



Vidiya Amrit Khan, Deputy Managing Director, Desh Group

DESH GROUP MOVES FORWARD WITH STRONG FOCUS ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Desh Garments Limited, the flagship company of Desh Group of Companies, is hailed as the 'first' 100 per cent export-oriented readymade garment factory in Bangladesh, which was founded by Late M. Noorul Quader in 1977. The group

has always aimed at transforming the lives of women in Bangladesh. The founding Chairman has always been of the opinion that the women in the society must have their own individual identity and strength to reflect the very important role that is

uniquely played by them as a mother. After Quader's demise in September 1998, the legacy was carried forward initially by Rokeya Quader as Chairman of the group along with her son, Omar Quader Khan as Managing Director. However, once **Vidiya Amrit Khan**, the only daughter of Late Quader returned from completing her Barrister-at-Law from the UK in 2007, she joined the company as **Deputy Managing Director** and has been at the helm of managing the group ever since. At the time of her joining, Bangladesh's RMG sector was mostly headed by men.

Team Apparel Online Bangladesh (AOB) recently met with **Vidiya** and had a freewheeling conversation about how Desh Group is empowering women and why sustainability is becoming a major focus in its business operations. Here are some excerpts.

Women empowerment is in the DNA of Desh Group

Started by my father M. Noorul Quader, Desh Group of Companies has been a pioneer of the 100 per cent export-oriented RMG industry in Bangladesh. My father played a very critical role in liberating the country and, being a patriot, he understood that our country had no industry! The nationalised industry in 1970s was primarily jute which wasn't working well. At the same time, he wanted to do something for Bangladesh that will benefit its people, particularly the women, in long run, given his very important role as a freedom fighter during the Liberation War in 1971. That was the time when South Korea was looking for a source to expand their production facilities due to President Nixon's Multi Fibre Agreement that put an embargo on imports from South Korea.

My father then formed Desh Garments Ltd. in 1977 and through a joint venture agreement with

Daewoo Corporation of South Korea, he facilitated the technical and marketing know-how training of 130 men and women in Daewoo's South Korea factory in Busan. This was the first time in our country when 18 women were sent overseas for any such training programme. These were some of the brave and progressive women of that time, who became the torchbearers for the millions of women we see working in the garment industry today in Bangladesh.

I would like to think that women empowerment is not just limited to Women's Day, rather it is in Dosh's DNA. Our Honourable Prime Minister is a woman, and for us women who are working in Bangladesh, in regular everyday jobs, we draw great inspiration from her as to how far a woman can dream and what all she may achieve if she puts her mind to it. Today, she is the Prime Minister of our country and is given the highest respect, regardless of her gender and thus, we may also achieve the same with hard work and perseverance. Sadly however, we are still a male-dominated society, so paving the way for women is something we take pride in. We are building an ecosystem where women are empowered economically, mentally and socially.

Dosh Group has always been self-financed – a result of the efforts made in last four decades

In 1979, Dosh Garments opened a unit in Chittagong city because of the close proximity to the port. My father was a visionary of sorts and decided that it would make good sense to build a factory in the port city so that one could save on time and commercial costs. He also knew that Bangladesh was a relatively small country and therefore over the years, good infrastructure planning



The existing RMG workers working in factories in Bangladesh are possibly amongst those that work in the best conditions of safety and sustainability in the world, right now. Multiple compliance standards, the ILOs' direct intervention in programmes that run in the factories have ensured that we do not have any sort of child or forced labour producing garments within Bangladesh. We are as transparent as one can possibly imagine in any given industrial setting. Workers are aware of their rights, salaries are paid on time through digitally devised methods of mobile banking in many cases, and they all have access to national or international helplines. The RMG sector has done wonders in the last 10 years to improve the number of green factories in Bangladesh, Corporate Social Responsibility, childcare centres, breastfeeding stations, subsidised commodities through Fair Price shops and more. And this of course, we do, not only for the well-being of the workers alone but also for their extended families too. Thus, it is not that we have not made our mistakes while growing our industry, but what is rather most important is what we have learnt from our mistakes to come back even stronger.

would mean that various types of roads and highways would be built over time linking the entire country as we become economically stronger. The factory, at its time of inception, was considered to be one of the most efficiently built industrial garment-producing facilities in the subcontinent, introducing the concept of line production as a new process of readymade garment production in Bangladesh and in the beginning of 1980, Dosh exported its first shipment of men's shirts to a company called MNR in Germany.

My father was the innovator of the Back-to-Back Letter of Credit banking system and the concept of the Duty-Free Bonded warehouse at the factory level, both instruments which became the nucleus of the financing system of the readymade garment industry in Bangladesh. When the factory initially received orders, my father went to Bangladesh Bank wanting credit to purchase raw materials but the bank could only give him 12-15 per cent of the requirement. To improve the financial structure of the RMG industry going forward, my father proposed the idea of the Back-to-Back Letter of Credit banking system, calling it the 'Triangle of Trust', to Mr. Nurul Islam, who was the forward thinking Governor of Bangladesh Bank at that time. The concept was agreed upon and a solution was developed to accommodate the purchasing needs while keeping the price of the raw materials competitive and while storing them in the Duty-Free Bonded warehouses. This system still stands today and has been a major instrument to welcome investors in the readymade garment industry in Bangladesh.

A few years later, however, Dosh Garments Limited and Daewoo Corporation of South Korea mutually agreed to discontinue their collaboration of producing garments

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together. Bangladesh got stronger, there were far more garment factories that were being set up by either groups of those very 130 trainees or those who employed some of those trainees to build what has become today, the second largest garment producing country in the world.

What more my father did as a leader of the industry was, to then convert Desh Garments Limited, the first garments-producing company into a publicly listed company, shares of which would then be traded in the Dhaka Stock Exchange, thereby further making sure, that the access to finance was not solely dependent on traditional banking methods.

Recovery after lots of setbacks including the devastating cyclone of 1991

Although glorious, our journey has not been an easy one. We had a lot of setbacks but we would like to think that we Bangladeshis are known for our resilience. In 1987, my father had lung cancer and that was a personal setback for him. Then, the Desh Garments factory in Chittagong was severely hit by one of Bangladesh's most devastating cyclones in 1991, when our factory was severely damaged as the factory was waist-deep in salt water. Due to unfortunate banking and insurance circumstances at the time, we faced huge financial losses and had to stop operations for the next 5 years. Finally, in 1996, we restarted our operations, but in 1998, my father passed away.

So, for us, to get a hold of the business and grow exponentially with this substantial size of varied businesses within the group was a bit of a challenge as we were hit by the most common circumstances often faced by a traditional family business. The family my father left behind was young, not as experienced and with simply, far too much to manage.

My mother, Rokeya Quader, who had studied as a lawyer, stepped in as the Chairman at that crucial moment and my brother, Omar, who had just returned after completing his studies in Economics and International Politics from Cornell University, became the Managing Director. As for myself, I had just left to study for my A levels to an all girl's boarding school in the UK and with the aim of completing my Barrister-at-Law degree.

And so my mother and brother jointly started to manage the factory going forward. She broke barriers, and managed the factory, while my brother took care of the buyers and together they managed to keep the business alive. She told me stories of how she travelled for various training programmes, engaged in ILO conferences or work with local customs and regulatory bodies and slowly but surely she built inside me, a level of confidence that, there were actually no real barriers for women if they want to establish themselves in a business community and country that is primarily dominated by men.

I finally moved back to Bangladesh in 2006 but the challenges faced by our RMG factory had increased a lot more and one's presence in the factory became mandatory. It was then that I decided to leave all my other work and move to Chittagong to run the

factory for the next five years. This was one of the most challenging periods of my life as a single, young lady living in a rather conventional city which hadn't experienced the presence of my type. I was breaking barriers, without being sheltered by my father, my brother or a husband.

I was new to them and they were new to me. Some people welcomed my presence while others shook their heads in concern. But I quickly made 'friends' out of the hundreds of young women who were working as a majority in my factory. They accepted me and so did I.

I contested my first election of the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association and won from the opposition, as the only female on the Executive Board of 27 men, in 2013. Rana Plaza collapsed two months later and nothing could have been more tragic for the women and workers working in an industry striving to establish the economy of a country. And yet, we learnt. The Bangladesh garments owners and workers all came together, as did the Government and foreign stakeholders who ensured Bangladesh because the safest country in the world to produce in, as far as fire, structural, electrical and social compliance was concerned.

I was the only female advisor on the Board of Alliance for Worker's Safety in Bangladesh, made up of multiple stakeholders and all the North American brands to ensure safety standards of RMG factories in the country. Later, I was twice elected to be on the Executive Board of the Bangladesh Employer's Federation and finally, once again, in 2021, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, after six years later, I again participated in the BGMEA Elections as one of the three female Directors in a board of 35 men. And finally, today, nearing almost 10 years of the Rana Plaza tragedy, we are all

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really proud of the work we have done together as industry leaders to create what is possibly the most green and sustainable production countries in the world, investing in traceability and environmental-friendly factories.

Desh Group continues to plan a post-pandemic revival

The Covid-19 pandemic proved to be a particularly challenging time for Desh Garments since we dealt in men's and boy's shirts. Needless to say, that when the world was at a standstill and no one was really going out to shop for new shirts. It took us almost one-and-a-half years to get back into the regular flow of things and then of course, there was a huge influx of orders into Bangladesh. However, further challenges remain and we are yet to see how the dust settles as the world seems to be ready for a global recession.

We had originally planned to go for both an expansion and product diversification starting mid-2022; however, given the current global economic conditions, we have certainly decided to put our investment plans on hold. Moreover, since we are now globally facing various climate sensitive regulations and goals, we would like to make sure we are more sustainable as a whole.

Desh Garments will focus on reducing 'pre-consumer' wastage

With the recent talks about circularity and recycling, thoughts and ideas of integrating the production process by looking into how we can establish a way of reducing the consumption of virgin materials and getting closer to 'closing the loop' while sourcing to manufacture new garments, is certainly something



In Bangladesh today, we take pride in the factories that we have built, the workers that we employ and the garments that we manufacture. We have come a long way since Noorul Quader sent those 130 people to South Korea, way head of his time, to learn the skills of a trade that would put Bangladesh on the global map by creating the backbone of our economy in the financial, commercial and manufacturing sectors. And least we forget, most importantly, Noorul Quader gave our women an identity like in no other industry or NGO that exists today in Bangladesh. The garment sector has single-handedly empowered the women in Bangladesh in the true sense of what encapsulates the meaning of the word 'empower'. They come to the gates of our factories, we take them in, we teach them skills and they work for as long as they wish to. Quader wanted the women with little or no skills to move out of their village homes and get a new identity. He wanted to give them respect within their families and amongst the men who perhaps still want to dominate their lives, society and the workplace. But what he too perhaps couldn't envision, was the force with which those very women would one day lead the way in a country like Bangladesh, which is possibly one of the youngest in the world today. Hence, we remain, proud as citizens, proud as daughters and proud as women outlining the demographics of Bangladesh as a country in this world.

that is on the cards for us. I have personally become very interested in circularity after attending the Global Fashion Agenda conference in Copenhagen earlier this year in June 2022 with a delegate of the BGMEA, headed by our current President Faruque Hassan. He is in fact a very forward-thinking and dynamic leader who is taking new steps in various directions to promote individuality, women, social cases, industry efficiency and most certainly environmental sustainability in the industry. I am currently also the Director-in-Charge of Circularity within the BGMEA to see how Bangladesh can adapt more concepts of circularity in our industry going forward.

Bangladesh is the second largest garment producing country in the world, so one can only imagine the amount of pre-consumer waste that may be produced. However, unfortunately, we may not be making the best use of that waste. Studies have shown that 60 per cent of this pre-consumer wastage gets exported out to India and other neighbouring textile producing countries, 5-10 per cent is perhaps being recycled in Bangladesh, 10 per cent is used in downcycling, either by incineration or going into landfills, while the remaining 20 per cent is just getting lost in the system. The idea, going forward, is certainly to make far better usage of this wastage and to keep it within our industry in Bangladesh.