#WOMEN IN FOCUS

When women have to rethink their ambitions

A recent conversation with one of my female friends at university left me thinking about how women imagine their working lives after graduation. She is one of the brightest students I have met, and among the top students in her batch. I expected her plans to involve a long and ambitious career.

Instead, she told me she expected to work for six or seven years before becoming a full-time homemaker.

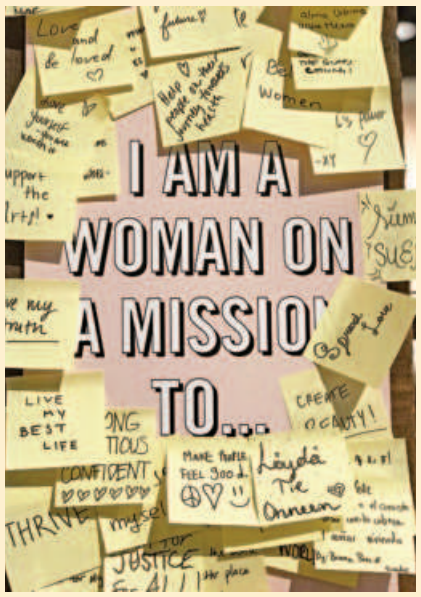
Her answer caught me off guard. Not because choosing to focus on family is inherently wrong, but because it made me wonder what other young women around me imagined for their futures.

For women encouraged to study, excel and build their futures, what happens when those ambitions meet marriage, motherhood, and social expectations?

For some young women, a career may be important without being a lifelong commitment. Rifakat Ali Sheen, a business student pursuing a CA qualification alongside her undergraduate degree, expects to work for several years before potentially stepping away from a conventional career when she becomes a mother. If financially possible, she said she would prefer not to pursue a corporate job during the initial years of motherhood, while investing her earnings to remain financially secure.

Business student and marketing enthusiast Afiat Rahman approaches the future differently. She wants her career and family to coexist rather than compete. She expressed her view clearly: "I have always found the idea of asking women to choose between a career and a partner rather strange, because I have never imagined those two parts of life as being mutually exclusive."





Marriage, however, can complicate that balance. Nazia Akhtar Rashmi, an assistant professor at a private university, began her career in multinational organisations with high professional ambitions before moving from corporate HR into academia after marriage, partly for greater flexibility.

Reflecting on that transition, Rashmi explained, "It's not about the families, it's the social structure, the social expectations. No one would say it out loud, but somehow, the social expectations shape the way a woman thinks about her professional ambition." The change brought flexibility but also new demands, including evening classes and Friday teaching.

Motherhood did not make Zeyran Mehrnush Juhie abandon her ambitions, but it changed how she pursued them. The business owner continued working while adjusting her routines around her child, with support from her family and husband.

Juhie shared, "The first two-three years, I had to go slow because a baby needs their mother the most. So mostly, if I had work or a shoot, I used to bring her with me."

That support also made her question the different expectations placed on mothers and fathers. "We have to get out of the thought that if the father works, he's a good father, but if a mother does hundreds of things, it's normal," Juhie stated.

Not every woman who leaves professional work sees it as a permanent rejection of her career. Simrin Rubab, former advocate turned housewife, continued working after marriage before stopping while expecting her elder son.

She explained, "When I was conceiving my elder son, I thought it's an important and crucial time for a child and I need to give him time, so I stopped that." Her legal education and experience still help her in dealing with people and raising her children.

Rubab does not view leaving advocacy as a decision she regrets, though the possibility of returning remains in the back of her mind. "Sometimes, I think, and a few of my close ones also say to me, that I should have continued after taking the break," she shared.





Perhaps that is what makes the question of women and work more complicated than a choice between career and family. They imagined different futures, then adjusted their ambitions and made different compromises within the realities of marriage, motherhood, and social expectations.

Maybe the question was never about whether women should choose careers or families, but whether they have enough room to decide what that balance should look like for themselves. We keep telling girls that education will open doors. But when the time comes, are they allowed to choose which door they want to open? Where does personal choice end and circumstance begin?

By Mir Elham Bin Ahmed
Photo: Collected