

Empower Together: Student, University, and Industry

BOOSHRA AHMED

In 2014, my nephew, Dipto, had claimed that investing time and money for graduating from a university was pointless, if he did not have an uncle who can help him find a job afterwards. At the time, I knew there was no easy fix for what he thought, and I wanted to do everything I can to reset my nephew's view on the Bangladeshi job market and life in Bangladesh overall. I knew then that what worked in the USA will not work in Bangladesh. A lot has changed since then. Today, given Bangladesh's progress in so many fields, I am confident that a model I see working flawlessly in the USA will work similarly well in this country.

However, first, we need to understand the reasons why Bangladeshi youths find job hunting so frustrating. According to Zahid Hussain, Lead Economist at the WB's Dhaka office, the key problem is skill mismatch. A recent article in *The Daily Star* summed up this current gap brilliantly. According to the article, the biggest reason for university graduates to lag behind the job market was that graduates often lack relevant skills valued by employers. To remediate the issue, Professor Abdul Mannan, former chairman of the University Grants Commission, had said, "The graduates should be equipped with the right set of skills to make them employable in the fast-changing job market."

Clearly, universities have to step up to the plate, but that is only one side of the equation. Employers, too, have a key role to play under such circumstances. Out of 235 employers surveyed, three employers had partnerships for recruitment and two

reported having a partnership for apprenticeship programmes with colleges. Employer involvement for developing necessary skills amongst prospective employees early on in their careers, is a critical component for addressing the skill gaps referenced by Professor Mannan.

We need a model that works for both universities and industries, to address the skill gaps. We need to figure out a way to empower our students by allowing them to attend university and work at the same time. We also need to empower companies by providing them access to the students and vet them, before the hiring process begins.

I am not suggesting a traditional co-op or internship model. I am talking about universities and industry leaders developing a sustainable career development partnership to help students establish a strong foundation of education and practical business experience, which will enable them to become the future employees that all employers want. I have been a part of such programmes in the USA as both an educator and a corporate mentor, and I see no reason why such programmes will not work here in Bangladesh.

Booshra Ahmed is the Senior Vice President, Bank of America, a faculty member of the MBA & Data Science Program at University of North Carolina Charlotte and the Management Development Program at Harvard Business School Alumni CC. She is also the Executive Coach at the Applied Technology Program, run by Bank of America and UNCC. An Executive MBA graduate from Harvard Business School, she was featured alongside 17 HBS Alumnae Female Leaders worldwide.



PHOTO: SHAMS ASIF

Promoting a broader understanding of SRHR

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

Farhana Alam is the Assistant Director of The Center of Excellence for Gender, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (CGSRHR) at the James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University. She is working in this field for the past six years. She presented a documentary on single working women as a panelist at Dhaka Lit Fest 2019. She has also written a book about people living with physical disabilities. We recently caught up with Farhana to learn more about her work.

How does your work intend to address issues related to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)?

The main aim of my work is to promote a broader understanding around gender, power relations, masculinity, disability, sexuality, diversity and human right issues that are stigmatised by our society. I also work on comprehensive

sexuality education for adolescents which is an important aspect of SRHR. I am involved in both academic and action based research and strongly believe in translating knowledge into advocacy-based action for social and structural changes. I would like to extend my gratitude to our Dean, Professor Sabina F Rashid, for her constant support throughout my professional endeavours.

What is your book, 'Untold Desires,' about?

It is a photo-narrative book launched in 2018, which shows how people with physical disabilities navigate through their emotional and materialistic struggles when it comes to their identities, relationships and sexuality. The narratives of this book questioned my own assumptions about people with disabilities. It was great to see how men with disabilities challenge the norms of masculinity, and that not all women subscribe to stereotypical images of a passive disabled person.

Tell us a little about your documentary on single working women.

More often than not, working women, be they single or married, face harsh judgements from the society. As an independent woman advocating for sexuality and rights, I have encountered passive aggressive behaviours from people around me. The idea of the documentary came from personal experiences and listening to other women's stories. The documentary is about working women who face challenges for choosing to be single and still thrive as the architects of their own happiness.

What other projects are you currently working on?

I am working on a project that focuses on strengthening voices and capacities for addressing gender-based violence in Bangladesh and I am involved in couple of research projects on issues like migration and inclusion of marginalised communities.

HIGH SCHOOLERS TO REPRESENT BANGLADESH AT NASA ROVER CHALLENGE

For the second consecutive year, a team of high school students from Bangladesh have been selected to participate in the Nasa Human Exploration Rover Challenge, which is set to take place on April 17 - 18, 2020, at the US Space and Rocket Center in Alabama.



PHOTO: COURTESY

SHOAIB AHMED SAYAM

This year's team, MAR5, consists of six youngsters, Aryan Andaleeb Azim, Rubaiyet Islam, Sadia Alam, Alif Hassan Aunkur, Tasnia Mustafa and Rafiul Alam Khan. They are guided by the youngest adviser in the competition's history, Jawadul Hassan Probbat, a recent high school graduate. MAR5 is participating under Synopsis Education.

The Rover Challenge is an international competition for high school and university students, where each team has to plan and construct their own human-powered rover. Two team members will then have to use the vehicle to traverse specific obstacle courses prepared on the event premises. The teams will also get opportunities to conduct

research, and those with the best papers will be awarded based on different categories.

It was not an easy journey for the team, however, as they had to tackle several problems.

"Unlike other participating countries where the teams get proper support, in Bangladesh, we don't have the facilities and resources to carry out all the required work," said Jawadul, who also took part in last year's competition. "For example, we had to scour different areas to find appropriate materials, that too, keeping the financial constraints in mind."

"To make the rover, we had to spend several days in Dholaikhal and Shyampur for picking the right parts and attaching everything together," added Rubaiyet, an alumna of the Kennedy-Lugar

Youth Exchange and Study Programme. Moreover, the high schoolers have their final exams a couple of weeks after the main event, but somehow, they are keeping everything in check.

Despite the hardships, all members agreed that going through the challenges has developed their skills immensely. "We learned how to plan and solve problems in unconventional situations," said Aryan, a national medalist of Bangladesh Physics Olympiad. "We also feel that being a part of this competition will positively affect our future prospects."

Jannatul Ferdous Sigma, CEO of Synopsis Education, added that besides academics, it is essential for young people to participate in such competitions.

Ten Actions to Stand Against Rape

On 25th November 2019, representatives of the Government of Bangladesh, civil society organisations, the UN family and development partners, gathered together on the occasion of the National Dialogue on Actions Against Sexual Violence to commemorate the 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence under the theme: Generation Equality Stands against Rape. As a way forward from the National Dialogue, experts and practitioners commit to the following actions:

1. Invest more in research and data collection on sexual violence; the data should at minimum be disaggregated by sex, age, disability, and location. Work towards a national level statistics database accessible to all

2. Address violence as a multidimensional gender equality issue. Use the media and other platforms to break the culture of silence and impunity, change the narrative of rape by raising awareness about consent, and speaking up against the root causes of GBV, including the patriarchy, power imbalances, toxic masculinity, and gender inequality

3. Move away from a protectionist discourse, which limits women's mobility and agency, to a more empowering one that ensures that both the private sphere and public spaces are safe for all women and girls

4. Introduce or strengthen self-empowerment programmes and age appropriate comprehensive sexuality education in schools. Incorporate these programmes and sexuality training in the national curriculum and encourage parents to stop treating sex as a taboo. Promote a culture of positive sexuality

5. Invest more in primary prevention, challenge rigid social norms and the normalisation of sexual violence and develop a common platform to share good practices on what works to prevent violence

6. Establish a more inclusive and multi-sectoral coordination of response to violence, including health, legal, livelihood and psychosocial support, at national, district and sub district levels. Roll out the "protocol on health sector response to GBV for the health care service providers" countrywide. Medical services should be available for GBV survivors 24/7 at all levels

7. We need to listen to, and believe, survivors: Eliminate the re-victimisation and stigma of rape survivors and provide them with a safe space to report

8. Strengthen existing sexual violence legislation implementation and costing, including implementation of the High Court Directive on Sexual Harassment, and advocate for the amendment of discriminatory laws that discourage rape survivors to report and hamper women's access to justice. Enact the proposed Sexual Harassment Law; amend the Penal Code by changing the discriminatory definition of rape to make it more inclusive, amend character evidence provisions, and adopt the victims/witness protection law

9. Strengthen accountability: Consistent with SDG 16, enhance effectiveness and accountability of institutions, especially law enforcement agencies, administration and judiciary, to ensure rule of law and justice for survivors of sexual violence; work towards a more liable, informed GBV and gender responsive law enforcement structure and enhance the system for monitoring and evaluation of the National Action Plan on Prevention of Violence against Women and Children, on Ending Child Marriage and the Women's Development Policy

10. All government orders, policies, directives and referral pathways concerning prevention and response should be widely disseminated at the grassroot level, to ensure that rights holders are aware and empowered to claim their rights. Duty bearers should strengthen access to justice for survivors of sexual violence.

As development partners, the UN family, government and civil society, we commit to be held accountable to these actions and to resolutely join our hands to end sexual violence and all other forms of violence. United Nations Bangladesh, USAID, Government of Canada, Kingdom of the Netherlands, Australian High Commission, Concern Worldwide, Christian Aid, Plan International, Oxfam, Action Against Hunger, icddr, Save the Children, The Asia Foundation, ActionAid, Ain O' Shalish Kendra, BLAST, Transparency International Bangladesh, BRAC, BROTEE, ADAB, Nijera Kori, Awaj Foundation, Manusher Jonno Foundation, World Vision, Protigga, Naripokkho, Dalit, SEED, Girls Not Brides Bangladesh, National Girl Child Advocacy Forum, Dipto - A Foundation for Gender & Development and IMA Research Foundation are partners of this initiative.

SOURCE: UN WOMEN