

RUBANA HUQ – 2014



Managing Director
of Mohammadi
Group

Rubana Huq has been praised for steering one of the most successful apparel companies in Bangladesh: Mohammadi Group.

At the 15th Bangladesh Business Awards ceremony, her name played out as an inspiration for women in the corporate world largely dominated by men. She has been feted for excelling in her professional life both as a leader and a role model.

The pioneering garment maker,

Mohammadi Group, began its journey with only one factory in Khilkhet, Dhaka, with 500 workers in 1985.

It now owns eight factories employing 9,000 workers. It exported goods worth USD 70 million last fiscal year with 15 percent year-on-year growth.

Rubana joined the company as a junior officer in 1995, and it was her dedication and hard work that elevated her to the position of managing director in 1998.

In the beginning, three friends had joined hands to set up the company that exported only USD 5 million a year between 1985 and 1995. Later, two of them sold their shares to her husband Annisul Huq, chairman and chief executive of Mohammadi Group.

Going from strength to strength, Rubana showed her managerial and entrepreneurial calibre to take the company to a new height.

A trailblazer, Rubana is setting up a new factory at Bangla Bazar in Gazipur where 600 workers will have accommodations and will be given the ownership of the dorms after six years of their stay in exchange for a monthly instalment.

Bangladesh Bank is helping the project with Tk 20 crore in loans at 2 percent interest.

Work on the new factory is expected to begin in October. "We will employ 1,000 more workers to produce woven garments," Rubana said.

The factory will have green building certification or LEED that stands for leadership in energy and environmental design.

The group has reached its current status without any major loan from banks, as profits were reinvested to expand its footprint.

Rubana credited the garment company's success to the female workforce that works relentlessly to churn out products to the global buyers' satisfaction. "So, all entrepreneurs should invest in developing human resources. Our entrepreneurs also need to take a hard look at the people working in the factories."

In her career of 19 years, Rubana has not only expanded the garment segment, but also diversified to other sectors such as real estate, software, and power plant. The group distributes Indian STAR television

programmes in Bangladesh.

"I mainly manage the garment business and I am not involved much in the management of the other companies within the group."

She said she always incentivises good performers to encourage them. "I hold regular talks with officials and workers. Such interaction between top management and workers bridges the gap in communication and results in higher efficiency."

On future expansion plans, Rubana said the group will invest in media on a large scale as the prospects are bright.

In the next few years, the group plans to expand the garment business by at least 30 percent and grow its agro business in organic products.

"Just increasing the number of units is not my objective. My main target is sustainability. I want my company to grow at international standards so nobody can question compliance or the quality of products."

Swedish retail giant H&M is the group's main buyer, taking 60 percent of its products.

Mohammadi Group also supplies garment items to many other renowned retailers and brands worldwide.

"Credibility is a big asset. My workers are hard-working and I personally visit them and listen to their problems on the floor and try to solve their problems," she said.

Mohammadi Group currently runs two primary schools for the children of the garment workers. It plans to open similar schools in all its garment factories in the future.

In her 19 years as an entrepreneur, Rubana has worn more than one hat. She was among BBC's 100 outstanding women in 2013 and 2014. The Bangladeshi entrepreneur also writes extensively and is a philanthropist.

Rubana dreamt of becoming a university professor when she was young. "I did not give up on my dreams. I've recently completed my post-graduation in English from a private university."

"People must not give up on their dreams, even in the face of challenges. We must always pursue our dreams to grow."

TANIA WAHAB – 2013

Walt Disney once said that all dreams come true if there is courage to pursue them, and nowhere does it resonate more than in the case of Tania Wahab, the owner and managing partner of Karigar, a thriving leather goods company.

Fresh out of university, with just Tk 10,000 in hand and opposition from her family, she set about fulfilling her childhood dream of owning a business. And that company today, after nine years, has managed an annual turnover of over Tk 1 crore.

"It was incredibly tough in the beginning. I had no support from my family and I came from a non-business background. But I always had the strength of conviction in me."

Her venture of choice was a leather goods manufacturing company, having obtained a BSc from Bangladesh College of Leather Technology. "The four-year educational



Managing Partner of
Karigar

background gave me immense faith," she recalls.

She bought a sewing machine, hired a worker and rented a dingy small room for Tk 3,000 at Hazaribagh. And to make up for her

non-business background, she spent days on end at the cluster of leather factories in the neighbourhood to learn the nitty-gritty of the trade.

Back then, the majority of the leather firms would copy designs from a select few external sources, meaning their products would more or less end up looking the same.

Seeing the gap in the market, she opted to design the products herself and infuse novelty in them such that they stand out from the crowd.

Karigar initially concentrated on corporate gift items, with Tania Wahab personally marketing the products door-to-door. "I did it all myself. But I was always confident that I would get there."

Her big break came when Eastern Bank Limited commissioned her to make 600 diaries – and there was no looking back since.

Indeed, her creations were a hit in the corporate world; so much that in 2008 she had to find a bigger factory space nearby to fulfil all the orders.

Karigar now employs 20 full-time workers and 100 part-time ones and its clientele includes British American Tobacco Bangladesh, Grey Dhaka, BASIC Bank, Mutual Trust Bank, East West University, Chevron Bangladesh, Grameenphone, Sanofi Aventis, and Orion Group.

Reassured by the success of her corporate gift items, Tania Wahab decided to expand Karigar's portfolio. She included handbags, purses, photo frames, jewellery boxes, and leather garments.

Meanwhile, she cracked the export market as well. Her first direct export went to the UK in 2008, following which she sent out items to Switzerland, Japan, India,

and Cambodia.

"But I am more focused on the domestic market, which is huge in size," she said, adding that 80 percent of Karigar's products are sold locally.

Tania Wahab, however, is disappointed that the country's leather industry has not progressed as much as she had hoped.

And for that, the traders are partly to be blamed: they still prefer products made in China, Thailand, and Taiwan.

"But we can make the same product of the same quality. And the fact that we manufacture for the export market as well is testament to our capabilities."

As for her future plans, she said she wants to make Karigar a household name and set up a dedicated factory complete with modern amenities for the export market.

MASUDA ISLAM – 2012



Chairman of Protina
Home Made Foods

Masuda Islam's journey as an entrepreneur began in the mid-1980s, upon completion of her undergraduate degree. For a brief period, she taught at a school, but the job did not gratify her enough. She wanted to do something that would leverage her creativity and the skills she had picked up

during her time at university.

And one day that opportunity came, when she was in Mauchak market with her daughter. Her daughter was clad in a frock made by Masuda, which caught the attention of one kids-wear vendor. So much so, that he went up to her to enquire where the dress was from.

Upon learning that the piece was all Masuda's doing, he straightway ordered several iterations of the frock for his store.

"I accepted the offer on the spot, although I had no extra money on me then to buy the fabrics and accessories needed for the multiple frocks. The pay day, too, was a good few days away. Still, I decided to take the risk," Masuda fondly recalls.

She borrowed Tk 500 from a relative as soon as she got home and headed straight to Gulistan to get the materials. She managed to make 18 dresses in total, which fetched her Tk 1,800 in one go.

Not only that, it opened the floodgates for her: she returned home with more orders, and there was no looking back since. "It was an exciting and proud day for me."

Before long, the venture needed all her time, so she decided to leave her job at the school. Still, it was not enough; she had to call upon extra help to stitch the dresses, which were selling like hot cakes.

Empowered by the runaway success of her clothing business, she decided to try out other things. She spotted that the country was lacking in frozen snacks market, and in 1996, she started her ready meals business, from her kitchen.

She started off with supplying three frozen snack items to a large departmental store at Gulshan. Just like her dresses, her food items, too, received an overwhelming response.

In 2000, she shut down her other

venture to concentrate on her fledgling food business full-time.

"The dress-making business was serendipity for me, and I looked at it solely as a source for making money – there was no overriding passion for it. But my entry to the food business is a different story altogether. I always had this desire to devote myself for social causes, and providing safe food was the perfect way."

Today, her firm Protina BD Foods makes 100 items, including frozen snacks, sweets, bakery, and vermicelli, under the brand Protina. She employs 26 people, and her asset value stands at more than Tk 1 crore.

She, however, continues to supply frozen snacks to Agora and other supermarkets, with all the items made under her supervision at home for quality control.

Masuda, a mother of two, says juggling a family and a growing business did not come easy to her. "All of it would not have

been possible without the unconditional support from my husband and family."

Now that her children have grown up, Masuda has chalked up grand plans for her company.

Next in her scheme of things: supply safe vegetables and processed carrot noodles.

However, she is not aggressive in her expansion bids; rather she wants to go slow.

"I believe in quality. If I go for a huge expansion hastily, it may be difficult to maintain quality," she says.

"I don't want to compete with others through massive expansion and sales promotion. I want to compete through higher quality."

Everyone who is engaged in food business should focus on making safe food, she says, adding that she has been working to find ways to offer pesticide-free vegetables.

SHARMIN HOSSAIN – 2011

Even as recently as 2008, Sharmin Hossain was a full-time homemaker, with no plans whatsoever of starting a business of her own.

Then the random use of harmful chemical for ripening and preserving fruits and vegetables became rife in Bangladesh, which led the protective mother of four with a degree in agriculture to grow fruits and vegetable on a shared family patch for her family's consumption. And there was no looking back.

Motivated by good yields and overwhelming requests from friends and neighbours, Sharmin started considering cultivation on a commercial scale and soon immersed herself in research and development.

Then in 2010, with a group of professionals she formed Fresh and Safe Agro Ltd (FASAL) with the aim of supplying chemical-free products.

"We have established the company to address the issue of scarcity of pesticide-free fruits and vegetables," said Sharmin.



Chairperson of Fresh
and Safe Agro

"It is a safe fruits and vegetables producing and marketing company with the ambition of becoming the key fresh vegetable producer, processor, and marketer."

Sharmin, who mainly manages the technical aspects of the company, said by and large farmers use different varieties of pesticides, which are extremely harmful.

Most of these unsafe and adulterated

products end up in the capital where these are consumed by unsuspecting consumers including children, said the wife of a senior police official.

FASAL's fruits and vegetables are grown under safe conditions following global standards like Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and Good Agricultural Practices (GAP).

"We have started to work as a bridge so that the consumers get fresh and safe fruits and vegetables directly and to ensure that farmers get fair price," said Sharmin.

She said handpicked fruits and vegetables are washed using safe water to eliminate soil and dirt, sorted to make those free from rotten and decayed ends, graded to different sizes, shapes and weights, and packed with environment friendly materials to keep them fresh and safe.

Sharmin said the company has contract growers of fruits and vegetables located in Manikganj, Narsingdi, Bogra, and Dhaka and currently works with more than 12,000

trained farmers.

All the contract growers are involved in regular training and auditing system, using IPM and GAP standards.

"These training and audits ensure that all FASAL branded products meet the required safety regulations," Sharmin said.

She said farmer's training is one of the company's core business activities and they select farmers after several screening process. The chosen farmers are then given several days of training.

The FASAL field officers, who have diploma on agriculture, work with the farmers and teach them how to farm fresh produce by using safer chemical-free inputs.

The company collects the agro commodities from the contract farmers at higher prices compared to the local market prices, according to Sharmin.

"We generally pay Tk 2 more per kilogramme over the local market price to the farmers to encourage them."

Many farmers are keen to join the company's network to get fair prices for

their produce. "Farmers want to join our network as it will give them a guaranteed market to sell their produce."

A venture of around Tk 2.5 crore, the company currently employs around 100 employees.

But the requirement of labour varies according to seasons. For example, in winter, the company hires extra workers to handle the additional output arising from winter vegetable harvest.

Currently, the company sells around 50 kitchen and food items through its eight sales centres in Mirpur, Mohammadpur, and Banani areas, with monthly receipts of around Tk 20 lakh. It also sells the agro-products through mobile vans in Uttara and Dhanmondi.

"It aims to start another 20 outlets in prime location of the capital by December," said Sharmin.

"If we can serve only one percent people of the Dhaka city, we are looking at figures of Tk 100 crore a month."