

Runi looked down at her passport. It contained her name, nationality, date of birth and photograph. Curiously, there was no section marked HUSBAND: CURRENT LOCATION. She told Aunty Farzana that immigration officers could ask about her travel, but she could not understand why they would need to know where her husband was. Aunty Farzana simply replied that it was "for safety."

Of course. Safety was an extraordinary concept in Bangladesh. A woman could spend two hours navigating broken pavements, buses grazing her elbow and motorcycles approaching from directions previously unknown to geometry. Nobody asked where her husband was. But put her inside an international airport, surrounded by CCTV, security officers and several branches of Premium Sweets, and suddenly, civilisation required male supervision.

Aunty Farzana had recently read about women reportedly being questioned at Dhaka airport about whether they were married, whether their families knew they were travelling and why they were travelling without guardians. She approved of it, insisting that "they are protecting girls." Runi pointed out that these were adult women. Aunty Farzana responded, "Exactly. Young girls."

Runi then asked how old a woman had to be before she became an adult. Aunty Farzana thought about it for a moment before saying, "Depends." When Runi asked what it depended on, Aunty Farzana gave the answer as though it were perfectly obvious: "Whether she is married."

There it was: the unofficial constitutional amendment nobody remembered passing.

At 34, Runi could earn a salary, pay income tax, sign contracts, vote, take out a loan, and be prosecuted for crimes entirely on her own. But apparently, at immigration, she might still need to explain whether somebody at home knew where she was going.

Runi imagined the equivalent conversation with her cousin Rabbi. An immigration officer might ask him, "Sir, are you married?" If he replied, "No," the officer could then ask whether his mother knew he was going to Thailand and who had given him permission. Rabbi would probably assume it was a prank and look around for cameras. Nobody would call it protection. They would call it ridiculous.

That was the clever thing about restrictions placed on women. They rarely introduced themselves as restrictions. They arrived dressed as concern: Be careful. We're only asking. It's for your safety. Does your family know?

By midnight, Runi had packed her passport, ticket, hotel confirmation, travel insurance, and enough skincare to survive a minor corona crisis. Just before she finished, Aunty Farzana appeared at the bedroom door and advised her to take her marriage certificate, just in case.

Runi stared at her aunt and replied, "Aunty, I'm going on holiday, not applying for a residency."

The next morning, Runi reached the airport. She had her passport, ticket, visa, hotel confirmation and travel insurance. When she was asked about the purpose of her travel, she simply answered, "Tourism."

For a brief moment, Runi wondered whether she should also declare that her husband was alive, informed, and broadly supportive. Instead, she handed over her passport.

Because perhaps the question was never whether Bangladeshi women were capable of travelling alone. Perhaps the real question was why, after all these years, their independence still seemed to require a permission slip.

Photo: Representational Image: AI generated



