

## Breaking down barriers, leaping across prejudice

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Ho Chi Minh Islam and Tashnuva Anan Shishir Courtesy

For the first time, transgender women have got the opportunity to study at an international platform in Bangladesh

For the first time in the country, two Bangladeshi transgender women have been nominated to study at an international platform at Brac James P Grant School of Public Health (JPGSPH), Brac University.

Ho Chi Minh Islam and Tashnuva Anan Shishir obtained scholarships in two categories to pursue higher studies on the Master of Public Health (MPH) program.

They are enrolled in the course with 45 other students, where 50% are Bangladeshis and the remaining students come from 14 different countries.

The one-year course costs each student Tk16 lakh. However, Ho Chi Minh and Tashnuva's scholarships will cover their full tuition fees. Tashnuva also received an International Scholarship which will support her living costs.

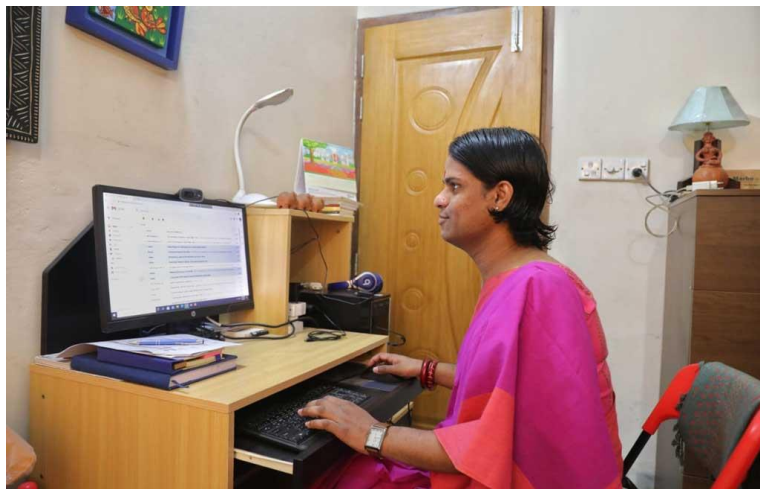
While talking to Dhaka Tribune on Monday, Ho Chi Minh and Tashnuva said they had come so far to make their presence known in society.

After finishing the course, both of them want to work for their communities' health service as Bangladesh did not have any exclusive facilities for transgender health.

### **Ho Chi Minh Islam**

26-year-old Ho Chi Minh Islam finished her studies in nursing from TMSS Medical College in 2018 and then started practicing at Square Hospital Ltd. She has been performing her duties as a frontline fighter during the ongoing pandemic.

When Brac issued a circular for a nurse instructor in 2019, Ho Chi Minh applied for the job. However, she was not called for an interview as she was a transgender woman.



**Ho Chi Minh Islam** | Mahmud Hossain Opu/Dhaka Tribune

She told Dhaka Tribune: "I was born as a man, I look like a man, but now I am a

transgender nurse. When I asked them why I wasn't eligible for the job, they told me I looked like a man so students would feel uneasy learning from me.”

“A few days later, I tried to find out how I could join the public health course at Brac James P Grant School of Public Health. I regularly contacted them to make sure I would not be left out of the admission process just because I am a transgender woman. They reassured me about applying for the course. Finally, I got the chance to attend the program with a national scholarship,” she added.

She said: “Transgender people or sex workers have no separate medical care facilities. The complications of the body of this community are different; they need different treatment and services. I needed this course to work on it.”

Mary Ritchil Mridha, nursing supervisor of Square Hospital Ltd, said: “She is like my child. One thing I always saw in her is a strong interest in learning, which will take her a long way. I feel that there is a God-gifted power in her. She just needs a little opportunity which she is creating little by little.”

Ho Chi Minh said: “This was my first job. It breaks my heart as I have to quit my job since the scholarship had some terms and conditions. Moreover, it is not possible to continue with a job if you want to find time for morning and evening classes.”

### **Tashnuva Anan Shishir**

Tashnuva is a performer by profession. She has been modelling and acting for a long time. This year she signed up for two movies. In one of them, she will play the role of a female football coach.

“After my SSC exams in 2007, my family left me. The next path was not easy. Still, I continued my studies in order to survive. I have completed masters in Social Welfare. Extreme gender inequality prevails in society, where members of the transgender community struggle to find their own existence,” she said.



**Tashnuva Anan Shishir** | Courtesy

“Those of us who continued their studies at school, college or university, have had to face constant bullying, harassment and mental suffering. As a result, we have a huge gap in our studies. To meet that, I needed better education facilities,” Tashnuva added.

“I have got that now with students from 14 different countries. I have been attending classes for 10 days and not once did I feel that I was different from them,” she added.

Tashnuva was raped, has faced discrimination, got bullied and still fought for her position. She has now become an activist working on issues relating to the transgender community.

She said: “After seeing me, maybe someone from our community will come forward. Open the door for someone else.”

Professor and Dean Dr Sabina F Rashid of Brac JPGSPH, said: “This is the 16th batch of the MPH program, where two transgender people have got the opportunity to join the course for the first time.”

“They got this opportunity by fulfilling all the criteria. Not just anyone can get into this course as it is an international platform. So even if we allow some people [who are unqualified] to attend the course, they will not be able to finish it, unless they deserve it fully” she mentioned.

She said the authorities definitely wanted to give more opportunities to the people of the community, but they would have to be eligible like Ho Chi Minh or Tashnuva.