

The startup world says it wants women founders. So why doesn't it trust them?

NOMROTA SARKER

Bangladesh is very fond of the idea of the woman founder. She appears everywhere the ecosystem likes to flatter itself: on panels, in annual reports, in donor presentations, in the language of "inclusion" and "progress". She is photographed as proof that things are changing. That the country is modern. That entrepreneurship is opening up.

But speak privately to enough female founders in Dhaka and you hear a familiar complaint. They go into investor meetings prepared to talk about margins, customer acquisition, logistics, retention. They leave with the odd feeling that somewhere in the room, without anyone quite announcing it, they have stopped being treated as founders at all; they have been gently recast: as daughters, as girls, as someone's future wife.

An investor asks whether your parents support what you are doing. He wonders, almost tenderly, whether you plan to continue after marriage. He tells you startup life is very hard for girls. He praises your courage, your energy, your resilience, your "passion". What he does not do, at least not with the same force, is engage with your business as though it were an engine built to last.

A founder might be told: you remind me of my daughter. Another hears: don't burn yourself out, life is long. A third is praised for being "brave" rather than pressed on her numbers. Each remark, taken together, creates a pattern that is harder to shrug off. The founder is being moved, conversationally and psychologically, from the world of competition into the world of care.

That is the problem with paternalism. It rarely thinks of itself as prejudicial.

It often arrives disguised as warmth. Our business culture prizes respect, hierarchy and interpersonal ease. None of those are bad things in themselves, but they can provide a very comfortable shelter for bias. A woman is not dismissed outright. She is indulged. Encouraged. Protected, even. It sounds good until you realise that protection is often just another way of saying: I do not quite place you in the category of people I would back without reservation.

Ambitious, certainly. Promising, perhaps. Serious? That is where the hesitation creeps in.

A woman may be good enough to represent the ecosystem, but not quite solid enough to be read without qualification. She can be visible without being fully believed in. She can be funded, even, but under a cloud of extra supervision, extra advice, extra doubt. She gets mentorship when she is asking for money. She is described as inspiring



ILLUSTRATION: ZARIF FAIAZ

when she would rather be described as formidable. She is praised for surviving conditions that her male peers are expected simply to master.

But startups do not run on encouragement alone. They run on capital, trust and the presumption of seriousness. Once a woman is seen not quite as an operator but as an interesting exception, something essential has already been lost.

Then there is the simple matter of scarcity. Capital is not abundant. Women, like everyone else building companies here, are repeatedly told to be practical. Take the meeting. Take the money. Ignore the tone. Don't make it personal. But of course it is personal. It is also structural. Those are not opposites.

Investors like to think they have a back vision. In truth, they also back inevitability. They back the person they can imagine still pushing, still expanding, still hardening into scale five or 10 years from now. If a woman is being subconsciously read as temporary—someone who will eventually soften her edges, step back, settle down—then her ceiling has already been lowered in the minds of the people holding the cheque books.

Intent, at this point, is almost beside the point. Many of the men who speak this way would be horrified to think of themselves as sexist. Some probably are trying, in their own minds, to be decent. But ecosystems are not shaped by self-

image. They are shaped by habit. And habit, repeated often enough, becomes culture.

It has consequences for how ambition itself is read. When a woman founder is repeatedly exposed to this systemic exclusion, her ambition starts to look provisional. Her company becomes a phase, or a passion project, or an admirable hustle to be admired before life "properly" begins. That may never be said outright. It does not need to be. The assumption settles over everything anyway.

The cost of all it is harder to measure than a missed round of funding, but it is real all the same. Women learn to modulate constantly. To laugh when a comment misfires. To soften a sentence that ought to land with force. To choose likeability over precision because the room feels brittle and access feels precarious. A great deal of entrepreneurial energy is spent managing male comfort instead of building the company.

The encouraging part is that women are naming it more clearly now. They are comparing notes. They are becoming less willing to interpret every uneasy moment as individual oversensitivity. Some are learning to redirect these conversations back to the business at hand. Some are being more selective about whom they raise from. Some are simply staying put, succeeding noisily enough that the old patronising script begins to fail.

That, perhaps, is where the real change begins: not in the ecosystem's self-congratulation, but in its discomfort. In being forced to hear that what has long passed for politeness may also be a way of keeping women in their place.

We often ask when the country will produce more globally significant startups. It might ask, first, what kind of rooms it is asking people to build them in.

Because an ecosystem is not judged only by valuations and exits. It is judged by the assumptions that govern everyday encounters. By who gets to be treated as inevitable and who is still treated as decorative evidence of progress.

If Bangladesh wants a startup culture that can genuinely compete, it will have to do better than applauding women in public while quietly domesticating them in private.

The politeness is part of the problem. And until that is said without flinching, the pattern will continue to hide in plain sight.

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Views expressed in this article are of the author's own and may not reflect the editorial stance of The Daily Star.

JOBS SPOTLIGHT

Radiant Pharmaceuticals Limited

Officer, Production/
Quality Control
Deadline: March 14



Eligibility:

• M. Pharm or M. Sc. in Chemistry from a recognised university.

Minimum experience: 1-2 years

IDLC Finance PLC

Legal Officer, Litigation



Deadline: March 14

Eligibility:

• LL.B (Hons), LL.M, with previous experience in court activities.

Minimum experience: 1-2 years

Danish Refugee Council (DRC)

Area Support Services
Manager



Deadline: March 15

Eligibility:

• Master's degree in the relevant field of studies, with previous experience in people management and similar roles.

Minimum experience: 3-5 years

American International University

Bangladesh (AUB) - Lecturer,
various departments



Deadline: March 24

Eligibility:

• MBA/Master's with a Bachelor's/Honours degree in a relevant discipline with no third class in all examinations with a minimum 3.80 CGPA.

Minimum experience: N/A

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"Without work,
all life goes
rotten. But when
work is soulless,
life stifles and
dies."
ALBERT CAMUS



OpenAI robotics head resigns over Pentagon deal

NEXT STEP DESK

A top hardware executive at OpenAI has resigned over the company's recent agreement with the US Department of Defense, citing concerns that the deal was announced without proper safeguards in place.

Caitlin Kalinowski, who led OpenAI's robotics and consumer hardware team, announced her departure on Saturday in a series of social media posts. She joined the company in 2024 after previously leading augmented reality hardware development at Meta.

"AI has an important role in national security," Kalinowski wrote on X. "But surveillance of Americans without judicial oversight and lethal autonomy without human authorisation are lines that deserved more deliberation than they got."

She emphasised that her decision was "about principle, not people" and expressed "deep respect" for CEO Sam Altman and the team. In a follow-up post, she clarified that her issue was with the process: "The announcement was rushed without the guardrails defined. It's a governance concern first and foremost. These are too important for deals or announcements to be rushed."



Human advantage in workplace remains critical, study finds

NEXT STEP DESK

As artificial intelligence transforms how work gets done, organisations that prioritise human-centric approaches are significantly more likely to see returns on their investments, according to financial consulting firm Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends report.

The study, which surveyed more than 3,000 business and HR leaders across 15 countries,



found that those taking a human-focused approach to AI are 1.6 times more likely to exceed return expectations compared to those taking a tech-focused approach. Technology is replicable, the report argues, while people are not.

As per the report, despite nearly 60% of workers now using AI intentionally at work, only 14% of leaders say they are adept at shaping human-AI interactions. Organisations that prioritise intentional design of human-machine collaboration are nearly 2.5 times more likely to report better financial results and twice as likely to provide meaningful work, says Deloitte.

The research also highlights growing concerns around trust and culture. 80% of leaders, managers, and workers are concerned that colleagues are using AI to appear more productive than they are. Only 5% of organisations are making significant progress in understanding AI's impact on organisational culture, adds the report.

Special committee formed to examine PayPal launch in Bangladesh

MD ZAHIDUR RABBI

The government has formed a special committee to examine what is needed to launch PayPal in Bangladesh, according to a gazette notification issued by the Prime Minister's Office on March 2.

The committee will be chaired by Rehan Asif Asad, adviser to the ministry of posts, telecommunications and information technology. Its members include the chairman of the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority, the governor of Bangladesh Bank, the secretary of the finance division, the chairman of the National Board of Revenue, and the secretary of the information and communication technology division, who will serve as member secretary.

According to the notification, one of the committee's main responsibilities is to take effective steps to facilitate the start of PayPal's operations in Bangladesh. PayPal, one of the

world's largest online payment platforms, is widely used for cross-border transactions, particularly by freelancers.

The committee has also been tasked with improving the management of high-tech and software parks and ICT centres across the country. It will also work on policies aimed at providing affordable workspaces for freelancers and technology professionals.

Another part of its mandate is to promote ICT training programmes to help build a skilled workforce for the technology sector. The notification also says the committee may co-opt additional members if needed.

For years, freelancers and technology entrepreneurs in Bangladesh have called for access to global payment services such as PayPal, arguing that it would make international transactions easier and help connect the country's growing digital workforce more closely with the global economy.



Google CEO Sundar Pichai eyes new pay package worth \$692m

NEXT STEP DESK

Google parent Alphabet has lined up a new three-year pay package for chief executive Sundar Pichai that could be worth as much as \$692m, putting the Google boss among the best-paid corporate leaders in the world if the performance targets are met. Most of the award is tied to long-term stock incentives, including new grants linked to Waymo, the group's self-driving car business, and Wing, its drone delivery unit.

A filing with the US Securities and Exchange Commission shows Pichai's annual salary will remain unchanged at \$2m and that he will not receive an annual bonus. Instead, Alphabet has structured the package around triennial equity awards: two tranches of performance stock units with a target value of \$63m each, \$84m in restricted stock units, and separate "bet performance units" in Waymo and Wing with target values of about \$130m and \$45m respectively. Those performance awards can vest at between 0% and 200% of target, depending on results.

Alphabet said the award was intended to reflect Pichai's performance and to sharpen his focus on scaling its more mature "Other Bets" businesses. In the filing, the company said Waymo and Wing had made strong progress under his supervision and that incentivising him to develop those operations was in shareholders' interests.

The package also underlines how much Alphabet's value has grown during Pichai's tenure. The Financial Times reported that the company's market capitalisation had risen from about \$535bn when he took over as Google chief executive in 2015 to \$3.6tn, after briefly topping \$4tn in January.

3 deals drive massive \$189 bln venture spike in February

NEXT STEP DESK

Artificial intelligence (AI) companies accounted for the vast majority of global venture capital investment in February, according to a recent report from Crunchbase, with 3 firms alone responsible for most of the record-breaking total.

The report found that \$189 billion in venture funding flowed to startups worldwide last month, more than three times the amount recorded in January. Of that sum, \$171 billion, or roughly 90 percent, was directed to AI-focused companies.

Much of the capital was concentrated in three large funding rounds. OpenAI secured \$110 billion in fresh investment, one of the largest private fundraising rounds on record, valuing the company at \$730 billion. Its competitor Anthropic raised \$30 billion in a Series G round at a valuation of \$380 billion. Meanwhile, Waymo, the self-driving technology subsidiary of Alphabet, attracted \$16 billion at a valuation of \$126 billion.

Together, the three companies accounted for 83 percent of all venture dollars raised in February. The combined \$156 billion raised by OpenAI, Anthropic and Waymo in a single month amounts to roughly one-third of the \$425 billion invested across the entire venture capital market in 2025, according to data provided in the Crunchbase report.