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SOLIDARITY THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

WHEN WOMEN FIND SOLACE, SUPPORT AND STRENGTH IN EACH OTHER
THROUGH FACEBOOK GROUPS

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Twenty-seven-year-old Noorjahan Kabir, an advocate at the Dhaka Judge Court, was excited about her first-time pregnancy. But she was stressed, too, constantly worrying about the baby's development during each trimester. While

talking to her mother and mother-in-law was a big help, she craved the support and advice of other women, closer to her age, who were going through the same experience.

"During my pregnancy, I would stay home doing nothing. I remember I used to lean on a family friend who was also expecting for the first time. I called her frequently to check if we had similar symptoms. I used to watch hundreds of videos on YouTube on pregnancy and motherhood as well," she recalls. "Suddenly it dawned on me—why don't I create an online platform for millennial mothers like me to share their experiences with each other? I formed the Facebook group 'Pregnancy Journey and Motherhood' and started adding my friends and acquaintances—pregnant ones, as well as those who had recently given birth."

Noorjahan soon found out that women had great interest in this topic and were eager to talk about common problems like how to take care of themselves during pregnancy, what not to

eat, how to take care of the babies, what home remedies to use, and so on. Many of them simply posted how they were feeling on a particular day, and others would reassure them or dispel their pregnancy-related fears through their replies.

Today, the group has nearly 47,000 members who provide support and practical assistance to each other. "Our members don't just consist of well-off urban women. We have members who live in remote villages with little education, but they do have a Facebook account, and they stay connected with the group," says Noorjahan.

Doly Sultana, mother of a four-month-old, says the group gave her courage during her pregnancy. "When I was five months pregnant, the doctor discovered that I had a condition called a low-lying placenta and I was put to bedrest until my last trimester. I was very scared about it, as no one in my family had experienced such a thing. But when I posted it in the group, I found it was not something unusual and everyone gave me good advice," she says.

Another mother, Sheuly Juthi, informs that groups such as these are also important for creating awareness and eradicating superstitions and misconceptions related to pregnancy and child-rearing. "Since most first-time mothers are extremely sensitive and lack prior knowledge about childcare, they try to follow whatever they hear from people around them. And, by adhering to superstitions, unknowingly, they harm themselves and their children.

In addition to that, there are a good number of gynecologists who regularly monitor whether anyone needs any medication or treatment in emergencies. Case in point, if an expecting mother tells others that her baby is not moving, the doctors as well as the other mothers counsel her to treat it as an emergency and see a doctor. "I remember a mother was lucky enough to avoid the still birth of her baby at the eleventh hour, after the group members suggested she should see her doctor immediately. Since that experience, everyone is more careful than ever about the movement of their child," says Noorjahan.

This is how the female-only Facebook groups are creating an impact on a large number of women online; beyond problem solving, these groups are a sanctuary for women to support one another in everyday life. One such group is 'Shokti Network'—formed in 2015 after the Pahela Baishakh sexual assault incidents at TSC—to create an area-based friendship network that helps women explore places in a group and protect themselves from harassment.

"Initially, we wanted every girl to be connected with the other girls of her area and become friends," says Nushrat Farhana, one of the administrators at the Shokti Network. "For example, the men of a specific area can befriend each other easily in an evening tea stall gathering or after Jumma prayers on Fridays. But women don't have that opportunity. They don't even know who is living in their opposite flat," says Nushrat.

Currently, the group has connected nearly 2,000 members from 13 areas of the city and in each area, they have a group coordinator.

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