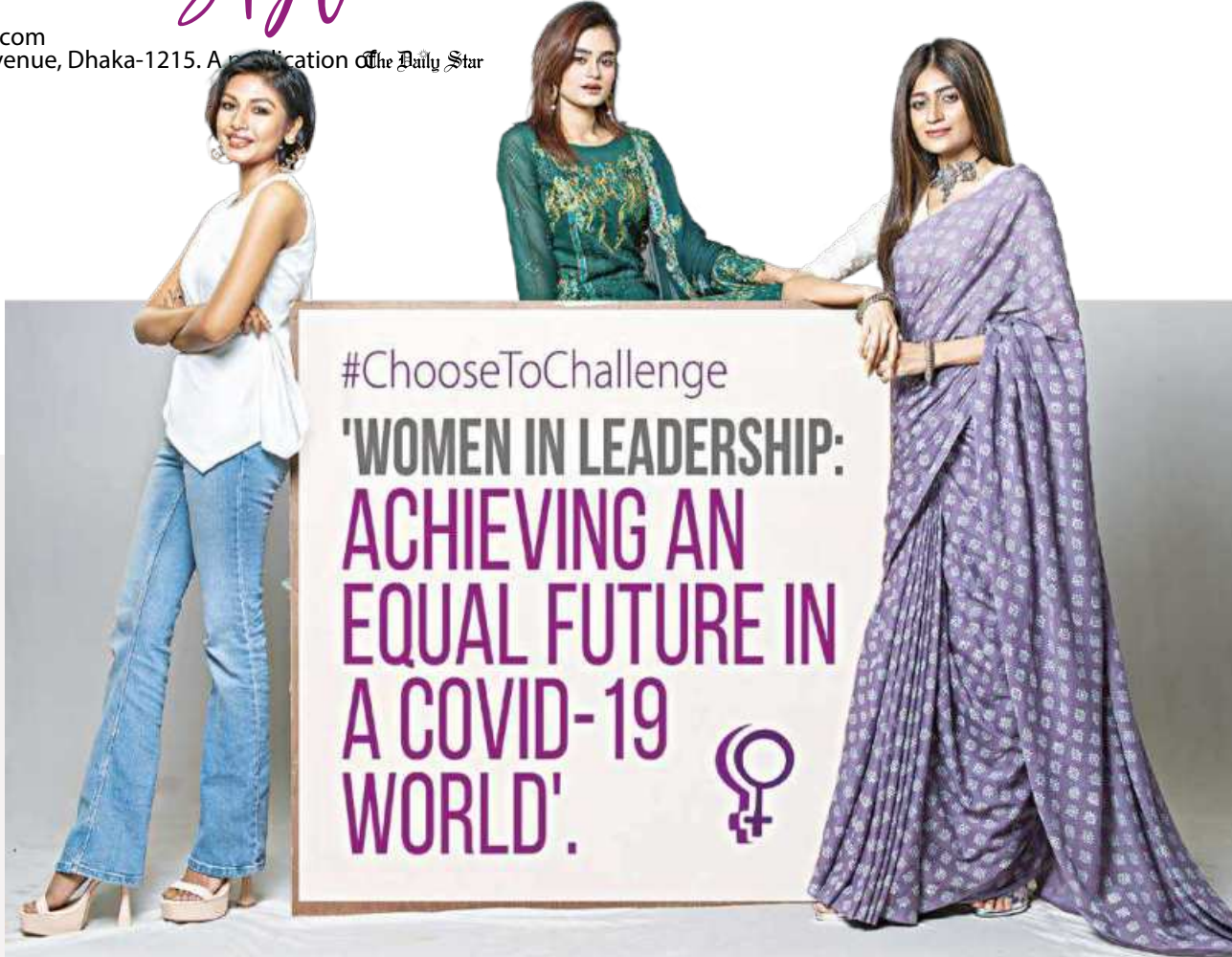


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Leaders and frontrunners

BREAKING BARRIERS
ENCOURAGING WOMEN IN STEM P4



FOR THE YOUNG AND YOUNG AT HEART
AARONG TAAGA'S NEW OFFERS P8-9



EMANCIPATION AND SUPPORT
SHWAPNO'S JODDHAS P12

PHOTO: SAZZAD IBNE SAYED

MODEL: TABINDA, ARPITA, BORNO

সুরক্ষিত দেয়াল নিরাপদ পরিবার

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#CHECK IT OUT

Women in the workplace: Silver linings and the way forward

Although issues like patriarchy and gender-based inequality should be thrown in the garbage can and become a forgotten past, they live on, deeply rooted in every sphere of the society. And the workplace is no exception. However, amidst the scores of cases of discrimination, stereotyping etc. that continues in offices, women in every field and line of work are striding forward — shattering the glass ceiling and rising to leadership positions.

These women are our inspiration and their success stories give us hope in an otherwise patriarchal and male dominated world.

And hence, on a positive note, in celebration of International Women's Day 2021 today, Star Lifestyle has taken the opportunity of speaking with many such women, hailing from various walks of life, to bring forward their journeys and achievements.

From female professionals working in large multinational companies and local organisations alike, to women who have bravely embraced entrepreneurship — and be it the field of athletics or technology or retail — we celebrate the hardship

and subsequent contribution these women have made in society, not to forget that a few of them are frontliners as well in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

They spoke eloquently and candidly — discussing the hurdles and possible solutions in overcoming them, their thoughts on leadership, the role of corporate culture and work environment, and their advice for the future or younger generation of workers.

Even though Bangladesh has come a long way when we look around, we still see horrific cases of gender-based violence and harassment, disheartening instances of discrimination, etc. But the people we are featuring today on our Women's-Day-

special have refused to succumb to patriarchy and despite all the barriers they are successful in their respective fields — the silver linings amidst the grim scenario.

After all, it needs the contribution of all genders to make a family or society or economy work. So, let the silver linings be landmarks to find our way out!

Therefore, we hope you flip through the pages and read on, as we observe International Women's Day by celebrating the successes and contributions and pointing out the hurdles of women in the workplace.

By M H Haider



Tangail Saree Kutir
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আন্তর্জাতিক নারী দিবসের শুভেচ্ছা

“কোনকালে একা হয়নিকো জয়ী,
পুরুষের তরবারী;
প্রেরণা দিয়েছে, শক্তি দিয়াছে,
বিজয়ালক্ষী নারী”

ম্যান্ডালিনা
সোপ

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রূপচর্চায় আত্মজাগৃত্য...

us on /Sandalina KOHINOOR CHEMICAL

EMPOWERING WOMEN FOR FINANCIAL FREEDOM



সব হবে
নগদ-এ



#NAGAD

A lasting impact with Nagad

The word 'Nagad' means cash. It's a word that's frequently used to refer to instant impact. Likewise, aiming to stay true to its name, Nagad has taken on initiatives that not only have an economic value, but social importance as well. Even though it's only been around for a little over two years, Nagad has already secured a large number of customers and is currently the second largest mobile finance carrier in the country.

But let's ask the real questions, what are they doing that calls for the attention? How about women empowerment?

Take Purnima Mandal, for example. Having completed the higher secondary certificate level in commerce, she was enthusiastic to start her own business and financially support her husband. As a result, she opened a mobile recharge point close to the under-construction coal-fired power station at Rampal Upazila of Bagerhat where she also started offering digital transactions with Nagad, soon after the service was launched in early 2019.

"Initially, I was a little nervous as I wondered what people might think of me, but immediately when my business started to grow with the help of Nagad, I

became confident, and now, I feel proud of my own job," said the 29-year-old turned entrepreneur, supported by Nagad.

Currently, Purnima is transacting more than Tk 25 lakh a month only through the Nagad platform. It is also helping her and her neighbourhood by cashing-out the social safety net allowances, stimulus funds among the poultry farmers who have been affected by the pandemic. Mothers of primary level students are also getting assistance from Purnima in cashing their stipend amount which the government has distributed through Nagad.

"With the business, it also quite satisfactory that I am helping the marginalised citizens to access digital service," said Purnima who is a mother herself. With an 8-year-old child, many would have thought the challenge is too unreal to take on, but Purnima not only took on the challenge, she's making real changes for her family as well as her neighbourhood.

Opening a Nagad account is as easy as dialling *167# with no hassle, and no waiting. Dial the number from your desired mobile number, and set your four-digit PIN.

While we have heard nasty stories of

women being harassed in the virtual world and over the phone because their phone number was disclosed at some transaction point somewhere, Nagad has introduced a way to tackle this issue and protect the privacy of their customers, especially women.

With the easy cash-in process through banks and VISA or Mastercard, Nagad offers an in-built virtual card which enables the user to avail all the services while hiding their mobile number. Every Nagad app user will get the virtual card, which will provide them with a 16-digit unique number, and using that number, anyone can get all the services, while protecting against virtual harassment.

The story of Purnima is one of hundreds scattered all across the country. And like Purnima, most of them get huge business every month and that has changed their lives, with Nagad.

"Our focus is to ensure convenient digital transaction facilities across the country for people from all communities and we are especially taking care of those who are lagging behind," said Tanvir A Mishuk, Managing Director of Nagad, "While

empowerment of the women is also one of our top priorities," he added.

Being a state-owned mobile financial service carrier, in partnership with the Bangladesh Post Office, Nagad has been the only mobile financial carrier in the market to offer digital payment for COVID-19 tests. During the lockdown period, hundreds of garments manufacturing companies paid their employees' salaries using the platform. A number of social welfare organisations are also collecting donations for the moment via the platform, including Bidyaniketon.

The world has changed, so has our country and its economy. Mobile Financial Services are undeniably one of the crucial elements in modern economy, but even a transaction and payment business holds responsibility towards the society, especially on important issues like women empowerment and safety. Everyone is pitching in with their own ideas, and Nagad looks like being one of the top in terms of services!

By Ashif Ahmed Rudro
Photo : Nagad

Women thriving in the corporate sector

Despite being 21 years into the 21st century, it is indeed unfortunate that a variety of hurdles still persist for women at the workplace today, even within a civilised society. However, some corporate firms actually strive to create a women-friendly atmosphere as much as possible and British American Tobacco Bangladesh can safely be listed as one.

In order to promote such views towards the society at large regarding how an organisation plays a significant role to help women climb the corporate



ladder, three amazing women from BAT Bangladesh share their views and experiences on this topic.

A progressive society starts with progressive policies

Adrita Datta, HR Business Partner at BAT Bangladesh, shares her opinion regarding women at the workplace from an HR lens.

LS: How far do you think the HR laws of our country support women at the workplace?

Datta: HR laws have evolved over the years, but there is still a long way to go. If the onus can be shared by workplaces making positive changes in small pockets, the path to progress becomes quicker and smoother. For example, at BAT, progressive attitude is prevalent through few policies.

To begin with, on top of the provided six-month maternity leave, our policy enables an extension up to nine months for female employees who are working in unconventional sectors such as in shifts at the factory or in outstation locations. We extend our maternity leave policy for parents who adopt a child, given that they are the primary caregiver, irrespective of their gender.

Emphasising on the fact that being a mother should not act as a barricade against career growth, we have introduced such novel policies. If more organisations and market leaders come up with such initiatives, this can inspire and influence national level policy changes.

LS: What are some of the challenges you face being a female team leader, if any?

Datta: When I started my career, the organisation was not sensitised to the



niche needs of women because there were not too many women to begin with. In those days, I had to devise innovative ways of getting myself heard. However, as the company evolved and women rose up the rungs, I started being treated as a leader and not a female leader.

Sociocultural barriers still exist, but from a personal point of view, it is important to not be restricted by bond or boundary when it comes to growth in your career. If you want something, reach for it – all obstacles and negativity can be dealt with later.

Pioneering to cease common workplace stereotypes

Sadia Zahin, Company Environment, Health & Safety (EHS) Manager at BAT Bangladesh, speaks about breaking stereotypical attitudes at the workplace, having worked at the factory floor during odd hours.

LS: Throughout your professional journey, how have you tackled the hurdles faced?

Zahin: When I joined eight years ago, I was the only female member in a team of 17 people. Although I received sufficient support and cooperation from my male colleagues, proving myself as credible to the team was challenging. To tackle this, I combined the forces of intellect and empathy that eventually resulted in great teamwork!

Also, there was the question of whether I am fit for the role, which I had to prove through my actions. However, in my opinion, the stereotypical mindset has altered quite a lot in the last few years, given that people are now seeing more females work in a factory environment and thus, embracing

the fact that women can also work in unconventional places such as the factory floor even during odd hours.

LS: In your accord, what are the main drivers to keep thriving in this sector?

Zahin: According to me, a strong personality is the prime driver. Remaining enthusiastic regarding work has allowed me to thoroughly enjoy it as well. As long as you are confident, you are ready to tackle any obstacle thrown your way and you will thrive. But once you falter, that is when society and other associated factors begin to intervene.

The various roles of women

Mahmuda Peya, Area Manager (Dinajpur) at BAT Bangladesh, shares her sentiments about working in a male-dominant environment.

LS: From your experience, what are the stereotypes that still persist in today's time in regards to a female leadership role?

Peya: Speaking of the industry itself, this is definitely not a very orthodox one for women. Starting from farmers to sellers, it can be regarded as a highly male-dominant industry. But as more and more females are joining this sector, this stereotypical view is gradually fading, although at an incremental rate.

Adding to that, a major prejudice that still remains is the notion that females are assumed to take decisions emotionally rather than rationally, which is far from truth. We have to juggle between several roles pristinely and this is impossible to accomplish by always thinking from an emotional perspective.

By Fariha Amber
Photo: Shahrear Kabir Heemel and BAT



The launch of Supernova – An exclusive BAT Bangladesh programme to groom female talents in STEM

For too long, jobs have been severely gendered, and women have been wrongfully deemed unfit to pursue certain professions, that have led to low representation of women in these fields.

One of the career paths which have historically been devoid of women is the field of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). Women have been systematically tracked away from pursuing their dreams in STEM.

The barrier to entry often begins from tertiary education and deteriorates further when they enter into their professional lives. A lot of these fields still remain male-dominated. However, with time, organisations in Bangladesh have supported women to excel in their STEM careers, leading to the creation of many role models who are living proof that women with drive and resilience can and will ace careers, even ones that are deemed unconventional for them.

BAT Bangladesh is one such organisation



and one of the very first organisations which have female representation at the top. In fact, 50 percent of the BAT Bangladesh Operations Leadership team consists of empowered and highly capable women. As a forerunner in gender parity and inclusivity, the company took on the responsibility to lead young girls who are taking control of their lives more fiercely and passionately than ever.

With a spirit to groom young talent and make their path to success a little less rocky, BAT Bangladesh has launched Supernova — an exclusive program to groom female talent pursuing careers in the field of STEM. This platform is designed to equip aspiring graduates with the confidence and know-how to challenge societal stereotypes.

The supernovas are paired with female mentors working in leading positions in the

Operations Function of BAT Bangladesh. Through the 1-year long programme, they will have the opportunity to be coached by these mentors and receive grooming on developing their skills.

Maeesha Ryaan, a student from Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology (AUST), said, "I'm thankful to Supernova for creating an opportunity where I can express myself freely and have a sneak peek at the corporate world before I graduate."

Ramisha Raida Karim, a student at the Islamic University of Technology (IUT) said, "This platform will help us develop leadership quality and prepare ourselves to do better in any field of profession we choose. Our mentors will help us grow as confident individuals."

Madeha Sattar Khan, a student at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology said, "I am very excited to find out what kind of person this year-long mentorship programme will mould me into."

The programme is being proudly sponsored by the leadership team at BAT Bangladesh. Throughout the year, the Supernovas will get the opportunity to network with and learn from the very best, and be equipped to craft their future as bold, strong and unstoppable shining stars!

Photo: BAT



A WARRIOR IN THE FIGHT AGAINST THE PANDEMIC



"Having two young children and an elderly mother-in-law at home, it was dangerously risky for me to go out during the pandemic. Still, I couldn't leave my work and my community behind," shares Haowa Khanam, a socio-economic and nutrition facilitator (SENF) of the Shonirvor CDC Cluster under the Livelihoods Improvement of Urban Poor Communities (LIUPC) project of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

As soon as the pandemic hit, 35-year-old Haowa and her team were out in the field with banners and leaflets containing COVID-19 safety guidelines. She also worked on installing hand-washing stations and carried out training sessions to teach people of her community at Korail Slum the importance of proper hand-washing. However, even though she was going out to

work for the greater good of the community, not everyone was supportive of her actions.

"Initially, people in my community did not approve of me going outside my house during the pandemic and tried to stop me multiple times," shares Haowa. She had to explain to them how her PPE would protect her from the virus and that they need not worry. "I viewed the pandemic as a kind of war. During wars, you don't only think about yourself but about what's best for all the people around you. And that's exactly what I did," she continues. She and her team also faced resistance from the police, with one of their operations being completely shut down. "We didn't give up. We changed the way we worked and continued serving the community," says Haowa.

Haowa's career started at a

garments factory soon after she got married. Later on, she found work at BRAC, where she spent around eight years. "Then my child fell ill, and I had to leave Dhaka. It was a huge struggle financially for me without work," recounts Haowa. After two years, she was back in the capital, looking for work at an NGO again since she had found her calling – social work. She quickly found a job at UNDP in 2019 and has since been working tirelessly in her role.

"The fact that I can stand by my community during a global pandemic and share advice that can help improve their lives is something I'm greatly proud of," shares Haowa. She hopes to continue her work in the future and has dreams of seeing her two little girls grow up to be successful women.

**By Mayabee Arannya
Photo: Rashed Shumon**

A MOTHER TO THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY



"I was six months pregnant when the pandemic first hit Bangladesh, but I knew I had to go out and help my community," shares Sajia Akter, a 29-year-old mother of two. Since July 2019, Sajia has been working as a socio-economic and nutrition facilitator (SENF) for the Alor Pothey CDC Cluster under the Livelihoods Improvement of Urban Poor Communities (LIUPC) project of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

"I used to be petrified of the risks of going out, especially as a pregnant woman. Being in PPE all day under the sun was no easy feat," recounts Sajia, whose team single-handedly distributed five soaps per household to 2,760 families in her community at Bauniabadh. One issue they faced during this operation was that people began to gather around the distribution point. "We couldn't risk COVID-19

transmission, so we instead went door-to-door to every single house. We ensured that not one family was left out," shares Sajia. They also delivered food baskets to 150 families. These essentials were life-changing for people during a time of increasing economic uncertainty, as many community members were being laid off.

With two young children at home, Sajia's day usually begins at 4:30AM as she juggles taking care of the kids and working full-time as a SENF. "We are all slaves of habit. At one point, I got used to this routine, especially since I love the work that I do," shares Sajia, with a big smile on her face. One aspect of her work she is most passionate about is helping pregnant women and young mothers. Currently, her team is responsible for counselling 97 young mothers. Sajia ensures food baskets containing eggs, oil

and other essentials are delivered to them every month.

"We regularly monitor whether the food is going directly to the mother and child as intended," she adds. Sajia also holds meetings with the women of the community to explain COVID-19 guidelines and nutrition information, especially for pregnant women and young mothers. "Since I am raising my children following the correct nutritional guidelines, I can be an example to other mothers in the community. If my words can help even one mother, I consider that a huge success," mentions Sajia.

"I am grateful to LIUPC for allowing me to do such meaningful work. I hope to continue working relentlessly for the betterment of my community," she adds.

**By Mayabee Arannya
Photo: Rashed Shumon**

A BEACON OF RESILIENCE



"I had always dreamt of working to help marginalised communities, and I made sure my dream came true," shares 23-year-old Beauti Rani Sikder, a woman who not only takes care of her family on her own but has also dedicated her life to taking care of her community. With her father having left when she was only five years old and her mother tragically passing away a year and a half ago, Beauti was left to fend for herself and her younger sister.

Adding to her list of hardships was the global pandemic that hit Bangladesh in March 2020. "I wouldn't leave the house. It felt like corona was standing outside like a ghost waiting to catch me," says Beauti, recounting the horrifying first few days of lockdown. But she quickly realised that the situation was bigger than her fears. As a Community Facilitator (CF) of Alor Khojey CDC Cluster under the

Livelihoods Improvement of Urban Poor Communities (LIUPC) project of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), she couldn't just stay put and let her community at Korail slum suffer.

Putting her fears aside, she went door-to-door with her team and distributed soap, COVID-19 awareness banners and leaflets, and food baskets. "Looking back, I can't believe how I managed to carry out distribution even during heavy rainfall," shares Beauti. Rain, however, wasn't the only barrier she and her team faced. "Sometimes, the police would frisk us or even threaten to take us away if we continued our work," she adds. Even though they were in full PPE gear and had UNDP identification, the national lockdown was still strictly maintained by law enforcement.

"Despite all these barriers, we worked day and night, during weekends and

even national holidays. It gave us peace of mind knowing that we were doing something great for our community," shares Beauti, who has been working as a CF for over a year now.

Beauti and her team also worked on installing hand washing stations, and they routinely monitored whether people were washing their hands properly and maintaining all COVID-19 safety guidelines. "To avoid having large families using a single hand washing station, we also introduced tippy taps, which are low cost and easy to install. They're like big water bottles that can easily be turned on and off," explains Beauti.

Looking to the future, Beauti hopes to continue her education and become successful and independent, as per her late mother's wishes.

**By Mayabee Arannya
Photo: Rashed Shumon**

RESOLVE IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY



"I dream of building a world where no human being ever has to die of starvation," replies Runa Akter, with firm resolve when asked what she wants to do in the future. As Bangladesh is set to graduate to middle income status, the 23-year-old believes that at this point, there should not be a single person going hungry.

But when COVID-19 struck the country and lockdowns were put in place in March of 2020, food insecurity increased. People lost jobs and poverty spiked. But Runa remained resilient and amidst the uncertainty caused by the virus, she always stood beside the marginalised community. As a Community Facilitator (CF) for the Livelihoods Improvement of Urban Poor Communities (LIUPC) project of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), she was involved right from the beginning of the lockdown in the work towards relieving the sufferings of her community in the Jatrabari area of

Dhaka city.

"When working during the lockdown, I did not really have any fear. This was work that I wanted to do. The real challenge was the empty roads, lack of transport, and getting past the police and the army. Every time we left the house, we would be barraged with various questions by law enforcers and we had to convince them to let us work," shares Runa. Furthermore, there was also resistance from her landlord as they feared she might infect the people in her building. But throughout all these obstacles, she had one goal in mind. She knew that the people in her community were facing hardship and they needed help. With this in mind, she carried out her services by following all the necessary COVID-19 preventative measures.

At the peak of the pandemic, Runa helped distribute soap and

food baskets to the marginalised families. Along with her team, she set up hand washing stations and monitored them as well. She also worked to raise awareness among slum residents.

Listening to her fearless stories in the face of the pandemic makes one awe at her resolve. In fact, Runa Akter has been working tirelessly to bring change in her community for over a decade now through involvement in several other UNDP projects.

"If I did not get the chance to work with the marginalised community, I never would have fully understood their struggles. The more I got to witness their hardships, the more my love and passion grew for the work I do. I am grateful that I have this platform."

**By Tasnim Odrika
Photo: Rashed Shumon**



DARING TO DREAM FOR A BETTER WORLD



"My parents were eager to get me married right after my SSC examination but I resisted. Now they are both very proud of the work I do for my community," shares Ayesha Siddika Shilpi, 20, a Socio-Economic and Nutrition Facilitator (SENF) for the Livelihoods Improvement of Urban Poor Communities (LIUPC) project under United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

At first glance, her demeanour may seem meek. But as she starts describing the work she does, one can sense her passion and tenacity.

"In March 2020, as word of the pandemic spread, misinformation amidst the masses followed suit. This misinformation and lack of awareness remained at its peak among the slum dwellers. I knew that I could not just sit at home while all these people needed help," adds Ayesha. Although her work



is mainly related to raising nutritional awareness for pregnant women, during the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, she also helped raise awareness regarding the virus and the necessary preventative measures. Her work was centred on ward number 49 of the Dhalpur area of Dhaka city. But she went the extra mile to help poor communities residing in other areas as well whenever she could.

With the help of UNDP and Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC), she started personally visiting the slums and raising awareness by distributing informational posters among the dwellers there and using microphones to curb misinformation. People living in slums did not have hand washing stations near their houses, which dramatically increased the chances of carrying the virus inside their homes. In order to deter the transmission of the virus, Ayesha helped build tippy

taps outside each house and also campaigned for proper hand washing methods to fight the virus.

"To say it was a challenge working as a frontline worker in an area like Dhalpur which had been a red zone with colossal numbers of COVID-19 cases, is truly an understatement. In the beginning, fear overpowered the poor communities that I work for and they were reluctant to listen to me. It took a lot of time and patience, but in the end, I was able to earn their trust," recalls Ayesha, with a hint of pride gleaming in her eyes.

Currently in her third year as an economics student, Ayesha has a vision for the future. All her dreams revolve around helping the marginalised in her community.

**By Tasnim Odrika
Photo: Rashed Shumon**

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.

Gender based violence have become a major topic of discussion in the recent times – would you like to elaborate on this. What inspired you to start Kotha?

Gender based violence is a very strong topic. We usually do not find any inspiration in these words. So, when I am asked what



inspired me to begin Kotha, I usually say 'rage!' That's exactly how I feel and I expect others to reciprocate in the same way because of the way we have normalised and become desensitised to such a heinous crime.

At Kotha, we work on the primary level, trying to change the mindset of the people. The root cause of gender-based violence is the way that we think. In our society we are encouraged to 'not talk' and hence the name Kotha. So 'speaking' is a way to our protests. We encourage everyone to talk about what's bothering them, what's hindering their progress, what's causing unhappiness in their lives.

Any words for the future leaders?

Always question what you are told. We are usually dictated everything; we need to be able to decide for ourselves what we want and not be navigated by others. And we should also remember that it is easy to rise as a single person and that the real achievement lies elsewhere — where we rise together as a team!

Ambreen Reza – Co-Founder and MD at foodpanda

What does being a leader mean to you?

First and foremost, leadership means 'being willing' to listen. You have to listen to the people around you — that's how you learn and implement new changes and achieve new goals together. Beyond that, being a good leader is about empowering everyone in your vicinity, being there for your team and giving your team the independence so that people never feel like their creativity and ability to innovate is being hampered.

Do you think it is harder for women to reach the top of the ladder due to the



dominant ideology of patriarchy?

I think that patriarchal notions often work to constrain women, and prevent them from reaching their full potential. These outdated notions have no place in the workplace, or anywhere else for that matter. So, as we move further into the digital era, I hope that everyone will be extended the same opportunities and allowed to climb to the top with no restrictions.

How did you gather the courage to think

out-of-the-box and break all sorts of glass ceilings to reach where you are today?

I have never been the one to settle! All my life I have tried to break the norms and I have worked hard to make sure that I'm always able to get a seat at the table. I was the first girl in my extended family to represent my school in the sports teams, to get a scholarship and pursue studies abroad, to be on the Dean's List at a foreign university, and to become a chartered accountant. Throughout my life my parents have empowered me to never settle and provided me with ample amounts of freedom, and I have used that to propel myself forward, towards new goals.

Any advice for the future leaders?

My advice is to follow dreams and never be dissuaded by failure. Any good idea needs grit and perseverance, to become a reality. Take criticism and feedback, but never let it hold you back. Instead, use it to learn more, forge forward to make impactful changes, and create something that really helps to make a difference in the lives of your target audience.

On Women's Day, as we pay homage to the leaders and recognise their efforts, we also instil a special hope amongst ourselves that everything is possible. Pandemic or not, nothing should be able to hinder our ways to progress. It only gets better from here, for all the genders.

#choosetochallenge #supportequality #supportprogress #supportwomen #womeninleadership

BY LS DESK

Wardrobe: TAAGA

Styling: Azra Mahmood

Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed



BOISHAKH/1428



#ADI

An inspiring workplace: Aadi BD

“Working hard is important, but there is something that matters even more believing in yourself.”

These very words were uttered by Harry Potter when he was addressing his peers in the Order of the Phoenix. Those words were valuable to anyone who was striving to succeed back then and they are just as important in today's world, especially for each and every one of those women who are working day in and day out to make their presence known to the world.

Sure, it's the modern world — it's the 21st century, where rockets land themselves; but has our society really changed as much as we'd have liked? The workplace is still not as smooth for women as it should be and one can't just ignore that fact. In the midst of that, Aadi holds an example that shows a ray of hope.

The idea for Aadi (www.aadi.com.bd) blossomed in 2017, and the company started its journey in 2018. Even though it's an online marketplace, it's a bit different from the rest. Aadi allows the local artisans, brands and manufacturers to sell their

products across borders. Local artisans, brands and manufacturers, particularly women, have a chance to make their brand's presence known to the rest of the world.

While there are a lot of businesses in our country still reluctant to let women into key roles, Aadi is having none of that. Their CEO, Fatima Begum, had some insightful words



to say. “In our workplace, we prioritise to consider humans as professionals, not stereotype them as men or women. We believe in fair and equal chances in leadership,” she said, pointing out that she wanted to launch Aadi as an icon of empowerment as well.

Nusrat Jahan, another woman in one of the key roles at Aadi, who handles the legal affairs and Human Resources, thinks women should be more vocal in our country to make their voice heard.

“Girls should be brought to the front line; don't just leave them in the back,” she interjected, referring to the prejudices still existing in our country. “When a person starts working, they need to feel valued and girls are often deprived of that,” she added, saying that Aadi is very open to hearing all they have to say and she's learning here.

You ever wondered if you are pursuing two dreams? Or feel like it's too difficult and you can't do it? You really shouldn't, and Maswiyat Iftekhar is proof as to why. She plays Basketball for Bangladesh National Women's Basketball team. She's also studying architecture at North South University and at the same time, working part time at Aadi. Sure, there have been difficult days with her commutes, but she's been with Aadi from the beginning and the friendly workplace certainly made it easier to cope.

Aadi is still a start-up and a start-up is usually more demanding than your average business. It asks for longer office hours, doing a lot of research on the market, building a new team and ensuring that there is a balance in everything. When you put all that together, it ends up being an eco-system and like any eco-system, you have to maintain the balance or it might fall apart. Aadi thinks a balance of women in the team will not only maintain that eco-

system but will boost it.

Teams are human beings working together, like the cogs of a wheel, and every now and then, a team member might need some support. But it's worth it.

Take Bijoy Lakshmi, head of Marketing at Aadi, for example. She is a mother and has to take on the challenge of maintaining her family and her job at the same time. Aadi understands that and is very flexible. Lakshmi on the other hand, appreciates the support and makes up for it with her work.

“Our HR has policies making the work hours flexible for new mums and giving them time to take care of their children, something that many organisations still do not think about, but here at Aadi, we offer that,” she said, pointing out that Aadi is very supportive and focuses on empowering women.

There used to be a time when women in crucial roles were only found in fiction; those days are long gone. Women are proving themselves in every sector and they have left ample evidence that not only are they able to handle leadership roles, they are good at it. Aadi holds no prejudice in their workplace, and its time this culture became commonplace all across the country.

By Ashif Ahmed Rudro

#HOA

In conversation with Tanzila Elma of House of Ahmed

In the new, Kamala-Harris-led world, more and more women from all walks of life are shattering glass ceilings and remodelling themselves to fit their own expectations. One such force to be reckoned with is Tanzila Elma, co-founder of House of Ahmed, a luxury label, entrepreneur and mother of two.

A businesswoman who knows her market, her clients and her products to the T, Tanzila is far from your average success story. Her journey began as a starry-eyed student, harbouring an untapped arsenal of creativity who dared to reach for the skies. Starting out by just designing apparels for her close circle of friends and relatives way back in 2013, House of Ahmed has been developing in baby steps over the years, with Tanzila putting into effect everything she has learned about marketing thus far, and then some.

Breathing life into lessons she learned from a fast-paced corporate job, Tanzila



dreamed bigger. She wanted to highlight Bangladesh; she wanted to affect economic change. She wanted to be an independent entrepreneur.

"I started House of Ahmed to put Bangladesh's name on the map of ethnic fashion. Bengal's artisans are underrated and their work is as good as any South Asian designers revered globally. We are motivated by the honest attempt to showcase the skillset and, quite plainly, the extraordinary magic a Bengali artisan is capable of producing by intertwining ordinary threads," explains Tanzila.

Easier said than done, Tanzila has worked relentlessly to frame her vision into a tangible enterprise. First and foremost, identifying the need for ethnic couture originating from Bangladesh, honing effective communication skills, understanding her customers and then creating an efficient supply chain were all steps that Tanzila effectively climbed as a true entrepreneur. At the top now stands the

glorified Bangladeshi ethnic atelier and a self-sustaining business, the House of Ahmed.

If you think these feats were achieved without pesky challenges, think again. Apart from the unstable waters of the Bangladeshi economy, simply being a woman is hard enough. And being a woman in business, naïve and inexperienced, is the cherry on top of this gender-biased cake.

Crushing the cake like a trailblazer, Tanzila set her own rules. This is where her strong and empathetic personality shined through beautifully.

"It's hard for a woman to be heard; nobody wants to hear what she has to say," states Tanzila. Empowered from within, she then reverts, "But I wasn't going to have any of that. I make sure that people listen to me."

Thinking of entrepreneurship as a means to do something for the community she's a part of, Tanzila is an avid believer of giving back. And this is exactly what defines one of the core beliefs of House of Ahmed.

"We want to help reduce poverty in the lives of Bengal's artisans. We want to uplift them by giving economic value to their skills. The tapestry they can weave, the immaculate designs they can create and the wonder they can strike in the heart of any on-looker deserves appreciation and monetary valuation," argues Tanzila.

This year's International Women's Day may campaign for a changed and alert world with its trending hashtag, #ChooseToChallenge, but Tanzila is focused on a far more personal objective.

"Instead of challenging a norm and rising in protest, I believe in developing my own self, both professionally and personally, and letting my work speak for itself. If I can prove myself and my capabilities, I'll basically be bypassing any norm or limitation thrown my way," she concludes.

By Ramisa Haque
Photo: House of Ahmed

**সাদার
আব এক
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ফাস্ট ওয়াশ

10 POWER WASH

১০ মিনিটে পাওয়ার ওয়াশিং এর মাজিক

Multi Booster

কাপড়ের যে কোন দাগ ময়লাকে নিমিষে দূর করে

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KOHINOOR CHEMICAL

Stories of the 'Shwapno Joddha'

Known for quality products and top-notch service, Shwapno has contributed immensely to keeping their customers and employees happy during difficult times. Yet, the women behind the scenes have gone unrecognised. However, their immense leadership and sense of responsibility have been recognised by Shwapno through 'Shwapno Joddha', an expression of appreciation and gratitude towards every employee.

Let's take a deeper look into some of these women's lives as Shwapno employees.

Luthfun Nahar Subarna

Working with Shwapno for two years, zonal customer relationship manager Subarna, currently looks over the Gulshan and Banani branches. As the family's sole provider, she was relieved to have a secured job in Shwapno during the COVID-19 lockdown. Without any fear of unemployment, she dedicated herself to her work.

Subarna was mindful of how crucial it was to provide customers with their desired products in online shopping. She felt a greater responsibility when customers living abroad would want to have groceries delivered to their families in the country. She extended her responsibility while facing a bigger challenge, catering to infected customers.



She believes that it was her duty to ease any fear presiding over her team. It was up to her to mentally strengthen and motivate them. It was only fair that such customers were treated like any other and no compromises were made.

In some instances, she herself had stepped into the field, saying, "If an employee felt hesitant, I went with them."

However, she had her concerns. What if she catches the virus? Her courage came from powerful support systems; her family and Shwapno.

Her biggest motivator and the most rewarding part of the job is customer feedback, reassuring her that they have earned their customers' trust.

"Being in the frontline, customer service is important to keep us going and feeling satisfied with the risks we're taking," states Subarna.

Making people happy through her efforts in such trying times was not limited to the customers. Subarna made sure to keep her team mentally motivated by encouraging their bonding, maintaining all safety protocols and checking up on each other if they fell sick.



Mahfuza Jolil Esha

Being with Shwapno for a decade now, working during the pandemic and lockdown felt like nothing out of the ordinary for Esha. Due to the management's effort in maintaining spirits high and a calm and normalised environment, she considers herself lucky to be a Shwapno employee.

As the Mirpur outlet's operation manager, Esha's responsibilities start from product availability to customer satisfaction. She elaborates how her team looks at her as a leader and respects her decisions. Going beyond her role as leader, she built an intimate relationship with her team as their friend to maintain morale.

She credits Shwapno for giving her the training to successfully do so. Furthermore, she highly appreciates Shwapno's zero tolerance attitude when it comes to harassment and protecting their female employees.

"Female employees are prioritised and as a female employee, I get a lot of benefits along with respectful treatment," she says with gratitude.

She concludes, "I thank Shwapno and am grateful to be working here. It's like we never experienced a pandemic within these walls."

Sultana Begum

For 12 years, Sultana Begum, the senior outlet operation manager of the Zindabazar branch in Sylhet, has never had second thoughts about her job. The selling point, for her, is the emphasis Shwapno places on employee safety and the respect she is given.

"Our management is respectful of female employees, something rarely found in other places," she says proudly.

The lockdown was a critical time for Sultana due to her pregnancy. Naturally, she was a little fearful. However, as the management provided all security possible, she stayed true to her duty.

"My responsibility outweighed my fears. I was also aware of my own safety and being recognised as 'Shwapno Joddha' I was inspired to work," she adds.

Along with receiving timely salaries and the management handling travelling costs, if female employees were unable to come to work, they still received full payments.

For Sultana, Shwapno took responsibility for 75 percent of her medical expenses related to her pregnancy with a 4-month maternity leave afterwards.

Sultana did not have to sacrifice being a mother. During her lunch breaks, she goes home to her children. As instructed by the management, family emergencies are always brought to light and employees are given days-off without pay cuts.

A little respect goes a long way, and Sultana's experience in Shwapno is exemplary of the success women can achieve when given fair opportunities.

She describes her work experience by saying, "When I do something well, higher management congratulates me. I feel like a valuable employee and it motivates me to keep pushing thrice as hard."

She beautifully concludes by illustrating her relationship with Shwapno and her team, saying, "I'm grateful and proud that I work in Shwapno. Before I go to work, I have a family. Once I enter the store, I have another."

With reduced working hours during the pandemic, proper payments, transportation, meals and safety gear, these women were able to dedicate themselves to the betterment of society with confidence and undivided attention. Being acknowledged as warriors, they have never stepped down from their responsibilities in the workspace and in their families, continuing to do their rightful part in keeping society together.

By Puja Sarkar
Photo: Prabir Das and Sheik Nasir