ABSTRACT

This study tries to explore the interrelated dynamics among cosmetic surgery, choice and empowerment. While poverty, poor health accessibility and gender inequality are common problems in Bangladesh, a growing number of cosmetic clinics are being established and a number of women are increasingly taking up cosmetic surgeries. This study seeks to explore why women choose cosmetic surgeries for beautification, how they experience it and whether cosmetic surgery leads women to be empowered or not. Using qualitative research methods, this study used in-depth semi structured interview, observation and case study method to collect the data from the different cosmetic surgery patients, coming from both urban and rural areas of Bangladesh. The data was further analyzed by coding informants’ responses into themes based on the research objectives and the theory, named ‘empowerment’. The study shows that even if the women choose surgery, it does not necessarily enhance their empowerment. That is the surgery that brings changes in physical appearance and might make them attractive, but it contributes little socially in terms of enabling them to make own decision in the contest of family and in community. Rather these women act as prescribed by patriarchal norms and gendered rules. Analyzing the data from theoretical point of view, this study found that the women, irrespective of regional boundaries, can rarely fulfill the condition of empowerment in relation to choice and IAP. The study concludes with some questions and queries that need more research to be answered.

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INTRODUCTION

Physical appearance is well-documented as being an important characteristic for both women and men, while it has a great implications for both intrapersonal well-being and interpersonal interactions (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Jackson, 1992; Langlois et al. 2000 as cited in Thornton, Ryckman, & Gold, 2013). Cosmetic surgery is one of the popular ways to enhance beauty, since it spreads as a growing industry in the world. Although the emergence of cosmetic surgery was to provide service for reconstructing the injured organ, the current expansion widely covers the wide areas of beautification (Kalam, 2010). Rohrich (2003) asserts that cosmetic surgery procedures have been dramatically performed with rapid popularity and the rate of using it increased in recent years (as cited in Gillespie, 1996; Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 2005). The blow from West, hits the East also. Bangladesh is not an exception from this global flow. Cosmetic surgery for beautification is rapidly expanding and gaining popularity among male and female in Dhaka (Hossain, 2010). This paper explores how the consumers who attend cosmetic surgery to enhance beauty exercise choice and empowerment in Bangladesh.

BACKGROUND

In feminist studies, perceptions of women’s body and beauty have for long been a major interest (Andrade, 2010; Black & Sharma, 2001; Bordo, 1993; Davis, 1995). Women have been encouraged to accept their bodies for decades, but this campaign seems to have had limited impact as interest in beauty enhancement measures only increases. Women from all race and class backgrounds are still desperately choosing different beauty enhancement measures. That might be caused, because beauty is culturally important for women to be successful in their life (Thornton, Ryckman, & Gold, 2013).

Taylor (2012) elucidated what he sees as the three stands of debate prevalent in cosmetic surgery. Proponents of the first debate see that women who undergo surgery are passive victims of a patriarchal social structure, requiring them to accept their own sexual objectification. The second school of thought does not necessarily accept the idea of women being passive, but rather argues that women who undergo surgery are acting as agents, who are capable of making their own decisions. This second school of thought further argues that women, who are seen as agent in cosmetic surgery, might act because of the reaction of unhappiness and domination they experience as part of the patriarchal standards of normative femininity. The last debate rejects both of the previous arguments. Rather, it sees cosmetic surgery as a form of consumerism practices increasingly common in societies in which women are obsessed with self-presentation and fashion.

While the intention of the paper is to reveal how individual makes the choice of opting surgery, the study focuses on the literature discussed on the contribution of cosmetic surgery from individual perspective. According to many researchers, cosmetic surgery can be seen to have positive implications. Black and Sharma (2001), for instance, have seen beauty therapy
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