



Special Issue on



Years of CARE in Bangladesh

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**CARE, Always There**



# CARE, Always There



As CARE celebrates 75 years of impactful work in Bangladesh, it is excited to continue contributing to the future of this rich and remarkable nation.



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To me, this special edition magazine is like the Webb Space Telescope, capturing the distant light from CARE Bangladesh's incredible 75-year journey. It's a glimpse into the past, taking readers on a time-travel adventure through the hundreds of milestones that shaped this nation's development and the vital role the sector played. Though much of the history – due to limited technology and archiving – may remain hidden, this magazine strives to illuminate the invaluable contributions of the countless people who've worked with CARE.

It's also a call to action for the Millennials, Gen Z, and the upcoming Alpha generation to believe in the power of change and that Bangladesh's future is one of endless possibility.

This edition pays tribute to the pioneering women who shattered gender norms, breaking barriers and setting new trends. From grassroots leaders to national icons, these women have led the charge for equality and progress. As we celebrate CARE's legacy, we honour their courage, resilience, and vision – shaping not just today but the future we will build together. Their stories are the guiding light for the changemakers of tomorrow.

**Tony Michael**, Editor

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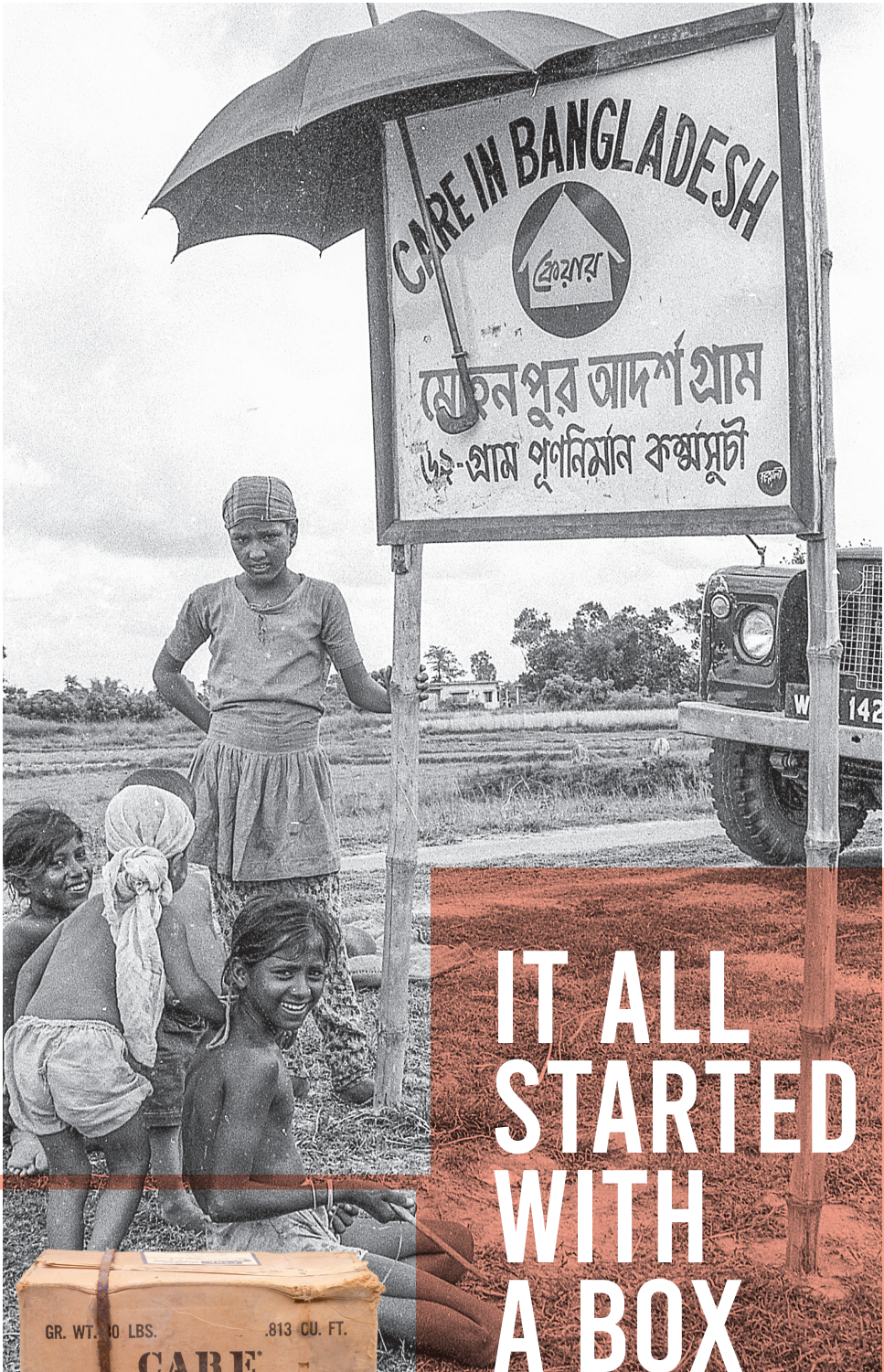
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IT ALL  
STARTED  
WITH  
A BOX





*Since its inception in 1946, CARE has grown from a simple relief effort into a powerful network, dedicated to improving the lives of millions in Bangladesh through innovative programs focused on women, health, and sustainable development*

**W**ith a humble notion to aid the people affected by war, a big brown box containing food staples travelled from America to Europe in 1946. Soon after, the box made its way to Asia, Latin America and Africa. Everywhere there was war and conflict, the big brown box with four letters – C A R E – imprinted on it made its way.

In just a few years, the box evolved to support emergency medical services and provide both short- and long-term solutions for conflict-affected countries, aiding their recovery and rehabilitation. Soon, CARE became synonymous with hope, transformation, inclusion, and social justice for hundreds of thousands of people.

What began as a simple relief operation for war-torn nations has grown into a vast global network of partners dedicated to tackling inequality. Within four years of its founding in 1945, CARE started its operations in the Indian subcontinent.

From 1950 until the liberation war, CARE primarily focused on disaster relief in Bangladesh, offering crucial food assistance to schoolchildren. For instance, CARE distributed powdered milk in schools, which significantly contributed to child health during a time of instability. By 1962, CARE was providing one meal a day to nearly 600,000 children, helping them stay in school.

This led to an increase in the nutritional status of children and their school attendance in then-East Pakistan.

The Liberation War of 1971 took a massive toll on the nation, affecting every sector. CARE once again found itself in a position to aid and support another war-torn nation.

Soon after the war, CARE took on major long-term projects to combat the new nation's crises of food shortage, agricultural limitations, housing challenges and many more.



■ **As Bangladesh emerged from the turmoil of liberation, CARE was there to help rebuild lives and restore hope**

Housing was a major challenge in the newly formed nation. In 1972, CARE constructed 7,500 housing units with financial assistance from the UK and US.

In 1974, CARE started Bangladesh's largest Integrated Food for Work (IFFW) project under an agreement with the Bangladesh Ministry of Relief. What later became popular as 'KABIHA' food for work/kaj er binimoy e khaddo began its journey to create short-term employment in agriculture through rural infrastructure development.

As the decade progressed, CARE continued to support major areas of the country with rural maintenance projects, women empowerment activities, health education and agri-

cultural advances. The active projects expanded in the area with more and more staff engaged from the national team.

Despite starting another decade with a catastrophic disaster event, in the 90s, CARE's size and scope continued to grow in new and diverse program areas with long-term programs.

It was a decade of agricultural advancement and health interventions that helped the country overcome the agricultural, nutritional and health barriers. Series of milestone projects such as LIFE, LIFT, NO PEST, INTERFISH 1, INTERFISH 2, GO INTERFISH, SHOBI etc. addressed the root causes that stunted food production, while projects on HIV prevention and national immunisation



drive uplifted the health indicators for the country.

As CARE continued to make advances for the agricultural sector of Bangladesh, there was another sector which needed strong attention – the health and nutrition sector. In the late 80s and early 90s, the infant mortality rate was high, and the low immunisation rate was one of the major causes of this. was severely underdeveloped.

The TICA (Training Immunizers in Community Approach) program, launched by CARE Bangladesh from 1986 to 1995, was designed to tackle the country's low immunisation coverage, which stood at less than 2% for children under five despite the availability of vaccines and infrastructure. CARE worked in this area with an ambitious objective to raise immunisation coverage from 2% to 80%+, creating herd immunity to prevent vaccine-preventable diseases, while making the system stronger to continue such initiatives.

This laid the foundation for CARE's role in strengthening public health systems, positioning CARE as a leader in the health sector in Bangladesh.

Just as the 90s started out with a devastating disaster, the end of the

In the wake of the new millennia, CARE realised that to make positive changes last longer in the communities, a shift was needed from a simple program delivery approach to a rights-based approach. With the rights-based approach, CARE began working with the communities, for the communities. This significantly changed the longevity of programs and projects as the communities began taking more ownership of services being offered to them by CARE and its partners.

With a strong focus on poverty eradication, strengthening market linkages and creating earning opportunities for the rural population, CARE Bangladesh was able to align with Government objectives for attaining the Millennium Development Goals.

Living Blue is the name of a dream that took shape in the heart of northern Bangladesh in 2005, woven together by skilled artisans driven by dignity and craftsmanship. What began as a by CARE Bangladesh with a focus to empower local women and men blossomed as a cottage business for reviving the 'Bengal Indigo'.

As the artisans began to master the skills of extracting indigo dye and using it in traditional and modern dyeing techniques, the industry grew famous in the international market. Today, Living Blue boasts 3,000 indigo farmers and over 200 artisans, producing the finest True Bengal natural indigo. Their commitment to quality craftsmanship continues to transform lives, one indigo-dyed fabric at a time.

Marking its beginning in the early 2000s, CARE Bangladesh has been implementing the HIV and AIDS Program for different vulnerable groups for 29 years now. With a goal to prevent the spread of HIV and provide care to affected communities, CARE continues to work on enhancing information systems, coordination and management capacity to ensure



decade was also marked by a historical flood that lasted for 65, claimed 1,100 lives, 30 million people became homeless and caused massive damage to infrastructure.

To help the affected communities overcome this ordeal, CARE was there.



Through the TICA program, CARE Bangladesh raised immunisation coverage from less than 2% to over 80%, creating herd immunity

an effective, human rights-based and sustainable national response.

Following a recurring trend of disasters since working in Bangladesh, CARE first came up with the idea of disaster preparedness and mitigation. In 2001, CARE Bangladesh initiated the Reducing Vulnerability to Climate Change (RVCC) Project

that aimed to help communities in southwestern Bangladesh adapt to the impacts of climate change.

Making women of the affected communities' key stakeholders for this project, was the beginning of CARE's journey in disaster mitigation. Long before climate change impacts were an issue globally, CARE Bangladesh implemented projects that would reduce the vulnerabilities of communities frequently facing natural calamities.

In 2015, Bangladesh was the most vulnerable country to climate change, in particular, its agriculture

was highly impacted. Field research helped better understand and effectively address the relationship between changing weather patterns, food security, social inequalities, and human mobility.

Building on the results, 'Where the Rain Falls' — a multi-nation project was launched. The project uses community-based adaptation to immediately reduce vulnerability associated with agro-climatic risks.

In a continued effort to shift the programmatic approach, CARE started addressing social issues at the root causes. This led to the emergence of the Tipping Point program that addressed child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) with community engagement, girl-centric activism, policy influence, intergenerational dialogue and more.

The program empowered generations of young girls to protect their future and encouraged families to invest in their daughters.

In the late 90s, Bangladesh saw a boom in the ready-made garment sector. A massive human resource, mainly of women, coming from rural areas, living in less-than-ideal con-





ditions and working in hazardous work environments with minimum worker rights demanded an intervention from CARE.

CARE's work in the RMG sector primarily began with worker rights and leadership quality development, which continues to this day.

In 2007, Cyclone Sidr ravaged Bangladesh, causing immense destruction and over 3,000 deaths. CARE Bangladesh stepped in, providing food, water, medical aid, and livelihood support to the hardest-hit areas. Their efforts, backed by international donors, helped rebuild communities and restore hope in Bagerhat, Barguna, and Pirojpur.

With new goals set across the globe to obtain accountable and sustainable development, CARE Bangladesh evaluated its program areas. Placing more focus on climate resilience, disaster reduction, gender equality, economic development and health and education, CARE Bangladesh started the journey for the next generation to become a network of networks, working with partnerships on both implementa-

tion and strategic levels.

CARE was one of the first few IN-GOs who began responding to the largest refugee influx of the Rohingyas back in 2017. Hundreds and thousands of people arrive in dreadful conditions with their entire lives on their backs, surviving near-death encounters.

With initial aid with cooked food and temporary shelters, CARE continues to be the voice of the Rohingya refugees in the global platform for their rights and repatriations.

CARE planted the seeds of localisation by forming solidarity groups in both rural and urban settings and linking them horizontally. These solidarity groups, known as EKATA (Empowerment, Knowledge, and Transformative Action), represent a model developed and tested by CARE Bangladesh to promote the collective empowerment of women.

At the same time, to increase the number of solidarity groups and amplify their collective impact, CARE extended its support to help them emerge as Self-Help Groups- fostering a cycle of constant capaci-

**By focusing on women's empowerment and climate resilience, CARE aims to transform the lives of 15 million people by 2030**



**CARE Bangladesh empowers women and marginalised groups to shape their own futures, with initiatives like the Rural Sales Program boosting economic capacity**

ty-building while it also continued Community Led Development in parallel to facilitating a reflective participatory process within the community.

In the meantime, CARE gradually scaled its efforts, transitioning from localised networks to a national framework while maintaining its commitment to local empowerment by building foundations, networks, and alliances such as Anukul Foundation, APOSH, NIRAPAD, Manusher Jonno Foundation, NAWG, CHAR Alliance, Right to Food, HAOR Alliance, and the Girls' Led Movement, among others.

Some of these evolved into national entities now operating across Bangladesh. These foundations and networks have become platforms for sharing best practices, amplifying local voices, and advocating for policy changes that reflect the needs of communities.

In the journey of localisation, CARE Bangladesh maintained long-standing partnerships with local organisations — particularly with partners that value, represent, or are led by women, girls, and marginalised groups — and it supports our local partners to lead on the design and implementation of programming.

Apart from hundreds of local NGOs, ESDO, MJSK, GBK, POPY and SKS also gradually scaled their programming and adopted CARE's best practices for maintaining accountability, diversity and amplifying local voices.

Furthermore, CARE Bangladesh also adopted and scaled operational models and programmatic approaches that ensure local people and communities — especially women, girls, and other marginalised groups — shape their own social,



economic, and development futures.

CARE's Private Sector Engagement (PSE) initiative aims to boost the economic capacity of those at the base of the pyramid (BoP). One of its key projects, the Rural Sales Program (RSP), was designed to empower marginalised rural women by employing them as sales representatives. These women travelled door-to-door, selling essential items like toiletries, footwear, and food from various private sector partners, including Unilever, Bata, and Danone.

As interest from the private sector in the RSP grew, and the project garnered international attention, it evolved into a social enterprise known as JITA. JITA Bangladesh has created a rural distribution network that empowers women micro-entrepreneurs to deliver essential consumer products to communities often left out of traditional distribution channels.

CARE Bangladesh has also partnered with other private sector organisations — such as Pran, LAL Teer, and Brac Dairy—on projects aimed at ensuring sustainability and fostering long-term economic growth through market-driven solutions.



As CARE celebrates 75 years of impactful work in Bangladesh, it is excited to continue contributing to the future of this rich and remarkable nation. With a primary focus on empowering women and girls and promoting gender equality, CARE also plans to strengthen resilience against climate change.

By leveraging market-driven strategies, supporting locally-led development, and expanding the use of digital technologies, CARE Bangladesh aims to transform the lives of 15 million people — primarily women and girls — by 2030, aligning its vision with both national and global development goals.

With a focus on empowering women and girls, CARE Bangladesh aims to transform the lives of 15 million people by 2030 through market-driven strategies and digital technologies





RANI HAMID

## Bangladesh's chess queen



**I used to watch my father play, and although children weren't allowed to touch the chessboard back then, my younger brother and I would sneak in and play when the elders were away.**

### TBS REPORT

**R**ani Hamid's life has been shaped by movement, passion and an undying love for chess.

Born in Sylhet, her father's job took the family to various cities in Bangladesh, allowing her to experience life in places like Cumilla, Chattogram, and Rajshahi. These childhood experiences, along with a deep love for sports, built the foundation for what would become one of the most inspiring chess careers in the country.

Rani excelled both in academics and sports as a child, earning the affection of her teachers. "I was always hyperactive as a child," she recalls with a laugh. But among all her hobbies, chess stood out — a passion that blossomed quietly.

"I used to watch my father play, and although children weren't allowed to touch the chessboard back

then, my younger brother and I would sneak in games when the elders were away."

Although Rani's early exposure to chess came in childhood, she did not pursue it competitively until much later in life. After marrying Mohammad Abdul Hamid, a military officer, her love for chess found new encouragement. "My husband knew I loved chess. One day, he told me about a women's chess tournament and asked if I wanted to participate," she recounts.

At that time, Rani was living in Dhaka. One of her neighbours, Dr Akmal Hossain, was a national chess champion, and their frequent games became a turning point in her pursuit. "Playing with him helped me realise where I stood," Rani says. When she finally entered her first tournament in 1976, she surprised everyone — including herself — by winning.

Her chess journey took off from there, and she went on to become the national women's champion nine consecutive times. During that period, Rani also authored a chess guide, inspired and supported by her husband. "He was very sports-minded and encouraged me to write a book to help others learn the game easily," she shares, adding that his support was invaluable.

"I consider myself lucky," she reflects. "Even 50 years ago, my family stood by me."

She notes that the younger generation is in an even better position today, thanks to the internet and global connectivity. "Today's players have access to international tournaments, games, and strategies. Technology has opened doors that weren't available in my time."



NISHAT MAJUMDER

## Pinnacle of success



**While climbing Everest, Nishat encountered a devastating avalanche that buried under the snow. But once rescued, she continued without a second thought.**

### TBS REPORT

**N**ishat Majumder's days start early.

After waking up at dawn, she heads to Ramna Park to run approximately 10 kilometres, practise free-hand exercises, and then engage in some yoga and meditation.

Born on 5 January 1981, in Bhatarah village of Ramganj, Lakshimpur, Nishat has been allured by adventure since a very young age. The daughter of a freedom fighter and the second among four siblings, she had a passion for reading, particularly enjoying adventure-related books.

However, she had limited opportunities to explore the outdoors, which led her to spend her days immersed in literature.

She began to explore adventure during her college days, initially taking up mountaineering as a hobby. However, as Nishat gained experience climbing smaller peaks, her dreams began to take shape.

In 2003, to commemorate the 50th

anniversary of the ascent of Mount Everest, she successfully climbed Bangladesh's highest peak, "Kowkradong," as part of an initiative by the Bangladesh Astronomical Association.

Now, she is a member of the Bangla Mountaineering and Trekking Club. Her club's first expedition aimed at Everest was focused on sending male climbers, but for the subsequent attempt, they decided to include women.

In May 2007, as part of a study by the club, she travelled to the Himalayas in Darjeeling. Recognizing her experience, they chose to send Nishat on that mission. This marked the beginning of her journey toward Everest.

After receiving training from a mountaineering institute, she conquered the "Mera" mountain peak in the Himalayas.

In 2008, she scaled the "Singachuli" peak and, in September of that year, participated in a joint expedition to Gangotri-1 on the Gangotri Glacier in northern Kashmir, India. In 2009, she was part of a joint India-Bangladesh expedition to Makalu. The following year, she succeeded in reaching the Nepal-Bangladesh Friendship Mountain peak in the Himalayas.

And finally on 19 May 2012, Nishat achieved her dream of climbing Everest.

But during that expedition, despite all the meticulous planning, she went face to face with nature. While climbing Everest, Nishat encountered a devastating avalanche. She was buried under the snow, but her team managed to rescue her.

Under such circumstances, most climbers would have lost the courage to continue, but Nishat persevered. Upon reaching the summit, she experienced temporary snow blindness, which prevented her from fully enjoying the breathtaking scenery of the peak.

Nishat's parents fully supported her during her mountain trekking endeavours. Her husband, a software engineer, has also always been a strong supporter of her pursuits.



SALMA KHATUN

## Shaping women's cricket



**Winning the Asia Cup in 2018 was a turning point; it changed how women's cricket was perceived back home.**

### TBS REPORT

**S**alma Khatun grew up playing cricket.

"My childhood was simple. I loved sports and played every game I could. Cricket became special, thanks to my cousins and uncle, who introduced me to it. I started playing for fun but eventually realised I wanted to take it seriously and pursue it as a career," the 34-year-old recalls.

"I played cricket with the neighbourhood boys in Khulna. Being the only girl didn't bother me — I believed if boys could play, I could too. My teammates would always call me for matches because I performed well," she adds.

But her talent would not be discovered until much later.

"In 2007, I was visiting my grandparents in Gopalganj when I heard about national team trials. A boy I used to play with told my family, and

I rushed to the selection without proper attire. I wrapped my dupatta around my waist and bowled spin. The coaches were impressed, and Sheikh Salahuddin bought me a jersey and shoes the next day," Salma recounts.

This paved the way for her selection to the Bangladesh women's cricket team ahead of their debut at the 2007 Asian Cricket Council Women's Tournament.

In 2010, Bangladesh earned a historic silver medal at the Asian Games in Guangzhou, China, by defeating the Chinese national team. Two years later, Salma made her T20I debut against Ireland on 28 August 2012.

Then in June 2018, Salma was part of the squad that clinched Bangladesh's first-ever Women's Asia Cup title.

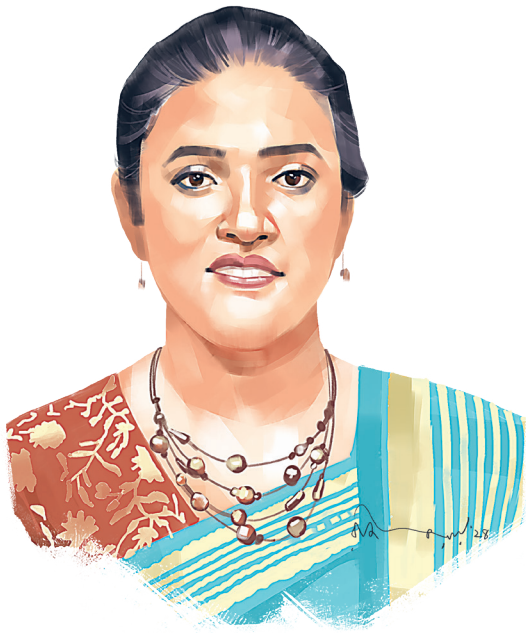
"Winning the Asia Cup in 2018 changed how women's cricket was viewed back home," she says.

Soon after, she was appointed captain for the ICC Women's World Twenty20 Qualifier. She led the team again at the 2018 ICC Women's World Twenty20 in the West Indies, where she emerged as Bangladesh's joint-highest wicket-taker, with six dismissals in four matches.

"My parents have always been my biggest supporters. Whatever I've achieved, I owe to them. If not cricket, I would have pursued another sport — I've always been passionate about athletics," Salma says.

Her captaincy continued in key tournaments. In 2019, she led Bangladesh to gold at the South Asian Games. She also captained the team at the ICC Women's World Twenty20 Qualifier and later in the 2020 ICC Women's T20 World Cup in Australia.

In 2021, Salma was included in Bangladesh's squad for the Women's Cricket World Cup Qualifier in Zimbabwe. She represented her country again in 2022 at the Commonwealth Games Cricket Qualifier in Malaysia and the Women's Cricket World Cup in New Zealand.



SHARMIN AKTER RATNA

## Shooting for the stars



**Winning medals isn't just about talent — it requires a system that nurtures athletes throughout their journey.**

### TBS REPORT

**W**ith a career marked by gold medals and the honour of representing her country at the 2012 Olympics, Sharmin Akter Ratna has cemented her legacy.

In 2010, Ratna gained widespread attention with two gold medals at the South Asian (SA) Games, followed by two more golds and a silver in Delhi that same year. Her career highlight came in 2012 when she represented Bangladesh at the London Olympics.

Alongside international achievements, Ratna holds numerous national records and gold medals, making her a dominant figure in domestic shooting competitions.

Ratna's love for shooting began unexpectedly when she joined the Savar Army Shooting Club in the ninth grade. Although her father, an army officer, had a shotgun, she was never interest-

ed in firearms until she learned that shooting could be a sport.

"Once I realised you could compete with rifles, I started practising twice a week, and that's how my journey began," Ratna recalls.

Like many athletes in Bangladesh, Ratna had to navigate family expectations. While her mother initially worried that sports would interfere with her education, her father supported her wholeheartedly, and over time, her mother came around.

The 2012 London Olympics was a proud moment for her, despite not winning a medal. "Every athlete dreams of the Olympics — it was the best experience of my life," she says.

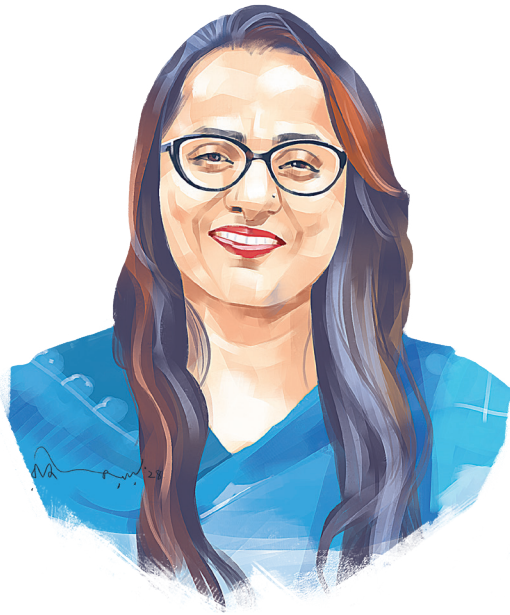
Now a coach, Ratna is focused on mentoring young athletes, but she points out the need for improved sports infrastructure. "We lack the support necessary for Olympic-level preparation," she admits, stressing the importance of better sports science, tailored nutrition, and mental health care.

She believes long-term planning is crucial for international success. "Winning medals isn't just about talent — it requires a system that nurtures athletes throughout their journey," Ratna emphasises.

Beyond athletic success, Ratna sees sports as a tool for social improvement. "Making sports a part of everyday life can improve public health and reduce lifestyle-related diseases," she argues.

Ratna encourages young athletes to pursue their dreams despite obstacles. "If you're passionate, go after it wholeheartedly. The road may not be easy, but determination will take you further than you imagine," she advises.

Her story is more than just one of personal triumph — it is a beacon of hope for athletes facing societal barriers. With Ratna's mentorship, the next generation may find it easier to achieve their dreams and leave their own mark on Bangladesh's sporting landscape.



SALMA KHATUN

## From dreams to rail engines



**My brother encouraged me, saying it was an unusual career — exactly what I had always wanted.**

### TBS REPORT

**W**hen everyone said it was impossible, there was still 1% who believed Salma Khatun could do it.

Now Bangladesh's first female train driver, Salma has always been drawn toward challenges, especially those considered off-limits to women. "Whatever people avoided, I was curious to do," she says. "Even now, if the train breaks down, I try to fix it first. I rarely give up."

Salma grew up in the village of Arjuna in Bhuapur, Tangail. As the fourth of five siblings, she had a deep passion for education. However, financial struggles forced her to pause her studies.

"When things became tough, my elder brother went to live with our grandmother and another brother became a live-in student at some-

one else's house," she shares. "Only my sister, my younger brother and I stayed with my parents."

Despite the hardships, Salma continued her studies, living in a hostel at Kumudini Government College, Tangail. But the financial situation worsened. "At one point, my father couldn't decide whether to feed us or educate us," she recalls. "He had to choose which of us would continue studying."

But Salma's childhood was filled with ambition and energy. "I was always the first in everything," she says with a smile. From helping her father with farming to assisting her mother with household chores, Salma never shied away from hard work.

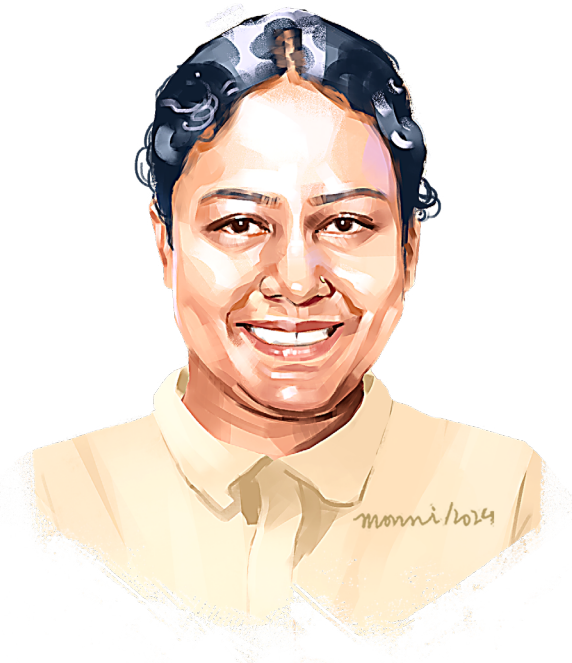
While studying at Jagannath University, Bangladesh Railway posted a circular for assistant train drivers. "My brother encouraged me, saying it was an unusual career — exactly what I had always wanted." Salma applied along with her siblings, and out of the 135 applicants from Tangail, she was the only woman.

"During the interview, people questioned if I understood what I had signed up for," she recalls. "Some said it was a man's job. But I told them I knew exactly what I was doing." After being selected, she joined a training program in Dhaka, where she was the only woman among 65 trainees.

Training came with its own set of challenges. "The boys hid my sandals, threw paper balls at me, and teased me constantly," Salma recounts. "There were no restrooms for me during fieldwork, so I had to rely on the kindness of staff to stay at their homes."

Despite the difficulties, Salma persevered, eventually becoming an assistant driver. She was promoted in 2013 and finally became a full-fledged train driver in 2017.

"When I first started, there were no female drivers. Now, 35% of railway employees are women," she says. "Many young women tell me I inspire them. These moments make all the hardships worth it."



## RABEYA SULTANA RABBI

# From hardship to hope



**With the skills I've gained, I'll always find work. I refuse to let poverty define us.**

### TBS REPORT

**T**oday, 33-year-old Rabeya Sultana Rabbi works as a technician at CARE Bangladesh, living in Dhaka with her husband and three-year-old son.

But her childhood was filled with challenges.

Growing up in a big family with three brothers and three sisters, her father sold vegetables and fruits to make ends meet. "We faced extreme poverty," she recalls. "There were days we went hungry, and even having one full meal felt like a luxury."

Determined to help her family, Rabeya began working while still in school, creating handicrafts and doing embroidery to buy her school supplies.

"I knew I had to contribute," she explains. But despite her efforts, the

financial burden became too great, and she was unable to afford the fees to sit for her SSC exam.

In 2005, Rabeya's life took a new direction when a representative from CARE Bangladesh visited her family. "She introduced me to a project offering training in sewing, driving, and other skills for women," Rabeya recalls.

Intrigued by the idea of learning to drive, Rabeya signed up.

But after completing three months of driving lessons, Rabeya returned home without a job. Shortly after, she got married. "My in-laws didn't allow me to continue training after I got married," she says.

However, determined, Rabeya negotiated with her in-laws to pursue her dream.

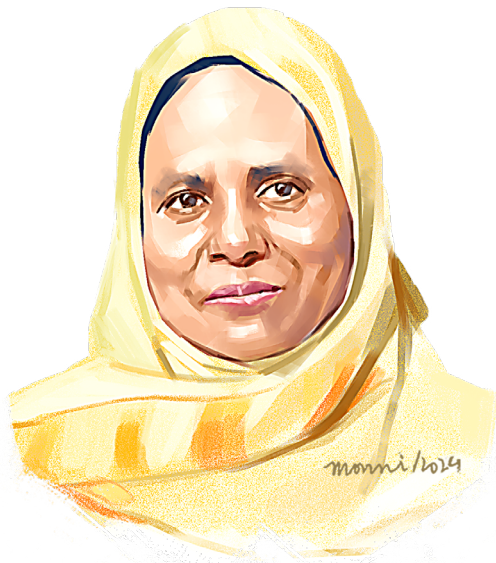
In April 2005, she returned to Dhaka and re-enrolled with CARE Bangladesh, this time opting for training as a technician. Nine months of training later, in 2006, Rabeya landed her first job.

Her first paycheck, Tk14,000 including allowances, brought her immense joy. "I sent the money home to my parents," she recalls with tears in her eyes. "I told them, 'Your suffering ends today. I'll make sure you never go hungry again.'" She also bought enough rice to last the entire year, determined that her mother would never have to worry about their next meal.

Managing her responsibilities as a technician, wife, and mother is no small task though. Rabeya starts her day early, preparing meals for her family before heading to work.

"When I leave the office at 5pm, I call my husband to ask what to take out of the fridge so I can start cooking as soon as I get home." Despite her busy schedule, she makes time for her son. "He always has funny stories or little complaints about his father," she laughs.

Despite challenges, Rabeya remains hopeful. "I believe that with the skills I've gained, I'll always find work. I refuse to let poverty define us."



## FERDOUSI AKHTER

# Empowering women on the roads



Some male drivers were reluctant to accept a woman overtaking them on the highway, but over time, Ferdousi learned to rise above the criticism.

### TBS REPORT

As one of Bangladesh's first female drivers, Ferdousi Akhter has broken barriers and changed perceptions about women's capabilities in traditionally male-dominated professions.

Born on 28 August 1977 in Dhaka's Dhamrai area, Ferdousi's early life was shaped by hardship. After the loss of both parents, she grew up under the care of her brother. Her future seemed predestined — early marriage.

And indeed, when Ferdousi reached the 9th grade, she was pressured into marriage, but resisted. She sought refuge with her sister for six months.

Then, a piece of life-changing advice came her way — someone suggested she apply for a job at Gonoshasthaya Kendra (GK). Determined to chart a different course, she followed this advice and, at just 14, began working in a metal work-

shop. It was her first step towards independence.

Ferdousi's early career spanned various roles, from assembling seats at Mirpur Indoor Stadium to making hospital beds at GK in Dhanmondi. After a brief stint working at a children's food factory in Cox's Bazar, she returned to Dhaka and took up a job at a bakery in Savar. But a new opportunity was on the horizon that would change her life: learning to drive.

Encouraged by Zafrullah Chowdhury himself, she returned to Cox's Bazar in late 1996 to take driving lessons. By 1998, she earned her driving licence and became an ambulance driver at GK.

On 1 January 2004, Ferdousi joined CARE Bangladesh as the organisation's first female driver. At a time when female drivers were almost unheard of, she became a role model for others, inspiring many to break free from traditional roles.

The following year, she conducted training sessions for women drivers, some of whom went on to work for prestigious organisations like the UNDP.

Ferdousi's decision to pursue her own path strained the relationship with her family. For three years, her brother refused to speak to her, but time eventually healed all wounds. Earning their respect became one of her personal victories.

Yet, there were challenges. Some male drivers were reluctant to accept a woman overtaking them on the highway, and others scrutinised her performance more closely than they would a man's. But over time, Ferdousi learned to rise above the criticism, understanding that not everyone would be supportive.

Her greatest accomplishment lies in the financial independence she achieved. Owning a house was one dream she realised, but more importantly, she earned a sense of purpose and belonging.

"Work gives you freedom," she says.



**With each empowered woman and every indigo thread, CARE is crafting a future where voices once silenced are now heard loud and clear.**

