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Experiencing shame: An affective reading of the sexual and reproductive health and rights classroom in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how shame functions in the teaching of sexual and reproductive health and rights in the classrooms for 13–19 year-olds in secondary schools in Bangladesh. Using the theoretical framework of affect, the paper looks at shame and other experiences of discomfort and hesitation among teachers while teaching these topics to young people. Drawing insights from 25 in-depth interviews with teachers in secondary schools in urban, semi-urban and rural settings, the paper explores how teachers deemed teaching certain topics as ‘excessive’, unnecessary and inappropriate in school settings. Teachers experience reluctance and discomfort in discussing culturally sensitive sexual and reproductive health and rights topics, and a persistent fear of being ridiculed and excluded from their community. By exploring how affect can be understood to initiate critical reflection about classroom norms, pedagogy and the role of teachers, the paper highlights the challenges for teachers who are seen as gatekeepers of sexual and reproductive health and rights knowledge, and brings forth a more nuanced reflection on the knowledge production process in classrooms.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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KEYWORDS

Shame; Affect; Sexuality; Classroom norms; Bangladesh

Background

The teacher was in the middle of his exam invigilation duty and expressed annoyance when we shared that we wanted to interview him after the exam was over. We sat in the principal’s room. We were interrupted by people, asking for the teacher, which broke the flow of the interview few times. Whenever it came to talking about topics of sex and sexuality, the teacher lowered his voice. It almost became a whisper, so that others around could not hear, even though the room was empty.

This response in the form of lowered whisper by a 47-year-old male teacher at a school in the semi-rural outskirts of Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, exhibited not only the teacher’s discomfort but also an embodied and instinctual response to the mention of particular topics in the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) curriculum. The teacher lowered his voice so that no one could hear him, even though the room was empty.

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asking questions about a sexuality curriculum that the teacher was responsible for teaching, but also shared a fraught relationship with. The interaction however emerges as an important site to think of a Bangladeshi teacher’s role and position in the SRHR classroom, which needs to be interpreted relationally with reference to students and the larger community that the teacher is part of. Doing so materialises the body of the teacher in the SRHR education space, where aspects of authority and power and their relationship with subjectivity formation need to be thought of critically. We employ an affective framework to take into account how shame of teachers is produced relationally and shapes their engagement with SRHR topics in the classroom.

In the Bangladeshi context, it is ‘challenging to inquire about sexuality because of its personal and intimate characteristics – aspects that are prescribed by society to be kept as inaudible and invisible as possible’ (Karim 2012, 24). However, in 2012 the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) in Bangladesh introduced SRHR topics, including physical changes during adolescence, menstruation, wet dreams and reproduction into the Physical Education book at the secondary school level. Moreover, the Government of Bangladesh, as part of its commitment to improving access to adolescent sexual and reproductive health services has introduced adolescent-friendly health corners in health facilities (specifically, Union Health and Family Welfare Centers and Mother and Child Welfare Centers) (Ainul et al. 2017, 6). Nevertheless, understandings of sexuality remain largely heteronormative, in which health rights are thought of in terms of reproduction and family planning between men and women, and information outlets and services continue to cater to married adolescents mostly. So, concern remains as to the effectiveness of adolescent-friendly health corners and whether unmarried young people feel comfortable using them.

Several non-Governmental organisations working on SRHR in Bangladesh have played an active role in advocating for a more comprehensive approach to the SRHR curriculum, delivering content education in several schools and community clubs and creating health facilities for adolescents. However, ‘like other South Asian states, Bangladesh is a conservative country’ (Rashid 2000, 28) in which unmarried adolescents (particularly girls) are expected to be modest and sheltered from knowledge of sex, reproduction and sexual experience. Aspects of premarital sex among young people, and gender and sexual diversity as a sexual right, are still not addressed in SRHR projects and interventions due to silence and overall socio-cultural taboos. This is telling of how the topic of sexuality sits very uncomfortably in the public imagination of Bangladesh.

Increasingly, conservative views conflict with a rapidly globalising environment as the majority of young people are exposed to popular culture and social media and have access to local and global realities via the Internet and television. In such a rapidly changing context, what do teachers feel and how do they respond when there are discussions about sex and sexuality in Bangladeshi society and in the classroom? What implications can this have for teachers as they try to perform certain roles when teaching certain SRHR topics? What levels of shame are experienced? Which pervasive norms and relations does the teaching of sensitive SRHR topics specifically challenge?

‘Sex Education is distributed, felt, and embodied in different spaces and places’ (Rasmussen 2012, 188), and ‘explorations of affects involved in knowing, teaching, and learning have remained largely on the margins of curriculum studies’ (Lesko 2010, 283). In this article, using the theoretical framework of affect, we will focus on the ‘felt’ or affective
dimensions of SRHR teaching in the classroom and write about how shame functions to provide entrance points to reflect on classroom norms.

Even though several studies (UNFPA 2010; Boonstra 2011; World Health Organization 2011), including those on the needs of adolescents and young people themselves, point to the importance of teaching SRHR topics and show that such teaching leads to less (risky) sexual practices and more informed choices by young people, in practice, such teaching rarely takes place in schools in Bangladesh. Teachers act as gatekeepers and their perceptions of shame, and how they experience it in the classroom, constitutes a largely unexplored area of enquiry in Bangladesh. Research on SRHR (Wood, Rogow, and Stines 2015; Dennis and DePalma 2015) highlights the importance of personal comfort if teachers are to teach SRHR effectively. Here, however we are interested in seeing how experiences of shame and discomfort do not solely depend on ‘personal comfort’ or confidence level. Exploring shame from the teachers’ side, and not dismissing it as a pedagogical failure or shortcoming, may generate critical reflection on shame in SRHR education for SRHR educators, curriculum designers, researchers and practitioners and, in the process, help rethink pedagogical philosophies and knowledge production process in regards to the SRHR classroom in conservative contexts.

This article draws on research from a three-year qualitative research project titled Breaking the Shame (2016–2019) conducted by BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health at BRAC University in partnership with Radboud University, Netherlands. The Bangladeshi partners of the study were the Unite for Body Rights (UBR) alliance and the BRAC Adolescent Development Programme (ADP). In this paper, we focus and write about findings in relation to UBR – a transnational programme led by Rutgers, Netherlands, working to strengthen and improve SRHR situation in nine countries in Africa and Asia, with funding from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. UBR is a comprehensive sexuality education programme that implements a curriculum called The World Starts with Me, which is translated as Ami o amar prithibi, or Me and My World, in Bangla or Bengali.

The World Starts with Me is an interactive programme for primary schools which adopts a human rights perspective. It targets young people aged 9–14 years old and has been adapted for use in several African countries as well. The UBR alliance in Bangladesh currently comprises nine NGOs working on the area of SRHR. The Me and My World curriculum was piloted in 2014 in two schools in two different sub-districts in Bangladesh. After a pilot phase, the project has been implemented in 2015 in 48 Bangla medium schools in 12 sub-districts around Bangladesh. Me and My World is taught in Bengali. The curriculum was translated by programme managers and regional coordinators of the UBR alliance, who then conducted training sessions with teachers from local schools.

**Teaching in Bangladesh**

Bangladesh has three main types of education: that conducted in the Bengali medium, that delivered in the English medium, and Islamic education in Madrasahs. The general education stream consists of Bengali medium and English medium schools divided into three major stages – primary, secondary and higher education. Primary education is 5 years long, while secondary education is 7 years long with three sub-stages: 3 years of junior secondary, 2 years of secondary and 2 years of higher secondary. Those attending primary education are generally between the ages of 5 and 10, while the ages of those in secondary education...
vary between 11 and 17. A higher number of schools are Bengali medium, and the majority of them are public institutions.

Bengali medium schools follow a curriculum set by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) whereby students sit for four main national/public examinations throughout the 12 grades. English medium schools, which are mainly private schools and also comprise 12 grades, follow the General Certificate of Education (GSE) facilitated through British Council Bangladesh, where students sit for two main exams. The UBR works mainly with only Bengali medium schools because of a larger national outreach. It does not work with English medium schools and works with only a very few madrassas or Islamic schools.

Teachers across the school systems come from diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds and do not form a homogenous group. It is common for teachers across all three types of education to struggle for time to complete the syllabus. Many teachers feel demotivated to take extra classes on SRHR. Teachers in Bengali medium schools are more hard-pressed with national exams compared to those in English medium schools. Understandably, Bengali medium school teachers who deliver Me and My World therefore struggle to balance the newly added responsibility of teaching the curriculum to adolescents that also comes with no extra pay.

A hierarchical and didactic pedagogy predominates in classrooms, influencing how knowledge is understood in Bangladeshi schools. Using the banking concept of education advanced by the educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (2005) to address Bangladeshi classrooms is helpful in making sense of this. Freire (2005) explains that traditionally knowledge in the classroom is viewed as something to be conveyed by the teacher to students. Such education is built upon uneven power relations between teachers and students, whereby teachers are superiors to students. Anthropologist Thérèse Blanchet (1996) in her book Lost Innocence, Stolen Childhood, writes, among others, about the hierarchical nature of education in urban schools in Bangladesh: ‘The education dispensed to children is syllabus-based and examination-driven. […] the school system sanctions the memorisation of a finite knowledge contained in book.’ (Blanchet 1996, 150–151). Such pedagogy has implications for how students and teachers view themselves, and for knowledge and the knowledge production process in the classroom. Crucially, a banking concept of education discourages teachers and adolescents from thinking about different realities of gender and sexual identity in and outside of the classroom. Given there has been very little work on SRHR education in schools in Bangladesh, this paper has much to contribute to the understanding around how analysing teacher-student dynamics in relation to SRHR education in the classroom opens up possibilities to initiate discussions around pedagogy, power relations and the school environment in general.

English medium schools in Bangladesh are often thought of as more ‘advanced’ in talking about sex and sexuality, where being advanced is not thought of positively (Karim 2012, 64). Paradoxically, however, students in English medium schools do not receive any sex education classes so the cultural unease that prevails when it comes to teaching or talking about sex and sexuality is cross-cutting across Bengali and English medium schools.
Methods

Although the focus of this paper is on shame and affect, data collection was not solely centred around these themes. Interview questions focused on thoughts about the Me and My World curriculum; thoughts about SRHR education more generally; positive and negative experiences of teaching SRHR; topics teachers felt uncomfortable discussing and reasons; preferred educational tools and methods of teaching SRHR; logistical challenges and ways of overcoming them; experience with working with the UBR alliance; and relationships with students, other teachers, community and parents. It is through the questions that addressed experiences of discomfort and challenge that teachers also spoke of aspects of shame and connected this to the relationships they have with students and the larger community in which they live.

Gender and cultural studies scholar Elspeth Probyn (2010) uses the framework of affect to talk about shame and writes about how experiences of shame are produced and felt on bodies in relation to their habitus. Shame, she writes, ‘dramatically questions taken-for-granted distinctions between affect, emotion, biography, and the places in which we live our daily lives’ (2010, 328). Shame is not only a private feeling but opens avenues to think of the relations one has with their habitus and institutions. Attending to affects is a step towards a materialist understanding of body. This is an important invocation as it encourages us to imagine the bodies of teachers as material beings, prone to transformation through their varied affective interactions with students and community members. Shame ‘is felt in the rupture when bodies cannot or will not fit the place – when, seemingly, there is no place to hide’ (Probyn 2010, 329). SRHR teachers experience shame when they experience ruptures in relation to students and the community. These emerged as important sites for theorisation in this study in thinking about knowledge production processes, authority, voice and subjectivity in the classroom.

Overall, we conducted 25 in-depth interviews with secondary school teachers in 15 schools from three major geographical divisions in Bangladesh – Dhaka, Chittagong and Mymensingh (see Figure 1). All the interviews were conducted in schools and in Bengali. The interviews lasted between one and one and a half hours. They were all transcribed in Bengali, and then translated to English. We used Atlas.ti software to inductively develop the different thematic codes from the data.

The schools were spread across semi-urban and rural sub-districts in the three divisions. Dhaka and Chittagong divisions are the biggest and most financially developed divisions in the country. Dhaka is geographically located in the heart of Bangladesh, while Chittagong is in the south-east, adjacent to the Bay of Bengal. One of the limitations of this article is that we did not analyse the interviews from teachers in relation to the

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Number of Schools</th>
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<td>15</td>
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<td>Number of Teachers</td>
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Total Male: 13; total Female: 12

Figure 1. Number of Teachers Interviewed (male, female) from schools across 3 locations.
particular location (district or sub-district) that teachers lived in. This was due to the fact that our focus instead was on looking at teaching experiences in relation to SRHR content and the materials used in class. We modified our interview guidelines significantly after the murder of LGBT rights activists\(^2\), and omitted questions concerning the topic of homosexuality and same-sex relationships (these topics had been part of the curriculum) to avoid any kind of backlash from the particular localities we visited.

Permission was given by the school principals to conduct the interviews, along with informed consent from the teachers who were interviewed. Teachers signed a consent form (in Bengali) that outlined the purpose of the research, stressed their anonymity and described the ways the data will be used. In our writing, we refer to participants by pseudonyms, gender and age. Ethical review was given from the Institutional Review Board at the BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University.

**Me and my world curriculum**

The Me and My World curriculum consists of 13 chapters focusing on Me and my world; emotional ups and downs; Is my body changing? Friendship and other relationships; Girl, boy, man, woman; Fight for your rights; Love and romance; Pregnancy: from the perspective of girls and boys; Protect yourself! Sexual and reproductive diseases; HIV/AIDS: Know about your role; Love does not hurt; Your future, dream and plans; My diary and advice for friends.

Core messages from each session are presented in PowerPoint slides that students are supposed to access through computers. All the sessions include different activities such as games, slides, facts and stories, discussion, role play, quizzes and class presentations. However, in practice, the lessons may be challenging to access via PowerPoint, due to the unavailability of computers, the Internet and electricity in several schools in the rural areas associated with our data collection sites. As a result, teachers often have to read from the printed curriculum that are given to them.

In 2016, the Me and My World curriculum was revised to include additional chapters on gender relations, gender diversity and menstrual hygiene, which were printed as new books that were kept at the youth-friendly centres\(^3\) for young people to read on their own. The content of the curriculum aims to be self-explanatory and is meant to by-pass the biases and influences of teachers’ perspectives, as the information it contains is intended to be ‘scientifically objective’. In order to make the curriculum visually relevant, two characters of a girl (Rima) and boy (Manik) were created, who appear in lessons throughout the book.

**Background of participants**

The teachers who were interviewed in this study came from public and private Bengali medium schools. They all attended a five-day training course conducted by UBR, on Me and My World. They were aged between 30 and 67 years. It was more common for teachers who taught Physical Education to be selected for the UBR training because SRHR content is included within the Physical Education NCTB curriculum.

Two teachers (one male, one female) from each school were selected for the UBR training on Me and My World by the school principal on the basis of how ‘eloquent’ and ‘motivating’ the teachers were with their students in the classroom. These are seen as important qualities to have in teachers, as expected by UBR coordinators and trainers.
The teachers whom we interviewed have been teaching for different amount of time, ranging between 7 to 30 years. The highest degree attained by the participants was a Master’s degree.

The teachers had the freedom to decide when they wanted to implement the Me and My World sessions, depending on their commitments and responsibilities. Ideally, it was preferred that a session should take place once a week after school, as suggested by UBR. Teachers conducted the sessions in the school venue, mostly in after school hours. Usually, an hour was assigned for the lessons. Some teachers conducted the sessions in a gender-segregated manner, while others did so using gender-mixed classes.

**Shame and affect**

We use the theoretical framework of affect to map out some of the materialities of shame, and the ways they function in an SRHR classroom. Shame in the South Asian context is intimately tied to aspects of one’s sexual modesty and moral development (Niccolini 2013, S11), which has implications for the lives of young people, as their ‘sexuality is presented as a problem that must be managed within the bounds of moral decency’ (Chakravarti 2011, 392).

Affect, theorised and understood as emotion, energy and intensity is the ‘tangible, embodied force’ (Skattebol 2010, 78), which plays, ‘a crucial role in the “surfacing” of individual and collective bodies through the way in which emotions circulate between bodies and signs’ (Ahmed 2004, 117). Alldred and Fox (2015) write how the bodies of students are part of a larger ecology that determines their sexual capacity in schools, which is not a static state, but a continual process that is in flux. Subjectivities are hence not fixed but are produced and are becoming in response to affects that shape bodies and capacities in the classroom (Alldred and Fox 2015, 908). Affects hence press upon bodies, mould them and determine their orientation in space. Shame, when understood within the framework of affect, can be also theorised as an energy or intensity that presses people into line.

‘There is no single widely accepted theory of affect’ (Alsop 2016, 558), and trying to provide an overview of different theories is beyond the scope of this paper. To analyse the findings from this research we draw from the theoretical insights of Sara Ahmed, a feminist scholar on race and queer studies. Even though she has not written specifically about classroom pedagogy, we find her take on affect relevant to theorising how teachers at times felt out of place and disoriented, when they view themselves and students as transgressing from their roles. Ahmed (2006) writes about being ‘pressed in line’ or the ‘stress points’ that speak of body’s relationship to space. Stress points, if met, will lead to achieving happiness and social good for individuals (Ahmed 2006, 90). By transgressing and by not meeting these points, one can feel out of place, and instead of gaining happiness, experience shame.

Shame can also be experienced as the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence, (Ahmed 2004 in Niccolini 2013, S14) stopping subjects from detouring from the routes prescribed by social norms, while at the same time ‘drawing them more tightly within the social contract when they betray’ (Niccolini 2013, S14). Shame can therefore be described as an affective cost that teachers experience when deviating from their prescribed role in the SRHR classroom, where they are expected to talk about sexuality and other related topics that are condemned in the larger society. Ahmed’s articulations can be extended to understand how shame is experienced when the bodies of teachers transgress the expected ideals of normative scripts. Teachers feel out of place
when they perceive themselves to have transgressed their respectable image, begin to feel anxious and do not know how to contain the ‘excessive’ nature of SRHR education inside the classroom.

Findings

Affects and/in teaching SRHR

During the interviews, it became fairly clear that teachers often felt uncomfortable when teaching the Me and My World curriculum in their classrooms. One teacher described the experience of teaching SRHR topics as follows:

‘[these SRHR topics are] issues that we do not accept easily. Suppose I tell you something which you cannot take normally. This is shame’ (Das, male, 29).

To talk about their feelings of discomfort while teaching SRHR topics, teachers not only used the words lojja (shame) or shorom (feeling shy), but they also used the terms jorota and oshoshtikor, words that convey bodily sensations. Jorota can be roughly explained as a feeling of being held back, a term we feel aligns more with an understanding of affect as an embodied experience. Oshoshtikor, on the other hand, can be roughly translated as experiencing bodily and mental unease/discomfort. Both terms have affective connotations, given they refer to the visceral sensations that teachers may experience.

Teachers also expressed their unease about the Me and My World curriculum by repeatedly describing the teaching of certain SRHR topics as beshi beshi meaning ‘too much’ or ‘excessive’. These terms convey how shame is produced, experienced and felt at the level of embodiment and spatiality. Several teachers said that topics such as sexual intercourse, pornography and condom use should not be taught in schools and were not appropriate for adolescents. As one teacher explained:

‘I think it is important for all boys and girls to know about reproductive health. I agree with that. But that knowing has to be done within limits. Many a times, we overdo things. We need to make sure we don’t do anything excessively’ (Rahman, male, 36).

The pedagogy and curriculum theorist, Andrée Gacoin (2016), has written about the imagery of excess. She describes excess not as ‘knowledge that was left out of a curriculum’ but instead as knowledge that ‘out of control’, meaning that which ‘exceeds the norms of ideological control or the requirements of any specific text’ (Orner, Miller and Ellsworth 1996 in Gacoin 2016, 536). Although teachers used the term ‘excess’ in a derogatory way to talk about certain SRHR topics, excess here may be read as information that is ‘out of control’, which led to the transgression of constraining and dominant norms in ways that could impact negatively on morality of young people.

In the remaining analysis, we will show how the affective costs play out in different ways for teachers as they teach SRHR. Firstly, we write about how teachers felt that teaching culturally inappropriate topics had the potential to taint the image and status of teachers and alienate them from the community. Secondly, we will discuss how teachers believed that teaching and discussing SRHR topics might influence students to become ‘too open’ or engage in risky behaviours, although they had no evidence to support this fear. Thirdly, we will describe teachers’ anxiety
of the hierarchy between them and their students being disrupted as a result of discussing SRHR topics, leading some students to behave badly, ‘get out of control,’ and become less obedient and respectful.

**Affective consequences on community relations**

Teachers are usually viewed with respect by local community members. They are often seen as having status and prestige. Teachers in this study spoke of the potential negative effects of teaching sensitive SRHR topics that are socially frowned upon in the community. One male teacher said,

> It should be taught in a way so that we can keep our privacy intact. Because one thing is, I am a teacher. If I get to teach more discretely, I think it will be better. (Alam, male, 45)

When asked further to clarify, he said,

> Topics that are just and logical and not obscene, we can talk about them […] I usually don’t say anything in excess. I say as much as needed. I stay within my limits. I don’t do anything that can cause trouble for me. (Alam, male, 45)

Alam then went on to give the example of ‘how to use a condom’ as an ‘obscene’ topic and thought that it should not be taught in a classroom, because students might go and tell their parents about it. Even though one element of UBR’s advocacy programme involves engaging parents and informing about the Me and My World content, teachers still felt vulnerable and worried that parents might view them as encouraging immoral behaviour. As another teacher explained,

> Our school is run by the community. So, all of a sudden, if the guardians see what we are teaching, they might charge us saying ‘what’s all this, what are you teaching my children’. For which, we cannot be direct in our approach and we have to explain [it] very carefully. (Shamim, male, 45)

Another male teacher said,

> Some sensitive issues can’t be talked in the classroom. I am a local teacher. I live here. I run into the students even after classes are done in the locality. They may share with other people in community that I am talking about these [things] in the class. They may tell their parents about that too. It will not be good for me. These issues are not openly discussed in our society. (Rajan, male, 39)

And a female teacher mentioned,

> We received complaints from the guardians. It is not only about us. If we want to talk about these issues, we cannot share everything. We are accountable to the guardians. (Fatima, female, 40)

Teachers argued that staying discreet was not an option in communities where rumours spread easily and nothing remains private for long. In addition, they worried about losing their status and respectable position in the locality. Many felt apprehensive about some of the content included in the SRHR curriculum because it risked revealing the fact that there had been discussions on sex and sexuality in the school, particularly in mixed classrooms with mainly unmarried adolescents participating.
In interview teachers mentioned that in addition to teaching Me and My World in class, they were expected to advocate with parents about teaching SRHR to adolescents. This put many of them in a difficult position. Several shared their fear of being misunderstood, viewed as encouraging certain kinds of moral transgression, and losing their respectability within the community. They feared their image would be tainted in front of parents and the larger community, creating a backlash as well as possible ostracism. As respectable teachers teaching SRHR, what would the larger samaj (society) (Blanchet 1996) think of them? In the Bangladeshi context, being a good member of the community is associated with proper living as a Bengali, as Muslim, as Hindu, as a ‘civilised person’ (Karim 2012, 58). Some teachers found themselves torn because their teaching required them to talk about things that are not viewed as acceptable and appropriate in the community. What would become of them if parents and other community members found out about the ‘excessive’ SRHR content they were expected to teach in class? A repeated theme was the fear of being outcast and estranged from the community for talking about what are viewed as cultural and socially obscene topics. Ultimately then, shame is experienced when one transgresses norms, causes discomfort and ‘fails to approximate [to] an ideal’ (Ahmed 2004 cited in Niccolini 2013, S13).

**Affecting students**

Teachers mentioned that teaching ‘excessive’ topics also had visible effects on students and led to chaos in the classroom and beyond. By chaos in the classroom, teachers meant that students started laughing and joking, and that it became difficult to control them. According to some teachers, discussing SRHR topics could also lead to temptation in the personal lives of students, and some of them going ‘down the wrong path’. One male teacher said,

> We have to provide information in a way so that they do not go in the wrong direction. (Hasib, male, 40)

A female teacher said,

> Wearing a condom should be talked in such a way so that they cannot be that interested about using it. (Nusrat, female, 36)

Another male teacher said,

> We tell students that they need to know all of this for a happy future. And reproductive health is part of your life. But you cannot think about it always. Some boys and girls think about some particular issue only and try to spoil others, by telling each other what they have seen on their phone or television. (Rashid, male, 40)

By spoiling, teachers meant that students spoke about sex or sexual content including pornography resulting in a general disintegration of moral values (or the perception of such) in the wider community.

Some teachers used the words *chalu* or ‘fast’ to refer to students who were ‘too forward’. Students who were forward were those who showed an interest in sex, and asked questions openly, as well as those students who ‘knew more than they
should.’ Both types of student made teachers uncomfortable. One female teacher said,

A girl, who was former student in our school, took part in a workshop. There were women of different ages in the training. The girl talked about physical relation very openly. She sounded very *chalu*. I felt very uncomfortable when I heard her say all that. I think she should not have talked so openly. Other teachers thought that she might be sexually active. (Nishat, female, 40)

The teacher’s source of discomfort here was two-fold: first, there was anxiety about the girl being sexually active and, second, there was discomfort about boundaries being broken when the girl openly asked questions about sexual relations. A male teacher shared how shocked he had been when one of his students asked him if he had ever had an affair. He commented,

When students start asking questions like what (sexual) activities are done in an affair, it becomes awkward. Sometimes students deliberately ask any question because it’s fun for them, but for the teachers it is tough to answer, and also embarrassing. (Farid, male, 29).

**Disrupting teacher-student hierarchies**

Teachers feared the erosion of hierarchy in teacher–student interactions. Most teachers said that students sometimes spoke about sex with little apprehension or hesitation. A female teacher said,

Adolescents are fast nowadays. We could not share many things when we were adolescents ourselves, but adolescents can ask many questions shamelessly […] more than this age, I feel they should know about these things [knowing about safe sex] when they are in college (grade 10-12), so that they do not do any mistake now. (Hasina, female, 36)

Another female teacher said,

Students already have [pornography] videos in their mobile[s]. They are very advanced. They use Facebook. In fact, some know more than what is expected. (Ferdousi, female, 40)

And a male teacher said,

You have to be careful so that they do not become obscene. Society is changing with time. We know what obscenity is and being shameless. We have to control them. (Badrul, male, 40)

The control of adolescent sexuality was seen as important. A teacher not only self-assessed but assessed other teachers in terms of how well they controlled the classroom, maintained order, and managed the interaction and behaviour of their students. Karim (2012), writing about sexual modesty, says

There is a widespread belief in ‘Bengali’ society that children should be kept under tight control […] In different ways, boys and girls are seen as vulnerable and in danger of getting ‘spoiled’. (104)

Keeping adolescents under control is seen as a social and moral duty of teachers, so young people ‘do not go down the bad path’ or do not engage in ‘morally transgressive’ behaviour. A sense of anxiety was therefore prevalent in teachers’ views regarding the future of their students, linked to their own failure and inability to
exert control and discipline. Teachers took pride when they felt young people were in line and behaved like good moral citizens. Teachers hence occupy a difficult position. On one hand, they are expected to teach SRHR topics with confidence, but, on the other hand, they fear that their teaching may motivate adolescents to become sexually active. They hence try to protect them from being ‘spoiled’, with resulting backlash from parents.

Interviews also revealed that some teachers felt inadequate and insecure regarding their own knowledge of SRHR compared to students, some of whom were perceived to be ‘all knowing’, due to ready access to technology and the internet. With the advent of digital technology and social media in rural and urban Bangladesh, teachers can feel at a loss, particularly because socially it is expected that they should have more knowledge than pupils. Adolescents, compared to teachers, are more savvy when it comes to using social media, which is a primary source of sex-related information. This inadequacy in knowledge among teachers shifts power relations between teachers and students in a subtle way, creating discomfort for teachers. As Skattebol (2010) writes, ‘teachers become more self-conscious when events disrupt the cultural assumptions that underpin a teacher’s professional sense of self’ (84). Teachers’ assumption that adolescents may have prior knowledge on SRHR or sexuality and that teachers do not challenge the traditional assumption of knowledge production in the class which is teachers conveying knowledge to students.

**Discussion**

Moments of rupture when teachers experience shame and discomfort are important to think about in relation to SRHR education, especially for the ways they shift understandings of pedagogy and knowledge production processes. Provision for discussion about discomfort and shame seems minimal in current teacher training. Teachers mentioned that during training, nothing had been said about the shame and discomfort experienced when teaching SRHR. Hence, the discomfort experienced by many teachers goes unrecognised. This is clearly a missed opportunity. By being able to discuss discomfort and its attendant affects in relation to the loss of one’s respectable image in the larger community, teachers may feel less at a loss in such moments of uncertainty. Having the space to discuss these ruptures also opens up avenues to theorise shame – not as a personal failure of teachers but as something that is relationally and affectively produced. Understanding shame affectively plays a role in rethinking about pedagogical practices in Bangladeshi classrooms, whereby teachers will not be posited as simply gatekeepers but instead, their subjectivities and anxieties will be better understood in relation to students and community members.

Curriculum theorist Nancy Lesko (2010), writing about SRHR curricula, notes that the literature ‘[rarely] includes mistakes or errors nor acknowledges that loss, misrecognition, and hurt are part of the sexual terrain. Vulnerabilities may be acknowledged, but they can be avoided by following adult dictates […] they exclude those who embody uncertainty, confusion, negativity, ambivalence, or mistakes’ (293).

When teachers in SRHR classroom feel disoriented and at loss and when they feel they are transgressing the role expected of them – these are affective moments. Such moments can be used to reflect on how the role of a teacher is open to interpretation.
and is not pedagogically fixed. By engaging productively with these moments we can also understand how starting conversation around constraining roles in the classroom may lead to better understanding and negation of classroom norms, and having conversations around sensitive SRHR topics more productively. Embracing the good and the bad, the pleasant and the unpleasant hence may enable possibilities for critical reflection on the classroom expectations that hold back teachers from truly engaging and understanding their students, and their own selves.

**Conclusion**

An affective framework can shed light on the ways teachers experience shame in relation to the students, community and the institution of school. Experiencing shame is not a pedagogical failure by an SRHR teacher. It should be used as an entrance point to reflect on the social and moral worlds people reside in. An understanding of affect can generate productive conversations around the hierarchies that exist between teachers and students, and the different standards that are expected of teachers as part of the process. Not adhering to standards such as appearing smart in front of students or having a respectful image in front of the larger community can cause stress, discomfort and shame for teachers. Recognising the discomfort of teachers and understanding the reasons behind it are important starting points for discussion as part of training. Doing so can create a space in which to engage with complicated and intertwined ideas around morality, social pressure, ideals and expected norms informing teachers’ understandings of responsibilities, roles and transgression in the Bangladesh context.

Shame is produced and experienced by teachers in relation to students and the larger community. Experiences of shame stand as moments when teachers felt disoriented for transgressing the roles they usually adhere to in the classroom. SRHR education creates ruptures for teachers when certain SRHR topics are seen as excessive for the effects they have or may have on students’ lives and futures. The act of talking about sexual content is reason enough to mark teacher out in front of the community, a dynamic that teachers struggle with. Students being too forward and asking personal questions of the teacher – showing interest in sexual knowledge – are moments when students transgress the social ideal of adolescents who are meant to be respectful, silent and look up to teachers. This kind of pushing of boundaries is one of the key reasons for creating moments of disorientation and potentially fear of humiliation for teachers, not only because of sexual content being discussed publicly but also because teachers experience insecurity about appearing less knowledgeable than students in the classroom where they are expected to be authority figures.

Our affective analysis has aimed to show how the shame induced by teaching about SRHR is produced relationally for teachers. Doing so opens up avenues for productive discussion around shame, and not dismissing it as a pedagogical failure of teachers in relation to the delivery of SRHR education in Bangladeshi classrooms.

**Notes**

1. Both Union Health and Family Welfare Centres and Mother and Child Welfare Centres are district-level reproductive health and facilities providing comprehensive emergency obstetric care and first aid services.
2. In 2016, two LGBT activists – Xulhaz Mannan and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy – were murdered at Xulhaz’s home by Ansar-Al-Islam militants. The murders drastically shifted discussion and activism around sexuality politics due to concerns around safety (Ta 2017).

3. The youth-friendly centres are located in the UBR alliance partners’ offices/training centres in local communities.

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