

# TOWARDS A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD FOR WOMEN

*In conversation with Adrita Datta, Farhana Islam and Nurul Monowar Ratul*

Organisations have come a long way today in ensuring congenial workplaces for women. However, there's still a lot of gaps that need filling. With a goal to learn and advance by leveraging competencies, 7 organisations (Unilever, Grameenphone, BAT, Nestle, Robi, SCB and HSBC) have formed a cross-industry council and started an initiative called "Inspirit". We sat with three representatives to explore the inspirations that paved the way for the initiative.

In the past, a major fault in the workplace was poor representation of women. When Farhana Islam, Head of Business Innovation & OTT Communication at Grameenphone, joined GP back in 2006, there was a total of 5 girls in a group of 30. At that time, she didn't really question the status quo, but as she took on leadership roles, she saw certain problems in the system. She said, "With time, you pay more attention to how you're being perceived at big meetings and how your opinions are being judged. Slowly, you realise that the culture needs more adjustments." Adrita Datta, Senior HR Business Partner – Operations at British American Tobacco Bangladesh, particularly felt the absence of female role models as she started her corporate journey. She said, "It was very difficult for the organisation to identify and address issues exclusive to women who had no significant representation across leadership forums. In 2012, after BAT got its first female member in the executive committee, we exponentially saw a rise in proactive interventions to make the organisation more inclusive across all levels." Nurul Monowar Ratul, Category head at Unilever Bangladesh Limited, was shocked at the low presence of women in the industry, when they had almost always been toppers at class. He said, "Diversity is still easier to ensure in numbers, and through our concerted effort, we have been successful in improving our gender balance significantly in just 3 years. However, ensuring 'inclusion' is a more difficult thing to achieve, which is why at Unilever Bangladesh, we focus on consciously promoting that."

GP initiated the forum "Women Inspirational Network" in 2016 and in 2017 they conducted an FGD to find out situations where women feel uncomfortable. They made a play with the insights, which created a huge impact because these issues were never publicly discussed before. The challenge was to explain to employees the need



From left - Farhana Islam, Adrita Datta and Nurul Monowar Ratul

for gender diversity. Farhana said, "We need diversity to ensure 5 things- better financial results, better decision-making, to better address the needs of our customers, for a more innovative culture and to attract the best talents." With that in mind, GP wanted to build a culture of inclusion that would begin with the leaders and launched the Leaders' Toolkit and an e-learning platform. Through this, leaders were taught to be more supportive to female team members in the office space and informal hangouts, and employees were taught to avoid benevolent sexism.

BAT, on the other hand, launched Gen W in 2009, spearheading mainstream inclusion of women across critical roles in the commercial frontlines of trade outstations and 24/7 factory operations, conventionally thought to be male-dominated spaces only. This directed under-the-rug discussions about inclusion towards organisational spotlight, giving birth to Symmetry, an exclusive platform on catalysing inclusionary initiatives. BAT also focused on unique development programs to create more female leaders across all levels by crafting tailor-made interventions and mentorship platforms. Following this trajectory, they pioneered the first 9-month maternity leave programme in Bangladesh. Adrita said, "By starting this practice in BAT, we hope that other MNCs and even local organisations

will do this soon to enable more women at workplaces in seamlessly balancing their personal and professional priorities."

Even today, women are primarily responsible for raising children and running families. Nurul said, "The concept of having both maternity and paternity leaves eases the burden that society places on women to be the prime caregiver. To enable fathers to play a more active role in early parenthood, Unilever Bangladesh has extended its paternity policy to 3 weeks of paid leave and hosts an in-house day care facility for both working fathers and mothers." He added, "We have also broken several stereotypes of having 'conventional roles' for women, with the appointment of our first ever female Regional Manager in the country, and the introduction of night-shifts for female Production Shift Officers at Kalurghat Factory."

Farhana talked about GP's "New Normal" campaign where GP tried to engage its employees in different activities that defy traditional gender norms. At BAT, a best-in-class day care facility is accessible to children of both male and female employees. In addition, BAT's revamped maternity and paternity leaves are accessible to biological as well as adoptive parents, a first-of-its-kind progressive policy in Bangladesh.

Women at workplace tend to feel an added pressure. Adrita said that this stems from women being more introspective in general.

She labels this pressure as a 'double-edged sword'. Farhana said, "When I was in a junior role, everyone was very supportive, but it became more challenging as my role and responsibilities grew." She added, "I felt that my voice was less heard in meetings and I had to put in extra effort to get my points across." Adrita resorted to interesting coping mechanisms, "During meetings, I was the only woman in a group of 15 other men. When they weren't listening to me, I'd simply raise my hand. I realised that in order to make an impact, I had to make my presence felt as conspicuously as possible."

With perseverance and resilience, both women grew out of the skewed system and had their moments of glory. Farhana was selected to be the Global CMO for Wow-Box. She was placed in Bangkok and people from different countries would report to her. It was an episode of good learning and excitement for her that made every effort worth it. Adrita's defining point was her second international assignment where she was appointed as the Talent Head at BAT Japan. She had a 6-year-old son at that point and her husband was in trade marketing. She said, "Initially, I wasn't so sure about the role. But looking back, I'm so glad that I took the assignment. Leading the talent team in Japan and working in a very different set up, taught me how to thrive in a different culture. It gave me confidence that I still carry with me. I am grateful that in BAT, my development was always prioritised, defying traditional norms of limiting females within bonds or borders."

With passionate change-leaders wanting to create a larger impact in the industry, the Inspirit forum was launched. As opposed to making efforts in silos, with Inspirit, corporations can now share their best practices with each other and advance through collaboration. The council is currently working on three pillars – facilities for outstation-based female managers, leadership development and cross-industry mentoring. Through these, the companies can share infrastructure with each other and enable women in unconventional roles to network and learn from women in similar roles in other organisations. With Inspirit, the future is headed towards a level playing field.

SYEDA ADIBA ARIF

Syeda Adiba Arif is the sub-editor of Next Step. Reach her at [adibaarif.3@gmail.com](mailto:adibaarif.3@gmail.com).

## THE BOSSMAN

BY E. RAZA RONNY



## What not to say to your female colleagues

More and more companies are seeing the increase of women in the workforce. Women are rising to the top levels of companies. An increasing number of companies are seeing the value of having more women in leadership roles, and they're proving that they can make progress on gender diversity. This is an important step in the right direction.

We often talk about the "glass ceiling" that prevents women from reaching senior leadership positions. In reality, the biggest obstacle that women face is much earlier in the pipeline; in fact it's at the first step up to manager. Fixing this "broken rung" is the key to achieving parity. All employees should feel respected and be assured that they have an equal opportunity to grow and advance. Employees care deeply about opportunities and fairness, not only for themselves but for everyone. A more diverse workforce doesn't automatically lead to a more inclusive culture; steps need to be taken to ensure inclusion. When a company's culture feels fair and inclusive, everyone does well. By fostering diversity, building a culture of opportunity and fairness, and focusing their attention on the broken rung, companies can close their gender gaps, and make progress on the road to equality.

Despite the efforts to ensure a neutral environment, corporate culture is male coded. Although things are getting better, there are a number of things men should never say to their female colleagues. Casual sexism is very deeply embedded, and much of it starts with seemingly

harmless office banter. It doesn't sound like much, but it deeply affects a woman's morale.

**"YOU'RE DOING GREAT FOR A WOMAN"**

No woman wants anyone to think that she is only doing well based on society's perception of what women are capable of doing, which unfortunately is not on par with men. This statement is very stereotypical and extremely belittling. Female coworkers are doing their best to ace the assignment, regardless of their gender, and they still have their jobs, because they are just as capable as their male counterparts.



**USING TERMS OF "ENDEARMENT"**

Harmless sounding terms such as "sweetie," "hon" or "cutie" are very patronising, and quite honestly not very endearing. Regardless of intent, the impact creates a demeaning aura.

**COMMENTING ON THEIR APPEARANCES**

Comments on a woman's appearance are inappropriate in the workplace unless you have a long established relationship where you're absolutely sure the comment will not be misconstrued. Even compliments may back fire, especially if it involves comments about weight

gain or loss. Women are particularly annoyed by this because it somewhat reinforces the archaic ideas that women are primarily objects that are nice to look at.

**MAKING SEXUAL COMMENTS**

Not only do sexual innuendos make the female employee on the receiving end feel embarrassed, offended and uncomfortable, they also create problems in the broader workplace environment. Top women employees will not stick around if the company does not promote and enforce equal respect.

**"IS IT THAT TIME OF THE MONTH?" OR "SHE'S SO EMOTIONAL"**

When a female executive is forceful or aggressive, her nature is perceived to be negative, but a man in the same position is perceived to be doing his job. One of the ways that negativity can be subtly expressed is by attributing the behavior to hormonal changes. It is never appropriate to comment on a female coworker's menstrual cycle or hormones and try to link her behaviour with that.

**"YOU ONLY GOT THE JOB BECAUSE YOU'RE A WOMAN"**

Suggesting to a woman that she's excelled in her career because of gender is disrespectful. These comments build up over time to create a corporate culture that ticks off the female employees and affects their performance.

NABILA HOSSAIN

Nabila Hossain is completing her undergrad at Institute of Business Administration, University of Dhaka. Reach her at [nabilaanima@gmail.com](mailto:nabilaanima@gmail.com).

## Making a DIFFERENCE

## HOW TO MAKE WORKSPACES WOMEN-FRIENDLY

Workspaces are often designed with functionality as the primary objective; gender considerations are yet to be integrated into office design for a large number of organisations in Bangladesh. What follows is a set of extremely simple things that organisations can do to make the office a safe, women-friendly place.

**PROVIDE MENSTRUAL HYGIENE SUPPORT**

In this day and age, sanitary napkins in the office should be a norm and not a revolution. Sadly, the majority of workplaces in Bangladesh are yet to follow through on this principle. While smaller companies or start-ups may face cost constraints in procuring and maintaining vending machines, it is very much possible to maintain and replenish a stock of sanitary napkins in women's washrooms without hurting the bottom line.

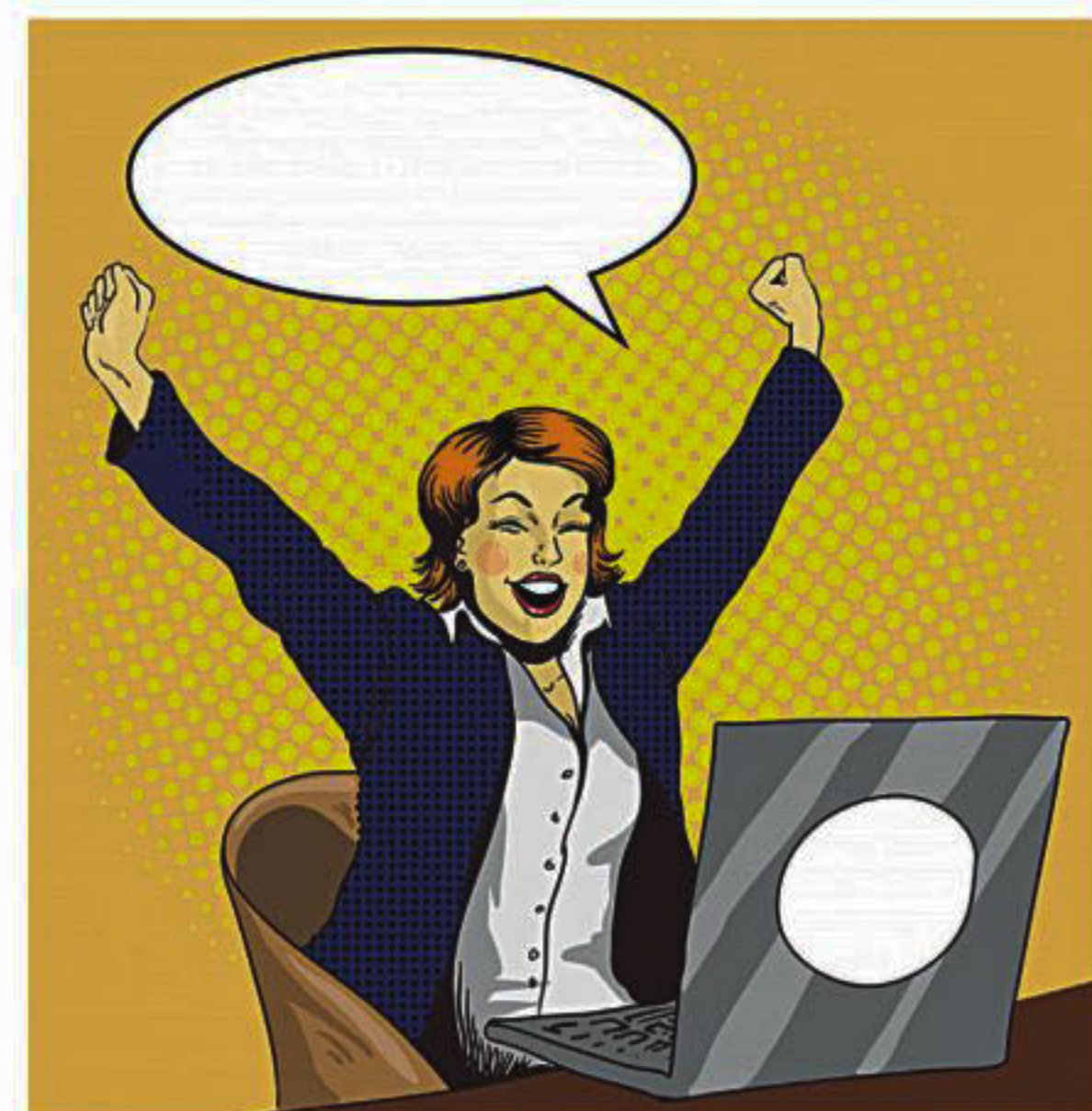
**CREATE PRIVATE RESTING SPACES**

Breakrooms at work are necessary and helpful, but they can hardly be called private. A woman experiencing cramps or a new mother who needs to pump may very well require a calm, separate space to rest a little before they can get back to work. In absence of enough privacy, they are forced to experience discomfort either because they cannot find a good place to be, or because of the self-consciousness that commonly arises from having many eyes on you in a space shared with many people.

**PAY EQUAL ATTENTION TO FEMALE SUPPORT STAFF**

There are times when office spaces cater to the needs of some of their female team members but inadvertently forget the others. For example, many offices have gender-segregated washrooms for core team members, but a single, ill-maintained washroom shared between female and male support staff. The women in these roles deserve the same amount of attention to their

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basic needs as those in white-collar positions, and it is important that organisations do not overlook this simple tenet of equality.

TASMIAH HAQUE

Tasmiah is a BBA (Finance) graduate from IBA, Dhaka University. She is currently working in the development sector and studying for a master's degree in economics at East West University. Reach her with your thoughts and questions at [thaque440@gmail.com](mailto:thaque440@gmail.com).