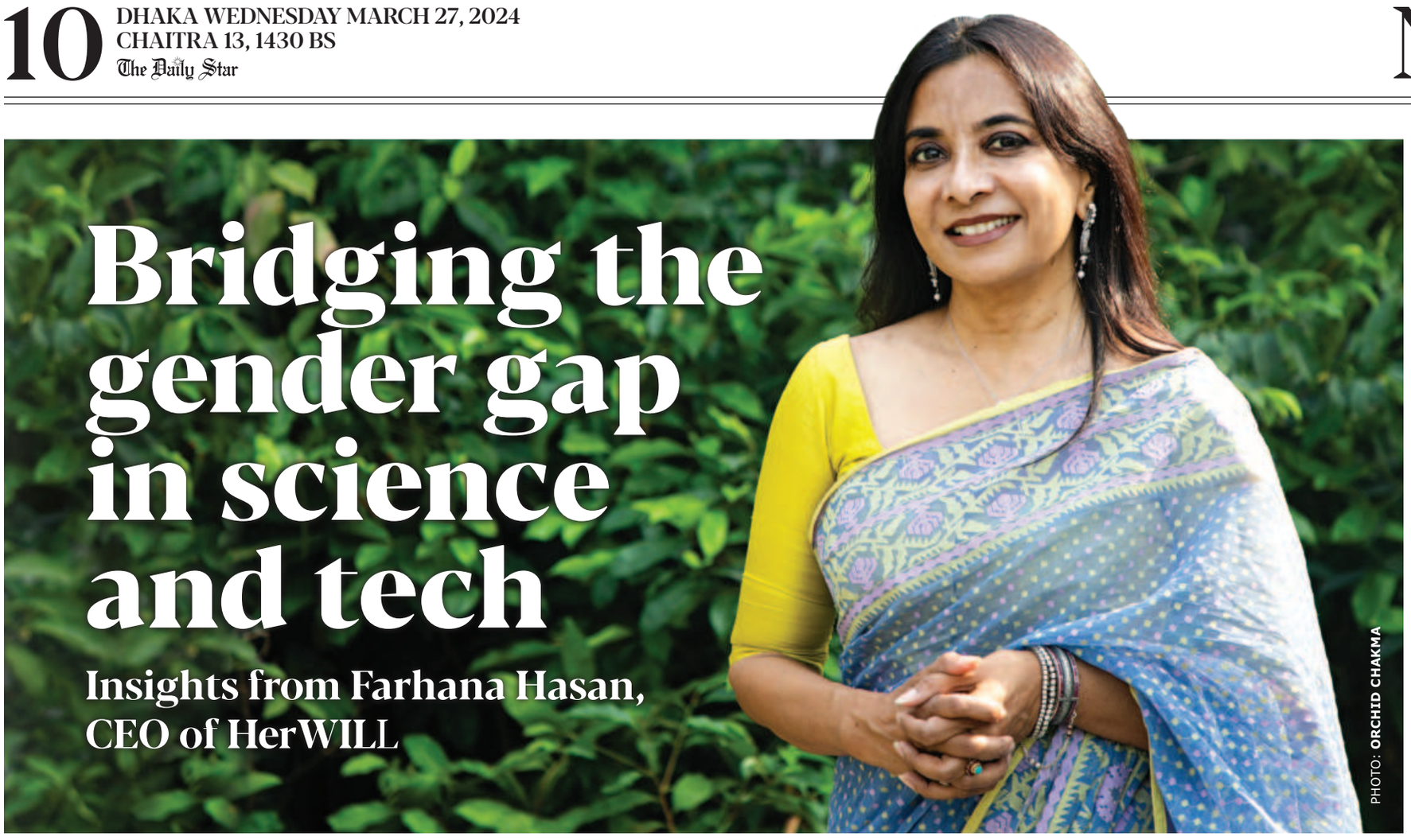

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Bridging the gender gap in science and tech

Insights from Farhana Hasan, CEO of HerWILL

The future of women in science and technology is brimming with promise and potential. The rise of hybrid and work-from-home options presents a remarkable opportunity for women.

MEHNAZ IRTIKA

Achieving true gender equality remains an essential objective in the modern world, making it more important than ever to empower women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths) subjects through education and opportunities.

In an exclusive interview, Farhana Hasan, CEO of HerWILL, a global platform built to highlight and elevate talented women for better opportunities, shared with us insights from her career, offering advice and inspiration to women navigating STEM's multifaceted complexities.

What sparked the idea for HerWILL, and how does it aim to empower women?

HerWILL was born out of a deep-rooted commitment to gender equality and empowerment in STEM fields. Recognising the persistent challenges faced by women in these industries, HerWILL provides a comprehensive platform where women can excel professionally. We organise mentorship workshops, financial literacy programs, knowledge sharing by subject experts, leadership training, and job opportunities tailored to the unique challenges women face in these fields.

How have you navigated the gender gap in your STEM career?

Many women face unconscious gender barriers that manifest in subtle ways, from imposter syndrome to the reluctance to speak up and assert leadership. Overcoming these barriers requires intentional mentorship and creating opportunities for leadership development.

As for personal challenges, while my ambition was evident, I realised that consistent and high-quality work delivery was essential. I refused to make excuses, all the while juggling family responsibilities. My journey in navigating these challenges fueled my determination to empower other women and provide them with the guidance and support they need to succeed.

ILLUSTRATION: ZARIF FAIAZ

In terms of opportunities, where do you see the biggest growth areas in STEM for women?

I would say that fields such as data science, data analytics, and artificial intelligence offer unprecedented opportunities for innovation and advancement, with a projected growth rate exceeding 28%. By acquiring expertise in these areas, women can position themselves as leaders in the burgeoning landscape of technology and analytics.

How important has mentorship been in your career, and how can women find good mentors in STEM?

Being a woman of colour in a predominantly male industry came with its set of challenges, from subtle racism to overt discrimination in career progression. However, a pivotal moment came when my boss took me under his wing, and encouraged me to pursue leadership, highlighting my potential beyond technical expertise.

This advice profoundly shaped my career, blending my technical skills with business acumen and leadership roles. Women can find good mentors in STEM by actively seeking out individuals who inspire them and share their values, especially through platforms like HerWILL.

What strategies would you recommend for women to stand out and succeed in STEM fields?

To excel in STEM fields, it is crucial to align your passions with practical considerations. Choose subjects that genuinely interest you while also considering their prospects. Breaking through barriers may require courage, but opting for high-demand areas can enhance your career trajectory. It is also essential to seek mentors with a broad perspective.

Looking forward, what excites you most about the future of women in STEM?

The future of women in science and technology is brimming with promise and potential. The rise of hybrid and work-from-home options presents a remarkable opportunity for women. This flexibility allows for a better balance between professional and personal life, enabling women to excel both in their careers and as contributors to their families and society as a whole. This shift has increased efficiency and a newfound sense of empowerment, as women can now choose when and where to work, freeing themselves from the constraints of traditional office settings.

The article above is an abridged version. Read the complete interview online on The Daily Star website.

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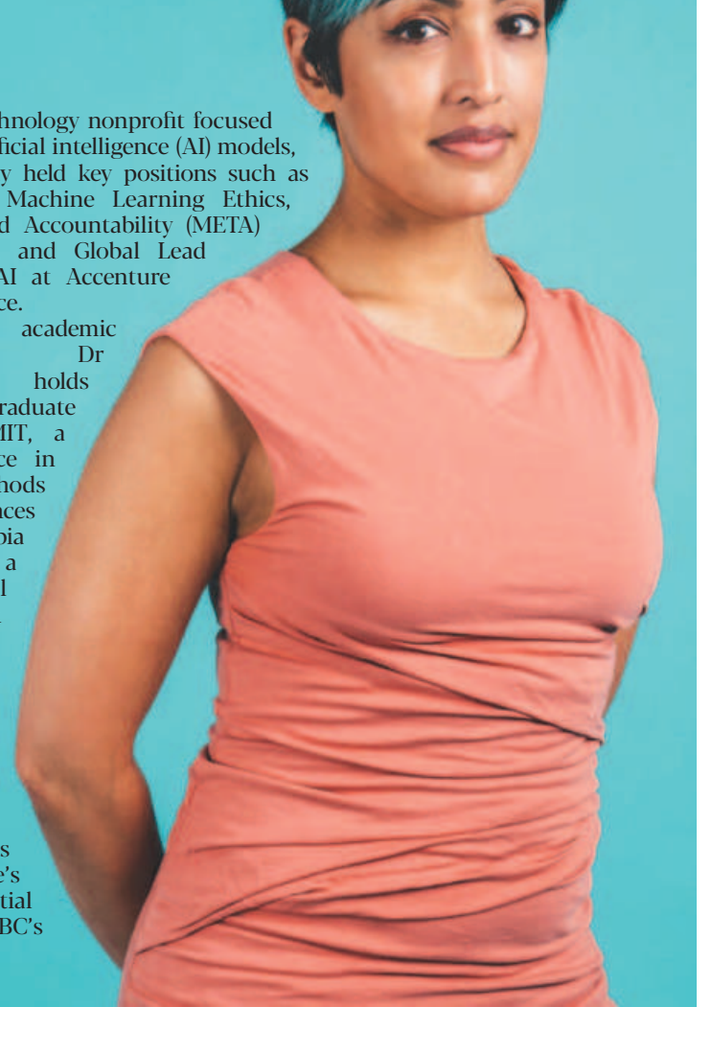
QUOTE OF THE DAY

The only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle.

Steve Jobs

Bangladeshi-born Rumman Chowdhury selected as US Science Envoy



The US Department of State has recently announced the selection of Dr Rumman Chowdhury, a Bangladeshi-origin Bengali American data scientist, as one of the four scientists to serve as a new US Science Envoy in 2024. With this appointment, she has become a part of the first all-female cohort in the history of the US Science Envoy Program.

The other three scientists selected as new US Science Envoys in 2024 are Dr Stephanie "Steffi" Diem, Assistant Professor in Nuclear Engineering and Engineering Physics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison); Dr Sian Proctor, a Geoscience Professor at the Maricopa Community Colleges, an Afrofuturism Space Artist, and an Astronaut; and Dr Dawn Wright, a geographer and oceanographer, Chief Scientist of the Environmental Systems Research Institute (Esri), and Courtesy Professor at Oregon State University.

The US Science Envoy Program, established in 2010, aims to leverage the expertise and networks of eminent US scientists and engineers to foster international cooperation in addressing challenges around the world. Through this program, scientists travel internationally as private U. citizens to engage with civil society and government representatives, facilitating science and technology cooperation.

According to the US Department of State, Dr Rumman Chowdhury brings a wealth of experience and expertise to her role as a Science Envoy. Currently serving as the CEO of Humane Intelligence, a technology nonprofit focused on evaluating artificial intelligence (AI) models, she has previously held key positions such as Director of the Machine Learning Ethics, Transparency, and Accountability (META) team at Twitter, and Global Lead for Responsible AI at Accenture Applied Intelligence.

As for academic qualifications, Dr Chowdhury holds two undergraduate degrees from MIT, a Master of Science in Quantitative Methods of the Social Sciences from Columbia University, and a Ph.D. in political science from the University of California, San Diego. Her contributions to the field of AI ethics and accountability have earned her accolades such as Time Magazine's 100 Most Influential People in AI and BBC's 100 Women.