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Entrepreneurial Aspirations and Empowerment: A Study of Urban Educated Women Entrepreneurs in Bangladesh.

Salma Khan*

Senior Lecturer, Department of English and Humanities, BRAC University, Bangladesh.

Corresponding Author: Salma Khan, *Email: salma.khan@bracu.ac.bd

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ABSTRACT

Post-independent Bangladesh had undergone a visible socio-economic transformation that fundamentally altered women's role in the family and society. This shift resulted in the growing participation of women in non-traditional employment for economic independence. Considering the firm link between entrepreneurship and women's empowerment and economic growth, promoting women's entrepreneurship has gained a key focus of government and NGO development programs. While entrepreneurship emerged as a means of income generation for rural women, an encouraging number of educated urban women have embraced entrepreneurship as a career choice to achieve economic independence and self-autonomy. This qualitative research paper is based on in-depth interviews of fifteen urban-educated female entrepreneurs involved in diverse entrepreneurial activities. The study focuses on the incentives behind entrepreneurial endeavors, business aspirations, and the broader influences of their enterprises on their personal and social lives. It has been identified that challenges such as graduate unemployment, the need for autonomy, rigid work hours, the glass ceiling effect, and difficulties balancing work and family responsibilities in traditional employment motivated these women to pursue entrepreneurship as a career path. The study also examines their perspective on the changing socio-economic reality of the business environment for women in Bangladesh. Despite countless barriers, these women entrepreneurs demonstrate noteworthy resilience and a strong sense of social responsibility, and contribute not only to the generation of employment but also to reshaping the outlook regarding women's role in the business landscape.

INTRODUCTION

Recognizing the effective link between entrepreneurship, women's empowerment, and economic growth, women's entrepreneurship has received significant promotion in recent decades in global development programs. The rise of women as entrepreneurs has become one of the most notable shifts in the world economy (Muriel, 2005). The socio-economic reality of Bangladesh has undergone a significant alteration since its independence. Growing landlessness, poverty, urbanization, and modernisation necessitated that both rural and urban women recognize the importance of economic freedom. In response, Bangladeshi women started to engage in diverse professions, including the traditionally male-dominated and competitive arena of entrepreneurship, notably the SME sector. Despite constraints like socio-cultural barriers, scant credit and training facilities, limited access to market and information technology, and defective implementation of government policies, women are increasingly engaging in entrepreneurial ventures to achieve economic independence. In fact, women's entrepreneurship in Bangladesh has undergone a significant transformation since the 2010s, changing the socio-economic landscape. In 2020, female-led SMEs contributed \$12 billion to Bangladesh's GDP (Press Xpress, 2024). As an agrarian country, where traditional gender roles have long restricted women's participation in the workforce, the acceptance of entrepreneurship among educated urban women shows a critical departure from the past. By analyzing the experiences of fifteen urban women entrepreneurs, this study sheds light on the evolving dynamics of women's entrepreneurship in Bangladesh and its implications for gender equality and economic progress.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A significant body of research has concentrated on the gender-centric analysis of entrepreneurship. Since the 1990s, researchers have given special attention to women entrepreneurs as their participation has grown in diverse business sectors. Globally, "push" and "opportunity-pull" factors influence women's entrepreneurial motivations. Push factors like unemployment and the necessity of extra-familial income are usually common in developing countries where gender-friendly job opportunities are limited. While pull factors are the desire for autonomy, self-fulfillment, and the chance to contribute to society (Meryem Aybas & Özçelik, 2020; Langowitz et al., 2005).

Research suggests that middle-aged, educated, and trained women have proven successful in seizing business opportunities. The urge to share economic responsibilities with husbands and family, and self-motivation of independence, drives them to do business. However, age, educational qualification, training, and marital status influence the entrepreneurial motivation of women. However, the selection of the types of businesses depends on the local market necessity, low capital requirement, and availability of the products (Sujit Roy, S. Manna, 2014). Women, especially from the middle class, are growingly embracing entrepreneurship, contributing to fulfilling their families' social and economic independence and improved equality and recognition in society. (D. Amutha, 2015) Recent trend shows that women are increasingly engaging in

small-scale self-employment through social media and the internet, utilizing digital platforms to develop a new form of economy that balances work and family responsibilities (Minako Sakai, Bhirawa Anoraga, 2020). This phenomenon reflects broader structural shifts in the labor market and gender roles.

In the context of Bangladesh, several studies have examined women's increasing engagement in entrepreneurship. Ensuf et al. (2017) found that the younger, more educated Bangladeshi women were increasingly interested in entrepreneurship for economic independence, though they faced demand-side issues like the lack of knowledge and supply-side obstacles like unsupportive policies. Similarly, Hossain et al. (2009) identified major decision-making factors, including access to capital, networks, skills, and family obligations. Huq and Moyeen (2002) found that Bangladeshi middle-class urban-educated women, especially housewives, often choose entrepreneurship to raise family income and balance work with familial duties. Yet, hesitation, financial constraints, and lack of experience prevent them from starting businesses. Huq (2000) further highlights that women's aspirations to start a business in Bangladesh are influenced primarily by family and gender roles. Negative social attitudes, lack of security and mobility, and inadequate exposure to role models through media and promotional agencies hinder educated women's participation in business.

Despite these constraints, women's entrepreneurship in Bangladesh has had a positive socio-economic impact, increasing women's empowerment and improving their status in family and society (Ahmed & Neaz, 2018). Embracing entrepreneurship as a career path has particularly empowered educated, middle-class women by reinforcing their decision-making abilities in the household, increasing their control over resources and assets, and facilitating social mobility (Datta, 2023). Khanum et al. (2020) found that entrepreneurial women have greater awareness and knowledge about climate change, disaster management, and women's rights. In this case, ICT access has played a crucial role in empowering women entrepreneurs by creating self-employment opportunities and promoting independence (Afrah, Helmi, & Fabiha, 2017).

Yet, existing literature mostly concentrates on rural or low-income women and broad policy issues, with limited focus on urban, educated women who pursue entrepreneurship by choice, not as a survival strategy. Their motivations, aspirations, and impact on gender norms and development remain underexplored. This study addresses that gap by examining the entrepreneurial journeys of fifteen urban educated women in Bangladesh, exploring how their choices intersect with social structures, gender roles, and personal agency in a changing national context.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, fifteen women urban-educated entrepreneurs were interviewed in 2022 (January-April), living in different districts of Bangladesh. These women

were engaged in diverse traditional and non-traditional entrepreneurial activities in the manufacturing and service sectors. In the non-traditional sector, the participants were engaged in handicraft production and export business, training services business, leather product manufacturing and export business, jute product manufacturing and export business, makeover studios, and wedding planning services. They were interviewed based on open-ended questionnaires, each lasting 30 to 45 minutes. The questions covered aspects like their educational background, family life, parents' occupations, motivations, gender-related constraints, changing business environment in Bangladesh, social responsibilities, future plans, and self-empowerment. The open-ended discussion methodology allowed the interviewees to respond spontaneously. This study uses a qualitative approach based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a small sample of urban, educated women entrepreneurs. No quantitative tools were applied, as the aim was to generate rich, descriptive insights rather than statistical generalizations.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study explores the experiences and perspectives of urban educated women entrepreneurs within the altering socio-economic and cultural context of post-independent Bangladesh. The specific objectives of the research are to:

1. Identify the personal, professional, and socio-economic factors that motivate urban educated women to pursue entrepreneurship as a career path.
2. Examine the structural and cultural barriers influencing women's entrepreneurial choices and experiences.
3. Understand the role of education, technology, and family support in enabling or hindering women's entry and growth in entrepreneurship.
4. Analyze how entrepreneurship contributes to women's empowerment, including increased decision-making power, financial independence, and social recognition.
5. Assess the effectiveness of existing institutional support, including government initiatives, in promoting a favorable environment for women entrepreneurs.

Changing socio-economic scenario of Bangladesh

In five decades of independence, Bangladesh has seen remarkable socio-economic change through the growing participation of women in diverse economic sectors. The country has been ranked first in gender equality among South Asian countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023. In 1974, female labor participation was only four percent, which increased to 42.68% in 2022. (TBS, 2023) As half of the population, women's economic participation was essential for Bangladesh's sustainable growth. It was surprising to see such rapid economic involvement of women after Independence as many were skeptical if they could bypass patriarchal and conservative social reality to gain economic independence. Traditional practices

of segregated gender roles, purdah, dowry, and child marriage had restricted women's mobility, resulting in high fertility rates, malnutrition, high maternity rates, and limited economic engagement (Hossain et al., 2013). A country's female entrepreneurial or other economic involvements are determined by social and cultural customs that decide the social security standard, mobility, and outlook on gender inclusion. Historically, East Bengal's rural economy was constructed on the rigid division of labor and gender roles that emphasized women's domestic and reproductive duties (Feldman and McCarthy, 1983). Society's rigid perspective of seclusion had refrained women from seeking work outside even during severe impoverishment. Only cases of extreme poverty and marginalization force some women to break these societal norms (Khondker and Jahan, 1989). Although women of the masses and the elite hold significantly different life patterns and aspirations, they share a somewhat similar reality on mobility and economic opportunities. Rounaq Jahan's survey in 1973 on a section of Dhaka city revealed that only 10% of urban women held jobs, whereas 35% of them had university degrees. Educated middle-class women would choose a career path that society and their male guardians would presumably approve (Jahan, 1975).

The 1971 War of Independence profoundly altered the lives of women in Bangladesh. During the war's nine months, women endured immense hardship as the most vulnerable victims. The famine of 1974 further revealed the need for women to become independent, as they felt unsafe to rely solely on family or household support. Between 1968 and 1974, socio-political instability delivered a lesson to women: the need to become self-dependent (Feldman and McCarthy, 1983). After the independence of Bangladesh, women's lives were reshaped by increasing landlessness, debt, and poverty. The economy grew slowly from 1969-70 to 1979-80, with per capita income rising only slightly from US\$84 to US\$94 (Khondker and Jahan, 1989). Landlessness worsened, with rural households lacking land rising from 35% in 1960 to 45% in 1983-84. Agricultural production struggled due to limited land and concentrated land ownership. Only 9% of rural households owned over 5 acres, while half were landless. The average farm size shrank from 3.5 acres in 1977 to 2.2 in 1984. The lack of industrial jobs and rising unemployment led to the breakdown of joint families and increased female-headed households as men migrated to cities for work (World Bank, 1990). As poverty increased, the traditional expectation for men to protect women weakened significantly. A survey revealed that one in five marriages in Bangladesh ended due to rural poverty. In 1981, about 15% of households were female-headed, rising to 25% among landless households by 1989 (Rahman, 1994). Female-headed households and married women in landless families increasingly sought paid work due to economic necessity. Women's income became essential, leading women from all social classes to seek full-time employment while economic pressures loosened traditional purdah restrictions. In short, after 1971, Bangladesh's traditional patriarchal system weakened as family ties and religious and political customs that upheld male supremacy began to decline. This shift reveals that even adamant normative controls could be redefined under economic necessity (Cain, Khanam, and Nahar, 1979).

In addition to economic factors, the growing rate of female education significantly contributed to female employment in cities. The number of girl students grew from 0.3 million in 1961 to 1.3 million in 1974 with an annual growth rate of 23%. Since Bangladesh's independence, the government has prioritized funding to improve education, launching programs like the "Food for Education Program," "Female Stipend Program," and "Free Education for Girls," in addition to regular policies such as compulsory education and free textbooks. (Sawada, Mahmud, and Kitano, 2018) The country made notable improvements in shrinking the gender gap in education. In 2013, the national enrollment rate was 96.2% for boys and 98.4% for girls, with girls making up 52% of those passing the Primary Education Completion Exam (PCSE). Similar achievements were seen in secondary school enrollment. (Sawada, Mahmud, and Kitano, 2018)

In the early 1970s, NGOs like Grameen Bank, BRAC, Proshika, and ASA emerged with the innovation of social entrepreneurship, which played a vital role in poverty alleviation. The rapid expansion of microfinance services allowed poor rural women to transform their unpaid household labor into market-oriented or entrepreneurial activities that generated household income. (Sawada, Mahmud, and Kitano, 2018) Innovative programs like Grameen Bank's Village Pay Phone or BRAC's Targeting Ultra Poor (TUP) Program successfully involved women in entrepreneurial ventures. By prioritizing women in non-agricultural employment, microfinance institutions (MFIs) demonstrated women's reliability for capital investment and recognized them as capable managers of enterprises. MFI's success also influenced the government to support and collaborate on special credit programs.

Rapid urbanization between 1990 and 2010 led to structural shifts in the economy, with the industrial contribution to GDP rising from 20% to 30% and formal services reaching 50%. Urbanization increased from 8% in 1974 to 35% in 2012, reflecting a major rural-to-urban migration. (Hossain, Sen, and Sawada, 2013) The rising urban population led to a sharp increase in living costs, which nearly quadrupled for middle-class city dwellers between 1969-70 and 1974-75 (Chaudhury, 1979). The rise of the RMG industry during the 1980s was the key positive outcome of the government's trade liberalization policy. The rapid industrialization in Bangladesh in the 1990s can be stated as women-led (Afsar, 2003). The RMG industries generated massive job opportunities for women and made up 80% of their workforce (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004).

The most significant outcome was the shift in the social structure of economic production, where men, traditionally the family breadwinner, started to accept women as equal earners. This transformation has redefined gender roles, shifting from the norms of seclusion and dependency to appreciating economic independence, education, mobility, employment, and broader societal engagement. As women embraced new opportunities, they gradually reshaped traditional social norms and perspectives. (Kelkar, Nathan, and Jahan, 2004) As Amartya Sen claimed, "Culture and norms influence gender relations but do not determine them". (Sen, qtd. in Das, 2008)

Why choose Entrepreneurship as a career path?

The motivations for becoming an entrepreneur differ globally between men and women, as women often start businesses out of economic need (Vossenbergh, 2013). Tambunan (2009) notes that female entrepreneurs in developing Asian countries typically fall into three categories: "chance," "forced," and "created" entrepreneurs. Chance entrepreneurs begin businesses without a clear plan, often starting as a hobby that eventually grows into a venture. Forced entrepreneurs are driven by survival, launching businesses due to financial crises or losing a family member. Created entrepreneurs, on the other hand, are "identified, motivated, and developed" through various entrepreneurial development programs. In developing countries, women often start businesses because they have no other income sources, which explains their growing appearance in the informal economy. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS, 2018), in 2015-16, 95.4% of employed women were in the informal sector, while only 4.6% were in the formal sector. In contrast, women in advanced nations typically become entrepreneurs when they recognize opportunities and seek independence (Vossenbergh 2013). However, factors like insufficient income for middle-class households, growing divorce rates, an increase in female-headed households, and shifting attitudes toward paid employment also motivate many financially stable women to start their businesses (Starcher 1996).

Educated women in Bangladesh are turning to entrepreneurship as a sensible career path. The progress in female education and the limited employment opportunities for women are two major contributing factors to female unemployment. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS, 2016), 35.27 percent of the total students in public universities in 2016 were female, an increase from 31.28 percent in 2009. Additionally, the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS, 2015-16) indicated that the unemployment rate among female graduates was about 16.8 percent, approximately 2.5 times higher than that of their male counterparts. Socio-economic obstacles, for example, lack of safety in public spaces, sexual harassment, violence, and restricted mobility, commonly contribute to this disparity (Parvez, 2018). Khatun (2018) discusses that women earn about 94% of what men make, primarily because they are concentrated in the informal sector, which provides 89% of female employment and typically offers lower wages and limited mobility. Women in the formal sector are often paid less than men for similar work and face invisible barriers to promotion, commonly referred to as the "glass ceiling." Additionally, women's reproductive roles force them to choose between family and career, leading to a gradual decline in interest among young, talented graduates due to family responsibilities. This midway departure limits their chances for promotion and causes their skills to become outdated when they return to the workforce.

The experiences of the fifteen women entrepreneurs interviewed for this study divulge these issues. The participants have all undergraduate or postgraduate degrees and have diverse professional backgrounds in banking, education, journalism, and government services. In many cases, motherhood had

necessitated the departure from their former occupation. Unsatisfactory job conditions, lack of supportive infrastructure like daycare facilities, rigid office hours, long-distance workplaces, glass ceiling effect, etc., compelled these women to leave their professions after pregnancy. As their children were old enough, these mothers chose entrepreneurship over returning to previous employment, attracted by its flexibility to balance family duties and a gainful career. Masuda, an owner of a Leather product manufacturing Enterprise, explained her difficulties in balancing work and childcare, saying,

Taking care of a baby while working for a buying house company was hard. Sometimes I needed to take leave to take my daughter to the hospital for vaccinations, but I couldn't because my office had an important meeting that day.

Shuchi, the owner of a Boutique house in Rajshahi, left her job at the Water Development Board to pursue independent work. She explains.

When my daughter was old enough, I wanted to work again. But I wanted to do something independently. Since I learned sewing and tailoring from my mother, I thought about working with block and batik and set up my business in 2005.

Shuchi feels quitting her job to start a business was the right move. "I meet new people, grow my network, and offer something fresh to customers daily. Most importantly, I'm creating jobs and supporting poor women." Her enterprise now employs 70 full-time and 1,000 part-time workers. For her achievements, she earned the BWCCI Progressive Award.

Supportive family environments are crucial for women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh. Strong family ties often mean women need family approval to start a business. Providentially, the social stigma around businesswomen is gradually shifting as many husbands and fathers have become supportive and provide initial funds, information, and guidance. Supportive husbands help women navigate criticism from in-laws. Surveys show that family involvement and support play a crucial role in women starting their own businesses, with many receiving initial capital from their families and facing less opposition (BWCCI, 2008; SMEF, 2009; BIDS, 2017). Muniza, a "Momtrepreneur" from Chittagong, leveraged her fashion sense to start the clothing business after facing opposition from her husband to work in a traditional job. Muniza explained,

I never planned on becoming an entrepreneur, but I didn't want to depend on my husband for money, despite having a master's degree from London. With a good fashion sense, I chose to enter the clothing business. My husband didn't allow me to work a traditional job, but permitted me to run a business due to its flexibility and lower stress. I visit my factory two or three days a week and spend the rest of the time at home caring for my children and household.

Similarly, Sharmin opened her boutique house in 2011 with the help and encouragement of her husband. She said

I have tailored my own dresses since class eight, and my friends' compliments encouraged me. After marriage, my husband suggested I pursue an independent business, where I could create employment for others and balance work with home responsibilities. He believed running a business would be easier for me than managing a regular job alongside household duties, including caring for the in-laws.

Encouragement from others also led the former banker Abida to become a vegetable carving artist. Her creativity and artistic talent led her to launch a wedding event management and catering service business in 2010. She said,

At my Holud ceremony, my bride-maids were setting the table of Holud and decorating with food carvings as the centerpiece, but I wasn't pleased. Then I took the knife and started to carve those fruits myself. Everyone loved my work. Their compliment and excitement became the source of my interest in food carving.

Women often pursued their passions or interests to supplement the family earnings. However, positive feedback and market opportunities encouraged them to start their businesses officially. Describing the motivation behind the enterprise, Abida said:

I initially received informal orders for food carving and bridal mehendi design. After posting pictures of my food carving art on Facebook, I got positive feedback and more orders, which revealed the potential of my services. Realizing I could meet most of the needs at a wedding, I decided to combine all these services into a package, launching my business.

Similarly, to recognize the gaps in women's knowledge about beauty products, Sharmin launched a content-based digital portal in 2013 and an online shop in 2018 to offer authentic cosmetics. She explains.

As a pharmacist, I understand the importance of using the right skincare products. Many women, however, apply cosmetics without knowing their ingredients, side effects, or benefits. The Bangladeshi market is also flooded with counterfeit products from global brands, which can be harmful. Using beauty products without proper knowledge or opting for unauthentic items poses risks to skin and hair health.

Sharmin's enterprise offers over 9 thousand esteemed national and global brand beauty products and delivers them to customers through e-commerce.

The need for self-fulfillment and autonomy drives many women in Bangladesh to become entrepreneurs. The desire to "do something" and self-fulfilment drive former stay-at-home moms to turn to the complex business arena. Modernization and rapid urbanization have led to a growing living expense in the metropolis. The Daily Star (January 3, 2018) reported that The Consumer Association Bangladesh (CAB) analysis says Dhaka's living expenses reached their highest point in four years by 2017. Compared to 2016, the city's cost of living increased by 8.44%, showing the rising financial pressures on residents. This made it hard to bear expenses solely on male members' income; it thus created a need for additional sources of income. This economic necessity drives and allows women to engage in business activities, helping them contribute to their household income. For instance, National Youth Award winner Ayesha founded a training Academy in 1994 and has been running it for 25 years. She explained, "When I came to Dhaka, I felt alone at home and saw the need to contribute to our household income. I decided to take training courses." In 1993, she trained herself in cooking, sewing, block batik, and more under the Department of Social Welfare. She said,

I worked as a trainer but wanted my own academy. I disliked regular 9-to-5 jobs with no freedom. With my own training center, I could train more people and create employment, which motivated me to establish my academy.

Urban-educated women are often driven by a strong desire for recognition, career autonomy, and freedom from conventional employment structures. They are drawn to entrepreneurship for the independence it offers and the chance to exercise creativity, generate jobs, and make a meaningful economic impact. This ambition, combined with a thirst for challenge and excitement to build something new, fuels their entrepreneurial spirit. For example, MBA graduate Farhana left her job as head of the marketing department of a national NGO to establish an exporting company in 2013 with the motto of "Maximizing benefits of the artisans and women entrepreneurs". She explained,

While working in export companies, I realized the global demand for traditional Bangladeshi handmade crafts. My goal was to promote indigenous goods from remote villages and bring recognition to local artisans. I left my secure, well-paying job and established my enterprise to pursue this vision fully.

Similarly, Esrat, facing the glass ceiling in the corporate sector, turned to entrepreneurship by establishing her enterprise in 2017, focusing on jute goods with global demand. She remarked.

I realized no matter how hard I work or the dedication I give, I will never be acknowledged. Therefore, I decided to do business where I could do something independently and where my dedication and innovation would mean something.

The business environment for women in Bangladesh

Economic, socio-cultural, and political factors influence the "entrepreneurial environment" that encourages individuals to pursue business activities. It also depends on the availability of a support service system and resources that facilitate the start-up process (Gnyawali and Fogel 1994). Internal factors, including the entrepreneur's previous job experience, family background, financial condition, and interest, etc. can influence the decision to start a business. However, the success and continuity of a business are facilitated by external factors like education, skill, training, technological facilities, and the nation's overall economic and business reality (Ahmed 2014).

From the 1990s to the 2000s, government policies in Bangladesh focused on including women's interests in the development process. The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action adaptation emphasized women's equal access to resources like land, credit, and training (United Nations, 1995). Therefore, the National Action Plan of 1998 was introduced by the government and included specific goals focusing on increasing women's entrepreneurship in the country. By 2005, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) further emphasized the necessity of fostering women's entrepreneurship and proposed legal reform of the family and inheritance to protect equal rights to own and inherit assets of women. It has been a key pressure from the Bangladeshi feminist movement groups, as inadequate asset inheritance often excludes women from securing funds for starting a business.

The Industrial Policy of 2005 can be seen as a gender-inclusive framework because it included the aims of NAP. To implement the policy, the same year, the government introduced strategies for SME Development, where the task force identified at least one special sector to focus attempts for female entrepreneurs and decided to give privileges wherever necessary. However, the major milestone was establishing the SME foundation in 2007, which launched the Gender Action Plan (GAP). This initiative addressed policy advocacy for women entrepreneurs and provided amenities like financial support, training, marketing facilities, business support, etc. Therefore, Bangladesh Bank adopted the 'Refinancing Scheme for Women SMEs' in 2007. This program offered some necessary privileges for female SME entrepreneurs, such as 15% reserved SME loans at a 10% interest rate and collateral-free loans up to BDT 1.5 million for women-led SMEs. Despite promising initiatives, poor implementation remains the main challenge. The Daily Star (28 Nov. 2008) reported that a 2008 survey of Bangladesh Bank revealed that 90 crore BDT funds were assigned to female SME entrepreneurs under the BB program, but only 10 crore BDT was disbursed.

Despite the multi-dimensional hindrances, the respondents were found to be optimistic about the change in the business environment in Bangladesh. Most of the interviewees believe that the nation's business environment is improving, although the pace is quite slow. Especially, the technological and training facilities are more available than before, making it easier for women to start a business than before. For example, Sharmin's online shopping platform quickly gained popularity. Her business page has 2.1 million Facebook followers, which

has built an active online community. When she began, few women were involved in business. However, over the years, she witnessed a notable change in societal attitudes and a growing desire among women to go beyond their traditional roles. She noted,

Women now understand the need to be financially independent, and thanks to technology, women are doing online businesses sitting at home with minimal capital. Banks are also providing special loan facilities to women. Our government is also taking steps to educate women about business and help them build networks through various entrepreneurship programs.

Farhana also thinks that the government is taking positive steps to develop women's entrepreneurship in Bangladesh. She remarked,

Opportunities are gradually increasing, leading to more women entrepreneurs. This is evident in the rising number of female participants in national and local SME fairs. However, the government should organize international fairs to promote and showcase our handicrafts to foreign customers and buyers.

Her observation is visible in the table below, which reflects the steady and notable participation of female entrepreneurs over the years. It also shows the growth in sales and order volumes at these fairs, reflecting the growing economic contribution of women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh (Khan, 2022).

Table 1. Percentage of Women Entrepreneurs' Contribution in National SME Fair, Dhaka

| Year | Sales at Fair (BDT) | Fair Orders (BDT) | Participation Percentage of Female Entrepreneurs |
|------|---------------------|-------------------|--|
| 2012 | 2.80 million | 6.04 million | 66% |
| 2013 | 4.81 million | 7.16 million | 56% |
| 2014 | 12 million | 14 million | 74% |
| 2016 | 14.90 million | 43.40 million | 66% |
| 2017 | 28.50 million | 38.70 million | 61.5% |
| 2018 | 55.60 million | 101.40 million | 68% |
| 2019 | 57 million | 95 million | 67% |
| 2020 | 49.4 million | 63.7 million | 66% |

Compiled from newspaper reports by the researcher

Similarly, Segufta, the owner of a makeover studio in Dhaka, believes the stigma around women in beauty parlours and make-up industries in Bangladesh is gradually altering.

Even a few years back, society did not accept women running or working in beauty salons. Fortunately, gradually, the attitude around the beauty industry is changing. It is not a sector for only women, even men are interested in makeup and working in beauty services in Bangladesh.

However, frustration is also evident among some women entrepreneurs. Like many interviewed women entrepreneurs, Sharmin expressed skepticism about government initiatives for women's entrepreneurship:

The Government of Bangladesh claims it will provide loans with easy conditions, but I doubt they will implement these initiatives. Banks often require extensive paperwork, making the process frustrating. They mention a 9% interest rate, but I'm unsure if eligible women entrepreneurs will truly benefit. The government needs to ensure we receive the promised support.

Taslima, the owner of the leather product manufacturing enterprise, believes that Bangladesh has yet to establish a truly supportive environment for women entrepreneurs. She remarked,

Business is difficult for women in this country. There are so many questions, harassment, and discrimination that create constant hassles. Still, women do it because they are resilient and determined. They take it as a challenge.

Ayesha echoes Taslima's view on women's growing confidence: "Women are much braver now. Earlier, many hesitated to start businesses even after training due to a lack of equipment and capital." She highlights how easier access to information and technology now enables women to launch businesses quickly after training, explaining how finding students for training used to require door-to-door efforts and leaflets. "Today, social media and fast internet have made everything simpler. Back then, communication was tough with scarce, expensive cell phones," she observed.

Sense of empowerment and ambition

When interviewed about their hopes, dreams, and legacies, the women entrepreneurs expressed a strong sense of empowerment and ambition, driven by both personal achievements and the desire to inspire others. Sharmin shared that her company aims to help every woman become her own beauty expert. She cemented,

When I first started my business, my family, including my mother, knew little about personal care and used random products. Now, my mother checks ingredients, knows her skin type and allergies,

and can detect original products. This makes me extremely happy and proud.

Sharmin's sense of empowerment stems from her financial independence and her ability to create opportunities for others to achieve the same. Masuda also feels empowered by her ability to be independent and serve as a role model for her daughter. Her empowerment comes from successfully balancing her business and family responsibilities, proving herself capable despite societal expectations. She said,

I feel most empowered when I see my independence. I feel proud when my daughter says she wants to be an entrepreneur. My parents, who once wanted a son, are proud of me. But, I feel empowered most when I successfully deliver product orders to my customers and clients.

Eshrat wants to pass her business legacy to her daughter, aspiring to establish herself as a leading exporter of jute products and contribute to the national economy. She hoped,

Bangladesh's jute industry has global potential. I aim to become a leading jute exporter, expanding my factory to create more jobs and boost the economy. I hope to motivate more women to join the jute sector as entrepreneurs.

Similarly, Abida wants her children to follow in her entrepreneurial footsteps. Her initial struggles turned into success, leading her to dream of establishing a training institution for food carving and event management. "I plan to establish an institution for teaching carving art. I hope it will become a recognized profession, with well-reputed hotels hiring artists trained by my institution." Parveen is inspired by the rural women who sew Nakshi Kantha for her. Under her enterprise, about 700 female full-time artisans and 3000 to 4000 part-timers stitch Kantha. Her ambition is to expand her business internationally and bring recognition to the traditional craft. She believes the government has a role in helping businesses like hers reach global markets. "Our Nakshi Kantha has global demand. How long will we sell Kanthas only nationally when we can reach the international market?" Similarly, Farhana feels empowered by connecting talented Bangladeshi artisans with the global market. She commented,

I feel proud seeing a basket made of palm leaves or hogla made by our women decorating a foreign dining table. I work with indigenous women of the Marma, Chakma, and Mrus tribes, and many had quit making tribal products. They are now encouraged to revive their traditional products and place those in my hands for the customers.

Her plan is to keep working with tribal artistry and create employment opportunities for deprived women and unrecognized artisans.

DISCUSSION ON RESPONSES

Many of the respondents had previously worked in diverse sectors, but they were forced to quit due to pregnancy and trouble handling the dilemma between professional commitments and household duties, which still remain primary obligations for women in Bangladesh. As seen in other developing countries like India and Pakistan, family support plays an influential role in facilitating women's entry into entrepreneurship (Sardar et al., 2019; Sohail et al., 2022). Although there might not be absolute support from the family, less hostility to women starting a business is required for women to proceed. As renowned Bangladeshi saree house owner Munira explained, "A woman's success is tied to family stability. She needs a supportive, balanced household to focus fully on work."

In the study, some participants reported having no familial objections, especially those whose families are involved in business. Some respondents were found to mention their family members (mothers, sisters, husbands) as inspirations for their enterprises. Husbands were the ones who encouraged them to start businesses, as entrepreneurship gives one the flexibility to manage their household obligations, minus the pressure of conventional office jobs, and achieve financial independence. Socio-economic factors like the spread of female education, modernization, the decline of Joint families, high graduate unemployment, and an increase in urban living standards and costs, along with pull factors like flexibility and autonomy of entrepreneurship, are causing the alteration. Therefore, women are receiving familial support in many cases, although it is their determination and resilience that ultimately lead women to their success.

Entrepreneurship empowered the respondents in diverse ways, and many wished their children would take over their enterprises in the future. The interviewees prioritized employing other women, especially those who were destitute, which is evidence of a conscious intention to make a societal impact and uplift the less fortunate. In addition, the capability of managing and operating the enterprises, taking orders and delivering good quality products and services to the customers on time, exercising creativity and innovations in their products, building networks with others, and achieving recognition were reported as some empowering aspects of entrepreneurship by the interviewees. Several interviewees emphasized tribal and traditional handicrafts reflecting the passion for revival, promotion, and experimentation with the nation's crafts and artistry. Their successes turned social and familial disapproval into admiration and respect. Women naturally possess good interpersonal and communication skills that facilitate the capacity to manage businesses successfully.

Interviewees expressed that their business had become their own "child" and they had been raising it to its full potential. Their motherly nature creates a personal attachment with the businesses and employees. The study also shows that these women are ambitious and aware of the strategies that are needed to reach their destinations. Business expansion, emerging as a well-known brand,

global promotion, and representing the nation in the process were some of the aims of the respondents. Naturally, they adopt a "slow and steady" approach, balancing business goals with traditional roles as wives and mothers. Like Masuda, they have a confident and sanguine outlook on the future of women entrepreneurship in Bangladesh. "I believe with support, women can outperform men. Hard work is essential, but I aim to establish myself as a human being, beyond gender labels."

Finally, women in Bangladesh are leveraging technological advancements and social media to navigate business challenges and reach wider clients. A similar trend has been visible in countries like the Philippines and Afghanistan (Lavilles et al., 2023; Merza, 2019), where digital platforms play a transformative role in expanding women's entrepreneurship. Seeking self-reliance, they are shaping their own fortune despite gender-oriented obstacles and limited capital.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As Bangladesh continues to develop, the empowerment of women through entrepreneurship will play a pivotal role in achieving sustainable economic development and social equity. It is essential to conduct extensive research through nationwide surveys and case studies on both current and unsuccessful women entrepreneurs. This will equip policymakers with a deeper understanding of the constraints and necessities for evolving and advancing women's entrepreneurship in Bangladesh. Based on the opinions gathered from respondents and the broader findings of this study, the following research-driven recommendations are proposed to improve the conditions and opportunities for women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh:

1. While respondents emphasized the necessity for sufficient loan benefits with low interest rates, the government must streamline loan application procedures and minimize bureaucratic hurdles for aspiring women entrepreneurs.
2. Distribution of credits alone may not suffice; proper monitoring and guidance are essential to ensure the effective utilization of the loans. The government should emphasize the honest implementation of initiatives to ensure that women benefit from the available facilities and services.
3. To support the new entrepreneurs, the government should consider reducing VAT and taxes on new businesses.
4. Training facilities provided by the government should be expanded to district and upazila levels, to make them more accessible to rural women. The training program should include aspects like Business management and product marketing strategies, account management, and promotional techniques. In addition, specialized English language and IT training courses should be offered to emerging entrepreneurs.
5. The government should create a dedicated and exclusive online business platform for women entrepreneurs to facilitate networking, knowledge sharing, mentoring, and access to online markets.

6. The government should support local entrepreneurs from unfair competition with cheap goods imported from neighboring countries by increasing taxes on them to encourage Indigenous products.
7. To encourage semi-urban and rural women entrepreneurs, fairs and exhibitions should be organized nationwide, not just in big cities, with lower participation fees.
8. The government should assist women entrepreneurs to reach global markets as well as improve the quality and diversity of their goods by organizing international exhibitions.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Analyzing the experiences of urban-educated female entrepreneurs, this paper examines the complex dilemma between socio-cultural restrictions and women's necessity for economic independence and self-autonomy in the changing socio-economic circumstances of post-independent Bangladesh. However, despite their educational background, they face structural and cultural barriers, such as limited access to credit, societal expectations, and a lack of institutional support. The analysis demonstrates that entrepreneurial efforts have enabled these women to gain confidence, contribute to household income, and foster greater decision-making power within their families and communities. By empowering themselves through their ventures, they are gradually altering the stereotypical perceptions of society regarding women's contribution to the business sphere. The prioritization of destitute women and the marginalized community in recruitment and the urge to promote traditional crafts and products while contributing to the nation's economic growth reflect their sense of responsibility.

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