

## TRIBUTE TO ROKIA AFZAL RAHMAN



PHOTO: SHAHREAR KABIR HEEMEL

## A Life Well-Lived



**Mahbubur Rahman**  
is president of the International Chamber of Commerce Bangladesh, and chairman and CEO of ETBL Holdings Limited.

## MAHBUBUR RAHMAN

I am deeply shocked and grieved at the sad demise of ICC Bangladesh Vice-President Rokia Afzal Rahman, an illustrious business personality in Bangladesh and a former adviser to the caretaker government. She was the president of the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Dhaka (MCCI) for two consecutive terms in 2013 and 2014. She was the founder president of the Bangladesh Federation of Women Entrepreneurs (BFWE).

I knew Rokia Bhabi, as I used to call her, and her husband Harun Bhai for a long time. Harun Bhai was a prominent businessman in the then East Pakistan among Bangladeshi entrepreneurs.

Rokia Afzal Rahman was one of the most famous icons of women empowerment in Bangladesh. In post-liberation Bangladesh, she played a big role in developing agriculture and industry. Over 15,000 farmers in Munshiganj have worked with her. With MIDAS Financing Limited, she endeavoured to create women entrepreneurs, and in the process played an instrumental role in Bangladesh's economy.

She reflected on her journey of becoming the first woman bank manager of the country in 1964 to becoming a well-known entrepreneur, all the while paving the way for women with drive and determination.

In 1980, when she started a cold storage business for potatoes in Munshiganj, local farmers were initially apprehensive as she was a woman. Her persistence led the farmers to take a chance, and eventually the business flourished. Rokia remains the sole woman in the region to own and operate a cold storage.

She joined the board of MIDAS Financing Limited in 1982, where she advocated to raise the borrowing cap without any mortgage from Tk 2 lakh to Tk 25 lakh. The benefits of MIDAS' borrowing schemes have benefited women across generations.

Her firm commitment to affect substantive social change led her to become an adviser to the caretaker government of

the country, in charge of the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Ministry of Social Welfare, and Ministry of Culture.

With time, Rokia made her mark in diverse sectors including media, insurance, real estate, and power. She was the chairperson of Mediaworld Limited, which publishes *The Daily Star*.

Rokia maintained a strong collaboration with the Ministry of Planning, and

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associations like the Women Entrepreneurs' Association (WEA), Women in Small Enterprises (WISE), Bangladesh Federation of Women Entrepreneurs (BFWE), and several other renowned NGOs where she was a board member. She was also the founder chairman of Presidency University and former chairperson of Asian University for Women.

Her notable presence in international development platforms includes her membership of the Business Advisory Council at the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), and her membership of the South Asia Women's Network (SWAN). In 1991, she was recognised as one of the Leading Women Entrepreneurs of the World in Monte Carlo. In 2003, she was recognised as the Businessperson of the Year by the American Chamber; she also received the Priyadarshani Award in India.

## A torchbearer for women's economic empowerment



**Shaheen Anam**  
is the executive director of Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF).

## SHAHEEN ANAM

Her grace was talked about in social circles. We often wondered how she always managed to look so elegant, so properly attired for every occasion. To many of us, she was an inspiration, a mentor who embodied the values and traditions of a South Asian woman, and at the same time was so modern, progressive and forward-looking.

Rokia Afzal Rahman, lovingly known as Roki Apa, passed away peacefully in the early morning of April 5, leaving so many of us shocked and dismayed. It will take a long time to really fathom the loss and void created by her demise. In a world fractured by self-interest and intense rivalry, she stood out as a unifying force, bringing divergent groups and opinions together to come to consensus on issues that were closest to her heart, one of which was women's economic empowerment.

Rokia Afzal started her career as a banking professional in 1962 when few women ventured into the profession. She became the first female bank manager in Bangladesh in 1964. She later entered the world of business and rose in stature to become one of the most respected entrepreneurs in the country, heading 11 different companies. She was elected the president of Bangladesh Employers' Federation and president of the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and served as the chairperson of

MIDAS. However, what made her stand out from the rest was her focus on building institutions to assist women to become economically independent. She believed that women's emancipation lay in their economic solvency. To this end, she set up the Women Entrepreneurs Association (WEA) in 1994. WEA's primary objective

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was to build skills of micro and small women entrepreneurs to manage their business better to make maximum profits. Thousands of women received training on financial management, book-keeping and sound business practices through the WEA.

She also founded the Women in Small Enterprises (WISE) to further upgrade

## My dearest ROKI



**Shahnaz Rahman**  
is the chairperson and managing director of Transcom Group.

## SHAHNAZ RAHMAN

On April 5, 2023, I lost my dearest friend, confidant, and someone who was family to my husband and I: Roki Afzal. Known to me, fondly, as Roki.

My husband, Shamim (Latifur Rahman) and I, were extremely fond of both Roki and Harun bhai. Our strong bond was formed over the years as we went through some of the most wonderful times together while also standing strong by each other during the most trying times.

Over the years, Roki did not simply remain my closest friend, but was also a sister to both my husband and myself. I always admired her amiability, coupled with her drive to make an impact. I had the honour of serving on multiple boards with Roki, from *The Daily Star* (where she was chairman), Reliance Insurance Ltd, Prothom Alo, and Bangladesh Lamps Ltd. Roki's presence across both my personal and professional lives was nothing short of an absolute pleasure; it felt good to go through it all together.

As I think of Roki, her infectious smile, glowing energy, and caring nature flood my mind with beautiful memories. From all the times we travelled with the ICC delegation, to our first safari together in South Africa, to when Roki was one of the few selected speakers at Shamim and my 50th anniversary, I feel blessed to have shared all those moments with her. Roki was not just a friend; she was family.

We had lost Harun bhai too soon, and it was then that Shamim and I had the privilege of standing by Roki. I feel that she found comfort and strength in us that helped move her forward. Little did I know that decades later, when I was to lose my husband, I in turn would lean on Roki as my crutch.

During a time when I felt more comfortable limiting social interactions, it was Roki's compassion, empathy, and unstinting support that gave me comfort. It was only Roki and Didi (Anita Chowdhury) whom I found some solace in speaking to after my husband's passing. I never imagined I'd lose them both so soon one after another.

I dearly miss Roki's presence and the light she brought into every room she entered. When I spoke to her recently, she was being cautious about visitors. But in the same breath, she said, "Joy, when you get back to Dhaka, I will see you."

That was my relationship with Roki, nothing could come between us.

I, along with many others, will miss Roki terribly. Her warmth and kindness will never be forgotten. Lots of my love and affection to my dear Roki, until we meet again in the hereafter.

