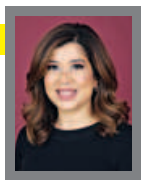


MIND THE GAP

NOSHIN NAWAL

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Picture this: Sara, a 29-year-old chartered accountant in Dhaka, walking into her office on a Monday morning. She's carrying a laptop bag, a cup of overpriced coffee, and the crushing weight of societal expectations. But don't worry — it's all just a *hobby*. At least, that's what everyone around her believes.

From the moment Sara got her first job, the narrative was set: her work was not *real work*. It was a side gig, an accessory to her main roles as a future wife, mother, and unpaid family therapist.

"What's the big deal?" her aunt had said during her graduation party. "You'll leave this job after marriage anyway. But good practice for managing your husband's business accounts!"

Fast forward to today, Sara is battling workplace sexism with the finesse of a seasoned gladiator.

Take her boss, Amin, a man who believes his "progressive" attitude deserves a standing ovation. Just last week, during a team meeting, he told her, "Sara, you're very talented for someone who doesn't *have* to work."

When she asked what he meant, he smiled patronisingly and said, "You know, since your father is well-off. You don't really need this job, right? It's nice to see you here as a passion project."

ELEGANTLY INTELLIGENT

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Dating in Dhaka — Dreadful or delightful?

Recently, I had a bit of an epiphany. As a thirty-something woman who likes to think she has seen a fair bit of the world, I hopelessly lacked any knowledge about the way dating works in modern times.

The Hobbyist Hustlers: A Woman's Guide to Not-So-Serious Success



Ah, the "financial affluence" card — a staple in every Bangladeshi woman's corporate experience! If you are well-off, you are accused of treating your career like a hobby. If you are not, your financial need is turned into an insult.

"*Taka banatei hobe? Ken shaami kaaj kore na?*" one particularly nosy co-worker once asked Sara, as if the only valid reason for her presence at work was a non-existent husband's unemployment.

But the real fun begins when office dress codes come into play. Sara's workplace is not exactly strict but it's full of unsolicited fashion critics.

And let's not forget the workplace *well-wishers* who specialise in character assassination. If Sara spends too much on a new bag, she's "showing off." If she does not, she's "stingy."

If she stays late to finish a project, she's "too ambitious" — a code word for "probably not getting married anytime soon." And if she goes home early, it's, "*Dekhecho? Ar nijeke career woman bole!*"

Then there's the *pièce de résistance*: workplace harassment, always served with a side of denial. Sara has mastered the art of dodging overly familiar "*bhaiya-type*" colleagues who somehow think leaning too

close at the printer is normal behaviour.

When she once complained about a male co-worker's inappropriate jokes, the HR manager — a man with the moral compass of a broken GPS — asked, "Are you sure you're not overreacting? Boys are just doing *ektu dushtami*."

However, perhaps the best part of Sara's career is the unshakable belief that her job is not serious. Once, during a heated family discussion about her cousin's wedding, Sara reminded everyone she could not take the day off. Her mother waved it off with, "*shomossha ki! Tor job-e chhuti nibi, bas!*" Sara wanted to respond, "Yes, Ma, because clients love it when you cancel to attend your cousin's *gaye holud*."

For Sara, every day is a balancing act between proving her worth and laughing at the absurdity of it all. She dreams of a world where her career is taken as seriously as her male counterparts, where she is not asked to "tone it down," "cover up," or "let it go." Until then, she will keep working, not as a hobby, but as an act of quiet rebellion.

As for the "*work isn't that serious*" crowd? Sara has a suggestion: try juggling deadlines, sexism, and unsolicited advice while pretending to enjoy your coffee. If that's a hobby, sign her up for the Olympics.

Illustration: Star Lifestyle

the 'type' of people they desire as potential mates. Sounds like a dystopian idea? It is as real as it gets.

The way it works is — one downloads an app of choice (these apps have their individual specialities for your information, to cater to a diverse range of interests), and pay a subscription fee. Having created an account s/he curates a personalised profile that via algorithm matches them with other individuals with similar interests and characteristics.



And this is where the plot thickens. Swipe right and you might just meet the one, or swipe left if you don't like what you see. Sounds so innocuous and fun right? Apparently, it's not as simple as it seems.

Meraz, a regular Tinder user laments that rarely ever are people honest about themselves. "It's one thing to gloss over a few things but when you expect to see a person and she turns out to be an entirely different being, it's crushing" he says.

Tina has a horror story to share. "This one guy described himself to be adventurous and an adrenaline junkie who later turned out to be a car thief! I was impressed by his devil-may-care attitude and suave looks. After two dates he started acting strange and would not return my calls or texts.

Imagine my surprise when I saw on an online news portal that he ran a car theft ring out of Uttara and it got busted by the police on the very day we were supposed to meet!"

Tinder Swindler, that very popular show from Netflix, taught us all that in the murky world of online dating nothing is what it seems. Proceeding with caution is essential; when it comes to matters of heart we rarely think with our heads. What's more, financial damages are often accompanied by heartbreak.

Junaid met a wonderful girl on one such dating site and fell in love with her. He proposed to her with a 1.0-carat diamond ring, alongside his mother's heirloom jewels. Shortly after his fiancé vanished into thin air, taking all of the gifts with her. He later learned that she's a professional con artist after going to the police thinking she was in grave danger.

While these may be extreme circumstances other users are mostly disgruntled with these apps. Some complain that the people they meet are only looking for casual relationships and not intending to go for long-term commitments. Some people get taken for a ride and so on.

It's not like dating apps are all abysmal. There are success stories where people ended up getting married after meeting on apps. A rare occurrence it may be but not entirely impossible. Stakes are quite high in this medium, but here comes the million-dollar question: How far will you go for love?

Illustration: Star Lifestyle