

CELEBRATION OF WOMEN INNOVATORS

April 1, 2019 | Dhaka, Bangladesh

The EVENT

On March 13, 2009, UN Women, supported by Global Affairs Canada, launched the Innovators against Gender-Based Violence (GBV) competition for young women innovators in Bangladesh. Its key objective is to provide them with an opportunity to unleash their potential and creativity to find ground-breaking ideas and innovative solutions to advance gender equality and women’s empowerment, with a specific focus on fighting GBV so that women and girls will be free from violence. Two hundred participants attended the event, including 150 students.

The Celebration of Women Innovators event was held on 1 April 2019 at the Institute of Business Administration, Dhaka University to announce this competition. The event aimed to reach students and the public with moving, inspirational stories by three pioneer women of Bangladesh working in various social enterprises and involved in promoting women’s empowerment and eliminating GBV– Sharmin Kabir, Founder of Wreetu, Zaiba Tahyia, Founder of Female Empowerment Movement, and Tasnim Afroze Tora, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of SafeSpace and Chief Financial Officer (CFO) of Decent Wastepreneurs.

This was followed by a street theater performance on the patriarchal social structure, sexual harassment and the #MeToo movement in Bangladesh.



| Participants at Registration Booth



| Opening note by Eshanee Sadukhan, Event Moderator

The PARTICIPANTS



Zaiba Tahyya

Founder and CEO
Female Empowerment Movement (FEM)



"[FEM] is something that started as an accident, then turned into a social experiment, then turned into social business. This is my story and telling you this is my success."

Zaiba Tahyya was the average girl-next door from Bangladesh who went on to study criminology. Following an academic degree and experience in a legal firm and the Bangladesh Police hoisted, her into a journey of discovery. She discovered the prevailing mistreatment, abuses and violence against women, especially of marginal communities, as well as discriminatory practices against victims/survivors of violence. She was so moved by her learning that she took the initiative to start the Female Empowerment Movement (FEM).

In 2016, under the FEM, Zaiba initiated and solely managed 'Project Attorokkha', financed by BLAST. Its aim is to give women confidence to believe in themselves and to be resilient, as well as to empower them physically and mentally to fight abuse instead of silently submitting to it. To achieve this, the project trained girls from disadvantaged backgrounds in the basics of self-defense. 'Project Attorokkha' has had a positive impact on social change and community development. In the first few weeks, when only seven girls joined the project, Zaiba feared that it had failed. But just as she was about to give up and close the activity, a participant told her of her newfound confidence in facing a sexual predator in the community by simply speaking up against him, thus ending his behavior. And soon, what started as a basic self-defense programme with a mere seven girls attending, grew to several classes of 40 girls, provided with military training.

FEM currently has a training hub in Korail, which serves as an afterschool club for women of urban slums. The hub has successfully been conducting English Language lessons, cyber security and bicycle training together with self-defense modules. FEM has now become a social enterprise, planning to expand its projects across the country and introduce hubs in rural Bangladesh. And in 2017, Zaiba was awarded the Queen's Young Leaders Award, in recognition of her efforts.

Sharmin Kabir

Founder and CEO,
Wreetu

Sharmin Kabir founded Wreetu, a social enterprise working in female personal hygiene in Bangladesh. But her enterprise is not just any other profit-making business; it is deeply rooted in her personal story of suffering.

When she was in class 8, she had her first period. Like many other girls, it was an embarrassing experience. Her sister gave her a sanitary napkin but did not

explain to her how to use it. Sharmin had to manage everything by herself. It was a difficult experience. Whenever she went to her village in Kishoreganj, she saw that the situation of the girls there had not changed. Even in cities, among her friends, on social media, she observed that many people considered menstruation a taboo. She was motivated by an acute need to speak up and eliminate the stigma around something she believes is a matter of 'feminine pride'.



After her post-graduation from Brac University, Sharmin started Wreetu, her dream project, with an aim to create a community of health-conscious women and girls in Bangladesh, and raise awareness about menstruation, reproduction and puberty. Wreetu began its journey in 2016 after Sharmin pitched her idea to SPARK Bangladesh. With a small grant from the organization and some of her own savings, Sharmin took the big step.

Today, they are a nine-member team including on-board gynecologists, medical trainers and volunteers. Through rigorous workshops on puberty, menstruation and reproductive health, the team reaches out to children and parents in different schools and institutions in the capital and other districts. Their next venture is Wreetu Reusable Sanitary Napkin, i.e. reusable napkins free from chemicals and bleach, a pair of which will last almost a year.

As the team expands its operation outside Dhaka, Sharmin aims to establish Wreetu in every corner of Bangladesh as a one-stop service point for young girls.

“While conducting workshops, we learned that most of the girls could not afford sanitary napkins, and instead, used cloths, rags and even weeds when they had their periods. This is dangerous for a girl's body. [Menstruation] is such a taboo that we hide ... important personal hygiene needs.”

Tasnim Afroze Tora

CEO of Safe Space
CFO of Decent Wastepreneurs

Tasnim Afroze, more popularly known as Tora, is the founder of SafeSpace, an innovative business providing children with sex education in underprivileged schools where sexual and reproductive health is a taboo. It also empowers primary and secondary school girls by involving them as volunteers who provide sexual reproductive health rights services and personal safety security knowledge to children and their communities. They raise awareness against child abuse, physical and sexual violence.

In a context where child marriage and GBV are a pandemic, and where everyday rape and defilement are on the front page of the daily newspapers, Tasnim involves children in her initiatives because she believes they should learn how to stay safe, or how to seek help when they find themselves in such situations. SafeSpace now creates contextualized multimedia content to deliver this knowledge to children, provide them with psychological and legal advice, and empower them as well as women by sharing knowledge and raising awareness.



"Don't you think that it's insane leaving our kids unprotected? Stopping them from going outside to play is not the solution, cannot be the solution. Why is it that our children can come to us and tell us that they got hurt falling from somewhere but cannot tell us when someone is touching their private parts, forcing them and invading their privacy? Half of the problems would be gone if we gave our kids a space where they could come and tell us about these taboo topics. If we don't acknowledge this, then these monsters will walk among us."

Shoko Ishikawa

Country Representative in Bangladesh,
UN Women

"As future business executives, you will go places, you will work at high positions with the authority and power to make decisions. At this moment, think how you can provide the talented female students with the same opportunities as those of their male counterparts to promote gender equity. Innovation does not have to be technology-driven. To innovate for gender equality, you must be ready to confront gender stereotypes and social expectations. It starts from being bold and courageous to do something different."



The PERFORMANCE

