



From salesgirl to employer

MD FAZLUR RAHMAN

SALENA Hossain started out as a salesgirl at Mini Mart in Dhanmondi, the country's first chain shop operated by women entrepreneurs. Fast forward a couple of years and she is now herself a successful entrepreneur.

"I worked with 20 other women at Mini Mart. These women sold the products they made at the shop. I thought to myself, if they could manage to set up their own venture, why not me?"

Salena worked there for two years. She knew some handicraft works from childhood and her sister, who worked for Aarong, the country's leading fashion house, helped her a lot in polishing her skills.

"At the shop, I found that many women did handicraft work. I was inspired to do something on my own. I wanted to give it a try."

Salena bought some fabrics and designed a range of women's wear. With the help of her sister, Salena got a chance to show her products to Aarong. The fashion house liked the products and asked her to supply some more.

The mother of one began with Tk 23,000 from her husband. By the end of 2000, she began supplying home textiles such as bed covers, cushion covers and table cloth. "I got some orders from Aarong. I, with the help of three other women, completed the work orders."

A major breakthrough came in 2004 when she received an order for 2,500 pieces of handicraft items from an American buyer. But her happiness was short-lived as financing issues proved to be a major headache for her. She had managed the early days with the money from her husband.

"I needed a lot of money. I contacted a state-run commercial bank, which was at that time disbursing loans to women entrepreneurs. But I failed to manage a loan because they asked for a number of papers, which I could not submit -- I could not provide any mortgage."

Salena got in touch with an MIDAS Financing Ltd official, and spoke about the order and her financial requirements. "She advised me to apply to MIDAS for a loan."

The non-bank financial institution did not discourage her and extended Tk 1.5 lakh as loan money. As a result, Salena was able to make the delivery on time.

Thanks to the assistance, she managed to deliver the order on time. That was just the beginning.

Later, she further took a loan of Tk 3 lakh and her current loan amount stands at Tk 5 lakh



Women hand-embroider clothes at a factory in Mirpur. Inset, Salena Hossain, owner of the factory, was able to change her fortune with hard work and financial assistance from MIDAS Financing Ltd.

from the same institution. Aarong also helped a lot kick off operations, she said.

As the business grew, she bought a small piece of land in Mirpur and set up a factory in a four-storey building. She uses the ground floor and first floor as factory premises.

Salena now employs 300 women in her village home in Kumarkhali, under Kushtia district. In her factory in Mirpur, 25 workers, most of them female, stitch and design clothes. She buys fabrics from Islampur and Narshingdi.

Currently, she supplies salwar kameezes, muslin saris, panjabis, drapes, bed covers and cushion covers to Aarong, a social enterprise of Brac, the world's largest non-government organisation.

The 42-year-old plans to open a showroom, where she would display and sell her own products, instead of remaining as a supplier. "It will take a lot of money, so I will have to wait for

some time."

The mother of a 13-year-old daughter said she is extremely lucky to have support from her in-laws in running the business.

Salena said getting financial support was the main problem during her initial days. "Things however have changed a lot nowadays."

"The mentality of people towards small businesses has changed," she said, recalling her days when she had to bargain a lot to manage women workers.

"The path is not that difficult anymore. The government and financial institutions are now more aware about their needs. Girls should not waste their time inside the house."

They should come out and try to set up their own businesses, which will not only employ them, but also a number of other people, she said.

Salena, with assets worth Tk 50 lakh, said

nothing could stop someone with the will to make a change.

She urged the growing number of successful entrepreneurs in Bangladesh to try to develop at least one woman entrepreneur, which would change Bangladesh.

She also urged the government to impart proper education and training to women entrepreneurs, to change the face of the country.

Salena said financial institutions have to further change their attitude towards women. "We have proved that women pay back loans. Most banks now call me everyday to know whether I need any loan. In the past, I ran after them in vain."

She said: "When I was in dire need of financing, I only got MIDAS on my side with loans on easy terms."

fazlur.rahman@thedailystar.net

AMRAN HOSSAIN

"The path is not that difficult anymore. The government and financial institutions are now more aware about their needs. Girls should not waste their time inside the house. They should come out and try to set up their own businesses, which will not only employ them, but also a number of other people"

Women entrepreneurs set success in motion

MD FAZLUR RAHMAN

IN a mere decade and a half, the story of the strained women entrepreneur, crafting household and boutique items from the corner of her home, has morphed into a success in Bangladesh.

Thanks to a few visionary steps by a handful of organisations, institutions and individuals, things have changed for the better and Bangladesh has become a home to thousands of women running business outside the confines of homes.

MIDAS Financing Ltd is one of the few institutions that has come forward and helped create enterprises owned by women.

The non-bank financial institution has not ignored credit to a person who single-handedly brought together scattered women entrepreneurs.

Shafique-ul-Azam, managing director of MIDAS Financing, said Mini Mart, a chain shop set up and run by women entrepreneurs, was the brainchild of Rokia Afzal Rahman, chairman of MIDAS Financing and one of the country's most successful women entrepreneurs.

"She came up with the idea of setting up a chain shop so that women could display and sell their products easily and get better prices," Azam said.

In the early 1990s, women in the city did not have showrooms to display the merchandise they made.



Mini Mart, a chain shop set up and run by women entrepreneurs, has given an outlet to skilled women to shine in business.

They could only supply their items to markets, such as New Market, Chandni Chawk and Gausia.

The first Mini Mart was set up in Dhanmondi in Dhaka in 1996, in a rented building. MIDAS financed 18 women who supplied their products to the chain store.

"Initially, we helped them in quality control and management. Later, we handed over full control. Now they run their businesses on their own," Azam said.

Every producer in the chain shop has a unique code, which helps each entrepreneur to get information about sales.

Thanks to the initial success of the initiative, more branches were later

set up in Gulshan, Bailey Road and the biggest one in Chittagong. The fifth branch is being set up in Uttara. MIDAS also plans to set up another in Jessore.

Azam said the entrepreneurs who started with Mini Mart have emerged as successful entrepreneurs in the country.

Roushan Ara Mahmud, who has been involved with Mini Mart since inception, said there were hardly any women entrepreneurs in the country 15 years ago. She holds a degree in political science from Dhaka University.

"The activities of women working on handicrafts were confined to their homes. Relatives and acquaintances



AMRAN HOSSAIN

were their main buyers."

She said scope for doing business was limited and most ran after jobs.

In 1996, Roushan came to know about a meeting called 'Wed Meeting' that was held on one Wednesday of a month. MIDAS and Rokia Rahman organised the meeting to bring together women entrepreneurs, to help them exchange views and ideas.

"That was when entrepreneurs urged Rokia Apa to help them open a shop, where they would be able to sell their products. The Wed Meeting gave birth to the idea of Mini Mart," she told The Daily Star.

Roushan Ara, who now supplies home-made food stuffs to major

department stores in Dhaka, said they initially faced an uphill climb in making Mini Mart a success.

"Financing was a problem due to the unavailability and high rate of interest for credit. Without MIDAS, we would not have been able to come as far as we have. Getting a place to set up the store was the biggest challenge, as owners did not want us to use their buildings for long."

She thanked MIDAS and Rokia Rahman for walking the extra, creating women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh and inspiring thousands others to do the same.

fazlur.rahman@thedailystar.net

Thanks to a few visionary steps by a handful of organisations, institutions and individuals, things have changed for the better and Bangladesh has become a home to thousands of women running business outside the confinements of homes