

Taslima Miji, owner of Gootipa and Leatherina, a local and export-oriented leather brand of Bangladesh, had a lot on her mind regarding the current situation.

Export Market Conundrum

"I have struggled a lot in life! I have seen the worst in entrepreneurship and yet, every time, I tend to gravitate back towards it... every single time!" expressed a dejected Miji.

The burdened entrepreneur continued in a pensive tone, while discussing her entrepreneurial life story.

"After a lot of struggle, last year, I had finally been able to reach a steady growth

could no longer linger around a blocked supply chain and had to shift the procurement process to a more expensive European country like Albania, on a temporary basis, till the lockdown in Bangladesh was lifted.

"According to your prediction, Europe will reach a plateau earlier than South East Asia, and hence, for a brief period of time, they



export-oriented companies at 2 percent interest rate.

"I will try to avail it

as soon as possible. I am already in talks with my bank manager and lawyer about this," she remarked, with hope in her voice.

She was quite detailed in explaining that this soft loan might not be a permanent solution to many because they were already drowned in liabilities, and a new loan, no matter how low the interest rate, would only add to the financial load.

"In this case, the solution could be an increased grace period for the previous loans or an exemption," expressed Miji.

While on the topic of how women entrepreneurs were averse to applying for government induced stimulus packages due to its complications, she disagreed with the idea.

"There is a limit to how much the government can help us. We must be alert on our own as well. Many women entrepreneurs of Bangladesh, even today, do not even have a proper Trade License, TIN – Tax Identification Number, or BIN – Business Identification Number. In that case, neither the bank nor the government can help in any way. So, the basics must be followed. Business literacy is a must, and it's currently lacking amongst many," said Taslima Miji.

Photo Courtesy: Gootipa Leather Goods



level. International buyers were quite content with my leather products and we chalked out an advanced sales plan. The first three months of this year had been quite successful and this brought me great hope," said Miji.

The entrepreneur also shared how her buyers, who were extremely cooperative,

need to shift the supply chain to be able to keep the business rolling. That's certainly disheartening for me and bad news for my company," revealed Miji.

When asked whether there was any government support to help her business wade through the murky waters, Miji informed of a soft loan stimulus package for

Online And The Future

As the world began to stay home in an effort to stay safe, brick and mortar outlets have gone out of business. Everyone plans on opening an online store, and while we tend to assume that business is booming on this end, we spoke to entrepreneurs, specialising in online businesses to truly assess the reality. This is where Fariya Tazin, owner of Polka Drops, and Lora Khan, owner of the 6 Yards Story shares their stories.

"Baishakh is done with and dusted off," remarked Tazin, adding on to say, "Taking consideration of a missed Eid is the most daunting thought today. During Eid, we actually expect to earn 30 to 50 percent of the yearly revenue and it's all lost in 2020," said the distressed owner of Polka Drops, a high-end, online, fashion outlet in Dhaka.

However, Tazin had few hopeful points to share with fellow entrepreneurs to help their businesses pick up quickly

from this distraught situation; a massive institutional level promotion of Bangladeshi boutique houses and brands, protection of local producers from foreign products — raised import taxes, fiscal incentive to entrepreneurs to be able to carry on with wages for at least three months after the lockdown is lifted, etc.

Photo courtesy: Polka Drops

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8



Still Hopeful Entrepreneurs

After Covid-19 has crushed Baishakh for both entrepreneurs and the general public, it now seems to be poised to destroy most of Ramadan and even Eid-ul-Fitr in 2020. Most of the fashion houses have already begun to count their losses, and if this pandemic somehow rolls on to 2021, there is no limit to the amount of losses that will occur in total. To get a clearer picture, we spoke to a few entrepreneurs to assess the 'before and after situation' caused by the viral catastrophe.

Sabera Anwar, owner of a high-end clothing line and an exhibition management company, was doing splendidly, until of course, Covid-19. She used to arrange mega fashion exhibitions under the banner of Panache Hub, allowing both newcomers and industry giants to rub shoulders under the same roof.

This year, Anwar wanted to revive her clothing line, Panache, by re-launching it in a new avatar. She had already set up a dedicated factory, hired workers and done fashion photo-shoots on her latest collection. Just when she was about to launch, the menace broke loose and created havoc in her plans.

"This is such a serious loss! I can't even begin to express where the losses begin and where it ends. I try not to think about the pandemic because it gives me panic attacks every single time," said the entrepreneur.

Anwar is planning to have an online discussion with fellow fashion entrepreneurs, in order to be able to deal with the situation in the aftermath of the pandemic.

"The basic discussion will be to reach a consensus regarding cost control and how to deal with sales in a 'Post Covid-19' world," said Anwar.

Sabera Anwar has already built a back-up plan, where she hopes to open her factory in a limited scale within a month's time, with all



the necessary protective measures against the virus; to at least be able to sustain in the long run, along with her family of employees.

"This is perhaps the dawn of the new era, where online sales would be the next big thing. I have to live through this pandemic and for that, I must reopen, even if that means in the smallest scale possible," she said.

When urged about suggestive plans for the future, Anwar promptly replied, "People must inject cash back into the economy, once this is all over — that's the only way we can survive through this major economic loss. Only a united effort can help pull us through."

Photo Courtesy: Panache Hub

Each For The Other

Esha Rushdi, owner of Powder Room, a popular beauty parlour in town, shared her side of the story to illustrate the existing calamitous situation of the beauty industry. The entrepreneur, who also heads a local label, Cape Town, seemed tense and sceptical of the future.

"I never thought I'd have to keep a large chunk of cash in my bank account to cover for business expenses. I never predicted this to happen. Every single month, I have to pay Tk 8 lacs, that too, only as rent! This situation is absolutely unprecedented.

"So, along with few other reputed industry leaders in the beauty field, we have reached a consensus to survive the pandemic by offering our employees a fixed salary of Tk 5,000 per person, so that there's less strain on the business and also because this way, we can continue paying their basic expenses, as long as it is necessary. Our employees, numbering in hundreds will now remain employed and would not have to worry about going hungry," expressed Rushdi.

She shared with us her open request to landlords, all over Bangladesh, to forgo or allow paying a reduced rent for the time being to help entrepreneurs survive in the long term, in a post-Covid-19 world.

"It would be great, if they helped us. We are all in this together and we can only endure the losses with each other's support," she said.

When asked about whether the government stimulus package would help in any regard, she was sceptical.

"The government provided a soft loan to SMEs at 4 percent interest rates, but that's only helpful if you are liability free. If you have huge loan lurking over your shoulders already, the bank will consider you risky. Plus, this wouldn't be a viable solution," said Rushdi, with a tone of concern.

As a tackle plan, Rushdi had few other business ideas which she thought could help out entrepreneurs at large, saying, "Once the threat of this virus is gone and the economy starts to pick up, I plan on giving huge discounts, helping cash to be injected back into the accounts. This will also help me maintain a steady cash flow. Profits would not be of primary concern, just to ensure sustenance and survival."

THE LONELY WARRIOR

Taslima Begum earned a comfortable middle class living during the regular 365 days of the year when there was no such thing as Covid-19. She used to work for Sheba XYZ, an online service provider, as one of their coveted beauty experts. Every month, she made a handsome amount, a certain percentage of which helped repay the online institution for allowing her to use their platform, while the rest helped Begum in paying rent, children's tuition fees, and even act as provisions for her ailing parents living in Noakhali.

Today, things are different. The pandemic has caused the masses to stay indoors in order to impede the multiplication of the



viral disease. And that means Begum can no longer go to people's houses to provide services (beauty treatments) and neither can Sheba XYZ help her in any way in this regard. Her service sales have dropped to zero, and her savings have almost become nought.

"I am living on borrowed money. If this goes any longer, I am going to die of panic and hunger, not by the virus!" she said.

The story has been the same for most freelancers like Begum. On further inquiry, she provided an insight to a 'respite package,' including grocery items, promised to be delivered by her service provider, sometime in the future.

"Relief is supposed to be delivered in a week or two; I have not been informed of a specific date as of yet. And it is the same situation with most freelancers like myself. We have all been promised some sort of help, sometime in the future."

Photo Courtesy: Powder Room and Cape Town