Female banker ratio edges up after post-pandemic decline

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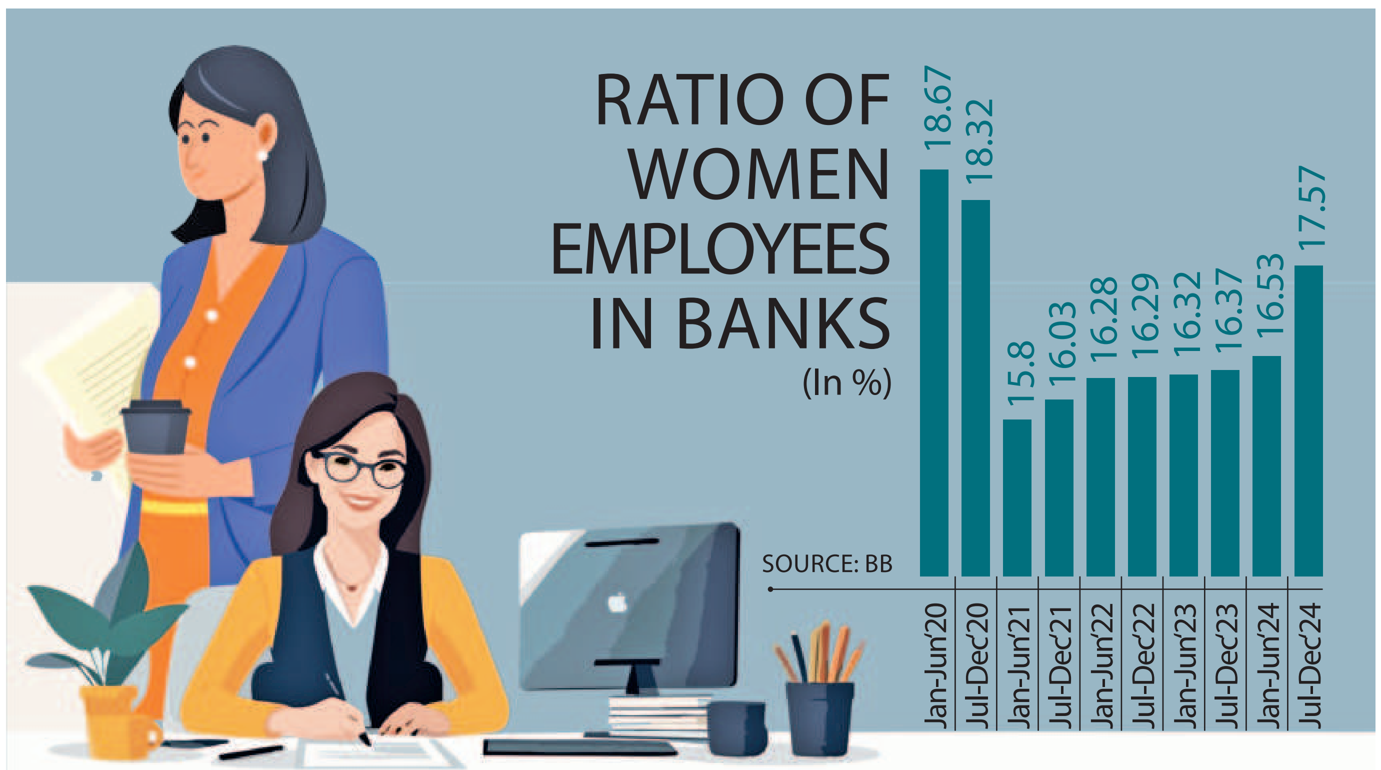

After slightly declining since the Covid-19 outbreak, the proportion of women among bankers edged up last year, giving hope of a more gender-inclusive banking sector.

In 2020, females accounted for over 18 percent of the sector's workforce, according to the Bangladesh Bank's (BB) "Gender Equality Report of Banks and Financial Institutions".

In 2021, it declined to 16.03 percent. Yet last year, it stood at 17.57 percent.

In other words, there were 37,649 women among the sector's 214,245 officials and employees.

However, one expert was of the opinion that this was no significant positive trend. Instead, it suggests that women are not truly welcomed to this sector, he said.

WHAT THE BANK AUTHORITIES ARE SAYING

Mahia Juned, additional managing director and chief operating officer of City Bank PLC, said during the pandemic, a few female officers and employees left their jobs.

"This was because banking operations had to continue at that time. However, many of their families did not allow them to go to their offices," she said.

She added that due to business downturns, cost-cutting measures were implemented, leading to a reduction in hiring in 2020 and 2021. "This trend is reflected in the regulator's data," she noted.

Juned further said as business conditions improved, hiring also increased.

"Speaking about our bank specifically, we have actively focused on increasing female recruitment," she said.

Currently, females make up over 18.50 percent of the bank's workforce, which was around 16 percent just one and a half years ago.

"Our goal is to increase the proportion of female employees to 20 percent by 2027," she said.

Juned also said for the past 13 years, the bank has prioritised hiring women. "A decade ago, there were hardly any female officials at the senior level," she said.

Mohammad Ali, managing director and chief executive officer of Pubali Bank PLC, said the banking sector, especially at the operations level, offers good job opportunities for women.

"It is suitable in every aspect—work-friendly and respectful," he said.

Due to the pandemic, some jobs were cut, and some employees resigned voluntarily, he explained.

"If we consider Dhaka district alone, female participation in every bank would be around 30 percent. In some places, it is 40 percent," added Ali.

Interest in banking jobs among females has increased and will grow even further, he said.

"One notable factor is that many women prefer to stay in Dhaka since their husbands or family members reside there," he added.

In 2019, female participation in the total workforce at Mutual Trust Bank PLC was 19.06 percent. It has since increased to reach 19.43 percent last year.

This came about for the enabling of a women-friendly work environment encouraging work-life balance, and implementation of a robust anti-harassment policy, said Ashraf Ali, head of organisational development and learning at MTB Group Human Resources.

Any decline since the pandemic can be attributed to factors such as migration to foreign countries, cultural expectations to care for children and family members, and the pursuit of better opportunities in other companies, he added.

HOW MUCH IMPACT HAS COVID-19 HAD?

A staggering 7,167 bankers lost their jobs between April 2020 and September 2021 as private commercial banks desperately tried to cut operational costs amid a business slowdown caused by the Covid-19.

These people, who were either fired or forced to resign, represented nearly 6 percent of the 122,912 officials and employees in the banking sector of Bangladesh as of June 2021.

At that time, 51 private banks had informed the BB that they had sacked 1,292 employees, while another 5,875 resigned.

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BREB cancels power purchase deal with Doreen

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board (BREB) has cancelled the power purchase agreement (PPA) for the 22 megawatt (MW) plant of Doreen Power Generations and Systems Limited located in Narsingdi.

The BREB is not interested in renewing the PPA and has terminated the deal for Doreen's Narsingdi plant, the private power producer said in a disclosure on the website of the Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE), citing a letter from the state agency.

Shares of the publicly listed company fell 2.69 percent compared to yesterday before closing at Tk 21.7 yesterday at the DSE.

In February last year, Doreen said the BREB had given consent for the continuation of operations of its Narsingdi power plant as per the terms, conditions, and tariff schedule until a new PPA was signed after negotiation on a "no electricity, no payment" basis.

At that time, the electricity producer said it was in the process of negotiating tariffs and other terms and conditions for the renewal of the PPA with the BREB.

In its disclosure yesterday at the DSE, Doreen said the BREB informed it about the cancellation through a letter on March 11 this year.

Doreen's earnings per share (EPS) dropped by nearly half to Tk 0.53 for the October-December period of 2024 from Tk 1.03 in the same period a year ago due to a significant increase in finance costs of subsidiary companies resulting from an interest rate spike and the devaluation of Bangladesh's currency against the US dollar.

As a result, the company's profit declined in the first half of the year.

During the July-December period of this financial year, Doreen's EPS fell 29 percent year-on-year to Tk 2.01.

Incorporated in 2007, Doreen has three power plants in Tangail, Feni, and Narsingdi.

The plants were supplying 66 MW of electricity to the BREB.

Muhammad Amzad Shakil, company secretary of Doreen, said all three plants have remained shut since December 2024.

At present, Doreen is supplying 225 MW of electricity to the DPDB from its furnace oil-based plants, he said.

Trump threatens further tariffs as EU, Canada retaliate

REUTERS, *Washington*

Donald Trump threatened on Wednesday to escalate a global trade war with further tariffs on European Union goods, as major US trading partners said they would retaliate for trade barriers already erected by the US president.

Just hours after Trump's 25 percent duties on all US steel and aluminum imports took effect, Trump said he would impose additional penalties if the EU follows through with its plan to enact counter tariffs on some US goods next month. "Whatever they charge us, we're charging them," Trump told reporters at the White House.

Trump's hyper-focus on tariffs has rattled investor, consumer and business confidence and raised recession fears. He also has frayed relations with Canada, a close ally and major trading partner, by repeatedly threatening to annex the neighboring country.

Canada, the biggest foreign supplier of steel and aluminum to the United States, announced 25 percent retaliatory tariffs on those metals along with computers, sports equipment and other products worth $20 billion in total. Canada has already imposed tariffs worth a similar amount on US goods in response to broader tariffs by Trump.

"We will not stand idly by while our iconic steel and aluminum industries are being unfairly targeted," Canada's Finance Minister Dominic LeBlanc said.

Trump said he would impose additional penalties if the EU follows through with its plan to enact counter tariffs on some US goods next month

Canada's central bank also cut interest rates to prepare for economic disruption.

Trump's action to bulk up protections for American steel and aluminum producers restores effective tariffs of 25 percent on all imports and extends the duties to hundreds of downstream products, from nuts and bolts to bulldozer blades and soda cans.

US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick said Trump would impose trade protections on copper as well.

A Reuters/Ipsos poll found 57 percent of Americans think Trump is being too erratic in his effort to shake up the US economy, and 70 percent expect the tariffs will make purchases more expensive.

EU LESS EXPOSED

The 27 countries of the European Union are less exposed, as only a "small fraction" of targeted products are exported to the United States, according to Germany's Kiel Institute.

The EU's counter-measures would target up to $28 billion worth of US goods like dental floss, diamonds, bathrobes and bourbon - which likewise account for a small portion of the giant EU-US commercial relationship. Still, the liquor industry warned they would be "devastating" on its sector.

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the bloc will resume talks with US officials.

"It is not in our common interest to burden our economies with such tariffs," she said.

At the White House, Trump said he would "of course" respond with further tariffs if the EU followed through on its plan. With Irish Prime Minister Micheal Martin at his side, Trump criticized the EU member country for luring away US pharmaceutical companies.

In remarks delivered later at a White House ceremony, Martin touted the history of free trade between the two nations.

Whether US is heading for recession or just 'detox', downturns are costly

REUTERS, *Washington*

US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick says a recession would be "worth it" to get President Donald Trump's economic policies in place, while Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent has spoken of a coming period of "detox" and Trump himself says the economy is in "transition."

However it plays out, history shows recessions - should it come to that - are costly affairs: The pain is never spread equally, and the outcome - from the length and depth of the downturn to the speed and breadth of recovery - is unpredictable.

SHRINKING GDP

In general terms a recession is when the total output of an economy, called gross domestic product, declines in a meaningful way. One common rule of thumb is that when GDP contracts for two consecutive quarters, the country is in recession.

But that doesn't really capture it. The National Bureau of Economic Research's Business Cycle Dating Committee, which determines when recessions begin and end, looks beyond GDP at things like unemployment, personal income excluding government benefits, consumer spending and industrial production.

Those might deteriorate just a bit for a long time. Or they might crash so hard that it is obviously recessionary, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic when activity fell fast but rebounded quickly to yield only a two-month recession, the shortest on record in the US.

By contrast, a sluggish economy in 2016 never tilted into a declared recession.

NBER never declares recessions in real time. That's left for others to ponder by looking at things like changes in the unemployment rate, where rises of a half percentage point or more within a year have in the past meant recession is underway.

Nothing in hard data like unemployment, GDP or consumer spending currently suggests that is happening. The conversation is in the air because of recent surveys showing declining business and consumer sentiment, and because of memories of Trump's first term, when tariffs far smaller than those proposed now, and preceded by tax cuts, caused global economic growth to stall.

WHAT CAUSES RECESSIONS?

As of January, the risk of a US recession was considered small. A low unemployment rate and rising wages meant consumers were continuing to spend, inflation was drifting down towards the Federal Reserve's 2 percent target, and the US central bank had cut interest rates by a full percentage point since September. Fed officials considered it a stable foundation for continued growth, and many economists thought the central bank had nailed a "soft landing" from the high inflation of 2021 and 2022.

That's a rare feat: Sometimes it is central bank policy that triggers a downturn, most famously in the early 1980s when then-Fed chief Paul Volcker sent the economy into a painful recession with crushing interest rate hikes to tame high inflation.

This time, the volatility in sentiment, the declines in stock market wealth, and the worries of a coming drop in activity stemmed from Trump's move to rewire global trade with broad and steep tariffs on major US trading partners.

Such shocks are the other sources of downturns. The pandemic was another one, as was the combined shock in the early 2000s from the crash in tech stocks and the September 11, 2001, attacks on the US.

WHO PAYS THE BILL?

Recessions come with costs. Business profits fall, as do stock prices, which can then amplify the impact as investors reduce their own consumption. Incomes fall and government deficits rise as more people qualify for benefits meant to offset economic weakness, known as automatic stabilisers.

One reason the pandemic shutdown gave way to a period of strong economic growth was the amount of government support under both the first Trump administration and former President Joe Biden. Both administrations left huge deficits in their wake, which some feel may limit the government's response this time if the economy does sink.

But typically the most notable recession feature is rising unemployment, a fact that puts the heaviest burden of any downturn on those thrown out of work.

Rising US unemployment tends to fall disproportionately on Blacks and Hispanics, but each downturn is different.

A customer shops for produce at a grocery store in Austin, Texas. There has been talk lately of stagflation, with growing concerns that economic growth will slow or even shrink while inflation rises on the back of the US tariffs aimed at Canada, Mexico, China and other trading partners.

PHOTO: AFP/FILE

India's retail inflation slips below 4% for first time in 6 months

REUTERS, *New Delhi*

India's retail inflation fell below 4 percent in February for the first time in six months mainly due to a decline in vegetable prices, giving the central bank room to cut rates further in coming meetings.

Annual retail inflation in February eased to 3.61 percent, below economists' estimate of 3.98 percent and the lowest since July. Inflation for January was revised to 4.26 percent from 4.31 percent.

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The South Asian country's inflation has been within the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) tolerance band of 2 percent-6 percent for four consecutive months.

The slower rate of inflation has been mainly aided by the fall in vegetable prices due to improved supplies on the back of favourable weather.

Food inflation eased to 3.75 percent in February, the lowest since May 2023, from a revised 5.97 percent in the previous month. Vegetable prices fell 1.07 percent year-on-year, compared with an 11.35 percent increase in January.

Prices of vegetables have been the main driver of inflation for over a year, with a rate of increase of more than 20 percent in nine out of the past 12 months.

"Inflation decelerated at a faster pace than expected as food corrected sharply in February, on the back of a year-on-year decline in vegetables and pulses," said Radhika Rao, economist at DBS Bank.

Prices of cereals rose 6.1 percent against a 6.24 percent increase in January, while those of pulses fell 0.35 percent compared to a 2.59 percent growth in the previous month.