



#PERSPECTIVE

# DHAKA'S SINGLE WOMEN VS THE REST OF "CIVIL" SOCIETY

*It's Women's Day soon, a time when people in Dhaka, just like those around the world, take to writing long posts on social media about women's rights and people in workplaces cut purple cakes and speak monologues on a women-led society.*

*Our conversations with single women in Dhaka on their experiences living alone in the city, however, revealed some disheartening and regressive insights, quite the opposite of the picture we like to paint of the so-called progressive society in which we live.*

Despite the celebratory atmosphere of Women's Day, young women in and around Dhaka have some dark stories to share, when it comes to living alone in Dhaka. Rife with discriminatory attitudes and security challenges, securing homes for single ladies in Dhaka continues to be a harrowing experience for all those who choose to live alone.

Imagine that you are a woman who dreams of achieving great things in life — academic accolades, promotions in the workplace, or even just freedom to do your own thing, outside of societal expectations.

A controlling household, public transport harassment, and even traffic jams stand as hurdles along the way. You sit there and dream of a home away from home, which could offer you proximity to your university or your workplace, so that you could truly give your work everything you have, instead of giving it away to hour-long traffic jams or to the creep on the bus who, yet again, made your journey home a fresh hell.

Sanjida Tanny, a communications specialist has a similar story to share. "I would spend almost half the day in traffic jams. From my home in Mohammadpur to my university in Mohakhali and my workplace, traffic was so terrible that it was taking a toll on my mental, as well as

physical health."

Convincing subcontinental parents to allow their children to stay away from home is a task in itself but Tanny managed to make them see her plight.

The landlords and ladies of the city were another story altogether. "Some came clear and refused to take the three of us roomies in. While we may not have agreed with their reasons completely, we appreciated their directness. It was the ones who called us around to size us up that were the problem."

Other women like Tanny have remarked how landlords would often call them to discuss the matter face to face, even when they had no intention to allow them tenancy. "Some just called us around to lecture us about "civil" society and how women like us don't fit in," said Sajeda Banu, a

young girl from Chattogram, staying in Dhaka to study EEE at a prominent university. Others pretended to care, only to take our numbers and spam us with creep calls at night."

Security is another concern for women who wish to live alone in Dhaka.

"We have had people trying to barge into our homes at all hours of the day, wanting to meet for coffee and so on," complains Shabana Tarannum, a 25-year-old trying to eke out a living for herself as a licensed freelancer. "They ridicule us and insult us to no end if we get on their wrong side. I've had to move out twice, only for this reason."

Upon speaking to a landlord in one of the more popular student locations in the city, it was found that

homeowners had their apprehensions about allowing young women to live alone on their property. "We cannot take responsibility for anything going wrong with these young girls," said Akbar Miah, a landlord in one of the most university-heavy localities in the city. "Nowadays, even women with parents residing in the same cities come to us with requests to allow them tenancy. I don't find any logic to this request."

Plenty of homeowners like Akbar fear everything under the sky for singletons living in their homes, from unsupervised guest presence to substance abuse.

"It is not unheard of for students to engage in improper behaviour," accepts Tanny. "But those who can afford such luxuries often have enough money on offer as well. I'm talking about the landlord, the chairman of the building and even the guards. You have to keep everyone happy if you have such hobbies. It is people like us, with limited resources to spare, who are left to scour the pot for home options."

Times have changed and similar to the West, women in Bangladesh now wish to move out of their parents' homes long before marriage — looking for a sound education, a better work life, or simply freedom. Homeowners, in this case, have a civic duty — to open their spaces to women who seek shelter outside of their family homes and to ensure that these spaces are safe havens for them, not a source of added stress.

Let's get our girls shelter first, the cakes can wait.

By Munira Fidai

Photo: LS Archive/ Sazzad Ibne Sayed

