

# Emerging women SME entrepreneurs

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It is heartening to note that despite many barriers, a new women's entrepreneur class in the Small and Medium sector has developed in the country taking on the challenge to work in a male-dominated, competitive and complex economic and business environment. It has been found that at present women entrepreneurs constitute more than 10% of the total business entrepreneurs in Bangladesh. However, in spite of these achievements, the real value of their participation and contribution is not fully recognised in the society. Differences and inequalities between women and men exist in terms of opportunities, rights and benefits. These include poor access to market, information, technology and environment. In spite of these, not only have Bangladeshi women entrepreneurship improved their living conditions and earned more respect in the family and the society, but they have also contributed to business and export growth, supplies, employment generation, productivity and skill development.

It was observed that few women entered business before the 60s; more in the 70s. Nearly 50% of enterprises

were established in the beginning of this century—from 2000 to 2010. Enterprises of women developed after the liberation of Bangladesh, as women established their business from 1971 onwards.

Impediments by women for Entrepreneurship Development from Society include the following:

Majority people generally did not like women to be in business, and that is the main impediment for the women to enter into business activities and also to become successful in business. Some faced difficulty in getting cash payment from wholesalers, the problems of ill-literacy and lack of knowledge, the troubles created through the teasing of women entrepreneurs by young people, the pressure and demand of unusual tolls which created crisis in business transactions, and the conservatism of the society and the general public regarding women's business involvement.

A study by SME Foundation shows that majority of women entrepreneurs (89.76%) were Muslims. Since Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country, it is natural that most of women entrepreneurs would be Muslims. But age-old traditions and misinterpreted Muslim beliefs in a male-dominated society often prevented these women from taking entrepreneurship as a profession. It was found that majority of women entrepreneurs (82.90%) in SMEs were married, 10.63% unmarried, 4.15% widows, among special households identified with the preservation of heritage products of age-old values.

Each area of Bangladesh has a distinct cultural heritage in products, designs, styles and utility. These are maintained by women in their efforts for preservation.

Nakshi Kantha, embroidered by women tell the tales of the past or the



PHOTO: STAR

women's thinking, incidents, stories of lives, which remain as memoirs for them stitched in with colourful thread to preserve their untold stories, incidents or thoughts. Most of these designs are stitched without any design printed on the cloth, since the rural women stitch during their spare time on their own and enjoy their endeavour as they stitch designs or subjects of their untold stories on cloth with simple "running stitches".

Innovations in designs are constantly kept in focus to attract buyers with new and innovative ideas and shapes. Designs differ in urban and rural areas

along with colour, shape, utility and fashion. Tastes differ in every area. Urban users prefer modernity and sophistication while rural people still cling to and preserve the old culture with ancient values and design.

Sonargaon wooden dolls, long-eared elephants and horses on wheels are fading away as the young generation prefers modern items with innovative designs. The old masters along with their wives fail to fulfil the wants of the new generation and thus remain idle with only a few products, which were a booming business for them even two decades ago. With modernisation the

urge for the old disappears since sometimes these are felt to be useless for life.

Woodcrafts usually by men are also made by women now but in smaller sizes. Similarly, are the situation of the bamboo baskets, fans, trays and bowls which have been preserved through generations. Marma women of the tribal community are still active with their bamboo products, since bamboo clusters still exist in these localities. Though export orders remain for these bamboo items, lack of raw material prevents regular export supply.

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