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For example, if someone from Dhanmondi area faces any problem in Gulshan area, she can inform her group coordinator, who can then in turn contact the one in Gulshan. The group coordinator in Gulshan will then either have the responsibility to solve the problem by herself or other members under her coordination. "It can be a very small thing like finding a pharmacy!" says Nushrat.

To strengthen the network's impact beyond social media, the members of specific areas occasionally meet offline. Debjani Modak, a content executive at a digital marketing agency, shares her experience about how she befriended other women in her area using the network. "I was very passionate about playing badminton but I couldn't do that as I did not have any female friends in my area. But I saw that the boys used to play badminton in front of my house every day. After joining Shokti Network, I got introduced to some of my 'elakar bon', and now we play badminton whenever we want," says Debjani. "I've learnt to ride bicycles from the Shokti cyclists, and often go on cycle rides with them. I even met my best travel buddy, a mountaineer, from Shokti. We had several trips to

Keokradong, Kaptai and Cox's Bazar," says Debjani.

Female only Facebook groups are also helping a large number of women psycho-socially, although mental health is a neglected issue in Bangladesh. Women become the worst victims of social stigma when they share their problems in public. Women are also stigmatised within their families for opening up about mental health problems. For such women, a group named 'Women for Each Other' is run by two female doctors who are mental health researchers by profession.

"We tried to create a non-judgmental platform for women, where a mental health patient can open up and nobody will judge or make fun of them. I think we have been able to make that happen," says Dr Syeda Fatema Alam, co-founder of Women for Each Other.

"If a woman goes through a situation which is harmful for her mental health, she can post about it in the group. At first our trained psycho-social supporters give them primary psycho-social support such as talking to them, listening to what happened and trying to understand what they are going through. If they need any psychiatrist, psychologist or therapist, we refer them and make an appointment

with them. The primary care we give is totally free of cost, while the follow-ups with trained mental health professionals are heavily discounted," she says.

"It happens so many times that we cannot go to the right person with regard to our mental health. For example, one might go to a psychiatrist for a certain problem, but she actually needs a therapist. Or someone might unknowingly go to someone who is not specialised for her needs. As such they lose time and money. Since we belong to this background, we try to refer them to professionals based on their needs," says Dr Fatema.

So far the group, consisting of 8,500 members, has referred nearly a hundred women to psychiatrists. Besides, the group is organising seminars and events on issues of mental health, anger-management and stress-management. If anyone needs legal help along with their mental health issues, this platform can also refer them to their partner organisations for legal support.

Beyond just the mind and the health, these social media groups also help with livelihoods. While larger businesses often have their own social media groups where they reach customers, smaller, or part-time entrepreneurs who only offer products seasonally find it harder to gain

visibility. That is where these online female-run marketplaces come in. These groups are also helping women entrepreneurs by giving them solutions for their business-related problems. Along with selling domestic products, the group 'Female Entrepreneurs of Bangladesh' is helping the entrepreneurs by giving them advice on product market research strategy, price determination and ensuring customer's acceptability satisfaction. The group is run by three female entrepreneurs and currently consist of 3,119 members.

Another group 'Female Only Freelancers of Bangladesh' is assisting inexperienced freelancers by giving them ideas and knowledge about online freelancing. Through this group, a large number of experienced freelancers are getting small gigs.

Apart from helping and supporting women in their everyday problems, these women-only Facebook groups are empowering women and connecting them to each other. And this is maybe the reason why first-time mother Sheuly Juthi can fight against traditional misconceptions during her pregnancy or young professionals like Debjani Modak is not hesitating to start her world tour with her best travel buddy.

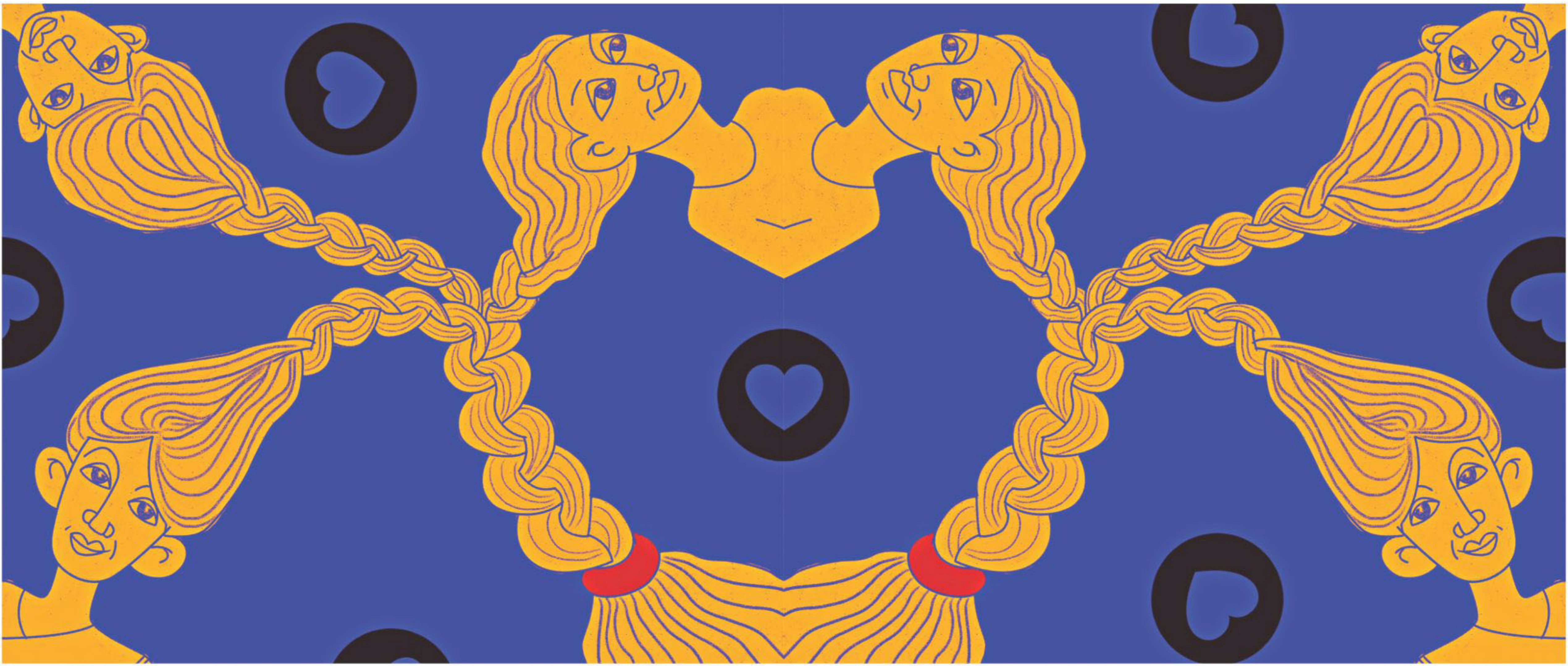


ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO AND NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

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In addition to visiting the heritage sites of each area, the travellers also met high school girls in every district, holding sessions with them on health issues, and raising awareness on matters of nutrition, self-defence and other problems faced during adolescence. "We didn't want to limit any of the women's experiences. We wanted them to explore their ideas without fear and ask us whatever questions they had," explains Sakia.

"Girls in towns are more or less informed about their health and reproductive rights, but the situation in the villages is still very different," she adds.

Many of the girls would blush, some lowered their heads and others hid their faces behind books when the four of them would start to discuss menstruation in the classroom. "Most girls still think that menstruation is an 'unholy' thing. Many don't even know what it is," she says.

The travellers would initiate the discussions by showing them videos which normalised menstruation as a natural part of womanhood. Gradually, the students would ease into the topic.

"Eventually though they would find the courage to speak up not just on menstruation but also child marriage, sexual harassment and other issues young girls

faced in the area. It was then that we felt like our mission was complete," says Sakia. "We don't think we can empower women just by travelling. But ours is just one step forward. Girls saw us riding scooters, living outside our homes and addressing different issues. Seeing this, perhaps many others will find the drive to follow their own dreams."

Like them, they saw many local girls peddling bicycles and riding motorcycles without any disturbance in extreme northern districts of Panchagarh, Thakurgaon and Dinajpur. But the sight of the four of them travelling in scooters was enough to draw lewd comments in

many districts. Worse still, men would begin swinging their motorcycles to show off every chance they got. On one occasion on their way to Chapainawabganj from Naogaon, a man swung his motorcycle around and hit Sakia's scooter, damaging the plastic front. None of them were hurt, but the incident left a lasting mark in their memories.

"We still have a long way to go when it comes to teaching the world how to behave with women," says Sakia.

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