

# Double Standards Bengali Girls Face

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In light of the on-going street harassments and sexual assaults, security for young women has been a hot topic and rightfully so. While we comply obediently with the stringent security measures, another issue comes to mind – how the same safety rules appear to be more lax when it comes to the boys. So here's another angle on gender equality in the country: double standards faced by girls under even the most modern of societal norms.

To those of you sulking over cancelled evening plans while your brothers are out having fun: this one's for you, sister.

## CURFEWS AND OUTINGS

Making plans with friends and having to get them parent-sanctioned is something we're all too familiar with. There are time restraints, people restraints and geographical boundaries involved. It's a complicated and nerve-racking process, but most of us have it down to a science by now. For Gulshan dwellers like a friend of mine, the following general rules apply: no staying out after 9pm and no travelling beyond Banani and Baridhara.

This was just an example and quite a liberal one at that, but it's quite common to not be allowed out for too long or too far a distance. Fair enough, because things get risky after dark and it's difficult to call for help if you're far away from home. But doesn't the same logic apply to the boys?

"I think the worst was when I was in high school," says Fahmida Mahfuz\*. "I was 16 and I still had to get home before Maghrib, but my brother was allowed to stay at his friends' till 8pm. He was 14. Really depressing stuff."

Twenty-six year old Tarannum Tasneem\* talks about similar experiences even now, "I don't have time limitations, but my brothers can go out of the house whenever they want without permission; I can't."

And then there's the much coveted dream of sleepovers. There are of course families who don't feel comfortable letting their children spend nights at friends' places, be it sons or a daughter. As frustrating as that might seem, if those are the house rules then so be it. But banning sleepover privileges simply because she's a girl makes no sense. Most of our

sleepovers comprise of makeovers and movie nights anyway. Let's just say they're a lot tamer than what boys usually get up to, in general.

## SMOKING AND OTHER SUCH ACTIVITIES

Smoking cigarettes is injurious to health. They're mean to our bodies and especially to our lungs. Nothing new there, right?

Now imagine an adolescent boy, maybe in his

practices when a girl is involved, no? Of course not.

## WEARING WESTERN CLOTHES

You would think we've come a long way from the notion that good girls wear *kameez* whilst the bad ones wear jeans. Maybe we have, but evidently, not far enough.

"The amount of whispering and staring that goes on when a girl wears

her *orna* draws unwanted attention?

## HAVING A SIGNIFICANT OTHER

If you're a girl and you've been in a relationship then you're called "impure". However, if you're a guy then you're called "experienced". How does this make any sense?

Sadly, this is how most people see it in our country. It's not just the judgemental aunties everyone complains about; teenagers use phrases like "damaged goods" and "used product" to refer to a girl who has had boyfriends. This extremely biased and negative outlook towards girls can prove to be unhealthy to both the people with such mindsets and the girls themselves.

"I will never forgive my mother for slapping me when she found out about my boyfriend, because I remember how she asked for the girl's picture when she found out about my brother's girlfriend," says Nazia Saleh, a student of grade 9.

"I was under the impression that I was committing a crime by falling in love with someone; the guilt consumed me until I could bear no more. I guess love is only an option for Bengali women after marriage, with the husband of your parents' choice," says Ayman Mohsin\*, 21.

A girl's character simply cannot be as fragile as our society thinks it to be, but these existing norms are never questioned. We believe that we have overcome inequality but we forget to ask about the little things. These little things amount to much more than restrictions for one's own good, they amount to suppression due to gender.

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Every society has its flaws, and the ones discussed above are not necessarily exclusive to just our country. Moreover, while unfair double standards exist for the women, so do restrictive guidelines for the men. But that's a topic for another article.

What we hope for is a society that generates awareness regarding the well-being of both sexes, not one that condemns half of the population for crossing their limits; a society that lets a woman be safe and yet free, and allows a man to cry when he wants to; a society that respects and celebrates our rights to live and love – not as men or women, but as humans.

\*The names of the girls have been changed due to their requests for anonymity.



teens, who gets caught smoking. In most Bengali families, the expected reaction would be a little bit of disappointment, a little bit of anger or maybe even a lot of both. Cue punishments ("You're grounded"), ultimatums ("Next time we catch you smoking, we're taking your phone away"), and a stricter monitoring regime so it doesn't happen again. But usually, the standard first-time smoking offence gets off with a strict warning and an "All boys do it at this age,"

Tweak the situation just a little bit by putting in a girl instead of the teenage boy, and what you'll have is a family drama truly terrifying.

Are men's lungs somehow less vulnerable to the perils of smoking cigarettes? You'd think it would be just as much of an issue of harmful

western clothing is astounding. A simple white shirt and jeans is just too controversial for Bangladesh," says Ashfi Afsara. "I am now used to elderly people questioning my parents' guidance and the others just outright judging me."

"Boys who wear *panjabi* only on Fridays are patted on the back, but when I wear *kameez* during Eid, I am called an attention-seeking hypocrite," says 16 year old Zareefa Haque\*.

Wearing a dress that doesn't reach the ankles is as big a risk as going out alone at night. Somehow saris do not apply to this rule; neither do body-hugging *kameez*. Our society sees the world in black and white, good and bad, "traditional" and "western". What about a girl who wears jeans with her *kameez*? What is she? What about the girl who wears shirts because constantly having to fix