Policies and Institutional Supports for Women Entrepreneurship Development in Bangladesh: Achievements and Challenges

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Abstract

Women's entrepreneurship is important for women's position in society, and for economic development of a country. Many scholars pointed out that women faces diverse challenges in doing business in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh. Women are now involved in economic activities than in the past, women constitute around 10 percent of the country's total business entrepreneurs. The present study is an effort to find out the factors which act as pull and push factors to engage women in entrepreneurship development in Bangladesh. In this study mixed method approach has been chosen. To attain the objective of the research researchers relied solely on the secondary sources. The study revealed that Government agencies provide policy, legal and financial support with active support from non-State actors. On the contrary, they do not get proper support from all relevant institutions because of corruption and lack of information. It is suggested that combined initiatives of Government and non-government institutions will be successful in meeting the needs of business women in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurship; Policies; Institutions; Patriarchal Society; Bangladesh

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1. Introduction

Women in Bangladesh face many challenges in doing business when their traditional roles make them responsible for preparing food to feed their families and supplying household needs. The opportunity to expand their work beyond a household level or develop other kinds of businesses is often hindered because of the dominance of patriarchy. Also, they do not get the same access to training, services, equipment, and financing as men. Women are also often constrained by laws or social discrimination that prevent them from owning property, borrowing money, and gaining access to land and natural resources. Despite these obstacles, many women are involved in income-generating activities, particularly small-scale business activities. Recently, that an increasing trend has been found in the involvement of women in small business is well- recognized in Bangladesh. In this article, we would like to identify the factors, with special attention to policy- and institution-related factors, which play important roles in the progress of women in small enterprise development in Bangladesh.

Women's entrepreneurship is important for women's position in society, and for the economic development of a country. It opens up new avenues for creating employment opportunities for women and men. Increased participation of women in the labour force is considered a prerequisite for improving the position of women in society because women can begin to contribute economically in their families. From the broader perspective, empowering women in economic activity is essential for building just societies, for achieving internationally-settled targets for development, sustainability and human rights; and for improving the quality of life for women, men, families and communities (ILO, 2007)

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Contribution of women's business to a national economy has been well-documented in different countries of the world. In Canada, the Prime Minister's Task Force on Women Entrepreneurs (2003) reported that more than 821,000 Canadian women entrepreneurs were engaged in economic activities and that their contribution to the economy of Canada is in excess of CAD 18.109 billion annually. In the United States, the female-owned and -managed firms represent 28% of total firms and these firms created employment opportunities for 9.2 million people. In Germany,, women-owned entrepreneurship have a good share in the business having annual turnover of at least Euro 16.620 billion per year and provide jobs for 2 million employees. In the United Kingdom and Korea, a growing trend of self-employment was found among women (26% of all self-employed in the UK in 1999 and 36% of all firms in Korea in 2001) (OECD, 2004).

Business women are also contributing in the national economy of Bangladesh. According to the Bangladesh Economic Review 2009, around 6 percent of the country's \$ 90 billion economy comes from SMEs, which is also the largest sector in terms of employment generation. (Daily Star December 29, 2009). Women's involvement in small and medium business is increasing day-by-day in Bangladesh. It is heartening to note that, despite many barriers, a new women's entrepreneur class has risen in the country, taking on the challenge to work in a male-dominated, competitive and complex economic and business environment. Not only has their entrepreneurship improved their living conditions and earned them more respect, in their families and in the society generally, but they are also contributing to business and export growth, supplies, employment generation, productivity and skills development in Bangladesh. A recent United Nations report concluded that the economic development of Bangladesh is closely linked to the advancement of women (Cited in, SMEF and MIDAS, 2009).

A survey found that a woman first established business in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) in 1954. Although women first established enterprises in the mid-fifties, most woman-owned enterprises were developed after the independence of Bangladesh was declared in 1971. A sample survey found that 14 enterprises were established between 1976-1980, 24 during 1981-1985, 43 during 1986-1990, 85 enterprises were established during 1991-95, 195 during 1996-2000 and 78 between 2006 and 2009. After 2000, Bangladeshi people observed a different scenario in the case of women's involvement in small business: nearly 50% of enterprises established in between 2000 to 2010 were owned by women (SMEF, 2009) (For more details, see Annex-A). Another recent report revealed that, from 1996 to 2005, about two-thirds of the women entrepreneurs surveyed started their business (BWCCI, 2008: 8). This trend is not only increasing from the previous level in Bangladesh, but it is also comparatively better than in some countries of the South Asia region (For more details see Annex-B). This evidence indicates that women's visibility in the economic sector is increasing despite the existing challenges.

Dominance of patriarchy in Bangladesh is an influential factor in all sectors of Bangladesh. Patriarchy of Bangladesh has been characterized with some concepts such as *izzat* (honour, focusing in particular on the control of women's sexuality), *lajja-sharam* (shame) and *parda* (purdah, restrictions on women's mobility) (Drinkwater, 2005). These concepts shaped the social norms and values which act as hindrances in the way of the social movement of women. In other words, these patriarchal features snatch away their fundamental rights. Ignoring the dominance of patriarchy more and more, women are now engaged in business activities and employed in public and private sector offices. One may ask the question why women are getting involved in business now. Different actors and factors are playing important roles to create a viable environment for women's participation: this hypothesis can be a probable answer to this question. This article seeks to find what factors play important roles, both positive and negative, in the case of women's business or entrepreneurship development.

This paper is analytical in nature. A mixed method approach (both qualitative and quantitative data) has been used in this study, where the "case study" was the key method. In this project, "women's entrepreneurship development in Bangladesh" has been considered as a case. Researchers reviewed literature, which included recent publications, journals, books, research reports, and newspapers, to meet the objectives of the research.

2. Justification of the Research

From the perspective of economics, the economy of Bangladesh is characterized by small- and medium- enterprises (Majumder, 2006). From the sociological and feminist perspectives, without involving women in economic activities, no economy can achieve its targets (Hanson, 2009). From the sociological and economic perspective, it can be said

that “women entrepreneurship” is a real life-oriented issue, which invites more investigation throughout the world. Also, different dimensional evidence is required to visualize the real scenario of women’s involvement in business. Chowdhury (2007) found that low capitalization and limited assets, poor knowledge about credit, very limited access to formal sources of credit, cash intensity in transactions, very limited record-keeping habits, poor financial disclosure on account of tax issues and high-risk perception are the main barriers to women's entrepreneurship development in Bangladesh. Ahmed (1991) reported that capacity development initiatives of NGO were essentials to deliver management training to landless and marginal women in rural and urban areas to engage them in SME activities. Saleh (1995) described the motivational issues of women entrepreneurs in getting into business and assessed the entrepreneurial skills of the women entrepreneurs. He also tried to evaluate the performance of women entrepreneurs in their businesses. BWCCI (2008) and SMEF and MIDA (2009) depicted a detailed scenario of women's entrepreneurship in Bangladesh, highlighting the socio-economic background of women entrepreneurs and also discussed training, financial factors and constraining factors. Other studies, for example Uddin (2008), Chowdhury (2007) and Miah (2007), have detailed the macro-economic environment, including the policy framework that acts as a determining factor for the economic efficiency and overall performance of the SMEs in the developing countries. Even though some researchers have stated some policy issues, they have not been considered as "push factors" to create a viable environment for smooth functioning of women’s business. Against this backdrop, this paper has sought to sketch the role of the institutional and policy framework and institutional issues in women entrepreneurship's development in Bangladesh.

3. Conceptual Framework

Gender-related factors are important factors of entrepreneurship which are closely linked with other factors in creating an enabling environment for entrepreneurship. Gender inequalities are considered as the vital factors that influence the processes in launching and sustaining a business. Feminist theories enhance understanding of entrepreneurship, by giving special attention to gender relations in the society. Public policy and institutional factors are examples of such factors which bring changes in gender-related factors (Hanson, 2009).

Torjman (2005) explains that policy is created in the context of perceived problems or to address specific needs in a society. In some cases, policy emerges to tackle a concern or crisis: this is called "reactive policy". "Proactive policy" consists of a deliberate strategy to develop a facet of society. Public policy, according to Torjman, is a guidance to achieve targets that are likely to be in the best interest of the whole community, often by aiming at specific groups within society. Dionco-Adetayo, Makinde&Adetayo (2005) investigated the role of public polices in women entrepreneurship development in the context of Osun State, Nigeria. This study found a good relationship between public policy implementation and women's entrepreneurship development. UN (2007) found that, to increase women's involvement in information and communication technology (ICT) and green-business cultural and gender dimensions in the social institutions, public policies and institutional arrangements, including credit and infrastructure support, plays vital role. State or local authorities should formulate and implement policy to remove the barriers to the start-up, formalization and growth of women’s enterprises. Time-demanding policies are needed to create access to market and policies. Without proper policies regarding social protection for “business women”, it would be tough to create a more-supportive enterprise culture and context, and a more-favorable business environment for women entrepreneurs (For specific policy aspects, see Box-1).

Box-1: Policies for Creating Enabling Environment

- policies to remove barriers to the start-up, formalization and growth of women’s enterprises;
- policies to improve women’s access to markets;
- policies to improve women’s access to and control over economic and financial resources;
- policies to strengthen social protection and social inclusion, and to reduce the risks and vulnerabilities facing women entrepreneurs and their women workers, including women entrepreneurs with disabilities; and
- policies to create a more supportive enterprise culture and context, and more favorable business environment for women entrepreneurs” (ILO, 2007 : 4-5)

This theoretical discussion reveals that no one can think of progressing entrepreneurship development without formulating and implementing women-friendly public policies. Basically, sound policy formulation and implementation depend on the capacity and initiatives of respective organizations or institutions. To measure the effectiveness of policies and respective institution OECD prepared a framework which is developed on the basis of five broad aspects: (1) policy leadership (2) institutional support for business women (3) access to credit and financial services (4) business development services and information and (5) data collection and research. Features of these indicators are shown in Table-1.

Table 1: Framework for Mapping Women Enterprise Development

Actions	Features
Policy Leadership	Design an Integrated Policy Framework making consultation with stakeholder Adopt an Action Plan for Implementing and monitoring the policy ensuring coordination with all stakeholder Establish an inter-ministerial Working Group with representation from business women's association to coordinate the inter-organizational activities Carry out large scale promotional activities to encourage the businesswomen and community people Carry out research to provide the clear picture about the existing situation
Institutional Support for Business Women	Setup an office for women entrepreneurship development under the ministry or agency which is responsible for SME, and aiming to assess the needs of women entrepreneurs and co-ordinate the entrepreneurial programs/projects. Making business registration process transparent and accountable, and women friendly Offer capacity building activities of central government, local government and private employee for providing women friendly services Generic business associations are open
Access to Credit and Financial Services	Financial initiatives or facilities seek to improve the provision of financing in women entrepreneurship
Business Development Services and information	Initiatives of public and private service providers to promote the women entrepreneurship development activities Information dissemination mechanism and access to information Efforts to women's access to market opportunities Initiatives to provide entrepreneurial and management training to the nascent and established business women
Data Collection and research	Gender Disaggregated Data on gender issues and business State of research on women entrepreneurship

Source: Adopted and Modified from, OECD, 2012: 44-43.

Considering the socio-economic context of Bangladesh, the authors of this paper have modified the mapping indicators. Using these indicators, the researchers have unearthed the state of women's entrepreneurship development in Bangladesh.

4. Women Entrepreneurship Development in Bangladesh: Factors behind the reality

This section evaluated some key factors which are taken from the "Framework for Mapping Women Enterprise Development". These factors are: policy leadership, institutional support for business women and business development services.

4.1 Policy Leadership

A "level playing field" is essential for establishing and enhancing women's enterprises in any economy. A level playing field is created by effective implementation of fair and equalizing policies which help women. A transparent regulatory environment and policy framework are preconditions to create an enabling environment for doing business, including entering the market, operating a business venture, and exiting from the market (APO, 2007). To create a favourable environment for women, the following policy initiatives have been taken in Bangladesh.

4.1.1 Public Policies

4.1.1.1 Industrial Policy 2010

The Government of Bangladesh has considered women's empowerment as one of the principles of governance and so women's contribution in economic development has received paramount interest. The State's Industrial Policy 2010

emphasized some issues for ensuring greater female participation in the industrial sector. One of its major initiatives is to create greater employment opportunities through creating a large number of women entrepreneurs. This policy framework also encourages private-public partnership for providing inducement, and financial help for women to establish themselves in SMEs (GOB, 2010).

4.1.1.2 Gender Action Plan/2008-2012

This action plan has identified the key issues and problems which are very closely associated with women's entrepreneurship development and for creating a favorable environment for women entrepreneurs. In the policy paper, some policy initiatives were highlighted to bring them into the mainstream of the development process. This would be done by creating opportunities to ensure full participation of women entrepreneurs in the economic development of the country, improve efficiency of women entrepreneurs, to enhance female participation in the decision-making process in business, and in enhancing capacity to establish and run SMEs.

4.1.1.3 Industrial Policy 2005 and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper 2004

The Industrial Policy-2005 states that the SME sector, including women entrepreneurship should be taken as a privileged sector. The PRSP noted that Government will take initiatives to create employment-intensive industrialization, with emphasis on SMEs and export-oriented industries. So, it can be said that Government is committed to prompt industrialization, led by the private sector entrepreneurs.

4.1.2 SME Policy 2005

The SME policy focused on capacity development of women entrepreneurs in the SME sector to promote their activities to translate women's endeavors in business as successful initiatives. The SME Policy of the Government also promoted bringing other women into business and motivating them to involve themselves in economic activities. This would empower themselves along with the society, in a broader perspective (Cited in, SMEF and MIDA, 2009).

4.1.3 Inter-ministerial Task Force

In Bangladesh, an inter-ministerial, high-powered committee, named "Task Force on Women and Children", has been established in The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. The task Force follows up the implementation of action plans to attain the objectives of national policies and the National Development Plan, and for development and empowerment of women and protection of women's rights (DCCI, no date?). According to the objectives of the Task Force, it is supposed to oversee the results of the above-mentioned policies, which are aimed at improving the development of women's entrepreneurship development in Bangladesh.

4.2 Institutional Support for Business Women

Policy only gives guidance to the implementing agencies and actors to take necessary actions for achieving the ultimate target. Without translating the policy's goals into actions, it cannot bring about any result for the target group. To what extent the policy framework of Bangladesh is supportive for businesswomen depends on the implementation of these policies. It can be argued that different government policies have heightened awareness of the issues of women's entrepreneurship development in Bangladesh. In this paper policy implementation will be measured by the actions taken by government and non-government organizations.

4.2.1. Focal Point (Office) for Women's Entrepreneurship Development

The Small & Medium Enterprise Foundation (SMEF) has been working as an independent center of excellence, created and generously-financed by the Government of Bangladesh, since July 17, 2007. The SME Foundation is providing different types of support to help the SME entrepreneurs, including the women entrepreneurs. To create an enabling environment for SMEs, this foundation has implemented a policy advocacy program, access to information and finance, a business support service and access to technology. Furthermore, special activities for women entrepreneurs have been undertaken by SMEF (2008-2009):

- SMEF has organized 109 different capacity building training for 3227 persons, 2010 of whom were women
- SMEF has conducted a national-level study, entitled "A Study on Women Entrepreneurs in SMEs: Bangladesh perspectives", aiming to set out the situation of the entrepreneurs.
- SMEF awarded eight outstanding women in Bangladesh for their 'role model' performance in business. It is expected that this award will encourage other interested women to become involved in business activities
- The SME foundation has arranged two regional conferences (one in Chittagong and another in Khulna) to demonstrate the success, present situation, problems and future prospects of women entrepreneurship development
- This foundation has conducted a gender-sensitive training for 40 senior-level bankers in collaboration with Bangladesh Bank Training Academy
- To solve the problem of financing this foundation created a wholesaling program giving special emphasis to women entrepreneurs. The capital of this program is BDT 200,000,000 and it is being implemented by MIDAS Financing Limited and Shakti Foundation on pilot basis (SME Foundation Factsheet, 2009).

4.2.2. Business Registration Process

Getting a trade license is one of the initial steps to start a business in Bangladesh but a large number of entrepreneurs, especially, women do not show any interest in getting Trade Licenses because of complex bureaucratic procedures. In this connection, owners of SME's in rural areas run their businesses informally. A survey found that 51.49% of respondents do not have trade licenses, which indicates that nearly fifty percent of the women entrepreneurs (48.50%) were doing their business without having valid trade licenses. Due to lack formal reorganisation of their businesses, they have limited access to finance, various government services, information and critical advisory services to operate a business efficiently. Government has started to take initiatives, from 2000, to make the business registration process simpler and women-friendly. As a consequence of the policy initiatives, the highest number, 38.93% of women entrepreneurs, registered their businesses in 2000-2009, compared to 10.72% in 1990-1999 (SMEF and MIDAS, 2009: 97). Although Government has taken some initiatives to improve the formal registration process of women business, most of the women entrepreneurs fell victim to corruption while they were getting trade licenses. A study found that about 37% of women entrepreneurs have experienced corruption while applying for a trade licence: 60% were asked to pay a bribe and 10% paid to get the trade license (The Daily Star, 6 November 2010).

4.2.3. Business Associations

In any country, more specifically in a developing or underdeveloped country, networking bodies or trade organizations play a vital role in improving bargaining capacity and business networking, which help women entrepreneurs by creating an enabling environment for doing business. A research finding showed that only 58% women entrepreneurs are members of formal trade bodies. Among the respondents (42%) who did not have any membership in any formal trade body, 32.5% mentioned that they were not well aware about trade bodies available in their localities and 15% mentioned that they well-informed about the trade bodies but the process to get membership seemed to them too complicated (BWCCI 2008 : 33).

4.3. Access to Credit and Financial Services

Financial access is regarded as first and foremost factor of being successful by women entrepreneurs (Bitler, Robb,&Wolken, 2001). In Bangladesh, some special packages have been started for women entrepreneurship development by the commercial banks. Most of the banks and financial institutions have been providing special services to women entrepreneurs through SME Cells/Service Centers for ensuring financial service for SMEs in Bangladesh. Although the absolute number of women entrepreneurs covered under the scheme is low, some 19,194 women entrepreneurs had received SME credit by the end of 2010. The total amount of loans disbursed to women entrepreneurs also increased from BDT 354 million in December 2009 to BDT 2.103 billion (BIDS, 2010; Priyodesk, 2011). According to the BIDS report, the number of SME service centers has increased to 179 in December, 2009 from 148 in June, 2009 (BIDS, 2010). In the FY 2012-13, Government of Bangladesh has allocated BDT 1 billion for the women entrepreneurs.

In spite of these policy initiatives, women are not getting access to financial services due to bank interest rates, which are around 13% for SMEs loans and 10% for women entrepreneurs, higher than in neighboring countries (India charges 5 to 7%). Moreover, bank loan procedures are complex for women entrepreneurs. Lack of tax identification numbers (TINs) and other necessary papers like bank account records and guarantees required for bank loans also hamper women in the banking process (The Financial Express, 31 January, 2012).

4.4. Business Development Services

4.4.1 Initiatives of public and private service providers

Different types of government and non-government organizations are working to develop the women's capacity for carrying on successful business. A number of specialized institutions at the national and local level are involved for providing training, technical support, information support and financial supports. A study (SMEF and MIDAS, 2011: 157), identifying the organizations which provide product development support, found that that there were as many as 24 organizations that had provided various services to 162 (16%) women entrepreneurs for their product development. The same study uncovered that 29.4% of women entrepreneurs had approached Government organizations supporting SME development (SMEF and MIDAS, 2011:103)

In Bangladesh non-government organizations (NGOs), mostly known as women's organizations, are working as networking organizations to promote the women's entrepreneurship development. There are 1800 NGOs registered with the NGO Bureau in Bangladesh, working on gender equality and gender mainstreaming. They cover an impressively wide range of activities. It is very tough to provide a breakdown with respect to NGO focus. In general, the organizations are more vocal about the women's rights. For empowering women in every aspect of their lives, NGOs are providing them training and finance. Furthermore, some central level and local level advocacy initiatives have been taken to create an enabling environment for women's free movement and work. A network with 700 or so members, which is popularly known as National Coalition for the Beijing Process (NCBP), mostly works at the grassroots level, committed to achieve the declarations of CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action (Siddiqi, 2006). Some other organizations established by the women business leaders have been working for creating an enabling environment for woman entrepreneurs. A list of supporting organizations is given as: *Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC, Bangladesh Bank, State and private commercial bank, Financial institution, Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB, Bangladesh Management Development Institute (BMDI), Directorate of Women Affairs (DWA), Development of Youth Development (DYD), Bangladesh Manpower Training Bureau (BMTB), Micro-industries Development and Assistance, Services (MIDAS), Job Opportunities and Business Support (JOBS), NGO-MFIs MSME program.*

Public-private initiatives try to provide information to the entrepreneurs and create an enabling environment, so that women entrepreneurs get access to training and markets. Also, State and non-State actors provide data support for the policy-makers and other actors, to give need- oriented policy guidance.

Table 2: Some Specific Aspects of Business Development Services

Indicators	Status
Access to Information	Information creating and dissemination culture is not women- and poor-friendly, especially for the rural women.
Access entrepreneurial and management training	Regarding training before business, 53.7% of the respondents informed that they had received training before business, 19.5% received training during business and 26.7% had not received any training (SMEF and MIDAS, 2011 :106)
Access to Market	27% of women entrepreneurs participated in trade fairs (SMEF and MIDAS, 2011 :106)
Gender Disaggregated Data on gender issues and business	SME Foundation, a state owned enterprise has published nationwide survey reports and other sector wise reports in Bangladesh but that are not updated.

Source: Prepared by Authors from Different Sources

5. Conclusion

It is encouraging news that Bangladeshi women are coming forward in the economic world, ignoring the hardships of doing so. In this success, initiatives of Government, donors and non-government organizations played significant roles. Although more women are now involved in economic activities than in the past, women constitute only less than 10 per cent of the country's total business entrepreneurs. They have enormous potential. Government and other stakeholders failed to ensure the maximum utilization of this potential and they (business women) are, up to now, facing challenges in doing their business. State and civil society actors should take time- worthy initiatives to support the business women in Bangladesh, which will ultimately bring success in the economic and social sector of Bangladesh.

Annex-A: Trends of Women Entrepreneurship Development in Bangladesh

Year	No	Percent
1951-55	1	.09
1956-60	0	0
1961-65	0	0
1966-70	0	0
1971-75	1	.09
1976-80	14	1.3
1981-85	24	2.3
1986-90	43	4.1
1991-95	85	8.2
1996-2000	197	19.0
2001-2005	397	38.3
2006-2008 ^b	78	7.5
No Response	195	18.8
Total	1035	100

Source: SMEF and MIDA, 2009

Annex- B: Regional Situation

Indicator	Regional	Bangladesh (2007)	India	Pakistan (2007)	Nepal	Sri Lanka (2004)
Firms With Female Participation in Ownership	15.56	16.08	9.11	6.70	27.35	-
Female permanent Full-time Non-production workers	2.12	0.96	-	0.09	6.71	2.33
% of Firms With Female Top Manager	5.13	1.27	-	-	13.37	-

Source: <http://www.enterprisesurveys.org/ExploreTopics/?topicid=6>. Accessed on, 18.02.10

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^b Here, the report only considered one and a half years

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