



DHAKA, MONDAY, MAY 30, 2011, E-MAIL: business@thedailystar.net

Rising from a speck of hope

MD FAZLUR RAHMAN

STUDYING in a college in Dhaka, Dilara Amjad had time on her hands to pursue her creative interests. She and five other friends together started making handicraft items that were quite popular. But their dreams of starting something were short-lived as they all got married at about the same time and were unable to pinch out time to follow their interests.

But the burdens of a household, managing a kid and opposition from in-laws did not put the brakes on Dilara's dreams to shine as an entrepreneur.

The entrepreneur, who won the 'BWCCI-EBL Progressive Award' last week for her contribution to small businesses, said it took about a decade to turn her dreams into reality.

In the year 2000, when she was a student of the Islamic history department at Eden College in Dhaka, Dilara and her friends were making block prints. They even supplied products to a leading fashion house at that time. But six months into their work, they had to call it quits as one of them got married.

"When I got married, I also had to shift to Rajshahi along with my husband."

Although she got preoccupied with raising a

Dilara's main satisfaction is in the fact that she has been able to create jobs for over a hundred women



ANWAR ALI HIMU

Dilara Amjad is at work in her factory in Rajshahi.

family, she never really quit handicrafts. Dilara said she has been interested in handicrafts since childhood. "My mother was very good at stitching. My two sisters and I learnt it from her."

Dilara learnt how to make block prints and embroidery in Dhaka.

"I made clothes staying at home and rearing a baby at the same time. I gifted the items to my nieces living in Canada. They appreciated my work and helped keep the dream alive."

She set up a factory in 2005 in a village in Rajshahi with 10 women workers. Before starting work however, she trained the women for three to four months on hand embroidery.

In 2008, she named her factory 'Dia'. Now, she runs two factories.

She said her journey towards becoming a successful businesswoman was never smooth. "My in-laws never wanted me to get involved in it. They suggested that as an educated woman, I should try for a job."

"But I always wanted to do something on my own."

She had to overcome social and family opposition to succeed in the business. "I had to go outside at night as my factory is far away from the house. My in-laws did not like that. But I had no other alternative either. I had to go."

"There was also not enough money to start my business," she told The Daily Star.

Dilara said the thought of abandoning her venture also crossed her mind several times as she could not take the pressures of opposition. But the very next moment, she would try to focus on her duties.

"There was nobody to look after my baby. I had to take him to the factory along with me. I made him lie there at times when he needed to nap. Now, my seven-year old is very happy that I won the BWCCI-EBL Progressive Award," she said.

She supplies items to a leading fashion house in Dhaka. "One of my sisters also has a small showroom in Canada, where she sells my products."

She said the recognition from the Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BWCCI) has encouraged her to move forward.

Dilara however said her main satisfaction is in the fact that she has been able to create jobs for over a hundred women, mostly needy, destitute and divorced. "Without these sources of employment, they could have involved themselves with other undignified professions. Now they can at least make a living for themselves."

Dilara aims to spread her business beyond

borders. "I use domestic cotton. I do not use imported fabric. I design the outfits by myself."

She supplies hand-stitched salwar kameezes, home textiles, saris and table cloth to 'Chorka', a leading fashion house in the capital.

Dilara said she would not open any showroom in Rajshahi, as there are many such boutiques in the small town.

"Rather, I will focus on the Dhaka market by supplying items to fashion houses initially."

The 31-year-old now plans to set up a garments factory on a large scale that will create jobs for at least another 400 women in her locality, one of the impoverished regions in the country.

Dilara said the 10 percent interest rate for SME loans is still a barrier to entrepreneurship development in Bangladesh.

"It should be brought down to a single digit and if possible, to below 8 percent. Otherwise, small businesses will not be able to sustain."

She particularly thanked National Bank Ltd for extending credit to her. She said other banks should follow suit, which will create a number of jobs across the country, changing the economy very fast.

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Youth development at the forefront

MD FAZLUR RAHMAN

A three-day national event is to take place in Dhaka next week to bring together all the stakeholders working on youth entrepreneurship to better manage the youth of the country.

The youth and sports ministry in association with SME Foundation and Commonwealth Secretariat will organise the 'National Consultation on Investing in Youth Enterprise and Entrepreneurship' at Sonargaon Hotel in Dhaka. The programme will begin on June 7.

Top officials from development organisations, non-government organisations, government agencies, junior chambers, young entrepreneurs and graduates from leading universities in the country will take part in it.

Parvin Banea, convener of the organising committee, said the national dialogue is part of the commitment Bangladesh made while participating at a regional conference on youth entrepreneurship development in Sri Lanka in February.

She said all participating Asian Commonwealth countries have agreed to organise national dialogues and Bangladesh is set to become the first country to organise such an event.

"We are trying to give a message to all the stakeholders,

including NGOs and financial institutions, so that they work for the development of the youth," Banea, also the deputy secretary of the youth ministry, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Syed Rezwanaul Kabir, managing director of SME Foundation, said unemployment is the main problem in the country, while the youth takes the majority share of the curse, as a third of the population is below 30-years of age.

"It is a huge sector. We have to bring them to the productive sector to integrate them with the mainstream," he said.

Kabir said the three-day event would share experiences and successful case studies from other neighbouring countries, such as India and Sri Lanka.

"We will listen to them so that we can replicate the success stories in our country and guide the young brains instead of suggesting them to look for jobs only," he said.

A total of nine topics will be presented at the national event, said Dr Nurul Quadir, one of the organisers.

He said the event aims to provide a platform to the stakeholders to discuss the challenges in respect of youth unemployment. "It will also look at opportunities, where the stakeholders can work to improve the situation and solve unemployment."

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Finance, no hurdle

MD FAZLUR RAHMAN

WITH knowledge on crafting beautiful handicraft items, Yeasmin Morshed Chowdhury was still unable to start her own venture in the early nineties due to inadequate finance. However, nothing would prove to hold her back.

Instead of whining about the drawbacks, the 40-year-old entrepreneur from Chittagong focused on training aspiring women on handicrafts, which got the dice rolling and she got some money to start her own venture.

"In 2006, I saved up enough money to set up a fashion house. The banks also helped me a lot."

She opened the store 'Mohua Naksha' in Nasirabad in the port city. Currently, she has four showrooms in Chittagong, employing 15 people directly and several hundred indirectly. She also runs a factory to supply goods to the outlets.

Yeasmin had participated in a number of training programmes on fashion designing, handicrafts, embroidery and other related areas. "Whenever I got a chance, I took part in training programmes."

A housewife, Yeasmin took the trainings in between 1993 and 1996. She started by designing clothes and supplying orders. "Initially, my work was limited to family members, relatives and friends."



ANURUP KANTI DAS

Yeasmin Morshed Chowdhury

Yeasmin designs saris, salwar kameezes, fatuas, and panjabis and also takes orders to make these items.

The mother of two said she plans to expand operations. "My business is already standing on a sound foundation, as I have done the basic thing. I just need money to invest and expand."

Even still, she spends plenty of time providing training on stitching, handicrafts and making bou-

tique items to other women entrepreneurs.

Yeasmin, a BA degree-holder, also eyes to export her items to different markets across the world, but she said it would take time.

She particularly thanks Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BWCCI) for arranging capacity-building trainings, which has helped her become more competent and

gain confidence.

As a member of BWCCI, Yeasmin has been playing an active part in encouraging others and creating awareness on different women entrepreneurship issues.

Last week, she won the 'BWCCI-EBL Progressive Award' for her contribution to entrepreneur development.

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