

LIFE AS IT IS

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The Date of Birth dilemma

Is your actual birthday the same as the one listed on your birth certificate, national identity card, or passport? If so, congratulations! Because most Bangladeshis have an 'official' date of birth (DOB) and an 'actual' DOB. In rare instances, the 'actual' DOB matches the 'official' DOB. But why is this the case?

When I was a kid in the '80s and '90s, the common practice was to reduce a child's age by at least one year, so the child could appear for the admission tests of top-tier schools more than one time. If a child failed the first time, he or she could try again the following year.

In those days, when the private sector in Bangladesh was limited in scope and capacity, government jobs were the most sought-after. Decreasing age by one, two, or more years meant that individuals could apply for these competitive positions for a longer period of time. Consequently, once employed, they could stay in these jobs beyond the mandatory retirement age.

However, the secrecy surrounding a person's actual age can have a psychological impact. Even today, when someone asks me my age, I feel uneasy. I give a nervous smile and wonder whether I should tell my official age or my actual one. In contrast, here in the US, I see people talking about their age very frankly, as if there is nothing to

hide. I wish I also possessed this level of frankness. But no, I can never be as frank as these Americans, especially when it comes to discussing age, because I grew up in a culture where we rarely discussed age, and even if we did, we always stated our 'official' age.

In our culture, asking someone's age is considered so impolite that many children never find out their parents' 'actual' DOBs. Our parents do not feel comfortable sharing their actual year of birth with their children.

A friend once asked me why we Bangladeshis lie so much. I said, "Because we grow up telling lies. We lie about our age throughout our lives. We lie every single time we utter or write our date of birth. Now imagine how many times we have already lied." I think that in this manner, we have normalised lying in our culture.

Healthcare

I know people who have their age reduced by as much as three or four years. When these people go to a doctor's office and state their 'official' age, they neither help the doctor nor themselves. For instance, age is important in determining the eligibility for certain tests and adult immunizations. For instance, colonoscopy or mammogram (for women) are generally recommended

at age 45. However, if you're 41 years old on paper, your physician will delay recommending one of these tests for four years. This means that if you are not honest about your age while seeking healthcare, you might miss out on important life-saving medical tests.

Legal rights

Not having the correct age on paper also presents other challenges. For instance, you will have to wait to cast your first ballot or obtain a driver's license. In addition, you will not be able to sign contracts or make your own financial or medical decisions, if your 'official' age indicates that you are underage.

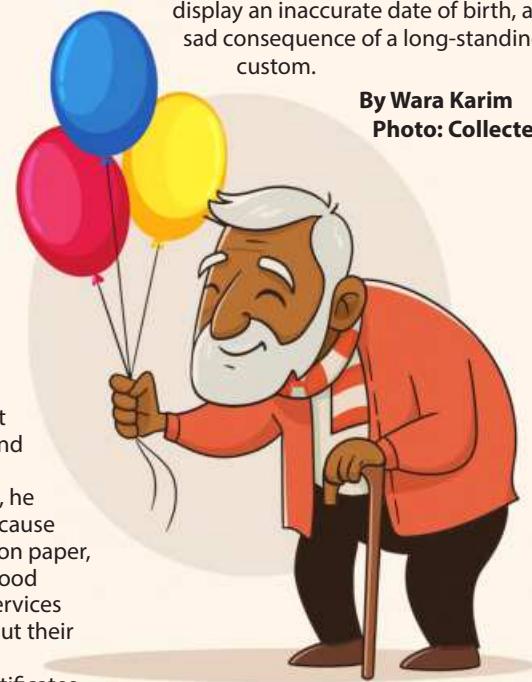
Nasir Uddin Ahmed, 62, is a non-resident Bangladeshi who lives in Sydney, Australia. Even though Ahmed is now eligible for the Seniors Card, a card that seniors can use to avail deals and discounts at restaurants, retail shops, and on public transport, he is unable to obtain the card because his 'official' age, that is, his age on paper, is 58. People can miss out on good opportunities and beneficial services when they are not truthful about their age.

In a country where birth certificates

can be forged, and birthdates altered, and where lying about one's DOB is perfectly acceptable, lying about other things becomes just as easy.

Lying about the DOB is something we are taught from a young age and continue to practice until our last breath, and thus, our death certificates also display an inaccurate date of birth, a sad consequence of a long-standing custom.

By Wara Karim
Photo: Collected



#PERSPECTIVE

Domestic violence doesn't have a gender

I struggled for breath. "Please... have mercy!" I pleaded. My vision slowly blurred. I could make out only fragments of the shattered flower vase glittering nearby. I gulped a lungful of cold air, desperate to steady myself, but it was not enough. In a blink, unprepared, I was pulled by the lumps of my thick, black hair and dragged back to our room. I collapsed at the person's feet, sobbing and gasping on the floor.

"But...wha...is...my...faul...?"

"You're alive for no good. That's what your fault is," replied the hoarse voice.

For a few minutes, a stunned silence filled the room. I could not summon the strength to speak again. I was exhausted, overwhelmed, unprepared for this; at least not today, not on such a special day as our third wedding anniversary.

As I struggled to sit up, memories replayed in vivid flashes: the best moments of our life together, hand in hand, promising to stay for better or worse, in sickness and in health, until death parted us. I clutched my chest as my heart pounded uncontrollably. The pain felt too dense to endure.

We had known each other since sixth grade, and love blossomed over the years. We believed we were meant to be. Life was beautiful in each other's company.



My better half, my wife — had seemed infallible, understanding, and passionate. I was grateful for a perfect partner, until a year into our marriage.

I would have to pretend, I thought. I would have to play with my cheer, work my brain to hide the panic from my face. I would need to look my best to complement my charming partner around the several people who have always looked up to us as an epitome of love. So, I did, once again.

"I am content. I am happy," I whispered to my fatigued reflection — a small attempt to lift my falling spirits.

Descending the red-carpeted stairs, I spotted many familiar faces, my mother among them, radiant with joy. Her sight froze my insides, but I forced a reassuring smile. She must have felt relieved to see her cheerful child, unaware of the hurricanes beneath.

I hugged her tightly before moving on to greet more guests at our extravagant anniversary celebration.

Suddenly, my eyes caught the ruins of the vase I had forgotten to sweep away earlier. My pulse quickened. A familiar dread washed over me. What would happen tonight when we were finally alone? I prayed silently. May it not come into view.

Just then, my wife tapped me from behind. She glared at me with a ruthless intensity, that savage pleasure intact in her eyes. I was seized by terror. Oh no, she had noticed it.

My heart tightened. My only hope now was God. May He save me from my wife tonight.

Domestic violence is often spoken of as a woman's issue. Women face overwhelming rates of abuse around the world. But the conversation rarely includes men, even though they, too, suffer behind

closed doors.

According to a national survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2022), 19 per cent of Bangladeshi men reported experiencing physical, psychological, or economic violence from an intimate partner at some point in their lives. In fact, the World Health Organization has found that about 1 in 4 men worldwide report experiencing domestic violence in various forms.

Yet, male victims rarely come forward. Shame, disbelief, cultural expectations of masculinity, and fear of ridicule keep them silent. Abuse against men is often dismissed as weakness, even humour, generally ignoring the trauma that might have been hidden beneath.

But violence is violence, no matter who endures it.

If we are committed to building a safer Bangladesh, one where women and children are protected with unity and compassion, we must extend the same humanity to men. No one, regardless of gender, should suffer in silence within their own home.

Every voice deserves to be heard. Every victim deserves protection.

By Zarin Khushnud
Photo: Zarin Khushnud