

Women building foothold in business

Women entrepreneurs talk about prospects and challenges



Geeteara Safiya Choudhury



Rubana Huq



Selima Ahmad



Kaniz Almas Khan



Sabrina Islam

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

Building a business career in Bangladesh is not so easy; the entrepreneurs have to face challenges in every step to be successful. It is even more challenging if the entrepreneur is a woman due to social taboos.

But with the change of time, the brilliant and hard working women have proved their caliber in setting up business and running them successfully over the years. They are performing equally with their male counterparts in the business world.

The women entrepreneurs are now dominating in the large, medium and small enterprises by opening thousands of enterprises in the major sectors including banks, insurance, garment, export, import and finance.

Rubana Huq, managing director of Mohammadi Group, a leading garment maker, is one of the successful women who joined business in 1994 after her husband Annisul Huq was diagnosed with high blood pressure.

More than three million female workers in the garment sector shape the country's economy; but the road to overall success for female entrepreneurs is still a long shot, she said.

"However, day-by-day, more and more women are springing up with innovative businesses in small and medium scale," said Rubana. "Being a woman is the most challenging as our society continues fending for traditions and mindsets that should

have become obsolete long ago."

In a male dominated society, facing male colleagues is part of being able to "make it" out there. Even if the journey of a female entrepreneur is supported by males, very often there are fewer women who support each other, she said.

"With wage inequality, and hostile workplace environments, it can be extremely difficult for a woman to make her mark and rise to the top," said Rubana, who manages the garments division, real estate division the television channel of Mohammadi Group.

In the garment division alone, she manages 12,000 workers out of which 8,000 are women. The annual turnover of the garment division is \$80 million.

Another successful woman entrepreneur Geeteara Safiya Choudhury, chairman of Adcomm, a leading advertising agency, also echoed the same views.

"A lot of progress has been made in the women entrepreneurship in Bangladesh over the years," she said.

Previously, females were dependent on their male colleagues, but the situation has changed now as women can run their own businesses. The women enjoy more freedom and they learned thinking independently, said Choudhury, who faced so many oddities in her career.

Many female executives are now seen working in the corporate world nowadays due to the changes in the society, she said.

She started her business in 1974, and now manages 150 employees, of whom 25 are females. Her company's annual turnover is Tk 50 crore.

Family's support, which happened in her case, is very important for a successful woman entrepreneur, she said.

The biggest change that took place over the years is the financial institutions do not judge the women entrepreneurs as women; they are now considering them as entrepreneurs and providing funds to them, she said.

"The male counterparts think me as a competitor now," she said. However, many women are not aware about easy access of finance in the banking system, she said.

Women are encouraged and feel confident if they are awarded and recognised for their outstanding entrepreneurial performance and contribution to the society, she said.

Selima Ahmad, president of the Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BWCCI), said it is encouraging that women entrepreneurship is progressing and so, the country is.

"Women now know that they need to be economically empowered. Many women who are married want to earn and fulfill their dream they have started with their own company," Ahmad said.

"For me becoming an entrepreneur is tough but not impossible. I was an exporter, I had to travel abroad. But selling bus and trucks in early 80's by a woman created huge

curiosity, doubts among many that whether I am able to do," said Ahmad, who is also a vice-chairman of the Nitol-Niloy Group.

Ahmad, also the HR head of the group, manages 5,000 employees of the group.

She suggested the women entrepreneurs to be more professional. In the business world one should have ideas, market study, innovation and hard working capacities.

Her future plan is to establish paper mill, special economic zones, agro industries in Africa and some new ventures.

Sabrina Islam, chief executive officer of Reflections, a leading producer of decorative and architectural art glass, said breaking all barriers, a dynamic class of women entrepreneurs has emerged in the country especially in the small and medium sector.

"They have taken on the challenge to work in a male-dominated, competitive and complex economic and business environment. More and more women are joining the world of business, establishing small and medium scale enterprises."

Women now constitute more than 10 percent of business entrepreneurs in Bangladesh and as such they are contributing to business and export growth, employment generation, productivity and skill development, she said.

Kaniz Almas Khan, managing director of Persona, suggested the women entrepreneurs to be "self confident" and "patient".

Women are natural leaders

Says senior official of StanChart

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Over the last two decades, women's participation in the workforce increased gradually. Despite the growth, participation rate of women in the labour force still remains low, at 33.5 percent, in Bangladesh.

But Bitopi Das Chowdhury, country head of corporate affairs at Standard Chartered Bangladesh, said there are ample opportunities for women to pursue a career. However, support from family is a key enabler to pursuing a career.

"I truly believe women are natural leaders and entrepreneurs. More women should realise this and join work and business," said Chowdhury in an interview with The Daily Star.

Beginning her career as a banker 19 years ago, Chowdhury worked at different positions spanning strategic management and planning, communications and marketing, retail banking to corporate affairs in various sectors including FMCG, telecom and banking.

Today, she has to look after the SCB brand in Bangladesh, internal and external communications for the bank and relationship with government and regulatory agencies.

She also has to maintain relations with the media and look after SCB's engagement with community through various forms of sustainability initiatives including donations, sponsorships and CSR.

Chowdhury is responsible for reputational risk management of SCB,



Bitopi Das Chowdhury

which has been operating here for over 110 years. She is one of the 470 women employees of Standard Chartered in Bangladesh. Of them, 14 are in senior management positions.

Chowdhury is the only female member of the Country Management Team.

Today, when she reflects on her career, she feels that hard work and the relationships she has built over time helped her in her career.

"It has been a very interesting journey," said Chowdhury, first woman who serves as country head of corporate affairs at Standard Chartered in Bangladesh.

She said success means a lot of different things to different people. "To me, it is a continuous endeavour to be better than what I was yesterday. And the destination is ever changing. Being successful requires commitment that does not wane," she said.

Chowdhury said she worked at top positions in three organisations in the last 14 years. "I still feel there are many more things to do to be successful," she said.

She said she subscribes to the view that one cannot achieve success alone or in a vacuum. Support from others helps a person to grow. And this is true for all, irrespective of gender.

"The only difference perhaps is that women may have to do more, prove themselves more to be recognised at the same level as their male counterparts," said Chowdhury.

LankaBangla to hire more women

SARWAR A CHOWDHURY

LankaBangla Finance plans to increase the ratio of women it employs to 25 percent by 2020 as it strongly believes females equally contribute to the growth and development of a company.

The non-banking financial institution has 1,546 employees, comprising both permanent and contractual staff, and about 20 percent of them are women.

These female employees hold positions in the back office as well as the heads of departments, according to the company.

The head of the legal affairs department

is a woman, who is also a member of the management committee. Besides, the heads of the liability operations and the corporate liability department are also women.

"The contribution of men and women is equal. Even sometimes the female employees are better than their male counterparts," said Md Shariful Islam Mridha, head of the human resources at LankaBangla Finance.

On International Women's Day, the company will arrange a function where its female employees will share their thoughts and experiences through stories.

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