



FIGHTERS in their own right

WARA KARIM



Single parenting is not something we all envision happening, but it does happen. Raising a child is inarguably the toughest job around and carrying out this great responsibility becomes far more strenuous when one has to do it alone - every day, day after day!

Yet, it can be a rewarding experience as well - a beautiful journey where even though you have to do twice the work and bear twice the stress, you receive double the love, pride and hugs. And whether you can nurture your child on your own often depends on how well you accept the challenges life hurls at you.

When Anisa Rahman became a single mother in 1983, she was only

27. Now at the age of 60 she looks back at those years with mixed emotions.

Rahman's second child was only two months old when she left her husband after he took another wife without her consent.

In the wake of her divorce, Rahman, who could not complete her studies at Dhaka University because her ex-husband deemed it unnecessary, established her own home-based readymade garments business.

Anisa Rahman sold the gold jewellery she owned to raise the capital as she was adamant about not accepting any financial support from her relatives.

"I did not want to take help from my family because mine was a love marriage. It was my decision to marry him,"

she said.

Rahman rented a flat for her new family of three and launched her business with five tailours. Children's clothing designed and sewn at her home soon began to occupy shelf space at the leading clothing stores in Dhaka. There was no looking back for Rahman after that.

"I plunged into my sea of work in the morning and worked late into the night, taking breaks only when I had to feed, bathe or teach my children or accompany them to and from their school."

When asked how difficult it was for her to lead the life of a single mother in the 1980s, Rahman said, "It was not only physically draining, but mentally, too. People said things behind my back. Some put my character in doubt. When I went outside alone for work, men often cast nasty glances at me."

It was challenging for Rahman's children, too, who were often labelled 'children from a broken family' by friends and peers at school and in the neighbourhood.

"Religion always gave me the courage I needed to raise my children all by myself. I found solace in my daily prayers," said Rahman.

Rahman's children, who are now in their mid-30s, have families of their own. She herself wrapped up her business of three decades and immigrated to the United States a few years ago. "I am happy, healthy, and still strong enough to work full-time and take care of myself."

Fast forward to the present.

We seldom met single parents in the 1970s and '80s, especially mothers who became single following a divorce.

Women often stayed with their abusive husbands because they could not imagine being in the outside world without a man by their side. They also often lacked the economic independence required to live alone with children, not to mention children of divorce were often stigmatised in the society.

Women therefore digested everything from physical and psychological abuses to infidelity, and a lack of commitment and equality in the relationship, so as to ensure that their children would grow up in a 'complete' family.

Times have changed and so has our perception of divorce and the idea of single parenting. It is still the most stressful job around, but many women



as well as men now single-handedly shoulder the responsibility of raising their progenies.

Parents now realise that it is healthier for a child to live with one happy parent than to live with two miserable ones under one roof.

A. Aziz, 32, is a telecommunications industry professional who became a single parent when her son was only 10 months old. Unlike many women of her generation, Aziz married early; she was only 22 and he was 27.

"At first it was magical, but gradually life got in the way. Work graduate school, hosting guests, attending parties, etc. left us with little time and energy for each other - we were exhausted all the time."

Aziz thinks most modern families do not raise their children to deal with the hurdles of real life. Children are only taught to study and do well in exams, so when the time comes to face reality, they do not know how to handle it. They think it is the responsibility of the spouse to take care of the bigger and more pressing issues of life on behalf of them, the same way their own parents always did.

Aziz is, however, determined to make the best of her situation now. Her experience as a single parent has made her stronger as an individual and taught her to set priorities in life.

When asked how difficult it is for her to raise her child alone, Aziz said, "It takes a village to raise a child! Filling the position of both mum and dad can be

overwhelming at times; you also do not get any time for yourself. But when I look at my son and see that he is growing up to be a caring, happy and intelligent person, I know that everything he is today is because of my effort, and I feel double the pride."

Aziz also believes that she could not be a better mother by being in an unfulfilling marriage.

She says that people around her are supportive of her and her decision to raise her child as a single parent. Her

In the wake of her divorce, Rahman, could not complete her studies at Dhaka University because her ex-husband deemed it unnecessary.

own parents, siblings and friends continue to be her greatest support system. Even acquaintances and complete strangers understand Aziz and her child, their feelings and their situation.

"When people hear that I am a single parent, they seem to care more about my son. I have seen random people being extremely kind towards him," she said.

All kinds of marriages go wrong. Nobody can vouch for the success of

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MOMS OF BANGLADESH

After Natasha Sabrin Khan, 32, became a mother in 2013, a new kind of awareness dawned upon her. She realised that the child-rearing tips she received from the previous generation did not match her own preferences. "I read extensively on parenting and baby care when I was pregnant and felt that I was more inclined to following the modern childcare methods," Khan said. "Times have changed after all."

But when she searched for a platform where she could connect with other Bangladeshi new or first-time mothers, she could find none. So, in early 2014, Khan took the initiative to create Moms of Bangladesh (MoBD), a Facebook group where Bangladeshi mothers, not only from Bangladesh but all over the world, can come together and discuss any parenting issue under the sky - from baby food recipes, common illnesses, sleep routine to work-life-motherhood balance, post-partum depression and child psychology.

With more than 4,000 mem-

bers, MoBD is the largest Facebook group for mothers in Bangladesh. "Many other similar groups have been created since MoBD started its journey, but one feature which makes MoBD different from the rest is, we do not encourage any individual or party to promote their products or services here," she said.

MoBD is a 'closed' group, which means that unlike an 'open' group, not every Facebook user has access to it. Khan is also very selective about who she allows to become a member of MoBD. She rejects many member requests that she receives every day because they are either not recommended by existing members or because she cannot find much background information when she visits their profiles.

"Yes, I know that by doing this, I might be rejecting some genuine requests, but I have to do this to moderate the appropriateness of the content being discussed."

But MoBD is way more than just a virtual group. In the past,

MoBD organised play dates which gave members and their children opportunities to meet in real life. The group also collects old baby clothes and toys several times a year and donates them to underprivileged children.

They have donated toys to the Paediatric Surgery Department of Dhaka Medical College and various orphanages. They have also sent baby clothes collected from members to places outside of Dhaka. On only one occasion, MoBD collected monetary donations when the group raised funds for the medical treatment of baby Suraiya, who was hit by a bullet while still in her mother's womb.

"I am deeply indebted to all the members without whose participation MoBD could not become what it is today," Khan said.

Khan has big dreams for her brainchild, MoBD. She hopes to turn her group into a one-stop solution to all queries about parenting and child-rearing needs.