
Widow to Women Entrepreneur: A Case Study on Shihab Boutique

Iqbal Hossain Moral^{1*}, Md. Saidur Rahaman², Md Solaiman Chowdhury³,
Ahmad Ahsanullah Farhan⁴

ABSTRACT

After reading and discussing the case, the participants will be able to examine the challenges faced by a rural entrepreneur focusing on a widow (Nurjahan). It explores the role of Effectuation Theory in Shihab Boutique's success, analyses strategies to overcome obstacles, and fosters resilience. Potential support includes resources, mentorship, and networks to empower and uplift widow entrepreneurs. Nurjahan Khanam, a resilient woman who faced adversity with determination and transformed her life. After her husband's sudden passing, Nurjahan found herself burdened with debt and the responsibility of raising two children. Drawing on her skills in handicrafts, she started a small business with a capital of only \$30. Overcoming numerous obstacles, she expanded her company, Shihab Boutiques, into a successful enterprise that employs more than 300 women. Nurjahan's focus on eco-friendly products and her commitment to empowering women have earned her recognition and awards. She has also broadened her ventures into various sectors, contributing to sustainable economic development in Bangladesh. This case study showcases women's empowerment through entrepreneurship, promoting eco- friendly practices, and supporting vulnerable groups, emphasizing the transformative power of entrepreneurship in addressing social issues and fostering community development. Effectuation Theory can provide valuable insights and frameworks for understanding Nurjahan's decision-making processes, her resource utilization, and her ability to navigate uncertainty and create opportunities. It can be a useful tool for teaching entrepreneurship and guiding discussions on entrepreneurial decision-making in uncertain contexts.

KEYWORDS: Case study, Challenges, Entrepreneur, SME, Cottage industry, Stigma, Widow.

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1 Human Resource Management Discipline, Khulna University, Bagladesh

2 Department of Business Administration, Metropolitan University, Sylhet, Bangladesh

3,4 Department of Management Studies, University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh

* Corresponding Author

Introduction

This is inspirational when it comes to the narrative story of a widowed woman to become a successful entrepreneur. This case study has been conducted based on the transformative tale of Shihab Boutiques by exploring resilience, determination and entrepreneurial spirit of a widow in Bangladesh. While dynamic and multifaceted studies on women entrepreneurship have been done, very few studies have been found on widow entrepreneurs applying the case study method. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap by addressing the distinctive motivating and challenging factors of widows who are engaged in entrepreneurial ventures. Becoming a widow is a life-changing experience with a lot of psychological, social and economic obstacles. From the perspective of financial solvency, identity reconstruction, and self-fulfillment are the main driving forces to start an entrepreneurial venture by a widow. However, deciding to become an entrepreneur after the loss of a spouse is influenced by many other factors. Construction of an effective support system and interventions is possible only when a widow understands the motivations and challenges of being an entrepreneur. In this context, researchers of this article applied the case study method to find out the real-life experiences of a widow entrepreneur from the southern part of Bangladesh through in-depth interviews and personal contact. By exploring the psychological, social, and financial motivating and challenging factors, this study contributes to the existing literature on entrepreneurship and inspires other women, including widows, to overcome the obstacles and establish their businesses.

Women Entrepreneurs' Status in Bangladesh

Women in the rural areas of Bangladesh work in a variety of small and medium-sized businesses. However, they are faced with various obstacles in terms of economic and social equality when compared to men (Rahaman et al., 2021). Moreover, access to resource, self-employment rates, income disparity and decision making differ significantly by gender issue. For example, women have limited access to resources such as land and credit, despite the improvement of the government policy regarding this area (Hasan, 2020). Women who already started entrepreneurial journey has some distinctive characteristics like motivation, courage, resilience and taking right decision at the right time. However, they have facing problems when managing family responsibilities and business simultaneously. The challenges women entrepreneurs have faced may include financial constraints, networking problems, resource collection, societal stigmas, work-life balance, and emotional resilience in the face of adversity (Polas et al., 2022). Despite having obstacles, women have specific opportunities such as getting loan with low-interest financing from non-profit organizations and financial institutions (Fenton et al., 2022). Even to help women entrepreneurs, the government has also developed programs like the Entrepreneurship Support Fund (Jaim, 2022). So, considering these advantages, women can take the privilege of becoming entrepreneurs. In addition to helping their families, communities, and the nation, female entrepreneurs set an excellent example for others by conquering obstacles.

Why this Case Study?

This research fills a knowledge gap using qualitative case studies of widowed businesswomen in Bangladesh. This study will track Nurjahan Khanam, the widow who founded Shihab Boutiques, to learn more about the inspiration for her business and the challenges she faced along the way. Through the perspective of effectuation theory, her decision-making processes are analyzed, focusing on topics like leveraging resources, absorbing tolerable losses, establishing coalitions, navigating obstacles, and keeping one is cool. By conducting in-depth interviews with widowed company owners, this study sheds light on their unique perspectives, inspires and informs other women entrepreneurs and policymakers, and ultimately contributes to women's economic emancipation.

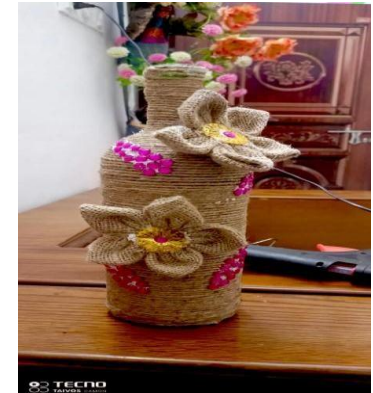


EXHIBIT-01: Shihab Boutiques Products

Source: Photo captured by Norjahans's son

Elements of Entrepreneurial Principles- effectuation

Saras D. Sarasvathy developed the "effectuation principles" of entrepreneurship. The notion of effectuation offers a new way of thinking about the choices and actions of entrepreneurs (Sarasvathy & Kotha, 2001). Effectuation principles emphasize the logic of entrepreneurial skill, as opposed to traditional theories which place greater emphasis on causal or predictive reasoning (Foss et al., 2023). It recommends that business owners employ a set of rules of thumb, known as heuristics, to help them make judgments in situations where there is little or no precise data (Sarasvathy et al., 2014). According to the effectuation theory, entrepreneurs should not be led by a particular objective or a pre-defined plan; instead, they should employ these principles in an iterative manner to experiment, learn, and adjust their tactics based on the opportunities that present themselves (Thiru et al., 2015). It emphasises the significance of taking action, interacting with others, and an entrepreneur's potential to affect the results. The following are principles:

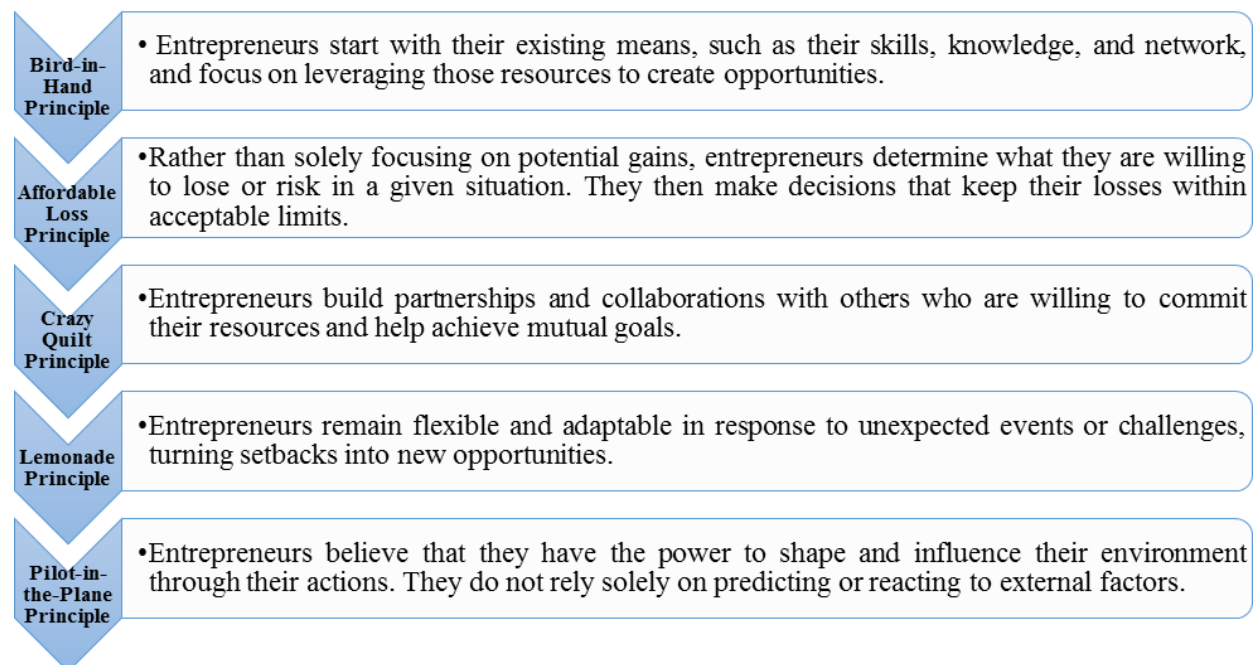


Figure-02: Principles of effectuation for an entrepreneur.

Source: Author's own creation

Case framework/Case Model

The framework is founded on Nurjahan Khanam's entrepreneurial journey and related significant factors. The "Decision-Making Processes" variable initially investigates Khanam's methods, techniques, and approaches for making business decisions, particularly in ambiguous situations. The "Resource Utilisation" variable evaluates how effectively she utilised her social, personal, and financial resources to achieve her business goals. In addition to these variables, the discussion provides additional relevant factors. "Navigating Uncertainty" evaluates Khanam's adaptability and decision-making skills in the face of unforeseen obstacles. The book "Creating Opportunities" focuses on her capacity to recognise and seize growth opportunities through prudent resource allocation and prudent decision-making. The "Business Success" variable measures the overall

success and growth of Shihab Boutiques due to Khanam's business endeavours. The "Effectuation Theory" sheds light on Khanam's decision-making procedures, resource allocation, and outcomes by mediating the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. In addition, the discussion identifies additional factors to consider, such as "Contextual Variables" that describe the sociocultural environment, "Challenges and Barriers" that describe roadblocks encountered, and "Opportunities for Women Entrepreneurs" that are unique to the context of Komlai village in Bangladesh. The discussion examines Khanam's entrepreneurship, resource utilisation, decision-making, and company outcomes while taking into consideration several contextual and gender related factors.

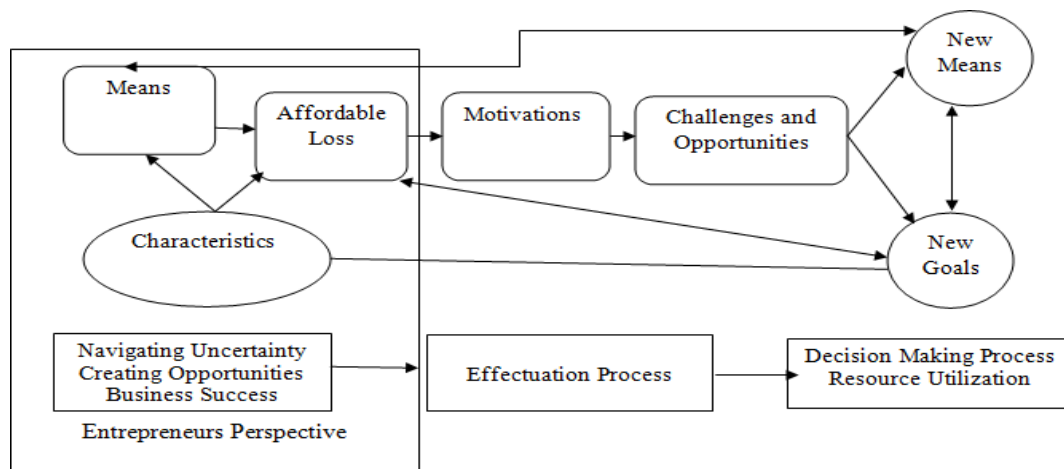


Figure-03: Effectuation process of Nurjahan Khanam

Source: Author's own creation

Voice of Nurjahan Khanam: Real-life experiences,

Effectuation Process of Shihab Boutique

Nurjahan Khanam's entrepreneurial career may be methodically comprehended by applying Effectuation Theory in stages, with each principle strongly aligned with her actual company actions. Beginning with the **bird-in-hand philosophy**, she used her existing handcraft abilities, limited financial resources, and local knowledge to launch Shihab Boutiques without waiting for ideal circumstances. Moreover, she used the **affordable loss principle** to reduce risk by investing just what she could afford to lose, which was an important strategy given her financial constraints following her husband's death. As her business grew, she adopted the **crazy quilt approach**, forging relationships with over 300 local women to increase her resource base and stimulate collective growth. She exemplified the lemonade concept by turning problems like economic hardship and social limitations into opportunities to grow her business and empower other women. Finally, using the **pilot-in-the-plane approach**, she actively altered her

entrepreneurial trajectory by making strategic decisions, launching training programs, and expanding her operations, eventually leading to financial success and social impact. This step-by-step alignment demonstrates how effectuation ideas were actually integrated into her decision-making, resource allocation, and ability to negotiate ambiguity.

Case: Noorjahan Khanam (Widow to Women Entrepreneur)

Triumph Unveiled: A Widow's Entrepreneurial Journey

Nurjahan Khanam was born in 1968 into a noble Muslim family in Baruipara village, located in the Rampal Thana of Bagerhat district. In the village, their family was known as Hajibari. Her father was a schoolmaster, and her mother is a housewife. Her family was diligent in religious practices. Because of these religious traditions, Nurjahan Khanam married a bank employee at the age of 18 after completing secondary education. Nurjahan Khanam's mother, aunt, and many other relatives were involved in handicrafts as a hobby. She learnt these skills from her mother and aunt, driven by her interest. She continued working on handicrafts, mainly as gifts for friends and family. Nurjahan's family life was harmonious with her husband and two sons. However, in 2008, an unexpected tragedy struck her life. Her husband suddenly died of a stroke. Following his death, Nurjahan Khanam faced the burden of a home loan left by her husband and the future of her two children.

Nurjahan was depressed but did not stop there. She capitalized on her childhood education in handicrafts and tried to reinvent herself. She started journey with small and cottage industry in 2008 with a capital of

\$30. In the beginning, she did all the work herself and gradually employed two to three women as her business grew. Now, more than 300 helpless and disabled women are working in Shihab Boutiques. Initially, she faced many challenges, including children's education, social taunts, sourcing raw materials from distant locations, religious barriers, and a lack of capital. Despite severe resource constraints, Nurjahan first collected raw materials by developing contacts with local suppliers and small traders in nearby markets. She frequently purchased things in a small amount on credit and used locally available, low-cost alternatives to cut costs. In addition, she used informal networks, such as neighbors and family, to gain access to materials and share transportation costs, allowing her to continue manufacturing in the early phases. However, as her business expanded, these problems were gradually resolved. The main reasons behind Nurjahan's success are her hard work and the fact that very few women entrepreneurs were active in this area in Bangladesh during 2008-2009. Additionally, Nurjahan works with eco-friendly products, which contributes to her business's success.

She started with an investment of \$30 but today she has been able to construct a home worth nearly about \$95000 in Khulna city along with repaying the debts left by her husband from the business profits. Additionally, one of her sons has completed a BBA and an MBA from North South University, Bangladesh, and another son is now in India for higher education. Nurjahan is currently not only financially self-sufficient, but also has received the “Shrestha Jayita” award three times as the best entrepreneur at the divisional level.

Currently, she is working as a trainer in 64 country districts as a successful entrepreneur. She

provided structured, hands-on training led by skilled workers of her organization and partnered with government agencies to expand training programs and scale the business. She is working as a trainer for the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs and the Department of Youth Development. So far, she has provided training to 30000 helpless women, including 1000 disabled women. As part of her social contributions, she established an NGO called Mukti Foundation. Also, one of her significant social contributions is that she provides regular training to the tiger widows (husbands taken away by tigers) of Koira Upazila for the well-being of these helpless women and provides constant efforts to introduce them as entrepreneurs. Nurjahan is now involved in many other social works, including helping to get married, supporting poor meritorious students, helping the sick patients and caring for the old people.

Finally, Nurjahan Khanam is not confined to being the founder of Shihab Boutiques and Mukti Foundation. However, she is working to revolve the wheel of the fate of helpless widows, tiger widows, divorced women and disabled women in the southern region of Bangladesh. After all, she dreams of contributing significantly to the country's sustainable economic development by motivating women to be entrepreneurs.

“Shrestha Jayita”-Key characteristics of a successful entrepreneur

Based on the case of Nurjahan Khanam and her entrepreneurial journey with Shihab Boutique, Nurjahan Khanam possessed several key characteristics that contributed to her success as an entrepreneur. Her determination and resilience in the face of unexpected challenges, such as her husband's sudden death and the burden of financial responsibilities, demonstrated her ability to persevere and overcome adversity. She exhibited a unique perception of uncertainty by not being overwhelmed but instead capitalizing on her skills and interest in handicrafts to navigate difficult situations. Nurjahan Khanam's dynamic nature and evolving aspirations showed her flexibility and adaptability. Initially focused on providing handmade gifts, her ambitions expanded to financial self-sufficiency, supporting her children's education, and empowering other women in similar circumstances. This ability to continually reassess and adjust goals based on changing circumstances was crucial. Her effective information processing strategies, acquired through knowledge and skills from her family, enabled her to start and grow her business successfully. Additionally, Nurjahan Khanam adopted a multifaceted approach to entrepreneurship by actively engaging in various social initiatives, demonstrating her attention to new goals beyond purely business-related objectives. Nurjahan Khanam's success can be attributed to her determination, resilience, perception of uncertainty, flexibility, adaptability, effective information processing, and focus on new goals. These characteristics played a significant role in her entrepreneurial journey and highlight the key attributes necessary for success in entrepreneurship.

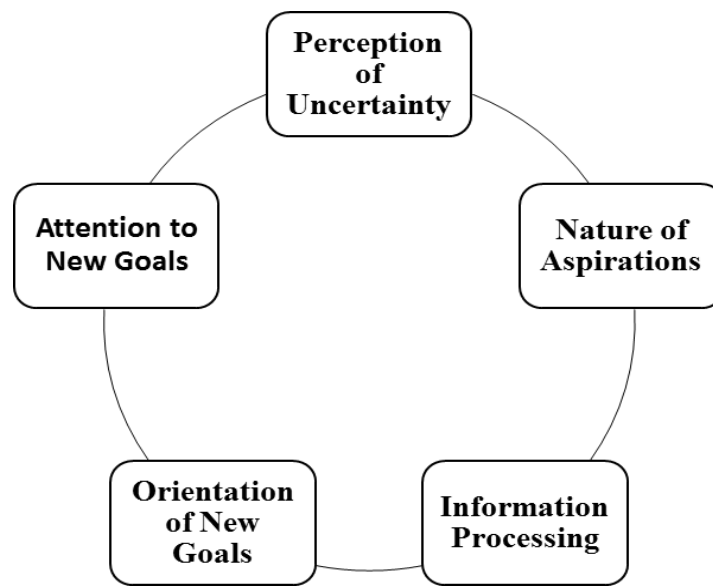


Figure-04: Key success factors

Source: Author's own creation

Motivation and Challenges of Nurjahan (Shihab Boutiques)

Women entrepreneurs have been found in many sectors in Bangladesh, but in most cases, they are doing their businesses based on agriculture, garments, and small shops (Adom, 2014). Very few women are currently engaged with small and cottage industry in this subcontinent. Especially, widows are not willing to engage in these types of business due to having some challenges. Widow entrepreneurs who are actively involved with small and cottage industries have some distinctive characteristics. The main distinctions of widowed women entrepreneurs are courage, technical knowledge, willingness to start an entrepreneurial venture, compassion and the capacity to balance work and family and timely decision-making skill (Salamzadeh & Ramadani, 2021; Moral et al., 2024). In this context, Nurjahan Khanam expresses her feelings in the following way;

Every step in our life brings many difficulties. I believe that any adverse situation can be overcome if you have strong mental strength, belief in your heart, some technical skills, and, ultimately, a positive attitude. I am a living example who did not have much of an educational background but possessed the ability to make the right decision at the right time.

From Nurjahan's life story, it can be seen that not all these characteristics are equally important for a widow to succeed in an entrepreneurial venture. However, in Bangladesh, most women face certain challenges when they attempt to engage in entrepreneurial activities. Widows are not exempt from these difficulties. Collection of raw materials, work and family management, a strong religious family background, debts owed by others, intermediaries, social prejudice, and capital collection are identified as the main challenges for entrepreneurs in this study. These findings are

somewhat similar to those of previous studies. According to Bahn, Cohen, & Van Der Meulen Rodgers (2020), household chores, capital shortages, social neglect, and gender inequality are the primary challenges faced by women entrepreneurs at all levels. In this regard, Nurjahan's perspectives are as follows;

“Still, I can remember the day when my husband passed away and left two kids to me with a bank loan. Nobody was there besides me. Even when I decided to start a handicrafts business, many of my surroundings laughed at me. Moreover, I did not have required capital start my venture in a large scale. You are just seeing today's successful Nurjahan, but behind this position, lots of miseries and struggles are implied.”

Despite having some challenges, many widowed women are set as examples who retain their entrepreneurial ventures and many of them are achieving success. Nurjahan is one of them who faced lots of hurdles but overcame them passionately.

Over the past decade, women have begun to step out of the domestic sphere and contribute to the country's economic growth by launching many entrepreneurial ventures. This has led to economic improvements both on small and large scales (Nassar et al., 2021). However, widowed women are not excluded from this trend. The increasing involvement of women at all levels in entrepreneurial activities is because they are receiving greater benefits and support from family, society, and the government. Evidence from the literature indicates that the family is a crucial source of support for many women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh (Jaim, 2019). Additionally, low labour costs, inexpensive raw materials, minimal knowledge requirements, low capital investment, and limited female participation in this sector are primary reasons for maintaining the handicraft business.

As women, we can achieve anything (Amra nari, amra pari). If women have willpower, no obstacles can stop them. We have many opportunities, such as running our businesses from home, and some businesses require only low capital. All my products are eco-friendly and sourced from rural villages at affordable prices. Moreover, you'll find someone who can inspire you on your entrepreneurial journey. My mother inspired me, and she still supports me today.

Although widows face significant challenges and difficulties in their business activities, they also enjoy some advantages as women. In certain sectors such as small and cottage industries, women's participation exceeds that of men. Additionally, the products they create are in high demand worldwide. Bangladeshi women also benefit from the availability of affordable female labour. Furthermore, women's empowerment is closely linked to their financial stability within society, which can be demonstrated through entrepreneurship. According to Nurjahan,

The products we have produced are in high demand from customers both domestically and internationally. As a result, our business has been growing

rapidly. I believe we should see ourselves as employers rather than employees. Today, people respect me, and I have the opportunity to influence societal change through sharing entrepreneurial experiences.

So, nothing could stop widowed women; no obstacle can hold them back. Instead, they all forge their own path and turn the wheel of life for many helpless women in society. After all, widowed women are not a curse on society; rather, they are self-reliant, change-makers, respected, and above all, exemplars of society. Finally, to gain a clear and close-up view of the challenges and opportunities they face, along with the characteristics that widowed women entrepreneurs' exhibit, a figure has been included below.

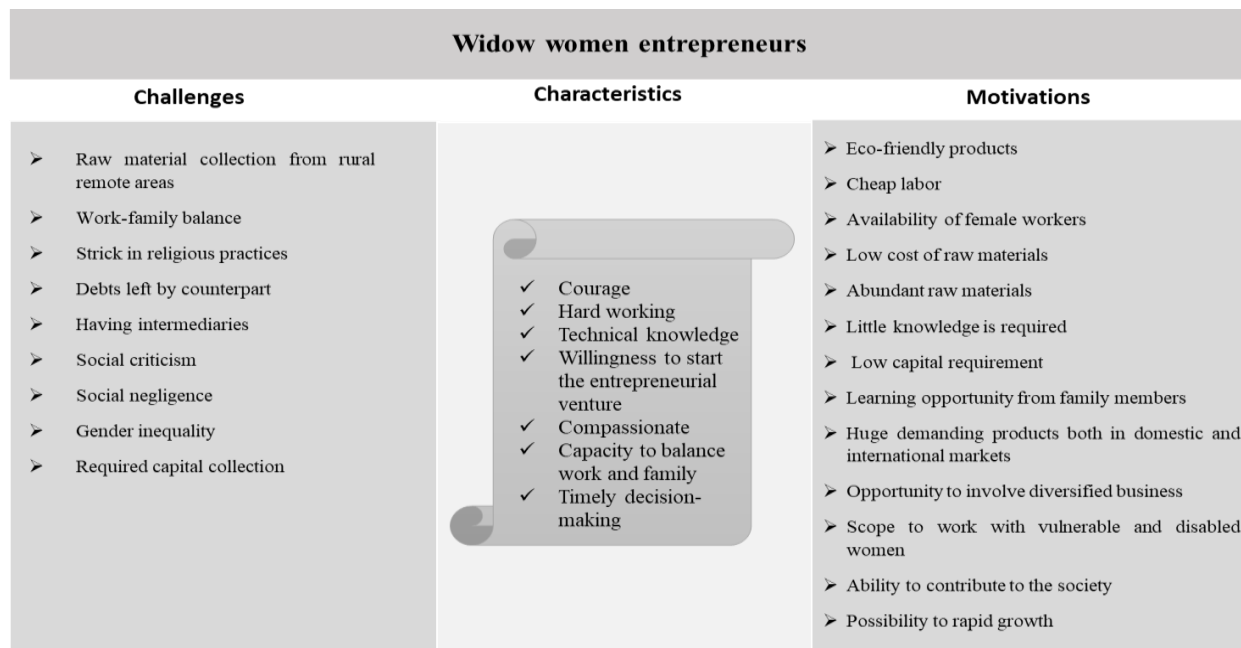


Figure 5: Entrepreneurial characteristics, challenges and motivations

Source: Authors own creation

Theoretical, Practical and Social implications

The case study examines the entrepreneurial journey of Nurjahan Khanam, a widow who founded Shihab Boutiques, a small-scale eco-friendly product cottage industry. It has theoretical implications by contributing to the understanding of women's entrepreneurship, exploring their motivations, challenges, and success factors. It aligns with the effectuation theory of entrepreneurship, highlighting a mindset and decision-making process based on entrepreneurs creating their future through action and initiative. Practically, it offers guidance on identifying market opportunities, developing product portfolios, establishing supply chains, and building distribution networks. Socially, the case demonstrates women's empowerment through entrepreneurship, showcasing economic opportunities and financial independence. It underscores social entrepreneurship by promoting sustainable development and responsible consumption.

Furthermore, it illustrates entrepreneurship's role in community development, creating employment and supporting local economic growth.



EXHIBIT-02: Nurjahan Khanam with Authors.

Source: Authors taken from Norjahans' son.

Conclusion

Entrepreneurship transforms, as seen by Nurjahan Khanam's narrative. Nurjahan's story from starting her business with \$30 to empowering hundreds of women shows resilience, determination, and the possibilities for personal and community progress through entrepreneurship. Her case study details her entrepreneurial drive, her struggles as a widow in a conservative community, and her chances to make eco-friendly items and expand her firm beyond handicrafts. Nurjahan's success helped her financially and socially by creating jobs and educating other women entrepreneurs. Her narrative suggests that women entrepreneurs require focused help, financing, and sustainable business practices. Nurjahan's example inspires legislators, organizations, and aspiring entrepreneurs to establish a supportive environment for underprivileged

entrepreneurs. Nurjahan Khanam's path inspires people to overcome obstacles, pursue entrepreneurial goals, and promote sustainable economic development. Her tale shows how business can alter lives and communities.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the respondent who shared her life story to introduce herself as an entrepreneur. Without her support, their success story could not be unraveled. All the best wishes from the author to these women entrepreneurs who are still striving to succeed in their entrepreneurial journey.

Ethical Focus

The study secured total secrecy and anonymity of the information supplied by the respondents to ensure the ethical standard. The data was also gathered with the respondents' informed consent, using an adequately planned structured sheet. Researchers directly led the conversation and listened to the respondents due to the sensitivity of replies such as work-family conflict and family stress. For the sake of confidentiality, respondents' first letter of the name was used.

Company Profile

“Shihab Boutiques”

Founder: Nurjahan Khanam

Year Founded: 2008

Location: Komlai village, Rampal police station, Bagerhat district, Bangladesh

Mission: To ensure the availability of eco-friendly products throughout Bangladesh while eliminating the use of plastics and environmentally harmful products.

<https://m.facebook.com/groups/997630797068429/>

Overview

Shihab Boutiques is a socially responsible small-scale and cottage industry founded by Nurjahan Khanam in 2008. The company has become a successful enterprise, starting with a meagre capital of \$30. It began with just two employees and now provides employment opportunities to over 300 women.

Product Focus

Shihab Boutiques specialises in creating eco-friendly daily essentials using locally sourced raw materials. Their product range includes a wide variety of items made from jute, water hyacinth, paddy straw, catkin, coconut husk, betel nut husk, and recycled fabrics. They produce over 200 different products, such as containers, wall hangers, jute curtains, caps, toys, tissue holders, wine bags, swings, wall-mates, shoes, travel bags, nakshi kantha (traditional embroidered quilt), shitolpati (fine woven mat), school bags, garment items, pen stands, fruit baskets, and pillow covers. Importantly, Shihab Boutiques has also created innovative products like jute tea and jute polythene.

Distribution Channels

Shihab Boutiques supplies its products to various retailers and wholesalers in the domestic market. Furthermore, they have received orders from esteemed institutions such as Khulna University, Khulna University of Engineering and Technology, Dhaka University, British Council, Shilpakala Academy, and Aarong, BRAC. The company has successfully met the demands of the domestic market and has expanded its reach to international markets, exporting its products to countries around the world.

International Presence

Shihab Boutiques has international exposure, which helps them earn more money. They exported a variety of eco-friendly products to many countries, as shown in Table 1.

Table-01: Recent research studies in the context of women entrepreneurship

Country	Products
USA	Wine bags, Jute curtains and Fruit baskets
Canada	Toys, Jute curtains, Shitolpati and tissue holders
Australia	Travel bags, Fruit baskets, Toys and Wine bags
Saudi Arabia	Cap, Pillow covers, Tissue holder and School bags.
Dubai	Fruit baskets, Wine bags and Toys
Turkey	Toys and Caps

Source: Authors compiled

Diversification and Growth

Besides handicrafts, Shihab Boutiques has expanded its business into fish farming, dragon fruit cultivation, mango cultivation, banana, coconut garden, betel nut garden, dairy and poultry farming, agro-based food production, and restaurant operations. Furthermore, it conducts its business using modern practices by adopting e-commerce through various social media platforms. This diversification and growth have increased Shihab Boutiques' \$30 into \$30000.

Shihab Boutiques always tries to retain its commitment by ensuring eco-friendliness while exploring new products. Additionally, this enterprise is concerned about the development of the local community.



Figure-01: Study Location

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

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