

Rewriting the Script for WOMEN'S FINANCE



We are bridging geographic barriers through Agent Banking and simplified digital onboarding. Our goal is to enhance financial literacy and digital confidence, supporting long-term economic empowerment for women across Bangladesh.



ALI REZA IFTEKHAR
Managing Director
EBL

This year, EBL is celebrating Women's Day by transforming financial inclusion into measurable economic impact. In this interview with *The Daily Star*, Managing Director, Ali Reza Iftekhar delves through the bank's specialised SME programs and digital innovation. That is how EBL empowers women to become key drivers of national prosperity.

The Daily Star (TDS): What led EBL to introduce a dedicated women-focused banking portfolio?

Ali Reza Iftekhar (ARI): Our portfolio was driven by market insight and strategic intent. We identified a structural financing gap despite women's growing economic participation. Integrating Women Banking into our Retail and SME strategy enables us to unlock growth and advance sustainable banking.

TDS: What is the current size and percentage of your women's portfolio?

ARI: Our portfolio stands at approximately BDT 10,000 crore in deposits and BDT 1,000 crore in loans. This represents 27% of our total deposit base and 13% of our overall loan portfolio, reflecting strong liability engagement.

TDS: How many women customers do you serve and what is their engagement level?

ARI: We serve 200,000 women

Our Women Banking segment is not a peripheral initiative; it is a core strategic priority. With exceptionally low NPLs, women borrowers have proven that inclusive finance is both socially responsible and represents a highly resilient, reliable segment of our overall portfolio.

with 300,000 active accounts. In 2025, transaction volume reached BDT 2,700 crore, demonstrating that women are not just opening accounts but actively participating in formal digital transaction ecosystems.

TDS: Which products or services are most in demand among women clients?

ARI: Savings products and credit cards are highly sought after for financial planning and lifestyle needs. We also offer *Mukti*, a women-led SME solution, and recently launched *Women Home Credit* to support homeownership

aspirations.

TDS: How has this segment grown over the last few years?

ARI: Over three years, we onboarded 80,000 new women customers, while deposits increased by BDT 4,000 crore. Women's loan accounts grew by 16%, reflecting steady portfolio deepening and growing financial inclusion across the country.

TDS: How does the repayment performance of women borrowers compare?

ARI: The *Mukti* program demonstrates exceptional asset quality with an NPL of approximately 0.18%. This performance underscores a superior repayment culture among women entrepreneurs compared to the broader SME portfolio, reinforcing our confidence in this segment.

TDS: What sectors and barriers are you currently addressing?

ARI: Women frequently borrow in fashion, beauty, and e-commerce. To address barriers like limited financial literacy and lack of collateral, we provide simplified digital onboarding and structured training through our dedicated initiative, *Adita*.

Interview conducted by Tagabun Taharim Titun

More than just a paycheck

ADRIN SARWAR

The first salary is never just a sum of money; the thought itself is amazing and carries a weight that makes one feel different. Even before the funds hit the bank account, many find themselves lost in planning, deciding what to buy, whom to treat, and where to go. These moments do more than just provide financial relief. They offer a sense of empowerment and the freedom to finally prioritise one's own wishes. Over time, these memories shape how we view ourselves, our families, and our lives.

Seikh Jinat Sharmin, Assistant Professor at the Department of Printing and Publication Studies, University of Dhaka, recalls the memory of her first salary, wanting to experience freedom without strings or guilt. "For the first time, I prioritised my own wishes over my obligations," she shares. Treating herself to a meal at a fine restaurant and a peaceful afternoon at a salon provided a thrill of empowerment. For her, this was more than a luxury. "Growing up, I often read news reports about how few women in our society truly own property. That realisation stayed with me. The moment I received my first salary, I made a silent vow: I would build something that was entirely mine. At the time, with my entry-level pay, it was my first stepping stone. Looking back now, those little savings and steps have led me to exactly where I wanted to be: owning something I can truly call my own." This sense of empowerment often manifests as a desire to celebrate the self in quiet, meaningful ways.

I remember planning my own first salary for days, imagining a long list of things to do. Yet, when the money finally arrived, I surprisingly didn't feel the need for grand gestures. I simply took myself to a nice coffee place to

enjoy the moment and bought a book to remember the day. Though I only did a few of the many things I had planned, that simple act of self-celebration felt deeply special and content.

However, for others, the true joy of financial independence is found in the ability to give back to those who supported the journey. Samiha Sarmin Munia, Assistant Professor in the Transfusion Medicine Department at the National Institute of Chest Diseases & Hospital, recalls her experience of receiving an internship stipend during Ramadan. "I remember for the first time I took a rickshaw home; before that, I used to take a bus and walk to my home. I bought jilapis for my family. I still remember the face of the rickshaw puller when I bought an extra bag of sweets just for him," she says, noting that the gesture felt more significant than any promotion since. Even when she entered government service in 2014, her first official paycheck was dedicated to gifts for her family and close ones, as her joy remained rooted in

providing for others.

As the excitement of the first paycheck settles, it often brings a sobering realisation of the effort required to earn it. Rahnuma Ferdous Oishy, a graduate student of Dhaka University found her first experience both special and confusing. "I finally understood the effort behind every amount," she explains. "Like how hours of hard work of your life get converted into numbers." This newfound mindfulness often changes one's perspective on spending, turning a proud moment into a lesson in value. Ultimately, these first earnings set the stage for the responsibilities of the future. While Samiha Sarmin Munia initially focused on the joy of giving, the birth of her daughter in 2016 transformed her relationship with money once again. She realised, "I am a mother now; I cannot afford to be reckless with the future," sparking her first real urge to save. Whether it leads to a quiet afternoon at a salon, a shared bag of sweets, or a dedicated savings account, a first salary is a milestone that bridges the gap between our past efforts and our future dreams.



ILLUSTRATION: E. RAZA RONNY

ABOUT LIFE, DEAR YOUNGER ME...

ADRIN SARWAR

There is a certain kind of stillness that settles in once you stop chasing the future and start living it. Even as you navigate the familiar rush—juggling classes, meeting deadlines, and moving through the daily hum of traffic—life has started to feel remarkably quiet. This isn't because the world has slowed down, but because you are finally showing up to the places you once only dreamed of. It is a moment to sit back and acknowledge that the "today" you once wished for is finally here.

To the quiet and growth

A path to establishing an identity is rarely a straight line. There were times when managing the expectations of family and those around you felt like an uphill battle. You tried to make them understand your vision; sometimes they understood, and sometimes they didn't. In those moments, it was easy to feel lost or to doubt the direction you were heading. But looking back, that doubt has started to fade. There is a specific kind of peace that comes from knowing you are exactly where you wanted to see yourself. Even if there are still miles to go, you've learned that the way forward is believing in your own process and continuing the work. Confidence isn't about having all the answers; it's about being okay with the journey.

Friendships and Letting Go

Coming this far often involves fighting the urge to quit. Along the way, there were people who stood by you, making it possible to bear the moments that felt too heavy. It is important to be grateful for those who stayed when things felt impossible. However, growth also means realising that not everyone is supposed to stay by your side forever.

Some people are meant to be part of a specific chapter, and that's okay. Instead of worrying about who isn't there anymore, the focus shifts to cherishing those who are. Learning to let go of the need to "fit in" with everyone allows you to value the genuine connections that remain.

Being comfortable with yourself

Many of us spend our teenage years trying to be the person who stands out in a room full of people. There's an exhausting effort put into impressing everyone, hoping to be taken seriously. That phase often comes with its fair share of embarrassment or perceived failures. It's easy to feel mad at yourself for not being the person everyone is talking about. But as you figure things out, you grow up. You realise that those stages were necessary for shaping who you are.

The desperate need to stand out eventually evolves into the comfort of simply being yourself. You stop trying to fit into a mold and start becoming comfortable in your own skin. In the end, all those struggles, the identity crises, the worries about friends, and the attempts to fit in, are what shaped the "quiet" you feel now. It's that comes from no longer doubting your worth. So, just keep going. Trust the path, cherish the people who truly see you, and enjoy the stillness you've earned.



Her success, OUR STRATEGY



A woman's financial future is her own. We provide collateral-free loans without spousal guarantees, ensuring access to finance is never contingent on male relatives.



AHSAN ZAMAM CHOWDHURY
Managing Director and CEO
Trust Bank PLC

Trust Bank PLC marks this year Women's Day by prioritising female-led growth. In this interview with the *Daily Star*, the Managing Director and CEO Ahsan Zamam Chowdhury explains how by bypassing collateral barriers and spousal guarantees, the bank transforms regulatory mandates into a strategic pillar for national economic empowerment and inclusive, long-term prosperity.

The Daily Star (TDS): What led to Trust Bank's decision to build a dedicated women's portfolio?

Ahsan Zamam Chowdhury (AZC): It starts with conviction. While Bangladesh Bank mandates dedicated desks, we chose to go well beyond compliance. Women represent half the population and a fast-growing share of entrepreneurial talent. This segment is now a core pillar of our SME strategy, targeting 27% lending by 2029.

TDS: What does the portfolio look like today in actual numbers?

AZC: Women account for 25% of our total depositor base. On the lending side, our portfolio is scaling consistently across manufacturing and trading. Crucially, our women-focused NPL ratios outperform much of our broader book, proving that when credit is designed

Supporting women is sound strategy. When we design credit properly, women repay. The data is clear, showing female borrowers consistently outperform our broader SME and retail portfolios.

properly, women demonstrate superior repayment discipline.

TDS: Which products are most popular among your women clients?

AZC: *Trust Sristi* is our flagship savings account, while *Trust Nondini* offers transformative financing. Use cases range from boutiques and agro-processing to equipment loans for beauty services. We provide up to BDT 25 lakhs without collateral at a capped 5% rate, without requiring spousal guarantees.

TDS: How has this segment grown over the past five years?

AZC: Growth has been substantial; women's deposit volumes more

than doubled while SME customers increased at double-digit rates. Remarkably, NPLs in this segment declined even as the customer base expanded. This validates our investment and reflects the rigorous commitment of women to their financial obligations.

TDS: How does the refinancing architecture support your operations?

AZC: We actively use the Small Enterprise Refinance Scheme. This enabling policy allows us to offer affordable finance at a 5% customer rate. Furthermore, cash incentives for timely repaying borrowers create a virtuous cycle that encourages more lending and higher asset quality across our portfolio.

TDS: What are the biggest remaining barriers and how are you addressing them?

AZC: Limited collateral and low registration rates are structural hurdles. We address these by accepting personal guarantees, simplifying KYC, and providing mentorship. Most importantly, we accommodate informal businesses without spousal guarantees, ensuring a woman's financial future remains entirely her own.

Interview conducted by Tagabun Taharim Titun