

Entrepreneurship and women's well-being in Bangladesh

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Sabrina Nourin has more than 11 years of work experience in managing supply chains in Bangladesh. She started her career at Avery Dennison Bangladesh and subsequently worked in Sanofi Bangladesh, Banglalink Digital Telecommunication Ltd and Berger Paints Bangladesh Limited. She then decided to follow her passion and advance her study. She completed her postgraduate research diploma at Monash University in 2017, where she conducted research on women entrepreneurship in Bangladesh under the supervision of Dr. Wee Chan Au and Professor Pervaiz K. Ahmed. Her research focuses on the experiences and challenges faced by women entrepreneurs through their entrepreneurial journeys. Prior to her research experience, she had completed her Master and Bachelor in Business administration from BRAC University Bangladesh.

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Abstract

The impact of entrepreneurship on a nation's long-term economic growth through job creation, productivity, innovation, and GDP are widely documented and evidenced (Baumol, 2002; Stel, Carree, & Thurik, 2005; Sautet, 2013; Wennekers & Thurik, 1999; Van Praag & Versloot, 2008; Wong, Ho, & Autio, 2005). To aid and buttress economic growth, governments in various countries have adopted a favorable outlook towards women entrepreneurship. To date much of research on women entrepreneurship has taken place in developed economy contexts. This study answers the call by De Vita, Mari, and Poggesi (2014) to extend research attention on the phenomena of female entrepreneurship beyond developed country contexts.

The particular focus of this study is to explore entrepreneurial experiences of women in the unique socio-cultural and institutional environment of Bangladesh. In developing economies, self-employment and entrepreneurship has in recent times become quite widespread as a means to attain economic well-being since women in such countries face great barriers in securing formal employment (Minniti & Naudé, 2010). In Bangladesh, a woman's life is highly constrained by a variety of socio-economic barriers, including but not limited to unequal access to education and resources as well as patriarchal socio-cultural norms. The aim of this paper is to explore the agency of women and the influence of structural forces that influence women entrepreneurship in Bangladesh.

Building on the belief that the nature of women entrepreneurship depends on multiple meanings, interpretations and realities of society (George & Marino, 2011), this study adopts a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs in

Bangladesh. Phenomenology as an approach focuses on understanding the specific phenomena as perceived by actors in a specific situation. In other words, this methodology privileges people lived experiences over abstract knowledge or reflection (Berglund, 2015). In this study the qualitative data collected via face-to-face in-depth interviews is in the form of narratives and lived experiences of women entrepreneurs, which are contextual and socially constructed in the environment of Bangladesh.

In total, semi-structured interviews with 35 women who are self-employed or entrepreneurs were conducted in 2017 at Dhaka and surrounding villages. Most interviews were conducted in Bengali, the native language of Bangladesh, while a few interviews with women entrepreneurs who were educated overseas were conducted in English. Interviews conducted in Bengali were transcribed and translated to English. To ensure accuracy in translation, transcripts were randomly selected to be verified by a third party who is fluent in both English and Bengali. This verification step ensures that our translation is accurate. We covered women entrepreneurs coming from a range of backgrounds and businesses to ensure heterogeneity of lived experiences. Among the 35 participants, the range of business include apparel retail, tailoring, manufacturing, IT support, and consultancy. Length of their business ranges from 1 year to 22 years. Education level also ranges from illiterate to master degree. Size of business ranges from self-employed to 40 employees.

The procedure suggested by Colaizzi (1978) was adopted to analyze interview transcripts. Themes were developed through the analysis process, with particular attention being paid to the manifestations of women's well-being within the narratives of their entrepreneurial journeys.

People like to perform in accordance to group and societal norms (Hofstede 1998). In Bangladesh, male dominant societal norms appear to lie at the root of weak agentic power among

women. Women are in a disadvantaged position in Bangladesh's patriarchal society; they have to rely on male family members for almost all decisions. A strong chauvinist culture, where male domination features heavily in the power structures of society prejudices women's lives in Bangladesh. Bangladeshi women have little agency to initiate and operate a business without a male figure. Accordingly, the presence of a male figure, whether openly or in the background, is commonly identified in the narratives of Bangladeshi women entrepreneurs.

Bangladeshi women have little space in building agency through conventional channels, such as networks. Religious and societal norms do not allow them to socialize and network freely like men. To some extent, women entrepreneurs from strong family backgrounds are still able to capitalize on their family's network or the network from their university or working life. In sharp contrast, Push women entrepreneurs are highly constrained in their ability to build agency power through networks. Stereotypes, gender role ideologies and low societal acceptance of women to act as entrepreneur strongly limits the development of agency of Push women entrepreneurs.

We observe from the narratives that the level and nature of agency developed by women entrepreneurs is the leading factor in determining if they will succeed in attaining economic well-being while assuring their psychological well-being through-out the entrepreneurship journey. Both Push and Pull women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh face discrimination, harassment and safety issues, but experience these at different levels of intensity. Pull women entrepreneurs' backgrounds buffer them from the worst excesses of prejudice. Push women entrepreneurs don't possess the buffer of a privileged background. This limits their ability to develop agentic power and leverage it during the conduct of business. Consequently, these women are subject to harsh discrimination, mistreatment and harassment along their entrepreneurial journey, which is heavily taxing on their psychological well-being. Nonetheless, their engagement in business

enterprise provides them an opportunity to improve economic well-being. Even a small improvement in financial independence can help them to improve upon the dire condition that pushed them into entrepreneurship in the first place.

Our study finds while economic well-being of family may be alleviated through entrepreneurship, women entrepreneurs' psychological well-being is constantly at risk as they strive to balance conflicts arising out of the expectations set by their husband, family, society as well as business demands. Pull entrepreneurs equipped with better resources and support are able to generate stronger agency to deal with the challenges they face. Possessing low level of agency, Push entrepreneurs find navigating the process of entrepreneurship to be much more psychologically depleting. Some are able to cope with the multiple sources of stress for short periods but few are able to absorb such pressure over the long run. Business success for these women is more of an exception than the norm.

Findings of this study revealed that women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh have to maneuver through many explicit as well hidden obstacles throughout their entrepreneurial journey. A few manage to overcome these impediments and achieve economic well-being without foregoing psychological well-being but most do so at expense of their psychological well-being. Lacking agency within the highly constraining social structures of the Bangladesh's business and social environment many Bangladeshi women entrepreneurs struggle with severe consequences, such as family breakup. This is particularly the case when the entrepreneurial endeavor fails to succeed, irrespective of the reasons for failure. This makes the risks that much higher for women. Not only are the stakes unfavorably stacked but they are broader and reach far beyond the ambit of financial risk that men face.

Findings of this study affirms the root of women entrepreneurship in institutional theory (De Vita et al. 2014) whereby women's entrepreneurial experiences are strongly defined by Bangladesh's economic, legal and social-cultural context. This study highlights the heterogeneity of women entrepreneurs' experiences in a developing country context. While patriarchal rules embedded in Bangladesh's social structure portray common constraints on women's capacity to act, we find that the level of agency that is developed by women differs according to their backgrounds and shapes their entrepreneurial experiences. Agency of Bangladeshi women from weak family backgrounds in this study fits well with Mohanty's (1991) argument that women in the third world (who are ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, family-oriented, etc) tend to be the victims than agents of their own destiny. This contrasts with Bangladeshi women from strong family backgrounds, who are able to navigate many of the social and structural barriers more effectively despite facing common social sanction.

Reflecting over the findings, we contend that while some progress has been made Bangladesh must continue to work on policies that construct an environment that is accommodating and supportive of women entrepreneurs. This will require not just policy enactment but a shift in perspectives and civics towards women. Not just words but action in behavior. Without a strong behaviorally facilitating environment, women in Bangladesh are unlikely to be able to contribute to their pull potential to Bangladesh's economic growth.

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