

## STORIES FROM OUR YOUTH: THE INNOVATORS OF TOMORROW

## UN Women's "Innovators Against Gender-Based Violence" Competition



Sonia of Team Sanctum, having a group discussion with the employees of Hasan Jute Mill Factory, during the "Together We Change" workshop in Bogura

In 2017, Srity Pal from Khulna, Bangladesh, was sexually harassed by someone she considered a friend. "It wasn't a stranger in a back alley, it was someone who was my classmate from grad school, someone I knew, someone I trusted," she recounted. A few days after the harassment, she confided in her professor, but did not feel supported: "That day I felt so helpless".

It was this helplessness that Srity felt compelled to overcome on a larger scale. When she discovered UN Women's "Innovators Against Gender-Based Violence" Competition (IAGBV Competition), she saw a window of opportunity. "I felt optimistic that I could help other girls and women like me who experienced sexual harassment or [were] victims of gender based violence,"

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she recalled. Srity's team, **'Revive'**, was ultimately one of the two winners of the IAGBV Competition.

UN Women launched the IAGBV Competition in March 2019, under the Combatting Gender Based Violence Project, supported by Global Affairs Canada, inviting young women innovators to develop ground-breaking innovations to identify solutions to end violence against women. Under the theme, "Think equal, build smart, innovate for change," UN Women received approximately 100 applications with unique ideas to end GBV.

Sonia Azad was one such applicant, and a member of the other winning team, Team **'Sanctum'**. In similar circumstances to Srity, Sonia experienced a distressing incident in her workplace, forcing her to resign. She says she knew that "quitting my job would be financially traumatic for me but I was left with no choice but to quit...that is when I started to think about a start-up that will support women who go through harassment in the workplace". From March 2019, short-listed candidates for the IAGBV Competition from across the country participated

in capacity-building bootcamps, learning sessions and workshops on gender theory and GBV, as well as business strategy. “I was ecstatic to be among the top 10 teams who competed for the prize money— it greatly boosted my confidence as an aspiring woman entrepreneur,” described Sonia of her experience of the early days in competition. “After all, in Bangladesh, it is still the men who are given priority for funding as start-up entrepreneurs.” The capacity-building culminated in a “Pitch Day”, where Team Revive and Team Sanctum were declared the winners.

The winning teams piloted their projects in the district of Bogura at the end of November 2019. Team Sanctum created a comprehensive module named “Better Workplaces” to alleviate and prevent sexual harassment in the workplace. Over two days, they piloted the module “Together We Change” with 20 staffs (10 male and 10 female) at Hasan Jute Mill Bogura, incorporating games, debates and scenario exercises to examine and unpack workplace sexual harassment. At the end of the training, the workshop participants wrote 3 new strategies to be implemented in the next 3 months that address workplace harassment and build a violence free culture. “Participants loved the workshop and invited us to do more such trainings with all the workers at the factory,” described Sonia excitedly. “The management liked the way we positively inspired the participants to build a harassment free workplace and a better workplace culture.”

Team Revive’s product is designed to empower survivors of GBV, by engaging them in the production of low-cost biodegradable cotton sanitary napkins (called

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‘Charu’), and raise awareness about GBV through product marketing. The team conducted a capacity-building workshop on GBV and the associated myths and stereotypes that perpetuate GBV, interweaving the topic of menstrual hygiene into the discussions. The participants were originally reluctant to participate, relaying fears about discussing such taboo topics. However, Srity says that “by the end of the sessions on gender-based violence [the] women were lively, and they were even able to transition to the taboo topic of menstrual hygiene.”

Both teams officially launched their innovation on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2019 at the 16 Days of Activism Fair at the University of Comilla.

Both Srity and Sonia understand that although their innovations are breaking the silence around taboo topics for their participants, there is still much more work to be done. “Our sisters are...suffering the trauma in their daily life and seeking for help”, lamented Srity. “So we should disseminate all awareness about GBV and prohibit the culture of silence and shame”. These young, aspiring innovators understand that, through their ground-breaking innovations, the seeds they begin growing today will help women in Bangladesh tomorrow.



Sonia of Team Sanctum, having a group discussion with the employees of Hasan Jute Mill Factory, during the “Together We Change” workshop in Bogura