

'Always wanted to be a changemaker'

Marks and Spencer Bangladesh Country Manager Shwapna Bhowmick says at The Daily Star's The Chief Executive Show powered by Marico

DWOHA CHOWDHURY

Shwapna Bhowmick, Bangladesh country manager for Marks & Spencer (M&S), said she always wanted to be a changemaker. Be it small or otherwise, she always felt the urge to effect changes while representing Bangladesh through garment products.

"Meaningful change has been my only goal since childhood and that's what I really want to focus on," she added.

With this mindset, Bhowmick not only achieved personal esteem, but has also brought drastic changes to the country's garment industry.

After securing a post-graduate degree in philosophy from the University of Dhaka, she decided to pursue a different career and got herself admitted to the BGMEA University of Fashion & Technology (BUFT), previously known as the BUFT Institute of Fashion & Technology (BIFT).

Although her father discouraged the pursuit of a career in a male dominated industry, Bhowmick underwent an internship with a garment factory after completing her diploma in fashion

merchandising at BUFT.

"I remember standing in the middle of the factory, where I saw 50 per cent female workers but not a single female executive. That was the trigger point for me and I knew that I want to work in this industry and bring change," she said.

Having joined the leading multinational retail company as a merchandiser in 2006, Bhowmick was promoted to country manager in December 2013.

Even though 80 per cent of the workers at garment factories are women who are capable of taking responsibilities, very few are given leadership roles.

"There are many obligations when it comes to working after designated hours but things are changing. Now, we have more than 200 women in various leadership positions in the industry," she said.

For aspiring women entrepreneurs, Bhowmick had one suggestion.

"Have conversations with yourself. Ask yourself whether you want to see yourself in that place you aspire to be. If you really want to reach there, everyone will support you," she said.



Shwapna Bhowmick

She went on to say that the stereotypical ecosystem will not transform overnight, it will take a long time to change.

The M&S top brass also suggested that they should start working from the ground up even though everyone wants to begin their careers with a white-collar job.

"After joining a factory, seeing the process of making yarn from cotton, making cloth from yarn - such experiences still help me significantly," she said.

"Don't give up. You have to run twice as fast as the person beside you. Otherwise, you'll fail and that's reality," Bhowmick added.

The changemaker also believes in assimilating with the challenges of the ongoing digital transformation worldwide.

"To adapt with these changes, making yourself relevant is important," the M&S country manager said.

At the very beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, when people started to work from home, the garment industry faced a struggle to survive.

There is an old Chinese philosophy that's reflected in Sun Tzu's book 'The Art of War': "In the midst of chaos there is opportunity."

And similarly, M&S also found opportunity amid the Covid-19 fallout as it turned out that the gap in demand for formal products could be covered by the increased demand for casual wear.

The leading brand then successfully delivered these products in a customised and safe way.

"Ensuring the healthcare of workers, re-establishing manufacturers' activities and delivering a product is a huge success for us and a huge industry like ours will survive," Bhowmick said.

The pandemic also changed the

traditional forms of communication and therefore, fresh initiatives were needed to develop the peoples' skillset and digital competency.

"The traditional way was buyers come and visit a factory and select products but during the pandemic, it's completely virtual and a new skill needed to be developed among team members," she said.

The country manager also emphasised on the need for re-skilling people like formal garment workers.

During the very beginning of pandemic, besides ensuring the health safety of workers, Bhowmick initiated the production of personal protective equipment (PPE) for healthcare providers.

Around one lakh PPEs were

To ensure their world-class quality, M&S first ensures that the factories they plan to produce from follow their values and principles.

"The resilience of Bangladesh workers is very rare compared to any other country and we all together deliver the trust. And in all our products, we put the tagline 'Made in Bangladesh' with pride," she said.

M&S now imports around \$1 billion worth of products from around 80 factories in Bangladesh while it was only \$130 million when Bhowmick became country manager of the company.

Other than growing M&S's production in Bangladesh, she also extended it in different ways by enforcing a 55 per cent use of local textile while it used to be imported completely.

To Bhowmick, value added communication is also important and she always emphasised on embedding all possible values to product communication.

"No need to complicate things if we present the natural surrounded things with confidence and a fact with data; that value added communication is very important," she said.

Being the top leader of a multinational retailer's operations in Bangladesh, Bhowmick thinks that one must be absolutely aware of geopolitical matters.

"We import organic cotton from many countries, including India. We need to remain aware of China's relationship with the US or others to find opportunities," she said.

Through dedication, Bhowmick proved that the garments industry, could be led by women. And now, hundreds of women are following in her footsteps.



distributed among doctors and nurses all over the country and several voluntary organisations offered support. After completing her studies, Bhowmick began her career with Renaissance Group's Araf Apparels and then joined Next, a British multinational clothing brand, as assistant merchandiser before a lateral move to Walmart.

Bhowmick is now also responsible for M&S's Myanmar operations. She takes a lot of pride in working with Marks & Spencer, which is a 135-year-old company.

"We've survived world wars, different pandemics, recessions and many global crisis," she said.

"I remember standing in the middle of the factory, where I saw 50 per cent female workers but not a single female executive. That was the trigger point for me and I knew that I want to work in this industry and bring change."

Pandemic pushes up jobless rate in Asia Pacific: ILO

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Unemployment in the Asia-Pacific region could reach somewhere between 5.2 per cent and 5.7 per cent by the end of 2020 due to the Covid-19 fallout, a notable increase from the pre-pandemic levels of 4.4 per cent in 2019, according to an estimate by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

The ongoing coronavirus outbreak has led to considerable reductions in working hours and job growth, pushing millions of people into poverty, the ILO said in a statement yesterday.

The ILO study styled "Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2020: Navigating the crisis towards a human-centred future of work" estimates that the Covid-19 fallout

blow on the region's labour markets, one that few governments in the region stood ready to handle.

Low levels of social security coverage and limited institutional capacity in many countries have made it difficult to help enterprises and workers back on their feet, a situation compounded when large numbers remain in the informal economy, said Chihoko Asada Miyakawa, ILO assistant director general and regional director for Asia and the Pacific.

"These pre-crisis weaknesses have left far too many exposed to the pain of economic insecurity when the pandemic hit and inflicted its toll on working hours and jobs," Miyakawa added.

As per the ILO report, most countries in the region saw a larger decline in working hours and

take years for those who have exited the labour force to return to full employment," Elder said.

With fewer paid hours of work, median incomes are falling. Overall, labour income is estimated to have fallen by as much as 10 per cent in the Asia Pacific region in the first three quarters of 2020, equivalent to a 3 per cent loss in gross domestic product.

A further consequence is the increase in working poor levels. In absolute numbers, preliminary estimates in the report found that an additional 22 to 25 million persons could fall into working poverty, which would push the total number of working poor (living on less than \$1.90 a day) in the Asia Pacific region to between 94 and 98 million in 2020.

The report also warns that given the scope of the damage to labour



India's workers were hit especially hard during the lockdown imposed to rein in the spread of coronavirus, with many forced to return to villages far from workplaces in the cities.

REUTERS/FILE

wiped out some 81 million jobs in 2020.

In nearly all economies with available quarterly data for 2020, employment levels contracted compared to 2019.

The impact of the crisis has been far-reaching with underemployment surging as millions of workers were asked to work reduced hours or no hours at all.

Overall, working hours in Asia and the Pacific decreased by an estimated 15.2 per cent in the second quarter and by 10.7 per cent in the third quarter of 2020, relative to pre-crisis levels.

Working-hour losses are also influenced by the millions of people moving outside the labour force or into unemployment as job creation in the region collapsed.

Covid-19 has inflicted a hammer-

employment for women than men.

Also, women were more likely to move into inactivity than men. Young people have also been especially affected by working-hour and job losses. The youth share in overall employment loss was 3 to 18 times higher than their share in total employment.

The report shows a clear picture of young people and women being pushed out of work compared to other workers, said Sara Elder, senior economist at the ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific and lead author of the report.

"With increased unemployment, young workers are likely to find it difficult to compete for new jobs. When they do find work, it may well be a job that does not match to their aspirations. Millions of women have also paid a high price and it could

markets, the overall size of the fiscal response in the region has been insufficient, especially in the region's developing economies.

As a result of fiscal expenditure gaps, the crisis is likely to exacerbate inequalities among countries in Asia and the Pacific.

"On the more positive side, we are able to show in this report that government efforts to help enterprises retain workers, albeit on reduced hours, have worked to prevent what would otherwise be larger job losses," Elder said.

Given the mounting evidence that social protection and employment policies save jobs and incomes, the hope is that the crisis brings about a more permanent and increased investment in elements needed to boost resilience and promote a more people-centred future of work, she added.



China central bank urges wider acceptance of cash as payments go digital

REUTERS, Beijing

China's central bank has called for wider acceptance of cash in economic activities and vowed to punish those who refuse to accept cash payments in the wake of a widening gap in access to digital services.

China's online payments via barcodes and third-party payment apps such as Ant Group's Alipay and Tencent Holdings' Tenpay have gained in popularity over the years on government policies to promote innovation.

Some merchants and institutions have become reluctant to accept cash due to reasons such as cost control or user experience, with the trend accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the People's Bank of China (PBOC) said in a notice on Tuesday.

"Renminbi (yuan) cash is the most basic means of payment. Entities or individuals cannot refuse to accept it," the PBOC said, adding that the central bank will investigate and punish firms or individuals that refuse to accept cash or adopt discriminatory measures against cash payments.

In a separate statement, the central bank said payments of some basic public services such as medical treatment, water, electricity and gas fees have gradually migrated online.



REUTERS/FILE

A man wearing a mask walks past the headquarters of the People's Bank of China, the central bank, in Beijing.

The transition has left the elderly behind, as it is more difficult for some of them to adapt to the new digital technologies compared with younger people, it said.

"The innovation of consumption and payment methods should be conducive to...protect people's livelihood and enhance the public's sense of happiness," the PBOC said

in the notice. The PBOC urged that all entities and individuals should not discriminate or carry out any inconvenient measures to exclude cash payment and create "gaps of digitalisation".

"Non-bank payment institutions must not promote the concept of cashless or discriminatory means of cash payment in any forms," it said.

Reliance Jio makes complaint to regulator about Bharti Airtel, Vodafone Idea

REUTERS, New Delhi

Reliance Industries Ltd's telecom division has asked the Indian telecoms regulator to take action against rivals Bharti Airtel and Vodafone Idea Ltd for allegedly running a false propaganda campaign to attract its subscribers.

In a letter dated Dec. 10, Reliance Jio alleged that the two companies had created an impression that Reliance - which also runs retail operations - stands to gain from three new agricultural laws introduced by the Indian government in September.

"We once again bring to your kind attention that as a result of aforementioned false propaganda of competitors to affect customer perception, we have been receiving a large number of port out (cancellation) requests," Reliance Jio said in the letter to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, which was seen by Reuters.

Farmers have been demonstrating for nearly three weeks against deregulation of the agriculture sector

that will allow them to sell produce to buyers beyond government-regulated wholesale markets, where growers are assured a minimum price.

Bharti Airtel said in a statement: "We wish to emphatically deny this

baseless charge." Bharti Airtel also said the company treats its competitors and partners with respect.

Vodafone Idea said it "believes in doing business with ethics and Reliance's allegations were baseless."



REUTERS/FILE

A woman checks her mobile phone as she walks past a mobile store of Reliance Industries' Jio telecoms unit in Mumbai.