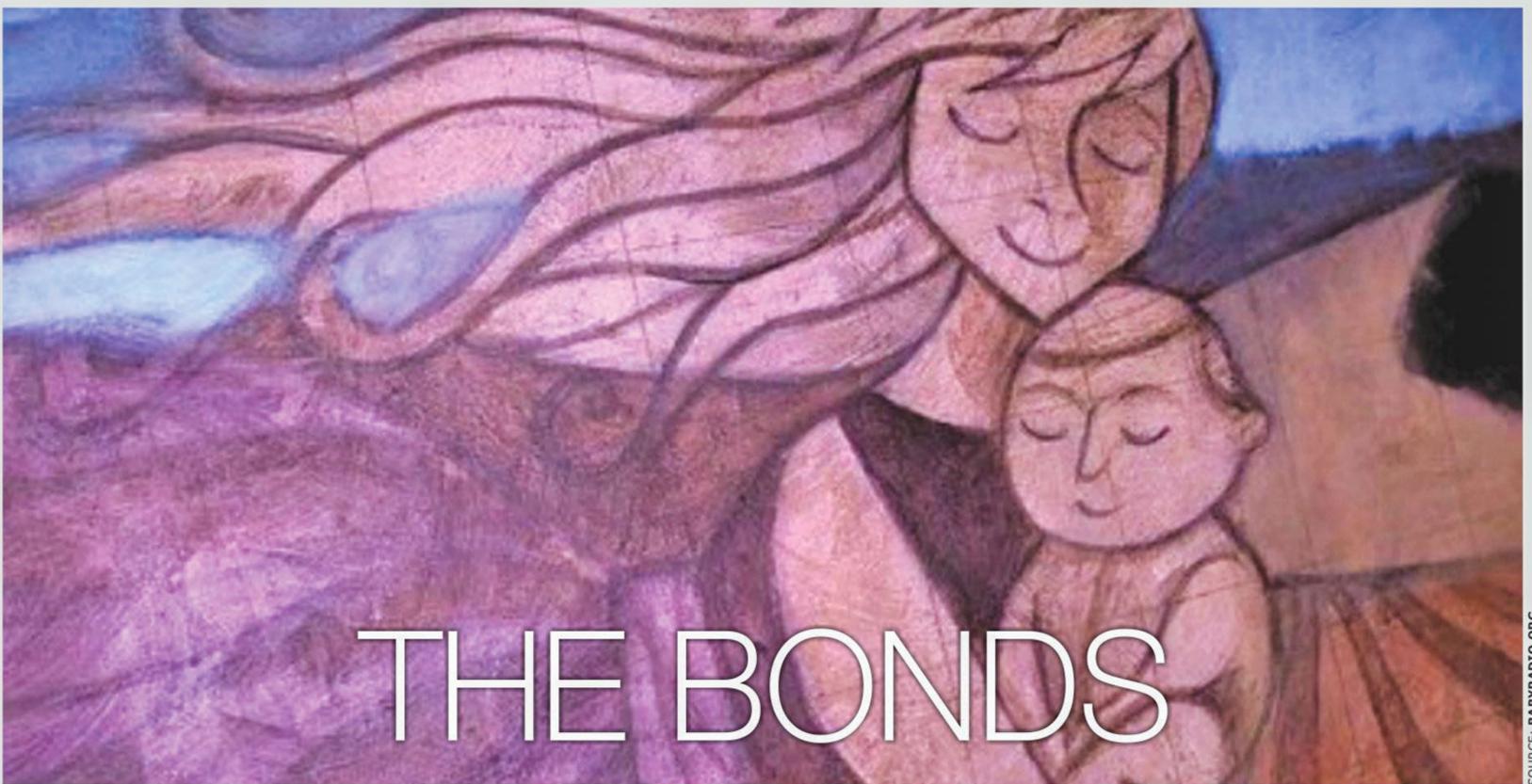


**INTERNATIONAL DAY OF FAMILIES**



SOURCE: BABYRADIO.ORG

# that run deep

SARAH ANJUM BARI

While parents usually form the first notions of what a 'family' is for a child, the uniqueness of family life in Bangladesh lies in the diversity of relationships we have with individuals who are not our parents. Family includes our grandparents, uncles, aunts, and entire neighbourhoods of cousins, all of whom give us childhoods that are seldom lonely. They provide an indispensable support system to parents, without which raising children would be extremely difficult and almost impossible for many.

In tracing the shifts from joint families of yesteryears to some single-parent households of today, what is happily evident is that the essence of the family remains the same. One of the biggest of responsibilities of the family as a whole includes the education – both mental and academic – of the children, which is the theme set out by the United Nations for the International Day of Families this year.

"Each family has a very different dynamic," shares Muddassar Ahmed, an employee at Standard Chartered Bank, Dhaka, who was raised by his mother after his parents separated shortly after his birth. Muddassar grew up with three sisters and surrounded by cousins throughout his childhood, while his mother worked as a teacher at the Agrani Balika Biddaloy to support the family. "I didn't really feel the absence of a father until my pre-teen years. But as I started entering adulthood as a teenager, what I missed wasn't necessarily a father, but an assertive parent. My mother was a very soft spoken person, and there was also the gender-barrier which wasn't there between her and my sisters. As a result I was often unable to formulate in words how I would feel at certain times. There was a lot of communication gap between us," explains Muddassar.

As a research titled "The Impact of Family Involvement on the Education of Children Ages 3 to 8" carried out by the Johns Hopkins University, USA, explains, it is important for families to engage in children's learning activities outside of the classroom. In order for children to learn effectively, according to the study, families must participate with children in libraries, museums and other learning resources. For Muddassar, this role was played by his older sister. While his mother juggled responsibilities at home and work to provide them with an English-medium education, Muddassar was encouraged by his sister to read from as early an age as five. "I don't know what I understood at that age, but I would always be reading books – a habit that encouraged me to study on my own and excel as a student once I grew older," he says.

But then he digs deeper. "I did well in subjects that I enjoyed, but not so much in other subjects like History and Geography," explains Muddassar. What's interesting is that he finds them intriguing now, and wishes that he had been guided and

encouraged by his mother to make more of an effort with challenging subjects when he was a child.

Growing up in a secluded household has shaped Muddassar in a certain way. He continues to be an inexpressive person, and often struggles to think outside the box in certain situations. Despite these shortcomings, however, what he prizes above all are the traits that he has gained from both his parents. "I never saw the ugly side of separation," he explains with gratitude. "Watching our mother struggle to provide us with a good childhood and education taught me to be resilient and to have a good attitude towards life. From the brief time I have spent with my father, his extremely high morals of honesty, integrity, his decision to never bribe a person or take shortcuts in life are positives that have seeped into me. I still don't know what I missed during my childhood, but perhaps I will when I become a father."

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 An article published by *The New York Times*, titled "Single-Parent Homes: The Effect on Schooling" starts out with the proposition that, "Time spent with a single parent during the formative pre-school years seems to have particularly bad effects on a boy's education." Citing a study by the University of Illinois, Urbana, the article elaborates that the circumstances can improve if the father pays child support, which portrays him as a responsible role model in the eyes of the son.

For Rahul Chowdhury, who has recently graduated from a private university, these role models came in the form of his grandparents.

Rahul's parents separated when he was two years old. He has since been brought up by his banker mother, with a lot of help from his mother's parents.

"My grandmother was the one who really pushed me to study," says Rahul, who grew up with a very open and friendly relationship with both his mother and his grandmother. "But they turned from friends to strict guardians every time I would get bad grades. That's why I was always more fond of my laid back grandfather as a child," he shares.

Rahul says he truly appreciated the gravity of their support when he was unable to make it through university admissions because of poor grades in his A Level examinations. "My grandfather was a respected and well-reputed man with affiliations with many universities. So I'd expected him to help me using his influence. It angered me when he refused. Instead, they pushed me to study harder and re-sit all my exams. I enrolled in university a semester late once I was able to pass the admission requirements through my own merit," he says. The lesson has stuck with him ever since, reminding him to choose hard work over taking the easier route when he faces challenges today.

Similar situations were faced by Md. Sakib Uddoza, an employee at a buying house in Dhaka who lost his mother when he was 13-years-old, and was brought up by his father and his joint family in the Pangsha upazila of Rajbari. Growing up primarily under the care of his grandmother and his Chachi (his uncle's wife), Sakib stresses on how he never felt the pain of losing a mother throughout his childhood. In fact, his

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Chachi at times gave more attention to his upbringing than that of her own children.

Encouragement in studies, in this case, came to him in the form of grounded guidance and advice. Sakib expresses gratitude towards his grandmother and aunt for instilling in him religious knowledge and the virtues of good character. "They kept my eyes open to our realities by always reminding me why I needed to do well in studies. We were a struggling household without a mother. I was always aware of my goals, my duties, and the fact that I would have to attain financial stability on my own. But instead of pressur-

ising me, this guidance taught me not to get frustrated easily, to develop a practical outlook towards life, and to persevere through adversities," explains Sakib.

Asked about the differences between his joint family back home and his nuclear family in Dhaka today, Sakib expresses concern over the lack of security. "I always had someone to fall back on in our joint family. It scares me to think what will happen to my children here, if they choose to live a secluded life in the city, with all our relatives back home."

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 While academic guidance holds its place, Mashiat Lamisa, a student at a private university, has felt most encouraged by the open channel of communication between her mother and her grandmother who raised her.

"We always had an academic environment at home, with my grandmother tutoring me while my mother worked to pay the bills," she says. "They were strict about my studies and I was encouraged to read from a young age. It was easier because I was always surrounded by books. But despite their high expectations of me, they dealt with my occasional bad grades and pre-exam panic attacks with love and support. They would sit down with me and try to figure out exactly where I was going wrong."

Most importantly, Mashiat was able to discuss sex with her family when she was entering her teens, something few teenagers are able to do. "These practicalities have helped shape me into a very mature and well-rounded human being. I think," says Mashiat with modesty.

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 Each of these individuals were exposed to a number of harsh realities – while Muddassar struggled to communicate with his mother, Sakib grappled with the challenges of living without one; both Rahul and Mashiat, meanwhile, faced awkward questions and taunts in school about coming from broken families. But as their stories reveal, the surrounding cast of relatives – be it uncles, aunts, cousins, or grandparents – always helped wrinkle out the massive challenges of living in single-parent households.

Seventeen percent of households in Bangladesh were run by single parents, according to a study by the Save The Children Foundation in August 2016. But bonds of the family, especially the extended family, are a particular point of pride in our country and culture. Each of these stories tells us how these bonds can serve to form particularly strong support systems for the changing shapes of families in modern-day Bangladesh. All that is needed are open communication, healthy guidance where necessary, and a balance between supporting the children and teaching them to fend for themselves in real world scenarios.

The writer is a member of the Editorial section, *The Daily Star*.

