

THE STORY OF RAHIMA SULTANA KAZAL: A JOURNEY OF GRIT AND LEADERSHIP

The Meaning of "Apa" and the Heart of a Leader

In the cultural context of Bangladesh, the term "Apa" translates literally to "elder sister." However, its meaning runs far deeper than biological relation. It is a title of profound respect, warmth and communal trust. To call someone Kazal Apa is to acknowledge her not as a distant executive, but as a sister-leader who walks alongside her people. It signifies a relationship where authority is balanced with empathy, and where the struggles of the community are felt as personally as those of one's own family.



This cultural nuance is essential to understanding the leadership of Rahima Sultana Kazal. By being addressed as "Apa," she is recognized as a guiding figure who has nurtured her organization from its infancy. Her leadership is not defined by a top-down hierarchy but by a shared "inner spirit" of voluntary actions for the betterment of society. This bond of sisterhood created a foundation of trust that allowed her to mobilize women in areas where traditional leadership had previously failed them.

A Vision Born from Inequality

The story of Kazal Apa is one of quiet rebellion and fierce independence. In the late 1990s, while working for another local organization, she reached a breaking point because she felt there were no real rights for women in that space. She observed that women's rights and female leadership were often treated as secondary concerns rather than the core mission. Driven by the conviction that women should be the architects of their own progress and have true priority, she decided to forge her own path.

This led to the founding of Association of Voluntary Actions for Society (AVAS) in 1st June 1998. The organization was established by five women, including Kazal Apa and her mother Mamotaj Begum, who dared to start with nothing but a shared goal and a deep desire to serve their local community. She even turned down opportunities with international organizations like the ILO to ensure she could remain dedicated to her vision of a locally-rooted, women-led movement.



The Year of the "Voluntary Spirit"

The early days of AVAS were a masterclass in resilience and sacrifice. For the first year of its existence, the organization had no external funding, no donors, and no income whatsoever. Kazal Apa managed a small team of six staff members who worked purely out of a "voluntary spirit," receiving only minimal amounts-sometimes just 300 to 500 BDT in a month, to cover their basic transportation costs.

The very survival of the movement depended on the support of Kazal Apa's mother- Mamotaj Begum, who effectively subsidized the organization's birth. Because there was no money for salaries or food, her mother cooked lunch for the entire team every single day for that first year. This domestic act of care provided the literal sustenance needed to keep the dream alive, proving that large-scale social change often begins with the quiet, unpaid labor of supportive family members.



Defying Social Stigma and Taboos

Leading as a woman in a conservative landscape brought challenges that were as much social as they were financial. Kazal Apa was frequently the subject of community gossip because her work required her to travel for international training and return home at late hours. At a time when very few women worked in the NGO sector, she was subjected to social taboos and labeled as a "bad woman" simply for exercising her independence and professional agency.

These judgments grew even harsher when she chose to advocate for the most marginalized groups, including sex workers and the transgender community. People in her own region judged her character and even spread rumors that she herself might be a sex worker because of her dedication to their rights and HIV awareness projects. Despite this intense pressure and the attempts to "stop her," she remained certain in her mission, supported by a family that told her to "keep going" until the community finally recognized her worth.



Resilience Through the Language Barrier

Even as she gained national and international recognition, Kazal Apa faced the elitism of professional circles, particularly regarding the use of English. She recalls a demoralizing moment at some event where a representative was openly rude to her for speaking in her native Bangla. Despite being a key representative at the forum, she was told she "must" speak English, even though the vast majority of those present were Bangladeshi.

Initially, this pressure made her feel demoralized and unable to properly explain her logic. However, she eventually realized that language is merely a tool for connection, not a measure of intelligence or leadership capability. She chose to become flexible, refusing to let a lack of "pro-English" fluency diminish her voice and she now proudly advocates for the idea that leaders should be able to speak in their own language to truly communicate with their people.



From Six Volunteers to a Global Legacy

Today, the woman who once faced community slander is recognized as a successful community leader by the government, the UN, and international partners. AVAS has grown from a six-person volunteer group into an organization with over 300 staff members. Over the years, AVAS had implemented nearly 195 different projects with various donors and presently managing 19 diverse projects in Bangladesh. AVAS places strong emphasis on Disaster Risk Management and resilience across its programs and is currently implementing several such projects in the coastal areas of Bangladesh. The organization's reputation is now so strong that Kazal Apa no longer has to seek out donors; instead, international NGOs and foundations approach her directly for partnerships.

Kazal Apa's journey serves as a powerful bridge for the next generation of women leaders. She has participated in prestigious international programs, including a leadership program in the United States, yet she remains deeply rooted in her local community where she is known simply as "Kazal". Her legacy is built on the belief that a woman's place is at the "table," and her life's work has been to ensure that the path she cleared remains open for those who follow.





The message that I always give, from the beginning until now, is that **women should never say that they cannot.** Men cannot be a mother, cannot provide the best food. If I can handle this, you can too. I was also once at this table, and now I have come to this table. I also want to see you at this table.

About SHIFT Asia

SHIFT Asia (Supporting Humanitarian Initiatives for Transformation in Asia) is an initiative that advances women's local humanitarian leadership and drives gender-transformative change across Asia, working specifically in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines.