

Think equal, build smart, innovate for change

SHOKO ISHIKAWA

Innovations in policies, management, finance, science and technology are increasingly recognised as a way to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs for all. From mobile banking ventures that facilitate women's entrepreneurship to e-learning platforms that take classrooms to individuals, social innovations have the potential to serve as powerful tools to break trends and increase awareness, access and the availability of opportunities. This is particularly true for women experiencing marginalisation due to their age, ethnicity, education, income, disability, location or migratory status.

In Bangladesh, we have inspiring women leaders who are making significant contributions through innovation.

Luna Shamsuddoha is a successful Bangladeshi entrepreneur—the chairperson of a software firm Dohatec New Media which she founded. She is also founder and president of Women in Technology dedicated to mobilising women in all levels of the technology industry. She received the Bangladesh Business Award-2017 for her contribution to the country's economy and has been awarded for her work in local software industry as women entrepreneur.

We also know Bibi Russell who is the founder of Bibi Production, a world-renowned fashion house that has been incorporating traditional textile into designs, and in the process

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has been reviving weaving and handicrafts in villages and giving a chance to thousands of people to rise out of poverty.

There are also inspiring stories of women in the new and emerging fields and Ivy Huq Russell is one of them. She is a former banker and founder of the Maya app which empowers women through giving them access to information on women's health and anything of relevance to a woman's life.

And there are many more like them who became successful through their innovations.

While there is great excitement around innovation, we should also recognise that there are gender gaps in this field. Globally, one of the main reasons for under-representation of women as innovators and entrepreneurs is their under-representation in Science, Technology and ICT related fields. Data shows in 2014, only 18 percent US based start-ups had at least one female founder, similarly 6 per-

cent app developers are women and based on current trends, women will hold only one in five computing related jobs by 2025 in the US. I imagine that the picture is similar in Bangladesh, and given that an estimated 90 percent of the future jobs globally will be in the ICT sector, there is a lot of catching up to do.

First, digital solutions are probably the most impactful innovations to accelerate progress towards gender equality, and gender equality in innovation calls for removal of barriers faced by women and girls in their engagement in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and ICT. In Bangladesh, we have seen tremendous progress in primary level enrolment of girls, and the government's school stipend programme has created positive impacts in raising the level of education among rural girls. However, the gender digital divide is significant. Girls need to be further given the opportunity to study STEM,

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Second, we need to have more research and studies that consider the needs of women as the basis for innovation. Furthermore, data on women's access and usage of innovation and technology is not widely available. For example, sex-disaggregated data on mobile phone ownership can be especially difficult to track in markets where men commonly register for their wives and daughters. This leads to gender-blind products and services, industry practices and national policies.

Third, we need to make social and public services more accessible for women, so that more of their time is freed up to invest in developing and executing their innovative and entrepreneurial ideas. According to a survey conducted in 2012, women in Bangladesh spend four times more hours than men in domestic and care

work in comparison to men. This means that women have far less time for creative thinking and income generating work. Access to quality and affordable child-care facilities, financing and skills development opportunities will also help increase their ability to expand their options.

Finally, we should disrupt "business as usual" and transform negative social norms that are at the root of hindering women and girls to fully access and contribute to innovation. Innovation has the potential to serve as a powerful tool to break trends and increase awareness, access and the availability of opportunities for women and girls, men and boys.

Together we can be game-changers with the women and girls, men and boys of the world, we can make the 21st century one and irreversible progress—for women and all humanity.

Shoko Ishikawa, Country Representative, UN Women Bangladesh

Imagining a women-friendly city

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"Currently just getting into a bus is a horrendous experience. We could easily overcome this issue by designating enough space to make two separate queues. What needs to be addressed is passenger discipline and traffic management," said Zarina Hossain, an urban planner from Chittagong.

Hossain also suggested that the city undertake a survey to determine the percentage of women travelers and reserve seats accordingly. Currently, buses reserve only nine to 13 seats for women, leaving many with no choice but to stand in the crammed aisle where they are more prone to sexual harassment.

For many women in lower-income groups, such as garment workers and domestic workers, public—or any transport—remains out of reach. They have to find housing close to their area of work or walk long distances every morning and evening.

"I leave my house at 7.15am everyday and walk for over 40 minutes to reach my factory. By the time I enter, I am already too tired and the city streets too are not easy to walk in," said Rashida Begum, a garment worker living in Tongi.

According to Hossain, pedestrians require wide and smooth walkways, safe and efficient road crossings at around half kilometre intervals, and sufficient trees and shade along major sections. At intervals, there should be small open recesses with trees and a place to sit as well as water fountains and designated spaces for street vendors.

Urban planners also point out that our cities are even less accessible for pregnant women and women with young children. "Pe-

destrians are forced to climb footbridges to cross the street. Zebra crossings or underpasses would make it easier for everyone—pregnant women, the elderly, and persons with physical disabilities," said Homaira Zaman.

"We know that mothers often have the responsibility of taking their young children to school. It is common to see a large number of mothers accompanying their children. Many have to linger on footpaths, often all morning under the hot sun, waiting to take them back home safely," said Hossain.

Lack of public toilets for women and its health ramifications are further shortcomings. "Between when I leave the house in the morning for classes to when I come back home in the evening, I drink as little as possible so that I don't have to use the washroom," said Sharmin Chowdhury, a student of a public university. The same goes for a female NGO worker who shared that she suffered from a urinary tract infection, as she works for long hours in the field with no usable toilets in sight.

"Half of the city of 20 million is women. Introducing 200 buses and five toilets in the city is not going to do enough," added Kabir. "The changes that have come after much advocacy and lobbying are more street lights, but these are still inadequate."

Women in the city need space for leisure and recreation, suggest gender experts and urban planners. They also need to reclaim public spaces.

"It is unfortunate that men feel that the roads and paths and other public spaces belong to them. They are not used to having so many women in public spaces—they do not make way and do not want to

share. We have to raise awareness about this," said Kabir.

"Women need not just protection but also places for recreation. It could be as simple as taking a leisurely walk and spending time alone, or with their children, family and friends. A woman may want to take her children to a playground, but unfortunately these spaces are the most neglected in our cities," opined Hossain.

Spaces like Ramna Park and the Botanical Gardens were created for public activity, yet these places are left unused, especially by women. "Planners must integrate activities into the design of public spaces," said Nusrat Sumaiya Tani, coordinator at Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements.

She cited the example of Hatirjheel, which was successful in terms of better connectivity but still falls short as an inclusive public space where women can go at any time of the day.

Around the world, recognising that historically cities have been planned by men, for men, local governments are taking measures to make streets feel safer and more secure for women and planning new urban development with women's needs in mind.

Women are still rarely consulted in urban planning in Bangladesh. "There are only a few professionals at the policymaking level who have a voice in urban development projects. This needs to change if we want a city where women feel safe, comfortable and respected," said Zaman.

However, more women in policy making alone will not ensure an inclusive city if they do not reflect the diverse backgrounds and needs of the city's inhabitants, she added.

Celebrating International Women's Day

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