

**SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS OF WOMEN
ENTREPRENEURS: A STUDY ON MANUFACTURE BASED
SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES (SMEs) IN BANGLADESH**

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ABSTRACT

Women constitute about half of the total population of Bangladesh. Like other developing countries, women in Bangladesh are deprived in socio-economic life in comparison to men. It is not possible for any country to be developed without active participation of women in main stream economy. Considering this reality, women entrepreneurs are a new phenomenon in Bangladesh. This study explores the socio economic constraints of women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh. To do this, this study is conducted on the women who involved in manufacturing based small and medium enterprises. Though SMEs are the most suitable and desirable scope for the women to start their own business, manufacturing business still very competitive and challenging sector for women. This study reveals the purposes of women to start their business, barriers from two different perspectives – social and business, and conclude with some suggestions to improve the socio-economic status of women in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurs, SMEs, Manufacturing based SMEs.

1. Introduction

Bangladesh is a highly populated country where women constitute roughly half of the population (BBS, 2006). Though overpopulation is one of the major problems of Bangladesh, its human resources are also considering as strength of this developing country. Women are about half of the formal and informal labor force and thus, half of our development depends on them (Al-Hossienie, 2011). Therefore, our development equally depends on the development of men and women of Bangladesh (Rahaman, 2010).

The socio-economic structure, insufficient employment opportunities and wages and behavioral discrimination in workplace are the main obstacles to women from main stream economy (Rahaman, 2010). Other similar studies (UNDP, 1994; UNICEF, 1993) also reveal that the ultimate solution to ensure rightful income to women and rescue them from social and professional discrimination is self-employment through development of small and medium entrepreneurship.

It is a matter of inspiration that a new women entrepreneurs' class is increasingly emerging in Bangladesh by taking the challenges of working in this adverse socioeconomic condition (Brush and Hisrich, 1999). Furthermore, they create employment opportunities for the women. Their entrepreneurship not only improve their living conditions and respects in the family and society, but also help in

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employment generation, skill development, business growth and all in all economic development of Bangladesh (Al-Hossienie, 2011).

Trading based SMEs face less problems in comparison to the manufacture based SMEs because trading has limited risks and ensures the return of the capital within short span of time (Ahmed et al., 2011). Besides that there are few women in Bangladesh who are willing to take such risks to prove themselves in this male dominated society. For this, researcher has selected the small and medium manufacturing sector and participation of women in this sector in Bangladesh. To do this, the rest of the paper is structured around seven sections where the first and second section describes the introduction of the study and objectives of the study respectively. The third section offers a review of related literature. In section four, a brief explanation is given on the methodology of the study that has been undertaken to do this study. This is followed by the findings and analysis. In section five, researcher has demonstrated the demographic and business profiles of the respondents. This part also reveals the main purposes of this study. Section six provides a conclusion on the current socio-economic status of women in manufacturing business. In the final part, researcher prescribes some recommendations to generate more opportunities for the women in Bangladesh.

2. Literature Review

SME sector is a significant component in economic development and employment. In many countries this sector has increasingly been seen as a means of generating meaningful and sustainable employment opportunities, particularly for women, the poor and people with disabilities (International Labour Organization, 1998). While women are active in SMEs, they face particular problems and challenges in developing their businesses. Women frequently face gender bias in the socio-economic environment (Mayoux, 2001).

Numerous research reports have been produced on the situation facing small and medium women entrepreneurs in a number of African countries (Rutashobya & Olomi, 1999; Haile, 1999; Hansen and Rand, 1989; Lwihula, 1999; Mayoux, 1999; Nchimbi, 2002). In the mid- 1990s, an ILO project in Asia aimed at promoting entrepreneurship among women in small and cottage industries in five Asian countries, viz. India, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand, and gathered considerable information on the status of women entrepreneurs in each of these countries (Mishra, 1996).

Razzaque (2003) argued that the factors that are acting as constraints in case of SME market development are: quality, poor marketing knowledge, investment availability and insufficient working capital, unskilled workforce, lack of entrepreneurial ability and managerial skills, poor physical infrastructure, high transport costs, trade policy and incentives, information, legal environment, social environment etc.

SMEs need a low capital investment but give rise to greater opportunities of employment. In developing countries, SMEs are typically playing important roles to alleviate poverty, economic growth, create jobs and increase productivity (Agbeibor, 2006). Mintoo (2006) agreed on this and suggested that the least developed countries (LDCs) have started refocusing their attention on SMEs to enhance their role in bringing about structural changes in their economies.

Miah (2007) and Afsar (2008) present government initiatives to promote women entrepreneurs in this sector. They also compare financial supports by government and other financial institutions to small and medium entrepreneurs to their actual financial needs. Ahmed (2008) argued that it is necessary to review the Government's industrial policy and technology policy to outline the Government's measures to support SMEs in technological up gradation.

Though many authors cited overall problems of managing SMEs, they do not provide any specific problems faced by women entrepreneurs in SMEs, especially in the most challenging sector, in manufacturing. This article initiates to fill up this gap and to explore the specific barriers for the women entrepreneurs.

Small and Medium Enterprise

Across the world, the SMEs are defined on the basis of two criteria: volume of turnover and number of person employed in a particular organization. European Union has defined SMEs on the basis of number of employees, volume of annual turnover and annual balance sheet total as follows.

Table 1: Small and Medium Enterprise by European Union

Enterprise Category	Headcount	Turnover (in euros)	Balance sheet total (in euros)
Medium-sized	< 250	≤ 50 million	≤ 43 million
Small	< 50	≤ 10 million	≤ 10 million
Micro	< 10	≤ 2 million	≤ 2 million

Source: European Commission Recommendation of 6 May 2003

Different multilateral development institutions represent definition of SMEs in the following criteria.

Table 2: Definition of Small and Medium Enterprise by Multilateral Institutions

Institution	Maximum no. of Employees	Max. Revenues or Turnover (\$)	Maximum Assets (\$)
World Bank	300	15,000,000	15,000,000
MIF – IADB	100	3,000,000	(none)
African Development Bank	50	(none)	(none)
UNDP	200	(none)	(none)

Source: Gibson and Vaart, 2008

On the other hand, Bangladesh Bank defined SMEs in line with the Industrial policy 2010 as follows:

Table 3: Definition of Small and Medium Enterprise in Bangladesh

		Value (replacement cost) of fixed assets excluding land & building	No. of Employees
Small Industrial Enterprise	Manufacturing	BDT 50 lac to 1 crore	25 to 99
	Service	BDT 5 lac to 1 crore	10 to 25
	Trading	BDT 5 lac to 1 crore	10 to 25
Medium Industry Enterprise	Manufacturing	BDT 10 crore to 30 crore	100 to 250
	Service	BDT 1 crore to 15 crore	50 to 100
	Trading	BDT 1 crore to 15 crore	50 to 100
Micro Industry Enterprise	Manufacturing	BDT 5 lac to 50 lac	10 to 24 or less
	Service	Less than BDT 5 lac	Less than 10
	Trading	Less than BDT 5 lac	Less than 10

Source: Bangladesh Bank, Industrial Policy 2010

Women Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship refers to the general trend of setting up new enterprises in a society (Begum, 1993). The International Labor Organization (ILO, 1984) defines an entrepreneur as a person with a set of characteristics that typically includes self-confidence, future-oriented, risk taking ability, originality, achievement-oriented and leadership quality. Khanka (2002) referred to women entrepreneurs as those who take initiative to innovate something new, imitate or adopt an existing business activity. Entrepreneurship is referred as the set of activities performed by an entrepreneur and being an entrepreneur precedes entrepreneurship.

3. Objectives of the Study

The main focus of this study is to highlight the socio-economic constraints faced by the women entrepreneurs in small and medium manufacturing enterprises. This paper looks for identifying such constraints of women manufacturers that hinder their mental peace as well as success in business in Bangladesh. Along with this, this paper also attempts –

- To explore the current status of women in small and medium manufacturing business
- To analyze the current status of women manufacturers in their families and society
- To identify the major financial and business constraints to SMEs of women
- To suggest some specific recommendations for future growth of women in SMEs in Bangladesh.

4. Methodology

4.1 Nature of the study

The paper undertakes a descriptive study based on field data on the social and economical obstacles of women entrepreneurs in the manufacturing sector of SMEs in Bangladesh. As the purpose of the study is to gain an in-depth understanding of such barriers this survey was conducted. Moreover, for the desire of maximizing the realism this paper also depends on some secondary data.

4.2 Scope of the study

Researcher conducted a study based on a survey on the women in SMEs in Bangladesh. To select the respondents for the study the following criteria were considered.

- Micro enterprise (10 to 24 or less employees), small enterprise (25 to 99 employees) and medium enterprise (100 to 250 employees).
- SMEs owned by the women in Bangladesh.
- Women entrepreneurs who engaged in manufacturing based SMEs.

4.3 Sample size

100 women entrepreneurs of manufacture based SMEs were interviewed which includes from RMG sub sector, leather sub sector, agri-business sub sector, plastic products sub sector, light engineering sub sector and handicraft sub sector.

4.4 Data collection and analysis techniques

In-depth interview is adopted for this study to gain an in-depth understanding of constraints faced by the women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh. Questionnaire was designed by incorporating 26 questions in five categories namely personal information, business information, business constraints, social constraints and opinions of women entrepreneurs on current situation.

Author also has collected secondary information from the publications of Bangladesh Bank (BB), Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), Ministry of Finance, World Bank, International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), European Union (EU), Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BWCCI), and relevant literatures.

5. Findings and Analysis

The respondents' demographic profile (Table 4) shows the respondent's age, marital status and academic background.

Table 4: Respondents' Demographic Profile

		Frequency (n = 100)	Percentage
Age	21-30	12	12
	31-40	39	39
	41-50	35	35
	51-60	14	14
Total		100	100
Marital Status	Unmarried	8	8
	Married	86	86
	Widow	4	4
	Separated	2	2
Total		100	100
Education	Up to class V	1	1
	Class V – class X	3	3
	SSC	12	12
	HSC	21	21
	Graduation & above	62	62
Total		100	100

Source: Field Survey

From the demographic profile it can be observed that maximum women entrepreneurs are middle aged people, 74 percent belongs from 31 to 50 years of age groups. Surprisingly, the percentage of married women entrepreneurs is about 86 percent which clearly represents the social structure of Bangladesh. However, the scenario is good enough in their educational background.

Table 5: Respondents' Business Profile

		Frequency (n = 100)	Percentage
Duration of business	Below 1 year	1	1
	1 to 5 years	17	17
	5 to 10 years	15	15
	More than 10 years	67	67
Total		100	100
No. of employees	10 to 24	53	53
	25 to 99	32	32
	100 to 250	15	15
Total		100	100
Types of Business	Micro	53	53
	Small	32	32
	Medium	15	15
Total		100	100
Types of ownership	Sole proprietorship	75	75
	Partnership	16	16
	Joint venture	9	9
Total		100	100
Source of capital	Formal	5	5
	Informal	60	60
	Both	35	35
Total		100	100

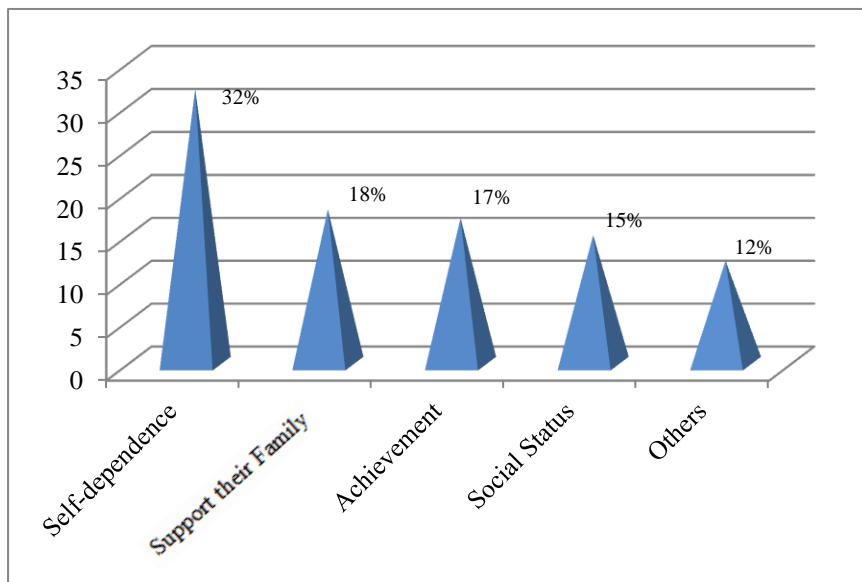
Source: Author's Field Survey

According to this table, 75 percent of women manufacturers are of sole proprietorship, only 16 percent women entrepreneurs operate their business in partnership and about 9 percent are joint venture. Almost 70 percent SMEs have been operating their business for over than ten years, 15 percent have been doing so for 5 to 10 years and the figure is slightly higher of those who have been doing business for 1 to 5 years. The initial investment of the 60 percent of the SME was collected from informal sources that are their own savings or loan from their friends and families. Only 5 percent women got help from any formal source (financial institutions, banks, NGOs etc.) to form their capital and rest 35 percent form their initial capital with the help of formal and informal sources.

5.1 Purposes of Starting Business

Income earning activities make women more confident, more vocal and surer of themselves and their rights and abilities than women not involved in income earning activities (Ahmed and Joshi, 1988). Realization of this made women interested for searching their own identity, individuality, and to participate in income generating activities. Some women become interested to prove their creativity (Hussain, 2011).

According to the study, the main reason of women to start their own business is self-dependence. 38 percent of the respondents respond that they started their business to be self-dependent. In their opinion, our social structure set that women would be always dependent on their counterparts, sometimes as father, sometimes as husband or often as their son. The second most important purpose of being entrepreneur is to support their families; the figure is 18 percent, followed by the reasons of achievement. 17 percent women want to achieve success in their life whereas 12 percent of them start their business to gain status in the society.

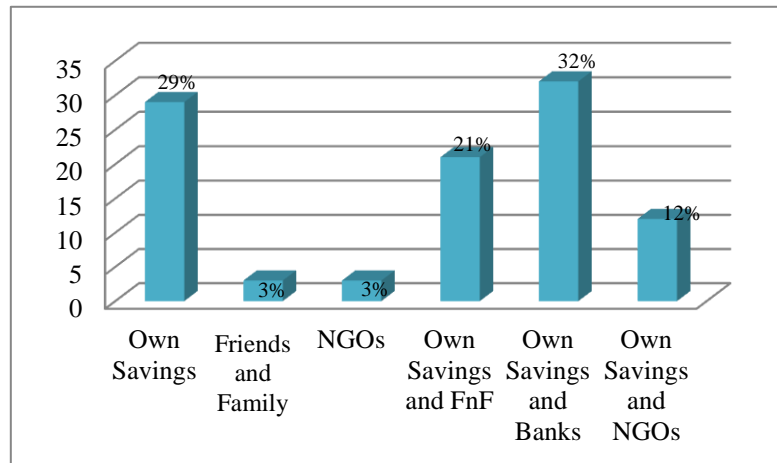


Source: Field Study

Fig. 1. Purposes of Starting Business

5.2 Financing of women entrepreneurship

It has been realized that lack of access to finance is a key impediment to SME development in Bangladesh. This problem is more crucial in the case of women entrepreneurship development (Zaman and Islam, 2011).



Source: Field Study

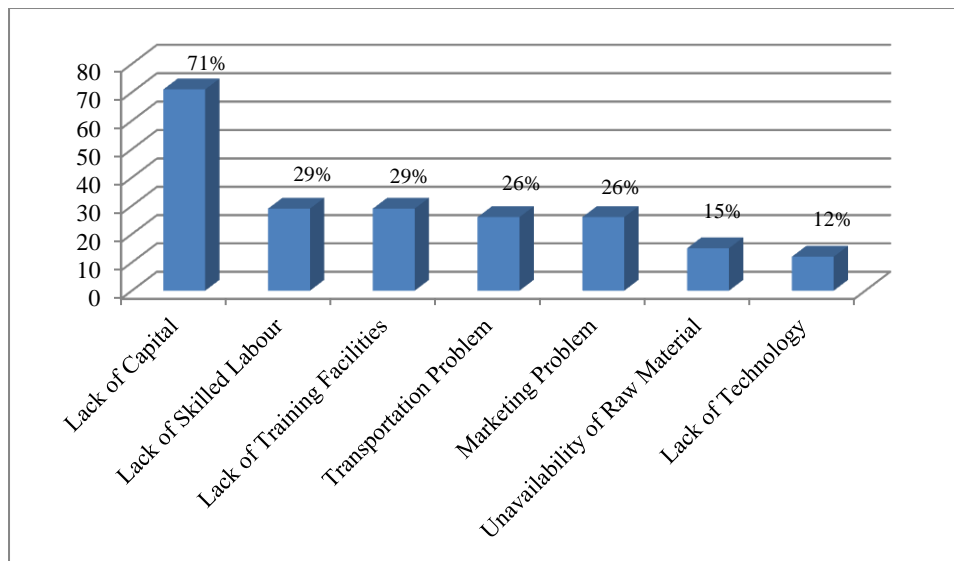
Fig. 2. Sources of Financing

Women entrepreneurs of SMEs are still lagging behind to get financial support from formal sources. According to the study, only 3 percent women entrepreneurs get full financial support from different NGOs to form the capital of their manufacturing business. 32 percent women have received some loan facilities from banks along with their self-fund but the amount of loans is very low to their needs. There are few women (12 percent) who often get financial help from NGOs to form their capital.

5.3 Business Constraints of Women in Manufacturing Business

In this study seven barriers (figure 3) have been identified by the respondents. The author tried to explore the related importance of these issues based on the opinion of the entrepreneurs. According to the study, majority of women entrepreneurs face shortage of capital and some face both lack of skilled labor and training facilities problem. Though very few entrepreneurs face marketing and transportation problem, this issue comes first to them on the basis of importance.

Lack of capital: Several studies reveal that the most crucial problem to SMEs is shortage of capital. However, women entrepreneurs suffer more by this problem than men. 71 percent women have the problem of capital insufficiency. This is because women in Bangladesh do not have proper right or access to their family assets. They often receive very little of even no hereditary property from families. That also minimizes the chance of getting loans from any formal financial supports due to lacking of collateral. Besides this most of the women in Bangladesh are unaware about government financial supports.



Source: Field Study

Fig. 3. Business Constraints of Women Entrepreneurs in Manufacturing based SMEs

Lack of skilled labour: Though the success of any manufacturing firm largely depends on its skilled labour, 29 percent of women who operate manufacturing based SMEs face problem of insufficiency of skilled labour. This study reveals that 65 percent of women entrepreneurs need training immediately to develop a skilled workforce. 15 percent of the respondents answer that they will need training if they want to expand their business in future.

Lack of training facilities: Though government is now aware of the growing need of women entrepreneurship development, still our women do not get sufficient support services from them. Only 20 percent women receive training from any government institution. 78 percent women depend on private institutions for training facilities which seems expensive to the women. 2 percent women claimed that they are self-trained entrepreneurs. Though government has taken several initiatives to provide training and counseling services to entrepreneurs especially women, most of the women are unaware of such facilities.

Transportation problem: Fast and cheap transportation is not available in Bangladesh and thus women manufactures' problem is quite significant in respect of transporting their raw materials as well as finished goods.

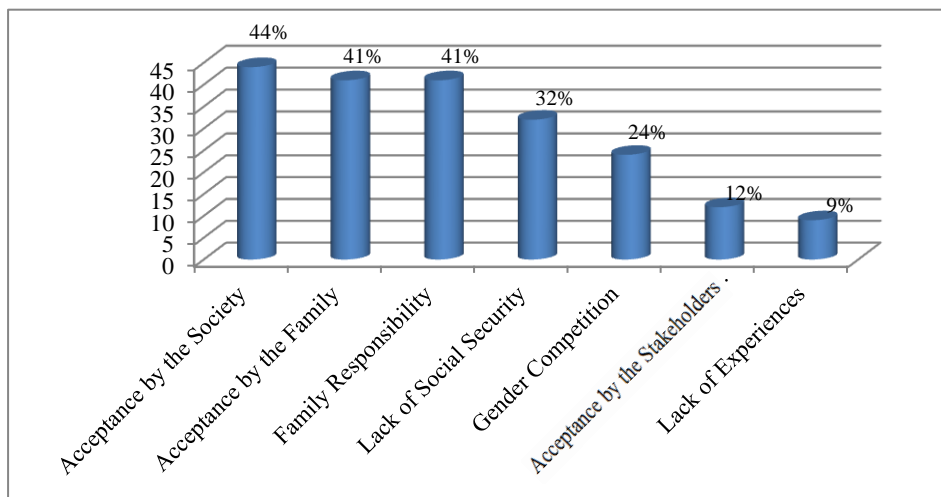
Marketing problem: Women in Bangladesh still lagging behind the knowledge to identify efficient and cheap means of marketing. The study indicates that absent of marketing facilities and marketing knowledge is a problem for 26 percent of women.

Unavailability of raw materials: According to this study, almost 68 percent women depend on local market for the raw materials of their products and the remaining depends on imported raw materials. More than half of the women replies that price fluctuation of raw materials often make their production uncertain whereas 15 percent claim unavailability of raw materials as a main reason of production threats.

Lack of technology: Internet connectivity plays important role in updating the manufacturers with the latest technology, product design, and customer choice (Ahmed et. al., 2011). Women entrepreneurs still very far from these technologies. Besides this, 29 percent women reply that they depend on foreign technology for their business which is expensive to them.

5.4 Social Constraints of Women in Manufacturing Business

The status of women in Bangladesh is consistently noted to be among the lowest in the world (Cain, 1984). In a tradition bound society like Bangladesh women end up being the focal point for receiving all the woes generated by the society (Hussain, 2001). Ministry of Women and Children affairs, Bangladesh explore that culture and tradition tends women to keep inside family and increasing poverty forces them outside for economic survival. This study identifies seven social constraints (figure 4) that women entrepreneurs face along with their business constraints.



Source: Field Study

Fig. 4: Social Constraints of Women Entrepreneurs in Manufacturing based SMEs

Acceptance by the society: The concept of women entrepreneurship is still not well accepted in society. Business is considered a man's job (Zaman and Islam, 2011). The outcomes of this study reveal that the strongest social obstacle for women is the fear of not being accepted by the society. Almost half (44 percent) of the women agree that they very often receive disrespect from society.

Acceptance by the family: One of the main reasons of women getting involved in earnings is to support their family. To our great surprise, this study explore that 41 percent of women do not get acceptance of their effort from their family. Though they start business to help their better-half, they suffer by inferiority complex by their husbands. Still most of the married women live in joint families where they are neglected by other family members.

Family responsibilities: Women entrepreneurs have to face double workload. In Bangladesh, like other developing countries, women are considered responsible for

all household tasks and child care. Even when they engage in economic activities, they need to take care of all family responsibilities and to do all household tasks. Therefore, 41 percent women agree that their family responsibilities hinder their business success.

Lack of social security: Manufacturing business demands time to do its daily activities. Sometimes women have to work till late night or full night to fulfill an order. Women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh face security threats as our society and government do not ensure proper and safe environment for them.

Gender competition: Another main barrier to women is that they face gender competition in business. Women entrepreneurship is a new phenomenon in Bangladesh. They are not always welcomed by their competitors. There are some men who do not accept that women as a competitor.

Acceptance by the stakeholders: Not only competitors but also other stakeholders (creditors, distributors, suppliers etc.) create competition for women. There are some women who face problems in doing business with suppliers or distributors just because they are women.

Lack of experience: Most of the women come to business to solve financial crisis of their family. Some women want to prove their capabilities and for achievement. Whatever the purpose of their business one thing is common to all and this is lack of experience.

6. Limitations and Scope of Future Research

Though a good number of women who started their own manufacturing business have been chosen to disclose information regarding various socio-economic constraints of women entrepreneurs, this shall not be enough to express the real scenario. This is because this study was conducted on the women entrepreneurs of Dhaka city which represent the partial truth. Women who lived in outside of Dhaka have to struggle more. Besides this, the women are still not ready to share their actual problems freely, especially the obstacles they face from their family life and conjugal life. Therefore, further studies should be taken to disclose the real picture of women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh. Further studies may also include the importance of creating awareness of women entrepreneurs about their economical and social rights.

7. Conclusion

This study tries to explore the constraints faced by the women entrepreneurs who have taken the tough responsibility of development of small and medium manufacturing enterprises in Bangladesh. This study identifies the constraints from two different perspectives – business and social. Manufacturing business suffers by a lot of business problems which are almost similar irrespective to men and women. However, women struggle more than men due to some social obstacles. In the early life, girls always sacrifice their educational right for boy children in families. In their conjugal life, women also sacrifice their career or opportunities for their husbands and families. This is very unfortunate that women often receive rejection from those people for whom actually they start business. Nevertheless, they are not properly

aware of their rights in family as well as in society to government. To encourage women and increase the percentage of women involvement in economic activities both government and women need to be concern about some issues. In the next section, researcher develops some suggestions for the women development in manufacturing based SMEs.

8. Recommendations

On the basis of the study, researcher develops two sets of guidelines to overcome the business problems and social obstacles. Government has taken several initiatives to promote SMEs in Bangladesh, especially women in SMEs. Moreover, current situation suggest that there is a wide scope to do something more for the women in Bangladesh.

Suggestions to eliminate business barriers:

- Banks and other financial institutions should give priority to women, especially who engage in manufacturing business. Women face shortage in working capital. To solve this problem banks should provide trade credit facilities to women.
- There is a controversy in the definition of small and medium enterprises. For this reason, SMEs often deprived from getting financial and other support services. Therefore, government should define SMEs in a clear way.
- Though there are enough institutions to support small and cottage industry in Bangladesh, the number is very few in case of SMEs. More institutions should be established to support this sector.
- Needs of manufacturing based SMEs different from those of Service and Trading based SMEs. So, each wing should be considered individually.
- Manufacturing business largely depends on many imported raw materials. Government should take proper import policy to support SMEs.
- Most of the women do not have any past experience of business. Therefore, proper training facilities should be provided them to develop their managerial skill.
- SME foundation established a separate wing to support women entrepreneurs. However, very few women actually aware of it. SMEF should concentrate on its publicity and make women aware about their services.

Suggestions to eliminate social barriers:

- Government and media should take proper steps to encourage women in economic activities and make people aware of women contributions in our economy.
- Women should be aware of their rights in family and society.
- Mother is the first teacher of every child. Therefore, women should teach their children to respect women.

- Family members should be respectful and helpful to women to perform their household and business activities.
- Government should ensure social security to women.

Besides of these limitations, women in Bangladesh are emerging rapidly in SMEs. Government, financial sector, public sector, society and its people should change their perceptions positively toward women entrepreneurs and facilitate development of women.

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