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**WOMEN FOOD ENTREPRENEURS IN BANGLADESH: A
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AGENDA ON SOCIAL
ENTERPRISE PERCEPTIONS**

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Abstract:

In recent years, the emerging trend of female entrepreneurship as a sustainable activity has attracted the attention of developing countries such as Bangladesh. Nevertheless, the issues of entrepreneurial leadership and gender relevant to female entrepreneurship have not been sufficiently explored. The growth of social entrepreneurs in Bangladesh remains low compared to the country's population and social problems. Women entrepreneurs have demonstrated their potential to serve society by playing an increasingly important economic role, actively creating jobs and income, and contributing to the tax base. Therefore, it is important to focus on existing women entrepreneurs and their motivations for transforming their businesses into social enterprises. This study proposes an agenda to explore the perspectives of women food entrepreneurs in Bangladesh regarding the development of their food business into a social enterprise, with a focus on the potential impact on food security and sustainable growth. The research agenda emphasizes the relevance and effectiveness of women entrepreneurship in the food sector. Using a qualitative approach, the research agenda aims to gather insights from women entrepreneurs in the food sector. The findings are expected to contribute to discussions on sustainable development and women's empowerment and highlight the role of women-led social enterprises in the food industry.

Keywords:

Food Security, Social Enterprise, Women Entrepreneurs, Small Food Business, Bangladesh

Introduction

Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in terms of development and poverty reduction. Although it was one of the poorest countries when it gained independence in 1971, it achieved lower-middle-income status in 2015. The country is expected to be removed from the UN list of least developed countries (LDC) by 2026 (The World Bank, 2024). However, despite progress in domestic food production over the past three decades, around 30.5% of the population was affected by moderate food insecurity and 10.2% by severe food insecurity in 2019 (BRAC, 2023). According to a survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, around 37.7 million people were affected by moderate to severe food insecurity in 2023.

Notably, malnutrition remains high, especially among women and children, affecting 40% of the population, with 70% of those affected belonging to poor households. Furthermore, the prevalence of anaemia among women is at a high rate of 39.9%. Achieving the target of reducing anaemia to 30% by 2025 and 20% by 2030 will be a challenging task for the country (BRAC, 2023). It is concerning that a majority of the population experiences food insecurity, especially as Bangladesh is on the path to becoming a developing country by 2026. Bangladesh must address persistent and newly emerged global and national challenges to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2, which aims to end hunger and food insecurity by 2030.

As part of national development efforts, developing countries like Bangladesh are focusing on increasing women's participation as entrepreneurs. As women make up almost half of the total workforce in Bangladesh, it is clear that their involvement can have a significant impact on the country's growth (Debnath, Chowdhury, Khan, & Chowdhury, 2020). The fourth phase of the Enhancing Food Security and Nutrition (EFSN) program targeted women as an entry point to transform communities through empowering them socially and economically and helping them become entrepreneurs in refugee-affected areas in Bangladesh, and the significant improvements of the program includes enhanced food consumption, increased household assets, higher incomes from agriculture, greater women's participation in economic decisions, and better nutritional outcomes for women and children (World Food Programme, 2024). Without the meaningful and active participation of women, achieving a dynamic and sustainable economy is impossible (Debnath et al., 2020). Therefore, the most practical approach to achieving SDG 2, as well as SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work) by 2030, is to promote women's entrepreneurship, particularly in the food sector.

Meanwhile, women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh are playing an increasingly significant role in the economy, actively creating jobs and income and contributing to the tax base (Nessa, 2024). Women's entrepreneurship serves as more than just a source of income; it also functions as a mechanism for achieving the SDGs. By actively participating in entrepreneurship, women can improve their livelihoods (Debnath et al., 2020). Entrepreneurs not only create jobs for themselves but also generate employment opportunities for others. This leads to economic empowerment and greater employment opportunities for unemployed women. The inclusion of women in the economy can help to reduce gender inequality, improve women's decision-making skills, and promote their economic empowerment (Debnath et al., 2020). Since the outbreak of COVID-19, around 30-35 women entrepreneurs in Brahmanbaria district¹ have set an example by starting home-cooked food businesses through online platforms (Shonchay, 2021). Also, noticing the surge of women entrepreneurs in home-based catering services

¹ An eastern district in Bangladesh located in Chattogram division.

around the port city of Bangladesh, customers of different age groups and various areas in Chattogram were surveyed. The results revealed that 89 percent of respondents availed of such catering services during the pandemic (Ali, 2020).

These women entrepreneurs, ranging from a fearless 16-year-old baker to a middle-aged homemaker, have begun their entrepreneurial journey while fulfilling society's demands at a crucial time of the pandemic. With restaurants closed, these women saw an opportunity to meet the increasing demand for affordable, healthy, home-cooked food. Their customer base consists mainly of low to middle-income employees and bachelors. As many men lost their jobs during the pandemic, the women took the initiative to support family expenses and became entrepreneurs. Additionally, they have created employment opportunities, proving their role as change agents in society.

This paper aims to propose a research agenda to explore the perspectives of women food entrepreneurs in Bangladesh on the development of their food businesses, focus on the potential impact on food security and sustainable growth. As Bala (2023) identified, entrepreneurial competency, encompassing innovation and opportunity recognition, emerged as a key mediator in enhancing business performance. Policies and support systems that focus on these areas were targeted to improve the performance and sustainability of women-led micro and small enterprises (SME) in Bangladesh. Therefore, understanding the perception and mindset of these women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh's SME sector is an important issue influencing their success. With the expansion of the food industry, women entrepreneurs can be pioneers in providing food security by transforming their businesses into social enterprises. Extensive research is needed to promote the development of food-based social enterprises in Bangladesh.

Literature Review

Who Are The Women Entrepreneurs?

The UNDP Human Development Report (2004) defines a woman entrepreneur as a woman who has independently started or inherited a business, either alone or with partners and is willing to assume financial, administrative, and social risks and responsibilities and actively engage in the business's daily operations (Ahammad & Moudud-Ul- Huq, 2013).

According to Yahya & Fitriyani (2023), women entrepreneurs engage in entrepreneurial activities full-time. They possess the bravery to take risks, the capacity to identify and exploit opportunities that emerge from their surroundings, and the ability to utilize their resources in an innovative way to sustain their businesses (Anggadwita & Dhewanto, 2015). In recent years, the presence of women entrepreneurs in both commercial and social entrepreneurship has been more apparent. Their inherent high levels of empathy and sociability often motivate them to participate in social entrepreneurship or engage in social activities, driven not only by the pursuit of profit but also by the desire to make a positive social impact.

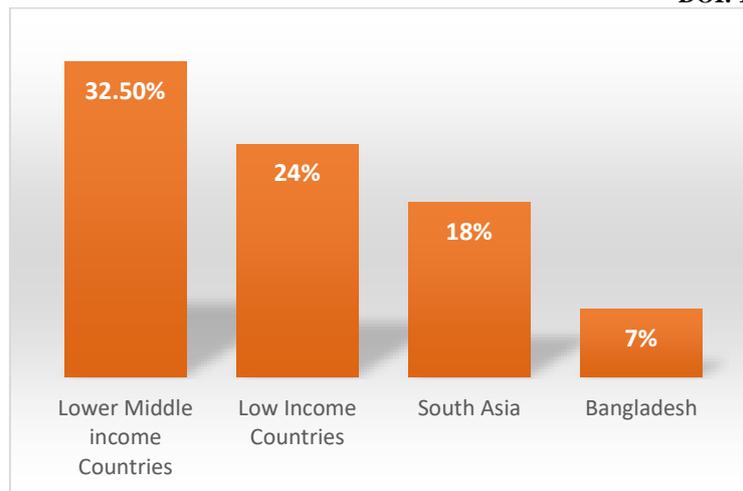


Figure 1: Proportion of Women-led Businesses in Bangladesh and Worldwide

Source: Adpated from World Bank Group, Gender Data Portal, 2022

According to the World Bank Gender Data Portal, one in every three businesses globally is owned by women. This percentage varies across different regions and is positively associated with the income levels of countries. In South Asia, the proportion of women business owners is the lowest, at around 18%, with Bangladesh having approximately 7% women business owners as stated in Figure 1. Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) highlights the strong commitment of women entrepreneurs to social and environmental sustainability. According to the GEM 2022/2023 Women's Entrepreneurship report, approximately four out of five entrepreneurs globally consider these factors in their business decisions, with women showing a slightly higher likelihood than men. This commitment is further underscored by the fact that women entrepreneurs tend to prioritize sustainability over economic business goals more often than men. Despite relatively low awareness of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, women entrepreneurs are taking proactive steps to address social and environmental issues. About half of them have taken measures to maximize their businesses' social impact, and approximately four-fifths have implemented strategies to minimize their businesses' environmental impact over the past year. This proactive approach shows their commitment to creating a more sustainable and equitable business landscape.

Women entrepreneurs face immense challenges compared to their male counterparts due to the variety of roles and social issues. Ahmed, Ahmed, Hoque, Majid, & Chhikara (2019) presented a stirring case study on 'Burger-E-KellaFote,' a fast food business founded by three sisters in Bangladesh. Despite facing numerous socio-cultural obstacles to be taken seriously, and coping up with the fear of being evicted by neighbourhood business owners, the entrepreneurs persevered and successfully established their new business. Their story is a powerful source of inspiration for female entrepreneurs in Bangladesh, vividly illustrating how women can defy societal norms and achieve success against all odds. Debnath et al. (2020), addressed key issues in entrepreneurship, women's empowerment, and sustainable development. Focusing on Bangladesh, the study offered insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by women entrepreneurs in a developing country.

Bala (2023) also addressed an important issue influencing the success of women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh's SME sector. the research identifies entrepreneurial motivation, orientation, technology adoption, favourable conditions, and government support as critical success factors.

At the same time, access to finance was found to be insignificant. Entrepreneurial competency, encompassing innovation and opportunity recognition, emerged as a key mediator in enhancing business performance. The findings suggest that targeted policy measures and support systems focusing on these areas can significantly improve the performance and sustainability of Bangladesh's women-led micro and small enterprises. Islam, Noman, Alam, Tonmoy, & Hasan (2020) analyzed key factors contributing to entrepreneurial success in Bangladesh's rapidly growing food processing sector. Key findings suggested that the use of information technology, support from family and friends, and the ability to understand and leverage market dynamics are crucial for success. The research highlights the industry's significant role in contributing to Bangladesh's GDP and employment, underscoring its potential for expansion to meet the demands of a growing middle class.

The e-commerce industry in Bangladesh is rapidly growing, and women are already making significant contributions to this area. E-Commerce has provided avenues for several women aspiring to be entrepreneurs. Currently, the number of Facebook users in Bangladesh is at 67.245 million². Nasima Akter Nisha established Women and E-commerce (WE) to cater to the requirements of female businesses. Their objective is to support female e-commerce entrepreneurs in maintaining their enterprises and enhancing their empowerment through this non-profit organization. Even though their contribution to the economy and society needs further exploration, their businesses show their potential to become a significant part of society. Understanding their perception of social enterprises is crucial, as it can lead their business towards a sustainable future.

Social Enterprise in Bangladesh

Multiple interpretations of social enterprises and related concepts exist globally. In Bangladesh, two globally renowned social enterprises, Grameen Bank and BRAC, have not only emerged as dominant players in the social entrepreneurship landscape but have also set a pioneering example with their innovative approaches (Darko & Sultana, 2016). Fazle Hasan Abed, the founder of BRAC, established a mixed model of social enterprises that combines traditional development, health, nutrition, Balance of Payment last-mile supply chain, microfinance, and education programs with profitable business activities. This approach ensures a double bottom line, similar to the BRAC Bank and bKash model (Shuvra, 2019). BRAC was founded in Bangladesh in 1972 and is now the world's largest Non-Government Organization (NGO). It has established several social enterprises to provide livelihood for people. BRAC can be classified as a social enterprise since it now funds 73% of its operations with the revenue generated by its own social enterprises and microfinancing. The organization operates 16 social enterprises in various sectors of Bangladesh.

BRAC Dairy procures milk from more than 50,000 farmers and, afterwards, undergoes processing, packaging, and sales of yogurt, milk beverages, and ice-cream products. This initiative creates market opportunities for milk-sourced milk from rural parts of the country, where storage challenges were prevalent. The dairy employs a cross-subsidizing approach, as around 40% of its 101 chilling centers are not financially sustainable due to their location. The BRAC dairy employs more than 1,400 people. Now, several private entities are operating in the sector. However, BRAC Dairy was the first to provide these rural dairy farmers access.

² For details, see Women and E-Commerce Forum (WE) webpage: <https://weforumbd.com/about/>; accessed on 27 July 2024.

On the other hand, Grameen Bank has become known as an international model for microcredit as a poverty reduction strategy. Mohammed Yunus established this microfinance institution and community development bank in 1976. The organization provides small loans (microcredit) to poor people without security or collateral. Dr. Muhammad Yunus introduced the concept of social business as an innovative model for solving social issues. In his model, he clarified the critical principles that Social businesses must adhere to to be classified as such, including the primary aim of combating poverty or addressing one or more societal issues like health, education, and the environment. The primary objective of a Social business is not to maximize revenue (Chowdhury et al., 2021).

Grameen Bank focused on the most disadvantaged people, with a specific emphasis on women. Historically, women had limited access to financial options beyond regular credit lines and sources of income. They were shown to have an unequal distribution of power in determining household matters. Yunus and his colleagues have discovered that providing loans to women leads to significant secondary outcomes, such as empowering a marginalized group in society. These women also tend to use their extra income to support their children, which is not commonly observed among many men.

Grameen Danone Foods was established as a joint venture of Grameen Bank in 2006 to battle malnutrition. They produce affordable yogurt enriched with vital nutrients. Grameen Danone Foods significantly impact people's lives, not simply by enhancing their health. Incentives are present across the entire supply chain. The milk used to produce yogurt is purchased from small-scale farmers. Production is strategically organized to maximize employment opportunities for many people. Solar energy is utilised for the processing. Moreover, the yogurt's packaging is entirely biodegradable. Danone Foods actively contributes to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which aims to eradicate poverty and hunger (Chowdhury et al., 2021).

Despite being home to two world-famous social enterprises – Grameen and BRAC – there are currently no policies directly governing social enterprise activities in Bangladesh (The British Council, 2016). This lack of specific policies is a pressing issue that needs immediate attention. While there are policies in place to help grow the social enterprise sector, there is no specific policy related to social enterprise. Currently, in the Company Law of 1994, there is no provision for establishing and operating social enterprise in Bangladesh. They can register in different forms and operate under various legal entities, such as sole proprietorships, partnerships, company acts, society acts, trusts, and NGO acts. As a result, establishing social enterprises is a complex and challenging process for social entrepreneurs in Bangladesh. Although organizations such as BRAC and Grameen Bank were established in the early 1970s, most social enterprises started at least two decades later (Shahriar & Habib, 2022). This delay is unacceptable, which makes it necessary to know how aware the women entrepreneurs are about these insufficient policies or how they perceive these policies according to their own business.

Extensive research is necessary to promote the development of social enterprises in Bangladesh. Such research should focus on existing entrepreneurs and their perceptions and motivations regarding transforming their businesses into social enterprises in Bangladesh's context. The findings of this research can provide valuable insights for policymakers and the government. The lack of data in this area may lead to delayed initiatives for developing social enterprises in Bangladesh.

Research Agenda

Addressing the issues of food-based social entrepreneurship and participation of women is vital for several reasons. First, it has direct implications for gender equality and women's economic empowerment in Bangladesh, aligning with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5 (Gender Equality) and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) (Ahmed, 2023). Second, by exploring the perceptions of Bangladeshi women entrepreneurs, the study can offer insights into the potential of women transforming their businesses into social enterprises to serve as a vehicle for sustainable development in emerging economies.

It is imperative to understand the shifting demographics and evolving lifestyles of individuals that have resulted in a substantial inflow of money into the food industry. Bangladesh's food and beverage business has experienced rapid growth since 2000 due to the country's reliance on agriculture. The industry comprises 22% of the economy and produces approximately 2.45% of the workforce. Bangladesh significantly influences the global market by exporting food and beverages to 90 distinct countries worldwide (Akter, 2019). This potential for growth should inspire optimism about the future of the industry.

Moreover, since 2000, food processing has been Bangladesh's fastest-growing industry (Statista Market Insight, 2024). Recent advancements in the food processing business have led to many entrepreneurs emerging in this sector. This trend might be linked to the change in the tastes and preferences of the Bangladeshi population. Currently, Bangladeshi people prefer to purchase processed food items and packaged food goods (Islam et al., 2020). Overall, the food business has experienced substantial growth, encompassing street carts, small kiosks, and online food services. Online purchases will account for 0.9% of the total revenue by 2024 (Statista Market Insight, 2024). Busy lifestyles have led to an increase in the number of people opting to order food through online platforms or snacking on the go. Due to increasing demand, delivery companies such as Foodpanda and HungryNaki are gaining popularity among customers and food-based enterprises (Ahmed et al., 2019).

In this evolving business landscape, particularly in Bangladesh's food sector, women are making significant strides. The food business is the second most popular choice among women entrepreneurs in rural areas (Hossain, 2022). The Bangladeshi food market is expected to generate US\$149.90 billion in 2024, growing at a 9.28% compound annual growth rate (CAGR) from 2024 to 2028 (Statista Market Insight, 2024). However, there is not enough data on the presence of women entrepreneurs in the food business. Their role in this sector should be recognized and supported, as it is crucial for the industry's growth and development.

Certainly, there is a pressing need to educate and train women about social entrepreneurship, and this study can contribute as a valuable guideline by reflecting on their mindset and fostering the development of women food entrepreneurs in Bangladesh. It's important to note that there is a significant gap in research, specifically on social enterprise in Bangladesh (The State of Social Enterprise, 2016). This makes the findings of this study all the more valuable, as they could provide actionable intelligence to tailor interventions, policies, and support systems. This tailored approach could better meet the needs of women food entrepreneurs, enhancing their effectiveness and sustainability in developing countries. By analyzing women entrepreneurs' perceptions of social enterprises, we can gain a clearer understanding of their mindset toward social entrepreneurship, paving the way for future studies in this area.

Lack of research on women entrepreneurs' development and social entrepreneurship in the context of Bangladesh made it quite imperative to examine the current scenario of food-based women entrepreneurs. Despite women social entrepreneurs reducing the gender gap, there is still a lack of literature on their ventures compared to commercial entrepreneurship, where the gender gap remains high (Nair, 2020). Gender and entrepreneurial leadership are largely unexplored and undocumented topics. The reasons behind limited ownership and leadership capabilities among women entrepreneurs is yet to be explored. In order to contribute to the knowledge about women entrepreneurship in the food sector and their motivations and challenges to transitioning to social enterprise, the present study put forth the research agenda of understanding the perspectives of women food entrepreneurs.

This study will utilize a qualitative methodology to gain a detailed understanding of how women entrepreneurs perceive their roles and challenges within the social enterprise sector in Bangladesh. A qualitative approach is suitable in opposition to quantitative research for the present study because when limited research has been conducted on a particular concept or phenomenon, a qualitative approach is merited to gain a deeper understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Moreover, avoiding structured and close-ended questions during interviews allows the participants to openly discuss their perceptions in detail. If necessary qualitative approach provides an option for the researcher to probe for further explanation from the participants for high-quality data.

Following the phenomenological research approach, the study aims to provide a detailed description of the experiences of women entrepreneurs in the food sector in Bangladesh. This approach will help reveal not just factual information but deeper insights into their subjective experiences and societal impacts. To achieve the research agenda, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach will be followed, where the meanings will be based on the experiences and perspectives of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The goal is to uncover factual information and deeper insights into their subjective experiences and societal impacts. To achieve this goal, semi-structured interviews will be conducted to allow flexibility in probing deeper into the respondents' experiences and thoughts (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Participants of this study will be divided into three major domains, firstly, women owning food-related businesses, second, NGO Workers or Organizers involved in fostering/training women entrepreneurs, and thirdly, Relevant Policymakers. Women owning small or medium businesses will be selected for the study. The most suitable participants for these in-depth interviews would be women who own food-related businesses in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. As women entrepreneurs from rural areas are generally less educated and they only invest small amount with the motivation to support their families (Ferdousi & Mahmud, 2019). Interview questions will be prepared in both Bangla and English. Purposive and snowballing sampling will be used to select 10 to 15 women who can offer rich, relevant insights until data saturation is achieved. Selecting individuals that can provide with the information that is needed to answer the research questions is the most important consideration in qualitative selection decisions (Maxwell, 2013). Key themes and patterns emerging from participants' interviews and experiences will be identified through Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis.

Conclusion

The focus of this study is to develop strategies for increasing the participation of women in the food sector as social entrepreneurs, with the aim of enhancing food security. Additionally, it

aims to understand how women perceive society and policies related to social entrepreneurship in developing countries, which can guide future social entrepreneurs. Given the growing demand for food, there is an opportunity to explore the factors that influence the mindset of food-based social entrepreneurs. This exploration can contribute to the growth of female social entrepreneurs in the food industry, positively impacting society and promoting gender inclusion and social equity.

This study's unique aspect lies in its focus on the intersection of gender, social entrepreneurship, and the food sector, which has not been extensively explored in existing literature. The findings of this research can provide valuable insights for policymakers and the government. The lack of data in this area may result in delayed initiatives for developing social enterprises in Bangladesh.

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