



## Beautification as Systemic Violence: A Critical Anthropological Perspective

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**Received:** 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2025

**Accepted:** 16<sup>th</sup> November 2025

**Published:** 5<sup>th</sup> December 2025

### ABSTRACT

This study aims to provide a qualitative analysis of the concept of beautification among university female students, analyzing how systemic violence operates through societal structures, institutional norms, and media influences on women's beautification practices. It also examines the psychological, social, and economic consequences of conformity to beauty norms. Fieldwork was conducted at Comilla University with female students from various departments. Both primary and secondary sources were used for data collection. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling, and a total of 60 participants aged between 20 and 24 years, all currently studying at Comilla University, were interviewed. Qualitative ethnographic approaches guided the research, and data were collected using multiple techniques. Participant observation proved effective, allowing the researcher to live within the community and observe daily life firsthand. The study was further informed by semi-structured interviews, which combined pre-determined questions with the flexibility to explore emerging themes. Research tools included field notes and audio recordings, obtained with the consent of each respondent. Findings reveal that students' perceptions are conflicted between natural and socially constructed notions of beautification. Beauty norms emerge not from personal preference but as responses to societal expectations, institutional norms, and media influences. As a result of these unattainable beauty standards, students experience social rejection, psychological trauma, and anxiety about unequal job opportunities. This study recommends that policymakers and researchers critically and effectively address SDG-5 in Bangladesh, advocating for a society where women are valued for their intellectual competence and aptitude rather than judged by physical appearance.

**Keywords:** beautification, systemic violence, patriarchy, women

## INTRODUCTION

In Mary Russo's key (1995) text, *The Female Grotesque*, she draws:

The images of the grotesque body are precisely those which are abjected from the bodily canons of classical aesthetics. The classical body is transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek; it is identified with the "high" or official culture of the Renaissance and later, with the rationalism, individualism, and normalizing aspirations of the bourgeoisie. The grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identified with non-official "low" culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation.

(Russo, 1995, p. 8)

Brown & Jasper (1993) illustrated, in Western culture, women and girls are socialised to perceive their bodies as indicators of economic value, leading many to believe that altering their body size or shape can fundamentally change their lives. Weitz (2008) found that conventional attractiveness confers power in both relationships and careers: conventionally attractive women are less likely to be lonely, more popular, more sexually experienced, and more likely to marry, often to men of higher socioeconomic status. Furthermore, these women are more likely to be hired, promoted, and receive higher salaries. Darling-Wolf (2009) notes that the transnational, multi-billion-dollar beauty industry exploits female consumers by fostering insecurities and offering products and solutions that promise to conceal perceived imperfections. This industry, therefore, perpetuates the notion that beauty is both a personal responsibility and a key to social and economic success.

Kenny et al. (2017) explain that beauty cannot be separated from women's bodies; what is considered beautiful is, in fact, the result of social construction. Over time, these social constructions of beauty become accepted as the "normal" or even "natural" standard (p. 293). On the other hand, Rondilla (2009) notes that each culture has its own unique construction of beauty. For example, what is often regarded as "Asian beauty" is shaped by Western or white imagination. In Asia, for instance, fair skin has become a prevailing beauty standard (p. 64)

However, from an anthropological perspective, every culture and every human being has its own understanding of everyday life. The uniqueness of human culture is defined by the term Cultural Relativism. The concept was introduced in anthropology by anthropologist Franz Boas, in 1887: "civilization is not something absolute, but...is relative, and... our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes" (Boas, 1887). Cultural relativism is the perspective that concepts and moral values should be understood within their own cultural

context, rather than being judged by the standards of another culture (Chandrashekhar, 2023). According to the Boasian theory, women have their own way of thinking and expressing themselves. Then, why does society try to construct women with different criteria? “You are not smart enough; you are not cultured at all”. These types of questions continuously elevate the thoughts regarding women’s domination by setting beauty standards.

It is not beauty standards alone; patriarchal social structure has created a system where women act accordingly. The word ‘patriarchy’ literally means the rule of the father or the ‘patriarch’, and originally it was used to describe a specific type of ‘male-dominated family’ – the large household of the patriarch, which included women, junior men, children, slaves, and domestic servants all under the rule of this dominant male. Now it is used more generally “to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways” (Bhasin, 2006, p. 3). Capitalism represents women as products and generates significant profit. Capitalism emphasizes women’s bodies, while patriarchy has never considered women beyond their physical appearance. Kate Millet’s theory of subordination argues that women are a dependent sex class under patriarchal domination (Millet, 1970).

In today’s life, the concept of beautification has been growing gradually and has become one of the finest weapons for patriarchal domination against women. The patriarchal social structure does not confine itself to conceptualising the ideology but sets the standards of beauty. Women have been confined within the boundaries of a patriarchal power structure that systematically excludes their rights and interests in politics, the economy, society, culture, and technology. Rather than achieving equality in an increasingly modern world, women are confronted with beauty ideals that demand straightened hair, lighter skin, a tall, slim body, and a pointed nose. These characteristics—often associated with classical depictions of Venus—serve to objectify women and pressure them to conform to narrow beauty standards. (Putri, 2020; Sorokowski, 2010). In this study, this is evident that women are characterized by their physical appearance (fair, slim, tall, hairless body, glass skin, silky hair, and so on) not by their inner qualities (intelligence, creativity, talent, rightful thought, etc.).

In the context of Bangladesh, beauty is not merely about aesthetics, but also about its internal value. It has deeper consequences with socio-cultural expectations. This study has witnessed how females are perceiving beauty and how they treat themselves. Their worth is determined by whether they are beautiful or not. This study shows that if beauty is considered normal, as we

are embracing it unquestionably, then why don't most females think they are beautiful enough? This was the core point to study among female students. Men and women in a society experience beauty in a different way. Women have been facing more difficult consequences than men. If beauty norms are normal, then why do they think they have to be beautiful? These are the questions that drive this research deeper to understand the systemic violence of women through beautification practices. To clarify the research objectives, this study presents some cases where you will find the irrelevance of the thought of female students, where they are not sure what they should do, and what they are practicing in real life. Women unknowingly carry the burden, as they feel pressure to be beautiful. Society's role has set in a way that women want to survive in this competition, they have to be attractive, 'hot', 'sexy', 'glamorous' as well. For that reason, Women are increasingly experiencing a sense of entrapment within their own bodies as a result of pervasive beauty norms and societal expectations. Nowadays, women are talking about freedom while they are confined within their own bodies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Perception of beautification among university students is one of the unavoidable factors in 21<sup>st</sup> century. As university female students are holding mirrors for the women's freedom and empowerment for rest of the women living in a society. Therefore, their understanding of beauty norms is crucial. Rahbari (2021) described the concept of beautification and she presented male and female respondents' perspectives on beautification. Most male participants viewed "beauty as a primary social resource of status for women to be used in marriage marketing; and thought of education as a secondary resource that was used in the lack of the primary capital" (p. 317). According to them, "women working in academia, especially doctoral candidates were less attractive than less educated women. Some participants compared their students in bachelor's, master's and doctorate levels to conclude [often humorously] that the higher the level of education, the lower the level of attractiveness" (p. 313). "Beautiful students might marry first because they get more marriage proposals... others can focus better on their studies because they are attracting less attention... by getting a good degree they can also increase their chances of marriage" (p. 314).

Ambarwati (2018) presents another perspective on beautification. She added that "applying cosmetics on the face is always related to the beauty of women in general, many women agree with this opinion. The face, in the end, has been a symbol of women's submission to cultural constructions and the male gaze. Red Lipsticks is often associated with sensual color. Many

women think they will look beautiful and attractive in this color. Red lipsticks to attract the male gaze and put the male as the audience” (p. 89). Being beautiful is regarded as something valuable and desirable, which explains why many women become obsessed with attaining beauty. It is not surprising, therefore, that women flock to purchase cosmetics, watch beauty vlogs, and attend beauty classes in pursuit of the ideal of “prettiness.” The act of applying cosmetics is, in itself, a form of agreement with the dominant beauty discourse. Over the years, people have learned to construct their faces through makeup—applying foundation, contouring the nose, coloring eyebrows, and using eyeliner, eyeshadow, lipstick, and blush—to conform to the societal definition of “beautiful” (p. 93).

Naomi Wolf (2002), throughout her text, asserts that “The Beauty Myth”. “Beauty is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is shaped by politics, and in the modern West, it is the last, best-belief system that maintains male dominance. In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves” (p.12). This study finds that the influence of society to the women’s body is intense. This concept is regulated by the patriarchal society, deepening the power struggle between genders, where women are confined within their own bodies. At the very moment when women were fighting for their rights, society introduced the regressive concept of beautification. This notion is not neutral; it clearly serves a political agenda. By encouraging women to focus on conforming to beauty standards, society effectively diverts their attention from challenging systemic domination and underlying conspiracies. As long as women remain preoccupied with beautification, their ability to raise their voices against social oppression is significantly diminished (Wolf, 2002).

The consequences of beautification are multifaceted. It has impacted women’s lives in different aspects. The ratio of using beauty products has been presented by Shalini & Lakshmi (2022). They pointed out that “62 percent of the respondents started giving importance to beautification between 16 to 20 years of age, 23 percent started giving importance for beautification between 21-25 years of age, 13 percent gave importance to beautification even before 15 years of age, and two percent gave importance to beautification after 25 years of age. 66 percent of the women respondents were influenced by self-beautification. 56 percent of women were influenced by their attitude towards fashion and trends. 25 percent were influenced by nature of the job. 24 percent were influenced by needs and motives. 20 percent were influenced by hygiene factor .19 percent were influenced by health factor for beautification.16 percent were

influenced by family members; 14 percent were influenced by climate/environment. 12 percent were influenced by peer group influence. 10 percent were influenced by place of residence” (p. 360).

Whereas in Indonesia, the consumption of decorative cosmetics like eye makeup and lipsticks has a high percentage, which is up to 74 %. (marketeers.com). The increase in cosmetics consumption is driven by the demand to fulfil the ideal beauty standard. The hat is by using decorative products. Besides cosmetics consumption, beauty class also cannot be separated from the demand of lower-middle-class women to fulfil the beautiful image. The beauty class opens an opportunity for the lower middle-class women to try various cosmetics” (Ambarwati, 2018, p. 88).

McKay et al. (2018) have described beauty pressure among young university women. They found that “women’s gender, race, class, culture and size all largely shape their experiences with Western beauty pressures” (p. 8). “Female athletes are often dehumanised in a masculine domain in which gender differences are not evident through the use of makeup, clothes or other forms of ‘gendering the body.’” Thus, women who are perceived to be masculine often endure sexual and homophobic harassment as a result. Being a mixed-race woman or a woman of color in Western culture meant having to negotiate between two cultures with different beauty “ideals,” making it difficult for women to develop positive perceptions of their own beauty. People who question the legitimacy of a woman’s identity based on presubscribed notions of how they think she should look reinforce this struggle. The class also impacted women who could not afford to spend large amounts of money on beauty products and clothing. If women are unable to afford clothing and products needed to achieve Western beauty norms, they often feel excluded” (p.9).

Another article showed that the relationship between body-image dissatisfaction, psychological preparedness for beautification and academic achievement among university students is complex and multifaceted. Female students who prioritize beautification over academic achievement are more likely to experience body-image dissatisfaction, low self-esteem and low academic achievement. Urien (2025) found that “body comparison was one of the major factors leading to body image dissatisfaction among female students who compared themselves with their friends or other females around them, Societal beauty standards: Societal beauty standards emerged as one of the leading factors to female student’s body image dissatisfaction and social

media is also another factor” (p. 812). “The fear of being rejected or ostracized by peers can drive individuals to prioritize beautification over academic achievement” (p. 813).

Besides Habiba & Bano (2025), Urien also found the connecting consequences. participants have internalized the beauty standards, causing body image dissatisfaction and low self-esteem. They added that family is the primary socializing agent, and girls are socialized to maintain their beauty. Different stereotypes are attached to girls from childhood, such as being sensitive, pretty, beautiful, and attractive. Throughout their lives, they are pressured to maintain them. No doubt, parents have a deep affection for their daughters, but they also face societal pressure to present them in a feminine way, adhering to beauty norms. Mothers usually advised their daughters to maintain weight, take care of their skin, and hair. In university settings, participants strive to maintain beauty standards because it boosts their confidence and self-worth. Those who do not keep themselves updated experience social exclusion in classroom settings. Due to the social environment, students are compelled to conform to beauty standards (Habiba & Bano, 2025).

Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being. “Woman, the relative being,” writes Michelet. Thus, Monsieur Benda declares in *Le rapport d’Uriel* (Uriel’s Report): “A man’s body has meaning by itself, disregarding the body of the woman, whereas the woman’s body seems devoid of meaning without reference to the male. Man thinks himself without a woman. A woman does not think herself without a man (Beauvoir, 1949). Blood (2005) states that beauty standards have undermined women’s self-worth and pressured them to conform to beauty practices in an attempt to emulate the ideal of beauty. In the context of Bangladesh, women also experience self-doubt and strive to fit these prevailing beauty standards. As Dworkin (1974) has pointed out, beauty is a cultural practice that often wastes time and resources and can be detrimental to one’s self-esteem. To fit the ideal of beauty, women are expected to apply makeup, style their hair in elaborate ways, or even undergo cosmetic surgery.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Systemic Violence**

Juanita Ross Epp and Ailsa M. Watkinson define systemic violence as:

“Systemic violence is any institutionalized practice or procedure that adversely impacts on disadvantage, individuals or groups by burdening them psychologically, mentally, culturally,

spiritually, economically, or physically” (pp. 4-5). “It is perpetrated by those with power, entitlement, and privilege against those who have less. Systemic violence results from conventional policies and practices that appear neutral but result in discriminatory effects. The harm caused by discrimination can be physical, mental, cultural, spiritual, economic, or physical” (p. 5). In the context of women in Bangladesh, these criteria of beauty have burdened their lives with societal expectations for so long that it appears normal to them. Women are blindly practicing the aesthetic practices, yet they are facing discrimination within patriarchal socio-cultural structures and social media exposures. Now, women are questioning their self-worth because they do not fit into the preconceived beauty norms.

## METHODOLOGY

For assessing the beautification concept among university female students, to analyze how symbolic violence operates through society, institutional norms, and media influences on women’s beautification practices, and to examine the psychological, social, and economic consequences of conformity to beauty norms, a survey was conducted at Comilla University. Female students were selected as the sample because their thoughts determine the future of women’s freedom and empowerment. The survey covered a total number of 60 respondents, and their age range was 21-24, who are studying in different departments at this university.

This research continued using non-probability sampling. If your objective is to estimate a parameter or proportion from a sample to a larger population, and your research requires collecting data about attributes of individuals—whether those individuals are people, organizations, or even episodes of a sitcom—the rule is straightforward: collect data from a sufficiently large, randomly selected, and unbiased sample (Bernard, 1940).

Data was collected using purposive sampling. In purposive sampling, you decide the purpose you want informants (or communities) to serve, and you go out to find some. This is somewhat like quota sampling, except that there is no overall sampling design that tells you how many of each type of informant you need for a study. You take what you can get (Ibid, p. 189-190).

Data were collected using a semi-structured questionnaire that aligned with the study's objectives. Semi-structured interviewing retains much of the freewheeling nature of unstructured interviewing and requires similar skills, but it is distinguished by the use of an interview guide. This guide is a written list of questions and topics that must be addressed,



typically in a specific order (Ibid., p. 212). As the research was not quantitative in nature, it required questionnaires that were not listed before.

Participant observation was one of the fundamental methods for collecting information, allowing for firsthand understanding of the research problem. Participant observers can be insiders who observe and record aspects of life around them—referred to as observing participants—or outsiders who take part in certain aspects of daily life and document their experiences, known as participating observers (Ibid., p. 347).

This study employed a qualitative research approach. Interpretive studies of texts are of this kind. You focus on and name themes in texts. You tell the story, as you see it, of how the themes are related to one another and how characteristics of the speaker or speakers account for the existence of certain themes and the absence of others. You may deconstruct the text, look for hidden subtexts, and, in general, try to let your audience know—using the power of good rhetoric—the deeper meaning or the multiple meanings of the text (Ibid., p. 451).

## ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

### Females' Perceptions About Beauty

Women in Bangladesh face difficulties in many spheres every day. In the context of Bangladesh, the definition of beauty is more acute for its socio-cultural perspective. This study explores the female students' perspective on the definition of beauty. The question was, who is beautiful according to you? Female students defined beauty from diverse perspectives. Most people consider physical beauty to be the ultimate, while others define inner qualities as beautiful.

Farzana (Pseudonym, 22 years old) said that,

“Beautiful means slim but not so thin, fair, tall but not that much that we cannot find any man to marry because in our society it is unusual for a woman to be taller than a man, silky hair, flawless skin and body, smart, not khet (Local term means unsmart, perfect body count)”. (Source: *Fieldwork*, 2024)

Tamanna (pseudonym, 23 years old) said that,

“It is quite obvious that beauty is who has every quality to be an actress or model. She has a lighter skin tone with a hairless body. You will never see any actress with dark skin. She is perfect in height, her nose is slim, eyelashes are thick. She is not fat; she is slim and has a perfect jawline. Everything is perfectly aligned with one another.” (Source: *Fieldwork*, 2024)

These statements clearly define beauty from the perspective of society's established standards. To most students, beauty is defined by their lived experiences and the socio-cultural structures prevalent in Bangladesh. Physical appearance is the most important parameter in defining beauty. On the other hand, some students tried to define beauty as talent and inherent capabilities.

### **Beautification Creates a Docile Body**

Following the study, a few students have tried to manipulate their answer based on the question of defining beauty. They have given importance to inner beauty, e.g., intellectual capabilities, behavior, mental strength to solve problems, and honesty. Their words seem fair, but the reality is far crueler. They got perplexed when try to answer the question, do you think yourself beautiful? In this case, most of the students do not assume themselves as beautiful. This study tries to explore the reason behind it.

Sharia (pseudonym, 22 years old) defines beauty as

“Beauty is not defined on the basis of physical appearance. With your age, you will gain weight, you will have wrinkles on your face, after having a baby, your body structure will not be the same, and you will face massive hair loss. So, I don't think beauty is only defined by physique but by the intellect.” (Source: *Fieldwork*, 2024).

Sharia (pseudonym, 22 years old) denied herself as beautiful, although she mentioned intellect as beautiful. She replied,

“Perhaps I am not beautiful because my skin is not fair. Besides, I have pimples and hair on my face. My parents are not happy as I am dark skinned. Neighbors always suggested that my mother give me some fairness cream. My parents feel inferior when compared to my cousins. I cannot post my picture without a filter. My friends taunt me by saying that there's a huge difference between you and your picture. You look beautiful in the picture.” (Source: *Fieldwork*, 2024)

Following the questions, Tamanna (pseudonym, 23 years old) answered that,

“I am okay, but I am not beautiful. My teeth are not in order. My smile is not pretty. I always cover my mouth while I start laughing. Since my childhood, I have received criticism about the structure of my teeth. On the other hand, I am 4.9 feet, which is assumed as short. People call me Lilliput. So, I can't be as beautiful as you ask.” (Source: *Fieldwork*, 2024)

Farzana (pseudonym, 22 years old) stated that,

“I am not pretty. I am fatty. People laugh at my weight. They trolled me by saying how much rice I eat every day. I look older than my age. Besides, I have dark skin. I always

feel I am not enough. I have never heard beautiful in my whole life.” (Source: Fieldwork, 2024)

These statements reveal that these are the criteria society has fixed for women to feel less. Michel Foucault’s concept of docile bodies, in *Discipline and Punish*, draws on the theory that, the docile body is a pliable object; when disciplinary force is applied through mechanisms of control and dependency, the individual becomes bound to the structure of these disciplinary practices. According to Foucault, the docile body “is something that can be made out of a formless clay, an inapt body [from which] the machine required can be constructed.” (Foucault, 1978/2012, p. 135). Foucault, therefore, suggests that, the docile body is suited to being “manipulated, shaped, [and] trained” willingly, adapting itself to the demands of disciplinary power. (Foucault, 1978/2012, p.136). This study shows that women have never felt complete, honored, or beautiful because of the unrealistic standards. Women wanted to feel confident, but the patriarchal structure has set the patterns in a way that women roam around to fulfill physical appearance. Women regulate their own bodies according to the patriarchal socio-cultural structure willingly, where they are questioning their self-worth every day.

### **Hegemonic Power of Normalizing Beautification**

Following this disparity, a question has arisen: Is beauty a natural or constructed phenomenon? This question was asked as female students were determined to define beauty in terms of inner capabilities, but they were not yet ready to accept that they are beautiful. To female students, the beautification is natural, not constructed. From the very first day of their journey as girls, they always hear that women are the symbol of beauty. Besides, society has categorized beauty on its own terms. That’s why women are naturally drawn to it throughout their journey. One more question was asked of them: Is it necessary to be beautiful? They got puzzled within their own ideology.

Farzana (22 years old, Pseudonym) said that,

“Definitely, being beautiful is important. Women who are beautiful always get all the privileges from everywhere. Their family feels proud and secure about them. They get all the attention at any family function. They appear confident in every aspect of their life. They get a good marriage proposal and a wealthy groom. Their parents need not worry about dowry. Beautiful women are not desperate for a job, as their beauty is their currency. Besides, they will get a rich husband.” (Source: Fieldwork, 2024)

Tamanna (23 years old, pseudonym) replied that,

“It is not necessary to be beautiful all the time. You can use your talent to stand out. You should not get obsessed with beauty. But it is unavoidable that beautiful women

feel more acceptance than those who are not. They get more friend requests, more dating proposals on Facebook, Instagram. It helps them to boost their confidence, which turns into arrogance, pride sometimes. Because there are proverbs existing in our society that beauty against the brain. So, these things are not new.” (Source: *Fieldwork*, 2024)

Female students’ opinions contradict their own statement of beauty. It is perfectly aligned with the concept of cultural hegemony. The concept of cultural hegemony was given by Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci illustrated "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production." (Gramsci, 1971). These statements clearly assert that if beauty is natural, then why is it necessary to be fitted into a certain category? If it is something natural, then everyone should get the same preference based on their physical appearance. Why beauty is praised and others are not? Who has made this distinction between beauty and the unattractive? Due to various factors (e.g. gene, hybridity), physical features differ from one another. Someone is white skinned, another is brown or black, someone is tall, other is short, someone is fat, other is slim. Some has long and silky hair, other has curly hair. Why do women feel the pressure to feel attractive? Why does society give extra attention to it? But when we place emphasis on beautification and attach specific adjectives to it, we further reinforce narrow and prescriptive ideals of appearance; at that point, it ceases to be a natural phenomenon. These standards are universally accepted and verified by the capitalist market, and they are strengthened by the patriarchal social structure.

### **Male Beauty Compared to Female and Performativity**

In the context of Bangladesh, males are free from the traditional notion of beauty as it pertains to women. Male is not assigned to attractiveness and beauty. Their beauty is defined by strength, power, merit, hardworking, bread provider, leadership, decision maker, and so on. This study inquired about the necessity of male beauty in society from the perspective of females. Because as human being both genders should have been treated the same and equally. The question was, is male beauty important? Students have replied with diverse perceptions regarding male beauty.

Farzana (pseudonym, 22 years old) said that,

“I have never thought this way earlier. In our society, we never hear the word that males are beautiful. It’s quite unnatural to think about male beauty because there is no such thing. Males are treated as always superior in the family, society everywhere. Some words we use about males are handsome, manly. Apart from this, society never expects males to be beautiful. They are a warrior, protector.” (Source: *Fieldwork*, 2024)

Besides, Tamanna (pseudonym, 23 years old) added that,

“From our childhood, we hear some proverbs like “sonar angti baka holeo sona” (a gold ring is gold even if it is crooked). It determines that men do not require other adjectives to define them. They are born as men, is their ultimate beauty. They do not feel the pressure of physical appearance from society. We used to think of men as superior to us. We always feel the burden to be chosen as a beautiful daughter and bride.” (Source: *Fieldwork*, 2024)

Judith Butler (1999) explains this dilemma within the framework of gender performativity theory. This act encompasses the way a person walks, talks, dresses, and behaves—actions described as "gender performativity." According to this concept, what society perceives as an individual's gender is merely a performance intended to satisfy social expectations, rather than a genuine expression of the person's gender identity. Our behaviors are shaped not by our inherent gender, but by ideologies established both by ourselves and by society.

The notion of beautification has revealed how gender is regulated within a society. Men do not feel the pressure of beauty as women do. Every day, Women navigate both the advantages and disadvantages associated with beautification practices. Societal norms often reward women who conform to established beauty standards, granting them increased social privileges, confidence, and perceived opportunities. Conversely, women who do not meet these ideals may encounter significant obstacles, including diminished self-esteem, social exclusion, and limited access to resources or opportunities. This dichotomy shapes women's perceptions of themselves and others, gradually altering their life narratives. According to participants in this study, women deemed conventionally beautiful receive privileges from society, while those labeled as “ungracious” face various forms of discrimination. As a result, many women internalize these standards, leading to a loss of confidence among those who feel they do not measure up. Consequently, women often prioritize beauty as a means to fulfill societal expectations, whereas men are encouraged to cultivate strength, both physical and otherwise, to achieve social acceptance. This dynamic reinforces gendered expectations and perpetuates systemic inequalities.

## Women's Beauty as Socio-Economic Capital

For a prolonged period, women have experienced both the advantages and disadvantages of beauty. Women have been facing the difficulties throughout their life's experiences. This research explores the benefits of being beautiful. Their responses were diverse yet deep.

Farzana (pseudonym, 22 years old) showed her emotions that,

“In our marriage system, we have always witnessed the fear in every girl to be judged based on their physical beauty. My sister had faced it before she got married. My sister's in-laws' family came to our house to see whether our sister fits into their criteria or not. They asked my sister to show her face to everyone. Then they check her hair (long or short). After some time, they requested that my sister stand up, and the groom stand next to her, so they could match her height. As my sister was short, they were not ready to select my sister in the first place. After numerous calculations, they decided to select my sister as the bride, but they requested some gifts in return. My parents were in tension as we are 4 sisters, and who will choose their daughter for marriage? That's why they tried to meet all the demands by selling our trees and some portion of our land.” (Source: *Fieldwork*, 2024)

Bourdieu developed the concept of cultural capital to account for differences in educational achievement and cultural practices that could not be explained solely by economic inequalities.

“The concept of cultural capital denotes the ensemble of cultivated dispositions that constitute such schemes of appreciation and understanding. These dispositions are cultivated in a double sense: in the evaluate sense, they are “refined”, and in the descriptive sense, they are the product of a process of (conscious or unconscious) cultivation” (Brubaker, 1985, p.757).

“Cultural capital exists in the form of incorporated dispositions but also in the objectified, socially certified form of academic degrees. As desirable positions in the job market increasingly require formal educational qualifications, it becomes essential for parents to invest in a good education for their children, meaning one that will have sufficient “scarcity value” to be profitable on the job market. This process of investment Bourdieu describes as the conversion of economic into cultural capital” (*Ibid*, p.757&758).

In the present context, beauty is regarded as a form of capital, and women cannot escape the pressure to conform. Many women internalize these expectations and unconsciously adjust their behavior to align with prevailing beauty ideals. Capitalist society promotes the perceived advantages of being beautiful, driving women to relentlessly pursue these standards. However, this serves merely as a subtle mechanism for the repression of women, reducing them to commodities. Ultimately, this raises an important question: do women truly benefit from this process? Actually, women do not benefit from this process. These normalizing processes of

beautification make women vulnerable to their own bodies. They feel the need to ensure their bodily appearance is perfect to receive the privileges afforded by society.

### **Social Media Role for Perpetuating Beauty**

Understanding women's suppression, it was necessary to explore how they are aware of beauty standards. Most respondents reported using social media, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. In the globalized world, we are not separated from the world stage.

Farzana (Pseudonym, 22 years old) replied that

I personally follow some actresses on Facebook and Instagram. My favorite is Deepika Padukone from Bollywood. She is the symbol of perfection to me. Her media appearance is so elegant. Her jawline is so sharp. I wish I could have this. But I have a double chin, which makes me older than my age. I am on a diet right now to lose my weight. I have never posted any of my pictures without using filters. Because everyone is beautiful, stylish on social media. Sometimes I feel ashamed of my physique. Because I am not so cool. After clicking my pictures, I probably take 2-3 hours to select and post my photos. Sometimes I feel awkward meeting someone physically, as the filtered pictures are so different. (Source: Fieldwork, 2024)

Tamanna (Pseudonym, 21 years old) replied that

Actually, I love modeling. I am a huge fan of Kendal Jenner from the West. She has a perfect body shape. You will never witness any professional model with a fatty body, short height. In the world context, they are an example of beauty. I do not follow any Bangladeshi model, although they are beautiful, yet not elegant. I wanted to participate in a beauty contest, but my smile is not beautiful because of my unorganized teeth. Because if you are beautiful, you will get more likes, comments, and followers. When I get average likes and comments, I feel overwhelmed. But when the likes are not satisfactory, I feel depressed. It happens most often. Sometimes when someone give a haha emoji, I get confused whether I should remove this picture or not. I know this is a virtual world, but the validation from people makes me happy and confident. (Source: Fieldwork, 2024)

These statements revealed that in the 21st century, most people spend a significant amount of time on social media. Social media itself is not inherently harmful if you use it responsibly. But men and women are both triggered by the beauty projection through different portals every day. Men used to see women who were perfect and flawless, virtually. Their expectations have been changing in comparison to their counterparts. As a result, women are trying to conform to their partners' visual standards. Women also follow social media influencers to emulate their beauty. In most cases, they are doing it unconsciously and unknowingly because it never appears as domination to the women.

## CONCLUSION

Women's freedom, women's movement, and women's empowerment are pivotal in shaping history. While women were once confined to the household, the 21st century has witnessed increasing participation of women in higher education and public life. However, this progress raises the important question: are women truly achieving freedom? This research demonstrates that women's freedom remains deeply contested, especially regarding physical appearance. Although both men and women are integral to society, women in Bangladesh continue to be treated as less than men. They are deprived of rights and privileges in numerous areas. In Bangladesh, women are often regarded not as full human beings but as products, valued primarily for their appearance. The invisible force behind this treatment is patriarchy, which denies women their intrinsic worth. Through the concept of beautification, patriarchal society confines women within their bodies, constructing them according to socio-cultural expectations and erasing their authentic selves. Patriarchy maintains its power by perpetually introducing new forms of control, and beautification has become a subtle yet powerful tool to systematically disempower women. The pressure to conform to beauty standards undermines women's mental health, self-worth, and confidence, creating an environment in which systemic violence is normalized and often goes unrecognized.

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