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Gender is a Human Rights Issue: The Case of Women's Entrepreneurship Development in the Small and Medium Enterprise Sector of Bangladesh

By Chowdhury Dilruba Shoma¹

Abstract

This article explores the significant gender gap that currently exists in regard to power relations in the Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) sector in Bangladesh. Particularly, the focus is on the discrepancy between the economic and social opportunities available to women as compared to men. The problem is treated in the context of the research theme "gender is a human rights issue". It is argued that this gender gap impacts negatively not just on women but also on the performance of the national economy as a whole. Taking a broad international comparative approach informed by a liberal-feminist perspective (articulated most cogently in the work of Fischer, Reuber and Dyke), it is argued that far-reaching cultural change to address entrenched patriarchal attitudes is needed in addition to a program of legislative and regulatory reform. These reforms include full implementation of the national policy for women in development 2011 and a comprehensive credit policy for women entrepreneurs. Such changes will help turn the sector into an engine of growth in Bangladesh and at the same time give women greater independence and better access to fundamental rights. The findings show that traditional legal systems, traditional models of inheritance and entrenched male-dominated hierarchies in the financial system restrict the capacity of women entrepreneurs to run SMEs. Specifically, laws around formal economic rights do not support women in Bangladesh. These laws inhibit their ability to accumulate assets that can be used as collateral, which then makes it harder for them to obtain loans. Further, women are less likely to obtain a loan than men are even if they meet the requirements, and they face higher interest rates. To remedy this, women must be given the same property inheritance rights and access to credit as men. These fundamental rights must not only be granted, but also enforced.

Keywords: Gender and Human Rights, Liberal Feminist Theory, Women Entrepreneurs, Small and Medium Enterprise, Bangladesh

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Introduction

Women represent about half of the population in Bangladesh². The contribution of women in the socioeconomic fields has improved substantially during the last few decades (Ahmed, 2014). However, women's participation in the institutional economic sector is inadequate and the status of women as entrepreneurs³ in Bangladesh has not progressed as quickly as is desirable (Chowdhury, 2006). The reason is that in many parts of society there are legal barriers, discriminatory approaches and the absence of policy awareness in mainstream institutions that inhibit women from carrying on development activities (ADB, 2006; AusAID, 2007).

In Bangladesh, the level and extent of participation of women in the Small and Medium Enterprise⁴ (SME) sector shows inequalities compared to men in terms of rights, opportunities and benefits (Kabeer, 2012). Women-owned firms account for only 3 to 4 per cent of total business enterprises in Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2014). According to the report of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics in 2001–2003, there is an enormous gap between the SME ownership of women (7.40 per cent) and men (92.60 per cent) [Chowdhury et al., 2010]. The World Bank Enterprise Survey in 2013 notes that in Bangladesh about 12.7 per cent of manufacturing firms are dominated by women, a much lower percentage than in other nations of the South Asian region.

² The demographic structure of Bangladesh shows that the sex ratio is 105 males per 100 females [Statistical Pocket Book, published by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2008)]. *Gender Statistics of Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Planning Division, Ministry of Planning, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

³ In light of the Industrial Policy 2010 of the Bangladesh government, Bangladesh Bank defined a women entrepreneur as a woman engaged in business in her own name. A woman can be termed a woman entrepreneur if she is: owner or proprietor of a private or proprietary enterprise; director of a registered private company or owner of at least 51% of the enterprise's shares. In addition to this, woman entrepreneurs will be entitled to facilities under special consideration. Women-owned micro and cottage industries are considered SME enterprises and they will receive all the special facilities, including a grace period provided to woman entrepreneurs (BB SMESPD circular no 01, 19 June 2011. <https://www.bb.org.bd> BB SMESPD circular letter no 03, 30 October 2017. <https://www.bb.org.bd>).

⁴ "In light of the Industrial Policy 2016 of the Bangladesh government, Bangladesh Bank groups CMSME in several ways. Note that in all cases, the value of the enterprise includes replacement cost of fixed assets and excludes land and building. (a) In the manufacturing sector, an enterprise with: capital below BDT1.00 million or with a maximum of 15 workers comprising of family members is defined as cottage industry; capital between BDT1.00 million and BDT7.5 million or with between 16 and 30 workers is defined as micro industry; capital between BDT7.5 million and BDT150.00 million or between 31 and 120 workers is defined as small industry; capital between BDT150.00 million and BDT500.00 million or with between 121 and 300 workers is regarded as medium industry. (b) In the service sector, an enterprise with: a value of less than BDT1.00 million or with a maximum of 15 workers comprising of family members is defined as cottage industry; a value of less than BDT1.00 million or with at most 15 workers is defined as micro industry; a value of between BDT1.00 million and BDT20.00 million, or with between 16 and 50 workers is defined as small industry; a value of between BDT20.00 million and BDT300.00 million or with between 51 and 120 workers is defined as medium industry. (c) In the trading sector, which includes micro and small enterprises only, an enterprise with: a value of less than BDT1.00 million or with at most 15 workers or with a maximum annual turnover of BDT10.00 million is considered to be micro enterprise; capital between BDT1.00 million and BDT20.00 million or with between 16 and 50 workers or annual turnover between BDT10.00 million and BDT 120.00 million is considered to be small enterprise. The maximum value of loans that are allowed to entrepreneurs differ by sector. In the manufacturing sector, the ceiling is BDT 1.00 million for cottage industry; BDT 10.00 million for micro industry; BDT 200.00 million for small industry and BDT 750.00 million for medium industry. In the service sector, the ceiling is BDT 2.5 million for micro industry; BDT 50.00 million for small industry and BDT 500.00 million for medium industry. In the trading sector, the ceiling is BDT 2.5 million for micro industry and BDT 50.00 million for small industry. (Bangladesh Bank (BB) SME & Special Programmes Department (SMESPD) Circular No.02,29 June 2017. Available at: <https://www.bb.org.bd>).

Facing the challenges of Bangladesh's traditionally masculine economic and business environment, a significant number of women have entered the SME sector in recent years. Furthermore, women entrepreneurs gain earning power, decent living standards and respect in their communities (Kabir & Huo, 2011). In Bangladesh, participation of women in entrepreneurship has enabled more women to be empowered economically and socially which is essential to the development of the society (Aus AID, 2007). Still, there are many more policy initiatives that could enhance the participation of women in the mainstream economy in Bangladesh.

Several challenges face women entrepreneurs running their SME businesses. Chief amongst these are traditional legal systems, complicated formalities and poor implementation of current policies, inadequate institutional support, entrenchment of the male breadwinner role, traditional values and social structures and religious beliefs. Consequently, women face unequal access to sources of formal credit, imperfect managerial training, and technological backwardness. All these negatively impact on the growth, expansion, and dynamism of women-owned SME businesses in Bangladesh.

This article uses the gender-related aspects of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as a framework for exploring the economic and social opportunities and power relations of men and women relative to each other. Through a liberal feminist theoretical framework and a case study – “the study of Micro Industries Development Assistance and Services and Small and Medium Enterprise Foundation in 2009”, the paper critically evaluates the current situation of women entrepreneurs in the SME sector of Bangladesh. It explores the obstacles and challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in highly gender-segregated Bangladeshi society in the light of the research theme “gender is a human rights issue”. The article shows an understanding of the relationship between gender and human rights is central to making full use of women's skills and abilities in SME businesses in Bangladesh. The article suggests necessary policy changes that will increase participation of women entrepreneurs in the SME sector, increase the sustainability of the sector and help turn it into an engine of growth in Bangladesh.

Literature Review

In many countries, traditional legal systems and discriminatory approaches have denied women access to the resources that bring economic development. Cultural values and beliefs play a vital role in shaping the country's institutions (Santos et al., 2016). Discrimination against women is pronounced when traditional gender roles are imposed on them by society, religion and cultural norms (Brush et al., 2014). This is likely to have a negative effect on women's rights (UN Human Rights, 2014). The challenges are familiar to women entrepreneurs in many countries.

Tambunan (2009) finds that Indonesian women entrepreneurs face serious legal constraints and unequal inheritance rights. Marston (2014) observes that women are unable to register a business in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Pakistan. Marston also shows that in Guatemala women's independent land ownership has been identified as contributing greatly to female participation and resulting enhanced productivity in agro-based areas. Women landholders in Guatemala are able to reap gains from trade.

Brush et al. (2014) found that the cultural setting profoundly affected entrepreneurial motivation and perception. Further, De Vita et al. (2014) and Kelly et al. (cited in Brush et al., 2014) showed that, in Arab societies, cultural traditions (like conservative patriarchal families)

inhibit women's business initiatives. This is why Middle Eastern and North African economies contain the lowest proportion of women entrepreneurs in the world.

Brush et al. (2014) and Welter & Smallbone (2008) showed that in the Ferghana Valley region of Uzbekistan, men impede women's choice of activities and keep them at home as prescribed by the Shariah. This has encouraged the seclusion of women and puts their rights in the darkness. Welter & Smallbone (2008) found that this was the case despite the fact the Uzbek government guaranteed women's legal capacity and promised to control any political movement backed by Shariah law. In Moldova, the majority of the women have to obtain family consent to engage in business activities (Welter et al., 2003). In Tajikistan, women were being taught by society that they were incapable of handling business (Cutura, 2010).

So we see that in many countries there are major cultural barriers to women participating fully in business. Even in countries which notionally support women, often this support is not enforced meaningfully. This is the case in Bangladesh.

Harrison & Mason (2007) argued that family responsibilities and lack of business experience might hamper women in being entrepreneurs. Ahmed (2014) and Brush et al. (2014) suggested that often, due to overburden of household responsibilities, women exclude themselves from many of the profitable networks in businesses. Robichaud et al. (2005), in a study on Canadian men and women entrepreneurs, found that men spend half as much time as women on household and childcare activities.

Takahashi (cited in Debroux 2004) found that balancing family and work creates the biggest obstacles to Japanese women in managing a company, as they are primarily responsible for caring for their children. Takahashi added that many women solve the problem through collective participation in the businesses, where their families are actively involved in decision-making.

On the other hand, women in Malaysia (Salleh & Osman, 2007) even women (mostly mothers and wives) in the United States of America (Ahl & Nelson, 2015) are choosing to be entrepreneurs rather than employees with fixed hours in an attempt to balance housekeeping and work. Thus, we see that (in general) unequal division of parenting labour, even when the woman is working full-time, inhibits women from participating fully in business.

In 2011 a study by International Finance Corporation proved that conservative thinking and gender-segregated education created gender divisions that restricted women's opportunities for economic participation. The study further added that this is why countries with high growth in women's higher education have a much higher representation of women in business and in labour markets than countries with low levels of education. Rather surprisingly, a study by Ahl & Nelson (2015) showed that women showed relatively low participation in areas such as technology and growth-oriented businesses in advanced economies like the USA and Sweden.

A number of studies – for example, Carter (2000); Marlow & Patton (2005) and Harrison & Mason (2007) – have argued that even when men and women have similar educational and occupational opportunities and experience and motivations, gender still makes an important difference because women suffer financial discrimination. Research proves that in Bosnia, 54 per cent of women face difficulties because of glass ceilings in accessing formal credit to initiate new ventures (Bosse & Taylor, 2012). Pfefferman & Frenkel (2015) found that in Israel loan committees declared women guarantors' inadequacy in 20 per cent of cases as against only 2.7 per cent cases for men.

Kaur & Bawa (cited in Sinha, 2005), in a study on seven South Asian countries, showed that due to shortage of security, documentation difficulties and loan offers displaying negative

perceptions of women, less than 10 per cent of formal credit was allocated to women. Further, research by the Diana Project suggests that, globally, female-owned firms own below 10 per cent of venture capital industries (Welter et al., 2014). Marston (2014) showed that today women entrepreneurs receive less than 5 per cent of the venture capital funding across the globe.

Using a multi-country database of 14,000 firms, a study by Muravyev et al. in 2009 found that women-managed firms are 5.4 per cent less likely to get approval for bank loans but they are being charged, on average 0.6 per cent higher interest rates than their men-managed counterparts (Irwin & Scott, 2010). The authors concluded that this gender disparity against women entrepreneurs by financial institutions may be a discouraging factor for women-managed firms in seeking banks as a source of fund.

Hulten (2012) notice that bankers prefer to lend to large and established firms run by men. Women-owned firms, are often smaller, home based, slower growing and less profitable than firms owned by men, and are neglected by lenders. Pfefferman & Frenkel (2015) suggest that this is one reason less venture capital has been raised by women. Riding & Swift (cited in Ahl, 2004) in a 1990 study on Canadian entrepreneurs showed that women-owned small businesses were subject to higher collateral requirements than men for equivalent lines of credit. In 2006, only 5 per cent of women in Tanzania had collateral to access bank credit. Therefore, lack of collateral would make it difficult for Tanzanian women in business investment (Marston, 2014).

Additionally, Aldrich (1989); Santos et al. (2016) found that women-owned firms face constraints that may produce smaller networks and higher financial barriers. Irwin & Scott (2010); Welter et al. (2014) implicated the weak social networks of women in their under-capitalization at start-up. According to Carter (2000); Marlow & Patton (2005) this initial under-capitalization may lead to underperformances of the women business owners. Thus, there is a great deal of evidence suggesting that there are entrenched biases in the financial sectors of many countries, and these are another barrier to women participating fully in business.

All the factors discussed above are at play in Bangladesh: discriminatory laws, lack of institutional support, traditional social values and structures, and the lack of a woman-friendly sociocultural and economic environment often restrict the capacity of women to engage in business in Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2006; Ahmed, 2014). Patriarchal outlooks of mainstream institutions, gender-biased norms, legal barriers, and unequal treatment by lenders and other service providers have all inhibited the ability and even rights of women entrepreneurs to obtain loans from banks and Financial Institutions⁵ (FIs) (Ahmed, 2014). In addition, lack of opportunities for building managerial and technical capacity, family responsibilities, lack of business experience and networks limit women's business performance (Chowdhury, 2006; Chowdhury et al., 2010; Ahmed, 2014).

Patriarchal attitudes, which are common in the country, do not encourage women to use their talents for management and organization, but restrict them to the home (Sinha, 2005). Religious backwardness and cultural norms in the society consider women below men in the economic sphere (SMEF, 2009). This gender segregation of roles has reduced the capacity of women to be economically self-sufficient as well as made it difficult for them in entrepreneurship development. Acker (cited in Pfefferman & Frenkel, 2015) and Witz (cited in Ross-Smith & Huppatz, 2010) argued that the masculinized nature of management and organization is a result of the propagation of gender segregation in organizations and would

⁵ Financial Institutions means Non-Banking Financial Institutions transacting the business of banking in Bangladesh under the Article 2(b) of Financial Institutions Act, 1993.

ultimately have encouraged marginalization of women. Bird & Brush (2002) show that this masculinization of entrepreneurship makes the way difficult for women. In this respect, Ahl & Marlow said:

The discourse underpinning entrepreneurial representation has been analytically revealed as fundamentally masculine. In effect, the defining characteristics of the entrepreneur are also those which define masculinity and so, unsurprisingly, men dominate as high profile entrepreneurial role models (2012, p.2).

In addressing the above-mentioned challenges and obstacles faced by women entrepreneurs, the article shows that despite a large literature on entrepreneurial gendered issues, previous research in Bangladesh did not use a concrete theoretical framework to evaluate the complexities of gender, including the rights, responsibilities and opportunities in power relations between men and women. This is why it has been difficult to identify the root causes behind the challenges and obstacles faced by women in SMEs in Bangladesh. The article intends to address this gap. This article uses a liberal feminist perspective to examine a case study that highlights the inequalities faced by women entrepreneurs in the SME sector. It explores economic and social opportunities and power relations. Feminist liberalism has in many countries been influential in changing legal discrimination and institutional barriers, with a goal of allowing women business opportunities equal to those of their male counterparts.

Analytical Framework

Theoretical Approaches to Gender and Human Rights

The section discusses gender equality from a liberal feminist viewpoint, built on the international human rights framework. Gender refers to socio-cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female (Aus AID, 2007). Gender equality refers to equality in economic and social opportunities and power relationships that are rights of women and men relative to each other (ILO cited in Wanner & Wadham, 2015). Equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for women and men, girls and boys is a human right as acknowledged in the charter of the United Nations in 1945 (Articles 7, 17(1), 17(2) and 23(1) of UDHR⁶) and is a prerequisite for, and a mark of, sustainable people-oriented development. The level of gender equality in a society is determined from an analysis of the different rates of male and female participation in decision-making activities, access to resources, and the benefits derived from development activities by men, women, boys and girls, including the advancement of their rights (Aus AID, 2007).

Following the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979 and the Beijing Platform for Action of the fourth world conference on women in 1995, principles including 'the principle of the equal rights of women and men' and 'non-discrimination on the basis of sex' are considered to be rights of

⁶ Article 7 'All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination', Article 17(1) 'Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others,' Article 17(2) 'No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property' should be ensured by the rule of state law, Article 23(1) 'Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protect against unemployment' (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948. New York, The United Nations General Assembly, United Nations 1948).

all individuals. They act therefore as part of the basis of feminist liberalism. For the accomplishment of gender equality and the upholding of women's rights, the liberal concept of human rights is a valuable starting point.

Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism evolved from European liberal political philosophy (Fischer et al., 1993). By advocating equality, entitlement and individual rights, egalitarianism is a central theme of the liberal feminist model (Carter & Williams, 2003; Kutains & Bayraktaroglu, n.d.). Well-known thinkers of liberal feminism include Marry Wollstonecraft (18th century), John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor (19th century), and Betty Friedan and Rebecca Walker (20th century). All grappled with power structures that are male-dominated (Carter & Williams, 2003; Tong, 2007; Hossain et al., 2012). All made the case for equal rights for men and women as rational, autonomous individuals (Fischer et al., 1993; Tong, 2007). Generally, liberal feminist theorists have assumed that discrimination and/or structural barriers hold women back from benefiting from power, opportunities and resources in male-controlled society (Hossain et al., 2012). As Connel puts it:

Men and boys are thus in significant ways gatekeepers for gender equality... [because] men control most of the resources [such as economic assets, political power and culture] required to implement women's claims for justice (cited in Wanner & Wadham, 2015, p.18).

Direct or indirect discrimination through other systemic factors such as lack of relevant education, social networks, employment opportunities, access to finance, experience, management training, and unequal access to property rights results in provision of few significant resources to women (Fischer et al., 1993; Vossenberg, 2014; Welter et al., 2014). Ely & Meyerson, Kanter et al. (cited in Nentwich, 2006) and Robichaud et al. (2005) argued that sex role socialization processes position males as dominant and may lead women to be less able to operate in a male-controlled business world and less capable of participation in competition.

In liberal feminism, gender equality is the acknowledgement that differences in opportunities between male and female should be modest or absent (Nentwich, 2006). Therefore, biases against women entrepreneurs should be overcome in society and the economy through implementing measures such as changing legislation and organizational policies to promote equal rights for men and women (Greer & Greene, 2003; Zolin et al., 2013; Vossenberg, 2014).

However, the liberal feminist school of thought is not without limitations. Specifically, this model is criticized for not aiming at reducing the gender inequities at home and in family labour, so leaving structural barriers that are disadvantageous to women's entrepreneurship (Greer & Greene, 2003; Vossenberg, 2014). Another limitation of the model is that it has focused on the contribution of upper/middle class white women in entrepreneurship development, and has ignored the vulnerability of businesses of all women (Ahl, 2004). Despite some limitations, liberal feminism is a major breakthrough that has significantly contributed to the welfare, education, and health of millions of women who now have strength and credibility to uphold their rights and status in society (Kutains and Bayraktaroglu, n.d.).

Liberal Feminism Towards Women Entrepreneurship Development

Liberal feminism has helped increase the level of women's participation in entrepreneurship. However, government plays a significant role in creating an environment for change by eliminating legal discrimination and systemic bias (Greer & Greene, 2003). This improves women entrepreneurs' access to resources and their participation on an equal basis with men. The USA has been most successful in this. The government's increased its allocation for SME women entrepreneurs from US\$0.5 million to US\$6.5 million in 1990s, and reduced the companies' gender plus revenue gap from 67 percent to 15 percent between 1991 and 1997 (NAWBO, 2010). "The Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974" and "The Women's Business Ownership Act of 1988" were policy initiatives that resulted in more women choosing to be entrepreneurs.

Findings from several studies were consistent with a liberal feminist perspective. A study by Robb & Watson (2012), for instance, found no significant gender differences (given the anti-discrimination legislation) in the performance of male and female-owned businesses in terms of either survival rates, return on sales and profits or in risk-adjustment ratios of newly established firms in the USA. Zolin et al. (2013) supported Robb & Watson's findings about new ventures in another geographical location, Australia.

We see from this that legislation inspired by the ideas of liberalism and equality makes a big difference, if enforced.

Study of MIDAS-SMEF in 2009

Using the joint study conducted by MIDAS and SMEF in 2009, this articles will argue that there is a positive correlation between women's entrepreneurship and the economic development of Bangladesh; however, institutional measures for the enhancements of women's economic position and status in Bangladesh are not enough to uphold the rights of women in the socioeconomic field. In 34 randomly selected districts of Bangladesh, the MIDAS-SMEF made an extensive study of the socioeconomic characteristics, current status, dilemmas and challenges that women were facing in the SME sector of Bangladesh. The study covered the period 2008–2009 and involved questionnaire surveys, interviews and focus group discussions, and collected data from 165 service providers and 1035 women entrepreneurs. Data covered demographics, level of education, previous business experience and start-up motives of women entrepreneurs. The study kept the identities of the respondents confidential.

The study showed that the existing systems, laws and management in Bangladesh do not allow women to enjoy equal rights in property inheritance. Further, the study also found that social norms, for instance conservative and patriarchal values in Bangladeshi society, lead to women being considered below men in decision-making. Moreover, gender-based restrictions protect the interests of vested groups by advocating the religious order of Islam. This social injustice restricts women from realizing the value of their economic participation. The full potential of women entrepreneurs is therefore not recognized in the society.

Current Situation of Women Entrepreneurs in SME Sector of Bangladesh

Table 1. Key barriers faced by women running SMEs in Bangladesh

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Limited property rights restrain women's access to the credit market needed for entrepreneurship, as they have to submit security or collateral for access to institutional capital.• Traditional masculine practices keep women socially and economically dependent on men.• Radical religious groups hold back women's emancipation by focusing on traditional values.• Societal myth and customs persist that women are best suited for home and lack the potential to be true organizers.• Women entrepreneurs have faced unequal access to formal credit, lack of collateral, high rate of interest.• Women are discriminated against by financing institutions and other service providers.• Banks and FIs do not allow women to submit household assets as collateral.• Women entrepreneurs lack opportunities to gain business experience, managerial capacity and technological education.• Women are concentrated in service-based industries that give low economic rates of return.• Women tend to borrow less frequently.

Laws and Policies Relating to Gender Rights

Laws and policies, in particular property rights that ensure equal resource distribution for women are essential for ensuring gender equality and social justice (ADB, 2006). In fact, social justice could be ensured through equal distribution of resources amongst the members of the community. The state is primarily responsible for promotion and protection of human rights through enforcing laws and establishing un-biased practices.

The survey by MIDAS–SMEF showed that most women had no fixed assets or land because discriminatory laws often prevent women from owning lands or inheriting property in Bangladesh. The existing patriarchal inheritance rights in Bangladesh limit women's access to collateral and thus to the credit market needed for entrepreneurship. Kieran et al. (2015) used land rights, documented ownership and plot size as indicators and showed that there are substantial gender gaps in the ownership and management of land across the Asian countries. The authors estimated that during 2011–2012, 22.7 per cent of landholders in Bangladesh were women, with the remainder being men.

The study of MIDAS–SMEF showed that although women are being motivated to be independent to start enterprises on their own, to raise their required capital they have to depend on others' for security (Sinha, 2005). In most cases, women need to provide more collateral or security than men to obtain access to institutional capital (Fischer et al., 1993; World Bank, 2012), hindering business growth (Cutura, 2010).

Women cannot borrow because they lack personal wealth; because they cannot borrow, they cannot build personal wealth. That is, women's inferior economic position and lack of control over resources keeps them structurally dependent on men. Ultimately, this will have a negative effect on the country's employment-generating activities and overall economic development (Chowdhury, 2006).

The Government of Bangladesh follows the policy of equality for women. All citizens in Bangladesh are fairly treated under the constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Articles 19 (1), 19 (2), 27, 28 (1) and 28 (2) in the constitution of Bangladesh 1972⁷ guarantee equal protection of law for all its citizens, including equal economic rights, and opportunities for the enhancement of women's economic position and status. Women and men in Bangladesh are entitled to equal political rights and economic and social opportunities, which are considered by the state as fundamental human rights. Furthermore, Bangladesh is party to the CEDAW⁸ convention that allows sharing power and responsibility between men and women from all points of view.

In 2008 the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs gave emphasis to developing women's entrepreneurship in SMEs as a part of National Action Plan in accordance with the policy of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 and reaffirmed at the special session of UN General Assembly in 2000⁹. The Ministry of Industry of the Government of Bangladesh created the SME Foundation in 2007. The foundation works in a partnership with different government agencies, donors, the banking sector, NGOs and the women entrepreneurs support agencies that contribute to the knowledge and development for facilitating a promotion of women's entrepreneurship in SMEs. Furthermore, in the "*National Industrial Policy 2010*", and in the "*Seventh Five Year Plan of 2016–2020*", the Government of Bangladesh has facilitated credit opportunities for women entrepreneurs to enhance their participation in business activities.

Recently, the Bangladesh government, United Nations Capital Development Fund, and Bangladesh Bank have delivered a credit guarantee scheme (CGS) of US\$0.2 million to support SME women entrepreneurs. In this tripartite partnership, Bangladesh Bank guarantees 30% of the total borrowed. In CGS, the so implementation of measures related to guarantors and collateral, however, remain inadequate. Women's collateral required to get access to bank loans (property, cash or cash equivalents, machinery and other assets) remain almost unchanged.

In Bangladesh, 89.15 per cent of the population are Muslims, about half of them are women (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2008, p.129, 85). The society is still influenced by religious beliefs where women are deprived of equal rights of inheritance of the property of their parents or husbands. In Bangladesh, inheritance is generally stipulated in Shariah (Islamic law),

⁷ Article 19 (1) 'The State shall endeavour to ensure equality of opportunity to all citizens'. Article 19(2) 'The State shall adopt effective measures to remove social and economic inequality between woman and man and to ensure the equitable distribution of wealth among citizens and of opportunities in order to attain a uniform level of economic development throughout the Republic'. Article 27 'All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law'. Article 28(1) 'The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth'. Article 28(2) 'Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life' [The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 1972. Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs (2008) Dhaka: Bangladesh].

⁸ To accelerate women's equal opportunity in all sphere of life, States are permitted to use temporary special measures for as long as inequalities continue to exist. 'Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, UNHR (1979)', Geneva: United Nations Human Rights.

⁹ According to declaration, para. 23, the goal of gender equality can only be achieved if men are encouraged 'to participate fully in all actions towards equality' and PfA, para. 23 stated if women 'work together and in partnership with men'.

under which women are not entitled to parity and inherit half of what their male counterparts get (Kieran et al., 2015). Bangladesh is one of the signatories to the CEDAW, but maintained reservations on article 13(a) of the convention that concedes equal rights for women regarding family inheritance. This condition negatively impacts on their ability to participate in economic enterprises. Many Muslim countries, such as Benin, Gabon, Indonesia, Maldives, Nigeria and Zambia, did not put any reservation on CEDAW provisions, regardless of Shariah law. Equal property rights have been adopted in Egypt, Tunisia and Senegal. The legal system of Bangladesh is a mixed arrangement of laws that consist of a combined influence of indigenous, Moghul and English legal practices. In terms of legal status of Muslim women in Bangladesh, the country follows non-religious secular legal systems in protecting their rights under the general laws such as the penal code of 1860 and the civil and criminal procedure codes of 1908 and 1898, which are based on European civil laws. But, in the issue of inheritance and marriage, Shariah law is applied through Muslim personal law which has granted that under all circumstances daughter, mother and wife are permitted to obtain several inheritance distributions and are not legally allowed to be excluded from the heritage; but neither is the treatment equal.

Women's groups in Bangladesh have long been calling for a change in inheritance rights for women, but successive governments, including the government in power, have failed to address the issue in Bangladesh's development plans, perhaps to avoid confrontation with the religious right and to calm down social conformists within parties. Therefore, prevailing inheritance inequality for Muslim women under Shariah law in Bangladesh not only challenges articles 19 (1), 19 (2), 27, 28 (1) and 28 (2) of the constitution of Bangladesh but is a violation of fundamental human rights under articles 7, 17(1) and 17(2) of UDHR that acknowledge the equality of men and women with regard to basic freedoms in the economic field.

Traditional Values and Social Structures

Research suggests that economic development leads to cultural changes that are transforming society and moving women from narrow subordination toward equality (Inglehart et al., 2004). Bangladesh is still a poverty-oriented country where women have an inferior position in the society and the family. Existing patriarchal values suggest that to survive a woman must rely on her father, husband, brother or son. Women are often considered less important than men and their problems have been overlooked. The study of MIDAS-SMEF revealed that prevailing social norms such as conservative and religious beliefs were imposing restrictions on women entrepreneurs' freedom of mobility and decision-making, and freedom to interact with others in managing their business activities independently (Sinha, 2005).

The study of MIDAS-SMEF showed that surveyed women faced backbiting and misconstrued religious sanctions against their businesses. At times, religious leaders told them their good reputation could be destroyed if they went out to work with men, and work would reduce their marriage prospects. This happened mostly in village areas. In a conservative Islamic society like Bangladesh, this has remained a barrier to women's increasing SME business participation. Similarly, because of physical harassment and intimidation many Afghan families become less interested in women's active involvement in business-related works (Marston, 2014).

A study by Kabeer on Bangladesh (2012) found that 48 per cent of women business owners reported all their customers were living within one kilometre of their businesses compared to 30 per cent of men business owners. This smaller network may be caused by women's lack of access to transportation.

The study of MIDAS–SMEF found that women became insecure through inadequate knowledge about how to protect their industries from illegal threats and criminal offences. Women entrepreneurs said they often faced difficulties purchasing raw materials or marketing their products while dealing with men. Roomi (cited in Tambunan, 2009) argued that religious beliefs and gender bias made it more difficult for most women entrepreneurs in the local, ethnic and feudal culture in Pakistan to access local and international markets.

The 2011 national policy for development of women in Bangladesh clause 25(2) refers to women's right to earn and use income, obtain loans and buy property. (However, it excludes the provision of equal rights for women in matters of inherited property.) Unfortunately, the policy was not put into effect due to strong opposition from the extremist religious groups within the country who challenged the constitution's supremacy and threatened to impose social and political restrictions on women in the name of Islam. Thus, resistance to change is not only from the political dogmas of regressive forces or the traditional conservatism of the communities but also from the weakness of the state administration. These factors have often slowed down steps for the improvement of the wellbeing of the society.

Male Breadwinner Role

Research suggests that there is a positive correlation between gender equality and higher growth of gross domestic product (Forsythe et al., cited in Cutura, 2010; Kabeer, 2012). Women's self-employment is encouraged as it significantly increases women's income and therefore family wellbeing, and so reduces poverty (Strier, 2010). In the study of MIDAS–SMEF, a majority of the respondents said that their parents, husbands, even children, discouraged them from entering into business. Buvinic & Furst-Nichols (2016), in a study in Brazil, found that children's survival rates increased 20 percent when household income was controlled by their mother. The World Bank's World Development Report 2011 said that some countries should pay attention to the elimination of unfair practices towards women. Increasing the level of skill of women would increase such a country's productivity by almost 25 percent.

The study by MIDAS–SMEF also established that Bangladeshi women are inhibited by the societal myth and custom that they are best suited for home (Sinha, 2005). The reason for this is that in the patriarchal Bangladeshi society men are considered as the family breadwinner and women are given care-giving responsibilities in the family (Vossenber, 2014 ; Zolin et al., 2013). Brush et al. points out:

Many societies mainly define women through roles connected to family and household responsibilities; societal values implicitly interpret women's entrepreneurship as less desirable and, as a result, provide lower normative support (2014, p.22).

The survey conducted by MIDAS–SMEF showed that women's participation in the business activities made a significant contribution their family income and living standards. However, non-cooperative attitudes of family members compelled them to attend household activities and stay at home to take care of children. A study by Khan (1993) found that in Bangladesh greater challenges are faced by women compared to their male counterparts since there is ingrained societal injustice involving the traditional role of women taking on family burdens and being isolated. She further added that women are balancing three roles: managing

households, working to get wages, and taking responsibility for child bearing and rearing. Ahl said that:

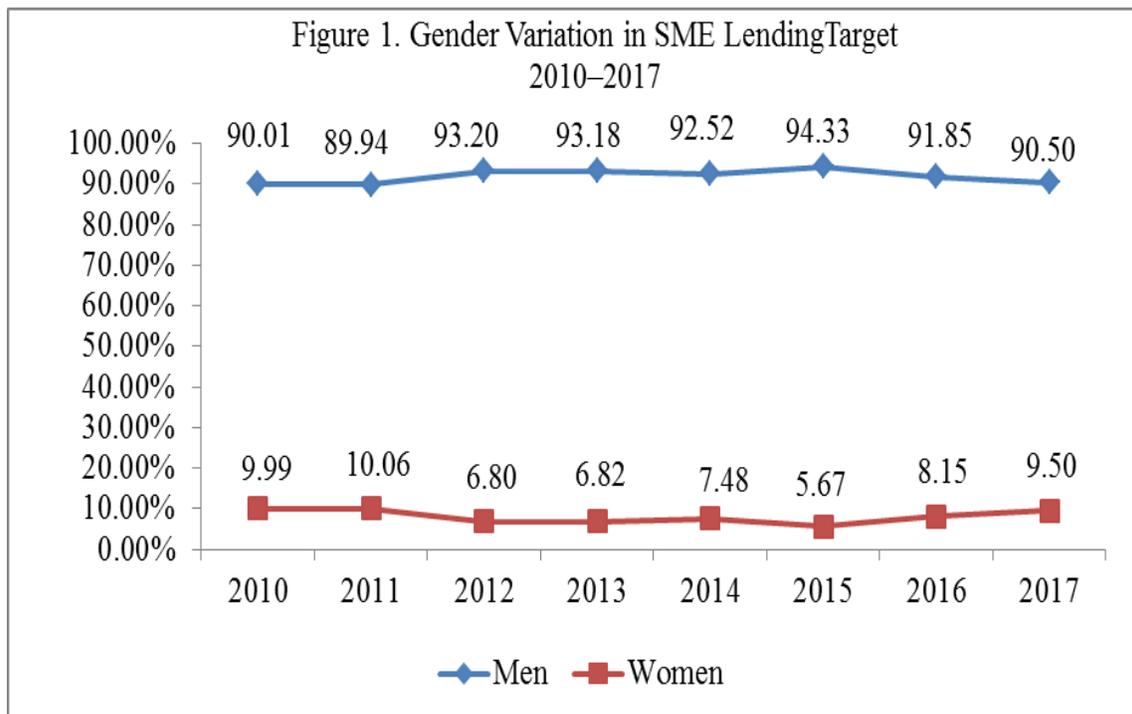
Giving the woman double responsibilities – work *and* family – means that she cannot compete on equal terms with a man in the same line of business. Her business is constructed as secondary and complementary, both to male owned businesses and to her primary responsibility, the family (2006, p.605).

(Unequal) Access to Finance

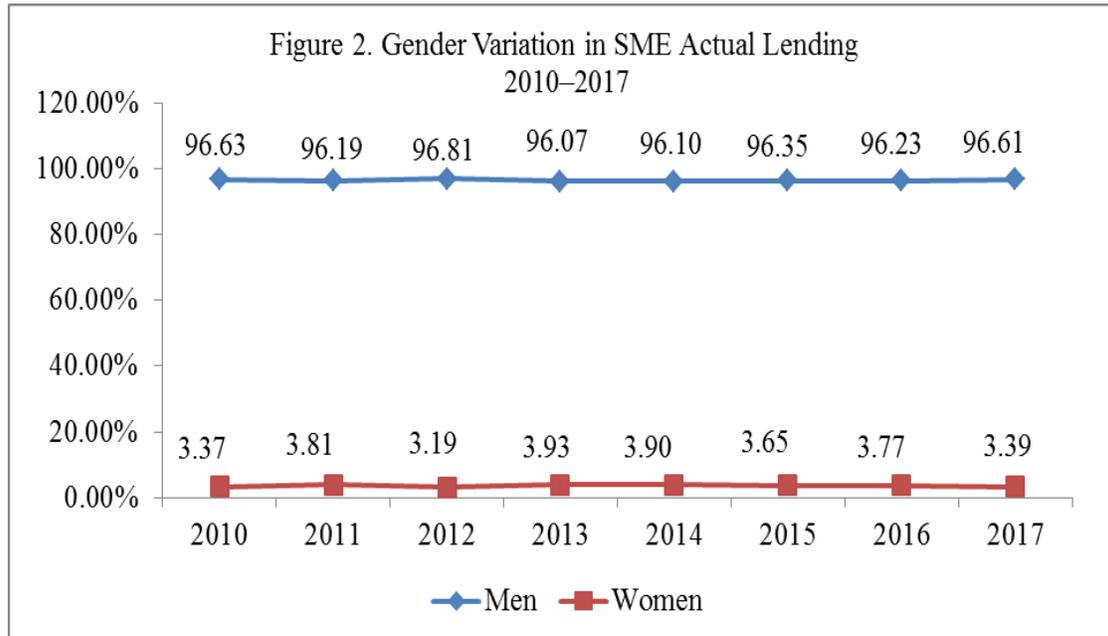
Nobel laureate economist professor Mohammad Yunus said: “credit is a human right” (Brigg, 2006, p.66). However, the study of MIDAS–SMEF observed that a majority of the respondents were excluded from obtaining institutional or venture capital support needed to start a new enterprise (Morris et al., 2006). The study also found that most of the respondents utilized personal savings, finance from parents, relatives and friends to start up their business. Accordingly, financial adversity because of limited access to sources of institutional credit restricts women entrepreneurs from participating in SMEs' growth potential.

Several studies (for example Coleman (2007); Chowdhury et al. (2010) ; Kabeer (2012) estimated that female-led firms earned significantly higher net profits than male-led firms. But remarkably in all years of SME loans, male entrepreneurs were given more loans than their female counterparts by all banks and FIs, where banks and FIs are the largest contributors of formal SME financing in Bangladesh. Since 2010, data on lending by banks and FIs for SME financing to male and female entrepreneurs has been collected by Bangladesh Bank (The Central Bank of Bangladesh). The data provides evidence of gender discrimination by the banks and FIs. Figures 1 and 2 show the percentages of the total lending (Banks + FIs) given to men and women, both in the target and the actual lending.

Figure 1. Gender variation in the SME lending target, 2010–2017



Source: SME & Special Programmes Department, Bangladesh Bank, Head Office, Dhaka, 16 April, 2018.

Figure 2. Gender variation in SME actual lending, 2010–2017

Source: SME & Special Programmes Department, Bangladesh Bank, Head Office, Dhaka, 16 April, 2018.

The data reveal substantial gender inequalities in access to loans. In all years, the banks and FIs set aside much higher portion of loans (the SME lending target) for men than women. Consequently, across all groups of 'SME actual lending', the ratio has always been higher for male borrowers. By comparison with the target, the share of actual loans to male-headed businesses has risen, while the share of SME loans to women-headed firms, over the past eight years, is declining. As a result, a significant gap exists in between men and women regarding formal SME loans.

Banks' and FIs' discrimination against women entrepreneurs is both a result and a cause of (Ahmed, 2014; Marlow & Patton, 2005):

- women's lack of experience in dealing with lending institutions
- women's lack of collateral and ability to personally guarantee loans
- rigid lending policies and difficult documentation processes
- ill treatment of women by different service providers
- the fact that women are more loan risk averse
- women suffer negative perceptions of harassment by loan officers while applying for loans.

In Bangladesh, all these issues not only constrain women's access to formal credit but have the effect of violating 'The right to bank loans, mortgages and other forms of financial credit' mentioned in article 13(b) of the CEDAW convention.

Most women respondents in the MIDAS–SMEF survey said that they started with home-based activities and could not afford the expense of taking possession of showroom or shops – yet the bank's officers often wanted to see show rooms or shops before lending to them. In 2011,

a study by IFC estimated that 97 per cent of businesses launched by women in rural Bangladesh were home based, compared to 25 per cent of businesses launched by men. Surveyed women said that refusal to accept their household assets as collateral by formal financial institutions in most cases influenced them to borrow less frequently. For that reason, often women-owned firms demand and use less credit than firms owned by men (World Bank, 2012).

Inadequate Managerial Training and Technological Backwardness

Growth and development occur while transforming productive arrangements and transferring resources into more highly productive activities (Feilpe et al., 2012). Therefore, poor managerial capacity and lack of technical knowledge could prohibit women from increasing productivity. Cooper points out:

Unequal access to labour markets and highly gender-segregated occupations generate a host of inefficiencies that ... depress investment in women's human capital and can distort market signals at all levels in many societies (cited in Chowdhury et al., 2010, p. 6).

The study of MIDAS–SMEF observed that few women in Bangladesh had high levels of management skills. A small number of women were focused on export–import business, but the vast majority of them were involved in local and national markets. The study also indicated that most of the respondents had no accounting or related discipline background, and had no vocational training in accounting and bookkeeping. Half of the respondents were unable to use a computer and had no access to information technology.

Further, the study of MIDAS–SMEF revealed that female-headed firms are concentrated in sectors where returns and growth potential are low (World Bank, 2012). Coleman (2007); Chowdhury et al. (2010); Hulten, (2012) and Kabeer, (2012) established that businesses headed by women concentrate in sectors like service-based industries that have lower rates of return than trading and manufacturing. Morris et al. (2006) found that high-growth entrepreneurs are focused more on achieving financial performance and profitability.

The study of MIDAS–SMEF found that most of the women entered entrepreneurship having fewer years of business experience, although experience has a positive impact on the financial success of women-owned firms (Ahl, 2004; Coleman, 2007; Kabeer, 2012). This is partly because prior business experience builds financial and social networks that aid business development (Brush et al., 2003), boosting long term business growth and development (O’Kane et al., 2012).

Several empirical studies have established that higher education and formal training could give a better foundation to women for entrepreneurship development (Carter, 2000; Marlow & Patton, 2005; Coleman, 2007; Cutura, 2010; Zolin et al., 2013; Brush et al., 2014; Santos et al., 2016). Reynolds et al. (in Ascher, 2012) established a strong correlation between education and women's entrepreneurial success. Education in business and entrepreneurship ultimately led to an increase in women-owned firms' skills, talents and confidence. This led to increased revenues and profits in business start-ups and increased revenues for government (Brush et al., 2014; Buvinic & Furst-Nichols, 2016). As Birdthistle identifies: "... education is a shaper of attitudes. How one is educated today will determine the success of tomorrow" (2008, p. 554).

In Bangladesh, however, about 70 percent of women entrepreneurs were self-taught compared to 44 percent of men (IFC, 2011). In 2010, a report by the Ministry of Industry mentioned that lower educational achievement by women in Bangladesh is largely responsible for their inadequate performance in SMEs (Chowdhury et al., 2010). Ultimately, all these factors have encouraged unemployment and incurred revenue losses to the government, negatively affecting the country's economy. In this respect, Welter et.al. suggest:

The uneven participation of women in traditional male-dominated and often high technology sectors is due to structural factors in the economy that prevent women from gaining experience, access to markets, or resources. This extends to the glass ceiling where women are often denied the chance to gain high level managerial decision-making experience which could be beneficial in an entrepreneurial start-up (2014, p. 8–9).

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The constitution of Bangladesh mandates equal rights for both male and female in all spheres of life. But today the society is highly stratified with gender-based disparities. Because of inadequate policy support and deep-rooted inequitable practices women (and the country) cannot realize the full value of their economic participation. In reality, the status of women remains low in business decision-making. Consequently, the fundamental rights of half of the country's population are not recognized. From the above discussions, the present situation of women entrepreneurship development in SME sector of Bangladesh could be considered as a result of gender-based discrimination, which is an issue of human rights.

A combination of legislative and regulatory reform can mitigate many of the issues that prevent women gaining from, and contributing to, the SME sector in Bangladesh. This might help transform the SME sector into a more important instrument of development in Bangladesh. Improvements in the administration and infrastructure of municipal and public financial institutions have significant roles to play in putting into practice effective policy measures that will improve conditions for women's entrepreneurial success. As a fundamental right, women should be given property inheritance equal to those of men. Such rights need to be not only granted, but enforced.

The Bangladesh government must give increased attention to implementing the National Policy for Women in Development 2011. This will aid in women's emancipation and allow them to move out of the home and use their entrepreneurial talents in SMEs in Bangladesh.

Initiatives are also necessary to raise social awareness and to identify the opportunities for relieving women from the burden of household activities – the traditional gender roles imposed to them by the country's patriarchal attitudes (Ahmed, 2014). There should be equal educational opportunities for males and females, building women's skills from childhood so they can accept entrepreneurial challenges.

Rosenthal (1998) argued that women's influence is indispensable for successful policy implementation. Educating policy makers to be more aware of gender will encourage them to better integrate a gender perspective into relevant policy areas. These could include:

- provision of targeted training to help women gain access to technology, production planning support services and finance and markets;

- access to information to aid in determining the sustainability of women SMEs in Bangladesh.

Technology, gender awareness and managerial skills training should be made available both for women entrepreneurs and service providers through industrial–academic collaboration. It should encourage innovation, and accelerate technological progress to facilitate the entry of new women entrepreneurs in the SME sector of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Bank, the banking regulator, could determine a comprehensive credit policy in order to guarantee more access for women entrepreneurs to finance from banks and FIs. Full implementation of existing policies and regulations would aid in this. BB should start a target-based loan approach for banks and FIs to deliver for women entrepreneurs in the SME sector, and monitor these loans. BB could convince the banks and FIs to consider more collateral-free loans to women entrepreneurs in the SME sector, and especially encourage the loans that are already sanctioned by them to be allowed based on group security or social security rather than personal guarantee.

In case of failure of recovery of loans to women, the CGS may require the Bangladesh government, to involve stakeholders such as donors, the SME Foundation, and women's chambers of commerce in taking responsibility for providing some percentage of financial support to the fund as a mandatory contribution.

Additionally, adequate funds should be available from the Bangladesh government, Bangladesh Bank and donors to establish a separate fund named “women entrepreneurs” with a single digit rate of interest where NGOs can be involved through credit wholesaling processes by different banks and FIs while funding women entrepreneurs at the local level. Complementary financial support and technical assistance should be provided from the donor countries to the government to set up the incubation facility to promote women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh.

The present article has connected theoretical structure of gender to the practical need for the implementation of women's fundamental rights in the SME sector of Bangladesh. The contribution has been guided by the liberal feminist viewpoint around gender equality. Moreover, the paper has focused on a very compelling case study – the current situation of women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh. The article shows, both in theory and practice, the significance of gender equality as the central idea in understanding the relationship between gender and the human rights that allow women to make full use of their skills and abilities in SME sector of Bangladesh.

Hence, the suggested policies and reforms have a vital role in manifesting the potential of SME women entrepreneurs. This will promote gender equality and the rights of women in the economic sphere, and make the most of an opportunity to bring positive changes in the socioeconomic development of Bangladesh. This would eventually pave the way to broader social reform in Bangladesh.

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