

Accelerate Action: Women leading us into the future

In the ever-shifting corporate world, the call for gender equality has become louder than ever. The theme of International Women's Day 2025, 'Accelerate Action,' encourages businesses, governments, individuals, and communities to take valiant steps toward building an inclusive future. At BAT Bangladesh, creating an inclusive environment is no longer an aspiration; rather, it has become a reality. This transformation has been driven by the decisive leadership of women who have shattered barriers, redefined success, and set new benchmarks for excellence.

As we celebrate International Women's Day, we proudly highlight five remarkable women leading BAT Bangladesh into the future. Their journeys are a testament of ambition, resilience, and determination, inspiring people across all walks of life. Their stories convey a clear and strong message to all women: 'If we can do it, so can you.'

For years, women in leadership have battled systemic barriers like gender biases, work-life balance, and societal expectations. Overcoming these obstacles, a new wave of women leaders is proving that the future of leadership is diverse and inclusive. Through mentorship programmes, modern inclusive policies, and an organisational culture that promotes growth, BAT Bangladesh has been committed to accelerating gender parity. However, policies alone cannot create change—it is the people who make the difference. Through their relentless pursuit of excellence, these five women have established new benchmarks for leadership in the corporate world.

Monisha Abraham, Managing Director

Joining BAT Group in December 2021 as a cross-industry hire, Monisha Abraham exemplifies the company's inclusive culture. From day one, BAT's welcoming and collaborative environment enabled her to integrate seamlessly and contribute meaningfully. The company values fresh perspectives, fostering a culture where innovation is encouraged and new ideas thrive.

Empowered to challenge the status quo, Monisha has driven impactful change within the organization. BAT's commitment to equal opportunity has been instrumental in her growth, allowing her to leverage diverse experiences and make a lasting impact.

She shares, "To thrive as a future woman leader in the corporate world, remember



In the image: From left: Ms. Armeen Rahman (Supply Chain Manager), Barrister Sabrina Zarin (Head of Litigation & Commercial), Ms. Monisha Abraham (Managing Director), Ms. Nirala Singh (Finance Director), and Ms. Nashva Hamid (Head of Corporate Finance) from BAT Bangladesh.

these key principles: Be authentic by embracing your unique qualities and being true to yourself, as authenticity builds trust and respect. Embrace flexibility by adapting to change, being open to new ideas, and adjusting to different cultures and working environments. Drive for inclusivity by creating an inclusive environment, welcoming diverse perspectives, and building alliances, as inclusivity enhances creativity and innovation. Be confident by believing in your abilities and supporting others; confidence should be paired with humility and a commitment to learning, and by paying it forward through mentoring and helping others on their journey. By following these principles, you can make a significant impact and contribute to a corporate world that values diversity, innovation, and mutual support."

Nirala Singh, Finance Director

Leadership for Nirala Singh is the courage to show up as the true and authentic self, and be true to oneself, while still driving business results. When her teams witness authenticity, both men and women

can experience diversity in leadership styles and also be allowed the space to shape their own professional careers and styles in a way in which they are comfortable.

She shares, "A large part of my professional success came because I had people around me to support, sponsor, and mentor me; hence, support my career journey. As women, we need to support each other at all levels to grow, develop, and shape the future generation of women leaders."

Nashva Hamid, Area Head of Corporate Finance

Nashva Hamid thrives at work because of an inclusive and empowering culture at BAT Bangladesh. She has received fair opportunities for growth, as well as open and honest feedback for development from leaders and mentors. Generally, inclusion thrives when there is acceptance of different perspectives and accommodation of different needs. Nashva Hamid feels lucky to have experienced all these at BAT Bangladesh.

She shares, "My professional journey was supported by my family as well as co-work-

ers and leaders who have shaped my growth as a leader. However, only a supportive and inclusive environment is not enough; individuals need to challenge their limits and push their boundaries to know what they are capable of. I think being an inspiring leader is about making people believe in themselves to bring out their best and encourage their growth."

Barrister Sabrina Zarin, Head of Litigation & Commercial

In the fast-paced BAT Bangladesh, Sabrina Zarin stands out as a leader whose boldness and courage inspire those around her. What truly sets Sabrina apart is her ability to see and appreciate every contribution, no matter how big or small. She ensures that every team member feels recognised and supported, motivating them to continuously strive for excellence. Sabrina doesn't just lead by words; she leads by example, consistently inspiring her colleagues through her actions and becoming a true role model for all who work with her.

Sabrina's message is clear and powerful for aspiring women leaders: "Be bold,

embrace challenges, and commit to your growth. True leadership is about inspiring others—recognising their potential, offering unwavering support, and leading with courage and compassion. My approach to leadership is a testament to the transformative power of believing in others, being humble and creating a space where everyone can excel."

Armeen Rahman, Supply Chain Manager

While leading a team, Armeen Rahman tends to follow the servant leadership model. It is really about the mindset of serving the people in her team. Armeen likes to lead by listening and coaching to drive people's development instead of being controlling with top-down decisions.

She shares, "Unfortunately, even today, one of the most common problems women face at work is a question mark for their success. I get asked a lot about how to handle that. My mantra and usual advice are nicely summed up in a movie quote by Emma Thompson: 'I mean, the point is, you're here. And if you want people to see you as something other than a diversity hire, you have to make them.' Please do not concentrate on the negativity; rather, focus on how to be your best self and build a trusting network among colleagues and seniors."

The company understands that gender equality is not just a moral imperative but a basic ingredient for the business. According to a McKinsey & Company study, organisations with diverse leadership tend to outperform those without it. When women lead, organisations benefit from a broader perspective, stronger financial performance, and better decision-making processes.

The stories of these five women leaders highlight the fact that gender is not a limitation; instead, it is the mindset. Success is not reserved for a select few – it's within reach of every woman who is willing to push the boundaries and challenge the status quo. However, an individual's ambition alone is not enough. Companies must take proactive steps to break systemic barriers and foster an inclusive environment where women can truly thrive.

The time for waiting is over. We must Accelerate Actions for women to lead the future.

To aspiring women: Your voice matters, your ambition is valid, and your leadership is needed.

Banks must support and nurture female entrepreneurs

The Daily Star (TDS): What is the current level of women's engagement as employees and customers in the banking sector?

Sohail R K Hussain (SRKH): Regarding women's engagement in the banking sector—both as employees and customers—significant gaps persist. As of December 2023, women constituted only 16.37% of the total workforce in Bangladesh's banking sector. On the customer side, as of September 2024, female customers owned 37% of total deposit accounts and 19% of total loan accounts.

To improve this situation, banks must foster an environment where women can participate on an equal footing with their male counterparts. While each gender has unique strengths, organizations must recognize these differences and implement policies that actively support women, such as anti-harassment policies and inclusive workplace initiatives.

Women make up 51% of Bangladesh's population, and failing to provide them with opportunities for professional and personal growth is not only inequitable but also economically unwise. Any organization committed to performance and meritocracy cannot afford to overlook such a significant segment of the workforce.

The same principle applies to women entrepreneurs. Banks have a responsibility to support and nurture female entrepreneurship. Those that actively develop programs for women entrepreneurs are not just contributing to economic progress but also expanding their own customer base, ensuring long-term business growth.

TDS: What special banking features or tailored services does your bank offer specifically for women?

SRKH: We have dedicated Women entrepreneur Development Unit (WEDU) under MSME banking that offers deposit, lending, training and advices to the female customers and entrepreneurs. The women customer can avail the services through 135 Bank Asia branches and the bank's expanded network of more than 5,000 agent points all over Bangladesh. We offer several tailored services for women which include:

- Specially designed deposit products
- Working capital and fixed asset loans at lower rates under Bangladesh Bank's Women Entrepreneur Refinance Scheme and CMSME Pre-Finance Scheme.
- Incentives as declared and disbursed by Bangladesh Bank.
- Women-led enterprise cluster financing.
- Privilege Rate Loans under the SME Foundation's Credit Wholesaling Fund.
- Startup and handicraft training through the SME Foundation.
- Financial literacy training, awareness building and knowledge sharing seminars for women entrepreneurs.

TDS: How to increase women's access to banking services?

SRKH: Increasing women's access to banking services requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses financial, social, and technological barriers. Here are some key strategies:

- Promote digital and agent banking solutions to reach women in remote areas where traditional banks are not easily accessible.
- Simplify account opening processes using biometric identification and digital verification.
- Design savings and credit products tailored to women's needs, such as small business loans with flexible repayment options.

• Provide group lending options that allow women to access credit collectively

- Use community outreach programs to educate women in rural areas about banking benefits.
- Encourage banks to recruit female staff to make women customers feel more comfortable.
- Offer business mentorship and training programs to help women grow their enterprises.
- Create women focused banking desks or dedicated support lines for female business owners.

Implementing these strategies can significantly improve women's financial inclusion, leading to greater economic independence and overall economic growth.



SOHAIL R K HUSSAIN
Managing Director
Bank Asia

Real-time banking services bridging gap for unbanked women

The Daily Star (TDS): How have Bangladesh Bank's directives been instrumental in promoting financial literacy among women?

Tamanna Quadry (TQ): Prime Bank is committed to empowering women by promoting financial literacy in alignment with Bangladesh Bank's directives. Bangladesh Bank's directives have played a crucial role in advancing financial literacy among women, particularly by implementing initiatives such as collateral-free loans and low-interest credit for women entrepreneurs. These measures have cultivated an enabling environment for women to access credit and manage businesses effectively. Prime Bank has further aligned with this vision by offering women-centric banking products, such as the Prime Women's Savings Account and Hasanh Women's Savings Account, which feature health insurance benefits and interest rates of up to 5%. These tailored products are designed to promote savings, improve financial security, and foster long-term financial literacy for women across the country.

TDS: What training programs support women by leveraging local networks and interactive methods to address their unique challenges, equipping RMG workers, coastal communities, and indigenous groups with banking fundamentals for economic independence?

TQ: To empower women, various training programs leverage local networks and interactive methods to address their specific challenges. These initiatives, particularly targeted at RMG workers, coastal communities, and indigenous groups, focus on equipping women with essential banking and financial management skills. For instance, Prime Bank's Neera Service Corner brings banking services closer to women in remote areas, ensuring easy access to both services and support. In addition, Prime Bank has launched a free online learning platform, enabling women to enhance their financial skills through comprehensive training modules aimed at fostering economic independence. The bank also conducts nationwide financial literacy training sessions to elevate women's financial knowledge and support their autonomy. Complementing these efforts, Bangladesh Bank's microfinance sector, with women constituting 89.55% of MFI account holders, underscores the success of grassroots financial inclu-

sion programs. Through these combined efforts, women are empowered with the tools and knowledge needed to achieve financial independence and economic empowerment.

TDS: How could the collaboration between FinTech and Mobile Financial Services (MFS), as adopted by you, elevate unbanked women?

TQ: The collaboration between FinTech and MFS offers a transformative solution for unbanked women, particularly those in remote and underserved areas. Prime Bank's digital platforms, MyPrime and Prime Pay, provide real-time banking services that allow women to perform transactions, send money, and manage their savings with ease, helping bridge the gap for unbanked women and promoting financial autonomy. Recent data from 2023 reveals a growing trend, with 7.2% of women in Bangladesh now using mobile banking. In response to this surge, Prime Bank introduced MyPrime, which offers secure sign-ins, account snapshots, and easy access to a wide range of banking services. Additionally, Prime Agrim facilitates digital nano loan, which is enhancing women's ability to manage their finances seamlessly. These platforms are instrumental in empowering women to take control of their economic well-being, advancing financial inclusion, and ensuring equal access to banking services.

TDS: What tailored products do you offer for targeted women to enhance financial literacy and facilitate transactions?

TQ: To promote financial literacy and facilitate transactions for women, Prime Bank offers a range of tailored products that cater to their specific needs. These include the Prime Women's Savings Account, Prime Ahol Loan, and Hasanh Women's Savings Account, along with personal loans, bike loans, home loans, and credit cards. These products provide accessible savings options, health insurance coverage, and competitive interest rates of up to 5%, encouraging women to save and secure their financial future. For women entrepreneurs, Prime Anchor Rin offers flexible, low-interest loans, helping them overcome financial barriers and expand their businesses. These tailored banking solutions not only support women's financial inclusion but also empower them by making banking services more accessible, user-friendly, and aligned with their specific financial goals.



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