

Entrepreneurship and Empowerment: A Sociological Perspective on Rural Women in the SME Sector

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Abstract

The paper proposes to explore the empowerment of rural women in business in Bangladesh through their participation in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) through a sociological perspective in regard to economic pursuits, social accountability, and cultural change. The ultimate goal is to examine the role of SME engagement towards the multidimensional empowerment of women, especially in addressing gender-based disparities, poverty, and socio-cultural limitations. The study has a qualitative approach based on thematic analysis. Using in-depth interviews, field observations, and demographic surveys, 50 rural women entrepreneurs with varied socioeconomic statuses were included in the study. The aim of the study was to learn how empowerment varies according to some factors, including marital status, education, family support, income level, and experiences of hardship. Results show that women's SME involvement results in a significant level of economic and social empowerment of rural women. Women gained enhanced income, decision-making power in the homes, management of property and family wealth and mobility. The two diverse categories of women identified in the study are those who started their entrepreneurial career as a result of experiencing acute social or financial difficulties and those women who enjoyed a better familial support. The theoretical contribution of the study lies in broadening the current knowledge on empowerment as a sociological process determined by structural and agency-related variables. In practical terms, it provides policy and development practitioners with information about how to create gender-sensitive SME initiatives that overcome the intersectional constraints that rural women experience.

Keywords : Rural Women, Women Entrepreneurs, Empowerment, SMEs, Socioeconomic Development, Gender Equality, Sociological Analysis.

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1.0 Introduction

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are increasingly recognized as pivotal platforms for empowering rural women and promoting inclusive economic development and poverty alleviation (Jabbouri et al., 2024). These enterprises require relatively low capital investment and often utilize local resources, offering flexible business models that align with women's domestic responsibilities (Bhuvanewari, 2024). Rural women for long have contributed significantly to agriculture, food security, and community resilience, yet their roles remain largely unrecognized in formal economic systems.

Empowered rural women entrepreneurs transcend household income generation by challenging patriarchal norms and fostering community development and social transformation (Bukhari et al., 2024). SMEs provide strategic platforms for women to gain financial independence and social recognition (Gupta & Rathore, 2020). However, empowerment must go beyond economic means, involving integrative models that address social, educational, and health-related challenges to enhance women's agency in rural contexts (Sharma & Das, 2021).

Advancements in information and communication technologies (ICT), digital marketing, and e-commerce are reshaping the landscape of rural SMEs, enabling women to overcome geographic isolation and access wider markets (Ghouse et al., 2021; Akpuokwe et al., 2024). Conceptual models emphasize the synergistic impact of financial literacy and digital training, enabling women entrepreneurs to successfully navigate digital business environments (Verma, 2024; Akpuokwe et al., 2024). Empirical evidence from Indonesia shows that digital marketing training not only builds business acumen but also promotes leadership and community collaboration among rural women (Yuliatiningtyas et al., 2024).

Mentoring and stakeholder engagement further strengthen women's empowerment, offering social support, confidence building, and knowledge exchange (Ngalesoni et al., 2024; Kuran & Khabbaz, 2024). In Tanzania, mentorship programs have boosted women's managerial competencies and business viability, while initiatives involving refugee women mentors have highlighted the sustainability of cyclical empowerment (Street et al., 2022).

Despite these advances, socio-cultural and institutional barriers persist. Patriarchal norms and gendered labor divisions restrict women's autonomy in business decisions, while low education levels hinder their ability to harness financial and technological resources (Çolakoğlu et al., 2022).

Although initiatives aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to institutionalize rural women's empowerment through livelihood programs and financial inclusion (Soti, 2023; Riofrío et al., 2024), gaps remain in understanding the sociological mechanisms underlying these efforts (Kivalya & Caballero-Montes, 2023). This study seeks to bridge these gaps by examining the empowerment processes of rural women in SMEs and proposing a holistic model that integrates microfinance, digital tools, mentoring, and policy support for sustainable and inclusive development.

2.0 Literature Review

This systematic literature review explores the empowerment of rural women entrepreneurs through small and medium enterprises (SMEs), adopting a sociological lens to examine the structural, theoretical, and contextual factors that shape their entrepreneurial journey.

Concept of Women's Empowerment in Sociological Discourse

Sociological discourse conceptualizes women's empowerment as a multidimensional process involving economic, social, political, and psychological dimensions (Kabeer, 1999). It is not merely about access to resources but involves transforming power relations and social norms that restrict women's autonomy, especially in patriarchal rural settings (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). Structural marginalization such as traditional gender roles, limited education, and restricted mobility often constrains rural women's participation in entrepreneurship (Malhotra et al., 2002).

2.1 Theoretical Foundations in Sociological Analysis

Understanding the empowerment of rural women through SMEs necessitates robust theoretical grounding. This review identifies three primary sociological theories: Feminist Theory and Gender Empowerment, Empowerment Theory, and Social Capital Theory.

Feminist Theory and Gender Empowerment

Feminist theory critically evaluates patriarchal structures and advocates for gender equity. It views rural women's entrepreneurship as a transformative practice that challenges traditional gender roles, promotes economic autonomy, and reconstructs identity (Connell, 2005). Feminist economics highlights systemic disparities in access to capital and markets, arguing for inclusive economic reforms such as SME promotion (Sen, 1999).

Empowerment Theory

Kabeer (1999) theorizes empowerment through three interconnected components: *resources* (preconditions), *agency* (the process), and *achievements* (outcomes). In the SME context, rural women gain financial and social resources, assert agency through entrepreneurial decision-making, and achieve recognition, mobility, and household influence. Malhotra et al. (2002) expand this model by emphasizing the levels of empowerment individual, household, and institutional and advocate for both subjective and objective indicators to measure impact.

Social Capital Theory

This theory posits that social networks function as key resources facilitating individual and collective actions. Bonding and bridging social capital among rural women have been shown to enhance business performance, increase resource access, and build trust-based networks crucial for enterprise sustainability (Kawane & Shaw, 2024; Tomay & Hegedűs, 2023). During crises such as COVID-19, strong bonding

ties helped women mobilize support quickly, demonstrating the resilience potential of social capital (Tiwari & Shastri, 2022).

2.2 The Empowerment of Rural Women Entrepreneurs through SMEs

Empirical studies affirm that SMEs contribute significantly to rural women's empowerment, particularly through income generation, increased household decision-making power, and elevated social status (Iteriteka & Niyibizi, 2022; Dhasmana, 2023). Financial services such as microcredit and savings programs are central to enabling entrepreneurship among women with limited capital (Behera et al., 2024). These services not only facilitate business initiation but also enhance financial literacy and strategic planning abilities (Othman et al., 2022; Hernandez et al., 2022).

Training, mentorship, and business support are additional mechanisms through which SMEs empower rural women. These interventions foster skills, confidence, and self-efficacy, enabling women to overcome traditional barriers (Sanuja & Joseph, 2022). Furthermore, networking opportunities embedded within SME ecosystems help women resist socio-cultural constraints and form collaborative networks that support sustainable enterprise growth (Kabagerayo et al., 2022; Sharma & Das, 2021).

2.3 The Role of Sociological Factors in the Empowerment of Rural Women Entrepreneurs

Sociological factors deeply influence both the opportunities and constraints rural women face as entrepreneurs. Norms surrounding gender roles, family expectations, and community perceptions significantly shape women's entrepreneurial journeys (Tillmar et al., 2022). Community support, availability of role models, and visibility of successful women entrepreneurs are important motivators that enhance entrepreneurial aspirations (Azis et al., 2023; Kuran & Khabbaz, 2024).

Furthermore, intersectional identities based on gender, class, ethnicity, and religion often intersect to produce unique experiences of marginalization or empowerment. Women from lower-income or minority backgrounds face compounded challenges in accessing support and opportunities (Verma, 2024).

2.4 Research Gap

Despite increasing interest in rural women's empowerment through entrepreneurship and SMEs, notable gaps persist. Limited theoretical integration reduces understanding of how social, human, and psychological capital interact with stakeholder relationships to drive empowerment (Anggadwita & Indarti, 2023). Measurement inconsistencies, particularly the absence of standardized, context-specific empowerment indices, hinder comparability. Geographical bias toward South and Southeast Asia further restricts global insights (Aliamutu & Mkhize, 2024; Bukhari et al., 2024). Additionally, cross-sectional reliance overlooks empowerment's dynamic nature, necessitating longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches (Dana et al., 2023). Empirical evidence on digital technology's long-term effects and sociological dimensions in policy evaluations also remains scarce.

3.0 Research Methodology

The research is based on a qualitative multiple-case-study design which aims at developing a sociological analysis of the processes of empowerment of the women entrepreneurs in the sample population of SMEs operating in rural areas.

3.1 Research Design

This paper based on qualitative research design underpinned by sociological inquest was used to uncover lived experiences of women entrepreneurs operating in the SMEs sector in rural settings. The study used phenomenology in revealing personal ideas, subjective meanings, and sociocultural settings of empowerment (Creswell, 2013).

3.2 Sampling Technique

The sample was prepared through purposive sampling strategy whereby 50 participants were selected to have a variety in enterprise type, women entrepreneur's age, education and marital status. The reason why this non-probability method was adopted is to achieve theoretical saturation the point at which no new themes is generated by the data (Guest et al., 2006). The researcher managed to access 50 entrepreneurs owing to some unavoidable circumstances. Thus, in this research, the sample size was 50. The author carried out a deep interview of 50 feminine entrepreneurs, 30 in Chashara, Narayanganj and 20 in Khaleast, Munshiganj.

3.3 Data Collection Tools and data analysis Techniques, ethical issues

Data Collection Tools: primary data were collected through In-depth Semi-Structured Interviews as this provided a flexible but detailed interaction with the participants of the study to record their stories in terms of decision-making, resources access, autonomy, mobility, and social interaction.

Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) was employed. This included:

- Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts
- Coding data segments relevant to empowerment dimensions
- Generating themes related to sociological constructs such as agency, social capital, institutional trust, and gender dynamics
- Reviewing and defining themes to reflect interconnected systems of empowerment
- Interpreting findings within the broader sociological and theoretical context (Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra et al., 2002)

NVivo software was used to support coding and organization of themes.

Ensuring Trustworthiness:

The study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative rigor:

- **Credibility:** Achieved through member checking with participants.
- **Transferability:** Ensured through detailed, contextual descriptions.
- **Dependability:** Documented via an audit trail of research decisions.
- **Confirmability:** Strengthened through reflexivity and researcher journaling.

Ethical Considerations: A relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study ethically. The participants were made aware of the purpose of the study, and their anonymity, confidentiality, and participation were made voluntary. All the data were kept safely and utilized only academic purposes.

4.0 Analysis and Findings

The enablement of rural women with the help of SMEs demands demographic profiling as well as the thematic analysis. The demographic information provides important background that affects the empowerment (Roomi & Parrott, 2008; Ghouse et al., 2021).

4.1 Demographic Analysis

The empowerment of rural women through Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) must be examined through demographic profiling and thematic exploration. Factors such as age, education, marital status, and type of business significantly influence entrepreneurial opportunities and empowerment pathways (Roomi & Parrott, 2008; Ghouse et al., 2021).

Respondent Age

The age of respondents ranged from the twenties to the sixties, reflecting the inclusiveness and diversity of rural women entrepreneurship. Younger entrepreneurs like Khadiza Akter (29) and Sharmin Ali Himu (26) embodied innovation, energy, and a fresh approach to business. Middle-aged women such as Hasina Mossaraf Sweety and Nishat Anjum balanced family responsibilities with entrepreneurial ambitions. Meanwhile, experienced entrepreneurs like Jobeda Bibi (62) and Safia Khatun demonstrated resilience and the ability to overcome traditional barriers, such as early marriage.

Educational Qualification

Respondents' educational levels ranged from little or no formal education to postgraduate qualifications. Entrepreneurs like Santa Khan and Jobeda Bibi, despite limited schooling, succeeded through practical skills, endurance, and informal training. In contrast, Mahmuda Akter Pakhi (M.A. in Bangla), Aklima Begum (S.S.C.), and Afsana Akter (law background) utilized formal education to strengthen decision-making and strategic management. Some, like Nishat Anjum, turned both education and personal challenges into business assets. Even less formally educated respondents, such as Mousumi Neela and Humaira Khan, thrived with the help of job training and family support.

Marital Status

Marital status played a key role in shaping empowerment experiences. Married women like Mahmuda Akter Pakhi and Aklima Begum benefited from spousal support, while others, including Khadiza Akter and Mousumi Neela, faced opposition from in-laws or extended families. For divorced entrepreneurs like Afsana Akter and Nishat Anjum, entrepreneurship provided a route to financial independence and social reacceptance. Unmarried and widowed women, such as Reepa Akter and Sidratul Muntaha Munia, balanced domestic duties with business responsibilities, using entrepreneurship as a tool for autonomy and resilience.

Business Names and Identity

The names of the businesses reflected creativity, identity, and ambition. Examples include Safia Khatun Handicrafts, Foodz Culture, Lovely's Makeover Point, and Food Corner by Humaira Khan, which indicated personal branding and professionalism. Other names, such as Ancora Haat Butics, Heaven Chef, and Dreams, reflected emotional aspirations. Businesses like Nakshi Katha Enterprise, Yum Tour, and Mahmuda Akter's Herbal Medicine highlighted a blend of cultural preservation, innovation, and personal commitment to health and wellness.

4.2 Thematic Analysis

Steps of Thematic Analysis

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) suggested that the thematic analysis method is an iterative process consisting of six steps:

Step 1: Becoming familiar with the data

The information brings forth powerful stories of women in small businesses in the rural areas, and how they are becoming empowered and economically independent. Each of the stories unveils peculiar backgrounds, struggles, inspirations, and business development. The different experiences of successful entrepreneurs, such as Safia Khatun, who conquered early marriage, and Hasina Mossaraf Sweety, who flourished with the support of her family, point to various ways of achieving success.

Step 2: Generating initial codes

After that, I have initiated the coding process that involves selecting specific parts of text, including phrases or sentences and attaching brief descriptions or codes that was devote their meaning. To illustrate this process, let us take a look at a short passage of this research. In this research paper I am trying to find out the factors that contribute towards the empowerment of the rural women entrepreneur who participates in SMEs, I have gathered information by conducting interviews and below is a sample of one of the interviews:

- Gender roles and expectations

Women entrepreneurs face gendered expectations and challenges stemming from traditional roles and societal norms, impacting their access to resources and opportunities for business development. The dynamics within the family, including

marital status, familial support, and in-law relationships, significantly influence women's empowerment and their ability to pursue entrepreneurial endeavors. She owns an online platform called 'Nahar Collection', through which she sells a variety of products including beautiful artificial flower ornaments, different beauty products, kurtis, decorated ornas, and hijabs. Nahar shares her journey,

Artificial flower ornaments making used to be my hobby. I would create these ornaments for my neighbor's daughter's Gaye Holud ceremony. Encouraged by my parents and sisters, I decided to turn this into a profession. Initially, my elder brother provided me with 50,000 taka. Eventually he helped me to expand my business. I had to borrow 5 lakh taka from BRAC Bank, albeit at a slightly higher interest rate. However, I am currently earning between 1.5 to 2 lakh taka monthly.

- Access to education and training

Access to education and training plays a crucial role in enhancing women's entrepreneurial capabilities, enabling them to overcome sociocultural barriers and succeed in SME development. Notably, those who are engaged in food businesses have undergone cooking courses under the SEIP project, including Nishat Anjum and Humaira Khan. According to Humaira Khan,

After being married for a long time without having children, I began to feel lonely and frustrated. That's when I decided to get introduced with food business. Through my online food page, I offer a variety of Bengali dishes including Polau, Chicken Roast, Kachi Biryani, as well as Chinese items and delicious desserts. Thanks to this business, I now earn between 50 thousand to 1 lakh taka per month.

- Economic status and financial support

The availability of financial resources, both from family support and external sources like loans and grants, is essential for women entrepreneurs to establish and grow their businesses, contributing to their empowerment. Safia states, "My socio-economic status has improved, and my standard of living has risen. Despite facing challenges, including lack of cooperation from my in-laws, my children have been understood of my struggles."

- Marital status and family dynamics

Strong social networks and community connections provide women entrepreneurs with valuable support, resources, and opportunities, facilitating their empowerment and business success. According to Humaira Khan,

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- Social support networks

Women's motivations and aspirations for entrepreneurship are influenced by personal experiences, family dynamics, and societal expectations, shaping their journey towards empowerment and business success. Recognition within the community and social status gained through entrepreneurial success contribute to women's

empowerment, affirming their agency and contributions to economic development. Rowshan Akter Kona stands out as a successful women entrepreneur with eight years of experience in the beauty industry. Supported by her three sisters, she has been able to sustain her business despite being separated from her husband and in-laws. Starting with a loan of 1.5 lakh taka from her elder sister, Rowshan now earns between 25,000 to 30,000 taka weekly, with potential for higher earnings during festivals. She is grateful to have the freedom to retain her earnings and focus solely on caring for her daughter.

I began this business with a loan of 1.5 lakh taka from my elder sister. Currently, I earn between 25,000 to 30,000 taka weekly. During festivals, my earnings tend to increase further. Additionally, I am able to save some of my salary. My sole responsibility now is to take care for my little daughter.

- Sociocultural norms and traditions

Sociocultural challenges, such as restrictive gender roles and lack of access to resources and support networks, hinder rural women entrepreneurs' ability to access resources necessary for SME development. Aklima said, "My family and in laws are highly conservative. They have suggested me; you can do the business with maintaining Islamic norms and traditions. she received financial support from her father, amounting to 3 lakh taka, enabling her to establish her beauty parlour. Her economic situation has significantly improved, and she now earns 2.5 to 3 lakh taka per month from her parlour."

- Social and community recognition

Socio-cultural norms and challenges, including gender biases, cultural traditions, and societal perceptions, pose barriers to women's entrepreneurship, affecting their access to resources and societal recognition. Indeed, the monthly incomes of Reepa Akter finds vary significantly based on their entrepreneurial ventures. Her, the founder of 'Joyeeta Organization,' earns between 10,000 to 15,000 taka by selling handmade products, while also running an online page for selling 'Achar.'

Step 3: Generating themes

The case study on women entrepreneurs in SMEs operating in the rural areas depicts some common themes of resilience, determination, and navigating socio-cultural aspects. But with some difficulties, such women become economically independent with the help of the family, financial support, and the possibility to undergo skills training. Their use of technology, policy advocacy and community networks enable them to expand their businesses and break the old gender boundaries.

Theme 1: Marital Status and Sociocultural Influences

This theme highlights how marital roles, gender expectations, and cultural norms shape women's personal and professional decision-making. It also reflects how family and community expectations influence their opportunities and challenges.

Theme 2: Family Support and Economic Empowerment

This theme focuses on how economic conditions, availability of financial resources, and family-based support systems contribute to or limit women's empowerment. It

reflects the role of financial stability and household contributions in enabling economic independence.

Theme 3: Community Networks and Entrepreneurial Agency

This theme captures how community connections, social recognition, and personal entrepreneurial motivations enhance women's agency. It reflects the interplay between community-level support and individual ambitions in shaping entrepreneurial identity.

Step 4: Reviewing themes

When conducting the analysis of the data on empowerment of rural women using SMEs I maintained thematic accuracy which required going back to the data and confirming the existence and appropriateness of each theme. This was done by looking at omissions as well as the goodness of themes in representing data.

Step 5: Defining and naming themes

In the sociological analysis of rural women's empowerment through SMEs, key themes include "Gendered Expectations and Roles," "Family Dynamics and Marital Status," and "Access to Education and Resources."

Theme 1: Family Dynamics and Marital Status

Final Name of Theme: *Family Dynamics and Marital Status*

This theme explains how marital status, household roles, and family expectations shape rural women's involvement in SME activities. It highlights how spousal support, caregiving responsibilities, and sociocultural norms influence women's decision-making, autonomy, and ability to sustain entrepreneurial ventures.

Theme 2: Financial Support and Economic Empowerment

Final Name of Theme: *Financial Support and Economic Empowerment*

This theme focuses on the role of financial resources such as family contributions, savings, microfinance, and access to capital in enabling or constraining rural women's entrepreneurship. It emphasizes how economic stability and financial empowerment contribute to business sustainability, growth, and long-term independence.

Theme 3: Social Networks and Community Recognition

Final Name of Theme: *Social Networks and Community Recognition*

This theme captures how women's participation in social and community networks strengthens their entrepreneurial agency. It reflects how community recognition, peer support, and collective identity enhance confidence, visibility, and empowerment within rural SME environments.

Step 6: Writing Report

This research explores the empowerment of rural women entrepreneurs through SMEs as both an economic and sociological necessity. Guided by key research questions, it examines sociological influences, challenges faced, and the role of

social networks. Using qualitative thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, the study highlights women's lived experiences in overcoming socio-cultural barriers to achieve economic independence. The findings offer valuable policy insights for promoting gender equity, strengthening community support systems, and fostering inclusive economic development in rural areas.

4.3 Summary of the Findings of Study

This is the case of the empowerment of rural women entrepreneurs by their involvement in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Bangladesh which is found to bring about transformational changes in the socio-economic relations and gender roles. The results are defined according to major thematic dimensions of empowerment: economic, social, familial, and personal.

- The analysis indicates that there was marked improvement of income among the rural women entrepreneurs after their SME involvement.
- There was a significant change in the level of women involvement in decision-making about family and business matters. Prior to the SMEs participation, the majority of the women were left out in financial and social decisions.
- Rural women were traditionally tied down by patriarchal rules and household duties thus had restricted movements.
- A substantial number of the women were socioeconomically vulnerable- they were either poverty stricken, orphaned or victims of social stigma.

5.0 Discussion

This study reaffirms the pivotal role of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in empowering rural women economically, socially, and psychologically. Consistent with Roomi and Parrott (2008), SME participation strengthened women's agency, financial autonomy, and household decision-making. Respondents reported enhanced mobility, income, property control, and managerial skills. Echoing Karim (2014), entrepreneurship enabled women to transcend patriarchal constraints, particularly for those marginalized by widowhood, divorce, or poverty. These findings align with Kabeer's (1999) framework, highlighting empowerment through access to resources and agency. Supporting Cheston and Kuhn (2002), SME engagement increased women's financial control and community voice, fostering confidence and leadership. Nonetheless, sociocultural barriers gender-based violence, stigma, family resistance, and spousal unemployment or addiction persist, reflecting Mayoux's (2001) and Amine and Staub's (2009) observations.

6.0 Research Contributions

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes a notable contribution to the sociological understanding of gender, development, and entrepreneurship by analyzing the empowerment of rural women in Bangladesh through their participation in SMEs. The research strengthens and extends empowerment theory by showing that empowerment is a multidimensional, evolving process encompassing economic, social, and psychological aspects.

Practical Contributions

Practically, the study offers key insights for policymakers, NGOs, and development practitioners on using SMEs as tools for poverty reduction and gender equity. The findings also advocate for expanding entrepreneurial support networks and promoting community sensitization, male involvement, and enabling legal frameworks to dismantle structural and cultural barriers.

7.0 Future Research Directions

The current research on the Empowerment of Rural Women Entrepreneurs through Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs): A Sociological Analysis provides foundational insights into how rural Bangladeshi women empower themselves through entrepreneurship. However, several avenues remain open for future exploration. First, longitudinal studies could track changes in income, autonomy, and mobility over time to assess the sustainability of empowerment outcomes. Second, incorporating intersecting identities such as religion, caste, ethnicity, and disability would offer a more nuanced understanding of empowerment in diverse rural contexts. Finally, future studies should examine the role of male spouses, family members, and community leaders in shaping women's entrepreneurial journeys, using household power dynamics as a sociological lens.

8.0 Conclusion

The study has examined the empowerment phenomenon involving women entrepreneurs in the rural settings of Bangladesh by participating in small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Based on a sociological perspective, the analysis indicated that the SME participation had extensive contributions to the economic, social, and personal empowerment of women. It gave them financial autonomy, a better bargaining power, increased mobility, and more control over property and household resources. These developments are unlike the traditional gender roles and women have managed to assume their positions both at home and in the community.

The study established that the backgrounds of the rural women entrepreneurs are diverse and hence they have different socioeconomic, educational, and family backgrounds. These differences notwithstanding, they were able to engage in SME activities thus breaking the structural barriers including poverty, social stigma, gender based violence, and lack of access to resource. Notably, the lived realities introduced in the study belong to two different categories of women, including those who endured acute distress prior to entrepreneurship and those who had the relative support of family or finances.

In reporting the gains, the study equally reports that there are still some outstanding issues that include low institutional support, patriarchal opposition, and socio-cultural barriers, that still operate to abate the full achievement of women empowerment in rural Bangladesh. To sum up, SMEs are the effective instruments of rural women empowerment enabling access to economic activities and social changes.

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