



Even in countries with the most progressive equal rights agendas, it is still uncommon to walk into a mechanical workshop and see a young woman's smiling face pulling a motorcycle apart, explaining to a customer what is wrong with their engine. In Bangladesh, where women's involvement in technical and vocational education and training ranges from 9% to 13% in public institutions, the situation is no different.

Rabeya Akhter was a girl who could always be found outside, pulling whatever she could find apart and putting it back together. She was the youngest of three daughters; her father was a rickshaw-technician and her mother worked at home fitting stones into earrings. She often followed her dad as he worked and discussed her dream of working in a technical job with him and her cousin who was studying to be an engineer. He told her that if she tried her best, even though she was a girl, she could do it. Rabeya enjoyed her education and worked hard until, in Class 5, her father left the family and went back to his first wife. Rabeya's mother, who earned just 1000tk/month (USD 12), had no choice but to ask her daughter to stop her education and assist her with stone fitting at home. Fitting stones into earrings was a task that was not only repetitive, but Rabeya also made a mere 700tk/month, meaning there was no way she would ever be able to go back to school.

When Rabeya was accepted into the ILO/UCEP apprenticeship programme, she travelled long distances by herself to get there, facing constant criticism, taunts and abuse. Her unrivalled determination got her through and she successfully completed her four months off-the-job training early. She re-enrolled into general education one day per week and was accepted into a position at Walton, one of Bangladesh's largest mechanical service organisations, as their first female mechanical apprentice. Dodging eve teasing, marriage proposals and stereotyping, her supervisor says that she is now known as more reliable and thorough in her work than her male co-workers. Rabeya has become a valued part of the Walton team and beyond that; a role model for women in Bangladesh. She has challenged gender stereotypes and succeeded, and is now encouraging other women to do the same.

"I did not have the chance to finish school so I have made my own opportunity. Eventually my dream is to finish my general education as well and get a job in one of Walton's showrooms so that I can use all my skills and technical knowledge. I want to tell girls that technical trades are not difficult and there are many opportunities; you just have to do it. You can get married but you should get a job – for you, and for your country. My parents are trying to find me a husband but first I will inform him, and his family, that I have done this job, I can do this job and I want to keep doing this job. If they agree, then I will marry. "

Rabeya is a skilled young female ILO/UCEP apprentice taking part in a pilot programme of the TVET Reform Project, an initiative of the Government of Bangladesh, executed by the ILO and funded by the European Union. For more information, contact the ILO Dhaka via email: tvetreform@ilo.org or visit us on the web at ilo.org/tvet