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Navigating higher education ALONGSIDE MOTHERHOOD

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When we think of pursuing a degree in higher education, the promise of an arduous journey is almost always guaranteed. However, when we add the concept of “motherhood” into this mix, the difficulties transcend into a whole new league.

Such was the experience of Tasfiah Tasnim Raya, an Economics student from Dhaka University (DU), who gave birth to her daughter during her second year. She shares, “Having a child during my second year of studies was full of significant challenges, especially during pregnancy when I experienced physical discomfort and fatigue. Balancing coursework with prenatal appointments and preparing for childbirth was hectic.”

Similar sentiments are echoed by Adiba Sultana*, who was pursuing her diploma from Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) during her pregnancy. Adiba shares, “During pregnancy, I had gestational diabetes. I had to take insulin in the morning, afternoon, and nighttime. My morning classes were at 9 AM. Sometimes, I couldn’t take the insulin properly, or eat properly. Pregnancy is a stressful condition in itself. On top of that, I had exams, classes, and hospital duties. Everything combined led to a highly stressful journey.”

While pregnancy might be an incredibly strenuous journey, the hardships oftentimes begin after a child is born. Being responsible for another human being in the midst of academic pursuits has the capacity to overwhelm just about anyone.

Tahera Nargis Hamid, 59, who is currently pursuing a bachelor’s degree in Media Studies and Journalism at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), shares, “My child was born in 1988. I was a single parent then and studying for the Bachelor of Commerce Pass Course. As my child was growing up, I had to totally give up on my studies. A major reason was that my employers never lived up to their words. Although some of them promised that I would be able to continue my studies, they never allowed me to take leave to prepare for my exams or attend private tutors’ classes.”

She further adds, “However, having my child was the greatest reward in life. As such, she was not a problem or burden. I had no problem supporting her upbringing. After several attempts, I stopped asking the employers to support my parallel academic career and continued full throttle with my professional career instead. In spite of the fact that I had to make arrangements to ensure that my child got to school and returned home safely, and lived in a healthy, conducive

environment, I loved the extra responsibilities.”

When dealing with motherhood, re-entering the education system after taking a gap can prove to be quite daunting as well, with new sets of challenges.

Tahera, who re-enrolled at university at the age of 54, shares, “I had made attempts at continuing my education at different times. I wasted quite a lot of money for that – admission, continuation of classes, then dropping out. I did not get any support from the institutions where I had enrolled in. However, when I finally decided to enroll at University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), my daughter was doing her PhD. I was no longer involved in paying for her and was able to focus on my studies. Despite my age, everyone at the university (the teachers, the staff, the students) was extremely encouraging and supportive. I survived one semester at a time until I finally reached the end, with only one course and portfolio submission or defense left.”

In such instances, the importance of familial support cannot be understated. This can allow the mothers to not only focus on their education but also give them the chance to take care of themselves as well. Tasfiah shares, “In my current situation, managing my third year of studies alongside

caring for my daughter requires careful time management and support from my family. I’m continuing my education despite the challenges and also prioritising self-care by going to the gym, hanging out with my friends, painting, and so on. In this whole journey, my family and my husband have been great sources of support.”

Raising children truly does take a village. However, having an entire support system composed solely of family members in this day and age may not be sufficient. In that case, the concept of a “village” shouldn’t just end with familial ties.

Educational institutions can be considered to be a part of the community, where mothers are encouraged to further their academic pursuits without having to give them up to raise their children or compromise their health.

When asked what changes educational institutions can make in order to support mothers, Adiba said, “Institutions should first focus on improving their sanitation facilities. Additionally, they should also improve the mass transportation systems. Institutions should also try to change their negative perspectives of mothers as students and ensure that the students also form an encouraging environment.”

From an infrastructural perspective, Tahera says, “There are some bars regarding the validity of the students’ certificates for university enrolment, for instance ten years in the case of HSC certificates. They should remove that. It should be an open-ended process. The mothers desiring to return to studies should be able to take a degree with a shorter duration of studies, perhaps three years instead of four. They could have access to scholarships pertaining to their age in addition to their performance to encourage them.”

**Name has been changed upon request for privacy.*

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