

EARLY CURFEWS AT WOMEN’S DORMITORIES

An outdated practice



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

NAHALY NAFISA KHAN

“I used to work with a theatre group, and on most days, rehearsals would take at least 9.30 PM to be over. I used to miss the curfew at 10 PM and would need to go to my friend’s place in Uttara despite my campus being closer, because I didn’t want to go through the process of entering through the ‘late gate’,” recounts Nazifa Tasnim Khanam, a senior-year Sociology student at the University of Dhaka (DU), and resident of Ruqayyah Hall, while sharing her experience with the curfew at female halls of the university.

When asked what entails with the “late gate” procedure, she mentioned that a student would require a permission slip issued beforehand, even in emergencies, to enter through a back entrance leading to the residence of the house tutor, as the main entrance of the hall is shut at 10 PM.

This process comes with a handful of inconveniences for the students. From answering many questions to even getting character-shamed, a wide range of humiliation tactics awaits them.

“The authorities have always claimed that it is for the girls’ safety that they impose the curfew. If I’m not comfortable entering the dorm after curfew and have to travel halfway across the city to find a place for the night, how does that make things any safer? Does this not empower the potential perpetrators and the existing narrative of victim-blaming?” asks Nazifa.

Gatekeepers often seize students’ ID cards upon late entry. Some halls might even ask them to bring in their local guardians to vouch for them.

“How do they even expect that a local guardian will always be present to address these issues? If it were that simple, would I be going for university residence in the first place? Why do I not have the freedom to enter a place I call home at my convenient time?” asks Samira Tasnim, a Geology major at DU, and resident of Shamsun Nahar Hall.

This reality is not limited to DU only. Female students in almost every pub-

lic university in the country have to go through such troubles.

“Students need to call the house tutor to enter the halls after curfew. One of us had to stay out till 2 in the morning because ma’am couldn’t receive the call,” shares Tasnia Poushy*, a residential student of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST), Sylhet.

Afia Farzana is a third-year student of Architecture at Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology (RUET). At first, she used to stay at RUET’s only residential hall for female students, Deshratna Sheikh Hasina Hall, where the curfew made things quite difficult for her.

“Architecture required me to work late hours on projects. With a curfew that started at 6 PM in the winter and 7 PM in the summer, I often didn’t make it on time, and rarely had the energy to deal with the authorities after a day of hard work. So, I left the hall and found my own living arrangements,” she recalls.

The curfew leaves little to no scope for residential female students to engage in extracurricular activities, internships, or even enjoy a concert happening right on the campus premises.

“Considering the traffic situation of Dhaka, the time limit is rather too early to be met after carrying out other responsibilities. This rule also goes against the ideology of a university, where students should be encouraged to explore as much as possible. Barring them from participating in concerts, festivals and events are highly detrimental to the intellectual growth of female students,” says Labiba Mehrin*, a sophomore Economics major at DU and Ruqayyah Hall resident.

The issue recently became a topic of discussion once again after the SUST vice chancellor made derogatory and misogynistic comments about female students at Jahangirnagar University (JU), who are not bound by a curfew at their halls.

However, despite no official curfew in place, female students are often harassed by hall authorities and staffers upon late entry at JU.

“They [hall authorities] often issue show-cause letters to the departments. The usual character-shaming and harassment from proctorial bodies go hand in hand for the female students here as well,” says Nusrat Tuba, a residential student at JU from Bangamata Begum Fazilatunnessa Mujib Hall.

Students have called this rule inherently misogynistic, as no such provision exists for the male students of any university, who can enter their dorms at any time of the night.

“This is clearly a gendered issue. From my experience of serving as an elected Dhaka University Central Students’ Union (DUCSU) member of the hall caucus, I have first-hand experience of witnessing the harassment female students have to go through in this regard. I have been a victim of such harassment myself,” reports Arunima Tahsin, residential student of DU’s Shamsunnahar Hall, and ex-Ducus member.

“All of us are adults here. It is unjust that the administration claims so much agency over our movement. The fact that it’s only for women makes it clearer that it’s nothing but an authoritative and misogynistic practice,” adds Tahsin.

Professor Kaberi Gayen of DU’s Department of Mass Communication and Journalism shares her experience as

a female student at the same university, saying, “We were character-shamed in our time for demanding an extension of 30 minutes to the curfew. I clearly remember the then proctor saying, ‘No “good girl” can ask for such a thing.’ It’s utterly sad that the thoughts have remained the same even after decades.”

“Curfew at female halls is an unnecessary rule. It needs to go. If safety is the cause of concern here, the authorities need to focus on making the campus safer, instead of caging half the students,” adds Professor Gayen.

The restriction of movement of female students who live in public university dormitories is an appalling practice, especially given no such restrictions exist for male students. The stale arguments related to safety and guardianship are only feeble attempts to hide a culture of victim-blaming.

While society is still attempting to progress from these backdated lines of thought, our universities need to lead this movement. Instead, they’re busy holding back the women they are supposed to empower.

**Names have been changed on request*

Nahaly Nafisa Khan is a sub-editor at City Desk, The Daily Star.

Too many engineers?

FAISAL BIN IQBAL & AZMIN AZRAN

Growing up in a Bangladeshi family, consider yourself lucky if your family members or relatives never pressured you into pursuing engineering as a career. Consider yourself luckier if they never, for once, mentioned that life will turn out as beautiful as you want it to be only if you can become an engineer.

In Bangladesh, you are either born an engineer, or a disappointment. There are, of course, other occupations. Doctors are revered; law is traditionally looked at as a noble pursuit; business graduates, as far as the greater society is concerned, are only valuable to the system if they can work at a bank or an MNC. If you want to do something else, you had better be the best at it.

What’s with this fascination towards engineering? “I only decided to go for an engineering degree because my parents wanted me to,” says Afif Mohammad, freshman at the School of Business and Economics, North South University (NSU). “They would point to an engineer cousin of mine, who is very successful for his age, and tell me that life can be this beautiful only if I became an engineer. I, however, was not on board with this idea, nor did I want to study engineering. I wanted to get into the family business and help out my father.”

Listening to his parents’ advice, Afif did his best to prepare for the engineering admission exams. Sadly, he failed to secure a seat at any of the public engineering schools. His parents, dead set on making him an engineer, admitted Afif to NSU’s computer science engineering program, where Afif only lasted a couple of semesters before switching to the university’s BBA program.

“All my parents ever told me about engineering was that it would get me a good job, and earn me a lot of respect,” Afif replies when asked why he switched programs. “My school teachers would say the same things. No one ever told us what engineering was really about. All I knew was that I had to be good at Maths if I wanted to become an engineer. This did not help much. I was struggling from the start and eventually decided to switch to business.”

Like Afif, many Bangladeshi high school graduates have often been forced into studying engineering and eyeing it as a viable career option. And, like Afif, many have struggled to meet their parents’ and society’s expectations, and have either dropped out or switched programs.

In some cases, a little encouragement and guidance from schools can actually get kids interested in engineering. Such was the case for Sumaiya Rashid, an A Level graduate from The Aga Khan School, Dhaka.

“My school provided me with a good understanding of engineering degrees and adequately prepared me in fundamental subjects such as Physics, Mathematics, and Chemistry,” says Sumaiya. “I’ve combined my other interests with engineering. The idea of seeing something come to life as a result of my efforts and making it work to help bring about change in the world fascinates me.”

However, many out there still enrol into engineering programs even if that was not their original plan.

“I wanted to finish my undergrad in business administration but ended up choosing engineering anyways,” says *Sadiah Hussain, a final-year student at the Civil Engineering Department of Ahsanullah University of Engineering and Technology (AUST). “With an engineering degree, I knew I could choose a different career route if I wanted to do something else in the future other than engineer-

ing. To me, engineering simply opened up more career options.”

For Wasikul Islam Romit, a Department of Urban & Regional Planning graduate of Rajshahi University of Engineering Technology (RUET), not a lot of thinking went into his choice of major, which unfortunately is not that uncommon.

He says, “Like most middle class families in our society, my family also expected me to go to a public engineering university, and I bought into that idea. I tried my best to get in somewhere, and Urban and Regional Planning at RUET was the option I was left with.”

Engineering, for many students, simply appears as the obvious choice – the path most travelled. Whereas other paths may have been more suitable for them, they pursue engineering for all the wrong reasons, and that leads to further frustration down the line.

In many cases, even after enrolling in a top engineering school, many fall out of love with their desire to study engineering because of a lack of support from their universities. And more often than not, this lack of support is not because the university lacks skilled faculties, but because their approach of teaching the courses fails to appeal to their students.

“The most off putting thing about studying engineering is how people are often careless with responsibilities,” says Tasin Khan, a second-year Electrical and Electronics Engineering (EEE) student from Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET). “Except for some faculty members, the rest keep uttering the same words from the same presentation they made years ago.”

“We use a premium simulation software, but it is outdated,” adds Tasin. “There are far better and open source options here, but we are not using them because our computers and lab sheets are based on the older mentioned software.”

This adds to the frustration of many students. Even those that study engineering on their own volition will feel repulsed by the lack of commitment from their respective institutions’ ends. Eventually, many of these frustrated students, with engineering degrees once they graduate, turn away from the field itself. While engineering might have always been a passion for them, it is easy to see why they might walk away from it eventually.

And then there are individuals like Sadia, who know that an engineering degree can open doors to unrelated job fields. Thus, every year, we see engineering graduates out in the job market looking for employment in fields other than engineer-

ing. Over time, that number has increased.

Fahmim Ferdous, currently working as Project Manager & Trainer at DW Akademie Asia, remembers that engineering was his goal when he was in high school, and that is why he decided to study EEE at American International University Bangladesh (AIUB).

Circumstances changed his plans, however, and he found his passion elsewhere, “Right after my first year, I had to drop a semester because of financial reasons, and that summer I started looking for a job. I started working as a producer at ABC Radio’s English news bulletin, and continued it until I graduated because I enjoyed working for news and radio programming a lot. By the time I graduated, I had over three years of experience in journalism and had a much better job prospect there in comparison to engineer-

ing. Also, within the first year of starting to work, I realised I wanted to do it much more than I wanted to do engineering, and I did not study hard at all after that. I just wanted to be a journalist.”

The same was true for Romit, who had financial struggles of his own, and had to look for ways to mitigate that through work outside of his academic field. He found his passion in food, “I started with a juice cart in Talaimari, Rajshahi. At first, my family wasn’t on board, they wanted me to go to Dhaka and make use of my degree, but as the business grew, the disagreements went away.”

When talking about how his education helped him, Romit reflects, “I used my time in university to learn about life in general, I used it to learn many of the soft skills that help me now. In terms of my coursework, while I enjoyed them, urban planning was never my passion. My passion was food, and once I realised that, everything I did was meant to facilitate that. I’m currently employed in an urban planning related job, but its primary function is to sustain my food ventures through the pandemic.”

With the advantage of hindsight, both Ferdous and Romit agree that they would have been better off studying something that could have helped them now in their respective fields. However, passions don’t always clearly show when we are asked to pick our careers at the beginning of university, and that is where engineering often ends up becoming an easy choice towards a difficult future.

Engineering is difficult as it is. It becomes doubly challenging when students don’t fully buy into what it offers. This results in high levels of student dissatisfaction, and if a person is unable to identify and pursue a passion in time, it ends up in them being dissatisfied with their career choices, which makes for a difficult life.

The perceptions about engineering society has and projects is often skewed, if not wrong. And students jumping the bandwagon need to think long and hard before they make the decision to study engineering. Teachers and parents need to be responsible enough to provide them with all the information necessary.

**Name has been changed upon request*

