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**WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ENTREPRENEURSHIP
DEVELOPMENT WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SELF HELP GROUPS: A
CASE STUDY OF COMILLA DISTRICT**

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Abstract:

Women's economic empowerment is an inevitable part of development discourse. Excluding women from the mainstream development program, institutionalization of a sustainable development process is just unthinkable. Bangladesh has great entrepreneurial potential. Entrepreneurships enhance financial independence and self esteem of women. About 83% of enterprises in the sample were established between the years 2000-2007 indicating that young women are gradually becoming interested in business and entrepreneurial activities and women's visibility in economic sector is increasing. Consequently, under successive Five-Year-Plans, women's development initiatives have been gradually integrated into the macro framework and multi-sectoral economy to bring women into the mainstream of economic development and encourage potential women entrepreneurs realizing their business plans. Women's contribution to household income and family welfare, increasing women's participation in household decisions about expenditure and other issues leading to greater expenditure on women's welfare. The purpose of this paper is to show empowerment of women through SHGs.

Key Words:

*Women Empowerment,
Entrepreneurship, Self Help
Groups, Micro Finance,
Bangladesh..*

1. Introduction

Existing sex ratio in demographic structure of Bangladesh indicates that women comprise almost 50% of the total population. They are essential part of nation's human resources. Due to this demographic structure, the issue of the participation of women in the mainstream economy is imperative. Without a meaningful and active participation of women, half of the total population, in regular economic activities, a dynamic and sustainable economy is impossible. A sustainable economy is a precondition for national growth and prosperity including institutionalization of a democratic system. It is also impossible to achieve the target of a poverty-free society without incorporation of women in the mainstream economy. Women in Bangladesh are employed in low category jobs. Most of them are employed in Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery sectors, where the share of the women employees is 78.8%. Even in clerical jobs women are poorly represented. In administrative function, there is little woman participation, which clearly shows the frustrating job situation for the women in Bangladesh (Aktaruddin, M. 2000). Due to the grace of the emergence and growth of the Ready Made Garments sector, the share of women in production has increased. The share of women in this sector is 10%. Only in services sector, the job share of women is more than their male colleagues; the share of women in this sector is 5.4 % whereas the male only comprises 2.4% of the jobs of this category.

Development alone cannot bring peace and prosperity unless social justice and gender equality are ensured. It has been well accepted that various development programmes have bypassed women who constitute about half of the population of the country. International conventions and conferences, legal enactments, constitutional provisions etc. highlighted the imperative need for gender equality and women empowerment. The rural poor, with the intermediation of voluntary organizations join together for self help to secure better economic growth. This has resulted in the formation of a large number of self help groups in the country, which mobilize savings and recycle the resources generated among the members. SHG's are necessary to overcome exploitation, create confidence for the economic self-reliance of the rural poor, particularly among women who are mostly invisible in the social structure. These groups enable them to come together for a common objective and gain strength from each other to deal with exploitation, which they are facing, in several forms. A group becomes the basis for action and change. Significantly, credit is a major factor in boosting economic development if it is effectively utilized (Begum, R. 1993). The government's recent initiatives to streamline credit operations and delivery system through

micro-finance movement and strengthening and expansion of credit institutions (SHGs) can definitely help in the revival of rural economy and empowerment of the rural poor. Micro Finance as a tool of poverty alleviation and women empowerment has gained acceptance in development dialogue the world over. There is an acute need among the poor for credit, both for consumption and production, which often forms the declining line between survival and succumbing to poverty. It has been found that besides food, credit is also needed for health, housing education. These needs are also critical for survival. The success of SHGs as a development tool depends on the availability of Micro Finance.

By nature, it is an explorative study aiming at having an overview of the situation of women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh. The main thematic issues covered by this study are socio-demographic profile of women entrepreneurs, types of women-owned enterprises, regulatory procedures including tax, VAT, company registration, training and capacity buildings and human resources (Goswami, Arun Kumar, 1998). The study also focused women's access to finance, business management, product and design development, marketing and the issues related to business promotion. The study tried to explore the social perspectives of women entrepreneurs, their conditions and position in family.

2. Objectives

The overall objective of the study is to have an overview of the existing situation of women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh in line with their problems and prospects. The objectives of this study are delineating bellow:

- To have clear idea about Socio-demographic profile of women entrepreneurs
- To improve the legislative environment in which women entrepreneurs operates in Bangladesh, nationally and locally.
- To encourage women empowerment among the women for eradicate of poverty.

3. Methodology and Data

Considering the objectives of the study, geographical areas, time, types of respondents, major thematic areas under the study, both qualitative and quantitative research methods and procedures were applied to explore pertinent information for this study. In this study woman entrepreneurs were selected for questionnaire survey. In addition, the qualitative information was collected from various stakeholders, who are directly or indirectly related with women entrepreneurship development. Apart from women entrepreneurs, the qualitative information

were collected from the representatives of public institutions, local government, female ward commissioners, business community, NGOs, financial institutions.

As mentioned earlier, the questionnaire survey was conducted among 50 women entrepreneurs from Comilla district of Bangladesh. Considering this, the data were collected from three Upazillas namely; Comilla Sadar North Upazilla, Comilla Sadar South Upazilla and Chandina Upazilla.

4. Key concepts of Entrepreneurship Development

4.1 Concept of Self-Help Group

The International Network for Mutual Help Centers has developed this working Definition : Self help of mutual support is a process where in people who share common experience, situations of problems can offer each other a unique perspective that is not available from those who have not shared these experience. Self-help groups are run by and for group's members. A group of people, who meet regularly for discuss common issues and to look at solution for the same. But, as on date the members of the SHGs understood the importance of the savings though participation. In general, self-help groups are based on principles of empowerment, inclusion, nonhierarchical decision making, shared responsibility, and a holistic approach to people's cultural, economics, and social needs.

4.2 Concept of Micro Finance

During the last two decades micro-finance programs have proliferated around the world. The Nobel Peace Prize 2006 awarded to the Grameen Bank and its founder signifies the global recognition of micro-finance programmes as an effective strategy to generate income and employment and poverty alleviation in developing countries. They are considered for and important approach to poverty alleviation and enhancement of living standards, particularly of women. Moreover, microfinance has come to be regarded as a supplementary development paradigm, which widens the financial service delivery system by linking the large rural population with formal institutions through SHGs. The term microfinance refers to providing very poor families with very small loans (micro credit) to help them engage in productive activities and grow their tiny business. Overtime microfinance has come to include a broader range of services like credit, savings and insurance etc. It is believed that in principle and practice microfinance programmes are very easy for achieving financial access and alleviating poverty. Micro finance through Self-Help Groups (SGHs) has proved to be a strategic

measure for organizing women in groups and promoting saving and thrift habits to gain access to institutional credit for their socio-economic development and empowerment.

4.3 Women Empowerment and SHGs

The word empowerment means giving power. According to the International Encyclopedia (1999), power means having the capacity and the means to direct one's life towards desired social, political and economic goals or status. Empowerment does not mean setting women against men. Indeed it means making both men and women realize their changing roles and women realize their changing roles and status and develop a consensus for harmonious living in the context of an egalitarian Society. It means redistribution of work, roles, redistributing their values to the changing world and attitudes and evolving new kinds of adjustment, understanding and trust with each other. Empowerment of women also means equal status to women. SHG occupies the major part of the rural development of the nation. This constituted all the part of the nation. This concept was successfully implemented and achieved in Bangladesh. Bangladesh became a large size SHG constituted country and mobilized crores of money. SHG mainly concerned with the enlistment of the women in the society through, social, economical aspects. It leads to provide and bring the empowerment to the women. SHG not only mobilize micro finance and provide credit to the needed members but also it provides self employment training, awareness programme, promote the leadership qualities and confidential life to its members (A.V. Shivashankar Reddy and Chitrashekhar Chiralli, 2009).

4.4 Women Entrepreneurs

SHG has really helped to increase the skills and awareness of women. The objectives of Entrepreneurship Development programme (EDP) is to promote economic activities among the members of Self-help Group through skill training, Entrepreneurship Development, credit linkage and market support. The year 2001 was announced as the year of women Empowerment. The Bangladeshi women are under the control of the male in family womb to tomb. When she is a child, she is under the control of her father. At her later age after her marriage she is controlled by her husband and at the old age controlled by her son. This reduced her self-confidence and will to make independent initiative. They were not even made aware of the utility of education (Habibullah, M. 2003).

5. Scenario of Women Entrepreneurship in Bangladesh

5.1. Situation of Women Entrepreneurship in Bangladesh

Women in Bangladesh are a significant entrepreneurial force, contributing to the development of local, national and global economies. Women-run businesses –mostly micro and small enterprises– are found in the production and marketing of agricultural and consumer goods, as well as the provision of services for local, national and multinational markets. The enterprises owned by women feature some interesting characteristics regarding ownership, management, sources of capital, technology, market orientation.

5.2 Women's Entrepreneurship's Contribution to Poverty Reduction

It is recognized that women's entrepreneurship can reduce women's income poverty and thus contribute to poverty reduction. As women engage in business activities, they face different constraints and opportunities compared to their male counterparts. In Bangladesh, recent consultations carried out by the Asian Development Bank –in consultation with the *Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry* (BWCCI), the *Women Entrepreneurs Association* (WEA), and *Micro Enterprise Development Assistance and Services* (MIDAS) – identified a set of barriers to women entrepreneurship development. In addition to persistent gender biases and gender-based discriminatory laws and regulations, the consultations identified three critical impediments to women entrepreneurship, which form the rationale for the proposed subproject. These relate to women entrepreneurs' limited access to skills and technology; financial resources and services; and market information and business services particularly backward and forward linkage opportunities. These circumstances are further affected by women organizations' limited ability to advocate for change (Saleh, Abu.1995).

5.3 Limited Access to Skills and Technology

In Bangladesh due to gender biases and stereotypes, girls and women have low educational attainments and –when access to higher education is granted- limited involvement in non-traditional disciplines such as science, technology and business administration. Women's business is still considered from a self-employment rather than from an 'entrepreneurial' perspective. These factors combined with women's limited access to vocational training and technologies result in women entrepreneurs' limited ability to start and manage a business and the perception of being less likely to succeed.

5.4 Limited Access to Financial Resources and Services

SMEs, which contribute 40% of manufacturing output and about 80% of the industrial work force, are hampered by limited access to medium- to long-term credit. Banks and other financial institutions generally prefer large enterprise clients because of the lower transaction costs, and greater availability of collateral. SMEs also fall outside the reach of microfinance schemes, and are thus compelled to depend more on informal sources of funds at much higher interest rates. Access to credit for starting the business is a critical concern for women entrepreneurs and women-owned businesses, due to their limited access to collateral, banks' unwillingness to accept household assets as collaterals and the lack of positive attitude and confidence of loan officers to women entrepreneurs' managerial skills. Sometimes, credit may be available for women through several schemes but there are procedural bottlenecks and gaps, and the multiplicity of available schemes is often inadequately presented to women entrepreneurs. As a result of advocacy initiatives, the Government of Bangladesh (Bangladesh Bank) has recently enacted an amendment to the *Refinance Scheme for Women Entrepreneurs of SME*, raising the minimum target for earmarked resources to women entrepreneurs from 10 to 15%, 40% of which will be dedicated to small women entrepreneurs. The content of this and other gender-sensitive laws and regulations are unknown by most of the commercial banks outside metropolitan Dhaka and Chittagong (Rahman, Mizanoor Md.; Ibrahim Md. Hossain; and Abdus Shahid Miah. 2000).

5.5 Limited Access to Market Information and Business Services

The limited access to market information and business support services constitute a further impediment to women's access to existing opportunities. Some women-led enterprises have already reached export potential. Women-led enterprises export agricultural produce, processed foods, handicrafts, and other items, and some are looking to order more products from self-employed, owner-operated enterprises. These links have the potential to be strengthened to build a critical mass, but they require support. Many of the smaller producers are unaware of how to explore market potential for their products, the potential for value addition and the value chain as often they operate in isolation from markets and information. Programs run by and for women overcome these traditional attitudes more readily. Women who lack confidence often respond more quickly to ideas from women acting as role models (Rahman, Aminur. 1999).

6. Entrepreneurship Development of Rural Women through Self Help Groups

Women comprise half of human resources they have been identified as key agents of sustainable development and women's equality is as central to a more holistic approach towards stabilizing new patterns and process of development that are sustainable. (Birendra Kumar, 2009). The contribution of women and their role in the family as well as in the economic development and social transformation are pivotal. Women constitute 90 percent of total marginal workers of the country. Rural women who are engaged in agriculture form 78 percent of all women in regular work (Harendar Kumar, 2009). Experience of NIRD action research project reveal that, the operational aspects, such as the extent of enabling that goes into the community self help processes and sharpening the mind set of women. Men and the project administrators are low of critical components that determine their extent to which empowerment may or may not take place. The role of micro-credit is to, improve the socio and economic development of women and improve the status of women in households and communities. The micro entrepreneurships are strengthening the women empowerment and remove the gender inequalities. Self Help Group's micro credit mechanism makes the members to involve in other community development activities. Micro credit is promoting the small scale business enterprises and its major aim is to alleviate poverty by income generating activities among women and poor. Therefore, they could achieve self- sufficiency. Now-a-days economics development is one of the factors that have changed the entire scenario of social and cultural environment within the country especially for the women. The rural women are engaged in small-scale entrepreneurship programme with the help of Self Help Groups. Through that they were economically empowered and attaining status in family and community. Rural women play a vital role in farm and home system. She contributes substantially in the physical aspect of farming, livestock management, post harvest and allied activities. Her direct and indirect contribution at the farm and home level along with livestock management operation has not only help to save their assets but also led to increase the family income. She performs various farm, livestock, post harvest and allied activities and possesses skills and indigenous knowledge in these areas (Rahman, Aminur 1999). The women were empowering themselves technically to cope with the changing times and productively using their free time and existing skills for setting and sustaining enterprises. They were engaged in starting individual or collective income generation programme with the help of self-help group. This will not only generate income for them but also improve the decision-making capabilities that ensure the overall empowerment.

7. Findings and Analysis

7.1 Differences of Age limit

Percentage distribution of the respondent by age:

Age					Total
15-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	50+ years	
21.7	36.6	26.7	9.0	6.0	100%

Total No. of Respondents is 50.

Among women entrepreneurs interviewed, 58.3% respondents belong to the age group of 15-30 years and another 26.7% belong to the age group 31-40 years. Women entrepreneurs belong to middle (41-50 years) and older age group (50+years) constitutes only 15% of the total sample. The percentage distribution of women entrepreneurs by age indicates that most of the women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh are young. It is also evident from the values of mean and median age, which were found to be 30.60 and 27 years respectively. Median value indicates that 50% of women entrepreneurs in the sample belong to age bracket of 15-27 years.

7.2 Differences from level of Education

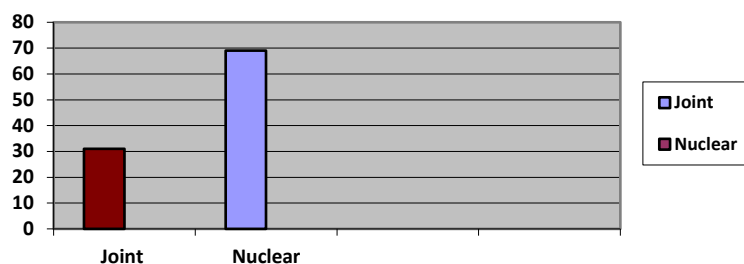
Percentage distribution of women entrepreneurs by the level of education

Level of Education	%
Post Graduation	10.9
Graduation	16.8
HSC	26.7
SSC	34.7
Class Eight	5.9
Primary (Class five)	1.0
No formal Education	4.0
Total	100

In terms of educational level of women entrepreneurs, 10.9% have post graduation degree, 16.8% are graduates, 26.7% have higher secondary education, 34.7% have secondary school level education and 6.9% have minimum primary education. Only 4% of women entrepreneurs interviewed have no formal education but some of them mentioned that they could read and write.

7.3 Types of Family and Number of Children

Percentage distribution of women entrepreneurs by the types of family



In terms of the types of family, most of the women entrepreneurs (69%) interviewed live in either a nuclear or a conjugal family while only 31% live in extended or joint family. Among married women entrepreneurs, 30% had no child. The arithmetic mean for the number of children for the rest of 70% married women entrepreneurs was calculated as 1.3 and the median value was found to be 1, which means average number of children for women entrepreneurs are less than 2 and at least 50% of them has only one child. This statistic indicates that women’s economic involvement is not only contributing towards economic development but also to country’s social development activities like ongoing family planning program. It is evident that

Involvement of women in formal economy inspires them to keep family size smaller.

7.4 Motivating Factors to Enter into Business

The respondents were asked to describe factors that encourage them to enter into business and entrepreneurial activities. The opinions they expressed in response to this question are compiled and given in the following table with relative frequency and ranking.

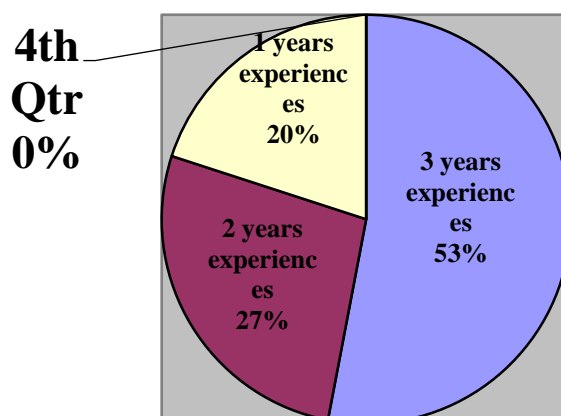
Factors that encourage women to enter into business	%	Ranking
Inspiration from family	26	1
To create self-dependency	20	4
Self inspiration	16	8
For economic freedom	14	9
Inspiration from friend	7	9
Inspiration from organization	5	9
No alternative to have a job	4	10
Inspiration from training	3	10
Eradicate gender discrimination	2	10
To established women’s right	1	10

Creating opportunity for others	1	10
Economic development	1	10

The picture that we found in our study area is outstanding because maximum women were inspired from their family members (26%). Family members encourage them to involve any kind of income generating activities. The positive attitudes inspired the women to involve any income generating activities (20%) by self dependency. 16% women were encouraged by self- inspiration. We found that the women were involve in various activities only for ensure the economic stability (14%). We also found that women were inspired from their friends (7%), various development organizations (5%) and 12% were inspired from various institutions and persons.

7.5 Duration of Experience in Business

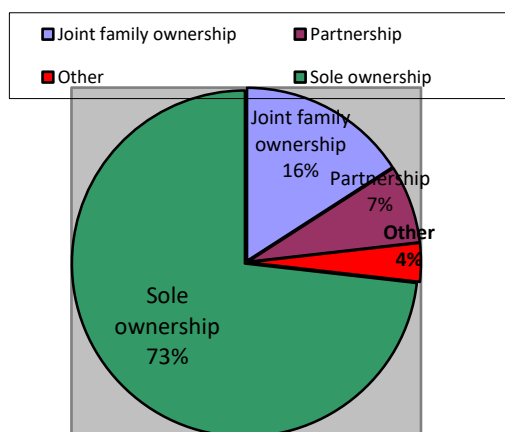
It is observed that involvement in formal business by women is not very old phenomena as about 53% of women entrepreneurs in the sample have only three years or less than three years experiences in business.



Among the 50 women entrepreneurs, 27% have only one year of experiences and 20% has 2 years of experiences in business.

7.6 Nature of Ownership

Percentage distribution of enterprises by the nature of ownership



Picture shows that individual ownership is dominant type. Among 50 enterprises, 73% is owned by individual, 16% is jointly owned by family members and only 7% business is run in partnership with other members. Beside these only 4% ownership were found which were not well connected from them or their family members.

7.7 Types of Business

As the research work we found women were involve in various sectors.

Name of the sectors	%
Garments	16.1
Printing	1.6
Handicraft	69.4
Agro based	3.2
Parlor	4.8
Food	3.2
Others	1.6
Total	100%

Among the respondents, majority of women entrepreneur (69.4%) were found to be involved in handicraft sector followed by garments/ home-textile (16. 1%). The table also shows that women are becoming in non-traditional sectors like printing and media, food business, etc. It is observed that 60% of women entrepreneurs did not know how to conduct feasibility study before selecting a specific product, 26.7% of them were completely found unaware of feasibility study and 6.7% of them did not feel necessity to conduct a feasibility study. Only few women entrepreneurs told that they conducted feasibility through market observation and participation in trade fair.

8. Advantages of Entrepreneurship among Rural Women

Empowering women particularly rural women is a challenge. Micro enterprise in rural area can help to meet these challenges. Micro–enterprises not only enhance national productivity, generate employment but also help to develop economic independence, personal and social capabilities among rural women (Aktaruddin, M. 2000). Following are some of the personal and social capabilities, which were developed as result of taking up enterprise among rural women.

- ✓ Economic empowerment
- ✓ Improved standard of living
- ✓ Self confidence
- ✓ Enhance awareness
- ✓ Engaged in political activities
- ✓ Improvement in leadership qualities
- ✓ Involvement in solving problems related to women and community
- ✓ Decision making capacity in family and community

Economic empowerment of women by micro entrepreneurship to the empowerment of women in many things such as socio – economic opportunity, property rights, political representation, social equality, personal right, family development, market development, community development and at last the nation development.

9. Conclusion

Empowerment of women has emerged as an important issue in recent times. The economic empowerment of women is of paramount importance to political thinkers, social scientists and reformers. Women entrepreneurs faced many obstacles with respect to holding property and entering contracts, etc. But they having basic indigenous knowledge, skill, potential and resources to establish and manage enterprise. They are in need of building capacity in marketing, business promotion, accounting and bookkeeping, product and design development, ICT, e-commerce and regulatory process, etc. The opportunity of training was found to be very limited. The roles of public training providing agencies were not satisfactory. NGOs are providing some training with limited scales. Our Government has adopted some policies regarding women entrepreneurship development in rural Bangladesh. But the complication arises at the time of implementation. Sometimes the services of Government are available in urban areas, whereas rural entrepreneurs continue to be victims of deprivation. In

spite of having access to various micro credits, rural women receive almost no training from development organizations, which adversely affects their efficiency and performance. Under this juncture self help groups (SHGs) as a tool for economic independence of rural women. The members of SHGs are involved in Micro – Entrepreneurships. Through that, they are becoming economically independent and providing employment opportunities to others. In total SHG not only mobilize micro finance and provide micro credit to the needed members but also it provides self employment training, awareness programme, promote the leadership qualities and confidential life to its members.

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