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# BANGLADESH'S WOMEN OF FASHION







**BANGLADESH'S  
WOMEN  
OF  
FASHION**

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Dear readers,

It gives me great pleasure to introduce you to the book "Bangladesh's Women of Fashion". Women form the backbone of the textile supply chain, making up the majority of its workforce. Their contributions are indispensable, yet their stories often remain untold. This publication is a testament to the resilience, creativity, and determination of women in Bangladesh's textile and fashion industry. Through their stories, we gain a deeper understanding of the pivotal role women play in shaping this sector, which is a cornerstone of Bangladesh's economy.

The book provides valuable insights into the challenges and successes of diverse women in Bangladesh's textile and fashion industry, while highlighting the importance of education for employment, digitalisation and gender equality in sustainable development.

This work is the illustrative result of a writing workshop conducted by talented students at the Chair for Sustainability and Textile Innovation at Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology (AUST) in Bangladesh. The chair was established on the initiative of the German workwear company STRAUSS in cooperation with the International Services of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit – GIZ InS.

The writing workshop itself was generated as part of the bilateral project Higher Education and Leadership Development for Sustainable Textiles in Bangladesh (HELD), funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by GIZ.

You are therefore literally holding in your hands a prime example of co-creation that applies in practice the BMZ Agenda for Decent Work Worldwide and our Asia Strategy, as well as the BMZ's Feminist Development Policy and our position on Digitalisation for Development. By amplifying the voices of these women, this publication also serves as a call to action to recognize the invaluable contributions of women in the textile sector.

My compliments to all the project partners, and especially to the students and their mentors, whose collective commitment has made such a flagship publication possible.

I wish you an insightful reading experience. It's worth it!

Kind regards,

**Dr. Bärbel Kofler**

Parliamentary State Secretary

Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development

# PREFACE



Nothing has a more lasting impact than education. It shapes mindsets, enables people to understand the consequences of their actions on the world, and empowers them to take responsibility for themselves and their surroundings. With this conviction, in 2019 we initiated the establishment of a Chair for Sustainability and Textile Innovation at Ahsanullah University of Science in cooperation with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) in 2019. We are delighted to see how well the program has been received and to witness the remarkable, forward-thinking projects already emerging from this educational initiative.

As entrepreneurs, it is evident to us: long-term success requires sustainable thinking and action. For us, this means aligning economic, ecological, and social aspects. We deeply value the positive development our company has experienced, which is largely thanks to the people involved in our business activities. In this regard, Bangladesh holds a special significance for Strauss. Over the years, it has become our most important manufacturing country. Proudly made in Bangladesh: Together with our longstanding partners, we have succeeded in producing increasingly sophisticated products. We are committed to ensuring that this takes place in a positive context. We firmly believe that our actions on the ground can create change beyond just production conditions. That is why we are increasingly engaging in educational projects in Bangladesh.

As a family business, we know that people are what matter most. Behind every organization are individuals, and the relationships we maintain with all our stakeholders are personal. Each of these relationships is built on mutual appreciation. For nearly four decades, the garment industry has been Bangladesh's driving economic force, creating more jobs than any other sector. Women have particularly benefited from this over the past decade: today, the majority of workers in the industry are women. This development has granted Bangladeshi women a measure of self-determination and independence. At the same time, there is still much to be done! At Strauss, we place great importance on the aspect of female empowerment in Bangladesh. This includes advancing more women into leadership positions, and we are committed to contributing to this effort.

Out of our desire to further integrate female empowerment into the curriculum, the present collection of essays, "Women in Fashion," has emerged. It features powerful contributions from inspiring women—a strong statement, and one that we intend to build on.

There is still much to do—let's tackle it together!

**Henning Strauss**

Owner  
Strauss GmbH & Co. KG

**Steffen Strauss**

Owner  
Strauss GmbH & Co. KG



© GIZ BD/Muntasir Ovi

It gives me immense pleasure to present this significant work, *Women of Fashion in Bangladesh*, which sheds light on the transformative journeys of women in the readymade garments (RMG) sector of Bangladesh. This project, born out of a partnership between the Higher Education and Leadership Development for Sustainable Textiles in Bangladesh (HELD) initiative of GIZ and the dedicated students of Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology (AUST), captures the voices and experiences of women who have become trailblazers in this vital industry.

The RMG sector is not only a cornerstone of our economy but also a symbol of resilience, creativity, and innovation. Over the years, women have played a critical role in shaping the success of this sector, navigating a landscape often filled with challenges, and emerging as leaders. Through their perseverance, these women have not only contributed to the economic development of Bangladesh but have also broken societal barriers, making way for future generations.

This book is more than a collection of stories; it is a celebration of ambition, courage, and leadership. It chronicles the lives of women who have overcome obstacles, led with distinction, and set benchmarks for others to follow. Their narratives will undoubtedly serve as inspiration for countless others, especially young women aspiring to make their mark in the fashion and RMG industry.

I am particularly proud that this initiative was driven by the students of AUST, whose commitment to learning, research, and social impact has resulted in this valuable contribution. Through their efforts, this book not only honours the achievements of women in the RMG sector but also underscores the importance of higher education and leadership development in fostering sustainable growth.

I hope this book serves as a source of empowerment and motivation, encouraging more women to embrace leadership roles in this vital industry and beyond. As we turn these pages, we celebrate the power of women to shape the future of fashion in Bangladesh and the world.

## **Prof. Dr. Md. Ashraful Hoque**

Vice-Chancellor

Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology (AUST)



© Shirin Araghi

When I entered the fashion industry several years ago, I was curious, I was full of energy, I was ready to change the world and I thought that nothing could ever stop me. Not for a second, I thought I couldn't be or become anything, just because I am a woman. I was lucky enough to meet countless incredibly influential and strong women, that supported me on my way and shaped the way I conduct business. Women, that formed who I am today. Yet, I could not ignore the fact that top leadership positions are often still held by men only, even in an industry that is carried by women.

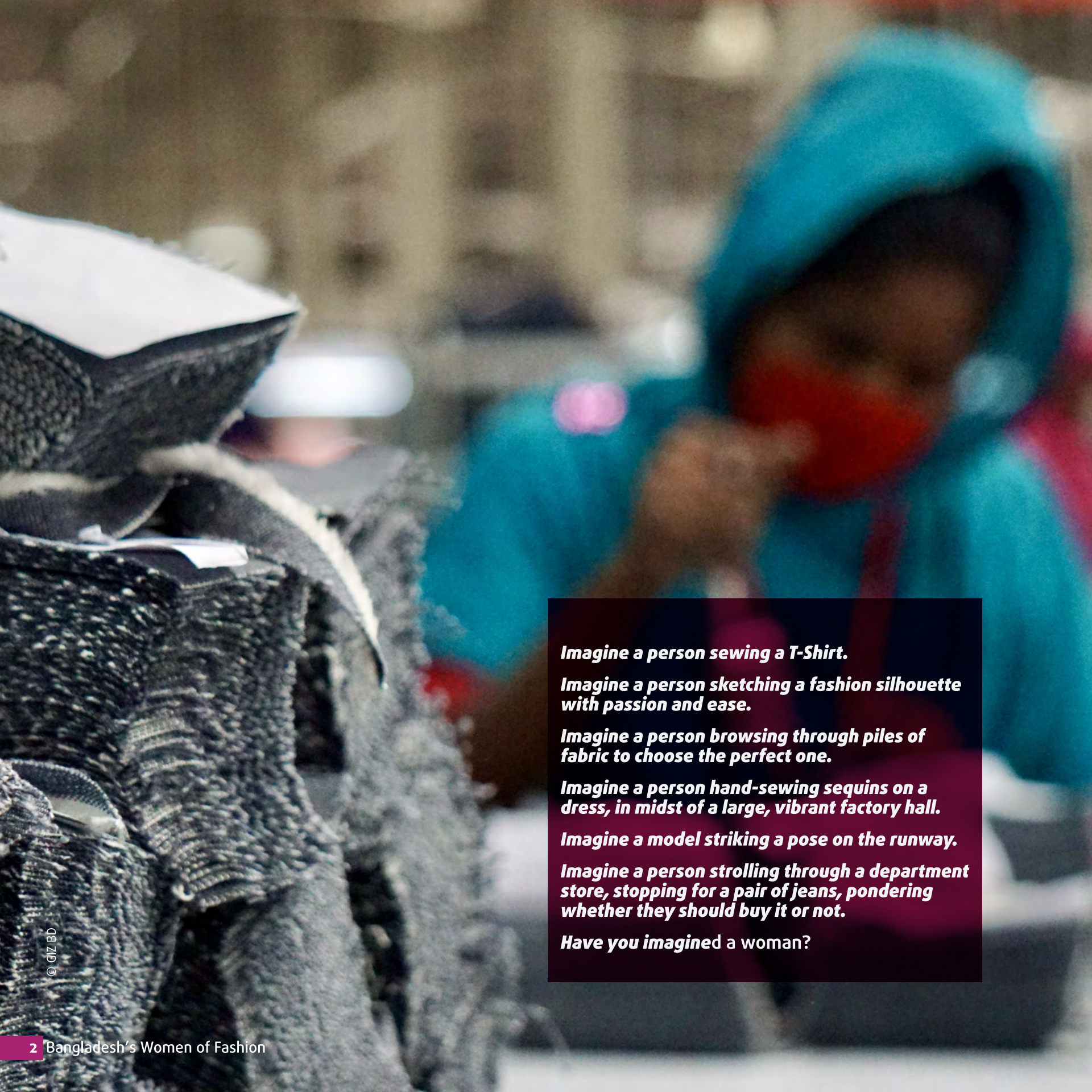
I felt the urge to highlight stories of women that are usually left unheard. Stories of fighters, leaders, starters, dreamers and believers, that form the backbone of the fashion industry.

Together with a group of talented students and graduates from Dhaka, I was able to turn this wish into reality. This book is the result of hard work and passion. All authors left their comfort zones to find the best stories worth telling, to dig deeper, to ask the right questions and to write, what must be written. And I am beyond proud of this.

## **Shirin Araghi**

Designer and Consultant for Sustainability in Fashion  
Editor

**MAKE  
WOMEN  
VISIBLE**



***Imagine a person sewing a T-Shirt.***

***Imagine a person sketching a fashion silhouette with passion and ease.***

***Imagine a person browsing through piles of fabric to choose the perfect one.***

***Imagine a person hand-sewing sequins on a dress, in midst of a large, vibrant factory hall.***

***Imagine a model striking a pose on the runway.***

***Imagine a person strolling through a department store, stopping for a pair of jeans, pondering whether they should buy it or not.***

***Have you imagined a woman?***

If you did, I can assure you that you are not the only one. When people learn about the word of fashion, they often associate this term with women. And the subconscious assumption, that fashion and the female are somehow connected, is not entirely wrong.

Fashion is made of women for women.

Around 60-90% of the workforce in clothing manufacturing industry is women, with the main production countries being located in Asia, like China, Bangladesh, India or Taiwan. Women are believed to have better fine motor skills than men, which brings many young females to the conclusion, that a job in garment factory could be a good opportunity for them to become independent.

But not only in the production floor is female dominated but also positions, which require creative skills, are often filled by women. Research shows clearly, that around 85% of the majors top fashion schools around the globe are female. Those creative graduates often start their career as designers, which are, as you might have guessed, predominantly female as well. In America for instance, female designers account for a share of over 80%, yet, a female designer only makes 91% of what a man with a similar position earns.

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***Around 60-90% of the workforce in clothing manufacturing industry is women, with the main production countries being located in Asia, like China, Bangladesh, India or Taiwan. Women are believed to have better fine motor skills than men, which brings many young females to the conclusion, that a job in garment factory could be a good opportunity for them to become independent.***

A similar picture can be drawn about retail: Internationally the number of female sales workers in fashion significantly surpasses that of males. Inditex reports of a pretty stable share of around 75-78% female employees over the past years. H&M's shares look



©GIZ / Sabrina Asche

very comparable, with again around three quarters of all employees being female. PWC estimates, that around 73% of all people working in fashion retail are women.

So, when you enter a store that sells fashion items, no matter if it's a small boutique or a big departmental store, the chances are high that there will be three times more female experts consulting you on what to buy than male ones.

And who are those sales representatives selling the goods to?

If we simply compare the global market size of womenswear and menswear, we already see a big gap. In 2023, the women's apparel market reached a total worth of 901 Billion USD, while men's apparel market value adds only up to USD 568 Billion. Womenswear is consumed in masses, and this consumption trend grows continuously.

With the growing world population and increasing purchasing capacity, more and more women can now afford to spend on clothes.



***HR managers tend to prefer male candidates over female to recruit for managerial positions. One substantial reason is that women would get pregnant, and often are considered as primary caregivers of their kids. A person who is constantly on calls of family members and has the responsibility | stress of childcare can simply invest or focus less of their energy, time and, attention to any outside job compared to the person who Don't have those responsibilities.***

Women consume fashion differently than men do. Overall, men rather tend to shop out of a necessity. They only replace a pair of jeans when they are not useable. Men have a tendency towards pragmatism, not only in their shopping behavior, but also in the way they combine outfits, which in turn affects to their buying

behaviour Women are, according to societal structures dictate, more drawn to aesthetic impressions. Women's shopping behavior has a high tendency to engage with feelings. When women buy clothes, they tend to convey a certain message or an image of personality. Clothes are believed or assumed to make women feel presentable, and beautiful.

Yet, a woman's buying capacity is not just limited to the things she chooses for herself. Due to the fact that more women than men carry primary responsibility for the household chores and the childcare responsibility within a family, they are often in a position where they purchase clothes for family members too. This also includes not only their children, but also their spouses.

According to studies, women take 80% of all thier family buying decisions worldwide.

Women care for fashion, for the aesthetic purpose of an outfit, for the craft of sewing and for trends. Women are the ones, who decide what to buy, what to wear and what to be thrown away, and it is the women who sew millions and billions pieces of garments every year.

Women are the backbone of the fashion industry, yet they are not well- recognized or equally paid as their male counterpart.

When we look at the top ten largest fashion companies in terms of their annual revenue, we notice, that only one of them is led by a female CEO<sup>1</sup>.

And this is only a single, high-level example.

Across different parts of the fashion business, whether in production, in design, in sales or in marketing, we see that the participation of women gets smaller towards the upper ladder.

Women have all in all fewer chances to fill C-level leadership positions, ironically even in the fashion industry, despite the high number of female workforces.

Some studies revealed, that HR<sup>2</sup> managers tend to prefer male candidates over female to recruit for managerial positions. One substantial reason is that women would get pregnant, and often are considered as primary caregivers of their kids. A person who is constantly on calls of family members and has the responsibility | stress of childcare can simply invest or focus less of their energy, time and, attention to any outside job compared to the person who Don't have those responsibilities.

Unfortunately, in today's society, the former is mainly woman and the latter is man.

In almost all cultures worldwide, women are still perceived as the prime parent. When a woman focuses on her career, she is considered a bad mother. When a woman stays at home to raise the next generation of tax payers, she is considered as a bad feminist.

So, how can we break the glass ceiling in this female dominated yet male-led industry?

While several legal policies and corporate strategies have been tested and introduced around the world with mixed reactions and results, there is one powerful, influencing factor, that nearly every expert in this field agrees on:

### **Visibility**

Having a role model can influence a person's decision making, and subsequently, their career paths. To inspire more women to be brave and demand fair treatment and to show men in positions of power, that women are capable of filling similar positions, we must make women the talk of town.

<sup>1</sup>Chief Executive Officer

<sup>2</sup>Human Resources: Department for training and recruiting of the staff





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The power of visibility is proven through countless studies and the result is always the same: People don't believe what they don't see. In order to believe in themselves, women must see other women do it. In order to make space and pass the ball to a female peer, men must see women take ownership.

In this book we will introduce seven inspiring female role models from Bangladesh, who have one thing in common--they work in fashion industry. They all faced injustice depending on their gender at some point in their careers and they can share their learning and strategies to pave a way through unfair landscapes.

### **But why Bangladesh?**

Bangladesh is the world's second largest garment producing country. About 4.2 million Bangladeshi women make a living through the fashion industry, the majority of them are employed in low-paid production level. Bangladesh is a melting pot of cultures, because of its geographical location in South Asia and its strong relation with western countries through this garment trade.

To Bangladeshi women fashion is a notional ideas but this could be more than they can imagine. Despite the country's specialization in garment manufacturing, lots of potentials of creativity is being lost in absence of proper opportunity. And thus the worth of women is underevaluated and ignored.

Bangladesh has immense potentials to be the role model and offering guidelines to others.

Let's meet some of them.

# TASLIMA MIJI

CEO of Leatherina



©Taslma Miji

## I REFUSE TO LET GENDER DEFINE MY SUCCESS.

Throughout her journey, Taslima faced gender-based challenges in the male-dominated (Leather) industry. Despite these obstacles, she remains committed to challenging gender norms and advocating for equality. Taslima emphasizes the importance of networking, fair recruitment practices, and supporting women in the workplace. Her story highlights the indomitable spirit of women navigating the complexities of structural inequality. Taslima's advice to aspiring fashion industry professionals focuses on self-worth, innovation, and staying updated with trends. Her story inspires others to dream big and defy expectations, paving the way for a brighter future.

Written by Fatema Binte Muhammed

*The sun was just about to set, creating long shadows across the bustling streets of Mirpur, an outskirts area of Dhaka, the capital city, mostly known for its diverse historical buildings and vibrant nature. In the heart of the industrial district, amidst the growling noises of machines and the subtlesmell of leather, stood a nondescript building – the future home of a thriving business. Inside, a woman is standing high at the threshold of a new chapter in her life.*

*With just one week left before the grand opening of her own factory, every details had been planned, every logistical challenges had conquered. Yet, one final obstacle still remained- a meeting with the landlord of the factory building. As she stepped into the dimly lit office, her pulse started to beat fast . Forcefully, she tried shifting her focus from now to the days ahead.*

*As she conversed with the landlord, the atmosphere quickly turned sour. His attitude was harsh, and disrespectful. Despite her thorough preparations she found herself in a disrespectful situation even before the beginning of the conversation, she was made to wait for hours in the dimly lit room. And once the meeting started, with each passing minute of the dragging dispute, her frustration mounted up. However, she kept her patience with the thought that this is nothing but a bump on herway .*

*The fan in the room rattled uncomfortably as the conversation went on. Then, in a sudden turn of events, the landlord's harsh words pierced the air. "Take your*

*money and go away," he spat, just before the scheduled opening.*

*The argument escalated over a minor issue: the landlord's dislike her negotiating tone. What began as a routine discussion over terms swiftly transformed into a clash of personalities, where not just the lease agreement, but the entire future of her factory came at a stake.*

*Stunned by his insensitive words and unprofessional behavior, yet undeterred, she gathered her self-control and met his gaze with determination. Although his words stung, she refused to let them break her spirit. Later, a friend stepped in and successfully negotiated a compromise with the landlord. Yet, despite her continued interactions with him, his behavior remained unchanged.*

*Yet, she persisted, ultimately finding a way to move forward despite the initial setback, proving her resilience and determination in the face of adversity.*

*And so, with her head held up high and her unshaken persuasion, she left the office that day, determined to overcome every obstacle in her path and emerge stronger on the other side. She was not just a tenant or a business owner – she was a woman on a mission to defy odds and leave a mark in the world.*

Taslima Miji, aged 46, is a powerful role model, she stands out from the many people working in Bangladesh's fashion business as she teaches us how to develop a resilient personality and authentic work ethics. Her name may blend into the myriad of entrepreneurs and sustainability advocates, but her story carries a resonance that sets her apart—a narrative woven with threads of strength, ingenuity, and a relentless pursuit of empowerment. As we delve further into the depths of Taslima's journey, we uncover a tale that transcends borders and cultures, inspiring all who encounter it.

Hailing from Bangladesh, Taslima's journey embodies the transformative power of perseverance and grit. From her humble beginnings to her current position as the founder of Leatherina Pvt. Ltd., she has navigated a road strewn

with obstacles, emerging stronger and more determined with each challenge.

From a young age, Taslima showed a keen interest and a passion for knowledge. Her insatiable curiosity led her to pursue a career in journalism, where she honed her skills as an investigative reporter, exploring social issues in depth and advocating for change. Through her work, she gained immense insights into the dept of governments work, policy and social dynamics, laying the foundation for her future endeavors.

As fate would have it, Taslima's life took a sudden turn, when she entered motherhood. Balancing the responsibilities of raising a child with the demands of her career proved to be an intense, yet rewarding challenge.



During this transformative period, Taslima found herself drawn to the world of leather and fashion. Dissatisfied with the traditional constraints of her previous career ventures, she sought to explore a new course - one fueled by passion, creativity, and a commitment to sustainability. Thus, Leatherina Pvt. Ltd. was launched - a manufacturing company with specialization in high-quality leather and fabric products.

Since its launch in 2016, Leatherina has grown significantly, exploring international markets such as the Netherlands. Today the company pioneers through environmental and ethical tenets and through engagement in women's empowerment, deeply influencing the entire country's market for leather goods, laying grounds for other players to follow them on their path of diversity, fair trade deals and the widespread adoption of sustainable techniques.

When asked about her journey, she reflected on the challenges she faced and the lessons she learned allthrough the way. "I didn't find the computer business fulfilling," she admitted. "I yearned for something more - a business that resonated with my values and allowed me making a meaningful impact."

Taslima values her freedom and her personality allows her to stand up for her beliefs and dreams. And this kind of emotional strength can get you far, especially as a woman. But it does not make you invulnerable.

Reflecting on her experiences, she candidly discusses the influence of gender on her journey up to this point. "As a woman in a male-dominated industry, I've faced challenges," she acknowledges. "But I refuse to let gender define my success." Her determination is evident in her daily life as a business leader, where she navigates a myriad of responsibilities with grace and determination.

Taslima recounted several such instances where being a woman has threatened her success as an entrepreneur, shedding light on the challenges faced in the male-dominated industries. "During my market research, I encountered situations where my gender was perceived as a hindrance," she reflected. "In one instance, I waited for two hours to meet with an industry owner. It was easily understood how much she had to undergo as she was felt undermined and disrespectful during the interactions.

She could not help noticing the double standards she was underestimated, only because of her gender. "The absence of courtesy and respect shown towards me left a lasting impression," Taslima shared. "It became apparent that I being a woman with high qualifications wasn't normal in their eyes. This experience, among others, left a scarce and created obstacles in the long run."

Taslima went on to share numerous examples from within the industry, highlighting a recurring theme of gender bias. Dealers and landlords displayed dismissive attitudes and made insensitive remarks, challenging her capabilities and bluntly telling her that her business would suffer without a male partner overseeing the situation. These experiences show how these entrenched traditional beliefs can undermine a woman's professional stance in the male-dominated fields.

She acknowledged the social perceptions that contribute to such biases, noting the prevalent concept that the number of successful single women are somehow inadequate.

"The mindset that women without male guardians or partners are incapable of achieving goals still persists" Taslima lamented. This notion undermines the achievements and capabilities of so many single women, perpetuating and amplifying gender differences in leadership and society."

Despite these challenges, she remained resolute in her commitment to challenge gender norms and advocate for equality.

"I constantly remind others of the importance of respecting women and acknowledging their competences," she noted.

"It's crucial to combat such outdated beliefs

©Taslima Miji



and empower women to succeed on their own merits."

When asked about gender disparity in leadership, Taslima shared her thoughts on the under representation of women in executive positions. "It's a systemic issue that needs to be addressed," she asserts. "We must fight for gender diversity in leadership to foster innovation and inclusivity."

Her commitment to fairness extends to her views on implementing quotas to promote gender diversity, advocating for equal opportunities for all.

Although different people have different opinions on the implications of women quotas, research shows that gender quotas can significantly boost women's representation in leadership, as seen in Norway's increase from 9% to 40% on corporate boards. (Matsuura et al., 2020)

Several sociologists highlight the importance of women quotas to make female's capabilities more visible in the society and consequently inspire more women to choose a similar path. Yet, many women do not want to be chosen due to a quota, they would rather be chosen for a

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***During my market research, I encountered situations where my gender was perceived as a hindrance," she reflects. "In one instance, I waited for two hours to meet with a traditional industry owner, only to feel undermined and disrespected during our interaction.***



**Bangladesh ranks 50th in global gender equality, with women underrepresented in decision-making roles.**

**Despite quotas, only 10% of parliamentary seats and 1.6% of board director positions in listed companies are held by women in Bangladesh. (Matsuura et al., 2020)**

50th in global gender equality, with women underrepresented in decision-making roles. Despite quotas, only 10% of parliamentary seats and 1.6% of board of director positions in listed companies are held by women in Bangladesh. (Matsuura et al., 2020) While discussing business, Taslima emphasizes the critical role of networking that plays important role in advancing women in the business world.

"Networking provides access to opportunities and support systems," she explains. "It's essential for women to build connections and leverage them for growth." Moreover, Taslima emphasizes the importance of unbiased candidate selection processes, ensuring fairness and equal opportunities in recruitment practices.

Throughout her experience as a woman founder, Taslima has come across gender-specific behavioral tendencies in the leather goods industry. "There's still a perception that certain roles are more suited for men," she observes. "But we must challenge these stereotypes and create a more equitable environment for all."

Taslima's commitment to gender equality evolves her daily actions and interactions. "This is my built-in bias. I would say that I am not unbiased. I am biased," she humorously confessed. Her passion for supporting women is evident in her anecdotes from the workplace. "In my factory, during interactions, we often share light moments, have fun, and engage in discussions. This is a common scenario, that represents our worker-friendly environment."

position based on their qualifications, their personality traits or their values. Many women fear, that being nominated for a leadership position thanks to quotas can harm their reputation, and give them a competitive disadvantage.

However, Bangladesh ranks

She elaborates on her preference for supporting women, recounting instances where it is recognized by her colleagues. "Our male employees often acknowledge my tendency towards supporting women, but they understand that the well-being of our female staff is a priority," Taslima explains.

This commitment translates into tangible policies aimed at ensuring a safe and supportive workplace for women. "We have implemented an anti-harassment policy to address any grievances from our female employees," she asserts.

The solidarity and the support among the female workers in Taslima's business are evident. "The female employees often share moments of joy, pain, and appreciation with one another. Their solidarity fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment," Taslima reflects with pride.

She extends her dedication to fairness through personal gestures of gratitude. "I am often greeted with flowers and chocolates on my desk, a token of appreciation from the staff. It creates a beautiful atmosphere," she reveals.

In Taslima's factory, the philosophy of women supporting women is not just a slogan but a reality. Through her leadership, she embodies the transformative potential of prioritizing women's empowerment, fostering an environment where they can flourish and achieve success.

Addressing issues like the gender pay gap, Taslima emphasizes the importance of equal compensation and fairness in the workplace. "We must advocate for equal pay for equal work," she declares. "It's a matter of basic fairness and respect."

Considering her experiences and efforts to bridge the gender pay gap within her company, Taslima shares her proactive approach. "When I investigated several scenarios, I saw that our girls, when they get promoted to a supervisor level or higher positions, often drop out due to family pressure," she explained.

Taslima takes a personal stance to address these challenges, engaging in one-on-one conversations with her employees to encourage them to seize opportunities for advancement. "I target specific girls and slowly train them for higher positions," she elaborates, emphasizing the importance of instilling confidence and competition in her female workforce.



©Taslima Mijj



Responding to question over gender-related behavioral patterns in the industry and instances of gate keeping from other women, Taslima offered insightful perspectives. Speaking from her own experiences, she acknowledged the complex dynamics at play and the existence of both supportive and unsupportive individuals within the female community. "Not every woman is necessarily willing to help other women. Not every woman is pro-women," she reflected.

Taslima is not the only one witnessing resentment, enviousness and prejudices among women. Misogyny among women remains a concerning, society-wide issue. It's evident that some women perpetuate negative behaviors towards their peers, including gatekeeping and undermining. These attitudes are often influenced by societal norms and patriarchal structures that shape women's perceptions and behaviors towards one another. While Taslima's resilience in the face of competition is admirable, addressing misogyny among women requires a collective effort to challenge and remove the long inherited gender biases. (Mavin, Sharon, Williams, Jannine, & Grandy, Gina. 2014).

Explaining her background in sociology and journalism, Taslima reflected on the unconventional path that led her to the world of leather industry. "I should have pursued a career in the development sector, as is the norm for sociology graduates," she remarked. However, her exposure to journalism during her university days ignited her passion for writing and eventually led to a career in journalism. Taslima's diverse networks of friends and mentors, including journalists, activists, and researchers, played a crucial role in shaping her entrepreneurial mindset and providing inspiration throughout her journey.

Given her concern for environmental aspects of the industry, her dedication to sustainability is obvious as she discusses Leatherina's initiatives to promote ethical manufacturing and environmental responsibility. "Sustainability is not just a buzzword," she asserted. "It's a moral imperative—a commitment to future generations and the planet we call home."

Navigating international markets, Taslima shared insights into Leatherina Pvt. Ltd.'s strategies for securing partnerships with designer brands. "We focus on quality and ethical practices," she explained. "It's about building trust and delivering value to our partners."

In addition to Leatherina Pvt. Ltd., Taslima launched 'Gutipa,' a B2C platform offering high-quality leather products to the local market. "Gutipa is a testament to our commitment to craftsmanship and authenticity," she remarked. "It's about creating a brand with a story—a brand that resonates with our values."

Beyond her professional endeavors, Taslima is also a devoted mother. Despite the hurdles she faced as a single parent, she remained strong in her belief that women can excel in both, career and family life. "It's not easy, but with support and determination, anything is possible," she stated.

Taslima shed glimpses into her family background and its profound influence on her entrepreneurial spirit. "I came from a family of resilient women," she shared with pride.

"Their unwavering determination and independence have profoundly shaped my approach to life and business."

When questioned about her current relationship status and family obligations, Taslima responded with candor. "I'm currently maintaining the status of being single after divorce," she revealed. "I have an adult son who now assists me, although it wasn't any exceptions of challenges."

She openly recognized the struggles of balancing motherhood with career demands, stressing the vital role of support needed from family members and the flexibility afforded by her work setup.

In contemplating the broader challenges faced by women in reconciling care giving duties with professional ambitions, Taslima spoke from her own experiences, "Many women including myself pushed off balancing between family and professional responsibilities," she noted adding that but it's not easy. She emphasizes the need for discussions and shared responsibilities within partnerships to share the burden of care giving.

Citing from her own experiences, Taslima named some of the sacrifices she made in her personal life to pursue her career ambitions. "I've had my fair share of personal storms," she admitted. "It signifies the importance of equal distribution of responsibilities within relationships, particularly in caregiving roles."

Delving into her family dynamics, Taslima pictures a heartwarming unity despite geographical distances.



©Taslima Miji



©Taslima Miji



"Despite our physical distances, we siblings--three sisters, two brothers, and I remain closely bonded," she shared. "We make use of technology to stay connected, supporting each other through life's challenges."

In a witty conversation, Taslima told that she is in search of a partner and ended up that she was just kidding. This revealed the strong personality with determination also the humour.

Taslima is a symbol of how keep balancing between personal and professional life with showcasing her resilience, family support and an unwavering commitment to gender equality.

Her story serves as a testament to the indomitable spirit of women navigating the complexities of modern life with grace and determination.

At the end of the interview, she shared invaluable advice for both current and aspiring members of the fashion industry. Taslima emphasized on self-worth in the profession, urging individuals to challenge the status quo and strive for self-respect and dignity. For graduates and young professionals, Taslima encourages taking initiative, studying extensively, and adopting a global perspective to lead the industry's transformation. Despite her own regrets about entering the fashion business lately, Taslima inspires the younger generation to seize opportunities and adopt a global perspective.

Highlighting the significance of innovation and vision, Taslima stresses the importance of investing in technology, education, and environmental compliance

within the fashion sector. She calls for collective action and a departure from outdated practices, urging stakeholders to drive change and propel the industry forward.

In her concluding remarks, Taslima emphasizes the value of contemporary design and

staying updated with trends. She highlights the need for a multi-sectoral initiative, emphasizing how teamwork and progressive thinking are essential to ushering in a new age of creativity and distinction in the fashion business.

Though unique, Taslima's story reflects a broader aspects of Bangladesh's society. Women in Bangladesh are increasingly pursuing entrepreneurship as a means of achieving economic empowerment and independence, despite various obstacles such as limited access to financing, societal stigma, less focus on profession due to familial responsibilities, shortage of money, insufficient managerial expertise, , other social issues and political influence impeding their future ventures.

Today, Taslima's journey serves as a beacon of hope for aspiring entrepreneurs, particularly women facing similar challenges in male-dominated industries. Her determination and unwavering belief in herself have paved the way for a brighter future, not only for herself but also for others who dare to dream big and defy odds.

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***Taslima stresses the importance of investing in technology, education, and environmental compliance within the fashion sector. She calls for collective action and a departure from outdated practices, urging stakeholders to drive change and propel the industry forward.***

**BANGLADESH'S FASHION  
MANUFACTURING SECTOR**

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**DID YOU  
KNOW?**



164 Million people live in Bangladesh.

4 Million people work in the field of fashion and textiles, with 80% of those being female.

In the recent decades, Bangladesh experienced an incredibly fast economic development, which the partially owes to the fashion industry. 80% of all exported goods from Bangladesh are coming from this business sector. Overall, Bangladesh is the second largest exporter of clothes, directly after China. To meet international demands, the nation had to develop whole industry branches and infrastructural systems in a very short period of time, which leads to modern urban habitats, but in contrast to that, comparatively very underdeveloped rural areas.

When referring to Bangladesh's fashion industry, people use the term RMG-Sector, which is the short form of ready-made-garments. On first sight, the choice to opt for this wording seems quite insignificant, but it expresses quite clearly, that Bangladesh is specialized in garment production first and foremost, and not as much in textile raw material

production. The biggest difference is the workforce that is needed. To generate raw materials like fibers, yarns or fabrics, many machines can be used to at least partially

replace human work. Sewing a garment on the other hand requires fine motor skills from a human. There is no fully automated sewing machine that makes seamstresses obsolete. Fine motor skills are often considered to be a rather female trait, which also

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**The national minimum wage has not been updated since 2019 and is currently at 8.000 Taka a month, which roughly corresponds to 74 USD or 63 EUR. The Clean Clothes Campaign demands a minimum wage of 23.000 Taka, which is a lot more.**

reflects in the high quota of women working in Bangladesh's factories. In other textile production industries, where more technical knowledge or muscle power is required, we see less women.

Many young women and girls consider jobs in garment manufacturing, because they hope for independence. Especially young women from rural areas often times decide to move to bigger cities to become a garment worker. Many of those even use parts of their salary to support their families in their hometowns.

The reason that Bangladesh developed into a prime clothing production country is therefore also closely related to the amount of work which is required to make a garment. Bangladesh offers incredibly low wages and therefore allows big corporations to employ large numbers of people for a price that is hard to beat on the international market.

The national minimum wage has not been updated since 2019 and is currently at 8.000 Taka a month, which roughly corresponds to 74 USD or 63 EUR. Many NGOs, unions, spokespeople and representatives from the industry state that this wage is not enough to make a living. The Clean Clothes Campaign demands a minimum wage of 23.000 Taka, which is a lot more. This demonstrates the big gap of the nations minimum



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***Nowadays, there are around 7000 factories in Bangladesh which create a national sum of export value of 25 Billion USD. No wonder, that this high speed of economic development and the high number of employed people lead to higher safety threats.***

wage and the conceptualized living wage.

A seamstress has to work approximately 100 over hours a month to earn enough to cover all living costs.

The work environment in garment factories is also a difficult one or tiresome as one has to work

a very long hours—eight hours and additional three to four hours as overtime. There is little breaks while there are evidences of harassment both physical and mental. That is why women over 30 are seen as too old for this industry, as they cannot keep up the energy to live under this high pressure.

Nowadays, there are around 7000 factories in Bangladesh which create a national sum of export value of 25 Billion USD. No wonder, that this high speed of economic development and the high number of employed people lead to higher safety threats.

In 2013 Bangladesh faced on of the biggest industry catastrophes of the history of industrial production: On April 24th the factory building Rana Plaza collapsed, 1134 people were killed and more than 1800 were injured.

But this disastrous event lead to positive political and social changes. Suddenly, safety standards in production countries were discussed and investigated on a global level. Uncountable organizations and unions were founded, which gained power over the years.

Bangladesh's political strategic landscape in terms of workers rights and safety looks promising. Many international labour standards have been adopted and several safety laws have been instituted over the past years.

Yet, the problem is the execution and control of these laws. The country is lacking human and financial resources, structures and councils to effectively control employers and working conditions.

But Bangladesh's women are learning to unionize and demand change. More and more workers, with many of them being female, stand up for their rights and make use of their words to ask for fair treatment.

# AZRA MAHMOOD

Model



© Azra Mahmood

## EQUITY IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EQUALITY

Starting her career in 2001, she overcame gender-based challenges and found success, winning the "YOU GOT THE LOOK" contest in 2002. Azra set out to establish the Azra Mahmood Talent Camp (AMTC) for bringing up young models, therefore advocating for women empowerment in the fashion fraternity. She is, despite the societal gender prejudices, a believer in equity rather than equality and acknowledges the importance of collaboration between men and women in achieving societal change. Her journey can be seen to symbolize the resilient spirit of women in fashion.

Written by Sumaiya Alam Meghla

*She is purposefully climbing up the stairs of the busy brick-and-mortar area Lalmatia, Dhaka, where the seeds of this young woman's dream are sown. She eyes on a big fashion poster, showing a graceful female figure adorning the wall of the building in front of her. She recognizes the leading model on the poster.*

*It's Tupa Nasser.*

*Her pose and facial expressions impersonate courage, passion and determination. For her, these pictures are more than a simple promotion and a flat image of a woman. These pictures are reflections of hope, the possibility of reaching seemingly unrealistic dreams. Inspired by the pictures of female role models, she embarks on her dream journey towards to be not only a fashion model for Aarong but also a fashion stylist. Her deep passion for fashion helps her dreams come true and her every move on the runway exudes women's empowerment. Azra Mahmood's story is a metaphor for the invincible spirit of women in fashion.*

*Today, in Bangladesh, Azra Mahmood is a fashion choreographer, model & stylist. She is the founder of Azra Mahmood Talent Camp (AMTC), a platform to equip individuals with the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to bloom in the fashion industry.*

Throughout her life, Azra experienced gender-based mistreatment on a daily basis. But surprisingly and fortunately not in her job as a model. According to her, females receive top priority in the fashion modeling industry and claimed that she did not face any gender inequality issues in her job. And this is not just a personal feeling, research also showed, that the modeling industry is one of a few industries where females dominate and highly paid. (Frost, n.d.) Yet, observing the whole dynamics of the society she born into, Azra sees that there exists a huge number of gender-related issues in Bangladesh beyond the fashion industry. People prioritize the thoughts of men than that of women.

In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, she and her husband were planning to build a house. Each and every idea for setting up the house came from both of their minds, and they were equally contributing to the decision processes. They hired a senior architect, but during meetings to discuss the house's design, the architect responded to every idea from her husband while ignoring hers. She couldn't believe it and this seemed too

*Azra Mahmood is a woman of natural authority. When she starts speaking, people listen. Her story has power, because it shows bright careers in the spotlight.*

*In 2001, Azra started her fashion modeling journey. She saw numerous fashion shows in her childhood and became a die-hard fan of those shows.*

*She knew almost all designer's names and every model on each runway.*

*Her dream was manifested. She wanted to be one of these figures. So, it was no wonder that she did not hesitate one second when she spotted a newspaper advertisement of a modeling agency and contacted the advertiser immediately. At that time, there was a top fashion model in Bangladesh -- Kawshiki Tupa Nasser, who had a training center for aspiring models. Azra joined there at the beginning of her career and took three months training. Her talents, hard work, and hunger to achieve goals didn't go unnoticed. Azra was the winner of the "YOU GOT THE LOOK" contest in 2002.*



*ridiculous. So, she hired a female architect to work on their house, allowing her to express her preferences and concerns.*

*Obviously, being ignored by an architect is an experience you can get over. Yet, for many women in Bangladesh,*

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***She is disappointed by the fact that men do not need to prove their capabilities as much as women do. And this is not referring to Bangladesh's society only, this issue is evident globally. 58% of all Americans say women having to do more to prove themselves is a major obstacle for those seeking top leadership position. (Horowitz, 2023).***

gender inequality regularly endangers their life. In Bangladesh's readymade garment industry which employs more than 4 million workers, women regularly experience discrimination at the workplaces, and they are less respected than their male colleagues. Women also

earn about 20 percent less than male workers.

Furthermore, female employees reportedly have to deal with inadequate compensation, delays in payment, limited or no health care facility, employers' unwillingness to paid maternity leave and unhygienic working conditions. In the garment industry, the number of female workers significantly surpassed male ones, especially in line operator positions. But in time of promotions, men are preferred over women. Senior managers believe that females cannot do management-related tasks as good as a man can, and also male operators might not listen to female supervisors.

Azra personally doesn't think there is any difference between men's and women's behavior patterns that could potentially make women less suitable for leadership roles. According to her, there isn't any problem with women's qualities, skills or abilities to reach higher positions, despite the fact that we live in a male-oriented and dominated society where males' thoughts are valued more. She believes that we are stuck in this mindset and there is no escape from it unless the mindset has changed.

She is disappointed that men do not need to prove their capabilities as women have to. Azra believes this distrust



towards female as the main reason why we do not see many women in leadership positions. When a man invests time into his work, it's appreciated. Women, on the other hand, must prove their worth and ability to be respected in the same way. And this is not the incidents taking places only in Bangladesh, they are also found globally. Some 58% of all Americans say women have to prove themselves and this is a major obstacle for those seeking top leadership position.

But there are women who do manage it all and overcome all the obstacles of injustice and reach high level leadership positions. In our society, those women are often seen as superheroines, because they made something happen that initially seemed unrealistic. Yet, Azra is against the image of a superwoman. She questioned as to why a woman has to prove her worth to be respected while men need not to be supermen to be respected. These types of pressure stem from patriarchic structures. Azra believed that both men and women must have changed their behaviour.

Now let's explore Azra's modeling world. Why is Azra so confidently stating that the modeling industry is free of gender-based injustice? It is because that female models are highly paid, and it is also very predictable and stereotypical. To explain in simple words, it is easy to show or sell women as a commercial product while women tend to spend more money on fashion and beauty products than men do. I would love to tell you that female models are highly paid because of their hard work and skills. Also, in reality, marketing strategy matters. (Frost, n.d.) When the targeted consumers are female, the industry, as a consequence, need female figures to showcase their products in a way that makes those products desirable. Of course, the prettier the model looks, the more appetite is generated. And to create this appetite, companies are willing to invest huge amounts of money, as they expect higher returns. So, the calculation is rather easy to sell products to women, you need presentable female figures. Looking back on her career path and the support she received; Azra sees her journey as a fabric woven out of both: encouragement and resentment. There were many people who directly or indirectly discouraged her. Yet, it is her mother who believed in her from the very beginning. Her father didn't know anything about her work and did not believe that this could be a



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***She has evolved to a role model for others. And role models are crucial to overcome gender bias! Having a role model can help to visualize goals, find inspiration and access a blueprint for success. (Skorko, 2023). A study revealed that 43% of women believe they would be more successful if they had a role model in the workplace, with 57% believing that having a relatable role model is crucial to achieving career success and 70% agreeing it's easier to be like someone you can see.***

being supportive. But her mother always encouraged her and was convinced that her child could choose between right and wrong.

Azra sees a pattern. It has always been females who supported unconditionally and still do. It has always been her female friends and family members, like her niece. This pattern of preferring or supporting the same gender can be explained by the term 'similar-to-me-bias'. Humans tend to feel closer to people that are to some extent similar to them, and gender can be one of those factors. A common example of the similar-to-me effect is women helping other women to climb the ladder. Women continue to face various inequalities in society, one of which is workplace representation. Therefore, a female manager might purposefully decide to hire another woman to try and make correct the wrong. They could even become their mentor and help them navigate a male-dominated industry. Since the two women share the same gender and the unjust societal treatment that comes along with it, they can better understand and

career where one could earn enough money to support themselves. He believed that she should consider it as a hobby instead.

However, in 2004, as she started hosting television shows and expanding her career beyond modeling, she gradually received much acceptance. Azra believes that people fear anything that is unknown to them, which was the reason for her father not

supportive to each other.

Azra appears as a ray of light of empowerment, not only because she managed to achieve her personal goals, but because she chose to share her knowledge and experiences with others. She has evolved into a role model for others. And role models are crucial to overcoming gender bias! Having a role model can help visualize goals, find inspiration and access a blueprint for success. A study revealed that 43% of women believe they would be more successful if they had a role model in the workplace, with 57% believing that having a relatable role model is crucial to achieving career success and 70% agreeing it's easier to be like someone you can visualize.

Azra understands the societal importance of establishing role models. She established an organization named AMTC, which aims to support and engage women in the fashion industry. She has realized how informative and meaningful her time at Kawshiki Tupa's institution had been, and she has realized that she had received the guidance at a time of need. She was trained and groomed. And naturally, she found herself grooming

other new talents, which seemed promising to her. When people told her that she should open an institution to spread her knowledge professionally, she first did not understand the necessity behind such push.

But now it has become evident to her that even though the industry has grown, most new models don't really identify the starting points or understand from where they should start. For fashion models to be of a certain standard, proper training is required. She understood the role of a mentor-culture to guide young women through the entire process. So, five years back she decided to open her own institution, Azra Mahmood Talent Camp.

She also felt that she had a responsibility towards younger models. She wanted to introduce them to the industry, give them a realistic overview of how this glamorous world works and help them to achieve success in their careers. Her goal for the future is to send Bangladeshi models abroad. Azra has a visionary leadership style and is committed to bringing change to the fashion industry. She has already carried out several courses including modelling training and pageant training, and in addition to that, many females have approached her for personal grooming sessions to develop their



confidence, to nurture their passion and to learn how to behave appropriately in their workplaces. She has planned to create a course particularly for those who encounter obstacles in their professional development. Her dedication, tireless efforts, empowerment, determination for fashion makes her exemplary role model for women in fashion.

Models are chosen to portray a desirable image, and this image often contains sexual components. Often, a model-campaign has appealing sexually poses, gestures, symbols or wordings to attract male or to depict an idealistic gesture of a woman. The old saying of 'sex sells' remains valid until today. So how does this subtle or sometimes obvious sexualization of women influence the daily life of a model?

Azra is convinced and believes that this segment of the industry is very safe. She specifically refers to fashion

modeling, where individuals are photographed for pictures and participate in fashion shows.

Yet, while this one side of the fashion industry apparently shines brightly, there is a bitter reality on the other side, which is being kept hidden.

In the garment industry, 80% of garment workers in Bangladesh have experienced or witnessed some forms of sexual violence and harassment at work, with 90% saying their job is negatively

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***Sexualization of women happens everywhere, in every country around the globe. Yet, when investigating and comparing especially vulnerable groups with privileged individuals, we see that sexual harassment affects first and foremost those, who have the least power. Bangladesh has both, shining role models like Azra, who invest time and passion into making a change, and similarly Bangladesh is the home of countless invisible women who work in unsafe factories for poor wages while experiencing sexual harassment. Those contrasts are harsh, but they are reality.***



© Azra Mahmood



© Azra Mahmood

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**To Azra, the key of introducing equity to the fashion industry is to stop all hostile narratives and to start collaborating. There is no point in blaming men and spreading hate, instead, Azra believes that men and women must work together to achieve this major goal. Societal change cannot be realized over night, it requires continuous effort.**

affecting their health & 72% of the respondents said they had been subjected to extreme verbal abuse at work.

Sexualization of women happens everywhere, in every country across the globe. Yet, when investigating and comparing especially vulnerable groups with privileged

individuals, we see that sexual harassment affects first and foremost those who have the least power.

Bangladesh has both, shining role models like Azra, who invest time and passion to bringing a change, and similarly Bangladesh is the home of countless invisible women who work in unsafe factories with poor wages while experiencing sexual harassment. Those contrasts are harsh, but they are reality.

So where is equality in all that?

Azra believes that equity is more important than equality. If a blind person and a person having eyesight are asked to describe the colors of a dress, she explains, expecting equality in their responses wouldn't make sense. So, we have to consider equity. According to the definition, there is a noticeable difference between equality and equity. Gender equality gives all genders equal treatment when it comes to rights, responsibilities and opportunities. Gender equity, meanwhile, is about fairness. To ensure everyone has equal opportunities, we need to consider privilege, biasness and other parameters that can limit how people access the opportunities.

Azra's example of a blind person's deficits is rather simple but proves a point and resembles the faith of many women within the fashion industry. Taking a close

look at situations, where men and women should be treated fairly, maternity issues are a major and good example. Women experience several stressful symptoms and different phases of challenges during her pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum recovery, which a man simply won't experience in the same way. So, fair treatment may include maternal leave, breastfeeding support, and workplace flexibility to support their personal & professional life. Offering both genders the exact same working conditions would not meet equity standards, even if it could be considered equal.

Azra is hopeful and strongly believes that women can and will overcome the burdens of inequality. Not only in garment manufacturing industry but also in retail segment where women have left a big mark. But she is disappointed by the fact that fashion designers like Bibi Russel, Maheen Khan, Rina Latif and other renowned fashion designers' contributions often go unnoticed. To Azra, the key of introducing equity to the fashion industry is to stop all hostile narratives and to start collaborating. There is no point in blaming men and spreading hate, instead, Azra believes that men and women must work together to achieve this goal. Societal change cannot be achieved overnight, it requires continuous efforts.

GENDER BIAS

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**DID YOU  
KNOW?**



Why do we all have an internal voice, which tells us how women and men should behave? Why do we think, that women are sensitive, emotional and caretaking, while we assume the opposite of men? Why do so many people express the opinion, that women are too weak and too sensible to be good leaders, while they trust men to have the needed assertiveness, perseverance and strength?

Social scientists have coined a term for assumptions of that sort: Gender bias.

Gender bias refers to all unconscious, internalized prejudices about what personality traits should accompany a person's sex. The term means, that every human that partakes in any kind of communal lifestyle has certain assumptions about what a woman or a man should act like, and about their strengths and weaknesses.

In general, biases cannot simply be called 'bad' or 'dangerous', they exist for a reason. Unconscious biases are the human brain's way of saving, processing and analyzing experiences. Biases are the

human version of statistics. Biases can help humans identifying dangers completely unconsciously, without having to invest active thoughts. A biased human brain can take immediate decisions when needed. When a human detects fire, the brain's bias will directly activate the person's flight instinct. And as humans usually take thousands of individual decisions every day, biases can function as a, 'shortcut' to save time and energy. Biases are the sum of our social influences and learnings, they are the basis of our instinct.

Gender bias, on the other hand, can have more adverse implications on today's societal structures, especially when investigating professional contexts. What we assume about a person, just because we unconsciously scan their gender and then reflect our past experiences onto them, can influence how we treat them, what opportunities we grant them and how we develop a relationship with them.

So, biases can be helpful when we find ourselves in a burning building, but can be dangerous and less adequate to trust when we review and feedback someone's performance in the workplace.

Over the past decades the topic of gender bias has been studied extensively by social scientists in almost all regions of the world. The main research methods have been of quantitative character, like surveys or questionnaires. Typically, participants are asked to assign a certain adjective, personality trait or general attribute to the terms, 'man' or, 'woman.'

Nowadays we have access to so called metadata analyses, where many studies can automatically be summarized and compared with each other. These analyses make it easy to see overlaps, contrasts and interdependencies. These metadata analyses are therefore a valuable tool to bring studies from different countries together to see, where all people agree on. And interestingly there is a large number of biases towards men and women, that almost all cultures in the world share.

According to the studies, men are believed to have so called 'genetic skills', which include extensive dedication, the ability to fully focus on the goal and the skill to motivate others to strive towards the same goal. People associate the male gender with strength, assertiveness, physical power and the willingness to take risks.



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Men are assumed more likely to win arguments and be open towards abstract ideas, which include mathematical skills and problem solving abilities.

Men are more dominant, tough minded and competitive; they feel motivated by challenges and like to win over an opponent. It is believed that men inherent a stronger wish for autonomy and self-actualization.

Women, in contrast, are associated with so called communal skills, which refer to their preference to put a focus on their social environment. According to research, women are more emotional and sensitive, which goes in line with their preference to spend their time on activities that have a social component. Those could be anything from raising children, taking care of others, fulfilling other people's emotional needs or communicating with a number of people.

Women are considered to be nurturing, warm and tender minded; and they are believed to be compassionate, which can be a threat and a superpower at the same time.

As leaders, women are associated with a strong focus on the emotional and physical wellbeings of team

members, as well as the lower tendency towards individualism. For them, the group is more important than their personal ego.

Studies have also shown that women are supposedly more open to visual experiences and are associated with an affection towards aesthetics. They care more for the way things look, which can explain why so many women care for fashion and choose to work in this industry.

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***Women are not chosen to be a manager because they are too emotional, too weak and not dedicated enough, we unconsciously look out for mistakes and failures and link them to those biases. When someone, who is responsible for hiring a leader, is influenced by gender bias, they could prefer a man over a woman, simply because of their certain assumptions or behavioral patterns.***

Those associated biases are widespread across the globe. Yet, there is no real evidence, that women are, for a fact, more communal, more sensitive and more nurturing than men, and similarly no one has fully proven men to be more assertive, dedicated, strong and dominant.

These biases are learned from a very young age, and are related to societal structures.

To some extent, research does see a biological reason for certain behavioral patterns of a specific gender, for instance, the hormones of a woman after giving birth do influence her thought patterns, her actions and her emotional needs, simply because she has a newborn to protect.

But to which extent gender biases are projected falsely, can so far not be proven by science.

But it is clear, that gender biases are a threat to women's careers.

When our internal biases tell us, that women are not chosen to be a manager because they are too emotional, too weak and not dedicated enough, we unconsciously look out for mistakes and failures and link them to those biases. When someone, who is

responsible for hiring a leader, is influenced by gender bias, they could prefer a man over a woman, simply because of their certain assumptions or behavioral patterns.

Gender bias in the workplace can also lead to false or unfair evaluation of outputs. When men and women submit the exact same work, the evaluation and feedback to that work can differ, based on the gender.

To eliminate threatening gender biases from a professional setting phase by phase, education is one of the most effective tools. Only a person who knows about bias and is able to scan their own thought processes for prejudices can initiate change.

Media can play an important role to eliminate gender bias. As many movies, songs or social media inputs fill our instincts with wrong assumptions. It is therefore very important to critically review our media choices and scan them for potential prejudices.

Lastly the key way out is to initiate and start discussions against biases. Sometimes an open conversation about a wrong assumption on someone's personality can be hurtful, and those conversations must be conducted sensitively. But when we learn to openly speak about our internalized thought patterns, we cannot only help others to detect biases in their own day-to-day life, but also reprogram our own brain. Ultimately, we all want to be seen for who we truly are, for our unique strengths, our values and core beliefs, and no one wants to be judged only by their gender.

# ASMA BEGUM

Sewing Operator



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**ASMA HAS TO JUST DO HER DUTIES, BE SILENT AND ACCEPT THIS INEQUALITY**

Asma Begum works hard as a sewing operator with bruised and tired hands. Born into a poor family in Narsingdi, she gave up her education and married at 16. Despite facing many challenges like gender inequality and low wages, she stayed strong. As a single mother, she supports her children with her small income. She dreams of a society where women have equal opportunities. Asma's strength and hope for a better future make her a true role model.

Written by Nopur Akter

*In the dimly lit factory building, in between whirring of machines and smell of fabric, Asma stood and, her tired eyes reflecting the weariness of her soul. Bent over the sewing machine, her fingers danced with practiced precision, stitching together seams that resemble the fragments of her own shattered dreams.*

*Bangladesh a country of cultural diversity, natural beauty and warm hospitality located in the Northeastern part of South Asia. The majestic sunlight in the daybreak offers a unique blend of sight. The rural landscape is filled with charming villages where traditional customs are preserved. A land of numerous beautiful rivers- a soothing beauty with a heavenly touch of nature.*

*But this medal has two sides. On the other side, we see a black spot with the environment where hard working people are struggling to survive.*

*A particular group of people undergoes immense hardship to cope up with day-to-day life sufferings from unfairness in every aspect of their life.*

*Despite the hardships, Asma Begum faced and the unfairness she is still going through, she refused to give*

From the early stage of her life, she had to go through a lot of hardships and sufferings as she was born in a poor family in a village called Narsingdi. Her father was the only earner of a family consisting of five members. Her father's earnings could barely ensure a living for the family, let alone any form of luxury. So, she had to sacrifice her schooling at an early age as her father could not cover the costs for her schooling.

Because of this inherited poverty and the lack of opportunities, she found no escape but to get married to the person she loved. She was married off at the age of 16 which should, in an ideal world, be an age for teens to make stupid decisions, find themselves trying new things and explore the life opportunities.

Asma, however, faced a difficult teenage period, as she was already married. Before she reached adulthood, she gave birth to her daughter at the age of 17, that added to the burden. At this early age, she not only acted as an adult and took responsibility of her own actions. She also had to take care of a small family, a newborn child. Yet, she did not lose her patience, rather she was determined to overcome poverty and ensure a better future for her daughter.

*up. Each day, Asma toils relentlessly as her poor wages are barely enough to cover her basic needs of survival. Her monotonous cycle of work echoes endless repetition with no promise of interruption. Her hands, bruised and fatigued, bear witness to the harshness of her reality, a reality where her dignity appears as a luxury that she cannot afford.*

*Despite all challenges she has been facing, she dreams of a better life with an escape from the relentless grasp of poverty. But she realized that she lacks not only the fair wages but also equality. She finds men being treated far better than women. She is a sewing operator currently working for 8 hours a day and earned a monthly wage of approximately 114 Euros.*



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Slowly, she learnt how to adapt to the situation and went along with it. Just when she started to feel that things were going well, her fate had another plan.

She gave birth to her second baby girl-four years after the birth of her first daughter. But that was not the core of the problem. The issue was that in her village people



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held onto the superstition that daughters do not bring significant change to a family, rather they see girls as a burden to their family and overall society.

Asma Begum's husband was no different than the rest of the villagers. He also believed that having two daughters was a bad sign of fate. At a certain point, her husband left his job, and the family again started struggling for their survival.

But Asma Begum did not accept her fate.

For a long time, she found that it was other people who made decisions of her life.

Her husband made his own choice while she never had her own.

She questioned how and why he simply decided to leave a job that was the fundamental of their family's survival. Why he never thought about others, while she was never allowed to think of herself.

No, she was not ready to accept this fate.

So, when she was 25, Asma Begum decided to leave her husband and returned to her father's house. She was only 25, an age, where other girls in other parts of the world study, go to parties, fall in love, and start careers. And there she was, a single mother of 2 children, back in her father's house.

Soon after her departure, she found her husband got married to another woman, without her consent. She was shocked.

Asma and her two children now added additional burden to her father creating a tense atmosphere in the household.

Asma decided to do something and earn so that she could help her family. She bought a sewing machine with the money she saved and started tailoring. She used to visit other tailors nearby to learn sewing, only by watching. But her self-taught skills were not good enough to feed herself and her children. One of her friends, one day suggested her to join the garment industry where her friend was a sewing operator. So, she did and in 2016 she became a seamstress in a factory of Bangladesh's RMG sector.

It's been eight years of sewing leading an artificial life with poor wages, toiling the long hours of workloads



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***As a sewing operator she has to work for about 8 to 9 hours, but the wage she gets hardly lets her survive. She can do overtime work, which enables working 10-12 hours, but the overtime salary is so minimal that it does not affect her overall earnings much. The inflation rate is getting higher day by day in Bangladesh, but Asma Begum's salary does not change.***

and so many sleepless nights.

As long as we highlighted the bright examples of female role models at the top levels, we must acknowledge, that the entrepreneurs and designers are a small portion. The truth lies in the section of low-level workers, where females toil untiringly to feed their families. The work of a sewing operator is not easy, it requires

concentration, mental stress and a high level of tolerance.

As for Asma Begum, she starts her day at the job by taking instructions on the patterns and fabrics. She then proceeds to stitch the pieces of fabric together and after that, she has to examine the quality of her work. After completing the final stitches, she then sends the products to the next stage of production. Her job requires a lot of concentration.

Asma Begum is now an independent person. She has her own earnings, but she is well aware that her salary is not enough to provide a decent family life let alone dream any form of luxury despite the huge workload.

As a sewing operator she has to work for about 8 to 9 hours, but the wage she gets hardly enough for her survival. She can do overtime leading a working hours of 10 to 12 hours.

With the rising inflationary pressure, Asma Begum's salary does not change accordingly. At this point, she is getting impatient despite all her determination. Asma Begum like many seamstresses and production assistants also face gender inequality. It seems that the

expectations towards her work outputs are much higher than that of her male counterpart.

Men get more attention in this field of work, women in her garment factory sometimes do not even get the right to speak for themselves. Also, men in her factory, at the same grade, get almost 20%-30% higher wages. This inequality, is also badly affecting her personal and professional life.

Asma Begum feels that she is being neglected in her factory. She does not get enough break times, and a lot of 'dos and dont's' also affecting her her mental health along with her physical well-beings. She never finds an opportunity to say something to a leader or superior.

Her voice is never heard. She has to just perform her duties, being silent and accepting this inequality.

Asma Begum wants to change these unfair situations. She dreams of a society where men and women are given equal opportunities, where no gender is prioritized over the other. A society where women can speak for themselves self, where a woman's work is worthy enough to make a living.

She is fully aware of her rights, but the problem is that she cannot fight for their realization by herself. In a



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society living under poverty, women do not feel that they should speak up rather accepting their misfortune. They fear that they might lose their current job if they go on a strike to ensure labor rights.

So, they accepted their fate and inequality in fear of losing the job that ensures a wage though poor. Asma Begum's factory also has a grievance mechanism procedure where she can complain about her issues or problems. But these complaints are not properly addressed at the male dominated perspectives.. women's complaint of being treated worse than men is not accepted as it is the men whose voices are heard.

Asma is determined to change her situation. She wants a decent life, and it is her belief, that this is not too much she has asked for.

In winter 2023, a worker protest participated by many brought a a small change in workers' salaries. Asma Begum's salary was only 72 Euros just before the month the strike took place. From January 2024 onwards, her salary rose to 114 Euros (Zaman, 2023), which does not bring a significant improvement in Asma's lifestyle taking the high prices of essentials in the day-to-day into consideration. But it was a change, a real change influenced by people who spoke up and demanded justice. Asma believes in the power of the people, and will never lose this faith.

She wants to feed her children well with providing them balanced meals, but cannot manage to do so with her poor income. And the consequence is heartbreaking: She has nohtin but to watch her children getting sick slowly in absence of nutritious food. Despite she has no other choice to stay in

this job keep on fighting as little food even though not balanced one is still better than no food. Asma Begum has to perform the workloads of 2 or 3 people at her workspace.

Asma Begum lost many of her



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friends in the tragedy of the Rana Plaza Building collapse. The families of the deceased workers were not compensated properly as they did not have any insurance coverage. The family lost their beloved ones and all they got in return was the poverty, as they lost earner.

Asma Begum does not have any life insurance and she cannot imagine what would happen to her children, if any accident happened in her life. Such concerning thoughts keep her awake at night.

As a low graded worker in her factory, Asma Begum is not getting treated well. She is given the workload of 2-3 people every single day, and this load puts her mental and physical health at risk. She is not allowed to take leave for a a day, even though she is ill There is simply no acceptance of being absent money has been deducted from the monthly wages if she takes leave. , All in all, she is dealing with uncountable challenges in her life where survival is the only goal she can achieve.

Asma Begum has a good bond with her co-workers. She helps them and gets help in return when needed, talks to them and understands their situations. She gives them

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***In a society living under poverty, women do not feel that they should speak up rather accepting their misfortune. They fear that they might lose their current job if they go on a strike to ensure labor rights.***



guidance and shares her experiences. She wants to build a community where she can ensure equal rights for every female worker. Talking to one another is one thing, but building a community with power is more difficult than it sounds. As many of the female workers are still not aware of their lawful labor rights, many of them are not eager to join Asma Begum in this community as they consider it an additional hassle. With juggling childcare, household chores, a stressful job and societal pressure, where would they even find the time for extra curricular activities or other engagements?

For many people in developed regions of the world, it is absolutely normal to have leisure time, hobbies and enjoy life.

But for Asma, those things only exist in her phantasy. From the very moment of her birth, it is poverty that dominated Asma Begum's life and she continuously struggled to survive in the race of life.

In developed countries, it is believed that every person has at least one role model, they learn from and try to copy in some aspects. Asma Begum did not get the opportunity to even seek for a role model.

At the end of the interview, Asma Begum tried to draw a conclusion by saying that she now maintains her family on her own which was previously dependant on others. Even though it was not happened overnight it was her

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**Asma Begum lost many of her friends in the tragedy of the Rana Plaza Building collapse. The families of the deceased workers were not compensated properly as they did not have any insurance coverage. Asma Begum does not have any life insurance and she cannot imagine what would happen to her children, if any accident happened in her life.**

sheer determination and the willpower to challenge her fate.

Asma Begum can be portrayed as a role model in a society, where many people are living under the poverty line still with the hope that they can bring a significant change to their fate and change their narratives. I



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truly admire Asma Begum for what she has endured and what she has now become. The challenges she faced are quite not imaginable to many of us, the feeling she must feel everyday are simply not understandable for many of us. It can be quoted that

“Where there is will, there is a way,” and Asma Begum is a true personification of this Proverb.

# SHAHINA PARVEN ALO

## Consultant



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### EVERY WORKER SHOULD FEEL THAT THEY BELONG ...

Shahina Parven Alo's journey is a testament to resilience and self-confidence, inspiring many women facing gender discrimination. Breaking stereotypes, she rose to become a respected consultant in gender and inclusion at SusNex Ltd. Despite facing skepticism and gender bias, Shahina climbed the corporate ladder and eventually transitioned to HR, where she thrived despite numerous obstacles. Her advocacy for better maternity rights, inspired by her own struggles during pregnancy, emphasizes the importance of communication and transparency.

Written by Munami Tasnim

*In the vibrant and hectic office building, the ambience was always filled with the buzz of productivity and worry of tight deadlines. The reception, where Shahina worked, was no exception. Papers were assembled neatly, and the phone continued to ring every now and then, but she managed to keep everything organized and her tranquility intact amid the chaos.*

*The day had started like any other day, she was doing her work attentively. However, the atmosphere suddenly changed when a male manager rushed hurriedly into the office, visibly disturbed. He asked explanation about a mistake made by one driver of the transportation department, which Shahina dealt with. As the manager turned to her with an angry mood, and scolded her badly.*

*"I had doubts over entrusting this department to a girl and you now confirmed that hesitation. You are clearly incapable of handling such role," he shouted and left the room without giving her opportunity to in fact react or respond.*

*She felt embarrassed and frustrated as the manager's voice echoed in her mind. She almost had tears in her eyes. But in this very situation, she recalled one of the best*

*pieces of advice of her professional life, which would later on help her in countless situations. One female manager sat next to her and witnessed what happened. Then she said, "I can talk to that manager, but I want you, Alo, to go and talk to him, tell him how you felt and what he can say in a different way."*

*Later Shahina took the courage and approached him over a cup of tea. With her steady voice, she said, "I know it was my mistake, but you could not blame that the work was delayed just because it was dealt by a girl. I do not think it is fair to attribute this delay to my gender." After listening to Shahina, the manager understood and sought apology from her in a soft voice for his misbehaviour.*

Breaking barriers and disobeying stereotypes, Shahina Parven Alo has emerged as a force to be reckoned within the competitive corporate world. Let's delve into the remarkable journey of this progressive female consultant, as we unknot the challenges she has overcome.

Shahina Parven Alo is an expert in gender and inclusion. She works as a consultant in SusNex Ltd and does open consultancy.

She was born in Jashore and stayed there until she finished her studies. Her father was a very progressive man, as he always taught his kids to be responsible and claim their own place in the society. He did not discriminate his daughters, but he was protective towards them.

While doing her master's degree in 2000, she got a job in an NGO called Proshika, where she had to travel to rural areas for doing her duties. Her father was reluctant, and did not want to see his daughter enter areas that consist of difficulties and survival problems. Despite her father's



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objections, she accepted the job and moved to the area. It didn't take long for her to realize that her father was right—the region was heavily male-dominated.

Therefore, the female adult literacy rate is quite low, as the women tend to stay in the shadow of their husbands, staying at home, taking care of the households and kids while their men strive for a career. And this village is no exception, it in fact goes hand in hand with

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**Primary and secondary level of schooling, female enrollment rates are quite high, but in higher levels, the enrollment rates of female students are dropping significantly. The main drop out reason is their social environmental, which is not always supporting education. The study also shows the difference between the rural and urban literacy rate, which shows, that people in cities are much more likely to know how to read and write, while illiteracy seems to be an issue of rural regions.**

the reality of many rural areas in Bangladesh.

A national study compares schooling enrollment rates of girls and boys on different levels of education, to explain, where the education gap between men and women is stemming from. This study clearly shows that during primary and secondary level of schooling, female enrollment rates are quite high, but in higher levels, the enrollment rates

of female students are dropping significantly. The main drop out reason is their social environmental, which is not always supporting education. The study also shows the difference between the rural and urban literacy rate, which shows, that people in cities are much more likely to know how to read and write, while illiteracy seems to be an issue of rural regions.

In 2002, Shaina came to Dhaka and worked in hotels, then joined a buying house at the front desk. Later she switched to a multinational clothing company as receptionist, but thanks to her working experience she was promoted and transferred to the administration department, where she faced negligence.

Some team members did not trust her abilities, they doubted she had what it takes. They held the mindset that certain jobs were reserved for men, and others for women.

Shaina had to fight to prove herself in a male-dominated



job, but she did. And her social engagement and persuasion to fight for what's fair did not go unnoticed!

One of her female managers approached her, and proposed a switch from the Administration department to the HR field. She said, "You get along very well with all employees. You know everyone and take care of all individuals. You should go to HR!"

When she was expecting her child, she was working in HR. Due to her pregnancy she shuffled her working time around, setting new working hours from 7:30 am to 4:30 pm. They held the mindset that certain jobs were reserved for men, and others for women.

For the longest time, Shahina resented the manager for this behaviors. She got angry and tense, every time her working hours were disrespected. She thought, this manager must have a personal problem with her.

After a while, she decided to start a conversation with said manager. Surprisingly, they had a healthy exchange which made him understand her problem and solve the issue with ease.

She learned one thing: Always communicate. Always speak up and raise issues. Only if you mention an issue, it can be solved. And she lived by this learning ever since.

At about the same time Shahina feared to lose her position when she went on maternity leave, she feared she would not be let back in, once she gave birth. And sadly, Shaina's experience is mirrored by the same fear of countless women in Bangladesh.

Interestingly, the national laws protect mothers quite well. The Bangladesh Labour Act states, that females are entitled to 8 weeks of compensated maternity leave before and after the expected delivery date. This policy, which sounds good in theory, is actually showing loopholes, when investigated closely. For instance, to be entitled, the woman must be employed for at least 6 months, which leaves newly employed women entirely out of the equation.

Neither does this policy apply to the informal sector, where many women, who work from their own domestic areas, are employed.

In practice, employers often try to get rid of pregnant women one way or the other, and they always find ways to do so. A study from 2011 found out, that around 50%



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**A study from 2011 found out, that around 50% of surveyed women still had to work overheard during their pregnancy, although their employer knew about her condition. 24% even stated, that they were denied sick leave during the pregnancy. Overall, around 90% of mothers do not return to their employer after giving birth (Islam 2015).**

of surveyed women still had to work overheard during their pregnancy, although their employer knew about her condition. 24% even stated, that they were denied sick leave during the pregnancy. Overall, around 90% of mothers do not return to their employer after giving birth.

Many Studies and field investigations show, that factories either knowingly violate

the national maternity protection laws, or fail to inform female employees about their rights. Because a person, who does not know about her rights, will surely not fight to receive the benefits she is entitled to. And those are not just a few: Most garment workers from the ages 21-30 are unaware of the amount of time off they are entitled to.

Her personal experienced inspired Shahina to advocate for better maternity rights in her workplace and beyond, inspiring women to demand change.

When I was talking to her about the ideal atmosphere of a working environment, she said: "An organization should have its own set of values and respect for all. They cannot be biased towards any gender. Every worker should feel that he/she belongs there."

Asking over any toxicity in her work environment, she replied affirmatively. She revealed it was not only men but also women who created obstacles for other female colleagues.. She had faced challenges in various workplaces due to jealousy from female colleagues. They made her feel like she did not belong there. She said: "A male colleague gets happy for his co-worker's success but females are not always the same."

Shahina shared an incident where one of her managers excluded her from joining on a project trip as a main lead of the project. She was not viewed as qualified as other male colleagues, simply not cut out to take the challenges. The incident indicates prevalent gender bias faced by many women in workplace.

Later, when she was working in HR, she experienced a contrary situation.

After three months of joining the new department, on April 1st, she received a mail from her manager who was on vacation. The mail was about a training in Hong Kong with the entire global HR team, and her manager invited Shahina to join and told her to take all necessary steps, to talk with both, the travel department and the country manager to sign the papers.

Shahina read the Email a couple of times, but she could not believe what she saw. She thought it was a prank, she assumed it might be an April fool's thing. So, she ignored that invitation.

Later the same day she got a call from a country manager and was told to meet him. When she went to see him, she got the confirmation that she was in fact invited to Hongkong. She explained that she was only working in this department for three months, she thought would not get that type of invitation that early on.

Then the manager said, "It is for all HR colleagues, and people are coming from all countries across the globe. You are a part of the team and you will do lots of interviews, so why would you not be invited to this training?"

In a candid conversation Shahina called out a significant reason behind the pay gap: The lack of transparency and knowledge. People simply do not know what is fair, so they do not demand it.

She pointed out that in many cases women might not be aware of the appropriate salary range of their positions and are therefore less likely to negotiate fair compensation. Moreover, she highlights the role of unequal access to information and resources, which can further perpetuate the pay gap. Shahina emphasizes the need for greater transparency in salary structure and a culture that promotes open discussion about fair compensation for all employee, regardless of gender.



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**Shahina firmly believes that women quotas should not be the main focus to establish equality in the workplace. She argues that quotas only serves to perpetuate the idea that women need a special measure to succeed, rather than being rewarded based on their merit and abilities. Instead, she advocates for equal opportunities and fair treatment for all individuals, regardless of gender.**

She revealed that she has experienced the pay gap herself. In one job, she received a salary increase after a male colleague joined the company on the same position as she held. To balance both fairly, her salary was increased. Only then she knew, that all this time up to that moment, she

earned less than other colleagues on that level.

As a professional Shahina firmly believes that women quotas should not be the main focus to establish equality in the workplace. She argues that quotas only serves to perpetuate the idea that women need a special measure to succeed, rather than being rewarded based on their merit and abilities. Instead, she advocates for equal opportunities and fair treatment for all individuals, regardless of gender.

In our discussion, she openly disclosed her belief that women are not as effective in networking as their male counterparts. According to her, the reason for that is women’s lack of confidence. They are, biased by the image, the society portrays and therefore stay in their lane.

That happened, when she was trying to get into the RMG sector. She got selected as a potential candidate by Capital Mercury Apparel. When she was approached, she did not even remember that she applied for that company.

Shahina states confidently, that her family is positively

contributing to her career. She mentioned that her parents and her husband are very supportive of her endeavors. About her career journey her husband said to her, “It’s your life, do whatever you like. If you want to do job then do, if not then that’s up to you.” Shahina also mentioned how her children encourage on her career path. She said that her nine years old son said, “You must do your own business. Why don’t you do that?”

With the needed support of her family, she can establish a healthy balance between her personal and professional life. From younger age she had taken the family responsibility till now. Her approach centers on a few key principles that help her maintain the balance. For Shahina effective time management is the key. She devoted specific time slots in her week for work and others for personal commitments, ensuring that each area of her life receives the attention it deserves.

But not all women receive that kind of family support, other women in Bangladesh are solely responsible for private chores.

An analysis of several studies shows that women often



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**An analysis of several studies shows that women often face difficulties when trying to balance their work life with their personal duties. The study comes to the conclusion, that only 22.5% of female participants were satisfied with their working hours, while 77.7% were not. Among all surveyed working women, only 10% state, they get to spend enough time with their family. (Tasnim, Hossain and Enam, 2017).**

face difficulties when trying to balance their work life with their personal duties. The study comes to the conclusion, that only 22.5% of female participants were satisfied with their working hours, while 77.7% were not. Among all surveyed working women, only 10% state, they get to spend enough time with their family.

At the end of the discussion Shahina added one last advice for the aspiring women who are dreaming of a big career: You need to have patience and passion. She advised to fix a goal, make plan, and execute it. She said, “You must choose an idol. It is not necessary to copy that person but you can just follow it. If it is possible, then talk to the person.” Shahina believes, admiring someone can make any task easy. It helps to understand what we want to become, and what not. It helps us to find out, what tools we need and which ones we should not invest too much time in.

The Journey of Shahina Parven Alo is an inspiration for a lot of working women who face discrimination based on their gender. Her persistence, resilience and self-confidence paved the way for a promising future for both, herself and her family.

© Shahina Parven Alo



A FATHER'S POWER

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**DID YOU  
KNOW?**



There is one pivotal moment in a woman's life that provenly changes her career path and her professional future for good: The Moment she becomes a mother.

Studies from Denmark, one of the world's most robust countries in terms of social safety nets, show that a woman's salary levels drop drastically after she gives birth to her first child. This is partly because that many women reduce their working hours once they have children, but not exclusively. Parallel, a man's salary does not change once he becomes a father. In Denmark, 80% of the overall gender pay gap can be traced back to childbearing.

An American study from 2009 draws a similar conclusion.

It examines salaries of business school graduates over the course of several years. Women made an average of 115.000 USD directly after graduation, and men earned around 130.000 USD. This already shows a small gap, but this grows over time. In between nine years of their careers, the men's salaries rose up to 400.000 USD, while the women earned only 250.000 USD. What happened during these 9 years, that men suddenly

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**A cross-country study based on metadata shows, that the hourly gender pay gap directly links to the hours women and men spend on household and care work. In countries or regions, where women spend round twice as much time on household chores and childcare than men, they earn only 65% of what their male counterparts do, based on full-time contracts. This even drops down to 40% when female caregivers spend 5 times as much time on unpaid work as male ones.**

made 60% more than their female peers? Many of them got married and had kids.

In average, this, child-bearing effect' has implications on the total national pay gap, as large groups of the population take similar decisions when it comes to the division of unpaid care work.

Due to gender bias and traditional societal structures, women in almost all countries on the

earth tend to fall into patriarchic family structures with clearly divided tasks once they give birth to a child. And in many cases they actually do want to spend time at home with their child and don't mind doing the majority of chores while being home! So why should anyone question those structures and personal behavioral patterns, if they are based on tradition, experience and free will?

Studies show, that the hours a woman spends on unpaid work are directly linked to the overall national gender inequality and the pay gap. The more time a woman spends doing laundry, washing dishes, changing diapers and feeding hungry mouths, the less time she can spend on her career.

A cross-country study based on metadata shows, that the hourly gender pay gap directly links to the hours women and men spend on household and care work. In countries or regions, where women spend as much time on household chores and childcare than men, they earn only 65% of what their male counterparts do, based on full-time contracts. This even drops down to 40% when female caregivers spend five times higher time on unpaid work as male ones.



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***A father has great power. When we acknowledge, that childbearing is one key lever of gender inequality, we can only come to the conclusion, that increased male participation in raising kids and taking care of the household can have big implications on their wives' career opportunities. The cumulative effect is incredible: For every month of parental leave taken by the father, the mother's earnings rise about 6,7%!***

What is hard to measure, but still influential in relation to the care-work gaps, is the mental load, which is often primarily carried by mothers and wives. Mental load is a term that refers to all subconscious or conscious thoughts, decisions, planning processes and debates that take place in a person's mind without being tangible or

graspable. The mental load of household and childcare work engaged a huge part of a human's brain capacity, leaving less room for thoughts on their professional life.

In Bangladesh, a woman spends around 25% of her time on unpaid care work, while men spend only 3,3 % of their overall time on those tasks. Or to put it differently: Women spend 7 times higher time on care-work and household chores as men do.

The pandemic has exacerbated this situation even further. Due to the lockdown people had left no other options to leave the house, dynamics within families shifted and created vacuums of support. During the pandemic, women spent another 28% additional time on unpaid domestic work than they did before March 2020.

If we want to effectively close the global pay gap, we must question the role of the woman in our societies and start doing the calculation concerning unpaid work. Often, decisions on the split of tasks within a married couple is based on tradition, patriarchic structures and a lack of alternatives.

So, a father has great power. When we acknowledge,

that childbearing is one key level of gender inequality, we can only come to the conclusion, that increased male participation in raising kids and taking care of the household chores can have big implications on their wives' career opportunities.

The cumulative effect is incredible: For every month of parental leave taken by the father, the mother's earnings rise about 6,7%!

And not only the mother can benefit from the father's more intense participation. It is also proven, that children feel closer to their fathers, when those had taken some weeks of paternity leave after the child's birth. And in addition to that, paternity leave can reduce the risk of divorce.

But unfortunately, an equal division of unpaid care work is still only in the concept, which is not largely applied in our society yet.

Even Denmark, which allows parents to freely split their parental leave between the mother and the father, does not lead to men taking full ownership in practice.

In most cases, the majority of parental leave is still taken by the mothers, Danish men account for only 10% of all parental leave taken nation-wide.

Why do men still hesitate to fully embrace fatherhood?

Societal pressure and biases can be identified as the root causes. Many men fear to be considered as weak and to be taken less seriously at their workplaces. Others simply believe in the gender stereotype that women are by birth more nurturing, loving and caretaking than men and can therefore take much better care of kids. Some still believe that it is a man's role to go to work and making an income for the family, while, on the other hand, it is a woman's job to stay at home.

According to some researchers, men are lacking role models. If more men would witness more, fatherhood champions' in their private and professional networks, it would broaden their horizon, challenge their stereotypical belief and help increased overall awareness.

But the lack of will to take paternity leave is not the only reason, why we see such low paternity leave quotas around the globe. The legal situation in terms of parental rights differs significantly from country to country.

In Bangladesh, a woman is entitled to 12 weeks of fully



SHADE

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***Other Scandinavian countries successfully motivate more men to take time off from work once their child is born. Iceland, for instance, reserves 13 weeks of parental leave for dads only. Those weeks cannot be transferred to the mother's total leave. The result: 90% of fathers in fact make use of this policy.***

paid maternity leave. In contrast to that, men who work in the private sector are not granted any paid parental leave. In some cases, companies offer a small number of days of paid leave to individual fathers, but there is no nation-wide policy that ensures a father's right to take a leave from work.

For new fathers,

who actively want to participate in family life and reducing burden from their wives, at least to some extent, the absence of parental leave rights limits their chance of action.

Many Bangladeshi men who want to be father and play a role in closing the gender pay gap, how they afford to stay at home and act as the primary caregiver if they are not allowed to miss a single day of work.

Other Scandinavian countries successfully motivate more men to take day off from work once their child is born. Iceland, for instance, preserves 13 weeks of parental leave for dads only. Those weeks cannot be replaced by the mother's total leave. The result: 90% of the fathers in fact make best use of this policy.

A father has a certain role to play in overcoming overall gender inequality levels, but with large international differences, it is nearly impossible to blame individuals. Only with strong policy frameworks that allow men to be absent from work with paid salary, it is possible to challenge stereotypical beliefs and motivate more men to take the responsibility of some of the unpaid care work, that women have been quietly doing for the most part of human history.

# JULEKHA BEGUM FAREEN

Fashion Designer



**MUST RECOGNIZE THE  
COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION  
TO AMPLIFY THE  
AMBITIONS**

Fareen, a prominent voice in Bangladesh's fashion industry, showcasing her triumphs. Her journey exposes the broader gender imbalances in a field often perceived as female-centric. As she entered the industry, Fareen confronted the harsh realities where women's contributions were often undervalued, and leadership roles remained predominantly male. Her story underscores the need for systemic change and advocates for gender equality in the workplace and society.

*The story of Fareen is the narrative of a woman finding her place in the colorful world of fashion, where everything seems possible, and all boundaries are limitless. Fareen, a young fashion designer from Bangladesh is a powerful voice of the fashion industry, which is characterized by the generalized dominance of men in both professional and powerful roles. Hence, the key issue under consideration is gender-based disparities in personnel queues and truly making a high impact on a specific gender image. Fareen's story, therefore, not only highlights her individual triumphs and challenges but also sheds light on the broader issue of gender imbalance in an industry often mistakenly perceived as female centric.*

*From the halls of Scholastica Missionaries School in Chattogram to the halls of Shanta Mariam University, Fareen's fashion designing journey had been nothing less than full of real, vibrant colors of cultures and creativity.*

"These were not just workshops," Fareen said adding that "it was stepping into the freedom of our artistic souls and opening up new eras to step forth in the infinite worlds of creativity."

In those classes, the seeds for her fascination for global lifestyles and education were sown and her desire to be what she is now today was innated.

Perhaps this is the reason Fareen took the independent spirits and academic mindsets of the foreign students with whom she shared the hallways. Their bright aura, filled with a thirst for enquiry, dug deeply into Fareen's personality and led to a desire to make her name in the world of creative arts.

But it was the workshop of fine arts, graphic design, and most pivotally, the fashion workshop that really stirred Fareen's innermost passions. These artistic immersions added to her inner loves for the inquisitive culinary of arts, for whimsical playing time with colors and crafting and for unsatisfied globe-trotting, crystallized into a multifaceted, unstoppable creative force. Pursuing fashion designing was the only conceivable path forward. No, her decision to go Shanta Mariam University wasn't random; rather, it was a deliberate movement to an incubator where she would nurture her technical abilities while also cultivating the one quality that made her stand

*The ground of her dream was laid in her childhood and the workshops she attended added another feather to the dreams.*

*Fareen was no ordinary student at Scholastica, she was literally a sponge who soaked up every bit of knowledge and got inspiration from the countless workshops held England, Italy and Spain.*



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out -confidence- piercing through all odds and change-related impediments. She was able to defy conventional norms and turn her visions to reality because of this enormous inner light.

Fareen's thriving years would be steeped in such a richly textured tapestry, every distinct thread weaving in and out to form her incredibly distinct and powerful voice as a creative visionary. And unlike those participatory childhood workshops, the electric buzz of every experience etched immense contours into her artistic soul, from the tranquil moments of meditative crafting to globetrotting. For Fareen, fashion had never really been all about stitching clothes. It was storytelling at its best; a medium for dreams, cultures, and life's deepest

experiences all together into wearable masterworks.

With a lot of hope and a desire to leave her mark, Fareen entered the vibrant fashion industry of Dhaka after joining a well-known textile supplier company. Her residence in Uttara's affluent Gulshan neighborhood put her in an ideal location to fully immerse herself in the vibrant and fast-paced world of fashion. But soon, Fareen was confronted with the harsh reality of a profession that, despite its glitzy exterior, was still deeply prejudiced against women.

The fashion design industry, both in Bangladesh and globally, presents a paradoxical landscape. Despite the considerable number of female talents and students, often outdoing men in design schools, the leadership of the country continues to dominate by male. This is not to suggest that this is a unique case with Bangladesh, rather an international phenomenon. Designing is an area that is believed to glorify the creativity and innovation of women, but men still dominate the leadership roles and executive lines of decision-making. This gap between participation and leadership has been translated into a critical limitation that might put the brakes on further career advancement for women in design.

It was similar to Fareen's early experience at a group of companies. Despite being very talented and committed, the opportunities were very limited. This was due to undervaluing women's contribution even in some form of gate keeping.

She was shocked to find one of her supervisors, also lady, at the root cause of the matter.

Far from being a mentor or an advocate, this superior often seemed feel threatened by the potentials of other women and created obstacles, if not actively, to their professional growth.

At the Group, this was a kind of representation of a bigger problem: women at the top, or in powerful positions, tend to, influenced by the surrounding patriarchal mindset, sometimes perpetuate those very biases that hinder gender equality at the workplace. Fareen's journey of making a name in the field of fashion design turns into the fight against the inherent attitude of society and structures of workplaces that snatch the possibilities from women to dream and be creative. The cynical looks while bargaining in markets, the small





exclusions amidst crowds—it wasn't really a big deal. But it was evident of the greater systemic challenges that women faced in being able to assert their place and authority, especially in fields or industries where leadership has, and in many ways still is, viewed through the prism of a male dominance.

Even within the modern workplace of the textile supplier company, too often, her insights get brushed aside or ignored altogether—especially in bastions of old-school thinking like factory floors. It's not just the struggle of Fareen but the common plight for ambitious women across Bangladesh.

The nation's glacial progress on gender equality is indisputable, ranking at a bleak 133 out of 162 countries on the UNDP's Gender Inequality Index. (Gender inequality in Bangladesh: Engaging men and boys to close the gap, 2022). Political empowerment has inched forward but economic inclusion and parity of women remains limited. For example, women's unemployment rates are twice as high as men's, and many women work in informal or lower-paying jobs without basic benefits like paid maternal leave or social safety net. (Wing, 2020).

In Bangladesh's fashion empire, Fareen has noticed a glaring absence of women occupying top roles—a phenomenon rooted in societal norms that disproportionately burden women with household and childcare duties.

Even after a grueling workday, countless women face a second shift of domestic chores and caretaking upon returning home. This unrelenting reality often forces ambitious professionals like Fareen to prioritize family over career advancement.

For working mothers, the obstacles are exponentially steeper. A dire lack of accessible, high-quality childcare—a basic facility taken for granted across the West—is a big hurdle for Bangladeshi women aspiring to leadership positions. Fareen has witnessed many of her colleagues hit the brakes on their upward trajectories once reaching a certain career juncture, opting to devote themselves fully to family life. A wrenching trade-off that lays bare the delicate tightrope women must walk between nurturing professional goals and upholding traditional obligations.

Fareen's experiences are sadly resemblance to a much

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***Since 2003, female workforce participation has inched upward from 26% to around 36% currently. Efforts to shrink the wage gap and cultivate women entrepreneurs have formed key pillars of this incremental progress—aligning with World Bank data charting a steady nationwide rise in women's labor force engagement from 1990 to 2020 (Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate), 2023).***

broader national crisis. In 2020, a mere 36% of Bangladeshi women participated in the labor force—a staggeringly low figure dwarfed by men's rates, underscoring the myriad barriers women face (Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate), 2023).

From deep-rooted

cultural biases questioning their leadership wisdom to work-life strains, the uphill journey for female professionals like Fareen highlights an urgent need for transformative change. To its credit, the government has begun taking modest steps toward fostering gender parity and unlocking career mobility for women.

According to Fareen, gender quotas have emerged as a crucial but imperfect tool for tackling Bangladesh's entrenched employment and political gender gaps. Although robust gains in girls' education have yielded near-parity in schools, a yawning divide persists in the workforce and corridors of power. To bridge this gap, the government has enacted policies like quotas reserving seats for women in parliament, key constitutional bodies, and local governance.

These top-down efforts have nudged the needle forward, propelling Bangladesh into a regional frontliner on gender equality. By 2021, the nation scored 0.719 on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report—a significant South Asian milestone. Still, many steps have yet to be taken. Labor force participation rates continue to showcase a significant gender divide, with

women's 35.6% trailing far behind men's 81.9%. Likewise, women remain severely underrepresented in management and leadership roles (Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate), 2023).

Alongside quotas, the government has rolled out complementary initiatives aimed at women's economic and political empowerment. Since 2003, female workforce participation has inched upward from 26% to around 36%. Efforts to shrink the wage gap and cultivate women entrepreneurs have formed key pillars of this incremental progress—aligning with World Bank data charting a steady nationwide rise in women's labor force engagement from 1990 to 2020 (Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate), 2023).

For ambitious women in Bangladesh's fashion industry, the vital quest of professional networking put an extra burden. Due to deeply rooted cultural norms and societal expectations, women like Fareen often face difficulties simply interacting freely and forging connections—especially with male colleagues. An obstacle their male counterparts rarely confront.



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Fareen has experienced these insidious challenges firsthand. In Bangladesh, women's interactions with men still invite scrutiny and judgment, erecting artificial barriers to forming meaningful professional bonds. Again, Fareen's personal experiences match to the broader societal challenges women must navigate themselves through.

Enacting real, lasting reform demands a multi-faceted approach. Encouraging men to be proactive allies in eradicating patriarchal norms is vital. So too are institutional initiatives designed to promote gender equity and challenge regressive cultural attitudes. Only through repeated efforts to rewrite the existing narrative that Bangladeshi women like Fareen can freely build out their networks and ascend to their highest career aspirations without facing any obstacles.

Fareen's fashion odyssey has yielded undeniable triumphs—a testament to her talents and tenacity. One crowning achievement was her innovation of Denim with knit bottom clothing line, for which not just her employer awarded but attracted global retailers like Zara. Her cutting-edge designs commanded the runway at the renowned fashion shows, displaying her creative brilliance to the world.

In another significant achievement, Fareen's work also came to the notice of Walmart, with the retail juggernaut, grabbing her coveted pieces. Each new milestone has further solidified her reputation as a visionary designer forging bold new paths.

Yet Fareen's journey has transcended a series of personal wins. It stands as a beacon of what Bangladeshi women can achieve provided with equal opportunities in the fashion arena. Her trail-blazing career knock downs conventional notions about their roles and limitations in the industry. When unfettered, women like Fareen demonstrates through sheer grit and genius what they can contribute to revolutionizing their craft.

Fareen has her prospects set firmly for the future with aspirations as bold as the designs that introduced her as a rising star. Over the next five years, she sets the goal of ascending into a managerial role—an Assistant General Manager position, should she continue conquering the fashion industry's ranks. But that professional zenith is merely one facet of her grander ambitions.

Fareen is equally driven to expand her creative horizons

through the pursuit of a master's degree abroad. An advanced academic journey, she believes, would refine her existing talents while granting a refreshing global perspective on the world of fashion design.

Her dreams and firm determination mirror a broader movement to reach the highest level. More and more women are reaching their goals with acquiring academic qualifications which once were exclusively reserved for men. It's an ardent quest transcending mere career accomplishments, though—Fareen and her peers are at the vanguard of a seismic societal shift toward true gender equality.

Fareen's trailblazing journey through Bangladesh's fashion world is far more than an individual success story. It's a rallying beacon for the transformative societal shift catalyzing across the nation where women are shattering long-imposed barriers in male dominated spheres.

Her career progression, overcoming ingrained gender biases to gain acclaim for her singular design brilliance, encapsulates the evolving role of Bangladeshi women in industries traditionally controlled by men. Fareen's achievements are a testament not merely to her own talent and resilience but also to the endless potential of her female peers across the fashion sector.

Her steadfast ambitions for leadership positions and advanced education are more than just personal goals, they're emblems of a mounting societal renaissance. No doubt, this is an encouraging paradigm shift, during last five decades in the making since Bangladesh's independence. But it also underscores the many efforts still required to uproot systemic biases and cultivate a truly equitable workplace for all. Enhancing access to leadership training, expanding mentorship, implementing meritocratic hiring practices, fostering

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***Fareen's trailblazing journey through Bangladesh's fashion world is far more than an individual success story. It's a rallying beacon for the transformative societal shift catalyzing across the nation—where women are shattering long-imposed barriers in male-dominated spheres.***



psychological safety in office cultures—these are just some of the vital next frontiers.


Ultimately, Fareen's inspirational saga transcends her individual triumphs. It encapsulates the vital role women are playing in reshaping Bangladesh's socioeconomic structure and by extension, the global order. As we laud her successes, we must recognize the collective obligation to amplify the ambitions of women across all professions. Fareen's mere existence as a fashion professional defies daunting odds and societal forces bent on curbing her ambition. Her tenacious journey summed up the stark uphill battle by Bangladeshi women yearning for equal professional stature.



THE ROLE MODEL EFFECT

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**DID YOU  
KNOW?**

A photograph of a busy street in Bangladesh. In the foreground, a man in a light blue shirt is walking towards the left, slightly out of focus. Behind him, several women in colorful saris are walking. In the center, a man in a green and white checkered shirt and blue jeans is walking towards the camera. To his right, a woman in a bright pink sari is using a metal walker. In the background, there is a building with a sign that reads "SECURITY DEPT. নিরাপত্তা বিভাগ". The street is lined with utility poles and power lines, and a tall water tower is visible in the distance.

Young girls, who have never seen a female astronaut, are less likely to believe that they could be one when they grow up. Young boys, who have never seen a full-time father, who has given up his career to solely focus on child upbringing household tasks, are less likely to ever take a similar decision when they become fathers.

As kids, we look up to the life as lived or enjoyed. As adults we often hesitate to pick role models. But role models can have a crucial influence on the way we navigate ourselves through our professional lives.

The role model effect is a sociologist term, that refers to the power of 'seeing is believing'. Humans are by nature tending towards options, that are known to them. So it comes as no surprise, that most of us unconsciously prefer to pick a career path, behavioral pattern or profession, that we have seen other people, which are similar to us, do.

When young females see only very few female leaders, they start doubting their own abilities and chances to become a leader down the road.

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***In the villages with long-serving female leaders, the educational gender gap for teens disappeared, because girls have set higher goals for themselves. Also the parents were 25% more likely to state, that they want their daughters to adopt ambitious educational goals, which in turn made them influence their daughters in that direction.***

introduced in that region. To find out, whether these quotas changed the social structure of the region, families with children between the ages of 11 and 15 in almost 500 individual villages were surveyed. Parents were asked about their attitude on education and career achievements.

Then, those answers were compared against results from similar surveys conducted in villages with no female representatives in the local leadership ranks.

And the results left no room for doubts:

In the villages with long-serving female leaders, the educational gender gap for teens disappeared, because girls have set higher goals for themselves. Also the parents were 25% more likely to state, that they want their daughters to adopt ambitious educational goals, which in turn forced them encouraging their daughters in that direction.

Conversely, in villages with no female leaders, expectations for girls and boys remained very different. Parents in those villages were 45% less likely to want their daughters to finish school, compared to the same aspirations for the sons.

This rather local study is reflective of how role models can encourage people to set higher goals. Especially in

On the other hand this also means, that more girls believe that they can be good leaders, when they see more women filling similar positions.

One interesting study, conducted in the West Bengal in India, came to a similar conclusion and puts this theory into numbers.

In 1993, quotas for female politicians in local governments



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***The role model effect can function as an argument for women quotas in both, political and corporate contexts. If we grant women access to leadership roles by policy, both men and women see, that it is possible.***

the context of gender inequality, making role models more visible can apparently improve lives of many women.

The role model effect can function as an argument for women quotas in both, political and corporate contexts. If we grant women access to leadership roles by policy, both

men and women see, that it is possible.

If companies or policy makers want to make use of the role model effect, for instance through showcasing exemplary women's stories in order to motivate more women to follow her footsteps (like this book does), there are a few things to bear in mind.

Firstly, one must elaborate the way how to get there. If we only reflect on a role models current situation, it does not become understandable for youngsters, if they do not have access to information on how to get into there. Role models should, ideally, not simply portray a dream of what could be achieved, but also share insights on their path that has led them there.

Secondly, when showcasing female role models to reduce overall gender inequality, it is crucial to allow and explain differences. The way women work can be different than that of men. This does not mean, that they are doing it in a wrong way rather they are doing it differently. And in most professions, there is no single right way to perform a task.

And last but not the least, a role model should ideally not be too far away from the aspiring youngsters. A CEO of a fortune 500 company or a country's prime minister might just be a far to be relatable for the many.

# ASMAUL HOSSNA TISHA

Content Creator



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**A WOMAN CANNOT SEIZE OPPORTUNITIES FREELY, AS SHE MUST CONSIDER HER FAMILY AND SOCIETAL REACTIONS.**

Asmaul Hossna Tisha, a blogger and content creator from Bangladesh, is known for her diverse career path. While some may see it as volatile, she views it as a way to explore her creativity. After facing challenges in the male-dominated corporate world, she shifted to blogging and quickly gained a significant following. Tisha has continued to thrive in content creation, balancing multiple roles and earning recognition in Bangladesh's social media landscape. She values comfort in fashion and aims to inspire others with culturally appropriate styles.

Written by Kazi Umamah Binta Sarana

*Asmaul Hossna Tisha likes to introduce herself as a blogger or content creator from Bangladesh, but people close to her might call her volatile, because she has tried out various career options on her life. What seems like indecisiveness to some, is just Tisha's way to explore, what her creativity can do.*

*Tisha was born in Rajshahi, Bangladesh. When she was two, she moved to Dhaka with her family. Growing up, Tisha always wanted to work creatively in one way or the other. She was willing to be a fashion designer or fashion stylist, or even an interior designer, what she would do was not the matter to her. As long as she could be creative and come up with ideas, she knew, she would find her calling. She was very good at drawing, even when she was young, and her father encouraged her to practice painting and improve. "When she was in sixth grade, she joined an art school called 'Aka Jhoka,' where she completed all the classes in less time than required. The head of the school offered her a teaching position at a very young age. But she did not accept that offer, because according to her father she would not be able to manage the consequences.*

*Instead, she focused on her academic education. And when she arrived at the point where she had to choose a career option, she was fluctuating between becoming a doctor, architect, fashion designer, or painter. This was a pivotal moment in her life, where she wanted to be in*

She was brave. Shy, but brave. She knew she could, and so she started planning her leave.

Soon, everything was set for her to go study in Germany. But she stayed in Bangladesh. Why?

Tisha started calculating back and forth about the career opportunities, that a degree from Germany would give her, once she came back home. And she came to a clear conclusion: The situation would be tough. Not because studies abroad would hinder her, but because powerful positions simply do not come across for women in Bangladesh easily. And if they would, she might have to move into a very rural area of the country, where she would sacrifice the infrastructure, the freedom and the lifestyle she adored.

So why even bother? She stayed in Bangladesh and completed an MBA degree at home, after which she

*charge of her future, choosing a path that would make her feel happy, make her feel fulfilled. Her father suggested she become an engineer, believing she was too impatient to spend the years required to study medicine and become a doctor. Her mother was also adamant in encouraging her to choose engineering. So, after a couple of years, she completed her bachelor's in electrical engineering from the American International University of Bangladesh, even though she faced numerous difficulties along the way. She knew, she would find some fun in this challenge, and she did.*

*After completing her bachelor's degree, her parents wanted her to complete a master's as well, and a good option to do so would be to go abroad. Yet, Tisha's family and friends expressed concerns, fearing that a life abroad, being separated from your loved ones with thousands of miles, can be dangerous and very challenging. Could she imagine herself doing that? Being a young girl going out into the world and leaving behind all she used to know, all the people she could count on, all the truths she believed in and the culture of her home, which she got used to and loved dearly?*



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started to look for jobs.

Her first job offer came from the Dana Group, a big player in the steel and oil industry, supplying other companies like car manufacturer Mitsubishi.

She wanted a job at headquarter, a real corporate job, where she would be granted a seat at the table and would participate in decision making processes. She knew she had all it takes to participate, and she wanted to be someone, that people could look up to. But the employer had different plans.

They offered her a job in the sales department. She is a young, charismatic girl and can surely convince potential costumers to buy their products, they assumed. At the end of the day, pretty women sell stuff easily, right? That was all they saw in her. While young men got offered real jobs, she was reduced to her gender and not seen as a potential engineer, what she was.

This job offer made her realize that though women are working in every sector of the country, men are always in the leading power.

She denied the job. Instead, she chose an internship in a bank. Another shift in her career, as you would notice. Just as she was trying to get a permanent job there, her father would again approach her. He would remind her, that the work in a bank can be both, hectic and boring at the same time. He reminded her of her qualities, and told her, that this does not fit to her. A bank is not the place she belongs.

So, he offered her a job in his own buying office. Tisha joined her father's company, and, in the meantime, started blogging.

At first, she did not have any intension to make content professionally, but out of nowhere, she quickly reached ten thousand followers. And back then in 2018, that kind of following was noticeable. She had a first-mover-advantage, delving into a new field of opportunities, which was not explored much yet.

Bangladesh's citizen were just starting to get familiar with social media, and loved her content right away. On day, a fresher clothing brand named Rise, which today is a renowned brand, contacted her and asked her to make content for them to promote their products. And as easy as that, she suddenly had gotten her first paid job as a blogger.

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**Bangladesh' social media landscape plays a vital role in how individuals connect with each other. The most used platforms in Bangladesh are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Bongo, MyGP and Payrchat, adding to all in all more than 100 Million internet users in the whole country. The main factor for the boom of socials in the past decade were the quickly rising availability of affordable smartphones and data plans.**

a vital role in how individuals connect with each other. The most used platforms in Bangladesh are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Bongo, MyGP and Payrchat, adding to all in all more than 100 Million internet users in the whole country. The main factor for the boom of socials in the past decade were the quickly rising availability of affordable smartphones and data plans.

Social media platforms in Bangladesh are a valuable tool for political activism, as they enable discourse. Several large protests and movements gained traction through hashtags and posts, and marginalized voices are now heard by the many. Those platforms could, in the past years, mobilize support and hold powerful people accountable for their actions.

What makes Bangladesh internet landscape unique from other countries' social media presences, is the emphasis on localized content and the cultural pride. Content creators from Bangladesh often celebrate traditional Bengali cultural facets, like national cuisine, fashion and art, spreading pride and awareness about the country's diverse culture.

There was a time, where Tisha had multiple jobs at the same time. During her first success periods as a blogger,

She was well aware, that there are many people across the globe that make a living off of social media and blogging, but in Bangladesh, social media marketing was not that popular yet. She did not know that blogging can be profession in her home region as well. Today, Bangladesh' social media landscape plays

she was creative in other fields aswell, finally earning money with creativity, like she dreamed. She was running an online boutique shop on her own, she gave classes to toddlers, she created online content, she accepted the previous offer from the art school and became a teacher there, and all of that while still working in her father's buying house for three years.

Altogether she managed to escape all monotonous work routines. Every day was different, and she enjoyed that. The little girl who just wanted to create, had grown up to be a woman, who finally could live the life she had dreamed about.

Among all of these occupations, blogging was the most interested thing to her, so she continued that with full dedication. Although she never approached any brand or famous person for getting gigs, she was growing proudly, in her own pace, getting more offers day by day.

Soon she started to get public relations inquiries from international brands, but due to corrupted custom services in Bangladesh, she had to deny a few projects from across the seas. Renowned brands like Pixi Beauty, Gerard Cosmetics and Daniel Wellington offered to send her products to work with, but she did simply not receive



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<sup>6</sup>Public Relations: Providing a positive Image of an Organisation

those from the customs. If the process of custom clearance had been easier like in other countries, bloggers like Tisha could accept more project offers from abroad.

Which seems like a small setback for Tisha, is actually a massive issue for public figures and private individuals in Bangladesh. Corruption is a national challenge, that according to studies, actually influences people's happiness. Bribery and corruption can negatively impact people's mental health, because they cause distrust in national institutions and therefore establish a feeling of unease. Corruption creates a sense of unfairness and inequality, causing people to lose trust in governments and political institutions. Overall, citizens of less corrupt countries are generally more satisfied with their overall quality of life than people from countries with many corruption incidents.

When investigating Bangladesh's corruption issue, one cannot exclude Bangladesh's fashion and textile industry as a major factor.

As the RMG sector is one of the country's most important economy branches, it is certainly at risk to be the target for corruption and bribery.

In essence, this issue comes down a power imbalance. As Bangladesh established itself as a major production hotspot due to low labour costs, the factor of cost competitiveness remains a main reason for international fashion brands to produce in Bangladesh. The international brands' financial power allows them to put profit over policies, because they can pressure Bangladeshi factories to overstep laws to achieve certain business targets.

And to be the cheapest, and therefore most favorable business partner for Western fashion companies, local producers use corruption as a tool to stay on top. The bribe auditors and quality and safety inspectors, they violate labour rights and let their staff work over-hours.

But that is not the end of the story, the consequences of corruption go far beyond financial stimulation. Bangladesh's worst industry tragedy, the collapse of Rana Plaza, was partly caused by corruption, causing many people to lose their lives.

The collapse was caused by a chain of factors - A power outage lead to diesel generators being switched on to

provide electricity. These generators vibrated heavily, triggering a total collapse of the building.

But why did this giant building not withstand machine vibrations? The answer is shocking: NGOs found out, that at almost every step of the building's construction process, people were corrupted.

Substandard materials had been used, extra floors were added without being taken into account statically, audits were inadequate, warnings had been ignored. The building, which was originally planned for commercial use, was turned into an industrial space, and authorities admitted this transformation without asking for static adjustments.

Without widespread corruption on many levels, the people who died in this building in 2013, could still be alive today.

Tisha experienced corruption in her microcosm, but the macro view of this issue influences the life of many individuals.

To Tisha, fashion means comfort. Dressing up, trying on new outfits and styling them to perfection is what makes her feel comfortable in her skin.



© Asmaul Hossna Tisha



She does not like to wear revealing clothes and if she does, somehow her posture and gesture will seem uneasy and unnatural, even though she has been styled beautifully. So she learned, only when she is comfortable, she can stand out and establish a self-confident atmosphere.

Tisha creates her own outfits and designs and styles them by herself, always considering the cultural circumstances. She knows that people who follow her try to replicate her style and fashion sense. Therefore, Tisha always wants to show a certain type of styling that would be easy for her followers to replicate, and which is acceptable culturally as well. She likes to choose something basic which can be worn by majority of her fanbase. That is why she gained popularity in the Bangladesh's fashion industry and why she is loved by almost 120k people out there.

Content creation is no longer her passion anymore. It has become a profession, and the turning point of Tisha's career. She has been doing it for a long time now, people really appreciate her work. But still, she does not get any active support from her parents in regard to this profession. Tisha believes, that it is a generational matter. Her parents' generation grew up without digital opportunities, and they see her job as 'modeling'. But they never asked her to quit it. They respected her passion, but they could not give her any support.

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***She does not get any active support from her parents in regard to this profession. Tisha believes, that it is a generational matter. Her parents' generation grew up without digital opportunities, and they see her job as, modeling'. But they never asked her to quit it. They respected her passion, but they could not give her any support.***

But overall, in Tisha's diverse career, her parents were the main support factor. They never stopped her from doing something new or from following her passion. Her father still treats her like a princess today.

He taught her to never look back. Whatever goes will never come back. 'So, move



© Asmaul Hossna Tisha

forward', he taught her.

Her mother is her best friend. She talk to her about anything. Ups and downs, relationships, friends and work related issues; no matter what is on Tisha's mind, she can share it with her mother. She says, she has got her elegant fashion sense from her mother. When she started blogging, and when she opened her own boutique, her mother was constantly by her side. She still helps her to get ready, to style her looks, to get dressed.

She has a younger sister who is like her first child. Her sister is a true companion for her, supporting her to engage in adventurous activities.

Family is everything to hear. Her family has taught her, what support means, and what true love looks like.

According to Tisha, being a woman does not directly negatively affect career opportunities in the social media sector, she feels like women even have more chances than men.

Yet, there are some indirect factors, that make her work difficult, simply because she is a woman.

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***Blogging is different. Digital spaces offer opportunities to aspiring women, that physical jobs cannot guarantee: Physical safety. Being a content creator allows Tisha to be seen by thousands of people, without having to face them in real life. She can stay in her safe space, but showcase herself in the digital public.***

Once she was granted an opportunity from an agency, but could not take it because she would only get back home very late at night. And that is a no-go for her.

A man can roam around late at night for work purposes, but a woman has to face severe safety threats.

A woman cannot walk around Bangladesh’s cities at night without having to fear harassment, inappropriate comments or worse.

A woman cannot just grab any opportunity like a man can, because she constantly has to think about her family or about how society would react.

A woman will be called selfish if she does not care about external factors, if she does not take the opinions of others into account.

A woman in Bangladesh might be judged, if she puts her personal success first, or she works hard for career development.

Blogging is different. Digital spaces offer opportunities to aspiring women, that physical jobs cannot guarantee: Physical safety. Being a content creator allows Tisha to be seen by thousands of people, without having to face them in real life. She can stay in her safe space, but showcase herself in the digital public.

In Tisha’s opinion, women are underrepresented in leadership, because they do not get proper family support. When a woman is highly educated and offers high potential, they could theoretically fill a higher executive position, but in practice, their private life does not allow for that to happen.

In South Asian regions, a woman usually has to manage the household activities all alone, even after a long day

at work. Nowadays, according to Tisha, the majority of women in Bangladesh want to work but lacks family support.

Cultural rules shatter their dreams. Society draws a clear image of what a woman has to be, and there is no escaping that image.

Tisha believes in women quota. She thinks that women will ultimately make use of opportunities, if they are granted access to those. If workplaces were safe and if childcare support would be accessible, more women would strive for a professional career.

Tisha created an online boutique called ‘Elegance by Asma’, where she generated good profits for the longest time. Since she was designing, tailoring and managing the delivery systems on her own, it became difficult for her to handle at some point. It was just too much for one person.

Tisha needed support, but she was lacking a network. Looking back, she now acknowledges, that her gender might have something to do with the issues she faced as a business owner. She could not access wholesale markets easily and she had issues to buy raw materials in bigger amounts. All of that, because the RMG sector is a



© Asmaul Hossna Tisha





women in Bangladesh, who do not experience private support.

Secondly, we learn, that success does not require stringency. Often, we look down on people, who tried out different things professionally, before committing themselves to one thing, before finding their true calling. But trying different jobs requires strength, courage and ambiguity tolerance.

tight-knit community, that prefers to welcome new members from existing networks. Tisha, as a young woman, is not connected with personalities from this industry branch. She does not have a full contact book with suppliers she could give a call at any moment. So, she closed the online shop temporarily.

But she is not giving up. She wants to build networks, streamline processes and establish a proper brands, with support.

Tisha recently got married to a marine navigator. Her husband supports her in every way he possibly can. He believes that she will be a better CEO than him if they should ever build a company together.

Her job allows her to travel around the country with her husband, as she can create digital contents from anywhere. She does not see that as a sacrifice, but loves to do it for the sake of her own, small family.

Tisha's story teaches us two important things: Firstly, personal support from family and from loved ones is crucial. If Tisha had not experienced this level of support from her parents growing up, she might live an entirely different life today. And that is the reality for many

THE ROLE OF THE WOMAN IN  
BANGLADESH'S SOCIETY

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**DID YOU  
KNOW?**



Bangladesh's diverse culture, its history and society structure has established a specific picture of what a woman should contribute to society, but this image is changing, not lastly due to the nations internationally operating business landscape.

To start, let's look at some numbers.

Only 42 percent of women of working-age actually participate in the labour force. Only 13 % of women in Bangladesh own land.

54% of women have at least once in their lifetimes experienced physical violence or sexual abuse. And still today, parents would prefer to give birth to sons compared to daughters, with some parents even opting for sex-selective abortions, when expecting a girl. (1)

Interestingly, these drastic numbers, showcasing the limited opportunities of women, do not go hand in hand with the national wage gap. Bangladesh has the lowest gender pay gap ratio worldwide, with 2,2% compared to the global average of 21,2%.

One reason for that is the high share of women working in the RMG sector, which accounts for a huge part of the

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country's overall labour participation.

In terms of political participation, we again see drastic contrasts. The government recommends political parties to achieve at least 33% women quota, but no party has currently reached this rate.

Bangladesh's first female prime minister, Khaleda Zia, assumed power in 1991, which seems very early, considering

countries like America never had a single female president in their entire history. Yet, Zia inherited her role from her assassinated husband. She did not achieve this position on her own, she was well connected and was able to make use of her close network.

But why does gender discrimination, gender based violence and inequality of opportunities still persist in a country, where the gender pay gap seems to improve steadily and where women can fill the highest political leadership roles?

You might have guessed it, biasness has something to do with it.

As we already learned, gender biases exist in every culture of the world, and Bangladesh's cultural landscape is no exception.

Studies show, that 99 person of people in Bangladesh hold at least one bias against women.

69% of Bangladesh's population believes, that men can be better political leaders and 88% state, that men are better and more capable business executives.

The power of gender bias is, that we cannot even view our own self in an unbiased way, even when reviewing our own personal abilities or traits. Almost every Bengali woman holds biases against her own gender, which perpetuates the societal norms that hold her back from breaking the glass ceiling. (1)

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***Women now have the independence to express their opinion, whether political or personal, and to contribute to the country's prosperity. Apart from that, young people in Bangladesh witness political actions and strategies from NGO's towards gender equality, which inspire many women to participate in activism and challenge the status quo, on a national and a personal level.***

If you are born as a woman in Bangladesh, depending on the family you are born into, you will either receive similar opportunities to the ones men get, or you will be seen as a burden to society.

Whether you belong to the one side or the other, has something to do with the wealth of your family.

Parents that live on a household income below the poverty line tend to see girls as a burden, while privileged, wealthy families have enough financial means to support their children, no matter which gender they have.

In Bangladesh's culture, tradition and religion play vital roles.

Within a family and community, women are often seen as homemakers and primary caretakers for children. Men are seen as the more dominant gender, and due to the fact that most Bangladeshis consider men to be the better leaders, women sometimes struggle to have get opinions being heard.

Many families design their day-to-day lives based on such cultural values, that persist in society since hundreds of years. But the country is changing. Young women feel a shift, a shift of opportunities, a shift of perspectives and a shift of values within communities. In Bangladesh's economic development process, people started to see, that prosperity can only be achieved, when women and men work together. It takes efforts from all genders to raise an entire nation's status. It feels like the opportunities that are now given to women have drastically changed over past years.

Women now are given the similar job opportunities to men, and more women dare to enter classically male-dominated industries. Women now have the independence to express their opinion, whether political or personal and to contribute to the country's prosperity. Apart from that, young people in Bangladesh witness political actions and strategies from NGO's towards gender equality, which inspire many women to participate in activism and challenge the status quo, on a national and a personal level.

And this change will affect first and foremost the coming generations. In 2022, the enrollment rates of schools show more girls than boys, and girls regularly outperform boys in school exams across the whole country.

To challenge the role of the woman in Bangladesh's society, men must engage themselves as active allies. Challenging discriminating beliefs can be beneficial for everyone, as traditional expectations towards what a man or a woman has to be like, challenges men's mental health just as much as that of women.

The next generation might grow up differently than all existing ones. The internet and the growing interconnectedness of cultures opens possibilities for exchange. Women can access information and female role models can become increasingly visible. Social media can play a pivotal tool to challenge stereotypes and portray women differently, and to advocate for women's rights.

But advocacy alone will not be enough to change deeply rooted societal beliefs. Legal loopholes must be addressed to ensure that legal frameworks grant equal rights to all genders.

# ROKAIYA AHMED PURNA

Fashion Designer ■ Activist



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**NEITHER SOCIETY NOR  
ANY SITUATION CAN  
DEFINE MY  
LIMITATIONS; ONLY I  
CAN SET THEM**

Rokaiya Ahmed Purna, an internationally acclaimed and award-winning fashion designer, exemplifies remarkable resilience and creativity. She founded the network platform Design In Global and her fashion label RAP to showcase Bangladesh's potential beyond garment production. Among her notable achievements are the creation of the eco-friendly Kamthala sneaker and her contributions to global discussions as a UNESCO Youth Representative. Her journey underscores the transformative power of determination and innovation in reshaping Bangladesh's global image.

Written by Sadman Hossain and Fardin Rahman

Even though Bangladesh is a geographically small country, it is the second-largest garment exporting country for Western fast-fashion brands worldwide. It only took four decades from struggling to support the nation financially to being an important player in the textile and apparel sector. The country's speed of growth is praiseworthy. According to the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB), "In 2023 Bangladesh's apparel exports reached a historic high of around 47 billion, exceeding the previous record achieved in 2022 by almost 10.27 percent." (Report, 2024) Furthermore, it also has become the top denim-sourcing country for Europe. (in 2023 revised EPB data stated that Bangladesh fetched US\$36 billion from garment exports)

Based on recent information, it may seem that the majority of Bangladesh's garment production is largely focused on bulk production for international brands, with the United States and the European Union major destinations, rather than focusing on creativity or innovation. The country's specialization on production and the associated growing value of garment exports has influenced, how the world views Bangladesh.

Rokaiya Ahmed Purna's story is not similar to the career paths of the majority of fashion designers. Coming from a country like Bangladesh, she had to work harder to become a respected designer. Her story explains how one woman's struggle to unburden herself from the traditional norms has led to her fighting for her artistic freedom and the eternal pursuit of perfection.

Her journey reflects on how resilience and determination can transform obstacles into chances for growth.

Rokaiya took the societal qualms and the stereotypes that come with being a fashion designer and how she overcome those to pave the way and to set an example that young people like her can follow.

Rokaiya Ahmed Purna is one of South Asia's leading fashion designers and the visionary founder of the network platform Design in Global and her fashion label RAP.

Due to her significant contribution to the fashion and creative industries, she is internationally recognized as a UNESCO Youth Representative and has participated in the 13th UNESCO Youth Forum in 2023. Her work has been

At the heart of Bangladesh's vibrant creative landscape, where innovative minds roam, lives a visionary pioneer shaping the industry. One woman's quest for innovation and excellence started a new wave of change. Meet the award-winning fashion designer, Rokaiya Ahmed Purna, whose journey in the creative realm inspired new perspectives. With strong self-belief, she transformed every "You can't do this!" into "I did it!" taking herself to the top.



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featured in many publications, such as Forbes, CNN, and Vogue, strengthening her status as an innovator.

Rokaiya's project Designed in Bangladesh, made in Europe is extraordinary because it changes the image of "Made in Bangladesh". Honestly, Purna's initiative is more than simply that of a design project; it is likewise a strong message that Bangladeshi designers speak about not only quantity but also quality, innovation and a footprint on the global level.

Since her childhood as she was good at painting and

<sup>7</sup>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization



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sketching, at one stage she was confused over selecting her profession whether she should be a graphic designer or a fashion designer. Her inner inquisitive provoked excitement for fashion, so she decided to study apparel design at the BGMEA University of Fashion and Technology.

At that time, the profession of fashion designer was not a popular career choice. The percentage of people choosing fashion designing as career was not much high in Bangladesh. And little did she know back then that this choice would change her life. Most of her relatives criticized her choice to become a fashion designer, they told her and even her mother that fashion had no future, and they were going to make a big mistake.

However, Rokaiya was determined to prove them wrong, no matter what. "I took everything as a challenge for myself," she said, emphasizing her determination to make her way into fashion rather than waiting for the chance to knocking at her door. After all, Rokaiya was a girl from an average Bengali middle-class family. Financial constraints also added to her struggles, making the path even more challenging. However, instead of giving up, Rokaiya made a decision to act. She put all the money she saved for innovative works and applying for international competitions during her study period.

To kick off her career as a designer, Rokaiya chose the full-steam-ahead-approach. Despite being a beginner, she was not in favour of wasting any time rather she started participating in national and international competitions, where she left her footprint.

As she won the first price at the 'Denim & Jeans International Show' in 2016, Rokaiya's journey, commonly known as RAP, began. Following the first achievement, RAP bagged her the second position at the same competition in 2017 and in the same year Rokaiya received the Wuhan International Fashion Week Excellence Award.

At Russia's Global Talent Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week, she presented a collection that included the fabric legacy of Bangladesh's ethnic minority. She wanted to develop a new dimension of fashion through worshipping and showcasing her home country's culture and tradition, leading her to create designs made of colorful fusion works. Her modern and out-of-the-box approach to developing shapes and patterns has redefined traditional

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**One of Rokaiya's most innovative collections is inspired by Meena, a fictional character from a popular pan-South Asian children's cartoon series created by UNICEF. Meena, a symbol of women's empowerment, is the brainchild of the artist Mustafa Monwar and UNICEF. Despite her simple appearance as a village girl wearing a pink blouse and red skirt, Meena's story is far from ordinary.**

collections was inspired by Meena, a fictional character from a popular pan-South Asian children's cartoon series by UNICEF. Meena, a symbol of women's empowerment, is the brainchild of the artist Mustafa Monwar and UNICEF. Despite her simple appearance as a village girl wearing a pink blouse and red skirt, Meena's story is far from ordinary. Through her daily adventures, Meena teaches valuable lessons on education, health, gender equality, child rights, and social awareness. These powerful messages delivered through Meena's simplistic narrative serve as a key inspiration for Rokaiya's collection, featuring Meena's story through detailed embroidery. Her designs symbolize themes of education, health, and feminism. The word education was also firmly embroidered on the garments, serving as a representation of the transformative power of knowledge.

Additionally, what sets Rokaiya apart from other designers from Bangladesh and makes her unique in the world, is her project Designed in Bangladesh, made in Europe.

In 2020, out of nowhere, Rokaiya received a message on Instagram that thrilled her with excitement. A German footwear brand, namely ,ekn', contacted her with a

wear and placed Bangladeshi craftsmanship on the international stage.

Her noteworthy contributions to the fashion industry, she was portrayed in both local and international publications and magazines such as Vogue, Forbes, the Daily Star, Canvas magazine, New Kid official, Textile Today and more.

One of Rokaiya's most innovative

unique project proposal. The brand, that works with recycled or novel vegan materials like fruit skins, was impressed by Rokaiya's unique innovative work and asked her, whether she was interested to teamed up in an international collaboration.

She was asked to design a sneaker, which would later be produced in Europe.

Her main source of inspiration for this sneaker is quite unconventional: she was inspired by jackfruit.

As a child, she spent countless hours under the shade of a majestic jackfruit tree near her home. The jackfruit tree wasn't just an ordinary tree. It was a symbol of motherly care for Rokaiya and her family. Its wide branches expanded over their home, offering a sense of comfort, like a mother sheltering her child. The fruit's unique shape and texture became imprinted in her mind, a symbol of her childhood summers.

This personal connection with the fruit went hand in hand with another source of pride of being the national fruit of Bangladesh. The bridge between her personal memory and her national heritage was then established, completing the story around this sneaker design. The



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<sup>8</sup>United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund



kamthala sneaker was developed. Kamthala is a word taken from the Bengali word *kathal*, which means jackfruit in English.

The sneaker wasn't just visually stunning; it was also functional and comfortable. The detailed yellow-colored textures is similar to those of a typical ripe jackfruit. The front part of the shoe's spiky optics is taken from the spiky surface of the fruit. Made with eco-friendly materials, the sneaker was completely free of toxic chemicals—a bold statement to empower an ecologically sound society. The EVA sole provides durable comfort and weightlessness, even though it's not made from typical shoe materials. A cherry on top, the removable insole, offered an additional degree of coziness and customization. The ekn Kamthala launched globally in 2023 after a few years of hard work (JustLuxe, 2023).

It was the product of a fusion of cultural pride and green practices that Rokaiya envisioned. It proved that innovative and sustainable projects couldn't only be dreamt of in Bangladesh but brought to life on a global stage, showcasing Bangladesh's potential beyond producing garments.

As Bangladesh, is a globally well-known clothing manufacturing country, Rokaiya had an urge to promote the idea that her home country has more potential and capability beyond producing garments.

But is Bangladesh constantly reducing its production? Bangladesh's Ready-made-garment sector has grown

immensely in the past decades, making it stand out from the competition with two key advantages. Firstly, production cost in the country is comparatively low due to low labor costs and secondly, its huge workforce.

According to the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), there are a total of four million people working in this sector directly while the sector creates employment for millions more through its backward and forward linkage industries.

From the very beginning on, women played a crucial role in the RMG sector. In 1980, a remarkable 80 percent of the RMG workforce was comprised of women. This share, however, has declined over the years, dropping to 53.7 percent in 2021.

This decline may be attributed to several factors. Balancing work with childcare and managing time effectively can be difficult. Additionally, low wages, safety concerns, and limited career advancement within the factories themselves are pushing women to seek jobs elsewhere. Furthermore, industry is increasingly enhancing its capacity towards automation potentially replacing several jobs that had previously been done by humans.

The RMG sector made an extraordinary contribution of 10.35 percent to Bangladesh's Gross Domestic Product in the fiscal year 2023, and last year, RMG exports reached an all-time high in value of nearly \$47 billion. (Daily Star, 2024, as cited in EPB, 2023; Uddin & Islam, 2023, p. 4).



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**Rokaiya has learned, that collaboration is key to break barriers and eliminate stereotypes. And she wants to accelerate change and help designers around the globe get connected with one another. For that purpose, she founded a network platform, called Design in Global. This foundation offers contacts, courses, a Podcast and other internet sources that help aspiring and practicing creatives to get access to needed tools.**

Despite being a powerhouse in garment production, the country is experiencing difficulties and challenges, specifically in the fields of design and innovation. The industry focuses on low-cost, high-volume production for international brands, prioritizing market value over designing their own products. Many

producers heavily rely on designs provided by foreign brands like H&M, Zara, Nike, Adidas, C&A, etc.

Imagine a vast factory where thousands of workers are vigorously producing countless garment products based on trends set elsewhere. This approach, while successful in terms of revenue sales, limits the variety and originality of Bangladeshi garments. Unlike other fashion capitals such as New York, Paris, London, and Japan, which thrive thanks to creative minds, Bangladesh hasn't fully utilized its design potential in clothing.

That is why people like Rokaiya need to bring about a positive change. Her work aimed at changing the fact that Bangladesh is only known as garment manufacturing country. She worked towards the vision to change perspectives of outsiders. The process of creating fashion should involve mutual understanding and knowledge-sharing; it shouldn't be one-sided, with large importers dominating the strategic landscape.

Rokaiya has learned, that collaboration is key to break barriers and eliminate stereotypes. And she wants to accelerate change and help designers around the globe get connected with one another. For that purpose, she founded a network platform, called Design in Global. This

foundation offers contacts, courses, a Podcast and other internet sources that help aspiring and practicing innovators to get access to the required tools.

In addition to her creative work, Rokaiya was also present on the international stage of policy making. She represented her country, Bangladesh, at the UNESCO youth forum as a female leader. This brings attention to the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, particularly in international arenas. Historically, leadership positions have been predominantly occupied by men, so Rokaiya's appearance raised awareness of gender differences in various domains. Gender diversity in leadership positions is essential, not just for achieving gender equality but also for promoting innovation, productivity, and possible development on a global level. Studies show that diverse leadership teams in organizations that include women in decision-making positions tend to outperform solely male leadership teams in terms of corporate earnings and organizational effectiveness.

Furthermore, promoting gender diversity in leadership roles is also a matter of economic necessity. Women make up half of the world's population, and they have



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unique skills, talents, and insights for addressing many issues. By utilizing the full potential of women in various fields and roles, we can unlock new possibilities for growth, creativity, and sustainable advancement.

The UNESCO youth forum serves as an important platform for young leaders like Rokaiya to address global issues and advocate for positive changes. As a female representative, Rokaiya took on the role of not only voicing her own beliefs but also raising the voices of women worldwide. Despite the load of responsibility, Rokaiya approached every discussion with determination and a deep sense of pride in representing her country.

Rokaiya designs clothings and footwear. Rokaiya speaks up about female representation on global stages and she runs a platform that connect creators worldwide. And this is not all. In addition, she provides lectures at universities, works as consultant, also has experience as a garment technologist while she worked as a costume designer for TV commercials.

But why she followed such a versatile path

At the beginning of her career, many people didn't believe she could handle multiple tasks at a same time. Society often pushes women towards stereotypical

paths, limiting their options to simple roles. Despite facing uncertainty and advice to follow a straightforward path, she refused to confined herself in limitaionbe limited. She wanted to be limitless. Ignoring the whispers of doubt, she continued to maintain her determination to embrace versatility and explore multiple possibilities beyond within and in her field.

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***The story of Rokaiya Ahmed Purna is inspiring on many levels. It reveals the life-changing impact of a brave mindset and a never-ending thirst for knowledge and skills. She surpassed restraints and achieved unparalleled success by utilizing her unshakable willpower. Youngsters can relate to her story, which guides them to accept challenges and shattering traditions for the greater good.***



© Rokaiya Ahmed Purna

“My philosophy of life is that I won't follow a single path; rather, I chose to pursue diversity and acquire additional knowledge to boost my career growth,” she explained. In the wide landscape of the fashion industry, she saw endless opportunities to expand and broaden her creativity.

Throughout her journey, she refused to let social norms or external limitations define her potential. “I believe that neither society nor any situation can define my limitations; only I can set them.” Despite receiving recognition for her accomplishments, Rokaiya remained humble, recognizing that her journey is characterized by constant changes and evolutions. “I'm still in a continuous learning state and won't call myself an expert.”

When you are involved in so many different businesses and endeavors, you need to stay up-to-date with the latest trends, practices, and developments to ensure that you stay competitive and effective in each of your pursuits. But Rokaiya does not only draw inspiration from Runways or big brands, she treats her whole environment as a source of new ideas.





***She changed the way she approached every decision, putting the difference she can make for her community at the center of her attention. She understood, that making a change is what truly made her happy, what made her proud of her achievements.***

Rokaiya takes her inspiration from her roots, from traditional aspects of her upbringing, from her own culture and from the fusion of different cultures. RAP is today known by many people around the world. And at the beginning of her career, Rokaiya dreamt of exactly that: fame. Growing up, she always envisioned herself becoming someone that people look up to, someone whose words are listened.

“It was my dream; I always wanted to be a famous designer.” But one night, after watching the movie “Rockstar,” she realized that the true meaning of becoming an artist is simply to make tangible what your soul has to offer.

“Purna, what are you doing?” she asked herself. Up to that moment, the only reason she was working so hard, was to be recognized.

But then, something happened.

She changed the way she approached every decision, putting the difference she can make for her community at the center of her attention. She understood, that making a change is what truly made her happy, what made her proud of her achievements. Fame is a tool to be visible, but providing opportunities to others, is what makes her heart full.

The story of Rokaiya Ahmed Purna is inspiring on many levels. It reveals the life-changing impact of a brave mindset and a never-ending thirst for knowledge and skills.

“I learn a lot from different people around me — from the rickshaw puller, driver, child; everyone can be my role model. But the essential thing is, I never forget my roots.” In the global fashion landscape, large design houses usually dictate trends based on western beauty standards. But

She overcame restraints and achieved unparalleled success by utilizing her unshakable willpower. Youngsters can relate to her story, which guides them to accept challenges and shattering traditions for the greater good.

She values the concept of never letting the light of curiosity go out and exploring the unknown ways. Her actions have led her to become a prime example of how to excel in both one’s personal and professional life. Instead of being controlled by customs set by the society, and her loyal commitment to her ideas of change serves as an influential reminder about the importance of self-belief and reaching goals while ignoring other’s doubts. As she continues to evolve and inspire, Rokaiya’s legacy serves as a monument to the revolutionary power of resilience and determination. Her journey highlights the sincere wisdom that success is not about reaching heights but also about the journey of self-discovery, growth, and continuous learning along the way. She remained determined towards o her dreams, and now she achieved numerous success.

Her success wasn’t the result of blindly following every piece of advice. As she wisely commented, “Become the captain of your own ship,” reflecting the importance of self-guidance. This mantra serves as a compass to navigate through a sea of guidance, clearing out dubious advice and creating a course based on one’s own strengths and goals. Rokaiya not only achieved remarkable success but also became a heroine, empowering others to channelize their own journeys toward their personal definition of success.

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# **THREADS OF CHANGE**

**Empowering Future Innovators through  
Education and Collaboration**



How can we make the textile industry sustainable and innovative? What skills do we need to foster so that young people can contribute concrete solutions in their future careers? These are two of the core questions we address and answer through education and university partnerships within German Development Cooperation (GIZ). Joint learning, the transfer of academic knowledge and skills and the development and testing of technical solutions are central elements in this process.

This comes with the need for practice. Applicability, and the consideration of the concrete context are central for successful adaptation. Equally important are the people who are part of or are the target of the solutions – those who apply technologies or methods and live and work in the environments where solutions are implemented. Therefore, any technical or other approach also has to take the perspectives of the affected individuals into consideration.

Within a writing workshop, we therefore sought to especially bring together and reflect on a wide range of perspectives: most evidently, the perspectives of Bangladeshi women on the fashion industry and textile production. But additionally, also the perspectives of instructors from Germany and Bangladesh, politics and business, engineering and social sciences, theory and practice. This writing workshop was implemented for the first time—it was an experiment with an unknown outcome.

We therefore were especially delighted by the feedback from students that conducting interviews, reflecting on role models, and writing their contributions provided them with a new perspective on the textile world and professional practice. They reported that during the unfamiliar process of creative writing, new ideas also emerged regarding textile design and technical solutions. The experiment was a success.

Our heartfelt thanks go to the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the company Strauss, whose support of university cooperation made the writing workshop and the resulting publication possible in the first place.

A source of joy was working together with Shirin Araghi, who developed the course with great enthusiasm, taught with dedication, and guided the finalization of the articles with patience. Our gratitude also goes to the Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology (AUST) and the Chair for Sustainability and Textile Innovation (CSTI), especially Prof. Dr. Lal Mohan Baral, as well as the instructors and students in textile engineering, who were open to join the writing workshop, despite it meant a shift in perspective, and a completely different digital learning and course model.

We deeply appreciate Taslima Miji, Asmaul Hossna Tisha, Shahina Parven Alo, Asma Begum, Azra Mahmood, Julekha Begum Fareen and Rokaiya Ahmed Purna, who contributed as role models and shared their perspectives on the textile industry first with the students and now also with us. And, of course, our special thanks go to the students, whose exceptional contributions are the center of this publication. With unique curiosity, courage, perseverance, commitment, and extraordinary dedication, they made the writing workshop happen as a space for learning, creativity, exchange, and testing. We wish them the very best for their studies and career paths and are absolutely confident that we will continue to learn from their creativity, solution-oriented approaches, and commitment also in the future.

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**Published by the**

Deutsche Gesellschaft für  
Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Registered offices  
Bonn and Eschborn, Germany

Higher Education and Leadership Development for  
Sustainable Textiles in Bangladesh (HELD)

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**As at**

June 2025

**Printed by**

Perception Communications  
Dhaka

**Design**

Fahud Khan  
Dhaka

**Text**

Fatema Binte Muhammed  
Sumaiya Alam Meghla  
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German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)