PHOTOS: MONG SING HAI MARMA AND MINTU DESHWARA

ECONOMY OF THE HILLS

Where women rule the market

MONG SING HAI MARMA AND JAGARAN CHAKMA

In the early hours of dawn, when Bandarban's residents are still asleep, the roadside market known locally as Marma Bazar is already teeming with activity.

Vendors spread banana leaves and empty sacks across the pavement, arranging freshly harvested vegetables. Their wares range from pumpkin greens, taro stems, water ferns, okra, brinjal, and lesser-known wild greens. Soon they are seen bargaining with customers, townspeople returning from morning walks.

The scene could be anywhere in Bangladesh. Except for one detail: every vendor is a woman.

They come from nearby villages at dawn, foraging for wild greens or gathering crops from small plots before making the journey to town on foot or by local vehicle. The money they earn keeps families afloat.

This is not an anomaly. Across the three hill districts of Bandarban, Rangamati, and Khagrachhari, women are the visible driving force of local commerce. They sell foraged vegetables, run established shops, trade handloom textiles, operate home kitchens, and launch ventures that bridge tradition and innovation.

ECONOMICS OF NECESSITY

Ekhyaing Nu Marma, 35, from Saing Phra Para, sells at Marma Bazar to support two schoolgoing sons. Her husband drives a three-wheeler, but his income alone cannot comfortably sustain their family of four.

Without substantial capital, she farms a small plot beside her home and forages in the wild.

"By selling these vegetables, I can buy salt, fermented fish paste, oil, onions, and garlic," she says. "It also helps cover my sons' school transport costs."

Her story is common. For many women in the hill districts, commerce begins with need rather than ambition.

Soma Dey, associate professor of Women and Gender Studies at Dhaka University, notes that subsistence farming, such as jhum cultivation, is widely practised in the Hill Tracts districts. "They engage in this form of farming to ensure food security for their families. For the same reason, they go to markets with fresh produce"

The associate professor explains, "Mobility restrictions are lower in indigenous cultures than among Bengalis, which is a major reason women here are more economically active both inside and outside their homes."

Yet even survival-driven enterprise creates ripples — supporting families, preserving food systems, and maintaining social networks that have existed for generations.

FROM MARKETS TO STOREFRONTS

A hundred yards from Marma Bazar, a different facet of the situation is seen at the Happy Market, also known as Burmese Market, where traders sell handloom clothes mostly made by Indigenous artisans. The shops here open later than the Marma Bazar, but the shopkeepers and salespeople here are also mostly women.

Kroi Sapru Marma is one of them. She sold five cows for nearly Tk 600,000, used the proceeds to rent a shop, and built a business. Now she runs two outlets and has paid for her younger brother's education at Jagannath University.

"I managed both studies and business. Now I run two shops. I have supported my younger brother's education at Jagannath University," she says, holding her 11-month-old child. "Now I can contribute to my family."

Nearly 80 percent of Indigenous clothing shops in Bandarban town are run by women, according to Chandra Tanchangya, owner of Shoi and Wa Shopping Centre. Many young women work as sales assistants. And established entrepreneurs boost employment and income generation for women who cannot afford to open up businesses in urban areas.

Tanchangya, owner of "Maing Collection", who started her business in 2016, sells clothes wholesale to women in remote areas.

"I also support college and university students in starting online businesses," she says. "So far, eight students are running online ventures with products from my shop."

PRESERVING CRAFT, BUILDING LIVELIHOODS

In Khagrachhari's Pankhaiya Para, Bina Chakma, 54, has been trading traditional handmade dresses, such as Pinon, Hadi, bags and Aalam, for over a decade. Everything she sells is woven on traditional waist looms, ranging from everyday wear to high-end pieces.

She started the business to support her family and cover her children's education. Her sales now average Tk 1 lakh per month. The business employs weavers from villages, keeping the craft alive while generating income.

Around 350 women entrepreneurs are involved in this trade across Khagrachhari district, she estimates. Some also run home kitchens, selling traditional food and sweets.

"It is quite difficult to maintain a solvent family with a single income," Bina says. This is why, in her view, women entrepreneurs embrace self-reliance and play an important role in strengthening their families and communities.

Lita Khisha, a history lecturer at a private college, entered the business in 2020 for side income. She trades mid- to high-range traditional tribal women's outfits.

Selling mainly through online platforms, she carved out a niche market among customers seeking authentic and quality handwoven outfits. Her monthly sales now average around Tk 80,000, though the figure fluctuates with seasons and festivals.

For women like Bina and Lita, business serves a dual purpose. On one hand, it sustains families financially. On another hand, it preserves cultural practices that might otherwise fade.

BREAKING CONVENTION

Not all stories follow traditional paths. Tejashree Chakma's trajectory is less typical.

Born in Rangamati, she graduated from East West University's English Department in 2019. In her final semester, she received an offer to pursue postgraduate studies at the University of Oxford. Her family urged her not to leave the country.

"That moment changed my future plans," she recalls. "I decided that if I could not go abroad, I would build something of my own, something unique, and enjoy my freedom."

She returned to Rangamati and launched a clothing business, selling both traditional and non-traditional wear. But the apparel market was saturated. Competition was fierce.

"I did not just want to do business," she says. "I wanted to do something different."

Searching for a less competitive and more distinctive venture, she identified a gap in the local market for quality sports items. She shifted the focus of her business entirely.

The gamble paid off. Within three to four months, her monthly sales climbed to Tk 5-6 lakh. She invested Tk 15 lakh with family support and now employs three staff at her outlet in Rangamati's Post Office area.

Her average monthly profit is around Tk 1.5 lakh, three times what she believes she would have earned in a salaried job.

"If I had continued in a job, I would earn at best Tk 50,000 a month," she says. "But business gives me freedom. I enjoy making my own decisions and creating something unique."

For Tejashree, entrepreneurship is not merely financial. It is about standing out, taking risks, and building an identity defined by independence and innovation.

THE CONSTRAINTS

Yet this visible economic participation does not tell the complete story.

"They do not have equal rights in decision-making," Soma Dey says. "For example, in the Chakma community, household and community heads are men. This implies that the power structure is unequal and men dominate decision-making."

The picture varies dramatically across indigenous communities. The Khasi people, who cultivate betel leaves in deep forests along the Indian border in the Sylhet region, live in a matrilineal system where women hold authority over family property and major decisions.

After marriage, men move to their wives' houses and help with household activities and betel leaf cultivation, according to Saju Marchiang, publicity secretary of the Khasi Social Council. The youngest daughter typically inherits family property, and lineage is traced through the mother.

Monika Khonglah, head of Meghatila Punjee, says women manage all financial matters in each family. They prepare betel leaves for sale, sell them to traders, and handle all related financial transactions.

Yet even in communities where women hold formal authority, broader constraints remain.

Violence in the hills has squeezed the space for women. And perhaps most critically, land rights remain elusive.

"Where are the land rights for them to undertake large-scale farming?" Dey asks.

She argues that there are gender-specific needs that should be addressed. Facilitating cooperative-based farming among women in the hill districts could promote large-scale, environmentally friendly agriculture.

"To do so, the state should support them by ensuring access to capital, developing infrastructure, and providing incentives to establish market linkages so that women can scale up and emerge as significant economic actors," she notes.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: WHY THE HILLS ARE DIFFERENT?

From vegetable vendor Ekhyaing Nu Marma to entrepreneur Tejashree Chakma, women maintain a strong presence across the Chittagong Hill Tracts' economic landscape. Their journeys differ in scale and setting, but their impact is undeniable.

Fahmida Khatun, executive director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, sees this as a noteworthy example of women's economic empowerment in Bangladesh.

The national picture is less encouraging. "While women make up about 51 percent of the country's population, only around 40 percent participate in the labour force, and nearly 90 percent of them work in the informal sector," Khatun points out.

What makes the hill districts different? Both Khatun and Dey point to social structures.

Khatun notes that women in Bandarban, Rangamati and Khagrachhari are actively engaged in trade and small businesses, playing a visible role in local markets and contributing to household income.

Comparatively supportive social environments in many indigenous communities encourage women to take part in economic activities and decision-making.

"This example shows that when social barriers are reduced, women can play a powerful role in strengthening local economies," she says.

The challenge now is to build on their entrepreneurial energy while addressing the structural barriers that remain. If cultural norms permit greater mobility, women lead – the hills are proof of that. The question is whether policy will catch up.

[Our Moulvibazar correspondent Mintu Deshwara also contributed to this report.]