

A Bangladeshi woman's guide to modern self-loathing

MIND THE GAP

NOSHIN NAWAL

Barrister Noshin Nawal is an activist, feminist and a columnist with a knack for sharp, satirical takes on social and societal issues. She can be reached at nawalnoshin1@gmail.com.



Ah, the eternal struggle of trying to lose weight. Forget inflation, Dhaka traffic, or even climate change — your weighing scale's number is apparently the most urgent crisis facing today's society. It starts early. As a child, your parents beam with pride when you devour your fourth plate of pulao roast because of "growing age". But puberty hits, and suddenly the same parents are *critical, offensive, and side-eyeing* your growing thighs and saying things like, "I was never this chubby at your age!"

The sofa becomes a measuring tape for how much space you are taking up, and somewhere between childhood and adolescence, you learn that you will never quite be good enough.

By your twenties, the self-loathing is a full-blown companion. Friends, relatives, and random aunties have endless advice. "Try keto," someone suggests, as if butter-drenched steak is magically going to fit into your grocery budget!

Another genius pipes up, "Just stop eating rice," because that's the solution to all of life's

problems. Meanwhile, you're dealing with prediabetes at 25 from years of stress-eating desserts, and the concept of intuitive eating. Non-existent. Let's not even talk about the fact that eating disorders are still seen as some kind of Western nonsense.

When you dare to complain, some keto veteran chimes in, "It grace of a flailing octopus. Then there's dieting, which is a disaster from the get-go. The day you decide to "eat clean", everything starts smelling like biriyani and the sound of falling rain is reminiscent of chicken being deep fried. You heroically skip rice and snack on sad rice cakes smeared with peanut butter, only for your mother to announce concern over your lack of appetite and inquire if you have fallen prey to drug abuse. This is the same woman who slips an extra puri onto your plate while casually reminding you, "At this rate, kono chele pabi na." As wedding season rolls in, you undertake keto — a brand of torture. You are told it's the ultimate weight-loss hack, but after a week of eating butter-laden eggs, you are fantasising about a single spoonful of daal. When you dare to complain, some keto veteran chimes in, "It

problems. Meanwhile, you're dealing with prediabetes at 25 from years of stress-eating desserts, and the concept of intuitive eating. Non-existent. Let's not even talk about the fact that eating disorders are still seen as some kind of Western nonsense.

You decide to hit the gym, and oh boy, what a journey. The trainer looks you up and down like a mechanic inspecting a broken-down car and declares, "You need a fat-loss plan. Let's start with a three-year programme". Three years? You might as well grow old with carbs. And the gym itself? It's a jungle — sweaty men grunting, hogging all the equipment, and occasionally staring at you while you attempt the StairMaster with the

problems. Meanwhile, you're dealing with prediabetes at 25 from years of stress-eating desserts, and the concept of intuitive eating. Non-existent. Let's not even talk about the fact that eating disorders are still seen as some kind of Western nonsense.

works if you stick to it. I lost eight kilos but fainted once. No big deal — it's part of the process." PART OF THE PROCESS? Excuse me, but when did fainting become a fitness milestone?

Failing at keto, your next bff hoves into existence — intermittent fasting. Even worse. You're told it is "life-changing," but no one warns you about the hanger. By the time your fast ends, you're ready to inhale the entire fridge. One time, after breaking my fast with a "healthy" smoothie, my dad stared at me like I'd committed a crime. "Isn't that too sweet? What's the point of fasting if you're going to eat like that?"

Then there's Instagram, the land of perfect bodies and even more perfect lies. Influencers flaunt flat abs under captions like, "No pain, no gain #BlessedLife #NoFilter." Meanwhile, you're sitting in bed

with crumbs on your chin, Googling "How much damage does one pizza do?"

Your friends, who swear they "don't even diet," conveniently forget to mention they have been surviving on lemon water and air since 2018.

Winter? A whole new level of trauma. Relatives transform into body-shaming Olympics judges, scanning you up and down before dropping gems like, "You'll never fit into a lehenga if you keep this up." If you dare to wear a saree, someone will comment on how the pleats are doing your hips no favours. And God forbid you eat at the buffet — one plate is all it takes for someone to ask, "Are you really going for seconds?"

And then comes the universal truth:

You heroically skip rice and snack on sad rice cakes smeared with peanut butter, only for your mother to announce concern over your lack of appetite and inquire if you have fallen prey to drug abuse. This is the same woman who slips an extra puri onto your plate while casually reminding you, "At this rate, kono chele pabi na."

you can never win. Lose weight, and people call you "too skinny"—a skeleton with no "healthy glow." Gain a little, and you are immediately labelled lazy.

It does not matter how successful, talented, or intelligent you are. Society will always find a way to reduce you to a number on a scale and a set of measurements.

So, here we are, juggling impossible standards and wondering why our worth is tied to an ever-shifting goalpost. If I could have one wish, it would be this: to take all the unsolicited opinions, wrap them up in the gym's sweaty towels, and throw them into Dhaka traffic. Maybe then, we would finally have some peace.

By Noshin Nawal
Photo: Collected

