

# Exist or exit? Women business-owners in Bangladesh during COVID-19

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## Abstract

Within the unique context of COVID-19, this feminist research provides novel insights on how gender-specific issues are articulated in the experiences of women concerning their small businesses in a patriarchal developing nation. Based on the interviews of women business-owners in Bangladesh, this research reveals the diversified gendered experiences of women in private and public spheres in continuing their business operations during the pandemic period. It also unveils patriarchal practices regarding women's discontinuing or closing down ventures due to the COVID-19 crisis. Thus, the research substantially advances the understanding on the influence of gender on women's continuing or discontinuing or even closing down their businesses in a highly patriarchal developing nation during the pandemic period. It further offers important suggestions for policy practitioners in supporting women business-owners of patriarchal developing nations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## KEYWORDS

coronavirus, COVID, developing nations, gender, women entrepreneurs

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

While small and medium enterprises are at the center of the COVID-19 crisis (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020), women entrepreneurs are particularly in a disadvantaged position (Orser, 2020). Studies (Chmura, 2020; Orser, 2020) on the Western developed context reveal that women are confronting major problems as their firms are over-presented in certain sectors, for instance, retail or hospitality, that are severely affected by the decrease of customer demand. The situation is critical for women due to other key

structural issues, for example, the small size and the young age of their firms (Chmura, 2020). Addressing the sudden financial crisis is comparatively challenging for women because of their lack of financial assets and the high level of dependence on informal financing (Orser, 2020). The limited networking of women during the pandemic period (Henry, 2020) also restricts them from obtaining advice in managing the crisis (Orser, 2020). Furthermore, women's increased caregiving duties for the school closure and the healthcare demand set barriers for many of them in adapting their businesses to the new situation (Chmura, 2020). Consequently, women entrepreneurs are incurring severe financial losses and even a significant number of them have permanently closed down their businesses at the initial stage of the pandemic as revealed in a survey (Chmura, 2020).

The problems of women entrepreneurs in highly patriarchal developing nations can be more challenging. The statement can be explained with reference to the issue of women's domestic duties. While the literature (Amine & Staub, 2009; Ghouse, McElwee, Meaton, & Durrah, 2017; Mehtap, Pellegrini Massimiliano, Caputo, & Welsh Dianne, 2017) has established strong negative impacts of intensive domestic responsibilities and childcare activities of women on their businesses in many developing nations, it is also important to note that maidservants play a critical role in assisting women in domestic activities in many of these countries (Alexandre & Kharabsheh, 2019; Roomi, Rehman, & Henry, 2018). Nevertheless, during the coronavirus crisis, part-time servants may not be allowed to work at home for maintaining social distance. In that case, women are in a challenging position in managing homebound responsibilities in the context where there is a high level of societal expectation regarding their performance of domestic duties (Roomi & Parrott, 2008). The scenario eventually raises the question concerning how the excess household work of women exerts a negative influence on their businesses. Therefore, it is important to investigate gender-specific issues concerning women's experiences of continuing or discontinuing or even closing down their ventures due to COVID-19 in patriarchal developing nations.

The research aim is to explore the influence of gender on women's experiences regarding their small businesses in a patriarchal developing nation during the COVID-19 crisis. The first objective of the study is to identify and analyze the gender-specific experiences of women in continuing their ventures during the pandemic period. The second objective is to investigate women's gendered experiences in the case of business discontinuation or closure due to the coronavirus crisis.

The article explores the influence of gender on women business-owners in a South Asian developing nation, Bangladesh, where there exists a high level of patriarchal practices (Khatun, 2019). Besides, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), Bangladesh is one of the top 10 countries out of 215 countries and regions of the world considering the number of positive COVID-19 cases (Abdullah, 2020). Initially, all ventures were not allowed to operate (WHO, 2020a), but businesses were resumed during the period of a steady increase of coronavirus cases (WHO, 2020b, 2020c). This critical scenario raises some intriguing questions, for instance, how women managed business activities with their household duties if maidservants were not allowed to work in order to maintain social distancing. Hence, exploring women's gender-specific experiences on continuing their ventures in this highly patriarchal country during the pandemic period is a rich line of enquiry. In the case of discontinuing or closing down businesses due to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, investigating the gendered experiences of women can provide distinct insights.

To address the research aim, the article commences with a literature review to provide the platform of the study. The methodology section explains the data generation and analysis. After presenting the empirical findings, the feminist study provides a critical discussion section and also offers policy recommendations. Finally, it presents a conclusion section with the future research agenda.

## 2 | WOMEN BUSINESS-OWNERS, DEVELOPING NATIONS, AND COVID-19

The entrepreneurship scholarship is criticized because of its gender biases (Ahl, 2006). The field of entrepreneurship is considered solely a male domain (Ahl, 2004). Nevertheless, the impact of women's domestic responsibilities and childcare on their ventures has received attention in the extant literature (Ahl, 2006). In this

regard, it is important to note that the issue has been discussed in terms of a negative consequence. It is not known yet whether there exists any constructive relationship between domestic duties and entrepreneurial activities. For example, whether the motherhood experiences of women lead to any positive influence on managing business employees has been overlooked. Moreover, little is known regarding the complexities of women in transcending or attempting to transcend the socially accepted behavior (Holmes, 2007) for operating their businesses in a male-dominated field (Ahl, 2004). Thus, in the male-biased entrepreneurship literature, many gender-specific issues of women business-owners remain underexplored.

The body of literature on women's entrepreneurship has also been criticized for the almost exclusive focus on Anglo-Saxon countries (Ahl, 2006). Considering the significance of context-specific aspects in revealing distinct insights, calls have been made to explore underexplored regions of the world, for instance, developing nations (Jaim & Islam, 2018). The limited literature on the areas beyond the Western developed context (Danish & Smith, 2012; Jaim, 2020a; Jaim, Martin, & Swail, 2015; Lerner & Almor, 2002) has established insightful findings compared to those of developed nations. For example, given the restriction on communicating with men, women tend to have weak informal networks that act as barriers for their business operation in many developing countries like Pakistan (Roomi, 2009) and Tanzania (Rutashobya, Allan, & Nilsson, 2009).

Although these studies demonstrate intriguing insights, exploring the gendered experiences of women business-owners in developing nations during the unique context of COVID-19 can be a rich line of enquiry. This statement can be justified with the issue of women's mobility. The extant literature (Danish & Smith, 2012; Jaim, 2020a) has already established the travel problems of women in operating their businesses in developing nations. During the normal period, women figured out ways to address these typical gendered problems; for instance, they were dependent on their husbands for some business activities (Jaim, 2020a). Nevertheless, the COVID-19 period has set barriers for the existing way of doing businesses. For example, the issue of social distancing has imposed restrictions on the mobility of people that can place women in a more challenging position in navigating the public sphere for their business activities. As women were, in general, struggling with many patriarchal problems in operating businesses in the developing context (Amine & Staub, 2009; Danish & Smith, 2012; Jaim, 2020b; Roomi & Parrott, 2008), this pandemic period raises the question regarding their distinct gender-specific problems.

To address this enquiry, this study is concentrated on Bangladesh, a highly patriarchal developing nation. Within the context of widespread patriarchal practices (Khatun, 2019), Bangladesh has witnessed an effective operation of the micro-credit program and, at present, there is a growing number of women in small businesses (Hasan, 2019). Studies (Jaim, 2019, 2020a; Roodman & Morduch, 2009) have identified diversified patriarchal problems of women in operating their firms in this country. Nevertheless, like many other countries, COVID-19 emerges as a threat to the small and medium business sector in Bangladesh (Hossain, 2020). A preliminary survey (Khan & Newaz, 2020) on small- and medium-scale business-owners highlights the problems concerning the liquidity crisis and operational activities. It also discloses that more than half of the respondents will need to shut down their businesses if the lockdown continues for 4 months (Khan & Newaz, 2020). During this unique circumstance, whilst the general scenario of the business sector demonstrates an alarming condition, women business-owners might face additional problems in this highly patriarchal country.

As the highest number of COVID-19 cases has been found in the capital city of the country, Dhaka (Kamruzzaman, 2020), this study concentrates on this area. More specifically, it is focused on women in small businesses, whereas micro-level firms are largely concentrated in the rural areas of the country (Jaim, 2019). Thus, this article responds to the research aim by investigating how gendered experiences are articulated in the experiences of women in continuing or discontinuing or even closing down their small businesses during the pandemic period in a highly patriarchal developing country, Bangladesh.

### 3 | METHODOLOGY

This study has been conducted as feminist standpoint research. As the feminist stance recognizes the differences in the life of women from that of men (Hartsock, 2004), it can uncover the gender-specific experiences of women business-owners during the pandemic. Moreover, whilst feminist standpoint theory is fundamentally positioned in Europe and North America (Harding, 2004), it has been argued that employing the stance in non-Western contexts could yield valuable insights (Narayan, 2004). As women in different parts of the world are oppressed in different ways, there exists a possibility of developing their distinct insights (Harding, 2004). While feminist standpoint theory provides space to women in interpreting social realities exclusively based on their experiences (Bowden & Mummery, 2009), this stance is important for exploring the gender-specific experiences of women business-owners in Bangladesh, the underexplored context.

The study deploys a qualitative method that can effectively transmit the voice of women (Olesen, 1994). Simultaneously, it responds to the call of the feminist scholars in the field of entrepreneurship as the qualitative study is contended to unveil gender-specific assumptions, norms, and practices of entrepreneurial activities (Henry, Foss, & Ahl, 2016). Given the novelty of the coronavirus pandemic, a qualitative study is deemed appropriate whilst it interrogates how women contextualize their experiences in terms of sociocultural or other macro-environmental aspects (Roomi et al., 2018).

Purposive sampling was adopted for generating data (Roomi et al., 2018) whilst the major criterion was that all the women were the self-proprietors and founders of their small-scale businesses in Bangladesh. As the study is to investigate the influence of gender on women's entrepreneurial issues, it is important not to have any share of others in the firms. Moreover, to assess the experiences of the pandemic period, another condition was that all the women had at least 5 years of experience of operating their ventures during normal times. It facilitated them to realize and reflect their differentiated experiences during the pandemic period (the overview on the context is presented towards the end of this section).

Given the issue of social distancing and the restricted mobility of the pandemic period, it was challenging to identify the respondents and to collect data from them. Building rapport is essential to develop trust and confidence between a participant and the researcher (Waddington, 2004) but COVID-19 restricts the required interactions for conducting a study. To resolve this problem, I considered communicating with the participants of previous research to recruit the respondents for this study. In 2014, for an extensive feminist study, I collected data from different women business-owners in Dhaka. Among those respondents, I selected four women who met the criteria for this pandemic-related study. In addition, there was one woman business-owner (Mrittika) who was not included in the previous research, but I came to know her during the period of generating data for that study. It is worth noting that, during the previous study, I went to the workplaces of all the respondents and, in some cases, to their residences. For that study, I had intensive interviews with those respondents on at least two occasions. Building upon the rapport, it was convenient for me to access data for studying the COVID-19 period. Further, in the case of data generation regarding the gendered experiences during the pandemic, the background understanding of their businesses and family aspects facilitated me to easily interrogate many issues.

Data generation was conducted through semi-structured interviews. This form of interview is deemed appropriate in reflecting the life of women (Jayaratne, 1983). There were two phases of interviews. At the first phase, the interviews of the respondents were extensive. The last interview was a brief one that took place during the data analysis stage. In this regard, it is worth noting that the interviews were voice-recorded. Interviews were conducted in Bangla, which is the native language of the respondents and me. When I completed transcribing the interviews, I made the literal translation of the interviews into English. There were necessary adjustments in the translated copies for the convenience of understanding in the spoken English (Pilnick & Zayts, 2016). In the case of grammatical omissions and the lack of clarifications, I inserted words in square brackets (Bryman, 2016).

I adopted thematic analysis by following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006). Initially, I gained familiarity with the data by getting heavily involved in transcribing and translating the data (Gehman et al., 2018). In general,

TABLE 1 Overview of respondents

Issues	Respondents <sup>a</sup>				
	Nodee	Kiron	Sheela	Aakash	Mrittika
Business <sup>b</sup>					
Type of business	Retail store	Production and retail	Production and wholesale	Wholesale	Retail
Products	Cosmetics, henna, accessories, etc.	Food items (mixed species and frozen food)	Handicraft products, dresses, etc.	Dresses for females	Dresses for females
Platform (for selling)	Physical	Online	Physical	Physical	Online
Personal <sup>c</sup>					
Age	Mid-40s	Late-30s	Early 60s	Mid-30s	Early 30s
Education	SSC	Graduate	HSC	Diploma	MBA
Business experiences	25 years	7 years	More than 25 years	13 years	8 years
Family					
Members (living with the woman)	Husband, two children (14 and 6 years), and mother	Husband, two children (9 and 4 years), and father-in-law	Husband, son, daughter-in-law, grandson (2 years)	Husband, two children (10 and 1.5 years)	Parents and sister
Maid/servant (during the pandemic)	No servant	Full-time servant	No servant; mostly daughter-in-law worked	No servant	No servant; mostly mother worked

<sup>a</sup>Pseudonyms for the respondents have been used for the confidentiality issue.

<sup>b</sup>Only Mrittika conducted her business on a part-time basis. She was engaged in a full-time job in a USAID project.

<sup>c</sup>In Bangladesh, SSC indicates the examination after completing 10 years of schooling and HSC indicates 12 years of school education. Besides, as far as the marital status of the respondents is concerned, Mrittika was the only respondent who was single.

those data were considered for the analysis that were related to women's gendered experiences regarding their ventures during the pandemic period to address the research aim. Given the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic, I generated codes by mostly applying the data-driven coding (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). During the phase of reading the transcripts, I considered developing such codes that reflected emerging ideas (Charmaz, 1990). In this regard, I took into account the recommendations provided by Ryan and Bernard (2003). For example, attention was paid to the issue of emphasis and, particularly, to the similarities and dissimilarities across the transcripts (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). At this stage, I had brief interviews with the respondents for clarifications or explanations on certain issues and communicated with them to confirm that their voices were properly reflected.

After reviewing and refining the codes, the first-order concepts were listed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The concepts were, then, categorized to develop second-order themes that reflected a more abstract level of distinct groups and, finally, aggregate dimensions were emerged from the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nag, Corley, & Gioia, 2007). The review of the entire data set was made to ensure that the research objectives and the richness of the data were properly reflected in the data structure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, "Gendered issues regarding continuing businesses" evolved as one aggregate dimension that addresses the first research objective and "Gendered

issues regarding discontinuing/closing businesses" emerged as another one that responds to the second research objective.

### 3.1 | COVID-19 in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the first confirmed coronavirus case was reported on March 8, 2020 (WHO, 2020b). The government announced a complete lockdown of the country from March 26, 2020, to curb the spread of the virus (Kamruzzaman & Sakib, 2020). Whereas all the public and private offices were closed, the exception was applied to certain sectors which included the businesses associated with kitchen market and drug stores (WHO, 2020a). Although there was a steady increase of COVID-19 cases in May (WHO, 2020c), from the second week of that month, many shopping malls were open on a limited scale for the shopping of the religious event, Eid (Mamun, 2020). Nevertheless, the nationwide general holiday pertaining to the pandemic ended on May 31, 2020, and all the businesses were allowed to open by following certain health guidelines (Shawon, 2020). It is important to note that, during this period, Bangladesh witnessed a steadily increasing rate of COVID-19 cases (WHO, 2020d). The scenario of Bangladesh demonstrates that, when the businesses were allowed to resume, there was still a severe health concern regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 4 | FINDINGS

The respondents of this feminist study reveal that, during the pandemic period, three women were operating their businesses whilst two of them were uncertain concerning the continuation of their businesses. However, two other women could not operate their ventures during this period. All the women disclosed diversified gender-specific experiences in relation to the continuation or discontinuation or closure of the small businesses in this highly patriarchal developing country.

### 4.1 | Gendered issues regarding continuing businesses

#### 4.1.1 | Private and public patriarchal experiences

Whilst the negative impact of domestic responsibilities and childcare of women on their businesses has been widely discussed in the literature (Amine & Staub, 2009; Constantinidis, Lebègue, El-Abboubi, & Salman, 2019; Ghouse et al., 2017; Mehtap et al., 2017), Nodee explained some particular problems that she faced in operating her business at a shopping mall during this critical situation. For example, although the new schedule of the pandemic period reduced her working hours, that is, staying at the shop for 5 hours, she considered that the workload was comparatively immense compared to that of normal times:

It [the workload] is more extensive than what was during the normal period. Why do I think so? I don't have any maidservant [during the pandemic period]. I have to do the work of the maidservant. This is one type of workload. (Nodee)

Nodee's comments on the critical role of the maidservant in managing domestic responsibilities reiterate what is known from the literature of many developing nations (Alexandre & Kharabsheh, 2019). Nevertheless, given the concern of social distancing, Nodee could not allow her servant at home as she needed to come from outside. She explained that her maidservant was mostly engaged in washing clothes (manually), sweeping the floor, and

traditional mopping. It is worth noting that, in Bangladesh, the traditional mopping requires the worker to bend for wiping the floor with a piece of wet cloth and move with a bucket of water for washing that cloth. Nodee poignantly expounded how those activities had an impact on her:

As because there is no servant at home, I have to do all those activities. I have to do it by myself with hardship. It [traditional mopping] is certainly a problematic task because I am a person who had a cesarean delivery. It is very painful for me. Still, what should I do? I have to do it. There is no other way except doing it [by me]. It is very painful. Still, I have to do it. Now after completing all those tasks at home, working for the shop is practically painful indeed. (Nodee)

By drawing upon the traditional way of working, Nodee illustrated her burden concerning accomplishing domestic chores. More specifically, by pointing out the physical problem associated with child delivery, Nodee exemplified her stress for working at home. Her repeated comment—*“It is very painful”*—clearly demonstrates the acute nature of the suffering. Despite her severe physical problem, it was she who had to accomplish all the laborious work to meet the patriarchal expectation regarding the domestic mode of production (Roomi & Parrott, 2008). She considered that, during this pandemic, the absence of the servant put pressure on her workload in such a way that it hampered operating her business.

Furthermore, Nodee disclosed some other gendered experiences in the public sphere in continuing her business during the pandemic. The issue of the supplier can be cited as an example. During the coronavirus period, the wholesalers charged a higher price for the products as they claimed to have a shortage of goods due to restricted imports. Against this background, Nodee expressed her disadvantaged position in purchasing goods for the shop:

Suppose, he [the wholesaler] sells a product to a man at the price of Tk. 30. He will sell it to me at Tk. 50. He will have Tk. 20 extra to sell the product. In that case, if we [women] protest, [the wholesalers say:] *“take it or leave it.”* They exactly say things like that. In that case, there is nothing to say because I have to have those goods anyway. Then I am obliged to purchase that goods at the price of Tk. 50.... Normally, Tk. 50 is the selling price [of that product] at my shop. If I ask the customer for Tk. 50 [for the product], s/he doesn't want to understand that. S/he doesn't buy that. (Nodee)

The comments reflect that women do not protest strongly against illogical pricing. It indicates that women have to comply with certain gender roles and norms of the prevailing society (Martin, 2006). From the quotes of Nodee, it is evident how the wholesalers took advantage of softness, the feminine attribute (Gherardi, 1994), of the woman business-owner. Given her gender identity, Nodee needed to pay the higher price for the product, which left her in a disadvantaged status in the market competition. Whereas the COVID-19 period is financially problematic for business-persons in general (Hossain, 2020), this example of Nodee clearly demonstrates how women are specifically in a challenging position because of the patriarchal norms and practices in this country.

#### 4.1.2 | Support from the family

Whereas the family is revealed as an important source of patriarchy for many women business-owners in Bangladesh (Jaim, 2019), this study unveils how the family can support a woman to continue her small business during this pandemic period. Kiron's experiences unfold such instances. The vital problem of Kiron's business regarding COVID-19 is clearly declared in her words: *“From the very beginning of the corona period, the major problem was—how will I send the products?”* As Kiron was operating an online business of food items, she relied on a delivery organization to deliver her products. During the lockdown period, the delivery charge increased significantly, which had a negative impact on her profit margin.

Kiron's husband played an important role in solving the problem as she mentioned: "I have our car. Sometimes, even I go to deliver [the products]. If there are many [customers] at Dhanmondi, my husband and I go for the delivery. Then I don't need to engage the delivery organization." The comments indicate that, by using the personal vehicle, Kiron was able to reduce the delivery cost that helped her to maintain a reasonable level of profit. The quotes further echo her husband's assistance regarding this issue. As Kiron could not drive a car, she was dependent on her husband: "We don't have a driver during this corona period. My husband drives. I can't drive. You know, in our society, only a few women drive a car!" Kiron's comments confirm that women driving is not a common social practice in Bangladesh. Her husband helped Kiron regarding her lack of skill that was associated with her gender identity. Existing studies (Barragan, Eroglu, & Essers, 2018; Constantinidis et al., 2019; Jaim, 2020a) also support the assisting roles of husbands in operating businesses of women in the highly patriarchal context.

Kiron also raised the production problem of her home-based business during the pandemic period. Due to the issue of social distancing, Kiron did not allow the employees at her house. She carried out the production of the business at a limited scale by herself. Kiron's increased work had an impact on her overall domestic activities. In this regard, she had the supportive approach of the family, particularly her father-in-law. Kiron, however, acknowledged that her father-in-law was not a typical person of that country. She stated:

The workload has been increased.... They [husband and father-in-law] don't have any complaint. Rather my father-in-law is very helpful. He prepares his tea. He also prepares tea for me. Again, I may be frying the "parata" [a traditional food item]. He also fries that. He gives those ["parata"] to me and my babies. He is a different [type of person]. (Kiron)

### 4.1.3 | Support to others in overcoming patriarchal barriers

The case of Sheela provides a fascinating example of how a woman business-owner was continuing her business during the COVID-19 period due to her concern about the patriarchal experiences of her female employees instead of solely focusing on the profit of the business. Although Sheela could not sell her products during the pandemic period, she kept her production running with available raw materials. As her business was partially a home-based one, the workers completed the production at their residences to maintain social distancing. According to Sheela, the main reason for the production was the responsibility regarding the female workers:

But I can't leave the female workers idle. They live on the earnings. So, I have to keep them working. I am giving money from my personal sources. I am getting the products ready. When there will be fairs, I will sell those [products] ... otherwise, where will they [employees] go? (Sheela)

As reflected in the quotes, Sheela was personally financing the business for the survival of female employees. It is worth noting that Sheela was awarded at the national level for her social welfare activities. She further explained the practical reason for her concern for these women:

You know about the women in our country. The women are oppressed—no matter whether they [the family members] are millionaire—[they are oppressed] aren't they? Many men do not provide the pocket money to the women [wives]. They don't even want to provide the expenditure of the study [of the children]. My husband—working at the customs—was affluent. They [husband and brother-in-law] thought about national politics—how they will work for the people of the country. My brother-in-law is the MP. They were busy with those issues. So, my children witnessed how I brought them up. (Sheela)



The comments convey Sheela's concern about the subordinated or oppressed experiences of women in Bangladesh. By drawing upon her personal experiences, Sheela highlighted that her husband and the close male relatives were not properly involved in the child-rearing process. The comments appear to suggest that Sheela's husband also did not provide sufficient money for the expenditure of the children despite his financial ability to support them. As her husband oppressed Sheela by leaving her in a financially constrained position to exert his patriarchal power, Sheela brought up her children with hardship. During the interview, she explained the brilliant academic achievements of her children, who were engaged in good jobs in Bangladesh and abroad. In this regard, it is important to highlight that Sheela received a prestigious award as a successful mother of the country. Sheela added:

Only I know how I managed to continue their [children's] studies. That's why, I feel that the women like us need to work at home so that they can provide the extra expenditure of their children—pencils, notebooks, pens. That's why, I work for those women. (Sheela)

Sheela's comments demonstrate how the personal patriarchal experiences positively shaped her entrepreneurial approach by critically considering the oppressed position of other women in this society. The scenario pinpoints sympathy, the feminine characteristic (Bem, 1981) of Sheela. During the coronavirus crisis, whereas employees laid off in small businesses were widely evident in this country (Atoshi, 2020), Sheela could not think about that option. The motherhood experiences of a woman business-owner, thus, worked as the force to support the workers during the critical period of the pandemic. Sheela summed up her patronizing approach: *"Now I am not needy, but I think about those days when I was needy. That's why, I try to help the mothers like me and those who will become mothers in future."*

## 4.2 | Gendered issues regarding discontinuing/closing businesses

### 4.2.1 | Gendered experiences regarding discontinuing businesses

The interviews reveal that Aakash and Mrittika, two respondents, could not continue their businesses during the pandemic period. Aakash uncovered how COVID-19 compelled her to discontinue her entrepreneurial activities when she was already struggling to manage her venture. After giving birth to her second child, she stopped producing boutique items and closed down the outlets. Aakash's experiences resonate what is known from the literature (Ghouse et al., 2017; Mehtap et al., 2017) regarding the adverse effect of women's maternal role on their businesses. Nevertheless, she was confined to a wholesaling service whilst she purchased products from different places to supply to a particular shop. Given the location of the shop, the major customers were the people related to a school. As the schools were supposed to take time to resume, Aakash reported that the shop would take time to open.

The salesgirl of the shop managed to informally sell a limited number of products of the shop from her home. Hence, it was feasible for Aakash to send her a stock of products to sell. Nonetheless, her problem was to communicate with customers. When she considered the online business as a solution for which she might appoint someone to check the digital platform, she raised the problem of lack of preparation for the new way of doing business: *"I am not doing [the business] online, but I will go for the online. Before starting [the business] in online, I need extensive preparation."* The literature also supports the fact that it takes substantial preparation to initiate a business online (Dy, Marlow, & Martin, 2016). As an obstacle of starting an online business, the traditional domestic role of a woman is echoed in the voice of Aakash:

Managing time is certainly an issue. My family is the first one; then other issues. The family is everything for me. My child is very young, and there is no person to support me at home—no person to look after the family. I don't have anyone to do the household work. It is I who have to look after the young child. (Aakash)

TABLE 2 Overview on women business-owners' gendered experiences during COVID-19 in Bangladesh

Aspects	Private sphere <sup>a</sup>		Public sphere <sup>a</sup>	
	COVID-19 issues	Gendered experiences	COVID-19 issues	Gendered experiences
Gendered issues regarding continuing businesses				
Private and public patriarchal experiences	Absence of maidservants at home to maintain social distancing	Increased household activities hindered business work	Wholesalers' manipulation of prices with false excuse of product shortage	Wholesalers' patriarchal attitude results in high cost of business operation
Support from the family	High delivery charge by delivery organizations; absence of driver of personal vehicle for restricted interaction	Delivery problem (including less acceptability of women driving in society) was addressed by assistance of husband	-	-
	Absence of production workers at home for maintaining social distancing	Negative impact on maintaining household duties for increased business work but received support from family	-	-
Support to others in overcoming patriarchal barriers	No sale of products; problems of production at home for health issues	Personal patriarchal experiences regarding motherhood instigate the support of female employees by continuing production process at their houses	-	-
Gendered issues regarding discontinuing/closing businesses				
Gendered experiences regarding discontinuing businesses	Absence of maidservants for domestic work to maintain social distancing	Increased household duties impeded initiating online ventures	Absence of staff for or unreliable service of delivery organizations for restricted mobility	Delivery problem could not be addressed by woman for gender stereotypical attitude regarding women's mode of mobility
Patriarchal problems regarding closing down businesses	Possibility of closing down business	Lack of mental support from husband; threat of losing dignified status (for generating income) at home	-	-
	-	-	Financial constraints of young women (particularly divorced) due to business loss	Possibility of sexual harassment in public sphere

<sup>a</sup>Based on the women's gendered experiences concerning businesses, the aspects are considered as either the private domain or the public sphere related issues.

Aakash believed that maintaining the family was her primary responsibility, which reiterates the well-known patriarchal approach as revealed in the literature (Ghouse et al., 2017; Mehtap et al., 2017). She explained the lack of support staff for looking after her family, specifically, taking care of her one and a half-year-old baby, during the coronavirus period. Hence, she considered that she could not manage the time for initiating the online business. Put simply, Aakash was complying with the patriarchal expectations of society regarding her domestic duties (Roomi & Parrott, 2008) for which she was not able to continue her business.

Mrittika was, however, operating her boutique business on an online platform from the very beginning. It is worth noting that, during normal times, she delivered her products outside Dhaka (including the Western countries for the Bangladeshi diaspora) through the postal service. However, within Dhaka, she had a staff to deliver the products and, in some cases, she went out for delivery purposes. Due to the safety issue, the staff did not continue the delivery duties after the identification of coronavirus in the country. In that case, Mrittika could not rely on the available delivery organizations. She mentioned that, as there was a restriction on the mobility of people, the delivery organizations were under “*tremendous pressure*.” Mrittika cited an example of the product loss by these organizations whilst the business-owners had problems as the clients had made their payments. Therefore, she concluded: “*For these problems, we can't keep 100% trust in the delivery organizations.*” Against this background, Mrittika could continue the business by delivering the products herself, but she raised a gender-stereotypical problem concerning the issue:

During the corona period, delivery is an important factor. If I were a man, I would deliver [products] by cycling. In fact, it is not possible for me. The delivery is an issue. If I could manage the safe delivery, I could run the business. I can't do that. That's why, it [the business] is off. (Mrittika)

Mrittika's quote regarding the product delivery issue—“*If I were a man*”—clearly demonstrates that she was in a disadvantageous position due to her gender in this highly patriarchal society. As cycling is not socially acceptable for a woman, this society left her with no other option but to discontinue the business. Within the context of COVID-19, to comply with the gendered norms of the prevailing society, the entrepreneurial potential of Mrittika was suppressed by the patriarchal expectations and values.

#### 4.2.2 | Patriarchal problems regarding closing down businesses

Although three respondents were continuing their businesses during the pandemic period, Nodee and Sheela were uncertain regarding the future of their businesses. In the voice of Nodee: “*[I'm] not sure how far I will be able to save the business. When I start thinking about it, I feel lost—what should I do?*” The scenario suggests the probable closure of her business. When, in general, businesses were facing losses during the corona crisis (Hossain, 2020), women were more vulnerable concerning the continuation of their businesses. This statement can be understood by considering Nodee's experiences of the higher financial cost for continuing the business (i.e., the excess payment to wholesalers) due to the gender-specific issues as discussed in the previous section. She further quoted her husband's comments regarding his attitude towards the business: “*You are opening the shop, but there is only loss. Besides, it is the time of diseases. I think it is better not to open the shop.*” In developing nations, the mental support of the family is deemed important (Alexandre & Kharabsheh, 2019) but the comments of her husband demonstrate that Nodee did not receive any such support from her husband during the crisis period.

Nodee considered that the possibility of business closure would change her personal life. According to her view, she enjoyed a certain level of dignity or freedom due to her income-generating capacity. COVID-19 provided

the threat of losing that status, which would leave her in a comparatively subordinated position in the conjugal life in the highly patriarchal context. Nodee's fear was articulated in her voice:

Now I am working; that's why, I am getting a certain level of value from my husband. When I will leave my work—I will sit idle at home, the husband will not give me that value [that I have now]. That's normal. Then he will dictate me according to his desire.... I will have to ask for something to my husband even if I won't like to do so. Whether he will give it or not that will depend on him. (Nodee)

In addition, Sheela provided a general view of the financial crisis regarding the women in small businesses due to the pandemic period. She expressed her opinion regarding the problems that many young women might face in seeking funds for preventing business closure or for surviving after the business closure. In the words of Sheela: *"Now where will they [young women business-owners] go? Wherever they will go to ask for money, they will be trapped by aggressive 'demons.'"* Sheela employed a symbolic term "demons" to clarify the highly patriarchal attitude of many men in this society. She explicated her view:

Many women of the young generation—they get married and suddenly have a divorce—I work with those women who are in such a disadvantaged position. Besides, the husbands of some women don't live with them, [they] don't provide them with any expenditure. They have one or two kids. They don't get any living expense. Sometimes, these types of women want to start businesses. They want to earn. When they try to earn—the men in this field are not good. Our patriarchal society is not at all good. They [many men] harass. They [the women] sometimes inform us—*"what can I do now?"* (Sheela)

Sheela's comments unveil the issue of sexual harassment of young women business-owners by referring to the practical examples that she came across. She brought to light that, when some young women are desperate to earn for their living and to support their children through their entrepreneurial efforts, their vulnerable position might lead them to an undesirable situation. They might be the victim of sexual harassment by men in this highly patriarchal society. While operating businesses is challenging for divorced young women in a country of widespread sexual harassment (Khatun, 2019), COVID-19 suddenly threatens the safety of these women because of the issue of their business closure.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

The research provides valuable insights into the gendered experiences of women while they confront challenges regarding their small businesses from the coronavirus. Regarding continuing the businesses during the pandemic period, whereas one respondent yields valuable insights on her patriarchal experiences of the private and public arenas, another one brings to light how she received support from her family to overcome public patriarchal issues and to manage her domestic chores. However, one participant provides a unique example of how the personal patriarchal experiences of a woman acted as the driving force to run her business during the critical period in order to support her female employees. The experiences of two other women bring to the fore certain patriarchal experiences that restricted them in continuing their ventures during the pandemic. This study further raises the question regarding the uncertainty of continuing businesses of the women business-owners whilst the gender-specific experiences were critical to consider. The dreadful patriarchal consequences related to business closure are also unveiled.

Drawing upon the empirical evidence within the distinct context of COVID-19, the feminist study significantly contributes to the existing knowledge by revealing the diversified gendered experiences of women business-owners in a highly patriarchal developing nation. The extremely limited literature on the impact of the coronavirus

crisis on women entrepreneurs to date highlights the financial loss of the ventures (Chmura, 2020) or mostly revolves around the problems due to the well-rehearsed issues, for instance, the sector or structure of women's firms (Chmura, 2020), the lack of financial and human capital (Orser, 2020), or limited networks (Henry, 2020). Nevertheless, this research significantly contributes to the understanding by disclosing the distinct nature of gender-specific issues that emerge due to the pandemic. Further, while the scant literature on women's entrepreneurship beyond the Western developed nations (Danish & Smith, 2012; Jaim, 2020a; Jaim et al., 2015; Lerner & Almor, 2002) discusses gendered experiences during the normal period, this article potentially contributes to the prevailing knowledge on women business-owners in developing nations with the unique situation of a pandemic period.

The study potentially contributes to the understanding on the critical factors related to women's continuing or closing down small businesses because of the coronavirus crisis in a highly patriarchal context. It yields valuable insights by establishing family support or the previous patriarchal experiences of women as enabling factors in continuing businesses against the adverse situation of the pandemic. It enriches women's entrepreneurship scholarship by identifying and illustrating diversified private and public patriarchal issues as constraining factors for women in continuing their ventures during the unique period of COVID-19. While the literature (Alexandre & Kharabsheh, 2019; Jaim, 2020a; Roomi et al., 2018) widely discusses the patriarchal practices at the family level and gendered problems in the public sphere in operating women's businesses in developing nations, the study adds to the prevailing knowledge by demonstrating that these issues can be so critical during the coronavirus period that they can be liable for the discontinuation of their businesses. It further potentially extends the knowledge base by uncovering gender-specific challenges of women in relation to the business closure due to the pandemic in a highly patriarchal developing nation.

The research further generates some specific contributions to the prevailing knowledge. During the COVID-19 period, in the Western developed nations, the domestic workload of women entrepreneurs has been increased due to the closing of schools and childcare facilities and the higher number of sick people, needing care (Bahn, Cohen, & Van Der Meulen Rodgers, 2020), but this article on a developing context significantly advances the understanding on women's problems of managing household work in terms of the maidservant issues. It extends the knowledge by revealing that the long-standing support system of women business-owners in managing their intensive domestic responsibilities (Alexandre & Kharabsheh, 2019) has been challenged by the pandemic period with the restrictions on interactions. Against this background, with the critical exploration into the household activities, this article potentially contributes to the understanding on how the context-specific traditional tasks (such as traditional mopping) of this developing country enhance the physical labor of women business-owners. Further, while the issue of child-bearing and rearing of women entrepreneurs has been addressed by the literature (Amine & Staub, 2009; Ghose et al., 2017), this article yields a novel insight on how the physical problem associated with giving birth to children can be painful for women in managing their household activities that can result in an adverse impact on their businesses.

As alluded to above, this study enriches the understanding by unveiling the problems of women business-owners with young children at the domestic sphere for the absence of support staff during the pandemic. The demand for marital and maternal roles is comparatively critical for these women for which they were already struggling to continue their businesses. Thus, within the context of the pandemic period, this article extends the view on how the lack of support of maidservants places women with young children in such a disadvantageous position regarding domestic duties that they have to discontinue their businesses.

Nevertheless, whereas the literature (Amine & Staub, 2009; Constantinidis et al., 2019; Mehtap et al., 2017) has established that domestic responsibilities and childcare activities exert a negative impact on women's ventures, this research substantially contributes to the understanding by providing different views. For example, the existing literature demonstrates that the household responsibilities cannot be reduced on the grounds of income-generating activities of women (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2010), but this article provides a contrasting view with an atypical example of a woman's household work experiences during the unusual conditions of the pandemic period. It goes a step further in contributing to the prevailing knowledge by presenting the engagement of an old male family

member in sharing the household activities and childcaring responsibilities of the woman business-owner. Furthermore, whereas the maternal roles of women and their businesses are generally correlated negatively (Ahl, 2004), this article significantly enlightens us by bringing to light how the motherhood experiences of a woman in a highly patriarchal context can positively influence her business decisions. It makes valuable contributions by highlighting the way patriarchal experiences of a woman business-owner led her to act as a powerful agent in protecting many women employees from being victims of gendered experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, while in the literature (Amine & Staub, 2009; Jaim et al., 2015; Roomi et al., 2018), the menfolk of the family are considered with due importance for their positive or negative influences on the entrepreneurial activities of women in developing nations, this research extends the view on the roles of family members during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst the assisting roles of husbands have already been acknowledged in the extant literature (Barragan et al., 2018, Jaim, 2020a), this article adds to the knowledge by presenting how the support of a husband can facilitate a woman in continuing her business during the critical period of the pandemic. On the other hand, this research echoes the existing studies regarding the patriarchal practices of male family members (Jaim et al., 2015) by unveiling a woman's concern regarding closing down her business due to the pandemic. Thus, this article contributes to the understanding on the roles of male family members in women's firms during the critical condition of COVID-19.

The research further contributes to the prevailing knowledge by uncovering the gendered problems of women business-owners in navigating the public sphere during the pandemic period. Whereas women business-owners' experiences of public patriarchy have been addressed in the literature (Jaim, 2020a; Roomi & Parrott, 2008), this article extends the knowledge by revealing that, during the COVID-19 period, the issues are so acute that some women need to discontinue their businesses or have to bear additional financial burden to continue their ventures. Furthermore, whilst the existing studies (Roomi & Parrott, 2008) discuss the issue of sexual harassment of women business-owners in the public sphere, this article extends the critical concern with the particular concentration on young women who can be in a vulnerable position for the sudden closure of their businesses due to the pandemic.

## 6 | POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this article can be helpful for policy practitioners in supporting women business-owners to manage the problems associated with the unprecedented scenario of COVID-19 in Bangladesh. The government has declared a stimulus package (USD 2.35 billion) with a subsidized interest rate for small and medium enterprises, but the allocation of loans for women-owned small firms has not yet been decided (Rahman, 2020). This research strongly recommends developing the loans policy by considering the gender-specific problems of women business-owners. The narrative accounts of some women disclose that they might have to shut down their businesses whilst the patriarchal experiences play important roles, for instance, paying the higher cost of products due to the gender-stereotypical attitude of wholesalers. By paying attention to these gendered problems, policymakers need to financially support women on a priority basis. Besides, as this article underscores the severe gendered consequences of closing businesses of women, particularly young divorced women, this cohort of women might get priority in accessing loans in this highly patriarchal country.

This research further unveils some problem areas that warrant attention by the policy practitioners. For example, the problems associated with the delivery service emerges as an important impediment in continuing businesses for women. Policymakers need to address this issue by taking measures in improving the delivery service. Further, apparently, the online platform is considered as a viable way for some women to operate their businesses (Khan & Newaz, 2020), but the problems regarding the preparation of transforming businesses to the digital platform have been raised by a respondent. Hence, it requires developing suitable policies to support women business-owners in the preparation for online commerce. In brief, by considering diversified gender-specific problems of women business-owners as unveiled by the respondents, the policy practitioners of Bangladesh and similar nations could develop appropriate policies to effectively support women regarding COVID-19.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

This feminist study potentially contributes to the understanding on gender-specific experiences of women in small businesses in a highly patriarchal developing nation during the unique situation of COVID-19. It unveils gender-specific aspects in the experiences of women in continuing their small firms in Bangladesh during the pandemic period. It also discloses patriarchal practices in relation to the discontinuation or closure of women's businesses because of coronavirus. While there is an extremely limited exploration on the impact of this pandemic period in entrepreneurship to date (Henry, 2020; Orser, 2020; Welter, Wolter, & Holz, 2020), this article reveals distinct and valuable insights in contributing to the women's entrepreneurship theorizing. It further provides valuable suggestions to policy practitioners in developing effective policies to support women business-owners during the crisis period.

While this research generates diversified important insights, future studies could conduct extensive surveys in line with the findings of this article to have a comprehensive understanding on different problems of women business-owners in patriarchal developing nations with the widespread coronavirus. Besides, as the data collection of the study was conducted within 3 months of the identification of the first coronavirus case in Bangladesh, future researchers could concentrate on gendered experiences at the later phase of the pandemic to investigate certain changes of women's experiences. For example, whether household responsibilities of women business-owners are negotiated for their increased workload of the pandemic or whether the dire necessity of continuing businesses leads women to adopt strategies to challenge the patriarchal norms in the public sphere could be a rich line of enquiry. Moreover, the design of the stimulus loans package for women business-owners in response to the patriarchal experiences warrants careful scrutiny. Thus, building upon the findings of this feminist study, future studies could advance the debate on women entrepreneurs' gender subordination within the context of a pandemic period and, simultaneously, could offer policy recommendations to effectively support them against the challenges of COVID-19 in patriarchal developing nations.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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