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founder of Hebaang.

"It was also quite difficult to bring the raw materials from the hills tracts as many ingredients would get spoiled while being transported to Dhaka," she adds.

But the one difficulty that all Facebook sellers mention is the struggle of delivering their parcels to customers. Since it is impossible to deliver every order themselves, these Facebook sellers are dependent on local delivery companies. Due to the mushrooming of Facebook shops, the number of delivery companies is also increasing day by day—and not all of them are legit. There are allegations that these companies run away with the money they collect from customers for "cash on delivery" orders.

"The delivery companies hand the money over to us once or twice a month because they deal with a large number of sellers at a time. But



the fraudulent ones simply do not hand us the money, and nobody can trace the deliverymen. Since many of the online sellers do not have trade licenses, they cannot even take any legal action in this regard. I have lost over one lakh taka to incidents like this," says Sazia.

Rupa, on the other hand, used to deliver her sarees through Sundarban courier services, but during last Eid, they lost packages worth Tk 10,000 and they

didn't even compensate her for her loss. This also hampers the reputation of the sellers as delivering a product in a timely manner is directly connected with the reputation of an online business.

Sellers also mention that the lack of copyright law enforcement is hampering their businesses. Although there have been copyright laws in Bangladesh since 2000, other online shops routinely steal designs and recreate them with low-quality products, and then undersell the original designer. Since it's a virtual shopping place, the customers cannot differentiate between the product quality, and this impedes the business of the actual designers.

"My designs are continuously stolen and recreated in a power loom in Tangail. But I cannot claim copyright because I am a small female entrepreneur," says Rupa.

But above all, the recent budget



announcement imposing a 7.5 percent VAT on online shopping has hit these Facebook sellers hard. "It is just a slap for the online sellers and will affect both the sellers and the consumers. We hope there will be a final decision on this soon," says Sazia.

#### PALTRY STATE OF TRAINING AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

It is true that women who never had a formal job in their life are creating a livelihood on their own through Facebook. But it is equally true that many of them lack minimum knowledge of digital marketing techniques to build loyal customers. This is why a large number of these sellers cannot sustain their businesses for

long, or create a strong brand image in the virtual space.

"Many consider it a good way to earn quick money. They don't care about market research, presentation or basic sense of selling products. This affects their brand image as well as reputation. At the end of the day, only those who work with authentic products will sustain," says Rupa.

The same opinion was shared by my colleague Zyma, who is a dedicated online shopper. According to her, the regular customers notice the reviews of a page and the style of presenting products. "I'm not going to buy any product from a page that does not have enough positive reviews. Also, visualisation is important because if a product is not presented nicely, it will never attract me. For example, there are many Facebook sellers who sell the products in live videos. These live videos create a nuisance for many as the presentation is not attractive at all, and people might not want to see a video where a woman is selling something sitting in her bedroom. I don't even bother to find out what they are selling—or whether their product is good or bad. Some nice photos and captions, go a long way," says Zyma.

Although there are a good number of digital marketing agencies, online platforms and Facebook groups that take workshops online and offline regarding increasing sales and other problems of the entrepreneurs. One such platform is ShopUp, mentioned by these entrepreneurs which is offering shop management skills, delivery services, training, Facebook boosting support and e-loans to these throngs of Facebook sellers. "They have great potential. Our first merchant started his/her business with only Tk 500. But now, they are selling products worth Tk 45, 00,000 a month," says Siffat Sarwar, founder and COO of ShopUp.

But, according to the Facebook shop owners, there is a huge gap between these digital marketing organisations and the sellers. Many entrepreneurs think that they can do everything on their own, while for others, these training and workshops are quite expensive. Some say these trainings cannot develop their skills substantially. As Priyanka Chakma, of Hebaang, says, "The workshops and trainings offered, in most cases, are not effective—they don't emphasise practical training to develop the venture's unique selling point (USP) that differentiate their product from the competitors. Rather they focus on inviting successful entrepreneurs as motivational speakers, which can be helpful but only to an extent. This is why not everyone wants to attend such sessions."

Women with an entrepreneurial spirit are stepping out of their cocoons and paving the way to lead a life of dignity and financial independence through their Facebook shops. If they are given proper training and logistical support in the near future, undoubtedly, a good number of them can come up with their own brands in the competitive virtual market. The government can play the best role here by giving them a platform to flourish their businesses, instead of slapping them hard with the proposed 7.5 percent VAT.

