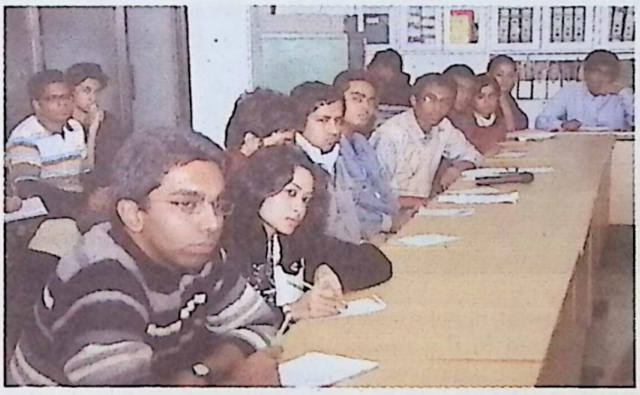
Although banks have resorted to extensive advertising regarding the credit-availability of women, in reality they have not lived up to their word. Even the circular issued by the Bangladesh Bank in 2007 allowing women to take collateral-free loan up to 1.5 million BDT has not been adhered to in its entirety. Recounting her earlier experiences during the time when MIDAS gave the first loans to women, Ms. Rokeya recalls the steadfast resolve that was required to ensure that these women do not succumb to the prevalent culture of willful defaulting of loans. She also talked about the study undertaken by the federation of women entrepreneurs to provide tangible evidence of credit-worthiness of women to the banks.

Mr. Fazlul Hoque drew a very lucid picture of the knitwear sector - the largest export earning sector of Bangladesh that can boast of the phenomenal achievement of maintaining a 24% growth rate (CAGR) for over a decade. He expressed his disdain for the opinion that the global financial crisis will not have any perceptible impact on the garments sector of Bangladesh. Many experts argue that buyers in the West belonging to the high-end will move to a lower spectrum to cope with the economic meltdown, and because Bangladesh exports garments at the low-end, this will lead to an expansion of our market. Mr. Fazlul Hoque pointed out that this is unlikely to happen as the low-end buyers are affected the most in an economic meltdown. He also referred to the downward slump in 2001-02 in the otherwise cheerful picture of the garments sector, which was the direct result of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which shows the degree of responsiveness of this sector to changes in the global scenario. Citing many of the successes of the garments sector, including the elimination of child labor and the increase in minimum wages of the workers, he mentioned BKMEA's latest project of ensuring, through a gradual process, that all the factories under its membership are compliant with the national labor law by the year 2009. In response to a question, he admitted that satisfaction with the current performance is actually an impediment to further growth of this sector. If the productivity level, which hovers below a meager 40%, is raised higher, the growth rate of this sector can easily double.

Mr. Rassel Hassan Kadir elaborated on the unique features of the manpower industry with which he has been involved with for over 22 months, while eliminating some of the misconceptions haunting this sector. Nearly a million workers went overseas last year. The net retention of remittance last year amounted to USD 8 billion money that is highly well-distributed and reaches remote areas of the country, and is earned without having to assign any of this country's resources to the workers. But there is huge room for improvement. Currently, 85% of the manpower of Bangladesh is unskilled, while the rest are mostly semi-skilled. However, if this composition can be changed to 40:60 in favor of semi-skilled workers, the net retention of remittance will increase more than twofold. However, lack of suitable training institutes, reluctance on part of the workers to receive training and absence of strong negotiating capacity of the government of Bangladesh have prevented this sector from realizing its full potential. The panelists also talked about the negative impact of branding the labor force of Bangladesh as 'cheap,' as it compromises the capacity for negotiating higher wages. Students also got to know about the propaganda carried out by South Asian manpower exporting rivals in the Saudi media to tarnish the image of Bangladeshi workers and prevent their recruitment.





One of the predominant themes of the discussion was that Bangladesh possesses the ability to aim for newer and hitherto unreachable heights a reason for optimism and hope for students throughout the country. However, these expectations were tempered by the panelists with a realistic outlook on the constraints under which Bangladesh has to operate in. The panelists also talked about the necessity of blending integrity with innovative business practices and the importance of re-branding Bangladesh. The business students got a glimpse of the daunting challenges confronting businesses in Bangladesh, while the panelists also gained an insight to the perceptions and beliefs held by the upcoming business professionals of the country.