

# F-commerce boom amid the pandemic: How women are taking the lead

NILIMA JAHAN

When her husband faced a huge pay cut a month after the outbreak of Covid-19, advocate Noorjahan Kabir was left with no choice but to step forward to help her five-member family.

The biggest hurdle for the 31-year-old junior lawyer was commuting from her Uttara residence to the Lower Court in Old Dhaka. The government-enforced shutdown made things even more difficult for her.

With some experience that she gathered as part of a member of a Facebook-based pregnancy support group, she thought of doing online business on her own.

"But it wasn't easy for me initially," Noorjahan told The Daily Star.

After doing some homework, she created a Facebook page that sells organic mustard, black seeds and sesame oil. She found an authentic source who uses a wooden ghani (a traditional oil extraction machine) to produce oil. Her family members and relatives tried the products first, and upon satisfactory results, she started posting the products on her page.

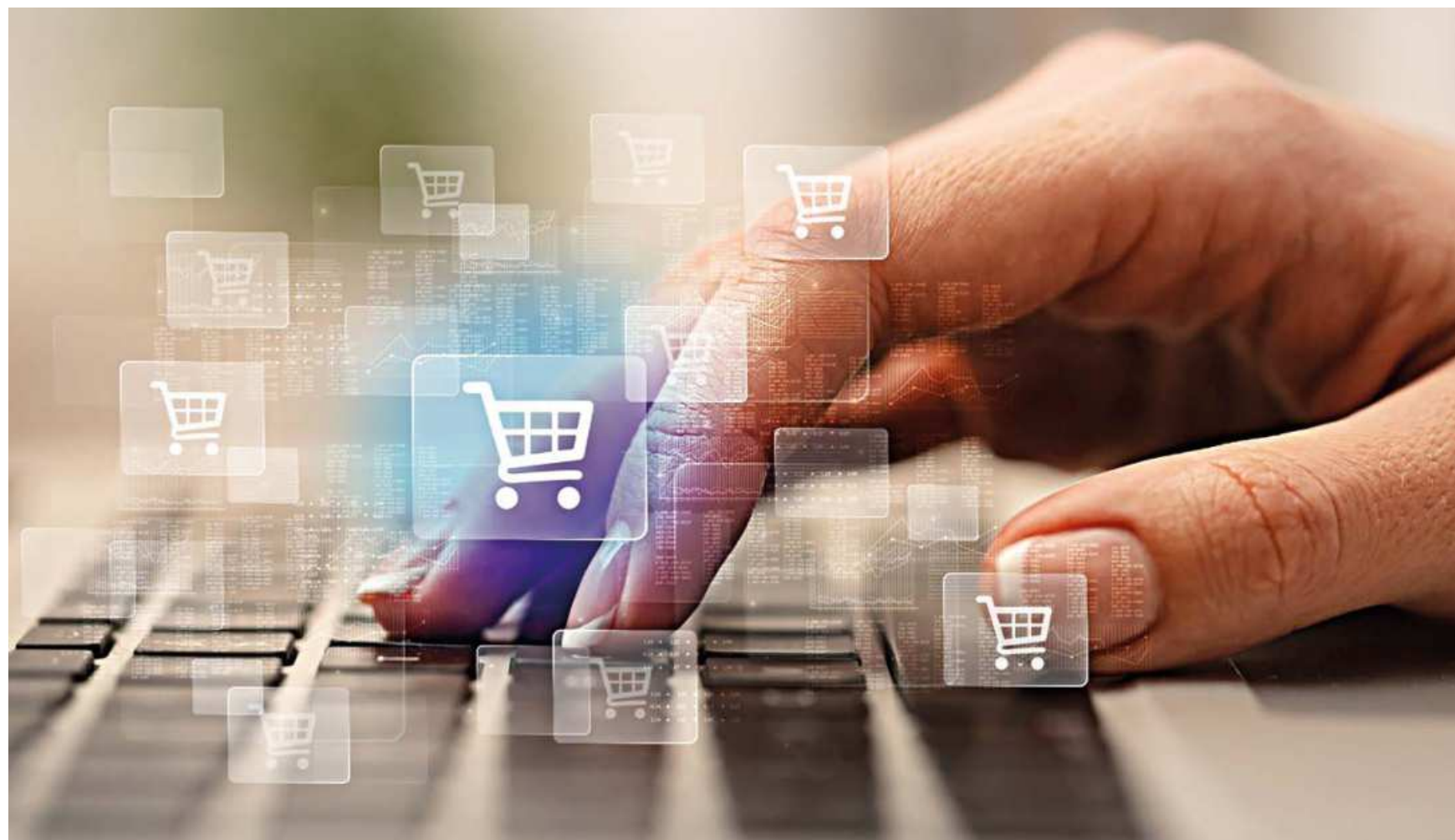
"It was more like an experiment as I started with limited stock. The customers who bought the oil posted positive reviews on my page and in groups, which helped me get more orders," she said.

Feeling optimistic, she included a few more organic food items.

"I am getting around 30 orders a day and making around Tk 1 lakh every month. I can proudly say that my husband is less stressed now," she said.

Noorjahan is one of the many budding entrepreneurs who have started their own business through social media during the pandemic that impacted women disproportionately amid a rise in domestic violence and added extra burden on women's unpaid care work.

As the pandemic accelerated the shift towards a more digital world, Bangladesh also witnessed a boom in new F-commerce businesses. A large number of women ventured into online business using skills and innovation – selling homemade food items,



organic food products, clothes, fashion accessories, saplings and gardening materials.

This correspondent interviewed 15 such Facebook entrepreneurs who have been making a small but steady income and are becoming self-reliant through F-commerce.

Israt Jahan Banani is a prime example.

The 41-year-old owner of a physical store that sold homemade food and pickles in the capital's Mohammadpur area had to close shop during the lockdown and shifted to her in-laws' house in Dohar.

But she revived her business by selling her grandmother's secret-recipe hilsa pickles online.

"I could not even imagine this item

would turn out to be so popular online," she said.

She prepares around 10 kgs of hilsa pickles a day, along with other pickles. Of late, she started selling mushroom pickles. "Now I'm earning Tk 60,000 a month without having to spend money on rent for the shop anymore," she added.

A good number of women learned Facebook entrepreneurship from a popular support group based on Facebook called Women and E-Commerce forum (WE).

This platform inspired many women to venture into entrepreneurship and helped them learn customer relationship skills required to run their business on Facebook and make money.

Farhana Mahjabin Ritu, 31, who sells

Muslim saree, got connected with WE through an acquaintance. She took a three-day virtual course organised by WE.

"Selling the sarees offline was not a successful venture. But when I started posting my products in WE regularly, I noticed many people started following me. The demand of the potential buyers, mostly women, went up and I opened my Facebook page," she said.

"So far, I have sold products worth nearly Tk 8 lakh in seven months. This would have never been possible offline."

Nasima Akter Nisha, president of the forum WE, stated that when the platform was formed in 2017, it had only 30,000 members.

Now it rose to 11 lakh this month, she said.

"Through WE, at least 400,000 women entrepreneurs are doing business online regularly today and earning anywhere between Tk 10,000 and Tk 60,000 per month by selling local products home and abroad."

"There are so many entrepreneurs who have never had a formal job in their life. They just got inspired by others, and are making a significant contribution to their family," Nisha added.

She said they are working on creating a database of regional entrepreneurs and helping them get trade licenses.

"We have already signed a MoU with Ekshop, a digital one-stop platform, developed by the Access to Information (a2i) so that our entrepreneurs can get a license without the hassle of paying extra money to the brokers," she added.

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