

BREAKING BARRIERS ON TWO WHEELS

TASNIM ODRIKA

What is an indicator of social progress? In a country like Bangladesh, women still feel unsafe travelling to the nearest grocery store, their own university, and even their workplace. Public transport is not an option for a lot of them due to the various risks of harassment associated with it. In such a situation, mobility is freedom. For a lot of women, this is what riding their bike means.

"I joined my first job back in 2007. I usually had to return home quite late at night during which time finding safe transportation back home was a challenge," shares RS Lina, branch in-charge of Yamaha 3S Centre in Tejgaon. Back in 2007, her father passed away and hence keeping this job was essential for her family. This is when she decided to get her very first motorcycle.

Although at first, the decision to get a bike was solely related to easing her transportation issues, this soon turned into a passion.

"You see, I have always loved travelling. With my bike I could travel anywhere. At first I rode solo to various areas and would sometimes take my brother or my mother along with me as well. It was a thrill like I

had never experienced before," exclaimed Lina. Her love for travelling led her to create a Facebook group for likeminded women bikers who love travelling as well. With the members of Creative Minded BD (CMBD), she has managed to arrange long tours to various places in Bangladesh starting from Kaptai, Cox's Bazar, to Comilla and many others.

On the other hand, for Sadia Yeasmin Chowdhury Menal, who works for the marketing department of a reputed private company, her passion for bikes was the primary reason she finally chose to get one for herself in 2015. Although her very first motorcycle was a scooter, she now rides a Yamaha FZS FI V2. "The current bike I ride weighs more than 130 kg. My parents were not very happy with my decision to get this bike in the beginning. They worried that I might not be able to manage such a heavy vehicle," recalls Menal. But the heaviness of the bike did not pose any issues as she managed to tour several areas outside Dhaka with this bike of hers. At present, she has big plans of touring all the 64 districts of Bangladesh and even riding her bike to India.

Even a few years ago, women bikers



Bike riding training at the Yamaha Riding Academy run by ACI Motors Ltd.



only really opted for scooters. But, now it seems that the trend is shifting and women are now choosing all types of bikes. In a conversation with the Executive Director of ACI Motors Ltd., Subrata Ranjan Das reveals that their company is also starting to sell a lot of sports bikes to women – a trend that was quite unheard of a few years ago.

According to Subrata, "Riding bikes in itself is a challenge in Bangladesh due to the road conditions. For women, the challenge is much greater. At ACI Motors Ltd, we want to support these women who are breaking barriers and hence we provide bike riding trainings at our Yamaha Riding Academy (YRA)." YRA started its journey back in 2016 and till date it has trained around 1,200 women. Along with training, the riding academy also helps build a community for the riders.

"In the future, we do not just want to see increasing women bike riders. We want women to have equal economic

participation in the country. Being able to ride a bike is a huge step in that direction. The theme of this year's International Women's Day is 'Choose to challenge' and riding motorcycle is still very challenging for the women in our country. ACI Motors will always try to support these women who try to challenge the limits by taking on this challenge," adds Subrata.

As rosy as all this sounds, the road towards change has not been as smooth for women in Bangladesh.

"When I first bought my bike in 2007, I was living in Khulna. Society was much more conservative. Whenever I used to park my bike outside, I would come back to find spit all over it," recalls Lina. Since those times, she believes that society and women in Bangladesh have come a long way.

"Now whenever I'm waiting in traffic on my bike, I usually see a few other women riders beside me. This makes me feel both safe and proud," she says.

For Menal, the inappropriate comments and constant harassment never really discouraged her but further strengthened her resolve to stay on the road. She mentions that every single female bike rider she has met has faced harassment while riding their bike at least once in their lives which is not okay.

"I wanted to be a role model for other women who were too scared to get their own bikes even though they needed to. I figured that if they saw me on my bike on the streets, it would encourage other women to finally make that decision as well," claims Menal.

It seems that a solution going forward is to have more women bike riders on the road so that this idea of seeing women on motorcycles becomes normalised in Bangladesh's society. This change will not only provide more freedom to women in the country, but also help Bangladesh's society progress in the future.

Female bankers on the frontline during Covid-19

MAHMUDUL HASAN

At the end of long working days, after the sun would set and the streets became deserted, Nafisa Sarwar would have to walk home all alone.

"There were no buses, no Uber or Pathao. Most of the time, I could not even find a rickshaw on my way back home from office. And especially during month-end closings, office hours would stretch into late nights. I faced tremendous difficulties in getting transport," Nafisa said.

Her struggle reflects the experiences of thousands of female bankers in the early weeks of the pandemic as they served the customers defying all odds.

Although most of the offices shut their doors in March, when the country went into lockdown to slow the spread of the highly infectious

novel coronavirus, most of the branches of banks had to serve their customers as it was regarded as one of the emergency services.

Among frontline workers to high level policy makers, women were very prompt in stepping forward in order to respond to Covid-19.

Thousands of female employees of local banks continued to perform their duties, despite high risk of being infected by the deadly virus at a time when most business activities came to a halt.

The worst part of her pandemic plight was when Nafisa, trainee senior officer of Shahjalal Islami Bank, became infected by the virus in the middle of September.

"I had to isolate myself and keep a distance from my kid. My child used to cry when they couldn't come near



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

me," she said.

However, she thanked her office management for introducing a weekly rotation system, according to which employees would work one week and take a break the following week.

"We had to perform all kinds of duties related to processing deposits, payments and withdrawal. As we had to work with a lesser number of staff due to rotation, everyone had to face tremendous pressure because of the huge workload."

Tanni Saha, senior principal officer at Eastern Bank, has to come to the office regularly as she works for the bank's trade operations.

"When the coronavirus first hit Bangladesh, various operations of local banks were suspended and the work of some operations declined. But my work is related to export and import, so there was no way to suspend it."

"At the beginning, I was mentally disturbed due to fear and some other reasons. But the positive side is that as we started working amid the pandemic from the very beginning, our fears slowly went away," she added. She thanked her colleagues

who helped her by offering pick-up and drop-off services during those challenging times.

The pandemic changed Tanni's philosophy towards her work.

"I have been working for almost ten years in private organisations and I always thought that I work only for the organisation I am employed in."

"For the first time, a sense of satisfaction developed in me. I realised that my work has a significant impact on the country and the people. It really gives me comfort knowing that."

Suraiya Afroz, vice president and head of Bank Asia's Mohakhali Branch, spearheaded the branch's business.

"Before coronavirus hit Bangladesh, I saw the news in the media and asked all my colleagues in the branch to be careful. Because, there were many hospitals and organisations around my branch including the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research."

"But everyone thought I was a little scared. But after the virus hit Bangladesh, everyone started getting scared," she said.

Despite all the measures taken, including frequent disinfection, the branch had to close for a few weeks in April because many of its employees were infected with the virus.

"We continue to work despite all the dangers. As a woman, I work from the front," she said. "But because of this, my mental

condition was not well. Because my mother-in-law was at home, I remained isolated to keep her safe from the virus. There was always a fear. What if I contract the virus and infect one of my family members?"

Afroz was infected with Covid-19 in late August and recovered two weeks later.

Mariam Javed Juhi, head of City Alo, the dedicated women's banking division of City Bank, had the privilege to work from home during the shutdown.

However, she came up with some innovative activities to serve women in general and her clients.

City Alo started organising webinars and workshops through digital platforms.

The topics of the webinar include women in the workplace, how the fashion industry is reacting to Covid-19, knowing one's rights related to marriage, divorce and finances, experiences and lessons from survivors in fighting Covid-19, guidance on taxes during Covid-19, education during Covid-19, etc.

Workshops were conducted on digital marketing and social media, sales strategy for small businesses, career transition, child anger management, etc.

"Although we were facing unprecedented challenges, I tried to deliver something different, helping women as well as running the business," said Juhi.