



PHOTO: STAR

THE BRAVE GIRLS OF JULY

SHAMIMA RITA

The photo of Sanjida Ahmed Tonni, blood streaming down her face after being attacked by Chhatra League activists, became one of the defining images of Bangladesh's July Movement. Around the same time, Nusrat Tabassum was dragged away by plainclothes detectives. Elsewhere in Dhaka, Nazifa Jannat led marches through private universities, while Nusrat Jahan Tumpa stood before a police van demanding the release of detained students.

Each risked her life for a cause larger than herself, a fight that began on the streets and continues long after the chants have faded.

For 27-year-old Nazifa Jannat, the night of July 18, 2024, remains vivid. She was leading a procession near Rampura Bridge when police opened fire from both sides. "My brain went blank. I thought I was going to die. Someone shouted, 'Apu, run!' I did, not knowing a student had just been shot nearby."

A fourth-year student at East West University, Nazifa helped mobilise private-university students through posters, social media, and rallies. "When the internet shutdown began, I feared we might lose momentum. But unity kept us going."

At Dhaka University, political science student Nusrat Tabassum became one of the movement's

faces. Arrested by the Detective Branch after leading a rally demanding Sheikh Hasina's resignation, she said, "I faced police firing and DB custody. Even now, 70 percent of my hearing in one ear is gone. But I'd do it again, because we were fighting for everyone's right to be heard."

In Rokeya Hall, psychology

rained down; one hit me below my eye. My glasses broke, and blood poured. My friends pulled me to safety."

The photo of her wounded face went viral, becoming a rallying cry — but also a reminder of danger. "People in my hometown put my picture on banners. It inspired others, but it scared me too."

but I feel stronger now."

AFTER THE UPRISING

The end of the protests brought no peace. "The journey after July is harder than those 36 days," said Tabassum. "Propaganda, doctored photos, online harassment — nothing stops."

Nazifa said, "Even now, I face verbal abuse for being outspoken. If I could lead a movement, why can't I live freely?"

Tonni still flinches at the sight of police uniforms. "But silence helps no one."

Today, these women continue to fight in classrooms, communities, and politics. Tabassum is joint convener of the National Citizens Party and preparing to contest the next election. Nazifa works on campus for women's rights. Tonni was elected Research and Publications Secretary of Dhaka University Central Student Union. Tumpa, back to her studies, is preparing for future leadership.

All four share one conviction: women must keep pushing forward. "Change begins with how society sees women in leadership," said Tabassum.

Nazifa added, "Women were visible in July but sidelined afterward. We must stay focused and unshakable."

Tumpa put it simply. "To speak against injustice is to live. That's what we owe every girl who comes after us."



When motherhood comes with fear

Raising girls in a patriarchal society

NILIMA JAHAN

For mothers across Bangladesh, love for their daughters comes with an inseparable companion: fear. From Dhaka's crowded apartments to quiet village streets, raising girls in a patriarchal society demands constant vigilance, courage, and resilience.

Filmmaker Farhana Bulbul Kangkhita, mother of 12-year-old dancer Azra Akin Rahman Samridhhi, said raising a daughter comes with an invisible layer of responsibility and risk that parents of sons rarely feel. "Every choice — what she wears, how she travels, when she returns home — feels like a calculation. Public spaces, buses, even online platforms feel unsafe. It's not just fear for her body, but for her spirit — that she might lose the sense of freedom every young girl deserves."

For Nabila Basher, mother of 12-year-old Anaisha Hossain now living in Canada, the distance brings perspective. "I wouldn't feel safe letting my daughter go out alone in Bangladesh until she's much older. My biggest fears would be abduction, sexual violence, even murder. Public transport and online spaces would constantly worry me."

For development professional Saudia Afrin, fear began early. Her daughter Adoita is only two-and-a-half. "She's so small, but I've already had to teach her about good and bad touch. It breaks my heart to prepare her for danger before she can even spell the word."

Shahira Sultana, owner of Toyomoy and mother of two daughters, said freedom must be negotiated daily. Her elder daughter Aurora, who has mild autism, faces barriers of acceptance. "For girls like her, the first challenge is inclusion. Even other parents teach their children to stay away." Her younger daughter, 11-year-old Aniya, though more independent, still grows up within invisible boundaries — allowed to visit neighbours or attend tuition, but always under supervision.

In Kapasia, Gazipur, 35-year-old Roksana Akter, who never had formal education, shares the same anxiety. "Now girls have no safety. I always worry when my daughter Raisa goes to school. My mother didn't have to worry this much."

Experts say this fear leaves measurable marks on both mothers and daughters.

Physician and psychotherapy practitioner Dr Sunjida Shahria said constant anxiety about daughters' safety takes a toll on mothers' mental health, triggering stress hormones that cause irritability and restlessness. "This over-caution can also undermine a girl's confidence. When she internalises limits early, she sees herself as trapped —

restricting her creativity and freedom."

These mothers carry a contradiction: protecting their daughters while teaching them not to be ruled by fear.

Farhana encourages Azra to find strength through dance — a way to claim both confidence and freedom — while reminding her that the world can be cruel.

Entrepreneur Fayeka Zabeen Siddiqua, mother of five-year-old Rehma, walks the same tightrope. "I want to raise a daughter who knows the world for what it is," she said. They take the metro, walk the streets, and join public celebrations. "I teach her to be cautious but also to take up space, knowing family and community stand behind her." Yet every outing comes with a silent calculation: should she let her travel alone or stay out late? "I know I'm not alone; mothers across Bangladesh walk this same line."

Saudia often feels torn between courage and caution. "Fear stops me from letting her try things she wants. It's heartbreaking. I feel guilty, like I can never protect her enough."

Farhana confessed she sometimes cries after warning Azra to 'be careful'. "I worry I'm stealing small pieces of her childhood."

For Shahira, the pain runs deeper. "Differently-abled girls are not welcome anywhere — not in schools, not in public spaces. Freedom feels like a luxury."

Fayeka refuses to carry the burden alone. "Society and policymakers should feel guilt," she said. "They've failed their daughters."

Despite everything, these mothers hold on to hope. Farhana envisions a Bangladesh where girls live without fear, valued for their minds and talents — not judged by gender. "Where boys are raised with empathy, not entitlement, and schools teach kindness and consent as seriously as math."

Shahira's wish is simple: dignity and inclusion. "For those with disabilities, stronger laws and real enforcement are needed so our daughters can live with dignity — even when we're gone."

Roksana Sultana, executive director of Breaking The Silence, said equality begins at home. "Families must raise sons and daughters alike, not by outdated gender roles. Prevention at family and community levels is far more effective than law after abuse occurs."

She called for stronger local systems — community schools, safer public spaces, and strict penalties — to dismantle the culture of impunity that breeds fear.

Dr Shahria added that while boys and girls may differ physically, their dignity must remain equal. "Equal inheritance, economic security, and education empower girls toward independence."

To the girl raising her father

WASIM BIN HABIB

It still feels like yesterday.

It was a March evening in 2017. I stood outside the labour room — anxious, restless, and counting the seconds.

Amid the noise of relatives and attendants, time seemed to crawl. My wife had been taken in around 2:30pm for a C-section, and by 5:00pm, there was still no news.

It was our second child, and we hadn't asked whether it would be a boy or a girl. Quietly, we wished for a girl. Around 5:15pm, the doctor came out.

As I rushed towards her, she smiled and said, "It's a girl."

When I walked in and held that baby for the first time, the rest of the world stood still. The hospital room, the chatter outside, even my own thoughts blurred into the background.

There she was — tiny, fragile, yet powerful enough to rearrange the very core of who I was.

Something inside me shifted. It wasn't loud or dramatic, but a quiet realisation that life would never be the same.

Her arrival completed our family in every sense. We already had a son, five years older, and her birth brought a balance we didn't know we were missing.

Our home soon filled with new sounds — softer, sweeter, yet commanding in their own way. Her presence coloured our world, transforming me in ways I had not imagined.

The way she stretches a word, asks a question, or mimics an adult's tone has an inexplicable charm. Her laughter, her curiosity, her wild colour choices, her drawings filled with blooming flowers, smiling suns, and dancing children bring me a joy I had long forgotten.

I find myself enchanted by the way she sees beauty in raindrops, in butterflies, in her mother's sari. The way she speaks with unfiltered honesty softens my own tone.

Raising my daughter has reshaped my

understanding of what it means to be a man. I once believed manhood was about being strong and stoic.

But in her little face, I found a reason to be patient, caring, kind. Her tears can undo my toughest day. Through her, I learned that real strength lies in expressing emotion — not in hiding it. It is not dominance, but empathy and respect.

I began to see how deeply words and

gestures matter as she watches everything I do. I know she will use me, consciously or not, to understand men and measure the world around her. That thought makes me strive to be a better version of myself — one she can trust and be proud of.

Raising a girl also brings a sense of vulnerability only parents understand. I worry about her safety — the streets she will walk, the systems she will face, the

biases she may encounter. Will her voice be heard? Will her worth be seen?

These questions come not from fear alone, but from reality.

As a journalist, I have covered women's struggles and triumphs — from the fight for education and safety to equality at work. I have seen how opportunities shrink, how voices are dismissed, how security is never guaranteed.

Raising a girl also brings a sense of vulnerability only parents understand. I worry about her safety — the streets she will walk, the systems she will face, the biases she may encounter. Will her voice be heard? Will her worth be seen?



AI-generated image