

**Gender is fluid, and yet, we live in a world that insists on its rigidity—of men being *men* and women being *women*. What's life like for those who do not conform, who refuse to colour inside the lines? Here are the stories of two people who do not fit society's arbitrary binaries—and their everyday struggles to just *be*.**

| PERSPECTIVE |

# UNGENDERING HAIR

## A LIVED EXPERIENCE

TANVEER ANOY

As soon as I left college, I decided to keep long hair. Having studied in Cantonment School and College, I never had the leeway to do this thus far. Whenever my hair grew an inch, it attracted the immediate attention of my teachers. Quite the recreant, I never mustered up the courage to go to school without a haircut.

I have always believed that my hair is and should be a matter of concern to me and me alone. Society does not hold the moral authority to intervene directly or

indirectly (i.e. through social conditioning) with my hair. However, I would soon learn otherwise.

As the length of my hair kept increasing, men around me did not give up the chance to raise their eyebrows in skepticism. My family members were hankering after me for a haircut, to which I paid no heed at all. As the tips of my hair began to touch my shoulders, even my friends started to get uneasy. Most of my friend circle started to label it as “effeminate”, “egregious” and even

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### UNGENDERING HAIR

After page 14 “disgusting”.

I had never imagined that my long hair would vex society so. People on the street would look at me like I was from outer space. I felt increasingly out-of-place. Men chuckled and called out to their friends to have a look for themselves. They treated me like a wild animal that had stumbled into human territory. I could sense that they were criticising me. Facial and body expressions often reveal a lot. Even kids ogled at me and had their share of laughter. Questions were raised about my gender: “Is he a man? And if he is, why does he keep long hair like a woman? He must be aware of how things work in the society!” It seemed as if my long hair systematically distanced me from society.

From early on, we are conditioned to look at things along the lines of the binary: male or female. Pink is a girl's favourite colour; boys are not supposed to like it. Girls play with dolls while boys are to engage themselves with cricket. Right from the moment we are born, it is decided what we will wear, what we will play with, and how we will lead our lives. Once you decide to disregard these constructed ideas, you will find that things are no longer looking so great. A bold attempt at rebellion will be looked down upon and the person will be forcefully excluded, labelled “unsocial”. It then becomes almost impossible for the person to lead a life free of explicit interventions.

I have often been subjected to mockery along the streets at university or at the shopping mall. One fine day, while I was travelling in a rickshaw, two men from another rickshaw literally screamed, “Why does this lad have such long hair? Is he a man or a woman?” They cackled with laughter, but thankfully, my rickshaw soon overtook theirs.

On another instance, I had gone out to buy some medicine. It was night time and the lane was quite dark so I could barely see anything. At the end of the lane, a few men had gathered for a chat. They spotted me and the ridicule began. I remained voiceless.

However, it was the last incident that was exceptionally unnerving. I was at a food court, waiting for a friend. As I was seated in such a way that I had no sight of the people behind me, I was a bit puzzled at a sudden outburst of laughter. I tried to concentrate on my book, but the hubbub grew louder. I turned around and I saw a group of college lads—around 30 of them. Unfortunately, I was their topic of discussion. I could easily discern one of them saying, “Is he a guy or a girl? Go and go have a look! She might be hot.” One of them actually came forward to inspect me and then returned to share his findings. Another round of merrymaking followed. One of them remarked, “He could have been a lady. Men do not keep long hair, do they? Waht a whore!” I was, yet again, trying to avoid my harasser. In the meantime, another of them took a seat across from mine, as someone from the same group loudly



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

exclaimed, “HEY! Why did you go there? Are you gay? HAAAA. Our nation does not accept the rainbows!” I got up and left the place immediately.

You may feel uneasy or disturbed after reading this. You must be thinking, “Does this guy lack the courage to stand up for himself?” And that's a pretty natural response. Yes, I have been unable to raise my voice, to put up a fight. But I would like to ask, if I had protested vociferously, would people have joined me in support? Definitely not. I would have had to face counter-harassment: “How can a young man be harassed? Is that even possible?”

Certainly! I am the victim of regular abuse. However, the most important message lies in the fact that we think of women as commodities in our society. Just look at how society is trying to label me as a female for having long hair and treating me for it. As if anyone bearing the slightest resemblance to a woman can be troubled in this way, as if in order to prove one's

masculinity, one needs to make fun of the “opposite sex”.

I often receive hate messages on Facebook. Many people are of the opinion that I should get a sex change or, alternatively, identify as a hijra. I am a disgrace to masculinity. Some ask me to get a haircut and tell me to be a “man”. It seems as if the line between a man and a woman is drawn by the length of one's hair. Get a haircut and you automatically transform into a man!

“Short hair or long hair, it's your choice. My long hair is the symbol of my freedom. I feel free. Society always tries to bring you down. You don't have to give them an explanation. It's your thing. It's your freedom,” I tell myself when I feel down. Someday or the other, we will definitely see a solution to the problem. Toleration and survival pay off, as goes the proverb, “One who endures, survives till the end.”

*Tanveer Anoy is an activist and writer.*

I am 25 years old, from Bogra. Biologically I am a woman but I cannot declare myself as gender conforming. Nor do I have an exact answer to give when asked whether I am gender non-binary.

When I graduated from university three years ago, I was the first female member of my family to do so. My family watched me with joy in their hearts and smiles on their faces.

These incidents happened right after. I went back home and took up a job with a local English medium school but my neighbours were not happy to see me come back. They whispered, stared and mocked me outright. The reason? The clothes I wore and how I carried myself. Not satisfied with saying things to my face, they bullied my younger sister, 15-year-old Binu. She would come home in tears.

One evening she ran up to me. “Apu, Amin Uncle asked me whether I want to become like you!” As a part of my external expression, I wear jeans under my kameez.

Soon, I began noticing that the members of my community were meeting regularly in the afternoons. On one such occasion when I was walking around my neighbourhood, I heard Amin Uncle telling those around him, “Look at her! I think she will marry a hijra.” I ignored him.

On my way to work one cold morning, I was crossing Amin Uncle's house and I heard raucous laughter. Then I heard my name. I decided, on the spot, to go and confront them. I found that Amin Uncle, his wife and his sisters-in-law were talking about me.

They were surprised to see me. I simply asked, “Would you repeat what you were saying about me just now?” They were taken aback but only for a moment.

Amin Uncle's wife suddenly sprang at me and shouted, “Who are you that we have to answer to you?” Angry, I yelled back, “Why are you shouting? Can't we talk?”

The shouting escalated into a fight. I insisted that they not touch me. This only enraged Amin and his wife who started shoving me around. His son, nephews and aunts then joined in. The fight became a beating. I was alone, trying to defend myself and fell to the ground. I was punched in the head and kicked around by Amin Uncle, his son and nephew. Nobody intervened. This was not 10 metres from the main road and a crowd of around 20 had gathered.

“ACT LIKE A GIRL!”

M HUSSAIN as told to MALIHA KHAN

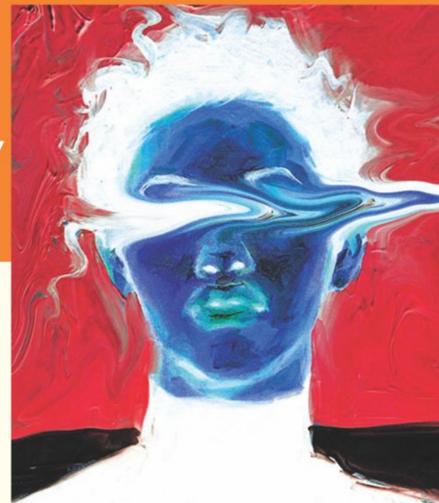


ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

After this went on for a while, a neighbour ran to my home to fetch my family. No one was home, except for my mother and my cousin, Asha. They came and dragged me from the road and helped me stand. Asha immediately took me to the police station to file a case against the family. I was not bleeding, but I had swollen bruises all over.

The police lodged a general diary and came to my area two days later. Amin's wife and sister-in-law then produced medical certificates claiming they were suffering health problems after getting beaten up by me!

“How could I single-handedly have fought five adults?” I asked. A crowd gathered to watch but said nothing. I had no witnesses except my mother's word that they had beaten me.

Amin's family went on to tell the police that this was entirely my fault because of the way I dressed and behaved. I was crying at this point. The police asked us to “mutually resolve” the problem. A case was filed against me and handed over to the local ward commissioner.

We chose arbitration, but the hearing, in mid-January, proved disastrous. The ward commissioner swore and yelled at Asha and I. I made the mistake of using my phone and the commissioner thought I was recording him. Angered, he hurled more abuse at me, “Are you so clever that you're going to file a case against me for being biased against you? Do you think you're powerful only because you're educated? What sort of woman are you?”

The room fell silent. He went on to scold and insult my father as well because he is merely a rickshaw puller. We lived in a tin-shed house, so we were perhaps singled out for our class differences.

The hearing then continued. He asked both parties to explain what had happened. One of my aunts defended me. She described my life over the years—how others in our community had never liked me because of my strong personality and ambition.”

The commissioner now stood up and gave his verdict—which was that both sides were at fault for fighting. The solution was to say sorry to each other, which we had to do then and there.

This was not the first such incident. I have been treated like this since I was a child. My father scolded me afterwards that he had been insulted in public only because of me. He said that it was my fault for confronting and not ignoring them.

Who even cared how I felt, and still feel, after this? M Hussain left Bangladesh shortly after the incident and is now pursuing a PhD in Atmospheric Science and Engineering. ■

## ABOUT TOWN

**BENGAL CLASSICAL MUSIC FESTIVAL 2017**

Organiser: Bengal Foundation  
December 26-30, 5-11pm, Abahoni Matth, Dhanmondi

**WALK OF AWARENESS**  
No Violence to the Voiceless  
Neither Animals, Nor Children

Organiser: People for Animal Welfare Foundation, Bangladesh  
December 22, 9am - 1pm, Bangladesh National Museum, Shahbag

**JOLOKABBO**  
MUSINGS IN WATERCOLOR

Organiser: EDGE, the Foundation  
December 26, 10am - 8pm, EDGE, The Foundation, Bay's Edgewater, Gulshan