

"When I took up single parenting, I decided to work even more seriously. And it is this same business that is helping us get through life comfortably," Shaily says.

Tahmina Shaily's life with her son may have been riddled with trials and tribulations at first, but they fit together now, as effortlessly as pieces of a puzzle.

"We are one unit on a journey. We support each other in whatever way we can, be it financially or emotionally. It is not that because he is denied his inheritance that we are facing some sort of financial stress, no. We are each other's world, and there is something here to be proud of. What others offer or deny us makes no difference to our lives," Shaily says.

Redefining family, on her own terms

Where Arsila Mehnaz and Tahmina Shaily are both mothers who have found comfort and power in single parenthood — for the most part, at least — content creator Pari Rukh Al Matin has chosen an alternative path. Throwing convention to the winds, she has chosen to exercise her right over her life.

"When I got married, I was very young," Matin reminisces. "I was still in university when I gave birth to my son. Two years after he was born, my family disintegrated."

Pari Rukh Al Matin was not financially independent. She was wise enough to know that to be financially stable, she would have to work. "Getting a degree and working, while single-handedly taking care of a child, is a tall order for anyone, let alone someone as young as me."

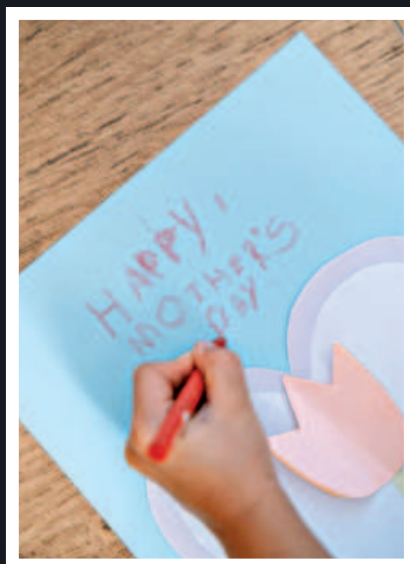
Matin found her chances with the law to be slim as well. "In Bangladesh, a mother of a boy gets custody of the child for up to 7 years only, after



which either the custody goes to the father, or it's another legal battle."

She thought this would be too emotionally taxing for her son. "He was already going through a divorce at the age of two; I did not want to drag him through another upheaval."

Pari Rukh Al Matin shares a cordial relationship with her in-laws and her

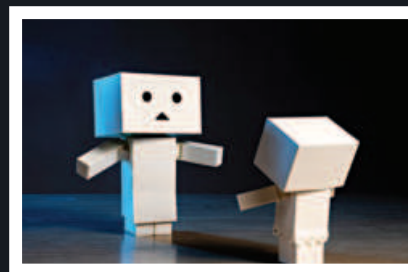


ex-husband, for the sake of her son.

"I am also on good terms with my ex-husband's partner because my son lives with them," Matin says. This way, she gets easy access to her ex-husband's home and is able to meet her son very often.

"My home is also always open for my son, and he comes to me whenever he wants and as many times as he wants. In fact, it has never been so that my son, to this date, has had to sleep without either one of his parents!" she adds.

Through efforts on her part and on the part of her ex-husband, Pari



Rukh Al Matin has managed to keep her son in high spirits. "There was no toxicity, no fighting. Despite the tumultuous nature of our relationship, both my ex and I were clear that we did not want our son to have a skewed relationship with either of us."

Pari Rukh Al Matin and her ex-husband have both remarried. "This was another area of confusion for our son, but we both chose partners who would not only accept our son, but also the bonding we share with our ex-partners' families. This way we could all be family—a great reassurance to our son."

Largely a foreign concept, it took Matin a while to convince her family and even her ex that such a set-up could hold.

"This was a largely unprecedented phenomenon in society. People said all kinds of things to us! That we still had a relationship and so much more. But looking back, what other choice did I have?" she says.

Even in an impossible situation, Pari Rukh Al Matin was quick to figure out the hypocrisies of society. In a typical Bangladeshi social system, there is an expectation for women to live in a bad marriage, simply to raise kids.

No one cares that she may have emotional or physical needs of her own. It is the desire of the same society that in case of a divorce, a child stay with the mother, even when she is floundering financially. What then can a woman do but run around like headless chickens in courtrooms, looking for child support that does not always come their way?

The society is quick to encourage a divorced man who decides to move on. The woman is expected to live with the stigma, as if asking for a career or another chance at love is reaching for the moon.

"It is never easy for a woman to be accepted by a man with a child from a prior marriage. This is not the same for a man," Matin muses, shaking her head at the injustice of it. "So, then, if a child must have his father's name and protection to survive at every step of life, is it not better that he lives with his father from the beginning?"

Pari Rukh Al Matin's story directly sheds light on the farcical nature of society. "The same society that trains women to change diapers, trains the men to go out and earn," she shares. But these double standards must end, she feels.

"Giving birth is a woman's biological privilege; changing nappies is a two-person job," she concludes.

By Munira Fidai
Photo: LS Archive / Shahrear Kabir Heemel

