

The experience of being a woman stand-up comedian in Bangladesh

In conversation with Poushi Razzaque, a young stand-up comedian.

The local stand-up scene for women is more challenging to navigate than it is for men. Women in comedy often have to consider many factors like societal stereotypes and audience perceptions while choosing their stand-up materials or topics for jokes.

YOUTH DESK

Poushi Razzaque is a recent graduate from the Faculty of Business Studies at Dhaka University. She is currently working at SELISE Digital Platforms as a business analyst. Occasionally, when she's not busy with work, you can find Poushi doing stand-up at various venues across Dhaka. In our local stand-up comedy scene, where most performers are men, Poushi is one of the few active woman stand-up comedians.

Star Youth sat down with Poushi for a quick one-on-one interview where she talked about her passion for stand-up, how she got into it, what's it like being a woman stand-up comedian in Bangladesh, and so on.

Star Youth (Y): How did you come across the local stand-up comedy scene? What did you like and not like about it?

Poushi (P): I came across the local stand-up comedy scene in 2019 when I attended a show in Dhanmondi as an audience member. I have always been a big fan of comedy; humour of any form serves as a stress-reliever for me. Experiencing it live for the first time in a cosy setting was a joyful experience as I felt the energy with every laughter. I got to know more about upcoming shows on social media platforms and realised that the scene had immense potential to evolve into a big part of the entertainment industry.

Y: What made you decide to try stand-up yourself?

P: I have always had a keen interest in humour and enjoyed making people laugh, particularly through creating online content like memes. I even made humorous digital content professionally (for marketing purposes) for different clients. So, when I got to know about the local stand-up comedy scene, I was naturally drawn towards it and saw stand-up comedy as an exciting opportunity to explore a new avenue of humour.

Y: Do you feel that the stand-up scene is male dominated?

P: Yes, I think the stand-up comedy scene, both locally and globally, is male-dominated if we look at the male to female ratio of performers. Currently, there are less than five



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woman comedians actively performing in our local scene, including myself. There's a common misconception in our society that women aren't naturally funny, and humour is often viewed as a more attractive quality in men. One major reason for women shying away from comedy is the societal perception that humour isn't a feminine trait. For men, their sense of humour is judged by their ability to be funny, while for women, it often depends on whether they understand jokes made by men. It is extra challenging for women to enter the comedy scene because of the existing stereotypes and expectations surrounding what is considered "appropriate" humour for women. While men can freely joke about any topic that might be even considered distasteful, women doing the same might make the audience somewhat uncomfortable.

Y: Did you feel welcomed once you started doing stand-up?

P: I have been doing stand-up comedy since April 2022. When I first started, I

felt very welcomed by other comedians. Everyone encouraged me to hit the stage more often so I can get better at it. The community has been very supportive and inclusive. I never personally faced any sort of discrimination or bias and could connect with people through comedy.

Y: Could you share your first stand-up show experience?

P: After contemplating for months, I finally gathered the courage to perform at Naveed's Comedy Club in April 2022 for the first time. I felt extremely anxious but it was a surreal feeling when the audience laughed at some of my jokes. On top of that, I have stage fright and my voice was shaking back then. But the audience was extremely supportive and I could feel the positive energy in the room. One audience member even approached me after my performance and encouraged me to continue. This moment of validation motivated me to work harder on my materials and overcome my fears.

Y: In your words, how would you

describe the local stand-up scene for women?

The local stand-up scene for women is more challenging to navigate than it is for men. Women in comedy often have to consider many factors like societal stereotypes and audience perceptions while choosing their stand-up materials or topics for jokes. While the community itself is very welcoming and supportive towards new woman comics entering the scene, it still remains male-dominated. There are obviously opportunities for both men and women to perform and grow as comics but women are more hesitant to try out. Of course, the organisers of our local comedy shows are careful about gender equality and inclusion when it comes to providing opportunities to perform.

Y: Did you ever feel that stand-up comedians rely too much on sexist or inappropriate content in their performances?

P: As a comedian, I've observed that while some comedians do rely on

sexist or inappropriate content in their performances, it's not representative of the entire community. Sometimes, sexist jokes guarantee easy laughs as the audience quickly responds to such materials. But in my opinion, humour is a powerful tool to communicate a message, so we should use it carefully. As comedians, it's our responsibility to use the platform wisely to raise awareness for important causes with thought-provoking jokes, and also entertain the audience in a respectful manner. In the community, there is zero tolerance against sexism, hate speech, and inappropriate content.

Y: Have you ever had to resort to such sexist or inappropriate content yourself to get the audience to engage or laugh? Did you try to avoid such content? If so, how, and how did you feel the audience's response was to it?

P: I've never felt the need to resort to sexist or inappropriate content in my sets. I firmly believe in creating material that's inclusive and respectful so that the audience can relate to it. I mostly write from my personal experiences and everyday observations. Through clever humour, I try to raise awareness for important issues including mental health, harassment, and my struggles as a woman. The response from the audience has been quite positive, which made me realise that we do not need to rely on offensive content to be funny. I want to be authentic on stage and make people laugh without bullying or offending the audience members which makes it even more challenging.

Y: What advice would you like to share to aspiring woman stand-up comedians?

P: I would like to encourage more woman comics to perform and enter the scene as we need more representation. For aspiring woman comedians, my advice would be to stay authentic, share your experiences with others in forms of jokes, and overcome the fear of judgment. Failure is a part of the process to learn and grow as a comic, because not every joke will land but we should always be ready to fail and challenge ourselves to be better. It's always difficult to take the first step. But once you take it, you will find your voice.

Why do we attach our self-worth to achievements?

NADERA NAEEMA OHI

For most of my life, I defined who I was by what I could do. This was not acts of kindness, my personal wit and humour, or a confidence in myself regardless of my circumstances. Who I was, for a very long time, was what I could accomplish.

Even if I was unwell, my grades had to be perfect. Even though I hated competition, I had to be the best at every activity I took up. If that wasn't possible, the impossibility was a symbol of failure.

Nothing I did was ever enough, and it crushed me to know that.

Although I no longer believe this, as a young adult, I see more and more of my friends and peers struggling with the belief that achievement is what allows us to have self-worth. Moving beyond this mindset is a difficult process, it can sometimes take years. In order to acknowledge how deep this feeling truly goes, it's

important to understand the ways different people live with it.

Most often, this feeling develops naturally enough that we don't really notice. Achievements slowly shift from a goal to an identity you feel like you can't lose. Perhaps your parents base punishment and affection on success. As Asha Anand*, a high school student, shares, "I noticed whenever I did something that could be considered an achievement, my mother immediately became more supportive of me, more loving towards me. Somewhere along the line, achievements became the only way I felt validated from my ma."

Before I was even a teen, I began to feel like I wasn't unique, or someone worthwhile who deserved love or care unless I had achieved something. I believed that there was always another step left to take before I would be good enough. My inner monologue was an unstoppable stream of self-loathing and criticism.

"If I didn't

have achievements, what did I have? In primary and middle school, I had finally reached the top of my class in terms of grades as per my parents' expectations. But what do you do now? Now that you're at the conceivable top?" asks Mushfiq Alam, an A level student at Maple Leaf International School.

"You start finding other avenues to compete in, such as competitions, activities, etc. This time it was in order to satisfy my own expectations

and feel worthy. This made being happy with myself very difficult, and dissatisfaction too easy," Mushfiq shares how he initially found unsustainable coping mechanisms.

Sometimes, our distorted perceptions of achievement and our worth as people can bleed into how we treat others. As in the case of Asha, "Just the thought of doing something which I know is not going to be perfect repels me from doing the thing. It has to be the best or there's no value in it - it becomes a waste of time. Socially, even if I don't want to, I

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subconsciously become dismissive towards those without a high academic performance or any significant achievements; I feel myself become distant, even though my love I have for the person is insurmountable."

Letting go of an achievement-based sense of self-worth needs to be deliberate. For me, fixing the damage meant taking active decisions for my wellbeing that I had never learned to make before. I had to break down an entire personal belief system cemented over almost a decade, force myself every moment of every day to reject my

inner voice projecting constant self-hatred, and consciously work towards divorcing my perception of myself over what other people said or thought about me. Everything I did was for one main goal: to accept me for me, and not a caricature of what I thought I could be.

It's tough to say what might help someone else, the complexity of these feelings varies from person to person. "Of course, there are some positives, such as pushing myself to work hard and become smarter. But I'd argue that it has been a net negative. Once you're conceived as someone 'smart', people around you start having high expectations of you. It can be crushing at times. Almost all of my friends are similarly well-accomplished, 'smart', and 'well-read'. I've also struggled making friends with or socialising with people who don't share my distinct world views or interests, or don't want to think the way I tend to," says Mushfiq.

However, I would still say that there are a few necessary steps to starting to be more kind to yourself. First, you have to believe it's something you deserve. Convincing yourself you deserve good things after a lifetime of not accepting happiness unless "earned" can feel impossible. It can feel exhausting and humiliating. But I realised that I owe it to myself - for the simple reason of being the only one who could give it to me.

Second is figuring out what to do to get there. For some, it might take emotional and mental effort, and for others, it might take physical effort to slowly reduce acts of physical punishment like not eating. We have to learn how to treat ourselves with the kindness we would give someone we love.

Finally, allow yourself to try, and to lean on loved ones for help. Building a new state of being for yourself might be the hardest thing you ever have to do, but if it is, every morning you wake up will feel just a little easier.

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