

SPOTLIGHT

THE #POWERWOMAN

SHARARAT ISLAM



PHOTOS COURTESY: BRAC



Minoti Probha Chakma

Meet Minoti Probha Chakma of Rangamati, Bangladesh, who is a part of a group of Bangladeshi women drivers trained by BRAC. She has been working as a driver at BRAC for the last two years, after receiving a six-month training from BRAC driving school.

"I used to be very shy and was scared to even go to school all by myself," she says with a smile. "But I am confident enough now to drive a car in the capital on my own and I think I am good at doing this." Minoti is one of the earning members of her family. She pays the school fees for her two nephews who now live with her parents and younger sister.

Driving through the busy roads of Dhaka, naturally draws a lot of unwanted attention toward a woman. "I don't care what the other drivers (male counterparts) are thinking about me. I keep my eyes on the roads and drive," said she with a grin.

When she first came to BRAC driving School for her training, people in her village were surprised. For a girl who could not go to school alone, choosing driving as a profession was quite brave. Now she stays in a rented house in Mohakhali all by herself and supports her family in Rangamati. This profession has given her an identity of her own which she feels is very important.

What she enjoys the most is the fact that people in her village now treat her like a star. These were the same people who initially said driving was not a respectable job for a woman. But with time, she has been able to change that attitude towards her profession.

There are many 'Minotis' in Bangladesh who are breaking stereotypes to bring change in the society. They are the true #powerwomen of our country.

The writer is Manager, Communications, BRAC.

Nihad Kabir is without a doubt one of the most brilliant legal minds of our country. After completing her BA and MA in Law at Cambridge University in England, she was called to the Bar of England and Wales in 1989. She returned to Bangladesh shortly after, and joined the chambers of Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed and Associates, where she is now a senior partner. "I think having a profession is important for a woman, and law is a profession that allows you to do many other things using law as a base," she tells us.

Although Kabir's area of expertise has been corporate commercial law, she has used her knowledge of law in a variety of other fields. She has been a consultant at the Asian Development Bank, she is currently a member on the panel of experts for the Padma Bridge Project, a member of the World Bank South Asia Chief Economist's Advisory Council, the Current Secretary General of Ain O Salish Kendra (Law and Mediation Centre), Independent Director at Brac Bank, Director at bKash and Independent Director at Square Pharmaceuticals Limited-- to name just a few.

When Kabir started off as a lawyer, there were only a handful of women working in her profession, but a lot has changed since then. Today, there are dozens of women lawyers are seen in court. "I think women have come a long way since the '71," she says. "Institutions like Grameen, and



Nihad Kabir PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

SETTING THE STANDARD

ANIKA HOSSAIN

other NGOs as well as the government have taken a lot of steps to promote the economic and social empowerment of women. From the late 70's and the early 80's the garments industry too, has really changed the economic landscape by giving women paid work," she continues. "For many

years now, our prime ministers and leaders of opposition have been women; even our speaker now is a woman." Despite these efforts however, she also believes that enough progress has not been made. "We are lacking in two ways, one is in changing the mindset of a very important group which is the men," she says. "Because just a generation ago they were used to women being subservient, and this generation is having a difficult time in adjusting to the fact that women just don't listen to what they're saying. On the other hand, the women are contributing enormously to the economy but the control of most of the wealth is with men." According to Kabir one of the major problems in matters of property rights and marriage is that religious personal laws, which were applicable 1,400 years ago still apply and not enough steps are being taken to update them. "The other thing that happens in violence against women, I don't think enough is done, in the law enforcement and executive jurisdiction," she says. There are laws for their protection, but the actual enforcement mechanism

overall is weak. "Having said all this, as a nation are still fairly young and the progress we have made in only a few decades has been tremendous considering the time we had to do it," says Kabir. We have a long way to go, but the current generation is proving that we will get there. ■



Kanak Chanpa Chakma

PHOTO: COURTESY

AN ENTREPRENEUR'S TALE

ANANTA YUSUF

Ivy Hasan, an entrepreneur and artist, has gone out of her way to fulfill her promise of upholding the character of our culture and nation. She passionately discusses her ideas

from ours. Their use of a variety of coloured fabrics and designs inspired me to look at things in a different way," she says. Her grandmother's interest and expertise in stitching Nakshikatha

ornaments and household objects that featured traditional motifs of Bangladeshi culture. Her brother-in-law Munir Hasan helped her to organise this exhibition, investing in it financially. "My family, Monowara Hakim Ali and many friends and relative supported me greatly, especially my husband, Khalid Hasan."

She has never had to look back after her first exhibition. Dr Muhammad Yunus was so impressed by her work that he took the initiative to promote her on different platforms both nationally and internationally.

In 1996, she was one of the few female entrepreneurs in the country. But she took a risk and is now a reputed name in the fashion industry. In fact, she even had the unique honour of designing a dress for Queen Sofia of Spain, who loved Hasan's designs, when she visited Bangladesh in 1997.

She is currently the vice president of the Chittagong Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CWCCI) and the organisation Designers' Forum that promotes and trains women entrepreneurs. She believes we need more institutes and training courses on fashion designing, "The existing institutes only focus on western designs and styles. But we should teach future generations to uphold our cultural roots and tradition in more ways than just using fabrics that are indigenous to our own country." ■



Ivy Hasan

PHOTO: STAR FILE

about designing outfits that represent our unique history and past.

Starting a business is always challenging and it was even more difficult for a woman living in Chittagong in the mid 90s. Her friends from indigenous cultures and tribes etched a different side of life in her eyes when she was a student at the Institute of Fine Arts, University of Chittagong. "I love the way they carry their cultural roots. Their clothes are different

also inspired her to become a designer.

Instead of renting a shop, she found a new idea to present her designs to a larger audience. She arranged an exhibition under the banner of 'Doll's House' at the Alliance Francaise de Chittagong. "It was more of an installation work rather than a presentation of designs from a fashion house," she says. The unique exhibition gained huge popularity for the distinctive way in which Hasan styled clothes,

A FREE SPIRIT

Compiled by APURBA JAHANGIR and ANIKA HOSSAIN

In the world of art, Kanak Chanpa Chakma needs no introduction. Being one of the most eminent painters of our time, Kanak Chanpa has created her own genre through her unique style. Her paintings mostly feature the indigenous community and their daily lives combining semi realistic and abstract in the same frame. Her work depicting the tragedy at Ramu that occurred in 2012, which advocated for the rights of the Buddhist community, were some of her most prominent thought provoking artwork.

Her paintings are admired all over the world and were exhibited in many countries such as Australia, India, United States, Germany, France etc. Her awards include Olympic Fine Arts Award, Best of the Show from Museum of Americans, Best Women Artist of the XXI century and many more. She was selected as one of Bangladesh's top ten women personalities by ANONNA.

Born in Rangamati, Kanak has grown up among a diverse group of people from different cultural and religious backgrounds. "When the Muslims celebrated Eid, or there was a Puja we never felt like this was something we were not a part of, it was our celebration too," she remembers. "When we celebrated Buddha Purnima, they all came to our houses, wore new clothes and took part in our festivities. I never felt like they were separate from us," she tells us.

"As a freelance artist, I like to do paintings regularly," she tells us, "When painting, there is a link between my mind and my hands, and my hands and the brushes, and brushes and the canvas, and I paint whatever my mind tells me." Kanak has visited many countries in Europe, Asia etc for exhibitions, seminars and art carnivals. Her favourite among them was Montmartre in Paris where artists like Salvador Dali, Amedeo Modigliani, Claude Monet, Piet Mondrian, Pablo Picasso and Vincent van Gogh had studios or worked around the community of Montmartre.

Through her work, Kanak gives us a glimpse into the lives of the ethnic minorities in Bangladesh, especially ethnic women, telling their stories and giving us a chance to get to know more about this marginalised group.



SALMA KHATUN THE CRICKETING WONDER

UPASHANA SALAM

they won two matches against Thailand in a series played in July 2007. They then went on to compete against China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Nepal, Singapore, Thailand and the UAE to win the ACC Women's Cricket Tournament in the same year of their international debut. Within a span of four years, the team was granted the one-day status in 2011, after beating the United States and finishing fifth in the same year in Women's Cricket World Cup Qualifier. Salma Khatun has been at the helm of these successes as the captain of the team since 2008.

Salma says that even though the country is finally recognising the Women's Cricket Team for their contributions, there are still obstacles that need to be overcome. While the men's cricket team is probably getting 100 percent in terms of support or resources, the women's team is receiving around 60 to 70 percent of the same, she says. The men's team is given preference in terms of practice sessions and timings, she adds. Even when a specific time and space is allocated for the women's team, if the men's team needs the space for an emergency practice session, it will be allocated to them.

Salma, however, says that such compromises are not that big a deal. "We really don't have too many complaints. Even the Prime Minister pledged to improve our facilities and resources, and that gives us hope."

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN