

| GENDER |

Let us first learn what a 'gender role' is.

The very basic meaning of gender roles is a set of societal rules that dictate what behaviours are considered 'acceptable' or 'appropriate' in accordance with your gender. The whole 'girls are supposed to know how to cook', 'boys are supposed to know all about cars'- all these things are socially constructed gender roles. The specifics concerning these expectations may vary significantly among cultures.

In our country's context, a married couple has some tasks fixed for them. The distinction between what a man has to do and what a woman has to do, without any biological reason, is very evident in a common Bangladeshi household. "No matter how modern the times get, we still tend to hold on to some traditions," says Shahana Siddiqui, Programme Coordinator, Center for Gender, Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights, James P. Grant School, BRAC University, Dhaka. In this part of the world, in every home, the women are to be the nurturers and caregivers, while the men are to be the bread-winners. While this gender bias starts in a newly married couple, it passes down to the next generations. They might not have the same exact activities, but we see it evident in the way the children start behaving. Early on, boy and girl activities are separated outdoors, fixing a gadget or throwing the ball around, while the girls are in the house baking cookies with mom, for example. Girls continue to follow their mothers' behavior while boy's shift to mimic their fathers. "But these children are also under tremendous pressure," Shahana says. "My son, if he goes to school and shares that it's okay for him to be a house-husband, he will have to endure a lot of bullying, so will my daughter if she doesn't have the Barbie that all her classmates have. So, the changing of these mindsets needs to happen in every household, not one or two. And it will be quite the balancing act."

In today's day and age, with the employment of women increasing, the change in such stereotypes of gender roles



HOUSE OF EQUALS

NAZIBA BASHER

PHOTOS: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

calls for action. As the world moves faster and our ways of life advance and progress, we tweak our day to day lives to live up to that progress. So why not change this?

"The burden of work for women increases tenfold. On the one hand, we are expected to be very educated in order to get married. Once we are married, we are expected to not put that into use and be ambitious as it will hamper the 'roles' we must play as wives. On the other hand, office timelines are very much male-centric. I will be expected not to have my family life interfere into my work life, even when it comes to giving birth to the next generation. These things need to change," says Shahana Siddiqui.

Shahana also believes that mother-in-laws have a huge role to play. "When a son is helping his wife in the house with children, don't belittle them. Be proud! Rejoice in the fact that you have raised a respectful and considerate son," she says, "men, if you are holding your child to help your wife, if you are cooking when your wife is tired from the day's work, if you are helping her clean up after your children and home, you are not emasculated! You are being a good husband, a great father. This trend of hyper masculinity where men think it's emasculating to work in the house needs to change- and in some households, it is changing already. So I'm hopeful."

Doing justice to Shahana's hopes, filmmaker and husband, Ashfaq Nipun says, "Since my wife is also a working

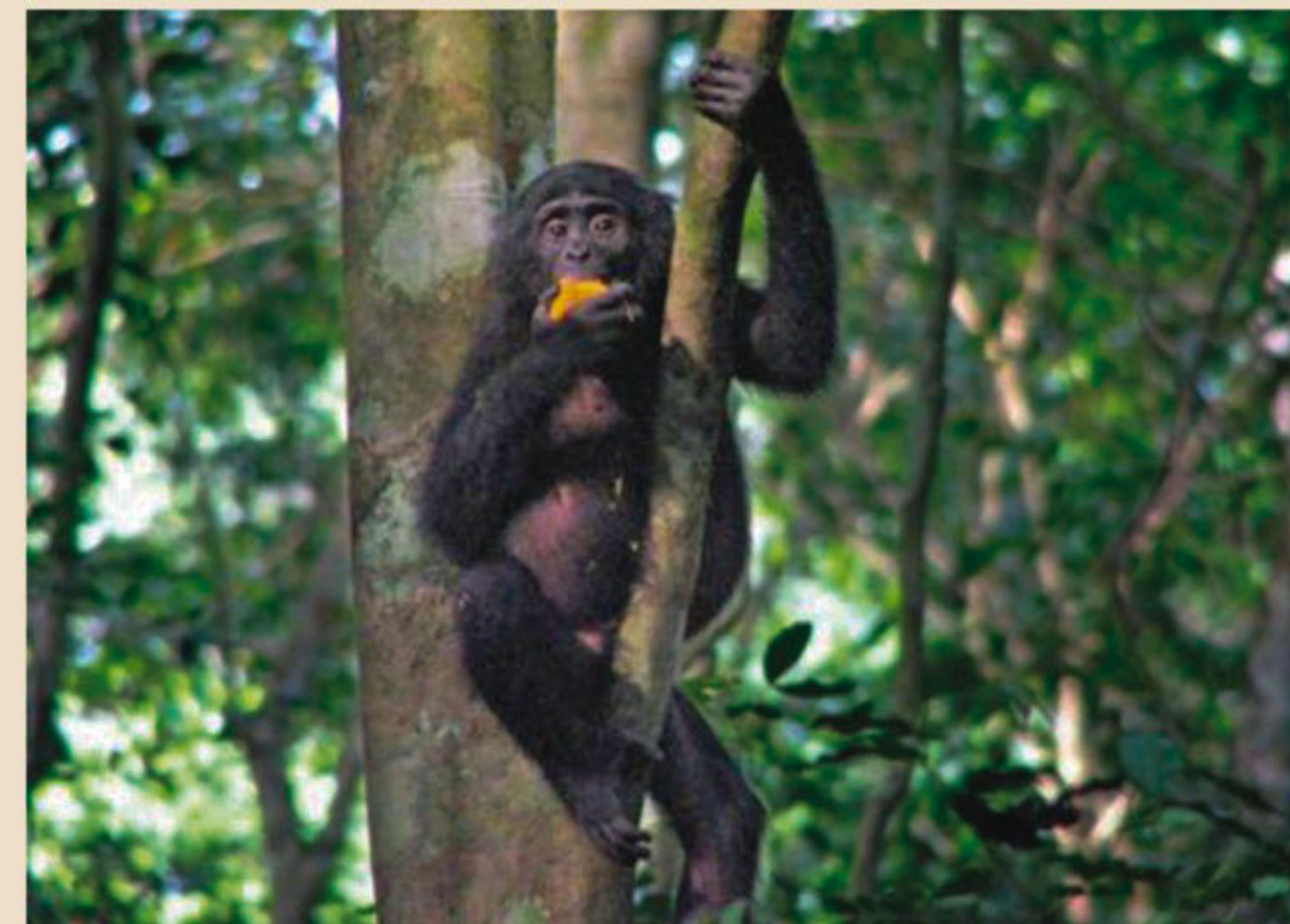
woman, I figured that after spending a hectic amount of hours in the office, it's very difficult for her to provide the same kind of energy and time at home as well. So without telling her, I try to help out with whatever I can, for the love and respect I have towards her. I don't even need credit for the work, as long as I know that it helped her," he says, "The only thing that drives me is when I see a smile on her face or peace in her eyes after finding out that the bed is done or the food is ready. I don't consider it as 'emasculating' either; rather I have learned that it makes a man more attractive to his wife."

With the changing of times and tides, it has also become difficult to maintain a family and home with one person's income. "So a husband and wife both have to work outside. If the woman is required to give equal amount of time and energy at home and outside, it will be unfair to them. Hence, the husbands should also take part in household chores and make a good family life. It will help their children to grow in a healthy environment as well," he adds.

On the same note, Shahana believes that two values ingrained in every individual can change the status-quo easily. "Chivalry and respect are the two key ingredients. Once you learn to be respectful towards your partner, or anyone for that matter, and have a chivalrous and helpful attitude, you can have a healthy household with equal effort given and equal joy received." ■



QUIRKY SCIENCE



THE SAME BACTERIA

For all the anxiety today about the bacteria in our gut being under constant assault by antibiotics, stress and bad diets, it turns out that a lot of the bacteria in our intestines have been with us for at least 15 million years, since we were pre-human apes.

A new comparison of the gut microbiomes of humans, chimps (our closest ancestor), bonobos and gorillas shows that the evolution of two of the major families of bacteria in these apes' guts exactly parallels the evolution of their hosts.

This shows that the microbes in our guts are determined in part by our evolutionary history, not just external

factors like diet, medicine and geography. Obesity, cancer and some inflammatory diseases, such as diabetes and Crohn's disease, have been linked to imbalances in the mix of microbes in our stomach and intestines.

"We are showing that some human gut bacteria are the direct descendants of gut bacteria that lived within our common ancestors with apes," said lead researcher Andrew Moeller, a Miller Postdoctoral Fellow in UC Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology. "It shows there has been an unbroken line of inheritance or transfer from one generation to another for millions of years, since the dawn of African apes."

ENERGY FROM GRASS

A team of UK researchers, including experts from Cardiff University's Cardiff Catalysis Institute, have shown that significant amounts of hydrogen can be unlocked from fescue grass with the help of sunlight and a cheap catalyst.

It is the first time that this method has been demonstrated and could potentially lead to a sustainable way of producing hydrogen, which has enormous potential in the renewable energy industry due to its high energy content and the fact that it does not release toxic or greenhouse gases when it is burnt.

Co-author of the study Professor Michael Bowker, from the Cardiff Catalysis Institute, said: "This really is a green source of energy."

"Hydrogen is seen as an important

future energy carrier as the world moves from fossil fuels to renewable feedstocks, and our research has shown that even garden grass could be a good way of getting hold of it."

The team, which also includes researchers from Queen's University Belfast, have published their findings in the Royal Society journal Proceedings A.

Hydrogen is contained in enormous quantities all over in the world in water, hydrocarbons and other organic matter. Up until now, the challenge for researchers has been devising ways of unlocking hydrogen from these sources in a cheap, efficient and sustainable way. A promising source of hydrogen is the organic compound cellulose, which is a key component of plants and the most abundant biopolymer on Earth.



STRANGE PROFESSION

PROFESSIONAL EAR CLEANER



One of Dhaka's strangest professionals can be found in some of the popular public parks in the city, like Ramna Park and Suhrawardi Uddyan. With a set of peacock feathers, forceps and fine needles, these people are waiting to give you the comfort of clean and wax free ear. The joggers and park visitors often get their service at the cost of a very minimum charge which is often not more than 20 taka for both ears. According to most of the users, when these ear cleaners clean their ears, it feels so comfortable that many people fall asleep. And the skill of these ear cleaners is passed down from generation to generation. However, this profession is becoming rare as many people do not want to clean their ear by these people, with the availability of cheap and handy cotton buds in the market. Physicians also discourage this trade, as the tools of these ear cleaners are not at all hygienic. Serious damage to the ear drums and infections can break out at any moment. However, in many public parks and in the public places of small towns, these ear cleaners can be seen waiting for their customers with their set of peculiar tools.

PHOTO: STAR FILE