

50 YEARS OF BANGLADESH

# A role model in the humanitarian and development sector



MUHAMMAD MUSA

**I**N the last 50 years, Bangladesh has emerged as a role model for developing countries around the world. From incredible economic growth to vast strides in education and public health, to major contributions

in culture and sports, Bangladesh has transformed into not just a leader amongst countries in the global South, but a truly global player. Since its independence, leaders from several different sectors have come together to create collective value for the country. During this time of celebration on the occasion of the anniversary of Bangladesh, all these sectors will receive well-deserved praise. However, today, I want to focus on a less visible area where Bangladesh is emerging as a global leader—the humanitarian and development sector.

There are several humanitarian and development actors who helped Bangladesh grow to where it is today, including the Grameen Bank and others. However, one visionary leader, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, was among the first to turn outwards and help bring Bangladeshi innovation to the world. BRAC, the development organisation Sir Abed founded just after independence, is now not only a leader in Bangladesh, where it continues to support and uplift the poorest and most vulnerable, but is also a global leader in the humanitarian and development sector. BRAC now works in 10 countries across Asia and Africa, bringing the same proven innovations it developed

in Bangladesh to people in need around the world.

BRAC built a name for itself by developing new innovations in health, microfinance, education and several other fields, and developing systems to bring those innovations to scale. Through collaboration with local communities, continued testing and measurement, and partnership with resource and knowledge partners in the global North, BRAC was able to develop and implement some of the most radically transformative poverty alleviation programmes in the world. These same programmes are still running today, changing lives wherever they are implemented.

One such innovation has been the Ultra-Poor Graduation Approach. Developed with the leadership of local communities in Bangladesh and then proven impactful through intensive measurements around the world, this has been heralded as one of the first scalable solutions proven to break the poverty trap. BRAC and its partners/peers are now bringing the Graduation approach to the world, helping other governments and organisations implement Graduation



PHOTO: TED, BRAC

programmes in over 40 countries. There is no doubt that Bangladesh's early investment in its youth and education has helped it progress to the nation it is today. Similarly, BRAC's low-cost non-formal primary education model, which helped expand education access across rural Bangladesh, has also proven very effective at reaching out-of-school children, especially girls, in other countries. Currently, BRAC is running schools in Afghanistan, the Philippines and Uganda, which are all

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proving to be low cost, locally compatible and very effective. Right now, the Mindanao regional government in the Philippines is taking up this model on its own, utilising BRAC as the main technical advisor.

BRAC's play-based Early Childhood Development model has proven remarkably effective, even in the most challenging contexts as well as in stable communities. In the Rohingya refugee camps, BRAC Play-Labs have captured the local games, language, toys and culture, with the philosophy of

promoting healing, learning needs and growth to support children in very difficult circumstances. These learnings have helped expand Play Labs to children in Tanzania, Uganda, and others. Even through the Covid-19 pandemic, new technologies and approaches, like utilising local radio stations, have allowed us to continue to reach children in their homes and ensure they don't miss out on this critical developmental period. Additionally, in six countries where BRAC has been running its microfinance programme, it is now adding products like agriculture extension loans and loans focused on youth and adolescents.

Historically, NGO development programmes have been run the world over by Western and Northern actors. With the growing influence of Bangladesh, we have now established a Southern model for development, where Southern innovation and values are promoted. Currently, 160 Bangladeshis are working and playing leadership roles in their own areas of disciplines in 10 countries around the world for BRAC, supporting those countries to grow in their own right.

This Southern approach to uplifting the poorest and most marginalised among us is a radical transformation in the humanitarian and development sector, and impacts the lives of not only Bangladeshis, but people all over the world. Bangladesh should be just as proud of its accomplishments in the development sector and celebrate its role as a leader in Southern innovation as much as it celebrates its cricket team.

Dr Muhammad Musa is the Executive Director at BRAC International.

## The business of being a female online entrepreneur



AFIA JAHIN

**T**HINK of something you want. Anything. No, really. Be it a set of frosted cupcakes, a piece of jewellery, or homemade sushi rolls. Or, perhaps, a very specific outfit that only exists in your mind—until a photo of it appears

on your Facebook newsfeed in the form of an ad (better known as a “sponsored post”). All you need to do after that is message the Page that posted the ad, enquire about the product's price (a process formally referred to as “inbox for price”), quality, quantity, delivery timeline, etc, and give them all the details they will need in order to make sure the product reaches your hands within—usually—one to five working days.

It's that easy, and a bit scary for being so easy. Let's leave worrying about robots taking over for a different day, though. Instead, let us wonder: is every transaction made online as simple for the seller as it is for customers?

When the Covid-19 pandemic set in around last March in Bangladesh, it wasn't long until we all got desperately bored of being stuck in our homes, worrying (often panicking) about The Future, and turning to quirky distractions. Luckily, we had the internet and soon realised that we weren't the only ones whipping coffee or suddenly turning into pros at cooking, baking, painting, etc—the rest of the world was going through the same. In fact, some of us got so good that we felt confident enough to earn some cash from our newly-found hobbies.

A year later, while many have returned to their pre-pandemic lives, the fad of pastimes dusted off, for quite a few people, those hobbies actually turned out to be serious business—literally.

While Zarrin Tasnim (owner of Cravory, an online food shop where she sells her homemade sushi rolls and desserts) has always had a knack for cooking and finding joy in feeding others, it wasn't until the pandemic hit that she felt her products could fill a gap in the market for delicious and affordable food that is also different from

what's usually on the market. “Soon after I started offering them through Facebook groups, my customers started appreciating my food and they would further encourage their peers to try them,” Zarrin tells me, “I got a surreal amount of appreciation and love from some very amazing people.”

Of course, it was a challenge to find many ingredients during the lockdown, but especially ones which Zarrin needed because they belonged to a foreign cuisine

But given how delicate some of her cakes are, and how new the business of delivering food still is in our country, the young baker had been in for a rocky beginning. “For some time, I struggled to find a good delivery service,” says Naseeha, mentioning that some of the cakes did suffer mishaps because of unsuitable delivery services. “But thankfully, my customers were very understanding and supportive about it. I do use a reliable service now, but it took me some trial and error to

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PHOTO: COLLECTED

and were not always available even before the pandemic. A second challenge was delivering the food to customers properly, and this was felt greatly by home baker Naseeha Nuzhat Rahman as well.

Naseeha has been baking for years, conjuring up unique and decorative cakes for her friends' birthdays and other occasions. But seeing all the hard work and carefully-selected ingredients she put into her baking, her friends insisted on paying her for her craft, and also encouraged (nay, nagged) her to turn it into a business like she had always wanted to. That is how Bucklebury Ferry, Naseeha's online bakery, came to be in September last year.

reach this point.” Although the average time taken for a delivery to be completed has shortened significantly over the past few years (from at least two days to orders now being delivered the next day after placing them, or even on the same day in cases of urgency), both sellers and customers still face age-old issues such as delays in delivery, and products being displaced or damaged. However, it is usually the seller who has to refund the customer for a lost product. And if a customer is unable to receive a product one day, the delivery company has to hold the product for another day and the seller will often have to pay the company a fine for said delay.

Another prevalent issue is when sellers make or order a product (from international websites) for individual customers, but the customers often “disappear” when the product is ready or cancel the order once the product arrives to the seller. This certainly incurs a loss given that the customised product may not be sellable to other customers of the business. While some sellers do require their customers to make a partial advance payment in order to avoid such situations, this is not possible for newer businesses as they need to gain credibility with their first few batches of orders.

But beyond all of these hurdles, some young entrepreneurs have to deal with personal issues which trickle into business matters, threatening to majorly hinder their aspirations.

Azmary Khan, a business student who had always wanted to run a business of her own, was finally prepared to pursue that dream when the pandemic hit. As such, the first few months of her business, Aurora (which mainly stocks imported jewellery and clothing items), were uneventful until she was gradually able to sell some of her initial stock. Now, her business' group and page on Facebook both have over 3,000 members and likes, respectively. However, when asked what the biggest challenge she faced in conducting her business has been, she spoke of two major ones. “Firstly, my father doesn't know that I have a business of my own,” Azmary stated, “And, secondly, I started my business with zero [outside] investment. I am still struggling, but at the end of the day it's worth it.”

The same kind of familial opposition is mirrored in Naseeha's experience. “Growing up, I often talked about being a chef and I

would be discouraged, as my family preferred more academic fields. Even when I was brainstorming for Bucklebury Ferry, their disapproval and worries about how it would affect my education delayed me [starting my business] for quite some time. And I can't help but think I'd be in a better position now, if I had started sooner.”

Though some have the tendency to not take online businesses seriously, most of the population is by now well aware of how accessible almost every kind of service and product has become, thanks to social media platforms and the internet at large.

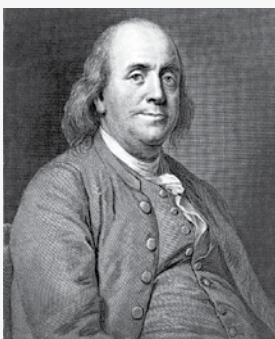
It is not news that a greater number of barriers exist for women entrepreneurs than what are in place for men. However, despite all of this, it is undeniable how much more convenient it is now for women to own and operate their own businesses, utilising their skills and crafts remotely and still finding immense success. And the three stories presented above are surrounded by thousands of similar (almost identical) ones, given how all such entrepreneurs have one bittersweet experience in common: that of being a Bangladeshi woman.

So while Naseeha hopes—with caution—to someday be completely reliant on her online bakery, Zarrin and Azmary are ever-optimistic about the future of their respective businesses, given the upward trajectory of the popularity of online shopping in Bangladesh.

Regardless, until the robots assume all duties, it is a welcome sight to see women (young and old) breaking down the societal walls of convention, without ever having to leave the house.

Afia Jahin is a member of the Editorial Team at The Daily Star.

**QUOTABLE Quote**



**BENJAMIN FRANKLIN**  
Founding Father of the United States (1706—1790)

*By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

<b>ACROSS</b>	38 Small porches	19 They may hold up dinner
1 Impair	41 On this spot	20 Bond component
5 Huey, to Donald	42 Conditional release	21 Camera part
11 Baseball's Matty	43 Big heads	22 Style of the 1920s
12 Soar	44 Homes	23 Magnetic metal
13 Stocking stuffers	45 Helper: Abbr.	28 "Don't misbehave!"
14 Israel's intelligence service	<b>DOWN</b>	29 Basic need
15 Rider's protection	1 Millinery wares	30 Skillet
17 Stellar cat	2 Lotion additive	31 Tennis great
18 Crucial	3 Feature of some British pound coins	35 Wields
22 Personal log	4 Bring together	36 Amorous archer
24 Tickle pink	5 Newborn's need	37 Try out
25 Mess up	6 Change over time	38 Relaxing resort
26 Good, to Georges	7 flower part	39 Bar bill
27 Rooster features	8 Possesses	40 Spanish gold
30 Hand parts	9 Greek vowel	
32 Beginning	10 Join together	
33 Frothy brew	16 Yong fellow	
34 Knight's glove		

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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

B	E	D	S	S	A	M	P	A	N
A	X	E	S	Q	U	E	E	N	S
J	A	D	E	U	G	A	N	D	A
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**BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER**

THIS DARN RASH IS DRIVING ME CRAZY!  
IT FEELS BETTER IF I ROLL MY PANT LEG UP  
IS HE ON ZOOM?  
YES BUT DON'T GO IN THERE, HE ISN'T WEARING PANTS

**BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT**

I LOVE WHAT YOU'VE DONE WITH THE PLACE.