



Carving out a niche

MD FAZLUR RAHMAN

HER family laughed it off. They didn't support her either. In traditional homes in Bangladesh, it is a wearisome effort for women to break free and take up formal jobs outside.

The problem arises two-fold. Outside, nobody took her seriously either. However, after eight years of struggle, Sharnalata Roy came out victorious.

Her brainchild Women's Fashion World, a beauty parlour in Sylhet, was crowned the 'Best Enterprise of the Year' in December.

Even before the SME Foundation honoured her organisation, the 39-year-old woman won battles against her family as well as society and both still believe that raising a family should be a woman's primary role.

He saw difficulty in the eye for a long time. Married off in 1988, a year after her secondary school certificate examinations, she had to convince her mother-in-law to allow her to continue her studies.

Sharnalata, who was educated in Bengali literature, first started her career at a local junior school and later, managed a job at a bank. But she had to give up on her dreams after responsibilities piled up with the birth of her second child, a son.

"I was depressed after leaving the job."

In between 1998 and 1999, she enrolled in a two-year diploma course in Dhaka, as the couple was contemplating migration. But she ended up becoming a highly successful entrepreneur in the country.

Initially, she rendered services to the guardians of her children's friends. They often complained of space constraints and asked her to expand operations.

Giving into her clients' demands, she opened up a parlour in 2004 in Mirer Maidan at Shubid Bazar, Sylhet, with only three employees. Now about 50 women and men work for her and most of her female employees are from the local indigenous communities and destitute from plain lands.

On the path to finding herself through her work, "My in-laws laughed off the idea I had presented. Even, when I asked my current landlord for space, he also expressed doubt and told my husband that I will soon lose enthusiasm."

"No female member in my in-laws



Sharnalata Roy, owner of Women's Fashion World, poses with a trophy at an SME awards ceremony in December.

family has undertaken a business venture before, so it was really tough to begin something like this," she told The Daily Star.

Overcoming all obstacles, she leased the space for parlour with the

help of a female friend. Her friend opened a boutique there, while she launched the parlour. That was 2004.

When she started, the concept of the beauty parlour as a business establishment had not gained

momentum in Bangladesh, let alone Sylhet.

She currently runs four branches -- two for women and two for men -- in the northeastern city. Men employees run the branches that cater to the

growing number of male clients.

Women's Fashion World also spurred enthusiasm among neighbours. One of her neighbours already opened a parlour after ditching his 20-year-old sweetmeats business.

Despite the leaps of faith on her part, she said society is yet to accept women entrepreneurs like her.

A regular taxpayer, her companies pays Tk 12,000 on average in value added taxes a month to government coffers. Her initial capital was Tk 6 lakh and in 2009, she logged a profit of Tk 2.24 lakh.

The mother of three also runs a voluntary organisation at the slum, where she serves impoverished slum-dwellers in the areas of education and health.

She now plans to expand operations, which will require about Tk 50 lakh in investment. She wants to instil modern beauty care technology at the facilities. She looks to local banks for financial support.

In addition, with plans to set up her company on her own land, she knows it is still a distant dream. Running the voluntary organisation, without any donor help, costs her a lot after all.

Sharnalata, whose eldest daughter is studying for a MBBS and the next two sons going to school, now prepares herbal products for her clients. She plans to set up a plant to produce herbal products used by local parlours.

Other plans include a full-fledged training institute for people willing to build a career in beautification, and spreading across Bangladesh.

Sharnalata attended training courses in India and the UK to harness her knowledge and gather international experience. She said she wishes to go abroad for further training, but those will be on hold until her five-year-old son gets older.

Sharnalata said it takes a lot of effort and planning to maintain a family and a business at the same time. She however urges women planning to start their own business, along with maintaining a family, not to give the highest priority to work.

"There is nothing wrong in women trying to be self-employed. That is how it should be. But to them, family should come first and children have to be raised properly. Otherwise, there will be none to cherish the success," she said.

fazlur.rahman@thedailystar.net

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Help desk for women entrepreneurs

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THE central bank has set up a separate desk at its Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and Special Programmes Department, exclusively for women entrepreneurs. "Women entrepreneurs will receive services directly from the desk just by making a phone call or visiting the desk in person," said an official of the bank.

He said most women entrepreneurs do not know which banks are offering what types of products or the interest rates. The central bank will help them with information from its database.

"We will also give the contact addresses and numbers of concerned bank officials to entrepreneurs, so that they can carry on further communication," he said.

The central bank official said Bangladesh Bank's services do not end there. "We will follow up on every case. We will contact the banks that were referred, to know whether the entrepreneurs received answers to their queries or not."

"We will also help them find trade licences, and the types of things they need to do to run a business smoothly," he said.

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SME financing fair due February

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BANGLADESH Bank and SME Foundation will organise a financing fair in Chittagong in February, to bridge the gap between entrepreneurs and lenders.

The two-day fair at the Engineers Institute in the port city is scheduled to be held on February 15-16. The fair is a part of the government's attempts to extend the much-needed financial services to prospective small and medium entrepreneurs across the country.

The aim of the fair is to create awareness among entrepreneurs about small and medium enterprises (SME) financing products that are available in



the market.

It will also facilitate financing through a display of loan products and procedures, and required documents for funding.

It will also support SMEs to prepare new, innovative and

demand-driven projects; act as a platform for match-making between the SME entrepreneurs and financial institutions; offer spot advice and guidance to potential SMEs; and identify strategies to reduce procedural bottle-

necks in delivering loans to the SMEs.

The fair, which will start at 10:30 am and be open until 8pm, will also feature seminars. Besides, banks will have to answer queries made by entrepreneurs, said an official of SME and Special Programmes Department of Bangladesh Bank.

The participating banks and financial institutions will also offer SME loans directly at the fair, he said. Each lender will lend to at least five entrepreneurs.

Fairs will also be organised at all divisional cities and major district towns, such as Bogra, Comilla and Mymensingh.

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