

MOTHER'S DAY

The devaluation of the sacrificial mother

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ALIZA RAHMAN

The image of the sacrificial mother has become a central tenet in our culture, and other cultures similar to ours. It pops up in speeches and advertisements, whether political or commercial, and places the mother on a pedestal so high, it runs the risk of a violent crash to the bottom at the slightest hint of not conforming to the ideal.

The ideal mother is often a housewife, her priority being her children, and it is usually children because a single child is often deigned as not enough. However, even as she is glorified, her work is devalued.

The relational category of mother, or more accurately the ideal one, is not just limited to children, it is closely attached to "wife" and "daughter-in-law". It is a frequent statement by husbands that their wives "do not work", and jokes shared by certain members of the older generation. She is grumpy, lazy, nonsensical, and ridiculous. These also reveal the stereotypical behaviour we expect women to have: to give without complaint and to give with a smile, for days on end without set time limits, until she is old enough to be replaced by a younger woman handling the responsibilities she had.

The responsibilities, of course, vary, especially so in the modern age. As women enter the workforce, many are experiencing what has been called the Second Shift, and the notion of "having it all" is ringing hollow to many struggling to find economic security while maintaining physical and mental health at breakneck workplaces. It ranges from doing extra housework after paid work even if the woman works the same hours as her husband, and it involves repeatedly making decisions for children

as fathers take a backseat. It is what causes mental breakdowns in the present age, and what caused the mental breakdowns in mid-century America as noted by Betty Friedan while documenting the "problem which had no name" among groups of women

happiness a mother has to feel.

An image making the rounds on the internet during the height of the pandemic included a Bangladeshi mother cooking while attached to oxygen support. It rightfully received criticism, with the

The ideal mother is a reductive image, but the fervour with which it is defended frequently makes discussion impossible. This monolithic idea does not take into account the various situations under which mothers have to raise vulnerable humans for whom

because her poverty forces her to work in households not her own. For mothers who are disenfranchised to the extreme, there is no amount of herculean maternal instinct that will feed her children if she can't gather the money to pay for resources. There is no chance for her to save her children if they are stuck inside a factory making juice for more privileged children when a fire breaks out, or if a building is turned to rubble by some accident.

The ideal mother is therefore an image meant to console us. It indoctrinates us into taking a mother's love for granted even when we proclaim that we can never repay them for their sacrifices. Should a mother admit she prefers work outside rather than staying at home, the reactions are often negative.

The sacrificial mother image is what allows one to be aware of what women who are mothers aren't allowed to have or be: flawed, human, needing alone time, a purpose outside the family, disabled, destitute, sick. In increasingly atomised societies, there is a further risk of shame in asking for help. Flippant remarks can follow the sharing of a struggle with raising children, even as we continue to live in a society that pushes having children as the ultimate ideal, regardless of the kind of person an individual is.

In such circumstances, we need to ask who is served by the glorification of the sacrificial mother. The need for community support and social systems providing assistance for mothers, like paid maternity leave, reliable childcare, and well-designed cities with parks and other necessities for children's wellbeing, is essential. It's essential not only for the betterment of future generations, but also because not helping mothers makes days like Mother's Day a cheap holiday and mere lip service, existing more as an outlet for our guilt as we reap their labour, and pacifying mothers feeling the stirrings of revolt.



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

who would be considered privileged even by today's standards.

Exacerbating the situation of so many mothers is the shame of having any negative feelings toward motherhood at all. It is what causes mothers with post-partum depression to suffer in silence, because it is so at odds with the dominant image of the unblemished

criticism directed at both the individual who posted that image and the culture that encourages such behaviour. In a gender stratified society such as ours, the realm of the home is still the responsibility of the housewife, even as she suffers from a health condition where the physical action of breathing must be assisted.

they are almost entirely responsible.

In the case of Bangladesh, as with many other countries, we also have to ask which mother we are speaking of. Often, it is the more privileged woman able to offload work to another woman who is either delaying her own motherhood or being away from her children, in some cases for months on end,

Daniel Kahneman and his influence on our policymaking



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

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ABDULLAH SHIBLI

One of my favourite economists, Daniel Kahneman passed away a few weeks ago, on March 27. He won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2002 even though he had never taught economics or taken an economics course. Known as the "grandfather of behavioural economics" and listed as one of the seven most influential economists in the world by the Economist in 2015, he was a professor in both psychology and public affairs since 1993 at Princeton University. Kahneman died in New York.

Kahneman influenced generations of economists by upending the basic tenet of economics. Adam Smith proposed that a "consumer" is a rational decision-maker. Kahneman and his fellow researcher Amos Tversky discovered "anomalies" in human behaviour. In pioneering experiments, the duo validated many departures from our pristine "rationality" model, including



Daniel Kahneman (March 5, 1934 – March 27, 2024)

PHOTO: REUTERS

One cannot deny that economic policymaking for a developing country like Bangladesh can be very tricky. Sometimes a political shift, or just a change of heart among bureaucrats at other times, can overturn the cart. Just look at our environmental policies.

status quo bias, endowment effect, scope sensitivity, and loss aversion.

Let us take an example. If you lower the price of a good or offer a discount, people buy more of it. "Not so simple", they said. Their experiments demonstrated various cognitive biases. They showed, for instance, that many more people were willing to make a 20-minute trip to save Tk 20 on the price of a Tk 120 train ticket than to

make the same trip to save Tk 20 on a Tk 300 train ticket—an example of what is known as the framing effect.

The recent bout of inflation and RMG wage negotiations that followed are also illustrations of how behavioural economists have validated an old concept known as the "Money Illusion." Economists Eldar Shafir and Peter Diamond and psychologist Tversky found that in periods of high inflation, employers can get away with giving workers raises that amount to substantial wage cuts on an inflation-adjusted basis.

Suppose inflation rises at a 10 percent annual rate, and you get a five percent raise. You've just received a real wage cut. If there's no inflation, and your wage is cut by three percent, you've also gotten a wage cut—but you've lost less money than in the case of high inflation. What's odd is that workers tend to view the bigger real wage cuts as fairer.

technology skills, or even language courses? The answers to these questions are not clear-cut. Kahneman and others confirmed experimentally that new graduates often have to overcome their risk aversion and status quo bias. More on that later.

I will pause for a second and acknowledge all the skills training programmes that the government has initiated in the last 15 years. We borrowed hundreds of millions of dollars from foreign multilateral development banks and government agencies for skills training, some for vocational and technical skills, and others for so-called manpower development. The EDGE project aims to train 80,000 students in three phases. Of them, 50,000 will get training on fundamental issues at the foundational level, 20,000 on more complex issues at the intermediate level, and 10,000 on frontier technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, robotics

and blockchain at the advanced level.

But the project is off to a very slow start. While AI and blockchain are very much state-of-the-art technologies, employers in Bangladesh are also voicing their concern about the absence of other soft skills, including communication, teamwork, and adaptability. A Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD) online skills assessment survey of graduates showed that the highest average score was obtained for "creativity", whereas the lowest average scores were recorded in "Communication, English language skill, Numeracy, and Mathematics."

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Status quo bias is the phenomenon (backed up by some significant evidence) that humans have an objectively non-rational preference for the status quo. A 2009 paper published by the US National Academy of Sciences found that when faced with difficult choices, people are more likely to choose the status quo. In addition, the study also noted that these choices were frequently not the "best ones" but that the difficulty of making the decision was a factor in driving people to stick with the familiar.

Like economists, agricultural scientists have often been baffled by the flawed choices people sometimes make. For them, the question is: "Why isn't there a faster adoption of agricultural innovation that has obvious benefits?"

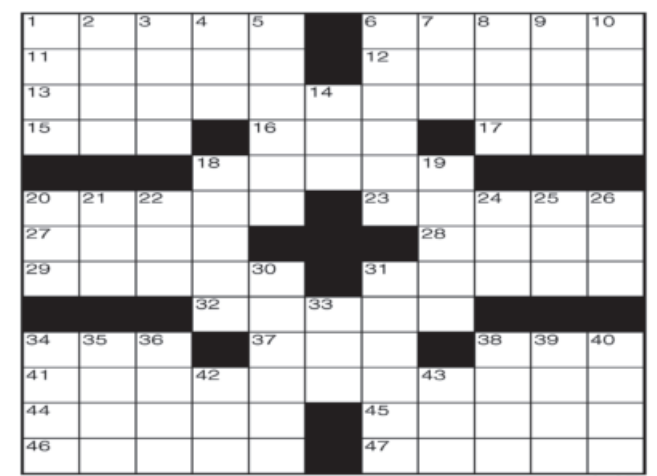
Richard Thaler, another behavioural economist who followed Kahneman's path, provides a clue. In his 2017 Nobel speech, he said, "We humans are absent-minded, a bit overweight, we procrastinate about saving for retirement, and—crucially—we are influenced by many supposedly irrelevant factors: how questions are phrased, what happened yesterday, what's the default."

Another example is the slow progress towards diversifying our manufacturing non-RMG sectors. Is it simply because of status quo bias or lack of policy support? That's a discussion topic for another day.

As Kahneman might have said, "policymaking is not for the faint-hearted".

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS
- 1 Syrup source
- 6 Warm's up
- 11 Starry hunter
- 12 Houston player
- 13 Heading to sea
- 15 Utter
- 16 Bit of humor
- 17 Buck's mate
- 18 Plentiful
- 20 Spanish resort isle
- 23 Superfluous
- 27 Blowgun ammo
- 28 Lowly worker
- 29 Start
- 31 Female donkey
- 32 Polite
- 34 TV spots
- 37 Quarterback Marino
- 38 Sack
- 41 Job for a judge
- 44 Deeply impressed
- 45 Singer Ronstadt
- 46 Famed fur tycoon
- 47 Finished
- DOWN
- 1 Forest growth
- 2 Region
- 3 Feel sorry for
- 4 Auction buy
- 5 Puzzle
- 6 Negotiate a price
- 7 Snaky shape
- 8 Slightly
- 9 Half a sextet
- 10 Foot part
- 14 Afternoon break
- 18 Early Mexican
- 19 Kick out
- 20 Wedding words
- 21 Prohibit
- 22 Form 1040 org.
- 24 Toe count
- 25 Director Howard
- 26 One or more
- 30 More neat
- 31 Commercial song
- 33 Mover's truck
- 34 China setting
- 35 Bears' lairs
- 36 Sports figure
- 38 Rock group
- 39 Staff member
- 40 Delighted
- 42 Binary base
- 43 Storage site



FRIDAY'S ANSWERS



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