

GOLDEN JUBILEE BEGINNINGS

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Women at work

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"I have learnt to take this non-personally. Just like I have the right to choose my profession and live my life a certain way, they have a right to live their lives a certain way. As long as there are ways to work around this, I take it in a stride," she said. Although, she says that the privilege and security that the company grants play a big role.

Here, another aspect can be observed—the work environment for women is not just a product of her capabilities, but also how the company treats the female employee, but even more on where the worker stands in terms of social standing. For example, a woman working in an NGO is automatically garnered more respect than a woman working in a garment factory, even though both their work is equally important economically, and in terms of dignity of labour.

ASP Das made a similar observation—while she and her compatriots who joined the police as officers, face a more educated cohort and thus the level of sexism-based judgement is lower, if not practically absent, there were people who doubted her capacities or wondered if she could fill in the shoes of her male

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predecessors, but the same seniors later commended her sheer dedication to work. However, it may not always be smooth sailing for ladies in the lower or non-cadre police ranks, even though female participation in those jobs is absolutely necessary for the force's effectiveness.

About increasing opportunities
The access to more education and technology has definitely helped women access more jobs, and the visibility of women in those jobs as well. It is



now more common to see women in employment erstwhile considered to be unusual.

"Once during my posting in a rather remote place in Sylhet, I overheard a father showing me to his daughter, and encouraging her to be like me. It felt inspiring," ASP Das said.

As more and more women enter all sorts of professions, especially those which were traditionally thought to be unsuitable for women or more of a male domain, they make it easier for other girls to follow in their footsteps. There has been a conscious policy push at the government level, from offering free primary schooling to training women entrepreneur in ICT to giving free training to young girls to creating mass awareness against abuse and on human rights, Bangladesh has in fact come a long way in improving gender equality and female empowerment.

With expansion of the service industry, there has been a significant boost to jobs available for women. Add to that the access to the Internet, and an environment conducive to female participation in the work force and especially in entrepreneurship can be seen.

Over just the past few years, there has been a sudden boom in the number

of women participating in online businesses, earning decent incomes, and exploring their passions, be it cooking, sewing, design or any other kind of bespoke service, like decorating bespoke dalas or cakes.

Sobia Ameen, a passionate baker, is also an incidental one. Trained as an architect, she posted pictures of her wonderful baked creations on her personal Instagram, just for the sake of sharing. But as people kept asking if she were taking orders, she decided she could!

For a while, she also pursued both architecture and baking side by side, but later chose to put all her effort into the baking side.

"I was perhaps privileged enough to be able to choose baking over architecture," she reflected, but she also felt that both her training in architecture and her passion for art helped shape her as a person, and influence her baking as well.

About the changing scene
"During an operation in unfamiliar terrain in Pabna, it was raining at night, and I fell into a canal by the roadside," ASP Das added with a touch of humble hilarity. Looking at her like that, wet and covered in mud, a local woman commented, "I do not have a job but I

have a roof on my head this night, and look at her!"

But conversely, in a remote village in Sylhet, one of the places considered more conservative, she observed a mother-in-law giving a water bottle and an umbrella to her daughter-in-law heading to work, and it pleasantly surprised her, and she felt it stood testament to changing moods in the society.

The company does not treat us any differently in terms of men and women, only as a source of talent and judges people based on performance, said Lamia Salim, about her organisation BAT. But while working, it does become evident that everywhere in the corporate sector, more female participation leads to improved policies which can foster more female talent, even if simply as an added perspective.

Her social media exchanges have become more mellow and tolerable, with fewer rude comments about body shaming or colourism, or even the random death threats and such, said Sobia Ameen. But as to what that is owed to, she is yet unsure.

About practical challenges

"The girls joining the police force in the more recent batches are even more professional than we were, and working very hard and proving themselves as assets to the force," said ASP Das. This will only help encourage more girls to join, and make their colleagues more appreciative as well, she felt.

"There has to be a more conscious effort to train and mentor female recruits simply because most women in Bangladesh do not have the same freedom that most men do, in general, while growing up. This means that even with equal talent, girls may lack the exposure to be equally effective in their roles immediately upon recruitment, and the social aspects of the jobs should be made more accessible," Lamia Salim added.

For example, while there are more women in the workforce, at the grassroots level, basic hygiene issues can

become very challenging. Both ASP Das and Lamia Salim, joined by a common need in their very different work spheres, attested.

"Working long hours on the road without having access to sanitary necessities can be a real challenge, which I and many of my female colleagues have to keep in mind," ASP Das said.

About what comes next

To build further on the improvement that Bangladesh has had in terms of women empowerment, it must intentionally continue, as a country, to raise awareness on these issues. "More awareness can encourage girls to fight for their rights and know about more opportunities," ASP Das said.

"The most important thing is to build confidence in girls, that they can do whatever they set their sights on," she added.

"The stigma has to be removed from girls working in different fields," Lamia Salim said.

It is very important to normalise the way that both men and women can have similar lifestyles, and what makes a man a hero does not make woman a whore, she added, reflecting on how the same kind of lifestyles can diminish a woman in the society's eyes while being perfectly acceptable for men, like coming home late or hanging out with colleagues of the same or opposite gender, even as networking and building ties remains essential to doing well at work. Moreover, becoming self-assured and confident is key, she says.

"After all, what can people do once you decide to not let it affect you," she added.

While parents have largely learnt to accept and love the girl child, it is now time that Bangladesh shifts focus to increasing acceptability for the female in the workplace, as salute to the pioneers who are already breaking barriers over her 50 years of independence, and also as an embrace for its younger daughters with shimmering dreams of glory.

Photo: Sk Enamul Haq



Women professionals in Bangladesh

SABRINA FATMA AHMAD

The long, arduous road from Raj to Partition to Liberation left our newborn country with an economy too small to accommodate many of its able-bodied men, let alone its women. Patriarchal values entrenched in our social mores meant that this was explained away using morality and the idea of the 'good' woman as being a caregiver above all is something that took decades to change.

For women in my dadi's generation, 'acceptable' career options were limited social work and education, nursing and midwifery, and domestic service, depending on the socio-economic background. The monetary value of household work was not considered in GDP calculations; and neither was the contribution women in

rural communities put in towards agricultural/artisanal activities. It was simply taken for granted that taking care of the home was something women were supposed to do, and in fact, to have a career up till the late '70s was an exception to the norm.

When the Middle East began accepting migrant workers, and the birth of the RMG sector happened, the cash injection into the economy relaxed these restrictions and we saw an influx of women in factory jobs, and at executive to middle-management levels in the emerging corporate sector. The key word for this stage was 'pressure': we had to prove ourselves capable of holding down a job — if we were allowed to get one — we had to make sure we didn't neglect household duties, and we had to do this without any necessary infrastructural or policy-

level support. The fact that women managed to rise to the highest offices in the country proved our mettle for self-determination.

As the economy continued to grow, there was better investment, with microfinance schemes and NGO led support for women in the SME sector. Education being made mandatory for women definitely had a positive effect in improving our occupational mobility.

By the time millennials like myself entered the job market, globalisation had provided us with the advantage of greater exposure, and we were better equipped to fight for our needs — for pay parity, for policy level protections such as maternity leave, sexual harassment policies, and for a seat at the table in general. Women were now branching out into areas previously

closed off to them; particularly in STEM fields.

The road ahead

Fifty years of the evolution of women in professional spheres in Bangladesh has seen many milestones. We have a bright, capable workforce, and opportunities our forebears could not have dreamed of. Yet, there is so much work to be done. Even with greater awareness, 2020 has shown us that safety remains a key concern, and a barrier to mobility. Our educational system needs a complete overhaul if we are to face the challenges, global and national, that lie ahead.

When I look back on my career of twenty years, I feel humbled by gratitude at the sacrifices made by women of my grandmother's and my mother's generations to pave the way for us, and for the amazing female

role models I had when I started out, who instilled in me a strong work ethic and motivated me to be the change I wanted to see. If it isn't too presumptuous of me to offer advice to young women entering their careers now, it is that they have every right to dream big; but they have to be prepared to work hard to achieve those dreams.

Life never goes the way you plan, but if you keep a positive attitude and give it your 100 per cent, what amazing things you will achieve!

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Photo: Prabir Das