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# Breaking gender barriers in the **World of Work**

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# **Breaking gender barriers in the **World of Work****




# Introduction

Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in terms of economic growth and human development but women's participation in the labour market is declining and their access to technical education and skilled jobs is still a challenge.

Although Bangladesh has become one of the world's most promising emerging economies, until women populate every rung of its work places, the developing country will always be developing but making little progress.

The Government of Bangladesh is well aware of what a difference having women in the labour force makes for reducing poverty and strengthening the well-being of the country's future. To be absorbed by changing employers' needs, girls and women must have the necessary skills. As of 2016, the rate for females not in employment, education or training was around 6.7 times greater than for males. And female enrolment in technical and vocational education and training was only 24 per cent.

The National Skills Development Policy, 2011, recognized the low participation rate of women in skills development and the need to correct the gender imbalance in the formal training system. It proposed promoting women's inclusion in non-traditional training courses and the recruitment of female administrators and instructors wherever possible. The National Strategy for Promoting Gender Equality in TVET, 2014, covers a mix of social, economic, institutional and systemic transformational measures. Objectives include increasing female enrolment in technical and vocational education and training by at least 40 per cent by 2020, transforming attitudes to eliminate negative perception towards non-traditional skills for women and establishing a gender-responsive environment.



The International Labour Organization has worked closely with the Government to help it achieve these gender-sensitive policy aims and to correct the many gender imbalances throughout the world of work. In 2014, the Canadian Government teamed up with the Government of Bangladesh and the ILO to fund the Bangladesh Skills for Employment and Productivity (B-SEP) Project and, through it, reach out to women of all ages – not just youth – and especially in remote and marginalized areas with skills training in non-traditional (male-dominated) occupations, followed by assistance with finding jobs that rely on those skills. The training includes carpentry, furniture making, automobile mechanics, electronics, electrical trades, tour guiding, baking and food processing. The point is to expand the participation of women in the world of work and help them explore non-traditional job possibilities and realize their dreams.

It is working. The 15 women featured in this book illustrate the boundaries that have broken down and the massive difference that a basic skills-training programme can make. These are young women disadvantaged at birth by location or circumstance who have benefited from an unusual door opening to them. Not only has the B-SEP Project pulled them productively into the world of work, it showed them facets of themselves that had been hidden for years and might have stayed that way their lifetime.

By changing these women's lives, the B-SEP Project is expanding not only the female horizon in the world of work but also helping the world of work to change the gender dimension and helping the country find its dynamic place in the world economy.

**Tuomo Poutiainen**

Country Director

ILO Country Office for Bangladesh



## Suruj Hemrom

Baker

*“Working with my father as a day labourer is all I thought I could do. I didn’t know I had the potential to build new skills. All I needed was just a push to achieve it. I’m very grateful to the Bangladesh and Canadian governments for supporting this training, which has changed my life. Now I can think big and achieve my dreams.”*

## Baking her household contribution

She was a baker born into a household with no oven. But Suruj dreamed of cake. And she yearned to make it more than eat it. Although in her Santal community, considered one of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable of the 45 indigenous communities in Bangladesh, luxuries such as cake were uncommon. The Santals are one of the oldest tribal populations in the country as well as across South Asia. They have their own religion, traditions and customs. In the far north of the Bangladesh where Suruj lives with her parents and one sibling, employment is scarce. Men like her father tend to earn income as day labourers (an older brother moved to Dhaka but is able to send home only BDT1,000 a month). Her father earns up to BDT300 a day but only works 20 days a month, for about BDT6,000.

In Bangladesh, there is a belief that men are more fit than women for many jobs. Women are not allowed to plough, chisel a hole or fish with a line and hook. Doing so would be considered a deviation from the socially accepted gender roles. Having dropped out of education at Grade 8 due to the family’s poverty and the lack of a high school nearby, Suruj spent her days with household chores, like so many young women her age. Yet, she longed to do something to make her life better and to contribute towards improving the family’s economic condition.

When she was 17 (a year ago), a neighbour in her Matrigaon village (in Thakurgaon District) told her about a unique course available to young women at the Thakurgaon polytechnic institute in the nearby district capital. For six months, they would teach her to bake cake and breads and other items she had never heard of, let alone tasted, in a course on food processing and quality control. The programme, available with funding from the Bangladesh and Canadian governments, offered a stipend for students to use for transport to and from the training centre and for snacks. Upon completion, she received a certificate of her skill, something likened to gold because it would enable her to apply for jobs within the country or abroad.

Suruj was immediately hired at the Omar Bakery, not far from her village, with a monthly salary of BDT10,000 for her baker position. She remains living with her family, who love eating her cakes, too. But with the extra income, they now eat more protein-rich meals.









## Nasima Akhter

Quality Controller

*"It really feels good to know that the training accepts aged people like me. I will put my best effort to be the supervisor in the production floor of this factory. My salary helps me to make my son's life better. He is a college student. I arranged private tuition for him so that he can obtain a good result."*

## Finding a fresh start while breaking an employment stereotype

Refrigerators are rolling in regimented fashion on a production belt until they halt in front of Nasima. She takes slightly more than 2 minutes to check the electrical connection and other quality indicators of each one before smacking it with a quality assurance sticker. As the watchful eye on product quality for International Appliance Company in her Mirpur enclave of Dhaka, that smacking sound is music to her ear.

For six years, Nasima lived abroad, working in a garment factory's in-house store in Mauritius. Her earnings were better than she thought possible at home, but she was missing her son, who would soon be a university student – able to enrol for higher studies because of income abroad. She had agreed to be gone 12 years, but the loneliness and exhausting work were overpowering. Still, in her six-year absence, her husband and son had learned to live without her. She felt unneeded around the house, plus she had no skills to contribute to the household's finances. She wondered if she had been wrong to come home.

A brochure she happened upon after months of finding no work lured her into the never-ever-did-it-occur-to-her world of electrical trade. Actually, the training choices were intentionally atypical and meant to attract women like her. The offer of a stipend for expenses (being paid to learn, she thought) won her over.

Even though it was not traditional women's work and women in appliance factories have been uncommon in Bangladesh, Nasima was open to the unique opportunity and to pioneering new ground. In the six-month course taught by the non-government organization Underprivileged Children Education Program (UCEP) Bangladesh (in one of their training centres), she learned about electrical coils, switches, earthing and circuits. Not only did she pick up the finer points of good grounding, for the first time ever, her eyes were opened to the importance of workplace safety and personal protection.

For whatever reason makes sense to her, Nasima considers herself, at 37 years old, as "aged". Perhaps because training programmes tend to target youth. The UCEP programme understood that older women are as equally in need of skills and opportunity as younger women.

The UCEP job placement officer arranged a job interview for Nasima once she had her certificate of skill in hand. She was promptly hired by International Appliance Company for the refrigerator factory's quality control unit. Her starting monthly salary of BDT7,200 in March 2017 jumped to her current BDT9,000, along with two festival bonuses and a BDT23,000 bonus after her one-year anniversary.

The income certainly boosted her confidence in her productivity and her value within the household. But more than anything, the training gave her access to a fresh start in middle age, something also uncommon for women in Bangladesh.







## Jannatul Ferdous

Cashier

*“That was the beginning – from then on, my life changed. I’m not dependent on anybody, and I can earn to support my family and the children’s education.”*

## Transforming disability into ability with new skills and visionary employer

After her husband died from illness in 2016, Jannatul needed to find a way to earn income to take care of her two children. She had never worked in her life. She moved in with her brother, who also was taking care of their mother, in Khilgaon, a densely populated area of Dhaka. But she needed to contribute to the household. Her options were limited due to her hearing impairment and having only a Grade 8 education – she had attended a school for special needs where she learned sign language (Jannatul was born unable to hear). She then taught her family how to sign.

At age 28 at that time, with no education, no work experience and no hearing, finding a way to earn income seemed daunting, if not impossible.

After a year of a struggling search to be productive and feeling more and more like a burden at home, Jannatul learned of a life-changing opportunity from one of her former school teachers. It was a vocational training programme available to people of all ages through the Parents Forum for Differently Abled.

She started the six-month food preparation course in 2017, learning to bake and provide restaurant service. Upon completion of the course, she was hired as a cashier in Swapno, a famous retail chain, which trained her to make bills and manage the payments. The store conveniently uses a digital monitor that lets the paying customers see what they owe.

Jannatul earns BDT7,000 per month, an amount she says has changed her life – it has given her a confidence in knowing that she can properly take care of her family. She can send her children to school and contribute to the household. She is planning to learn additional skills so that she can manage a superstore in the future. By developing skills and discovering her capacity to integrate within the hearing world, Jannatul feels, first of all, that she is no burden to her brother and is contributing equally in their shared home. And all of that, she signs, has created a happier home for her children.









## Israt Jahan Bristy

*Food and beverage host*

*"I'm very happy to work in such a great environment. I want to continue my job here even after my graduation. In the near future, I want to see myself as the manager for Water Garden Banquet."*

## Upward mobility comes within reach

When a Thai princess checked in at the Radisson Blue Water Garden Hotel in Dhaka, Israt was asked to attend to her devotedly with a few other staff members. She was given a hotel room to sleep in for the duration of the princess' visit and assigned to serve the princess breakfast and lunch. When Israt and her colleagues asked for a photo with the princess before she departed, she took her own selfie shot and thanked them for taking good care of her.

It was a cooking course that had led Israt to hotel work. She had been idle at home after graduating high school. Her brother had just finished a course at the non-government organization Underprivileged Children Education Program (UCEP) Bangladesh training centre. He thought it would be good for Israt to learn a skill there as well. She chose a short course in food preparation.

For her industry-based component of the six-month competency-based training in food processing, Israt was offered a kitchen position at the Radisson Blu doing food preparation. Once she had completed the cooking course, the hotel offered her a job preparing food. After three months and finding her to be articulate and capable of more demanding challenges, the hotel promoted Israt to guest services within its prestigious Water Garden Banquet restaurant, where she manages hundreds of national and international guests daily. Her salary continues at BDT10,000 a month.

Serving guests may not seem like a novel achievement. But in a society that frowns on young women working in hotels, Israt has helped redefine gender-limiting boundaries. Out of fear the landlord of her family's apartment would ask them to leave if he knew Israt was working in a hotel, she told no one in the neighbourhood the details of her employment. After her promotion, she gradually began talking about her lofty and respectable work and advocating for other women to join her in similar workplaces. The family has never been asked to leave their home.

Now 24, she says that even though it is still uncommon for women to take up hotel employment in Bangladesh, she intends to work her way into a management position. This requires she obtain a university degree – she is now studying economics in the evenings and weekends at a nearby college.











## Afsana Akhter

*Electrical installer*

*“Every day we prepare 3,000 lights ready to go to the showrooms for sale. ... I want to continue my career here and to be the floor manager. The environment is good for women, and they increase the salary on performance basis, which gives me enough reason to continue here.”*

## Lighting up homes and a woman's life with electrifying skills

Only 18 and with only a Grade 8 education, Afsana works for the largest company in the country, Bangladesh Lamps, helping to light up the world around her as well as her own. The company has found that women are more productive workers than men and has proactively recruited women into its factory ranks. In the past few years they have also found more women graduating with the required skills from training institutes.

Like many girls, Afsana dropped out of school as a young teenager because she didn't perform well in her studies. Through the non-government organization Underprivileged Children Education Program (UCEP) Bangladesh, which has been promoting atypical skills training among young women, Afsana enrolled in a six-month electrical trades course. At the UCEP training centre in Dhaka, she learned about earthing systems, electricity loads, circuits, hazards and the installation of LED lights.

Through the training centre's placement unit, she found of a job opening at Bangladesh Lamps, well known for its production of Philips lightbulbs. She was hired without hesitation to install LED chips into the ceramic tubes that are then packaged and distributed to showrooms.

Afsana wants to contribute to her household (she lives with her parents and brother) and gives her monthly salary of BDT7,000 (an increase from the starting pay of BDT6,000 a year ago when she was hired) to her mother. But beyond a few necessities, her mother is choosing to save that income for Afsana to use in the future (possibly for her wedding, when the right time comes for one).

Afsana wants to learn more about installation work and sees herself managing her section in five years. She says the factory is welcoming of women and treats them equally with the male workers. Because she is helping to produce a brand that is famous across the country, her neighbours find her status impressive and seek her out for advice.







**Farhana Akhter**  
*Refrigerator assembler*

*"It leaves me to wonder – how I could do this. I never realized that I have mastered such skills."*

## Woman with a vision: Skills making it possible

Twenty-year-old Farhana builds refrigerators for a living. It is, to her and everyone she knows, a fascinating and bewildering achievement. It seems to be a pioneering trade for women in Dhaka. To her employer, International Appliance, a domestic company that imports electrical parts for assembly in its factory, it is not surprising that anyone can do it if properly trained.

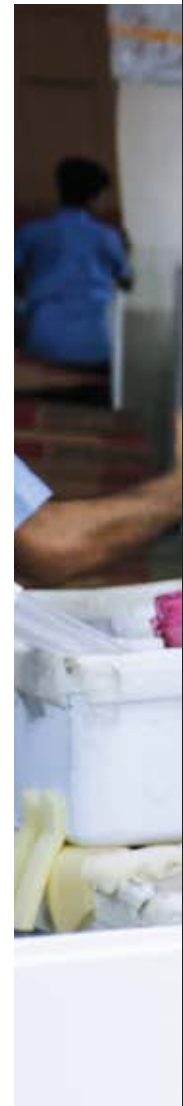
After her higher secondary school certificate exam, Farhana took the six-month course on refrigeration and air-conditioning assembly at the non-government organization Underprivileged Children Education Program (UCEP) Bangladesh training centre in Dhaka. The courses available were unusual choices, designed to broaden not only trainees' but also their families' and the general public's horizons on what is productive women's work. Living in an impoverished household and thus with few options at her fingertips, Farhana was open to new experiences. She more or less randomly made her skill choice.

Although she had her doubts that she would ever understand the nuances of appliance construction, especially one dependent on a cooling system, Farhana surprised herself in learning the mechanical structure of a refrigerator and how to make repairs.

The UCEP placement unit distributed her resume, which is how International Appliance came calling for a position in its refrigerator preassembling department. Further on-the-job training at the factory taught her how to assemble a refrigerator on her own. From her first earnings, she bought her family their first refrigerator.

Although refrigerators are common household items, for many families they represent a sizable investment and thus a symbol of some significance. Farhana delights in knowing that it is a woman who is building these items of household achievement.

An empowered Farhana does not stop there. In addition to her full-time work, she has enrolled into an accounting programme at a nearby college. Learning the mechanical nuances of refrigeration has opened her mind to other possible equations in terms of her mental capacity. And because of the factory's openness to women workers, there is scope to move across departments. Farhana is eyeing a position in the accounts section, once she has her degree in hand.









## Mohsina “Liza” Begum

Baker

*“People like us, with any kind of disability, usually don’t have any dream for their life or their future. Most of the time, we become a burden to our family. The Parents Forum for Differently Abled, with the support from B-SEP Project, showed us the path to be independent and contribute to our family.”*

## Finding unexpected freedom in a kitchen

By many standards, Liza’s family is well-off. But because there was no school capable of teaching her beyond Grade 5 due to her hearing impairment since birth 30 years ago, Liza has had few options to develop skills. Rather, what she has acquired is an unhealthy sense of being a burden to her parents, if only she has been unable to become self sufficiency.

Until a few years ago, her ambitions – if she dared allow them – circulated around independence and self-sufficiency.

At last and because of funding from donor organizations, the Parents Forum for Differently Abled began providing skills training in 2014 to differently abled children, youth and women like Liza, particularly persons with neurodevelopment disabilities. A neighbour told Liza about the programme.

Through sign language, Liza learned to bake cakes, breads and pastries over a three-month course. The Angel Chef restaurant, also run by the Parents Forum, hired her to bake for its branch in the popular Swapno store in Dhaka, not far from her home.

It is an unexpected freedom, she says in sign language. Not only is there lightness in being because she has a recognized value as an employee with a paycheck who creates sweet things that others enjoy, but travelling to and from work on her own also gives her accomplished purpose.

Having no skills and dependent on others, Liza explains, was like having a life that had a stopped, even though her heart went on beating. There was no reason to dream. The training and the job gave her a world in which she could dream. “So, my dream is to live my life and work,” she signs.









## Halima Akhter Shompa

*Hotel banquet associate*

*"The training and later the job opened up my world of work. I didn't know that opportunities lie everywhere. We just need to try – to see if [something] fits us or not. To me, this works. ... I want to do further training on hotel management as well. In fact, I already availed a short course on hotel management."*

## A five-star host demonstrates the dignity of hotel employment

At 15 floors, the Six Seasons hotel is smaller than some of the other five-star hotels in Dhaka. But with one of the city's largest and swankiest ballrooms that overlooks the Gulshan Lake through a glass wall, it is a popular choice for birthday celebrations, weddings and workshops. Menu options range from local dishes to Thai, Chinese, Japanese, Indian and continental.

On average, the hotel's banquet service hosts 300 people per special function. Twenty-two-year-old Halima's job goes beyond setting tables and arranging the décor – she is to help make each big event run efficiently and to the high standard the hotel expects.

Hotel work traditionally has not been encouraged for young women in Bangladesh. But government support to training programmes, such as the non-government organization Underprivileged Children Education Program (UCEP) Bangladesh, is challenging the old attitudes and the stigmas and ushering in dignified and lucrative options for young women. In fact, it was Halima's brother who had encouraged her to pursue the short food and beverage service course at the UCEP training centre once she graduated high school.

The competency-based training course requires students to obtain industry experience and connects each person with a workplace relevant to their training. Halima was offered a training spot with the Six Seasons in the banquet services. She also worked on call, rushing in whenever extra staff were needed to set up for and clean after big events. Two months into her training at the hotel the bosses realized she had strong skills and a likeable way with guests and offered her a full-time contract, with a starting salary of BDT14,000. After her recent one-year anniversary, she was shifted to permanent employee with a salary increase to BDT25,000.

Despite the amazing salary, Halima was confronted with disapproving reactions from relatives and neighbours because the job is in a hotel. Taking a calm approach to the sensitivities, Halima talked with those relatives and neighbours to explain what her work involved and how it was a dignified career path for women around the world. Plus, she told them, she is also working towards a bachelor's degree in business administration because of this opportunity to learn about hotel work and she thus needs the experience of working from the ground up to prepare her for working abroad in hotel management.







## Sheema Begum

Lacquer polisher

*“Earlier, I could not take decision for my family. Now I hold the power. My neighbours also come to me for advice.”*

## What a difference generating an income makes

After her sister died when Sheema was in Grade 7, her mother fell apart, and Sheema dropped out of school to take care of her. When she was 18 years old, she married and moved to the Manikganj area near Dhaka, known for its factories and possible employment opportunities. Because it was far away, she and her husband moved her parents with them.

Sheema learned from a friend about a training course at the Akhter Furniture Academy (which is a training centre for the Akhter Furniture Factory) that would deliver her a skill certification. It was three months of residential training, and she specialized in lacquer polishing, specifically polishing furniture. In rural areas women find work opportunities much more difficult to navigate with household responsibilities, typically little education, no skill and few actual jobs. It takes drive – and openness – to find any opportunity. For such women, furniture making is an attractive offer.

She was hired straight away by the Akhter Furniture Factory, where her husband also works, with a monthly salary of BDT6,000.

For the first time in her life, Sheema works and earns an income. Not only has the income elevated her to equal status with her husband in making family decisions, her neighbours seek advice from her on such ideas as health care and children’s education. Sheema used to dream of eating meat – once considered a luxury out of reach. Nowadays, she buys it for her family once a week. And she aspires to be the group leader for lacquer polishing department in Akhter Furniture Factory.











## Fahmida Abedin Disha

Hotel housekeeper

*"I have learned from my experience that we have to focus our vision to pursue our education and careers. Otherwise, we can be derailed from the track. I'm grateful that finally I could have managed competency-based training that helped me to find a job. In the future, I can also search for job abroad with the skills I acquired and a certificate."*

## Finding a future is housekeeping

Fahmida invested in standard skills training, learning basic computer, block batik and cosmetology. At the end of it, she felt more constrained and frustrated than when she had no skills. She realized that if she was to be productive with those skills (start her own business), she would need a huge investment she didn't have. Suddenly, she felt the skills were useless and she had wasted her time – and money.

It just so happened that Fahmida lived next to a training institute in the Mirpur area of Dhaka that had begun offering non-traditional courses aimed at women. The poster announcement caught her eye. In particular, she was drawn to a short course on housekeeping that would essentially pay her to learn and, most critically, help her put the new skills to good use.

It was a risky venture due largely to the social stigma attached to hotel employment for women. There is great reluctance to let a daughter or wife work in a hotel, partly because of the constant interaction with strangers. For housekeeping work, it also involves working in bedrooms and cleaning toilets – not necessarily respectable work.

The five-month training included a two-month component in an actual workplace. She was offered a training position from Amari International Dhaka, a 134-room of five-star standards. She learned the Amari style of making beds and cleaning rooms. In 2017, upon completion of the course, which provided her with a certificate of accomplishment, the hotel hired her to work full time with a starting salary of BDT20,000 a month. Suddenly, housekeeping seemed amazingly respectable.

Disha, now 25, contributes to her family's expenses but is investing in her further development through evening courses and saving for the future – having her own money she knows is a powerful currency. She aims to move up the rungs of hotel management; the first rung is team leader in the housekeeping department.







## Fatema Akhter

Entrepreneur

*"I am struggling since my childhood. But thanks to the B-SEP Project for encouraging me to grow mushrooms to become self-reliant."*

## A rosier life thanks to mushrooms

When she was 10 years old, Fatema's father abandoned his family to marry another woman. She was in Grade 5 and due to the family's poverty, she was forced to drop out of school. Her mother moved in with her brother's family in Jamshing village on the outskirts of Dhaka. But there was no room for Fatema, who has cerebral palsy. An aunt living nearby took her in.

When she was 15, Fatema's mother taught her how to operate a sewing machine and make dresses, for which she earned BDT1,000–BDT1,500 a month. Due to her physical condition, she finds it difficult to sit or stand for long periods of time (she also cannot walk well). Finishing a garment takes her a long while.

When Fatema heard about the training opportunity for growing mushrooms through the Access Bangladesh Foundation, she was intrigued. It required little investment and little physical care. Through the three-month course she learned the economic and nutritional benefits of mushroom production and how to run a business. After the training, she was provided spawns and BDT15,000 to build a mushroom house. Access Bangladesh operates a cooperative that grows and distributes the spawns and then collects the harvest and sells to markets in Dhaka.

Now 20, Fatema augments her sewing income with the earnings from her mushroom cultivation, achieving an average monthly income of BDT7,000.

Although she remains dependent on family members, having skills and her own income lets her feel for the first time like an equal member of the household. While life has taught her about the depths of resilience, running her own business has given her strength to stand on her own, even when her feet find it difficult to move.









## Krys Sa

Tour guide

*"I'm very confident now regarding giving guide to the tourists anywhere because I know how to greet and treat them and how to give them the services. Now, I know the tourists' interests and their needs."*

## Over hill and tract, a young tour guide changes her life route

At 18, Krys was a passionate storyteller who knew little about the wonders of her country, even her own beautiful Bandarban District in the heart of Chittagong Division in south-eastern Bangladesh. It is one of the country's three hill districts and a popular trekking area. Yet, Krys studied garment production in her high school, preparing for the one job she thought was available to young women, even though the factories were largely located in faraway Dhaka. Young women across the country know of the country's large ready-made garment sector and believe it is one of their few options if they want – or are allowed – to work, even though it means moving away from their family. What many don't know is that jobs are not always available, and it isn't always decent work conditions.

What so many young women also don't realize is that there are other options, if they look beyond the traditional parameters. Krys, for instance, lives with her family in Remacri, a remote corner in Bandarban that attracts adventure tourists. Her parents rent out lodgings to some 4,000 tourists a year. It is not huge income for them, especially because until recently, they never thought about offering other activities or how to better accommodate tourists.

When Krys saw a promotion for a tour guiding course for young women that was offered in the nearby district capital of Bandarban, at the technical school and college there, suddenly the beautiful outdoors made far more career sense than a factory job far from home. And she could help improve the family business by providing a needed and complementing service.

In the first level of the six-month course she learned the history of her area and the country, conversing in English and how to arrange itineraries. Still a student, she has proceeded to the second level of the course, which includes on-the-job training as a tour guide for nearby resorts. Through the training and learning what tourists to her area are looking for, she feels comfortable with strangers and fortunate in having endless opportunity to tell stories about her corner of Bangladesh.

Once she completes the course, she expects to work as a freelancing guide for the Bandarban area, although her primary commitment will be arranging activities for the tourists who stay in her family's lodgings.









## Parveen Akhter

Wood machine operator

*“The training opportunity gave me the access to skills and helped me to enter the world of work. Otherwise, as with many girls, I might have ended up doing the household chores only. Thanks to Bangladesh and Canadian governments to implement project like B-SEP, which creates the access and employability.”*

## Gender is not a barrier to operate a wood machine

Parveen looks at a piece of wood and sees a changing world – her world at least and maybe for many other young women. And she may be small and have little education, but she believes strength comes not from physical capacity but from indomitable will. So, in a factory where few women have previously entered and with machines that even fewer women know how to handle, she makes cabinets that people buy for their homes.

Twenty-year-old Parveen lives in Noyapara village in Manikganj district near Dhaka. She was in Grade 5 when her sister married and went to live with her husband’s family. With no other girl at home, she was forced to leave school to help her mother with the housework. Her father worked as an electrician.

Two years ago, about a year after the Akhter Furniture Academy (the training centre for the Akhter Furniture Factory and no relation to Parveen) began promoting non-traditional skills training for women, Parveen signed up for the machine operator course – the options were few and designed to attract women into non-typical trades. She learned how to operate wood-cutting machines and make cabinets and doors.

After completion of the course, the Akhter Furniture Factory hired Parveen with a starting monthly salary of BDT4,500 that quickly increased to BDT7,000. It was her first-ever paid work. If her family had any hesitation about the type of work their daughter would be doing, her wages quickly turned the doubts to dust – sawdust. And Parveen enjoys the liberation from the daily household chores to make lovely items for other people’s homes.











## Mosammet Shanti Begum

*Motorcycle mechanic*

*"I have to earn for my family. I didn't have any skills. With the help from neighbours and project support, I acquired the skill and am earning BDT5,000 a month. I'm hoping to have my own motorcycle workshop someday. I want to be an entrepreneur in the future."*

## A woman's place is wherever she wants it to be

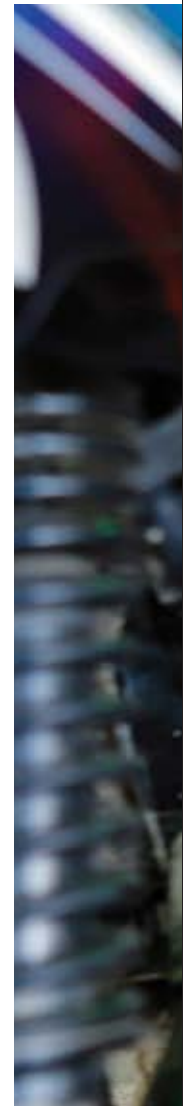
Mosammet never went to school. She can only read the Qur'an. When she was 17 she was married in an arranged relationship, like most of the village girls in northern Mymensingh Division. Now she is 30. Her husband abandoned her and their two children years ago.

At that time, she was forced to move back in with her parents. With no education and living in a village, her income-earning options were limited – a common story across the country. And so, she did what many women do and began a tailoring business. She had to sew day and night just to maintain a subsistence income. Over time, more women set up tailoring businesses, and it wasn't long before Mosammet's meagre income was dwindling due to the heavy competition, from BDT3,000 or BDT4,000 a month to BDT1,000.

A relative who owned a motorcycle servicing centre mentioned what seemed like an unusual idea at the time: Mosammet should become a motorcycle mechanic. Her relative knew of a local non-government organization offering women apprenticeship training programmes with stipends for traveling expenses.

Mosammet had never driven a motorcycle, let alone knew anything about motors. But, she felt she had no better option. She needed more income. She took to it instantly, surprising herself if not the whole village.

Now Mosammet works in her relative's servicing centre in Madarganj bazar in Jamalpur District. It is rare in the Bangladeshi context that a woman works in a marketplace where all types of men do business. But the skill revved up her outlook on life: She doesn't mind the grease. She is helping people. Customers are happy with her work. She is proud of what she can fix and what she can earn. And she intends to set up her own motorcycle repair workshop one day. But she still doesn't drive a motorcycle – she remains travelling by public transport.









**Mosammet Kamrunnahar Akhter**  
*Upholsterer*

*"I wish other girls can have this opportunity and change their lives from nothing and become confident as I have through the break I got from B-SEP and Akhter Furniture Academy."*

## Making a chair and taking a stand on what is women's work

Mosammet came to Dhaka from Gaibandha with her husband, two children and mother-in-law. They could only afford to rent one room for all of them. It didn't take Mosammet long to realize the difficulties of feeding a family on her husband's garment factory income. When she discovered a notice of a training course for women with little education, she leapt at the opportunity – even though the courses offered at the Akhter Furniture Academy (the training centre of the Akhter Furniture Factory) were not typically appealing to women.

The job placement promised along with the training had caught her interest. A stipend for the duration of the course and the residential component for three months, in which all expenses would be covered, were compelling motivators not only for Mosammet but for her family's approval as well. She chose upholstery.

She learned how to cut the foam to cover a chair or sofa frame and cut, tuck and pleat fabric over it. That may not be such unusual work for women, but any possible job would likely be in a factory populated mostly by men. It would take a few courageous women to pioneer these workplaces before the numbers of female workers would become a comfortable norm.

That was two years ago. Mosammet was promptly hired by the Akhter Furniture Factory, with a starting salary of BDT5,000 a month. She has doubled her income since then, now earning BDT10,500. The family has moved into a two-bedroom house.

She can buy things she wants to have for her children, but most importantly, she can send them to school. Mosammet is proud of how hard she has worked to overcome the adversity of deep poverty and believes that, through her training to better herself and by making a pathway for other women to follow, she has cut a good example for her children. And other women are indeed beginning to follow, not excessive numbers but they are slowly joining her.







## Breaking gender barriers in the world of work

The National Skills Development Policy of 2011 recognized the low participation rate of women in skills development and the need to correct the gender imbalance in the formal training system. It proposed promoting women's inclusion in non-traditional training courses and the recruitment of female administrators and instructors wherever possible.

In 2014, the Canadian Government teamed up with the Government of Bangladesh and the ILO to fund the Bangladesh Skills for Employment and Productivity (B-SEP) Project and, through it, reach out to women of all ages – not just youth – and especially in remote and marginalized areas with skills training in non-traditional (male-dominated) occupations, followed by assistance with finding jobs that rely on those skills. The training includes carpentry, furniture making, automobile mechanics, electronics, electrical trades, tour guiding, baking and food processing.

The 15 women featured in this book illustrate the boundaries that have broken down and the massive difference that a basic skills-training programme can make.

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