

GOLDEN JUBILEE BEGINNINGS

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That a woman has to be twice as good to get half as far has been a popular sentiment for near about a century, and sadly, it remains as pertinent and true today. Phenomena like the pink tax, the wage gap are evident in most countries, but these are just two of the more recognised and easily observable issues facing women in the workplace, but a larger aspect has been the effects that the larger society's attitude has on the lives of individuals, which is much more evident in the case of women.

WOMEN AT WORK

#EMPOWERMENT

SANIA AIMAN

There are multiple aspects to the barriers women face when they decide to work out of the house, be it for need or simply to pursue passions. Despite those facts, it remains true that Bangladesh has in fact come a long way towards female empowerment. The intentional push to enrol more female children to school by making it free, to making workplaces more inclined to recruit more women, to making child care services more available, and an overall improvement in visibility for female leadership has all contributed to this improvement.

Data suggests that female participation in the labour force has increased from 8 percent in the mid-1980s to almost 36 percent in 2016/17. International Labour Organization (ILO) data also puts female participation in the labour market at just about 1/3rd, which is significantly lower than that of the global average or near about 50 percent.

It points to the fact that a larger portion of these women are employed in low-level blue-collar jobs, for example in the garment sector, and even in the corporate world, industry insiders suggest that there is higher visibility of women workers, but not a lot are in decision-



"I employed salesgirls in early '82 when I opened my shop, Tangail Saree Kutir. We could also see few women in banks during that period. There were hardly any female entrepreneurs back then, perhaps because it was not accepted by the society.

"Some educated women wanted to do something of their own, and if anyone was in entrepreneurship, they would start kindergartens, or opened boutiques. It was at the far end of the eighties that women got into mainstream jobs," said Monira Emdad, Managing Director of Tangail Saree Kutir.

As Khushi Kabir, a noted human rights activist, pointed out, traditionally women were expected to become teachers, or doctors if they were really brilliant, at most. Any other choice would often invoke inquisitions or raised eyebrow. However, she also said that despite the lower participation of women in work, she felt there was safety in public for women, and she felt the sense of security even in the '80s. But even as jobs increased and so did opportunities like in engineering and

forces and all that, the insecurities in many men has increased, and most institutions do not know how to treat women with equality. This sentiment is also echoed by other ladies.

"We do enjoy the same rights and salary as our male colleagues as per the scale, but when it comes to promotions or appreciation, the decisions are often unjust," said a female bank official, preferring anonymity. A similar observation was underscored by ladies working in one of the leading telecoms of the country.

About women in leadership
Many women have reportedly been asked if they were planning to get married or have children during recruitments or promotion interviews, and found that the possibility was held against them, without any empirical proof.

"For a woman to prove herself, she must have the opportunity to test her mettle," said Bina Rani Das, Additional Superintendent of Police, RAB 3, and a President's Award winner.

She has been commended by all her commanding officers, and is affectionately called the "lady commando," but she said all that is only possible because she was given those charges, even if some people would have preferred it were not so.

Senior female colleagues have been overlooked for promotions in two cycles, without any credible reason, and were only given a raise as they threatened to leave, said a mid-level manager at a leading telecom.

On being confronted, line managers could only shrug as a justification, and one said, "It is difficult to justify giving a young woman a promotion over a man

who has been in the industry longer," even though fully acknowledging her superior performance and abilities.

"My time off during pregnancy hampered my promotion aspects, and the supervisors did not make any secret of that," said another media worker. Both these ladies prefer to remain anonymous, saying this could invite unnecessary troubles in their work lives, in the relatively small industries. During Ershad's regime, women were not recruited in the police, which created a huge gap in the female leadership, and we faced a dearth of leaders to look up to. There are still a few men who feel that women officers are a burden to manage.

ASP Bina Rani Das, with a stellar police career of over a decade, said, "But this is why we have to come forward, and encourage more female participation. Seeing charismatic women in political leadership over the past decades has helped break many stereotypes, and improve the social mindset about female workers."

Another aspect of women in leadership is work life balance, and a supportive family is paramount to creating female leaders.

"The same behaviour or work responsibilities considered perfectly acceptable for men, are not acceptable for women," said Lamia Salim, a territory officer with the leading tobacco company in Bangladesh.

"Moreover, the expectations from

women regarding taking care of the house are much more than those from men, which creates an added stress on interpersonal relationships. Many men, while accepting strong independent women as colleagues, are reluctant to accept them as comfortably as wives, even going so far as to brand them unsuitable as life partners in front of others. This kind of attitude is often discouraging to women in being ambitious, and familial pressures or societal pressures do get to people after a certain time," said Lamia Salim.

This does erode away female participation in leadership positions, as well as the bias and mistrust of their capacity and dedication. There are different organisations too.

"Here, it seems that many supervisors prefer to have female workers as they feel that women in general work with more dedication," said Tahmina Akther Liza, Assistant General Manager, Personnel, Apex Holdings Ltd. Even though she is happy at her own company, even she agrees that finding good workplaces for women, especially with equal opportunity, can be tricky.

About the mental barriers
One of the things holding back women is their own perceptions about their weaknesses. One of the first misconceptions that changed in her mind were about her physical "weakness," said Bina Rani Das.

Most girls grow up hearing about how they are not strong physically, or that they should just ask the men in the house with the heavy lifting, but the training helped me realise that I could be just as fit, and had much more strength than given credit for, she added. "I felt that I can do," she said, of her feeling more empowered as a human being.

"The police work to enforce law, so this is a place of power, which is why I do not feel insecure or unsafe at work, which is not true for many women in other jobs. But even here, society expectations do play a part. For example, no matter how strong I am, while going to apprehend a fugitive, it makes sense in the context of understanding Bangladeshi culture to have a team with male and female members rather than an all-female one, simply because the criminals will be less likely to try and act out when they see men in the team," she added.

A similar sentiment could be deduced from the observations of Lamia Salim. The nature of the product, namely cigarettes, which is essentially a male domain in Bangladesh, makes it necessary for her to engage and talk to various types of people, including retailers, small and large. Depending on the area, some retailers can even ignore her queries, refuse to talk to her at all, or simply ignore her existence. For these, she asks one of her male subordinates to communicate with them.

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making positions, and rise through the ranks is much slower, often regardless of ability.

Talking to women successfully working in the formal sector reveals the same — there is still a lot to do and change for larger and more impactful participation by women in all types of jobs. First of these is perhaps the notion of perception about what jobs are suitable/ideal for women.

In the early seventies, society reflected tension of building a war-torn country. It was conservative and stunted as far as women in workforce was concerned. Back then, the only acceptable profession for women was being a school teacher.

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