

FROM CENTRE

A menu for puja festivities

Add sugar, powdered sesame seeds, chopped nuts in it and mix well. Grease your palms with ghee and take a small portion of the mixture and shape them into round laddoos. Store in airtight container for up to 10 days.

BUNDIYAR PAYESH

Ingredients

250g bundiya

1 litre milk

¼ cup powder milk

2 tbsp sugar

1 tbsp chopped almond

Method

Boil milk on low flame. Keep stirring for 20 minutes. Add powder milk and mix properly. Add sugar and mix well until sugar dissolves completely. Add the bundiya and boil for 2-3 minutes. Remove from heat. Garnish with the nuts. Serve hot or chilled.

NARIKEL ER NARU (COCONUT LADDOO)

Ingredients

4 cups fresh grated coconut

2 cups grated jaggery

1 tsp ghee for greasing palms

Method

In a heavy pan, add fresh grated coconut. Cook on low flame. Stirring often, roast the coconut for few minutes. The roasting is just to get rid of some moisture from the coconut.

Add jaggery and mix it very well with the coconut. Stirring non-stop, cook the jaggery mixture about 5-6 minutes. The jaggery will melt and mixture will slightly thicken.

To test, take a small portion and let it cool down a bit. Then try to form a tiny laddoo with it. If the mixture can be easily shaped into a tiny ball, the laddoo mixture is ready.

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LIFE AS IT IS

WARA KARIM

Writer, painter, gardener, content creator
Website: <http://www.scratchingout.com>



I asked Bengali-speaking female friends and acquaintances from Bangladesh and India what they understand by the word 'freedom.'

When asked what it means to her, Ranita Ghosh Chakrabarti, an Indian American pursuing higher education, said, "To me, freedom is my ability to make my life's decisions by myself. Although I will welcome suggestions and advice from family and friends, I should be able to make my own decisions without hesitation or regret. I should be the driver of my own car."

Angira Nandi, who works for a Business



Processing Outsourcing company in Kolkata, India, believes that financial independence is what makes a woman free. "But when her very right to safety is at stake, how can a woman really be financially independent?" she said.

"When the length of my clothes will not determine my character, when I will not be denied the life of my choice, and when I will be able to walk out in the dark feeling safe, I will be 'free,'" Nandi said.

Nadia Ahmed is a fourth-year university student of economics in Chattogram. When asked what freedom means to her, she said, "Freedom, to me, means safety."

"I feel unsafe to go outside, even with my mother. The men are sparing no one. Your age does not matter, your clothes do not matter, you could be an infant or an 80-year-old woman and still get raped," she said.

To feel safe inside and outside of one's home is a basic human right. But millions of women across the world are denied this basic right to safety every day.

Dr Haseen Cherry, a British Bangladeshi microbiologist, said, "To me, freedom means the ability to have control over my mind and body, and to live life on my own terms."

Several factors influenced Dr Cherry's decision to settle abroad upon completion of her doctoral degree. One of the important factors was freedom to be out and about without the fear of being sexually harassed or assaulted.

"I feel safer and more respected here," she said.

Farhana Nizam, a Bangladeshi Australian ICT business analyst living and working in Sydney, said, "I have to look over my

In a quest for freedom



shoulder even here in Sydney, but as a woman, I believe that my life here is 1,000 times safer and better than it would have been in Dhaka."

If Bangladesh cannot guarantee its women their safety and security, "brain drain" can never be changed to "wisdom gain." Bright, young women will leave Bangladesh for work and higher education, never to return.

OUR BOYS AND MEN

We cannot stress enough the importance of teaching boys to respect girls and women from a very early age. If you are a father, watch your words when you talk to your wife. The way you treat your wife and other female members of your family gives cues to your sons about how they should treat women.

Today, children as young as 10 or even younger are exposed to sexually explicit materials, hardcore materials that degrade women and teach boys that women can be violently and disrespectfully treated. If you are a parent of a teenage son, consider it your responsibility to teach your child about intimacy, consent, and why pornography should be off-limits.

LAW AND ORDER

Law and order must exist in a society for it to function properly and peacefully. People who break the law must be brought to justice. A culture of impunity emboldens the existing lawbreakers and creates new ones.

In the societies of South Asia, however, we often do not understand the severity of sexual offenses. Many women simply accept sexual harassment as part and parcel of being a woman.

Here in the US, the Department of Justice makes public the information about convicted sexual offenders, so that the general people may know about the presence of such offenders in their communities.

The name, photo, address, nature of sexual offense, etc. of every sex offender in the US is "public information." On the Department of Justice's National Sex Offender Public Website www.nsopw.gov, by simply typing-in one's zip code, one can

obtain a list of all the sex offenders in their area. This is how seriously sex crimes are treated.

TASTE OF FREEDOM

I first tasted freedom in the summer of 2005. The memories are vivid to this day and they will always be. I was at a liberal arts college in Pennsylvania on a youth leadership programme sponsored by the US Department of State. It was the first time I travelled anywhere without my family and that too, half a world away.

I did start leaving home alone for work and shopping after a certain age. But now when I visit Dhaka, I am not allowed to go out alone. The law and order situation had now gotten worse. Now when I visit my home city, I feel trapped and imprisoned.

I do not mind admitting that Bangladesh never gave me the sense of security that America has given me. I never forgot my first taste of freedom — just to be able to walk alone from the computer lab to my dormitory at 1 AM in the morning. It was just a walk, yet it was astonishingly liberating. I looked up to the skies, took deep breaths, and smiled.

The whole experience eventually led me to returning to the US to pursue higher education. Eventually, I chose to live in the USA and call it home.

America is a huge country and is certainly not a "safe haven" for all its women, for violent crimes take place here every day, especially in metro areas with large population, low income, and low high school graduation rates.

After having lived here for 12 years, I can say that this country is safe enough for a woman like me to travel alone and also, to live alone at home. When I go out, strangers do not stare at me shamelessly and check me out non-stop; they do not make unwanted advances or speak disrespectfully. I also know that if I ever feel threatened, I can always dial 9-1-1; help will arrive wherever I am.

By Wara Karim

Photo: Star

Names of two of the interviewees have been changed to protect their identity.