

THE SILENT BATTLES

our university teachers grapple with

Many factors weigh in on the mental health of our mentors



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PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKMA

time. In the end, I am always in a rush.”

The hours required for teachers to put together a syllabus, prepare and deliver lectures, look after assessments, and fulfil all the administrative tasks that they are expected to take care of, are often a lot higher than the ones they agreed to on paper. What makes the situation even grimmer is the fact that their remuneration often does not reflect these efforts and long hours.

“The amount faculty members get is a bare minimum to make ends meet. We have to struggle to maintain the daily expenses. Within this, we have to do research, bear publication fees, among a myriad of other things,” Rahman adds.

When speaking about the pay disparity among universities, Rahman notes, “Having worked at both public and private universities, and contrary to popular beliefs, I have seen some private universities provide flexible work hours for the faculty members. And the salary structure is also way more rewarding in private institutions.”

Furthermore, the structure and workload can often be rigid and unforgiving. Without much room for flexibility in tightly packed schedules, especially those in private universities, can become a source of further stress.

Syeda Maisha Ali, a lecturer at North South University says, “While there are TAs to help us with our work, they are not allowed to take on the heavy duties. Designing our course materials, taking back-to-back lectures, and, at times, five sections consisting of forty students does affect our overall stress levels. What further exacerbates the anxiety is the incredibly short span of time available to us to get to know all the students and to understand how we, as teachers, can cater to their individual learning needs.



As a young, impressionable teenager in Bangladesh, when I was beginning to learn that there are some designated professions deemed better than others, I was told that becoming a university lecturer or professor was a top choice. Not only does this profession supposedly bring you a stable income, but it also puts you on the societal pedestal of intellectuals. You are automatically respected. However, it was not until I enrolled into university about three years ago and was able to develop a good enough relationship with my lecturers that I realised that while their noble profession is possibly one of the most reputable one there is, the educational system, in many ways, fails to accommodate their needs, which ultimately takes a toll on their mental health.

A university faculty member’s responsibility does not consist only of providing slides and delivering lectures, as one would presume in academia. It is a constant juggle between balancing their teaching responsibilities, research duties, and attending administrative duties, often resulting in sacrificing time with their own families. University teachers lead multiple lives, and most of us remain unaware of it.

Motiur Rahman, an assistant professor of English at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Dhaka University of Engineering and Technology (DUET), shares how due to his work pressure, he has to sacrifice a lot of his family time. “Due to excessive workload, I have to compromise a lot of my personal and family

With overarching expectations from students for us to be the best version of ourselves to them, and the general conditions of a university, the pressure to fulfil all expectations can sometimes feel insurmountable.”

Maisha Ali also says, “It is true that if a faculty member is invested in research duties, they can apply for course waivers. But those are the bigger parts of being a teacher at a university. North South University has recently begun to provide mental health support to faculty members and administrative staff.”

However, the workload faculty members have to juggle is already quite a heavy burden to carry. With most mental health resources and professional psychological facilities on campus catering towards students, faculty members are often left without a lurch, further adds Maisha Ali.

While deemed “safe” in terms of safety in the literal sense and also a safer professional option, educational institutions, to some extent, fail women. It’s a shame that reputable universities in Bangladesh often are inefficient in catering to women’s needs, such as providing on-campus support. Adeeba Naz, a lecturer at Bangladesh

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University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), points out how academic institutions can do better by their women employees.

“I am fortunate that I have not faced any gender disparity in my institute. Rather, we are seeing more and more female faculty members joining, even in an engineering institute like mine. However, I am speaking for my institute, and this doesn’t mean that disparity doesn’t exist in other institutes. We need to be proactive in addressing any such incidents of discrimination if they occur anywhere,” says Naz.

Naz emphasises the need to provide better support to female employees. “To better support female faculty members in balancing their professional and personal responsibilities, things like more flexible work hours, on-campus childcare facilities, and remote work options could make a big difference. Also, having a supportive workplace culture that understands and considers family responsibilities can help female faculty members manage their dual roles more easily.”

Faculty members, as you cannot already tell, are often overburdened or often treated as if they are superheroes. The pressure of excelling in all aspects of their lives is not only what they put themselves through but also what society, and to some extent their students, put on them.

Antara Das Antu, a psychological counsellor at Psychological Health and Wellness Care (PHWC), shares how

her patients coming from the line of academia often feel a constant sense of burnout. “Functional depression and anxiety are some common mental health issues amongst the academic line of professionals. However, one highlighting factor would be their feeling of failure – failure in their jobs, which leads to them feeling isolated from their colleagues.”

According to Antu, “They are burning themselves out and are putting constant pressure on them to thrive with daily preparation for taking classes, suffering from work-life imbalance. They feel somewhat out of place if they are not excelling and constantly battling the pressure to be successful in this career to be accepted among peers. It also goes without saying that people’s expectations from university teachers do not help.”

Antu advises academics to be kinder to themselves and for universities to begin talking about mental health actively, uplifting the stigma around it. “Universities need to begin by fostering open communication about mental health on the university campus, sharing their own journey of mental health struggles, arranging mental health campaigns and seminars, and providing free mental health support by professionals. And faculty members should start by providing self-compassion to themselves, expressing gratitude to those who are helping them every day, and self-reflect on how much value their work carries, and how it is impacting their own and others’ lives.”

In the line of professional work, academia is not only deemed the “safest” or just “respectable,” it does offer flexibility, as Naz points out, praising her line of work and institute, as well as her deliberate choice to make time for herself. “Balancing work and personal life can be challenging, as responsibilities often extend beyond office hours. While I try to make time for personal and family life, it’s not always enough, especially during busy periods like the start and end of a semester. That being said, academia might be a bit more flexible and comfortable compared to some other types of jobs. I believe maintaining this balance is crucial for mental well-being, so I make a conscious effort to prioritise and compartmentalise my time whenever possible.”

Our teachers are the backbone of our society. Therefore, it has become essential that we begin to learn how to treat them well and foster a more caring approach to their well-being. While having high expectations is alright, it is a collective duty of both educational institutions and students to remember that their faculty members are also humans with lives of their own and that they must be treated better.

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