

Start-ups that empower women

KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

One can define the term "women empowerment" in many ways, using many examples. Educating women, providing them with necessary resources, helping them set up their own businesses, teaching them self-defence – all this and more empowers women. In the process, it challenges inequalities in society and contributes to the sustainable development of a nation.

The best way to empower, perhaps, is when a woman works to look after their own. Such is the story of Begum.co, founded by Rakshanda Rukham, which provides a "360-degree support system" for women in their careers, lifestyles, health, safety, etc.

"When I was in university, there were no platforms connecting women with similar interests, or women-centric platform and local language content for women. I realised that women of our country need assistance through life stages to support their careers. This is why I founded Begum.co in 2015," says Rukham. From a need for women mentors who could lead and inspire young girls from rural areas, Begum.co now works across cities with over 4000 women access mentors, offering career tips, leadership training and content besides being part of various special initiatives.

Begum.co aims to improve the social status of women in Bangladesh. Its ecosystem supports a women in her journey through life. With education, mentorship and a growing community, it creates jobs for women and helps them become self-dependent.

This year, however, has been especially difficult for women around the country.



Rukham states, "We have identified that many women have lost their jobs during this pandemic, and experienced violence at homes. They need support to get back to their normal lives and we are focused on helping those women. Begum wants to create more income opportunities for women and reduce gender-based violence."

Similarly, it was a woman thinking about other women that gave life to Karigor.

"Years ago, I had bought a shawl in Bandarban for 250 taka only. In Dhaka, I found the same shawl in a renowned brand store going for 1700 taka. I asked myself, if the local craftsperson's products are worth so much, why do they struggle to survive? It's because they don't get the value of their work because of middlemen and the current market structure," Saraban Tahura Turin, co-founder of

Karigor, tells us.

Karigor connects the dots for craftspeople and consumers. Here, creative entrepreneurs can open shop and get maximum product value. Through the digital platform, artisans are brought under one roof and using the technology and modern solutions, able to revive and their businesses. The target is to promote the tradition and heritage of Bangladeshi handicrafts as part of the global economy in the long run.

Turin describes, "With UNDP's help, we turned Karigor into a social enterprise. We focused on social impacts and SDGs and after the incubation program, we modified our idea from scratch and turned it into an ecosystem."

Shuttle, on the other hand, was digital and urban-focused from the start. And founded by three men.

Reyasat Chowdhury, co-founder and

CEO of the female-only transport service, explains, "Upon observing and sharing our concerns regarding problems women face during commute, we realised this needed a customised solution. It was a key finding for us. We launched Shuttle in July 2018 with just two vehicles and after the positive response from initial users, we kept expanding and introducing new routes."

Shuttle's primary goal is a noble thought: To ensure that each and every woman in Bangladesh has the freedom to commute wherever and whenever they want to.

"We envision to redefine public transport in Bangladesh so that safe and comfortable transportation is inclusive and affordable for mass people," Reyasat adds. "We are still operating in Dhaka and Chittagong, however, we believe we're on the right path." A new service, Shuttle for Business, was launched this year, which enables organisations to support their employees on the move.

UNDP and Youth Co:Lab has been an integral part in the growth of these start-ups, especially in the early stages. Through its mentorship programs, guidance and networking opportunities, the enterprises have learned how to bring about positive impacts on the society that can be measured and developed.

An extended version of this article is available online. Read it on The Daily Star website, or on SHOUT on Facebook and @shouts on Instagram.

Kazi Akib Bin Asad is the editor in-charge of SHOUT. Write to him at akib.asad@thedailystar.net

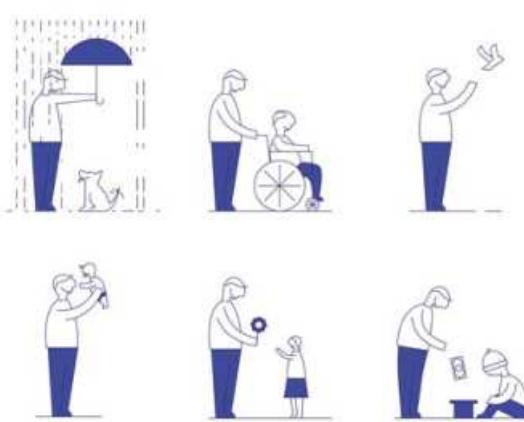
THE MISINTERPRETATION OF KINDNESS

BUSHRA ZAMAN

Kindness, politeness and good manners are capable of changing any person's day for the better. However, if subject to misinterpretation, they are equally capable of making a day turn for the worse.

How exactly does this happen? The aforementioned attributes are subjective terms, capable of varying even in people of the same culture. They relate to your morals and how you were brought up, therefore their manifestations as actions can easily be misinterpreted by others with different mindsets. There are a variety of different mindsets distributed among human beings, and therefore, a large probability of the misinterpretation of actions occurring.

Suppose you were incredibly hungry but were in a meeting with someone. You asked if they wanted to grab lunch with you because it would be rude to end a meeting abruptly, and offered to pay for them when you realised the person forgot his/her wallet. The concerned individual may mistake your good manners for attraction if they are not fully aware of your nature. Even the littlest things such as holding open a door for someone, stopping to help somebody who fell, and lending stationary to the person sitting next to you in an exam



can be mistaken for your interest in the individual you are assisting due to differences in manners and a lack of understanding.

Things can get more complicated; your politeness may be confused with negative personality traits if you are seen helping an individual you are on bad terms with. Hurtful terms such as "two-faced" may come to the minds of people who themselves believe politeness does

not apply to anyone they are not fond of. If they continue to ponder over why you're being polite, the negativity of assumptions can quickly escalate. You may even find yourself being accused of trying to use the person you are not fond of for your own personal gain.

Also, oddly enough, kindness can be connected to being a pushover. This presumption is exceptionally queer on account of how completely unrelated the two personality traits are. The connection has little to do with a variation in morals and instead serves as an excuse to exploit the good nature of a kind-hearted human being, potentially having a detrimental effect on the self-confidence of anyone who considers themselves to be kind. Kindness towards others should never be correlated to being unkind to yourself and belittling your own opinions.

If a good nature without a hidden agenda is discouraged and misunderstood it could lead to its eradication as an adaptive measure, much like any other process of natural selection. Let's just keep things simple by sticking to the true meaning of things instead of trying to find synonyms for it.

Bushra Zaman likes books, art, and only being contacted by email. Contact her at bushrazaman31@yahoo.com