

Problems of political unrest: women in small businesses in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Purpose – Whereas the extant literature on women's entrepreneurship is almost exclusively focused on developed nations, the effect of many context-specific issues of other countries on ventures of women has been overlooked. The study aims to reveal how political unrest, a common feature of the developing nation, can significantly affect the experiences of women in small businesses of that region.

Design/methodology/approach – This feminist research is conducted on Bangladesh, which is one of the most politically unstable countries in the world. The study conducts interviews with women to explore the adverse effect of political unrest on their small firms.

Findings – The feminist research reveals some problems of women business-owners concerning political unrest in this highly patriarchal context. It also discloses how political chaos challenges the government initiative in financially supporting women business-owners.

Practical implications – Policymakers of developing nations can be benefitted by taking into account the problems of women business-owners concerning political unrest, specifically the access to debt financing issues while designing policies for women's empowerment.

Originality/value – The article contributes to the women's entrepreneurship scholarship with reference to political unrest, a contextual issue of developing nations. Whereas the existing studies mostly concentrate on holding women individually liable for the limited scale of their business operation, this research potentially challenges the view by drawing upon political unrest as an external factor that negatively affects their ventures. The study further advances the prevailing knowledge by critically unveiling some gender-specific problems of women business-owners regarding political unrest.

Keywords Political unrest, Women business-owners, Gender, Developing nations, Bangladesh

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The body of literature on women's entrepreneurship is almost exclusively based on developed economies (Brush and Cooper, 2012; Yadav and Unni, 2016) while it overlooks other areas of the world (Muñoz-Fernández *et al.*, 2019). This developed nation-centric view assumes that it presents the normative model of entrepreneurial issues of the world (Fielden and Davidson, 2005). Nevertheless, entrepreneurship is a social phenomenon (Steyaert and Katz, 2004), whilst valuable insights can be revealed by considering context-specific issues of different regions (Johns, 2006; Zahra and Wright, 2011; Jaim and Islam, 2018). It is further contended that there exists an intrinsic association of gender with contexts (Muñoz-Fernández *et al.*, 2019). Researchers have started to study women business-owners in underexplored regions, for instance, developing nations, to enhance

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the understanding of women's entrepreneurship (Mair and Marti, 2009; Danish and Smith, 2012; Roomi, 2013; Ama *et al.*, 2014; Guillén, 2014; Henry *et al.*, 2015; Constantinidis, 2019; Xheneti, 2019; Jaim, 2017, 2021a).

While the limited literature on developing countries reveals interesting aspects of women's entrepreneurship that are substantially different from that of Western developed nations, there is an array of other issues that have not yet been properly addressed. For example, political instability is deemed an important feature of developing countries (Jaouadi *et al.*, 2014). Although the adverse effect of political disturbance has been addressed in the literature (Wiklund and Shepherd, 2005; Tang *et al.*, 2008; Saeed *et al.*, 2014), the specific field of women's entrepreneurship has been overlooked. Whilst women are generally held individually liable for the underperformance of their ventures without taking into account other external factors (Ahl, 2004), exploring the impact of political unrest on women's businesses is a wealthy line of enquiry. Besides, whether and how political unrest exerts any gender-specific problem for women in small businesses is yet to know. For example, while women's restricted mobility is evident in some patriarchal countries (Roomi *et al.*, 2018; Jaim, 2020a), a potential question can be posed regarding their additional problems of travelling for business activities during the risky environment of political instability. The exploration is critical for those developing countries where the government is financially supporting women business-owners for their empowerment.

Therefore, this research aims to explore how the negative impact of political unrest is articulated in the experiences of women business-owners who accessed to the government-aided debt finance for their ventures in a developing country. The first objective is to investigate the adverse effect of political turmoil on the overall activities and growth of businesses of women. The second objective is to specifically enquire into whether and how political turbulence affects the access to bank loans of women for their small ventures. While the first objective explores how political unrest causes overall negative effects on the business performance of women, two objectives together investigate their experiences in accessing and utilising the government-supported funds for their small businesses in a developing nation. To address the research aim, this study is conducted in Bangladesh, which is one of the most politically unstable countries in the world (Khan, 2017), and where the government takes an attempt to support women with specially designed bank loans for their empowerment (Bangladesh Bank, 2014).

The research generates important contributions to the theory and policy. Whereas the existing literature is individual-centric in explaining the underperformance of women's firms (Ahl, 2006), this feminist research substantially contributes to the understanding regarding the adverse impact of external factors in explaining the unsatisfactory performance of their ventures by uncovering severe negative effects of the unique issue of political unrest on women's businesses. The contribution of the study is not simply limited to the generic problems of political turmoil on businesses of women that can also be the case of male entrepreneurs; rather the contributions are extended to the gender-specific problems of women concerning their businesses during the politically vulnerable period. The study, thus, yields novel insights into the impact of political unrest, a developing nation-specific issue, on women's businesses, and, simultaneously, it contributes to the understanding by revealing the challenges of the government initiative in supporting women in a politically vulnerable developing context. Besides, whilst the studies on women entrepreneurs in developing nations are almost exclusively concentrated on micro-credit programmes of poverty-stricken women (Jaim, 2019), this research potentially contributes to the debt financing literature by focusing on the middle-class women in small firms of these regions. Given the significance of development programmes in developing countries (Rindova *et al.*, 2009), the findings can support policy practitioners in effectively designing and implementing policies to empower women in developing nations.

The paper commences with the relevant literature review to set the context of the study. Then the methodology section describes the way the research was conducted. After explaining the findings, the article presents its critical discussion on this topic. The practical implications of the study are also explained. Finally, the paper outlines the concluding marks on this issue and indicates the future research avenues.

2. Literature review

2.1 *Women and entrepreneurship*

The literature on women's entrepreneurship is criticised because it is based on individual undertaking without considering collective dimensions (Ahl, 2006). It is assumed that women are solely responsible for their ventures. Researchers incline to propose that women have limitations, and, accordingly, they suggest overcoming those shortcomings (Ahl, 2004; Coleman *et al.*, 2019). For example, the extant literature (Fischer *et al.*, 1993; Boden and Nucci, 2000) identifies that the lack of education is a significant problem for which women are not equally performing in entrepreneurship compared to their male counterparts; hence, they are advised to gain an adequate level of education. Specifically, while gender discrimination by bank officers is an important area of debate in women's entrepreneurship (Jaim *et al.*, 2015), the literature (Belcourt *et al.*, 1991) explains that the differential attitude or behaviour of bank officers is based on the educational background and experiences of women.

Nevertheless, some scholars (Chell and Baines, 1998; Ahl, 2006; Coleman *et al.*, 2019) strongly contend that structural, historical and cultural factors regarding enterprises of women are seldom discussed in the literature despite the significant effect of these issues on their businesses. As a consequence, gender power structures are made invisible, and no explanation is provided regarding how the social world is arranged (Ahl, 2004). The limitations are attributed only to women without taking into account the patriarchal social arrangement (Ahl, 2004). It has been highly criticised that gender subordination is not properly revealed by employing the individual-centric view regarding women business-owners (Ahl, 2006). Therefore, calls have been made by the researchers (Chell and Baines, 1998; Ahl, 2006) to concentrate more on structural and contextual variables in order to properly unveil women's subordination.

While considering broader contextual issues, it is also important to acknowledge that studies on women's entrepreneurship are largely concentrated in the USA and Europe (Fielden and Davidson, 2005). Other parts of the world are mostly under-explored by the researchers (Muñoz-Fernández *et al.*, 2019). It has been argued that entrepreneurship scholarship can be potentially enriched by considering the nature, uniqueness, dynamics and limitations of a particular context (Zahra, 2007). Therefore, how contextual aspects of developing nations exert influences on businesses of women can be an intriguing area to explore.

2.2 *Women's entrepreneurship, developing nations and political unrest*

The limited research (Amine, 2009; Ahmad, 2011; Danish and Smith, 2012; Naguib and Jamali, 2015; Bastian *et al.*, 2018; Constantinidis, 2019; Xheneti, 2019; Jaim, 2020a, b) in developing nations has already demonstrated substantially different patriarchal experiences of women compared to that of the Western context. For instance, Roomi and Parrott (2008) highlight that, in Pakistan, women are discriminated or dominated by some religious practices, which are practised in the name of Islam. Besides, women are legally bound to involve their close male relatives in certain business activities in the Islamic context of Saudi Arabia (Danish and Smith, 2012). While the existing literature rarely investigates broader socio-cultural or historical issues of the context (Ahl, 2006), the extremely limited literature (Roomi and Parrott, 2008; Roomi, 2009; Ahmad, 2011; Danish and Smith, 2012) exploring such issues in

developing countries is mostly concentrated on the religious aspects, particularly Islamic issues (Jaim, 2019).

Whilst different contextual issues of developing nations are overlooked by the researchers, political instability, a common feature of these regions (Jaouadi *et al.*, 2014), can be cited as an important issue to explore. In general, political stability is understood as a condition in which the destabilisation of the government is not likely to happen with unconventional means (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2010). During political stability, the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and performance is found strong (Saeed *et al.*, 2014). The stable political condition facilitates innovation in enriching entrepreneurial firms (Wright *et al.*, 2005). Conversely, in a politically unstable country, the returns of the activities of entrepreneurs are at risk (Saeed *et al.*, 2014). Businesses that are intensely dependent on resources confront problems in accessing raw materials, financial assets or human capital in a politically challenging environment (Wiklund and Shepherd, 2005). The scenario is particularly problematic for the areas, such as developing countries, where informal access to resources is dominant (Peng, 2001; Tang *et al.*, 2008).

Although these studies (Peng, 2001; Wright *et al.*, 2005; Wiklund and Shepherd, 2005; Tang *et al.*, 2008; Saeed *et al.*, 2014) have already established the adverse impact of the political condition on businesses, the specific context of women's entrepreneurship has been overlooked. Whereas, generally, women are held individually responsible for the performance of their businesses (Ahl, 2006), it requires investigating whether and how political unrest, the external aspect, negatively influences small businesses of women. Such exploration is important in explaining the underlying conditions of the underperformance of firms that remain invisible. Furthermore, the gender-specific issues of women concerning their businesses against politically vulnerable circumstance are yet to explore. For example, during a politically violent situation, when human beings are killed or severely injured (Barry, 2015; Raju, 2017), the people on the streets suddenly need to take shelter. The scenario potentially poses a critical question regarding the safety of women due to the concern of sexual harassment in a highly patriarchal context. Thus, women might face more challenging issues for their businesses because of political turmoil compared to their male counterparts.

Investigating the impact of political unrest on businesses is particularly important for developing countries. Entrepreneurial ventures are considered a significant means to bring potential changes in the socio-economic status of people in developing countries (Rindova *et al.*, 2009). Nevertheless, the politically vulnerable condition of a country can set barriers for entrepreneurs (Peng, 2001; Tang *et al.*, 2008). As a point of clarification, the enquiries are not intended for war or such an extremely hostile environment as this kind of dangerous and critical situation is self-explanatory for the challenges of entrepreneurs irrespective of their gender. In general, the politically vulnerable condition within the country can provide a platform to scrutinise the overall negative influences of such an instance on women's businesses as an external factor and, more specifically, to unveil gender-specific entrepreneurial experiences concerning the turbulent scenario.

Investigating women's enterprises concerning political unrest in developing countries can also bring to light the challenges of the government in an attempt to empower them with financial aids in these regions. The impact of political unrest on overall business activities can disclose the effectiveness of the fund utilisation by women. It also requires critically scrutinising the experiences of accessing debt finance of women business-owners during this vulnerable period to reveal the pertinent problems regarding the special bank loan scheme in a nuanced way. For example, while there is a risk of return for entrepreneurs during the politically challenging environment (Saeed *et al.*, 2014), the scenario raises the question concerning the timely repayment of loans of women business-owners, which may mark their bad credit record. The investigation on the gendered issues regarding the difficulty in the repayment ability of women business-owners during the politically disturbing situation can provide unique insights. Therefore,

exploring the adverse effect of political unrest on small businesses of women, who are supported by government-aided funds, in developing countries is a wealthy line of enquiry.

2.3 A feminist study on Bangladesh

This study considers Bangladesh, a South Asian highly patriarchal developing country, as a research context. Gender-based violence and discrimination are widely evident in this country (Khatun, 2019, 2020). Within this patriarchal context, the micro-credit programme witnesses a high level of effectiveness (Jaim, 2019). However, the women in micro-level firms are poor, almost illiterate and mostly living in villages whereas the middle-class, better-educated women are operating small businesses, particularly at the urban region (Jaim, 2021b). Whilst the women, accessing micro-credit, have received extensive attention from the researchers, little is known regarding the patriarchal problems of women engaged in small firms in Bangladesh (Jaim, 2020a).

The government has taken initiatives to financially support women in small enterprises through a special scheme of bank loans in order to empower them (Bangladesh Bank, 2014). Women are offered loans without collateral and with a comparatively less interest rate. A large number of women are taking loans for their small firms in response to this initiative (Bangladesh Bank, 2014). Nevertheless, the extremely limited literature (Jaim, 2020a, b) has already revealed that women business-owners confront a range of patriarchal problems while applying for bank loans in Bangladesh. In other words, the financial context for women business-owners is influenced by different gendered problems in this highly patriarchal country.

It is also important to note that this country falls within the lowest 15% politically stable countries of the world (Khan, 2017). Drawing upon the data of “Ain O Shalish Kendra”, Raju (2017) cited that, during the year 2013–2016, at least, 1,028 people were killed and 52,066 persons were injured in 3,540 instances due to political violence. In general, strikes, clashes and other activities of political unrest have a tremendous impact on the general public (Barry, 2015; Chawdhury, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2019). The small business sector of Bangladesh is adversely affected by the unstable political condition (Abrar, 2005; Chawdhury, 2016). For example, shopping malls are closed for many days that results in poor sales volume (Roy and Borsha, 2013).

Given the political instability of Bangladesh, investigating the impact of political turmoil on the government-supported firms of women of that country is a rich line of enquiry. While the literature (Roy and Borsha, 2013) has addressed the problems of political turbulence regarding the overall business sector in Bangladesh, the specific context of women’s entrepreneurship needs exploration for a comprehensive understanding. A potential question regarding gendered problems of women business-owners in relation to political unrest can be further posed. In so doing, the impact of political turmoil on the overall performance of the firms can be revealed. More specific investigation can be conducted regarding the access to bank loans of women during the politically vulnerable condition. The findings can potentially support the policymakers to bring meaningful changes in the businesses of women.

This study is based on a feminist perspective to explore the impact of political turbulence on the businesses of women. Whilst entrepreneurship is revealed as a gendered phenomenon, male norms are taken for granted in women’s entrepreneurship literature (Jennings and Brush, 2013). Consequently, there is an urge to incorporate the feminist perspective to add value in this field by discovering and establishing female norms in women’s entrepreneurship (Bruin *et al.*, 2007). In response to this call, this study is conducted on feminist standpoint theory which recognises that women have substantially different experiences from that of men due to their subordinated position in society (Ahl, 2004). While political unrest, in general, leads to an unwanted condition for entrepreneurs in the country, this feminist

approach can reveal gender-specific problems of women business-owners. Besides, this feminist study can uncover the critical factors of the underperformance of the government-supported businesses of women by considering political unrest, a significant external issue instead of exploring the individual shortcomings (Ahl, 2006). By paying attention to the voice of women (Bowden and Mummery, 2009), the research brings to light the generic and gendered problems caused by political unrest in the underexplored area. Thus, while providing the opportunity to women in contextualising their lives with explaining the associated obstacles (Nicolson, 1996), this feminist research investigates the adverse effect of political unrest on their overall small business operation, specifically on the access to debt finance in Bangladesh.

3. Methodology

This feminist study adopts a qualitative method to address the research aim. While qualitative method investigates into the complexity and severity of the social issues (Myers, 2009), this method is employed to uncover the experiences of women business-owners regarding political unrest in Bangladesh. Moreover, qualitative research is based on a holistic understanding (Silverman, 2009) whilst the researchers interpret the accounts of people in relation to their political, economic and social contexts (Golafshani, 2003). Consequently, the qualitative method is deemed as the appropriate one for this feminist research to explore the impact of political unrest on the businesses of women.

3.1 Sample

Purposive sampling was employed in this study to ensure the specific features of the respondents (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The study considered those women who were sole-proprietors and operating their small business at its growth stage. This specific stage, instead of the start-up level, is important because it can provide a scope to understand the impact of political vulnerability on the regular business operations and the overall growth of the businesses. Another criterion is that these women were accessing loans from the specially designed debt finance scheme of the country. It is important to consider the issue to respond to the objective of scrutinising the experiences of women in accessing bank loans during the politically unstable period. All these women had at least one year of experiences in accessing loans from this bank; the timeframe facilitates comprehending their experiences.

To identify the respondents, a Bangladeshi bank has been selected by considering that it had a strong background in disbursing loans from the government-supported programme. The study selected 20 women business-owners of the capital city, Dhaka, from the list of the clients of that bank. More than half of the respondents (12) were engaged in boutique and tailoring businesses while the rest of them had ventures in other different sectors. Among the respondents, six women had home-based businesses whilst the others needed to travel to their outlets or factories during the politically turbulent environment. The businesses varied based on the age of the firms. The women business-owners were also of different ages and had various educational backgrounds. (Table 1 maps the information regarding the respondents.)

3.2 Data generation

This study critically considered a year that can demonstrate the severity of the problem to assess the effect of political turmoil on the businesses of women. The year 2013 is considered one of the most politically problematic years in the recent past (Chawdhury, 2016). In this year, at least 500 people lost their lives due to political violence in Bangladesh (Raju, 2017). The movement of people was restricted (Raju, 2014). There were continuous strikes and blockades in the country that created a vulnerable environment for general people (Abdin, 2014). Normal business activities were interrupted (Raju, 2014). This political unrest

| SI No | Name of women business-owners* | Business information | | | Demographic information*** | |
|-------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| | | Types of business | Age of the firms (in years) | Outlet/factory location** | Age of women (in years) | Educational background |
| 1 | Fida | Boutique and tailoring | 15 | Outlets at big shopping malls and factory at another place | 50 | Masters |
| 2 | Mou | Boutique and tailoring | 10 | Factory and showroom at the ground floor of home | 40 | Masters |
| 3 | Zakia | Boutique and tailoring | 19 | Factory at home yard | 50 | SSC |
| 4 | Mayesha | Boutique and tailoring | 16 | Outlet at a shopping mall and factory at another place | 37 | Masters (on going) |
| 5 | Jenny | Boutique and tailoring | 18 | Outlets at big shopping malls and factory at another place | 48 | Masters |
| 6 | Riya | Boutique and tailoring | 11 | Outlet at a shopping mall | 35 | SSC |
| 7 | Niveen | Boutique and tailoring | 6 | Factory at the ground floor of home | 30 | Undergraduate |
| 8 | Laila | Boutique and tailoring | 14 | Tailoring shop adjacent to home (close to a school) | 33 | SSC |
| 9 | Firoza | Boutique and tailoring | 7 | Outlet at a shopping mall | 30 | Masters |
| 10 | Amaira | Boutique and tailoring | 8 | Outlet at a shopping mall | 60 | SSC |
| 11 | Ramisa | Boutique and tailoring | 9 | Outlet at a shopping mall | 35 | SSC |
| 12 | Sneha | Boutique and tailoring (Embroidery factory) | 8 | Factory at the ground floor of home | 45 | Grade 7 |
| 13 | Shila | Manufacturing and retailing (Dress and handicrafts) | 19 | Factory at another flat of the apartment where she lived | 54 | HSC |
| 14 | Beethi | Trading (Retailing curtains, bed-covers etc.) | 28 | Shop at a shopping mall | 56 | Grade 10 |
| 15 | Moly | Trading (Retailing curtains, bed-covers etc.) | 8 | Shop at a shopping mall | 29 | SSC |
| 16 | Shampa | Trading (Retailing dress, accessories etc.) | 14 | Shop at a shopping mall | 37 | SSC |

Table 1. Business-related and demographic information of the respondents

(continued)

| SI No | Name of women business-owners* | Business information | | | Demographic information*** | |
|-------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| | | Types of business | Age of the firms (in years) | Outlet/factory location** | Age of women (in years) | Educational background |
| 17 | Nisha | Trading (Retailing accessories, cosmetics, etc.) | 20 | Shop at a shopping mall | 35 | SSC |
| 18 | Keya | Trading (Retailing shoes) | 14 | Outlets at big shopping malls | 40 | Grade 8 |
| 19 | Reba | Beauty parlour | 6 | Parlour at a small shopping mall (close to a school) | 30 | SSC |
| 20 | Pinky | Beauty parlour | 9 | Parlour at a shopping mall (close to a school) | 45 | HSC |

Note(s): *For the purpose of confidentiality, pseudonyms of the respondents have been used

**The women business-owners were based in Dhaka. In most of the cases, the boutique products (and the handicraft products of Shila) were not only sold within Dhaka but also supplied to other places of the country

***All the women were married, but Amaira was widow, and Fida was separated from her husband. As far as the educational background is concerned, in Bangladesh, secondary school certificate (SSC) is equivalent to O-level and higher secondary school certificate (HSC) can be considered A-level

Table 1.

had a tremendous adverse impact on the economy (Raju, 2014). Therefore, data were collected in 2014 to reflect upon the previous year.

The semi-structured interview was used in this study, whilst the method of data generation is considered a pivotal way to explore the lives of women (Graham, 1984). The author conducted face-to-face interviews with women business-owners in Bangladesh. The interview sessions were arranged at the workplace or the residence of the respondents, which was deemed convenient for the research participants. At the initial phase of the interviews, women were asked to provide general information regarding themselves, their family and their ventures to set the background of the study. Then the interviews proceeded to the major issues that addressed the research aim. Women articulated their experiences of operating businesses and accessing bank loans amidst political problems. Nevertheless, brief interviews of some respondents were taken over the telephone during the data analysis phase. The origin of the author played an important role while interacting with women business-owners regarding their problems of the context-specific issue of political turmoil, whilst it has been established that an insider can have a better understanding compared to non-native researchers (Corbin and Buckle, 2009).

The interviews were conducted in Bangla considering the native language of the respondents and the author. Later on, interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English. To make sense of the interviews in spoken English, necessary clarifications have been provided in square brackets (Bryman, 2016). The accuracy of the translation has been checked with the back-translation method (Brislin, 1980). By taking into account the criticism of back-translation (for instance, the missing of equivalent terms in another language), the consultation with a linguistic specialist was done to maintain the high level of the translation standard (Nes *et al.*, 2010).

3.3 Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis. This method is considered the fundamental way of analysing qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The thematic

analysis was guided by the procedure offered by Braun and Clarke (2006). The author had familiarity with the data during the transcribing and translating phase (Gehman *et al.*, 2018). Considering this underexplored context, codes were generated with the data-driving coding (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) by following the guidelines of Ryan and Bernard (2003). The researchers listed out the first-order concepts by reviewing and refining initially generated codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Then second-order themes were generated by clustering the concepts. It is important to highlight that the author cross-checked the interpretation of some quotes with the respondents. There was also discussion on the interpretation of the data with some scholars in Bangladesh and the Western countries.

Finally, aggregate dimensions emerged from relevant themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In total, two aggregate dimensions were developed from the data. The first one is “Adverse Effects on Business Activities” which responds to the first research objective of exploring the negative consequences of political turmoil on the business activities of women and the growth of the ventures. The second theme is “Adverse Effects on Access to Loans” that addresses the second objective of assessing the impact of political unrest concerning the special bank loan scheme for women business-owners. Thus, these two themes address the research aim of the study.

4. Findings

The interviews of women business-owners bring to light their problems, struggles and disappointments in operating business activities while navigating the situation of political disorder in Bangladesh. Moreover, while the government was supporting women with bank loans, the women disclosed the challenges of accessing debt finance posed by political chaos. Some problems seem to be generic in nature that could exist for any business person, but some of the issues were particularly gendered that were faced only by women business-owners in this highly patriarchal developing nation. (Table 2 summarises the findings of the study).

4.1 Adverse effects on business activities

The experiences of the women present the gloomy scenario of the business activities due to political unrest that provides a good understanding on the broader picture of the business environment whereas the literature overlooks external issues concerning women’s entrepreneurship (Ahl, 2006). Furthermore, the narratives of some women business-owners provide a unique insight by specifically unveiling some gender-specific problems concerning the adverse effect of political instability on their business activities. By considering all these issues, the overall negative impact of political disturbances on the growth of the businesses of women is disclosed in the interviews, whereas the literature has not paid proper attention to this area.

4.1.1 Generic issues regarding overall business activities. In general, the negative impact of political turmoil on regular business activities was reflected in the opinions of almost all the respondents. By referring to the year 2013, Nisha highlighted the overall adverse situation of the country due to political problems, and then she explained the poor status of the market against this context: “*Blockade, disrupted law and order situation, harassing situation for the government . . . I had a very hard time – during that time, there was also less purchasing and selling [of products]. I was facing a hard time*”. The comments of the respondent clearly provide a general view of the unfavourable business condition as a result of political turmoil in Bangladesh.

Jenny, who was operating her boutique firm, specifically illustrated the business scenario concerning the peak seasons of selling of that sector. In this country, Eid is the most important religious festival, and the boutique business-owners expect the highest sales of the

| Women's business issues | Problems of political unrest | | Impact on businesses |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | Generic problems* | Gendered problems | |
| <i>Adverse effects on business activities</i> | | | |
| (1) | Less working days for blockade or disorder situation | (1) Threat of sexual harassment during travelling for work | (1) Less transactions, limited business operation, particularly less sales during peak seasons |
| (2) | Absence of participation in fairs for restricted mobility | (2) Disadvantaged position (Physically) in avoiding street violence while going out for business activities | (2) Downsize of businesses in terms of number of employees, machines, outlets |
| (3) | Unsafe environment while travelling for business work | (3) Gender based locational disadvantage of businesses to reach customers | |
| <i>Adverse effects on access to loans</i> | | | |
| (1) | Inability/delay to repay bank loans | (1) Restricted networking for household responsibilities that results in less access to funds for repaying loans | (1) Bad credit record |
| | | (2) Gender stereotypical attitude of bank officers in loans sanctioning | (2) Unsuccessful bank loans application |

Table 2.
The adverse effect of
political unrest on
women business-
owners in Bangladesh

Note(s): *The generic problems indicate the issues that exist irrespective of gender of the business-owners

year during this period. However, as Jenny mentioned, the case was different in 2013: “*Last year, what happened during Eid – last year, for the business-owners, Eid was not good at all. During Ramadan, the way it [political unrest] started, it was bad up to ‘Kurban Eid’*”. As Jenny referred to the period from Ramadan to the particular Eid, she indicated around three months of severe political disruptions. The unwanted problems of such a prolonged period led the business to yield unsatisfactory returns.

Jenny also articulated the disappointing position of this business sector by citing the sales status of another important period for the fashion industry, the Bengali New Year – “Pohela Boishak”: “*We were very optimistic that we would have [the proper sales in] Boishak. However, today is the 8th of the month [April]. Considering it [the date], there is not any customer*”. While Bengali people celebrate their new year in mid-April of the Gregorian calendar, Jenny was referring to April 2014. The scenario suggests that the severity of political chaos was so intense that the unfriendly business condition existed even in the next year. The opinions of these women concerning the adverse effect of political turmoil are also supported by the literature (BBC, 2015; Abdin, 2015; Husain *et al.*, 2015; Islam, 2015; Hossain and Abedin, 2017; Hasan and Mahmud, 2017).

Mayesha further stated that she could not take part in the international trade fair because of the unstable political situation of the country: “*I participate in many fairs. International Trade Fair – every year, I participate in Dhaka International Trade Fair. Only in this year, I didn't [participate] because, in this year, there were strikes, blockade – so on*”. It is generally understandable that the convenience of mobility is a pivotal issue for setting up a stall for the trade fair. Due to the strike, blockade or other political disruptions, Mayesha could not participate in such an important event. It has already been established that entrepreneurs confront problems of moving commodities and of incurring high transportation cost during the strikes due to the restricted mobility (Roy and Borsha, 2013). The comments of Mayesha,

thus, further disclose that political turbulence significantly impedes important growth opportunities of businesses in this developing country.

While illustrating different problems of business activities, some women revealed how they placed themselves in risky positions for operating ventures. The devastating scenario of political anarchy is vividly portrayed in the language of Beethi. While describing how she went out of her home for the daily business activities, she brought to the fore the deadly condition of the country: *“Using petrol bombs – using patrol bombs – they killed people before me. A woman died before my house. [. . .] By observing all these issues, I was very scared”*. From the quotes, the challenging and distressing position of business-owners is clearly evident. The statistical data on the dead or injured people in different political instances support the statement of Beethi (Barry, 2015; Raju, 2017). It is important to note that the literature on this country addresses the travelling problems of working women during political chaos (Ahmed, 2015), but researchers have not paid proper attention to such issues regarding women business-owners.

In sum, different examples demonstrate that, during the period of political unrest in Bangladesh, the women could not properly generate income from the regular sales, particularly during the peak seasons, some of them could not participate in the international fair to expand their businesses and they faced impediments regarding travelling for regular business activities for the overall risky condition. Although these issues are problematic for any businessperson irrespective of gender, this study highlights political unrest as a potential hindrance for women in operating their ventures. These findings are important as the literature tends to overlook the external factors for the underperformance of women entrepreneurs (Ahl, 2006).

4.1.2 Gendered issues regarding business activities. Few women unveiled the gender-specific issues in operating businesses against the devastating background of political turmoil. Beethi drew attention to the politically vulnerable scenario and uncovered the gendered problems in this highly patriarchal context:

The situation was not safe for people but it was more problematic for us [women]. If suddenly a problem arises on the street, it is not easy for a woman to run away like a man. You can't also take shelter anywhere because you are a woman. So, going out for business work wasn't easy for us [women]. (Beethi)

Beethi's quotes reveal the practical problems of women during political anarchy. In comparison to men, it is physically difficult for Bangladeshi women to escape from the turbulent situation on the street. In addition, given the highly patriarchal context, it is not convenient for women to take shelter at any place. In this country, sexual harassment in a public place is not uncommon (Hossain and Sumon, 2013; Khatun, 2019, 2020). Thus, the comments of Beethi provide unique insights. While political turmoil resulted in an overall negative effect on businesses of this country (Roy and Borsha, 2013), the scenario was far more complicated for women in operating their businesses because of their restricted mobility during the risky situations.

A few women also disclosed how their disadvantaged business location for the gendered issues placed them in a problematic position during political unrest. The case of Reba can be cited as an example. Reba initiated her parlour because the sector generally dealt with only females as she noted: *“No man is seen inside a good parlour. So, I like this business very much. I feel very comfortable with this business. That's why I learned [the work of parlour]”*. The reservation of women working outside is also evident in the neighbouring country, Pakistan (Roomi et al., 2018). Reba operated the parlour at a small shopping mall where almost all the customers were women. The parlour was located close to a renowned girls' school in the city, and the customers of the parlour were mostly school related people: *“I mean – my business is school-based. . . . Women – [female] guardians send their kids to the school;*

many of them spend time here [at the parlour]". During the period of political instability, the reliance on the school for the customers led Reba in a disadvantaged position compared to those who operated businesses at big shopping malls. In her own words:

When the school is closed, there is no one at this place – practically no one. During the political problem, the schools are closed for many days. Compared to schools, the shopping malls are open for many more days. I don't have customers because of this position of the parlour. (Reba)

By drawing upon the comparison between the established shopping malls and the areas near the school as business locations, Reba pinpointed her problem of not reaching customers during the politically vulnerable period. A similar problem was echoed by Laila for her tailoring shop. While the choice of the business location of these women was determined by their reservation at the public place which was tied to the gendered issue, the empirical evidence suggests that, compared to men, some women faced additional problems due to their locational disadvantage. Whereas the literature (Roy and Borsha, 2013) has already addressed the issue of lower sales volume because of the closure of the shopping malls in Bangladesh during political turmoil, the examples of these respondents extend the view by unveiling further gender-specific complications for women business-owners.

4.1.3 *The overall impact of political problems on business activities.* While the generic problems of political unrest could be applied to all business-owners, women were in a comparatively disadvantaged position for the gendered issues in this highly patriarchal context. The impact of political turmoil was so devastating that some women needed to downsize their businesses. Although the literature (Barry, 2015; Chawdhury, 2016) has addressed the issue in general, this study particularly reveals the case of women business-owners. Jenny stated the negatively changed status of her venture by mentioning the exact numbers: "*The last year – the whole year was bad for us [business-owners]. That's why, the number of employees – whereas it was 80, it has become 40. It has been reduced. I have reduced that. Whereas 14 machines were running, now 8 machines are running*". With the comparison of the number of employees and operating machines of two different periods, it is clear that Jenny's business operation was significantly affected by political anarchy.

According to Fida, previously, her business was running well, but political problems had a ruinous impact on her venture: "*I was operating at a good level. The end of the year 2012 and the year 2013 – for me [it was] entirely [a loss] – that just made me looser*". During the interview, Fida specifically mentioned that, previously, she had four showrooms and two factories of dresses. In 2013, she had to close down two large showrooms and a factory because of political turbulence. Fida summed up the status of her business due to political unrest: "*In 2013, it was downsized. I made it [the business] less than one-third of it*". Undoubtedly, political disruptions led to a disastrous condition for the business of Fida within a short time. Thus, the examples demonstrate the problem of the political scenario, the external issue of business, which can lead a vital negative impact on the performance of the businesses of women; the findings are particularly important as the literature seldom discusses the impact of external issues concerning women's entrepreneurship (Ahl, 2006).

4.2 *Adverse effects on access to loans*

While the financial assistance by the government is considered an important step for the empowerment of women in small businesses (Bangladesh Bank, 2012), the comments of women demonstrate how political unrest sets challenges for them in accessing the loans, particularly in terms of the repayment issue. The women further provided unique insights by illustrating the gendered issues regarding the problems of loan repayment during the political disturbance. While the issue of repayment was mostly discussed by the respondents, the problem of loan sanctioning was also revealed in this study. Thus, the government

initiative was critically assessed within the context of political uncertainty, whereas the literature has not paid proper attention to political issues regarding women entrepreneurs.

4.2.1 *Generic issues regarding access to loans.* Whilst the businesses of the country generally witnessed a strong negative performance due to political unrest, the condition eventually had an impact on the access to bank loans of women for their small firms. Some women business-owners reported that they had problems in repaying loans on time. Nisha explained how the bank officers pressurised her continuously to repay loans: “*I had two installments due. The bank [manager] made a phone call, and, he said ‘Why are you not paying the money?’*” In response to the question, Nisha explained her financial condition because of the political scenario. During the interview, Nisha also highlighted her daily transactions to explain the financial crisis:

... there were problems for the Government [political instability]. The sales [of my shop] wasn’t good. Accordingly, it was found that – there were some days when I sold goods of even Tk. 100 in this shop. The daily expenditure in my shop is Tk. 1500. In that case, if I sell Tk. 100-150, how much loss I have to incur! (Nisha)

When Nisha mentioned her financial constraints, the bank officer continued to pressurise her. In the words of Nisha,

[The bank officer said:] “Yes, I considered it. I may consider your trouble for 5 days or 10 days. Then I won’t consider it. You must have to repay the money.” Phone calls – one after another. [The officer said:] “You must have to deposit money [pay the instalment] today.” Such type of pressure was stemmed from him. (Nisha)

The quotes of the bank officer demonstrate that, although the financial constraints of the business-owners were apparently self-explanatory due to political issues, the officer was not paying attention to the problem. He was rigid about the maintenance of the timely repayment of the loans. Consequently, Nisha was under stress for the repayment issue: “*I was in tension – how will I repay the loan? Yes. It has never happened to me. I am trying hard to manage the money*”. The struggle to manage the money to provide installments of the loan is reflected in her comments. A similar concern for loans repayment was also reflected in the voice of other women. Despite the sincerity of women business-owners, they could not pay back the loan due to political problems.

Whereas the government was taking the initiative to support women with specially designed debt finance (Bangladesh Bank, 2014), these examples demonstrate that the normal business operation was so hampered by political turmoil that the women were not capable of maintaining the loans properly. Whilst the literature (Jaim, 2020b) has raised the problems of misappropriation of the loans of women by the family members, this study further unveils that the proper utilisation of loans can also be hampered by the external environmental issue, political unrest.

4.2.2 *Gendered issues regarding access to loans.* During political uncertainty, while repaying loans was a common problem for the small business-owners who accessed debt finance, Shampa brought to light the gender-specific nature of problems of the women business-owners. In her point of view, women are in a comparatively disadvantaged status than men in managing the funds for repaying the loans. Shampa explained the issue:

For a woman – managing the family, operating the business – after doing all these things, it is very difficult to maintain relationships with many people. We [women] don’t have a big social circle. You know what? A man has time to mix up with many different people. During the crisis moment, for instance, during the political problems, a man can think of asking money from his friends, relatives . . . sometimes, he might manage to repay the loan but that’s what a woman can’t do. (Shampa)

In the comments, Shampa drew attention to the impact of the domestic responsibility and childcare issue of women on their businesses. Shampa's comments demonstrate that women business-owners can spend less time on networking for their familial duties. Therefore, women have a comparatively smaller social circle that limits their access to informal funds. The issues concerning the limited networking for familial responsibilities have already been established in the literature (Kirkwood, 2016; Neumeyer *et al.*, 2019; Roomi *et al.*, 2018; Surangi, 2018). The particular problems concerning the access to debt finance of women due to the restricted informal networks in Bangladesh have also been addressed in the literature (Jaim, 2021c). Shampa's comments specifically reveal that women are comparatively in disadvantaged positions in repaying loans for the gender-specific barrier of networking.

The problems concerning debt finance with political vulnerability is not limited to the issue of repayment; rather, it can be extended to the issue of securing loans. The case of Zakia can illustrate the issue. While defaulting on loan repayment is evident during the politically unstable situation (Jamaluddin, 2012; Mahmood and Islam, 2015), Zakia mentioned the consequence of this issue. She applied for her next loan while continuing a loan in that specific bank. Nevertheless, as many women business-owners became defaulters during political chaos, the bank was not interested in sanctioning the loan for her. It is worth noting that Zakia personally did not have any bad record regarding credit. She poignantly explained the scenario:

Because of the political and economic condition, this year, about the loan, there is a quite . . . They [bank officers] do not want to provide me [loans], but my report is not bad. However, in the last month, they supposed to give me the loan. They didn't give it. So far, I have heard that many [women] took loans, and they became defaulters. That's why they [the officers] are not sanctioning [loans], but for them, why should I suffer? (Zakia)

The comments have made the point clear that many women became defaulters for the political situation that resulted in an overall negative impact on other female loan applicants. Women faced challenges regarding receiving loans during that time despite their individual potentiality. This scenario hints at the stereotypical attitude of bank officers of this patriarchal context. While the literature on political unrest regarding entrepreneurship (Wiklund and Shepherd, 2005; Wright *et al.*, 2005; Roy and Borsha, 2013; Saeed *et al.*, 2014; Hossain and Abedin, 2017; Hasan and Mahmud, 2017) has not paid attention to women business-owners, the comments of the respondents reveal how political turbulence plays an important role in hindering the access to loans despite the government support.

4.3 Summary of findings

The women business-owners precisely brought to light how political unrest had an adverse effect on the operation of their small businesses in the politically unstable country, Bangladesh. The women could not gain their expected financial returns even during the peak seasons of selling, and some of them could not also avail themselves of the opportunity to have the benefit from the international trade fair. Further, the politically vulnerable situation put them literally in a risky position in the public place whilst the scenario unveils the issue of sexual harassment, a gender-specific problem for women business-owners in this highly patriarchal context. Some women were also in a problematic position in reaching customers during the politically turbulent period as they were operating businesses at disadvantageous positions for maintaining gendered norms of the limited exposure to public areas. Against this background, many women were obliged to downsize their businesses.

The empirical evidence further reveals that political turmoil was a major hindrance for women in accessing specially designed bank loans while the government took the financial initiative to empower them. A major problem was related to the repayment of the loans as the women could not generate regular income from the businesses due to political chaos.

The restricted network was an added issue for women in accessing informal financial support to meet the crisis of repaying loans; the homebound duties were responsible for the limited social circle of women. Some women also faced the gender stereotypical attitude of bank managers concerning the additional loan sanctioning due to the defaulter position of other women during the politically uncertain period. Based on these findings, the next section “Discussion” and the section “Practical Implications” demonstrate important theoretical contributions and suggestions for management practices, respectively.

5. Discussion

While structural, cultural or historical factors are rarely addressed in women’s entrepreneurship literature (Chell and Baines, 1998; Ahl, 2006; Coleman *et al.*, 2019), this feminist research potentially contributes to the existing knowledge by demonstrating the severe impact of political unrest on the businesses of women. The findings on the entwined relationship of political disturbance with the businesses of women significantly contribute to the women’s entrepreneurship scholarship; while generally women are held individually responsible for their performance of businesses (Ahl, 2004), this feminist study considerably challenges the notion with reference to political problems. Thus, the novelty of this research is to contribute to the debate regarding the understanding on the aspects of external factors concerning the businesses of women (Chell and Baines, 1998; Ahl, 2006) by unveiling the unique issue of political unrest.

Further, whereas the entrepreneurship literature has addressed the issue of political unrest (Wright *et al.*, 2005; Tang *et al.*, 2008; Roy and Borsha, 2013; Saeed *et al.*, 2014; Hossain and Abedin, 2017; Hasan and Mahmud, 2017), this research extends the understanding on women’s subordination by unveiling gender-specific issues of operating their businesses during the period of political disorder. While the issue of sexual harassment in the public place is well established in Bangladesh (Khatun, 2019, 2020), this study enriches the prevailing knowledge by revealing how this threat shapes the travelling experiences of women during the political unrest that exerts a negative impact on their business operation. Besides, while the hesitation of women in operating businesses in the public arena has been recognised (Roomi *et al.*, 2018), this research extends the understanding by critically unveiling how the disadvantaged business location for their gendered reservation lead them to generate lower sales volume compared to those operating businesses at typical business places.

This study has important contributions to the specific field of debt financing. While the prevailing literature (Coleman, 2000; Cavalluzzo *et al.*, 2002; Wu and Chua, 2012; Jaim, 2020a) discusses diversified problems in accessing bank loans, this article adds to the existing knowledge by revealing how political chaos can be a constraining factor for debt financing of women business-owners in Bangladesh. The feminist study provides valuable insights into the gender-specific nature of problems regarding the repayment or sanction of loans. Whereas the gender discrimination by bank officers towards women business-owners have been widely discussed in the literature (Jaim *et al.*, 2015), this research extends the understanding of gender subordination within the specific circumstance of political unrest. Moreover, as far as the debt financing in developing nations is concerned, whereas there is a proliferation of research on micro-level firms mostly in rural areas (Mair and Marti, 2009; Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Sutter *et al.*, 2019; Korosteleva *et al.*, 2020; Shepherd *et al.*, 2021), this research contributes to the understanding on small businesses of women at urban regions.

The overarching contribution of the study is to enrich the understanding on women’s entrepreneurship scholarship from the context of a developing nation. In other words, while the literature has a developed nation-centric view on women’s entrepreneurship (Yadav and

Unni, 2016), this paper enriches the prevailing understanding within the underexplored context with the particular focus on political unrest. It is worth noting that, whereas the limited literature on women's entrepreneurship in developing countries is almost exclusively focused on religious issues as a dominant contextual factor (Jaim, 2019), this study extends the prevailing knowledge with the important context-specific issue, political instability. Thus, by considering the political condition of the country, this study responds to the call regarding paying attention to the context-specific issues of developing nations to add valuable insights into the entrepreneurship literature (Johns, 2006; Zahra and Wright, 2011; Jaim and Islam, 2018).

6. Practical implications

The findings regarding the adverse effects of political turmoil on the overall business operation and the access to bank loans are particularly important for the policymakers of a developing nation where the government is financially facilitating women for their empowerment. With the findings on the negative impact of political chaos on enterprises of women, this study demonstrates that women are in a disadvantageous position in utilising their government supported funds. Moreover, the study unfolds the problems of repaying loans during the politically vulnerable period. Whilst entrepreneurial efforts are deemed with importance for the socio-economic development in such contexts (Rindova *et al.*, 2009), the article significantly contributes to the prevailing knowledge by establishing how political disturbance potentially sets obstacles on the government initiatives in empowering women business-owners.

The study is also important for the practitioners of developing context. While the problem of gender stereotypical attitude in women's access to debt finance in Bangladesh has been addressed (Jaim, 2020a), this study further extends the understanding within the context of political unrest. For example, in some cases, the decision regarding the loan sanctioning is done based on the perception of loan default of other women instead of the individual potentiality of the female applicants. In light of the findings, it is strongly recommended that the bank officers need to scrutinise the individual loan accessing capability for the decision of loan sanctioning.

7. Conclusion

The feminist study extends the understanding on women's entrepreneurship in developing nations with reference to political unrest. It contributes to the prevailing knowledge by unveiling how political turmoil sets hindrances for women in operating and growing their small ventures in an under-researched context. It further yields novel insights into the gender-specific problems during political instability regarding women's entrepreneurship in a highly patriarchal country. Thus, the paper advances the understanding on considering different contextual issues concerning gender subordination rather than holding women individually responsible for the underperformance of their businesses. The research also discloses how political disturbance can act as a potential barrier in accessing the government-supported bank loans of women business-owners, and, consequently, it considerably challenges the government initiative concerning women empowerment. Thus, the findings of the study are insightful for the policy practitioners in designing and implementing programmes for women entrepreneurs.

The limitation of the study is that it concentrates on a single turbulent year. While considering such a year provides an opportunity to comprehend the intricacy and severity of the problems of women business-owners in an appropriate way, future researchers can study a typical year of political unrest to assess the hurdle of women. Besides,

while this study reveals problems regarding the particular field of debt finance of women's entrepreneurship, researchers can explore other areas of businesses, for instance, supply chain management during the political unrest. While this study discloses the vulnerable position of women during the highly risky situation, researchers can be benefitted by investigating whether and how women take special protective measures during such a condition, for instance, the safety of themselves and the employees, the security of their business assets and so forth. Quantitative analysis can also be carried out to identify the specific financial loss for the political turmoil to provide a precise account of the impact of the turbulent period on women's businesses. Whether and how women business-owners take special actions to manage the financial distress can be a wealthy line of enquiry to have insights regarding the recovery strategies. Moreover, by recognising the importance of addressing context-specific issues in an under-explored area (Bruton *et al.*, 2008; Jaim and Islam, 2018), this paper brings to the fore the unique issue of political problems concerning gender subordination of women in small businesses of developing countries. Whereas contemporary women's entrepreneurship is developed nations focused (Brush and Cooper, 2012; Yadav and Unni, 2016), future researchers can contribute to this field by paying attention to different context-specific issues of underexplored regions of the world.

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