

Zarin's passion for nutrition:

making healthy food an easier choice in Bangladesh



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Struck by the high rates of malnutrition among female ready-made garment (RMG) industry workers, entrepreneur Zarin Rashid was inspired to set up Feed Me. The enterprise, and member of the Scaling Up Nutrition Business Network (SBN) Bangladesh, has developed low-cost nutritious snacks to make tasty, nutritious food more accessible.

In Bangladesh, nutritious and safe foods are considered to be expensive and unavailable; hence for most of the low-income population they are seen as a luxury. This lack of access to nutritious food is one of the key factors behind Bangladesh's rising levels of non-communicable diseases and struggle in reaching the under-nutrition targets of the Sustainable Development Goals. National rates of anaemia in women are also high, at almost 40% of women under 49, but in the RMG industry, which is dominated by low-paid women, 77% suffer from anaemia due to their poor diets. Rates of anaemia for adolescents are also high, affecting almost half of girls aged between 15 and 19.

With a passion for health and fitness, and experience of working in her family's RMG factory, Zarin was struck by the rates of malnutrition among female RMG workers and their children. "I had the idea of making nutritious food as accessible as possible for everyone, and to teach people that nutrition

"The most exciting part of my work is feeling like I am making a difference for women, and getting the chance to actually see how their lives are getting better."

Zarin Rashid, Founder, Feed Me

shouldn't be a luxury," she reveals. [Feed Me](#) started in 2019 as a 'passion project' for Zarin, after she moved back to Bangladesh from Canada. Initially, the company began by offering a meal preparation service that delivered healthy and nutritious meals to people in the capital, Dhaka. By the start of 2021, Feed Me had served meals to over 1,200 clients.

A year later, Zarin had developed a low-cost nutritious bar and drink, specifically targeting RMG workers. "I come from a background of manufacturing," Zarin explains. "My family's RMG factory employs 5,000 people, so I have an in-depth knowledge of the main target group. I was able to trial my products with the employees and, by improving the nutrition of workers, the factory has seen a direct impact on productivity."

Feed Me's NutriBar and NutriMix are carefully prepared with local, environmentally sustainable, and nutrient-dense ingredients, including brown wheat, lentils, bran, nuts, and dates. The products are rich in healthy fats (Omega-3 and Omega-6), antioxidants, vitamin B, and plant-based proteins and minerals, which are essential for maintaining a healthy lifestyle. "NutriBar and NutriMix are very affordable, convenient, and calorie-packed products everyone can enjoy," Zarin explains. Eight factories, employing over 40,000 workers, have already shown a keen interest in purchasing these products.

Utilising partnerships

"The RMG sector employs about 4.5 million people in Bangladesh; more than 43% are undernourished, and 76% are women," Zarin reveals. "This is a really important group of people to focus on, and improving their nutrition will only be possible through cross-sector collaboration." Winning Bangladesh's NutriStar Innovation Challenge in 2020 gave Feed Me access to a number of partners, who are helping

increase the company's impact and reach. Organised by SBN Bangladesh, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), the competition brought together 400 small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). As a top 10 finalist, Feed Me received training on food safety and nutrition experts, business development, financial management, investor readiness, and communication skills.

Feed Me was crowned the overall winner, and received a cash prize of approximately USD 3,000, but has also continued to receive support from SBN Bangladesh. "There were times when I wanted to give up," Zarin reveals, "but SBN gave me hope that my idea could succeed, and they created a bridge to other organisations that have supported me." Welt Hunger Hilfe (a German non-governmental organisation, NGO) and the Bangladesh Institute of Research and Training on Applied Nutrition (BIRTAN), for example, have been working to assess the nutrition and flavour profiles of the products. The aim is to maximise the nutritional potential of each product and reduce the price to make the NutriBar and NutriMix as affordable as possible, so even those on a low wage can afford them. "The Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) is also helping to formulate the product using locally-grown, nutritious, and affordable ingredients, and increase shelf-life," Zarin explains. She hopes that the newly-formulated bar and drink will be available in early 2022.

Conquering hurdles

In addition to shutting down the meal preparation service for seven months, COVID-19 also created unexpected challenges in rolling out the NutriBar and NutriMix in RMG factories and through schools. Bangladesh has been severely affected by COVID-19, and many RMG factories



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have been hurt economically due to labour and supply chain disruptions. At a time when many of these companies are worried about their businesses staying afloat, it has been difficult to convince the management to make additional investments in nutritious bars and drinks. "Even though healthy workers mean a healthy business, many difficult decisions and cutbacks have delayed our plans to roll out," Zarin explains. "But we are using this time wisely – and part of that has been working with BAU to find a price point that works for customers but is also viable for our business operations."

Another serious challenge has been consumer education: helping customers, workers, and RMG managers to understand the connection

between food and health, and health and productivity. “There is such a misunderstanding of what nutrition means,” Zarin adds. “Nutrition isn’t being highlighted as it should be, so getting people to understand that nutrition is necessary for everything is a key hurdle to reducing malnutrition across the country.” To improve access to information about nutrition, Feed Me is working with GAIN, SBN Bangladesh and BIRTAN to develop information about the importance of nutrition that can be circulated to RMG employees.

A positive future

Looking to the future, Feed Me has been boosted by an endorsement from the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association. The governing body of Bangladesh’s RMG factories has offered its support in educating factory owners about the benefits of NutriBar and NutriMix. “We

are currently targeting 8-10 factories but hope we can expand this to every factory in the country,” Zarin enthuses. “With the reformulated NutriBar and NutriMix products, which should be available by 2022, I want to be able to reach every RMG worker and adolescent.” Several NGOs have already shown a keen interest in the products for the adolescent market, and discussions are underway with two which are interested in distributing the NutriBar in schools.

To further expand its operations, Feed Me is seeking investment from the government and international investors, to develop its factory and production infrastructure. Modern machinery that will automate production, will enable the company to maximise efficiency and scale, and thereby reduce the unit prices of the products. Investment is also being sought for marketing purposes to educate the target groups about the importance of nutrition and the nutritional benefits of the products.



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