

Ladies leading the way

On March 8 every year, we mark International Women's Day on the calendar as a day to recognise the achievements of women. While this has become the norm, we do not want to limit our recognitions to a single day, but express it all year round to inspire a new generation of feminists (of both genders) who will unlock the full potential of women and girls around the world.

Having said that, on this very day, we celebrate women in all their diversities; we pay respect to those who came before us and to those who are yet to see the world. This year, unlike any other, the celebrations will be a bit different because of the terrible impacts of COVID-19 and its repercussions on the society as whole — the already existent inequalities between the genders have been amplified in many ways. Hence, it has become indispensable that we put a combined effort to elevate the situation by increasing women's access to leadership roles, because 'women in the lead' can voice opinions and show the ways to a better, smarter, smoother recovery plan.

Hence this year's central theme for IWD has been put forward as: Women in Leadership: Achieving an Equal Future in a COVID-19 World#choosetochallenge

Paying homage to the theme, we have partnered with TAAGA, a brand strongly linked with the gender equality movement through its parent organisation BRAC, to identify five inimitable youth female leaders from diverse fields in our society. We caught up with them to speak about what leadership means to them and how it was possible to beat the odds to get to where they are today.

Nazia Hassan – Certified Fitness Trainer

What does leadership mean to you? A good leader is a part of the team. They work together besides everyone else, to maximise the efforts as a whole. True leadership always inspires, never intimidates.

Do you think it's harder for women to reach the top of the ladder?



I believe both genders have responsibilities. A woman who wants to excel in her career, has to overcome obstacles just as their male counterparts, sometimes a little more especially when they have a family. Women tend to be undermined in some cases; however, it is vastly changing in the recent times. Women are taking charge of their own capabilities and proving themselves to the world and working to achieve success.

Did strength training give you a special kind of inner strength?

Strength training has allowed me to build mental and physical strength that now not only manifests in my training, but also in all aspects of my lifestyle. It has helped me sculpt an indomitable will and has helped me to create a drive to gear myself towards helping others to build the same. That's why I became a coach.

Ashreen Mridha – Founder Deshi Ballers, Brand Manager of a multinational company

How do you define leadership?

The truest form of leadership I have known is to be a captain, to hold my team together through good times and bad, through victories and losses. Whether you are the captain of your basketball team or the captain of an industry, you have got to be the person everyone can always turn to for direction, hope and inspiration.

Do you think it is harder for women to reach the top of the ladder given the circumstances of a widely-existent patriarchal environment? How can they overcome such obstacles?

Bangladeshi female athletes have made outstanding progress, but our sports channels are still dominated by male sports. We need more women on the tables where these decisions are made – it's as simple as that.

Bangladeshi women have come a long way fighting for their basic rights, even though 'taking up sports' is a much higher order need, but access to sports must be free of discrimination and harassment for women. We have too many battles to fight, but I think the first barrier is to alleviate the discrimination at home. I would call out



parents and family members to make sports a positive experience for their daughters, because there are some things in life that cannot be learned in textbooks and parents must acknowledge that.

Did playing basketball help you in becoming more confident? Do you think women should take up sports to gain more confidence? Any advice for the 'next gen' leaders?

Skills learned through sports, such as discipline, fair play, teamwork, and sportsmanship can be taken off the field into other spheres of life, so the impact is gender neutral. Sports makes both men and women more confident and eventually great leaders. Basketball has given me an identity. My only advice for next gen leaders would be to 'always' put your community before yourself.

Sabira Mehrin – Founder Wander Woman

Few words on leadership... To me, leadership means guiding people towards a positive change, taking actions to achieve goals and helping oneself to grow, subsequently.



Do you think it is harder for women to reach the top of the ladder given the circumstances of a widely-existent patriarchal environment? How can they overcome such obstacles? Patriarchy is a crucial factor to hindering growth. Setting unjustified boundaries and unfair evaluation in case of a woman's progress have always pulled us back and shattered our self-esteem. However, with resilience and grit we have been able to break many glass ceilings. This challenging path gets smoother with the support of family for every person including a woman.

Did solo travelling help you in becoming more confident? Do you think women should travel more on their own to gain increased confidence?

Solo travelling indeed instilled a certain level of confidence in me. Today, I can handle any challenge anywhere in the world. I learnt to seek support when I needed it and manage unexpected crisis without losing patience. Women should definitely travel more to believe that they can take charge of their own actions and explore the world. This would definitely broaden their mindset, keep their mental wellbeing in check and make them more confident.

Umama Zillur – Founder and Director at Kotha

Few words on leadership...

Leadership means being able to 'instill hope' amongst others. We need to be hopeful first before we are able to make any change in the society. In my line of work if I am able to encourage people to 'hope for a better future', then I am considered to be efficient and on the path of becoming a good leader.