A Growing Presence

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PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Most Bangladeshi women grow up learning their place in society and in the household. They learn that their voice must always be in check, that they belong primarily in the kitchen and that their purpose is to be a homemaker. That would be the entirety of what women were in Bangladesh if this was the 1990s. But times have changed. The empowerment of women and their participation in the mainstream economy has transformed Bangladesh. Truth is, what it means to be a woman, even in the rural corners of Bangladesh, has changed dramatically over the last two and a half decades. The statistics will show you that the labour force participation rate has climbed from only 13 percent in 1986 to 36 percent in 2010! This means the proportion of women working outside their homes and earning their own living has almost tripled in that time. It's also interesting to see where Bangladesh stands in terms of a few neighbouring countries: India's current female labour participation rate is 32 percent, while Pakistan's is only 14.3 percent!

While these statistics are important in bringing the macro perspective to light, they fail to capture the human stories embedded inside. What these numbers cannot show us are how different the lives of these women are today, and how diverse their occupations are. Where numbers fail to tell the story, photographs succeed in letting us see the openness of wives of dressmakers who aid their husbands in taking customer's measurements, the hope in the hands of girls in pharmaceutical production lines and in garment factories, and the strength of female sportspersons. Women are no longer hidden within the walls where their labour remains unacknowledged. They are competing in the world of men with steady hands. And where men work all day and go back home to rest, women work all day and go back home to begin their moonlighting careers, as loving mothers, the best chefs, and as champion homemakers of Bangladesh. To bring the stories of today's women to light, Celebrating Life's theme for 2013 was "Empowerment of Women".

Celebrating Life, Celebrating Empowerment

"Celebrating Life" is a competition which brings films, photographs and lyrics entries to the same platform. The contest showcases various aspects of life in Bangladesh, based on a preselected theme for the year. Organised jointly by *The Daily Star* and Standard Chartered Bank, Celebrating Life provides a massive platform for creative expression to newcomers and professionals alike. The theme for Celebrating Life 2013 was 'Empowerment of Women'. Celebrating Life hopes to inspire its participants to search for stories of betterment which has enabled Bangladesh to come where it stands today. Bangladeshi women have learnt to take greater control over their lives, breaking free of traditional constraints which put them in an uneven playing field. There are thousands of women whose talents lie uninitiated, whose ambitions never take flight, whose potentials for contributing to the society are never explored. These women are coming forward every day in Bangladesh, becoming equals of men, in their families, as breadwinners, as decision makers and as opinion makers.

Since 2008, Celebrating Life has grown remarkably in terms of the number of participants and number of entries submitted; it has also grown far more diverse, reaching hundreds of thousands of people. The organisers have planned grand events throughout the year to showcase previous and current year's winning entries. In the spirit of patronizing the quality of production over the total number, the awards will be no less prestigious and no less financially attractive than any other competition - totaling in over seven and a half lakh taka in prize money. Dozens of participants who don't win marginally receive 'Honourable Mention'