness. [Sic]

Similarly, Doli (m/m) also thinks that such depictions are essential to create awareness which is necessary to prevent premarital pregnancy. But, Rina’s (p/m) approval for displaying sex beyond marriage in condom ads is derived from her belief that condoms should be used only during ‘unreliable sexual relationship’, and

³⁷ M. Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

³⁸ S.L. Bartky, Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power, in R. Weitz (eds.) *The Politics of Women’s Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, & Behaviour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 76-98.

³⁹ Among these five women, three belong to the upper-class younger generation, one to the middle-class middle-aged generation and the last one to the poor class middle-aged generation.

not in conjugal life. As she says: 'I don't want my husband to use a condom, because I know he does not go to *kharap jaega* (bad places, i.e., brothel), I trust him'. Therefore, she thinks pre/extra marital sexual relationships can be included in condom ads to promote safe sex. Bondhon (u/y) addresses the same trust concern from a different perspective. According to her, the prevalence of advertising representations, which associate the condom with "promiscuous" sexual behaviour, thus raises an issue of trust.

Consequently, when the condom is more an emblem of protection against HIV/AIDS and STD than birth control in the contraception ads, such representation strengthens the social discourse: '[...] use of condoms indicates that the partners are not sexually exclusive and signals a lack of mutual trust'.⁴⁰ This leaves women with a dilemma – whether to go for condoms or not; because going for a condom would mean that they do not trust their husbands. Accordingly, Bondhon suggests that sexual intimacy needs to be portrayed in not only condom ads, but in any kind of contraceptive ad to promote safe sex and birth control. She further expresses deep frustration about the double standard society maintains – permitting sexual objectification of women's bodies in ads, yet maintaining strict "policing" in the name of protecting the honour of the nation when it comes to contraceptive advertising. Similarly, Meghla (u/y) supports the portrayal of sexual intimacy to create awareness for both safe sex and birth control, and further recommends that pill ads should stop portraying marriage as the only context for using pills, as many unmarried girls, including her, are prescribed pills by doctors to regularise menstruation.

The final small group of women who did not respond are Tushar (p/y) and Nazu (m/o). Tushar did not address this aspect due to her limited knowledge of these ads. Nazu on the other hand, was more interested in talking about her life without reference to sex, mostly discussing about how busy she was in performing her responsibilities as a wife and a mother, which, as she recounted, barely allowed any time to think about other issues. This was a common style of talking about sex observed mostly in the older generation women, as if sex was not that important, just a mundane part of married life and that was it.

The "Lived" Vs. the "Represented" Sexuality and Gender Roles: Concluding Thoughts

One of the significant issues the research has revealed is that women are constrained in their access, consumption and understanding of contraceptive ads. With regard to

⁴⁰ S. F. Rashid, 'Small Powers, Little Choice: Contextualising Reproductive and Sexual Rights in Slums in Bangladesh'. *IDS Bulletin*, Vol. 37(5), 2006, pp. 69-76.

audience response to contraceptive ads, two issues are pertinent: firstly, the act of watching contraception ads is not encouraged in Bangladesh, rather “ignoring” such ads is a norm. Secondly, the act of interpreting these ads – discussing contraception with an outsider, in this case with me – is still culturally considered an embarrassing act. Thus, an investigation of the constrained responses on contraception ads in my research revealed: a paternalistic power presence curtails women’s opportunity to watch TV; with this, material limitations (lack of electricity, absence of a TV, extended workload and no leisure time for women) and religious restrictions upheld by some of the women also essentially hamper the act of watching. Interestingly, women who mentioned about materialistic limitations or gender politics in TV viewing did not consider mobile phones or internet to be alternative media platforms for them. Infact, none of the respondents consider these as their personal choice of media. Rather, some of them, as mentioned before, initiated discussions on modern technologies (mobile phones, satellite TV and the internet) in order to blame these for influencing young generation to adopt Westernised life-style; leading to engage in premarital sexual activity, at an early age. Furthermore, notions of “sexual privacy” – what to disclose and what not, together with socio-cultural and moral restrictions on public discussion of sexual issues, also limit the scope of viewing and/or discussing these ads. Thus, there are many restrictions posed on watching and discussing contraceptive ads.

Despite such constraints, however, the in-depth interviews with women across three social classes and generations revealed that women have a diverse range of valuable experience and knowledge about contraceptive ads and when discussing ads, they also relate the various representations to aspects of their everyday lives. One such opinion, though from a small group of women, indicates that the ads reproduce certain expectations towards women which are patriarchal. For instance, presenting women as shy, solely responsible for birth control and bringing happiness to the family by her use of contraceptives, actually present sexuality and birth control as an extension of women’s conjugal role. They consider such depictions problematic as these lead to a tension for not fitting the category of an “ideal wife”. Hence, these women question these patriarchal gender roles in real life and also in depictions in the contraceptive ads. The research findings suggest that such awareness emerged due to a consciousness of women’s rights in some of these women, developed from receiving higher education, or from the various awareness raising activities throughout the country to reduce gender inequality. Again, some of them hold such perspectives due to different upbringing, or simply due to varied lived experiences. In contrast, the majority of the women interviewed accept such representations, for what

seem to them as traditionally defined characteristics for an “ideal Bengali woman”, which they aspire to achieve in their real lives. Similarly, although pre/extra marital sex is an actuality, a majority of the women do not want to see a reflection of such realities in the condom ads; as the concern is such depictions may encourage “immoral” sexual practices. Rather, these women are reluctant to allow any kind of sexual intimacy to be portrayed in these ads. In contrast, echoing the contemporary sexual realities, a small number of women consider that the contraceptive ads need to demonstrate pre/extra marital sexual relationships.

A final insight that I want to offer with regard to women’s responses towards various depictions in the contraceptive ads is: the responses varied not only due to women’s divergent social classes and generations, but also depending on women’s varied lived experiences of contraception, upbringing, influence of Westernised education and an awareness of gender equality. There were clear distinctions in women’s responses across different classes and generations with regard to two particular issues: firstly, women from the poor class spoke less about the representations in the ads compared to the other classes, as they had fewer opportunities to view ads and limited literacy impeded their full understanding of ads. Secondly, on the representation of pre/extra marital sex in the condom ads, it is mostly the younger, upper-class women who uphold a relatively “progressive” view of sexuality. Again, due to differences of upbringing, even within the same social class and same generation, women had dissimilar experiences of contraceptive ads. For instance, Farha and Bondhon were from the upper-class and belonged to the same younger generation. However, whereas Farha’s upbringing in a religiously “conservative” family restricted her watching of TV and the contraceptive ads until a certain age, there was no such restriction for Bondhon. Rather, Bondhon was never discouraged from asking questions about contraceptive ads even in her childhood.

Nonetheless, one of the interesting aspects to emerge during the discussions about the ads was that when representation of sexual practices in the ads was raised, women expressed their opinions mainly in relation to how such depictions of sexuality had or might have impact on the larger society and Bengali traditions. They found it more difficult to refer to their own sexual experiences. Indeed, McQuail⁴¹ was right to opine, ‘Media use can ... be seen to be both limited and motivated by complex and interacting forces in society and in the personal biography of the individual’.

To conclude, the media landscape is changing rapidly and its digitalisation has created massive scope for advertising. However, anecdotal evidences suggest that

⁴¹ R. Silverstone, *Op.cit.*, p. 143

although ads for contraception continued to be portrayed inadequately, nonetheless, there has been striking changes in the contents of such ads. Therefore, further research is essential in the context of changing media landscape; how audience perceptions interpret such changes both in terms of contraceptive ad contents, as well as how the increased availability of media impacts audience's viewing patterns and gender dynamics of media viewing in a family setting.