



Impact of Soft Skills Training on Rural Women's Development in Bangladesh: A Mixed Method Approach

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper aims to examine how soft skills training have a positive impact on rural women's prosperity in Bangladesh, specifically focusing on the impact of such training on their business performance and overall personal growth.

Methodology: This study is based on a mixed-method approach by utilizing structured and semi-structured questionnaires, incorporating open-ended questions, and employing exploratory and descriptive research approaches to highlight the need of providing soft skills training.

Findings: The results of the study indicate that the provision of soft skills training plays a crucial role in improving the overall business performance of female entrepreneurs in rural areas. This study explores how soft skills trainings improved their daily life activities and smoothed also business activities. This study underscores the positive impact of soft skills training, encompassing improved communication, leadership, problem-solving, decision-making, and self-motivation, on rural women's development and entrepreneurship in Bangladesh.

Practical Implications: It is imperative for policy makers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector to prioritize the integration of soft skills trainings into programs designed to promote the economic progress of rural women in Bangladesh for mitigating the hiatus between their existing skill sets and the requirements of their businesses inclusion.

Originality/Value: Existing literature on soft skills training for rural women is deficient in gender-specific analysis and regional/cultural variation examination, which impedes the development of individualized programs. This study addresses the gender and regional specificities of Bangladesh while examining the efficacy of soft skills trainings for rural women through the use of a mixed methods approach.

Limitation: A more comprehensive approach is needed to inform effective interventions for rural women's development.

1. Introduction

The need for women to become financially independent is obvious from both a financial and political standpoint. Increased equality of opportunity for men and women helps economic growth and improves

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quality of life. This phenomenon has an important role in reducing income inequality and boosting economic activity expansion, hence fostering economic adaptation and sustainability (IMF, 2018). Women's economic empowerment has several dimensions, including active market participation, resource authority, and equitable access to decent employment opportunities, decision-making flexibility, and increased influence in economic matters at multiple levels (UN Women, 2018).

Practical skills are defined as a wide range of cognitive and social characteristics that enable well-informed decision-making, efficient problem solving, and the formation of positive relationships (WHO, 2003). These qualities enable a variety of people to effectively manage every obstacle they meet in their daily lives and live lives that are both good and meaningful. According to Ibrahim et al. (2017), developing soft skills such as effective communication and the ability to collaborate in a team is critical to encouraging personal growth and achieving professional success at work. Entrepreneurship success requires both hard and soft skills (Charoensap-Kelly et al., 2015; Ginting, 2016). In the context of rural women's entrepreneurship, Anthony (2016) argues that honing soft skills is crucial for achieving commercial success.

In addition, Bershin, J. (2019) defines that soft skill development is critical for a long and fruitful career, as well as boosting one's chances of finding work. These skills are essential for gaining success in one's job, mostly for women (Castrillon, 2022). According to a UNICEF poll (2019), a sample size of 32,000 young South Asians highlighted the presence of antiquated educational systems and barriers to securing jobs, with approximately 44% identifying employment discrimination practices as a significant concern. To successfully address the issue, it is critical to prioritize soft skills training for rural women, as it plays a critical role in creating sustainable growth and boosting company growth. Implementing soft skills training programs resulted in a significant improvement in the soft skills of female professionals in the early phases of their careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). This improvement was especially noticeable during the difficult period of the epidemic, with a 9% increase. As a result, there was an improvement in worker evaluation, and it could be used effectively for the growth of remote personnel (Melin & Correll, 2022).

Campos et al. (2018) conducted a World Bank study in Togo to analyze the efficacy of a psychology-related training for entrepreneurs program known as self-entrepreneurship coaching. The fundamental goal of business training programs in developing countries is to improve the financial well-being of self-employed entrepreneurs. According to the study's findings, this approach outperformed traditional company training methods, resulting in a 30% boost in firm earnings. The training program not only increased earnings but also aided in the development of creativity, the advancement of developing goods, an increase in financing activities, and an increase in the volume of resources.

Furthermore, the survey found that female entrepreneurs saw a 40% increase in revenues, compared to only a 5% increase for those who received traditional training. These findings highlight the importance of emotional variables in entrepreneurial training, which are currently being incorporated in various programs on a global scale. This study emphasizes the importance of psychology in improving small-scale enterprise coaching in the West African region, with a special emphasis on the importance of building an entrepreneurial spirit. As a result, initiatives in Mozambique, Mauritania, Ethiopia, Jamaica, and Mexico are being added to the scope of autonomous incentive learning.

Female entrepreneurs in developing countries face various hurdles; including talent differences, limited financial resources, and gender bias (Mulatu & Prasad, 2018). The continuation of such barriers, such as the lack of training opportunities, is clear. Women's success, however, is typically dependent on characteristics such as meticulousness, management aptitude, and familial support, particularly in Bangladesh (Afroze et al., 2015). Despite numerous efforts, female participation in financial transactions still needs to be improved, particularly in rural areas where women face barriers

such as limited access to financing, insufficient training opportunities, and a lack of market infrastructure (Chowdhury, 2017).

Achieving success as a businessperson entails a variety of aspects, including technological proficiency, efficient management, and the strategic combination of favorable conditions, individual talents, and available assets (Sousa, 2018). In today's digital age, it is critical for entrepreneurs, particularly those in their youth, to supplement their pre-existing soft skills while also acquiring novel technological and data-oriented competencies to succeed (Omar, 2019; Youth Business International (YBI), 2018). Djankov (2007) defines successful businesses as having a combination of innate abilities and environmental influences, as well as innovation, proficient communication and technical expertise, a focus on achieving goals, unwavering tenacity, adaptability, self-assurance, and a combination of innate abilities and environmental influences. Peer networks impact the decision to pursue entrepreneurship; nevertheless, the end success of an enterprise is primarily controlled by human attributes (Djankov et al., 2007).

An initial initiative in Bangladesh, supported by Benetton and implemented by UN Women and CARE, aims to strengthen female garment workers by improving their soft competencies, boosting their self-assurance, and extending their professional opportunities, all while mitigating instances of sexual assault at work (Mortada, 2018). The nation of Bangladesh grapples with a substantial obstacle to labour effectiveness and prosperity, as a considerable portion of its labour force possesses less training and expertise. In order to facilitate the shift towards more productivity and more fast-growing models, it is imperative to pursue diversification outside the apparel sector. This entails providing labor force with essential skills, such as technological expertise, and emphasizing nonroutine occupations that necessitate intellectual curiosity and innovation. These measures are crucial in expectation of the advent of technology 4.0 and the changing needs of the hiring process (Lee, 2020).

Soft skills training are of utmost importance for the advancement of youth and women in Bangladesh. It enables individuals to attain jobs, establish prosperous entrepreneurial ventures, and effectively tackle environmental issues in locations that are susceptible. Soft competencies play a crucial role in enhancing abilities to lead, facilitating timely decisions, and promoting toughness, so contributing to the advancement of socioeconomic emancipation. Furthermore, the provision of interpersonal development is of utmost importance in fostering the well-being of individuals, enhancing educational opportunities, and facilitating constructive societal transformation, guaranteeing a more promising outlook for women, children, and communities along the coast (CODEC, n.d.). Tackling the issue of excessive youth joblessness levels and a lack of access to learning opportunities in Bangladesh is of utmost importance. It is crucial to prioritize fostering the growth of soft skills, like interpersonal skills, collaboration, and resolving disputes, while also tackling prejudice against women and offering guidance and monetary help.

Above information raises some research questions of this paper

- Whether soft skills are essential for rural women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh and if so, which specific skills are most critical for them?
- Whether soft skills training have a significant impact on the business performance of rural women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh, and how effective is this training?

The objectives of this study are

1. To identify the key soft skills necessary for rural women to thrive in their economic and non-economic endeavors
2. To assess the impact of soft skills training on the business performance of female entrepreneurs in rural areas.

Thereby this approach is intended to empower women and strengthen their ability to create economic value and to encourage governmental entities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and financial institutions to prioritize the provision of soft skills training alongside hard skills training. This

study highlights the significance of incorporating soft skills training into the professional growth of women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh, as a supplement to hard skills, thus fixing a notable gap in their skillset. This study offers significant insights that can be utilized by lawmakers, enterprises, and financial companies in their efforts to promote and encourage women's entrepreneurship. The results of this study possess a wider scope of relevance that extends beyond the context of Bangladesh, as they offer valuable insights into strategies that can enhance the growth of entrepreneurship. The insights of this study have the potential to positively impact rural women by highlighting the importance of soft skills, thereby facilitating their participation in economic activities, enhancing their income levels, and fostering their contribution to the overall economic development of the nation. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes related literatures and theoretical frameworks. Section 3 proposes hypothesis. Section 4 describes the research methodology. Section 5 presents the empirical analysis with discussion. Finally, section 6 discusses policy implications with conclusion.

2. Literature Review

The phenomenon of women's entrepreneurship in Bangladesh has experienced a notable surge in activity since the 1990s, coinciding with the overarching developmental priorities of developing countries (Hamid, 2018). Bangladesh has set a target to achieve high middle-income status by 2031, with a focus on several strategies such as creating employment, growth of human resources, infrastructural improvements, and the implementation of laws conducive to investments from the private sector (The World Bank, 2023).

Bangladesh is currently making significant strides towards achieving its goal of graduating from the position of a least developed country by the year 2026, marking a remarkable 45-year journey of improvement. The stated objectives of the country encompass achieving an upper-middle-income classification by the year 2031 and attaining a high-income classification by 2041. These aspirations necessitate a GDP growth rate surpassing 8% and elevating the per capita income from its present value of \$2,824 to almost \$13,000 during a span of less than twenty years. The progress of women's entrepreneurship in developing countries is seeing notable growth, thereby making significant contributions to both economic prosperity and the alleviation of poverty. Bangladesh has set a goal of achieving middle-income status, characterized by a per capita income of \$3,500, by the year 2021. During the period from 2008 to 2018, the country has made significant progress in various areas, including women's empowerment, family planning, health, nutrition, small-scale business, and job creation. These developments have positioned Bangladesh as a noteworthy example for other developing nations to emulate (Bangladesh Awami League, 2019; Gupta & Liton, 2023).

According to World Economic Forum, (2022), Despite being ranked 71st out of 146 nations in the Global Gender Gap Report 2022, Bangladesh's female entrepreneurs encounter obstacles that impede their progress, hence underscoring the existing gaps in economic participation. Based on the report of "The Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurs, 2022", Bangladesh was rated last among 65 nations. These ranking sheds light on the challenges faced by women in advancing professionally, which may be attributed to several factors such as limited access to funding, educational opportunities, and structural hurdles. These limits are particularly prevalent in economies situated in the Middle East, Africa, and some Asian regions (Farhad, 2023).

Women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh play a pivotal role in driving economic growth and have demonstrated notable advancements in challenging conventional gender limitations, thereby making significant contributions to their families, neighborhoods, and the overall progress of the country at large (Chowdhury, 2017). The promotion and advancement of SMEs that prioritize the inclusion and empowerment of women are of paramount importance for the overall development of Bangladesh. Currently, only a mere 7.2% of firms in the country are led by women, predominantly including micro, small, or medium-sized businesses (Ahmed, 2019).

A plethora of scholarly research has shed light on the various obstacles encountered by female entrepreneurs, such as insufficient financial resources, limited initial capital, and societal norms and expectations (Ahmed, 2019). According to Chowdhury (2017), there are several significant challenges that individuals face. These challenges include the defiance of societal norms, restricted access to financial resources, taking ownership of one's accomplishments, establishing support networks, managing the delicate balance between family and company responsibilities, and dealing with the fear of failure. Women residing in underdeveloped nations face various extra obstacles, including disparities in skills and training, limited availability of financial resources, and instances of gender-based bias (Mulatu & Prasad, 2018). Despite the implementation of several efforts, persistent problems such as inadequate money, gender discrimination, illiteracy, and the absence of comprehensive training programs continue to hinder the progress of women entrepreneurs (Chowdhury, 2017). It is worth noting that the success of women entrepreneurs is significantly influenced by personal attributes and the support received from their families.

Soft skills refer to a broad spectrum of interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies, which comprise many qualities such as interacting, solving problems, and choice-making (Cinque, 2016; Majid et al., 2012). Personality-specific abilities, which are commonly acknowledged as factors that enhance psychological awareness and achievement in different aspects of life, include growth in oneself and professional performance, have been extensively discussed in the literature (Bora, 2015; Cimatti, 2016). According to the paradigm proposed by Spencer and Spencer (1993), soft skills can be categorized into two distinct groups: behavioral characteristics and cognitive paradigms. Personality-based soft skills comprise a range of attributes such as initiative, perseverance, commitment, and self-confidence. On the other hand, cognitive-style soft skills pertain to abilities in problem-solving, planning, persuading, and assertiveness (Riyanti et al., 2016).

Bolli and Renold (2015), summarized certain soft talents recognized as a crucial aspect in numerous academic works. According to Bolli and Renold (2015), The significance of communication has been emphasized by various scholars, including Maes et al. (1997), Gabric and McFadden (2001), Naidoo et al. (2011), Freudenberg et al. (2011), Robles (2012), among others. The significance of teamwork and interpersonal abilities has been underscored by scholars such as Hancock (2009), Freudenberg et al. (2011), and Bailey (2014). The importance of decision-making and problem-solving skills has been acknowledged by Maes et al. (1997), Silva and McFadden (2005), and Jackson and Chapman (2012). Kesner (2008), Ezzo (2013), and Klibi and Oussi (2013) have all discussed the concepts of ethics, integrity, and accountability. Authors such as Silva and McFadden (2005), Kavanagh and Drennan (2008), and Tempone et al. (2012) have also recognized time management, organization, self-motivation, and readiness to learn as essential soft skills.

Sundararajan (2019) identified two types of soft skills. Initially, Interpersonal attributes include Empathy, Leadership, Communication, Teamwork, Good manners, Ability to teach, Works well with diversity, Self-confidence. Secondly, Personal attributes include Optimism, Responsibility, Sense of humor, Integrity, Time management, Motivation, Common Sense. Communication skills, which consist of verbal, written, and non-verbal components, pertain to the transmission of messages (Sundararajan, 2019). The concept of teamwork can be defined as a collaborative endeavor that yields exceptional outcomes through the pursuit of a shared objective (Tarricone, 2002). Interpersonal skills encompass the ability to engage in successful communication and interact with people, which are seen essential for achieving social success (Sundararajan, 2019). The concept of time management encompasses the systematic arrangement and strategic allocation of time in order to enhance productivity and effectiveness (Nasrullah & Saqib Khan, 2015; Sundararajan, 2019). Leadership is a critical component of soft skills, as it encompasses the capacity to exert influence over others (Sundararajan, 2019).

The concept of critical thinking can be described as a form of reflective thinking that involves the evaluation and decision-making process in determining one's beliefs or actions (Kusuma et al.,

2018). The process of problem-solving involves the establishment of clear definitions, the identification of relevant factors, the prioritization of potential solutions, and the ultimate selection of the most suitable course of action (Sundararajan, 2019). Creativity encompasses the process of ideation and the identification of potential opportunities (Primi & Wechsler, 2018; Sundararajan, 2019). The field of conflict resolution pertains to the facilitation of a peaceful conclusion to conflicts (Sundararajan, 2019). Negotiation refers to the consensual process of resolving disagreements or dividing resources (Sundararajan, 2019; Zohar, 2015). The process of decision-making involves the cognitive selection of a belief or plan of action from a range of available alternatives (Sundararajan, 2019).

Self-motivation refers to the capacity to initiate action without being influenced by other factors (Ncube & Zondo, 2018; Sundararajan, 2019). Self-confidence refers to an individual's self-assurance in their personal judgment and talents. Self-awareness refers to an individual's ability to engage in introspection and perceive oneself as distinct from one's surroundings and other individuals (Sundararajan, 2019). Risk-taking is the act of participating in activities that have the potential to cause harm, while also offering the possibility of favorable consequences (Allah & Nakhaie, 2011).

In order to achieve success as an entrepreneur, it is essential to possess a blend of technical expertise and leadership attributes, as well as access to favorable circumstances, aptitudes, and Resources (Sousa, 2018). Soft skills, often referred to as life skills according to the World Health Organization (WHO), play a vital role in facilitating adaptive and constructive behaviour to effectively manage the challenges encountered in daily life (Renuka, 2016). In the current era of digitization, it is imperative for young entrepreneurs to not only enhance their present soft skills but also gain additional technological and data-related abilities (Youth Business International, 2019). The success of entrepreneurship is contingent upon various personal attributes, including but not limited to creativity, interpersonal skills, cognitive and technical competence, goal-directedness, perseverance, adaptability, self-assurance, and the acquisition of information through formal education and practical experience (Omar, 2019). Both nature and nurture are influential factors in determining company success, with individual traits having a prominent role. Additionally, social networks have been found to impact the desire to pursue entrepreneurship, although their influence on actual success is not necessarily guaranteed (Djankov et al., 2007).

Hogshead's (2014) research emphasized the significant impact of "people engineering" on an organization's financial results, attributing 85% of its profitability to this factor. Similarly, Based on Harvard University's (2011), 85% of job achievement can be attributed to soft skills, while technical skills accounted for only 15% (Erdem et al., 2011; Holmberg-Wright & Hribar, 2016; Sundararajan, 2019). The acknowledgment of the significant impact of entrepreneurship on the country's economy necessitates the recognition of education and training as essential components in fostering and augmenting entrepreneurs' capacities, thereby making valuable contributions to economic expansion and growth. The training program encompasses a range of abilities, including technical, managerial, socio-political, and financial management (Cooney, 2012; Davidsson et al., 2006; Henry et al., 2003).

A significant proportion, namely 68% of female entrepreneurs have expressed an intense desire for entrepreneurial coaching from commercial banks. This underscores the importance of evaluating the economic viability of startup courses. There is the significance of maintaining a favorable balance between the advantages and disadvantages of these programs (Idrus et al., 2014). Furthermore, Bora (2015) emphasizes the need to acknowledge and harness innate soft abilities in employees. This paper is designed to assess how effective soft skills trainings for rural women of Bangladesh. Before selecting training methods, several processes must take place. Initially, it is important to do a requirement analysis in order to figure out and characterize the challenge that the training course aims to address. Training is employed as a means to rectify inadequacies in expertise, ability, or mindset (Ibrahim et al., 2017).

The issue of escalating adolescent unemployment is a significant worry in numerous economically disadvantaged nations. Skills training have the potential to present a viable solution to

this issue; yet, the current body of research about the efficacy of training programs in developing nations is inconclusive. This study expands upon the current body of knowledge by examining a vocational training initiative implemented in Bangladesh, a nation characterized by a significant prevalence of unemployment among young individuals (Das, 2021).

A comprehensive evaluation conducted in Washington, D.C. employed a combination of both quantitative and qualitative (mixed) methods to analyze youth programs that incorporate training in soft skills, with a particular emphasis on girls and young women. The significance of integrating classroom and practical learning in conjunction with tackling detrimental gender norms was underscored in the analysis of 42 qualifying studies. The research emphasized the necessity of conducting comprehensive, extended assessments in order to measure the enduring effects, particularly in regions with lower economic resources and moderate-income levels (Martin et al., 2019). A randomized controlled trial was conducted in Jamaica to examine the effectiveness of two entrepreneurship training programs. The findings indicated that soft-skills training had significant effects on business outcomes in the short term, with these effects being particular to gender. These positive effects were mostly observed through enhancements in business practices. However, it is important to note that these advantages were not sustained over time. This highlights the necessity of ensuring long-term viability and tackling gender discrepancies in order to maximize the benefits of such training (Ubfal et al., 2019).

An exploratory qualitative study conducted in Bangladesh analyzes the soft skills training provided by the Alternative Learning Program and suggests that it be included in national policy to address workforce issues. The study also looks at how such soft abilities affect women's growth, highlighting how important these talents are for advancing women both in and outside of the workplace (Islam et al., 2020). Another study examines the role of female entrepreneurship in promoting women's development, with a particular focus on the efficacy of integrating entrepreneurial training and higher education, as well as non-cognitive skills. The aforementioned statement highlights the imperative nature of implementing comprehensive policies that aim to enhance women's economic empowerment and foster their growth. This may be achieved by acknowledging the significance of training and acquiring skills in the realm of entrepreneurship (Brixiová et al., 2019).

In the context of Liberia, a research study was conducted wherein a total of 570 entrepreneurs were assigned at random to two groups. The first group received normal business training, while the second group received a combination of standard training and additional soft skills training. The results of the combined training did not yield statistically significant increases in profitability and sales when compared to the conventional training. Nevertheless, it underscored the value and pursuing objectives over an extended period of time. The impact of business training on client interaction and pleasure was shown to be minimal, underscoring the intricate nature of soft skills in this context (Dammert & Nansamba, 2023).

A study, conducted in India, utilized primary data to evaluate the associations between access factors, ICT adoption intention, and entrepreneurial attitude. The research revealed that many forms of access, such as mental, material, skill, and usage, significantly contribute to the adoption of information and communication technology (ICT) among women living in rural areas. The adoption of information and communication technology (ICT) facilitates creativity and serves as a catalyst for entrepreneurial orientation. As a result, women micro-entrepreneurs experience improvements in their soft skills and business acumen, ultimately profiting from these advancements (Chatterjee et al., 2020). The present study examined the entrepreneurial competences exhibited by women entrepreneurs and underscored the noteworthy influence of these competencies on entrepreneurial achievement. Specifically, the study placed emphasis on elements such as management abilities, characteristic adjustments, and identity in relation to entrepreneurial success (Ismail, 2014).

Qualitative research conducted in Spain delves into the examination of competence-related matters among male and female entrepreneurs, with a particular emphasis on the identification and recognition of valuable qualities such as perseverance and social ability. The promotion of women's entrepreneurship necessitates the overcoming of gender preconceptions (Manzanera-Román & Brändle, 2016). Research conducted in Ghana and Nigeria uses a combination of mixed methods, such as Propensity Score Matching. These studies demonstrate that skills training programs have a beneficial effect on various aspects, including education, healthcare, empowerment, and employment, particularly among the youth population. Nevertheless, it is imperative to address obstacles such as limited access to land and financial resources in order to optimize the advantages associated with these efforts and mitigate poverty (Unnikrishnan et al., 2022).

A randomized controlled experiment conducted in Jamaica revealed that the implementation of rigorous soft-skills training yielded noteworthy immediate effects on business outcomes, namely through fostering the adoption of business practices. However, it was seen that these advantages did not endure over an extended period of time, and further analysis indicated variations in outcomes based on gender (Ubfal et al., 2022). A comprehensive assessment of the "Work-Progression Productivity Toolkit" initiative in Bangladesh revealed that both male and female participants in supervisory training had comparable levels of skills and knowledge. The program resulted in enhanced self-assurance among the trainees, while it did not yield any discernible advancement in technical expertise. This implies that directing attention towards soft skills, such as confidence, could potentially be an effective strategy for augmenting the likelihood of women advancing in their careers within the clothing business (Uckat & Woodruff, 2018). The Work-Progression and Productivity Toolkit (WPT) developed by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) incorporates the inclusion of soft skills training into its curriculum. The program offers a comprehensive four-day training session focused on the development of soft skills, encompassing key areas such as leadership, communication, and effective supervision. The inclusion of these training components focusing on soft skills significantly enhances the efficacy of the program in equipping female sewing operators with the necessary skills to assume supervisory positions within the ready-made garment factories of Bangladesh (Devdiscourse, 2018).

The International Republican Institute (IRI) has highlighted several significant obstacles encountered by women in the political sphere. These barriers primarily revolve around deficiencies in skills and networks, which are intricately linked to soft skills such as networking and communication. In order to effectively tackle these concerns and enhance the participation of women in the political sphere, the International Republican Institute (IRI) has developed a program that specifically emphasizes the development of essential interpersonal skills, including effective communication, networking, and leadership abilities. Through the cultivation and refinement of these interpersonal talents, commonly referred to as soft skills, and the strategic utilization of supportive male counterparts, women possess the capacity to surmount these obstacles and actively contribute to their own growth within the realm of politics. This, in turn, can culminate in their empowerment and overall advancement (Haque, 2022).

The present quantitative study examines the utilization of soft skills in the Bangladesh RMG sector, employing a structured questionnaire as the primary research instrument. The findings of this study reveal that while reliability is widely practiced, networking remains relatively underutilized in this context. The results underscore the significance of cultivating a more extensive array of non-technical abilities within the sector to promote the advancement of the workforce (Zaman et al., 2018).

2.1 Research Gap of Existing Literatures

The current body of research and literature pertaining to the effects of soft skills training on the development of rural women identifies a number of areas that warrant additional investigation. Initially, it is evident that there is a significant scarcity of gender-specific research, as the majority of studies tend to concentrate on more encompassing populations (Groh et al., 2012; Iqbal, 2022). The

lack of attention given to this issue hinders the understanding of the distinct requirements and obstacles encountered by women in rural areas, hence hindering the implementation of customized programs. Furthermore, the use of comprehensive mixed-methods approaches is not commonly observed, hence constraining our comprehension of the many effects of training.

Furthermore, there is a lack of emphasis on the influence of regional, cultural, and economic variations in shaping the outcomes of training (Djankov, 2007). The presence of such subtle distinctions can have a substantial impact on the efficacy of a program. Moreover, it is necessary to conduct a more comprehensive examination into the long-term sustainability as well as the persistent hurdles and facilitators that arise after the conclusion of training. Many current studies typically lack the ability to offer realistic policy suggestions that are firmly grounded in empirical facts (Taufiq, 2022; Haque, 2022). In order to ascertain the most effective techniques for empowering rural women in distinct circumstances, it is imperative to conduct comparative research that evaluates the diverse outcomes of different training programs. The identification and resolution of these research gaps will serve to enhance the precision and efficacy of interventions aimed at facilitating the development of rural women through the provision of soft skills training. This paper addresses these gaps by using a mixed method approach so that in-depth insights can be identified.

2.2 Theoretical Framework for the Study

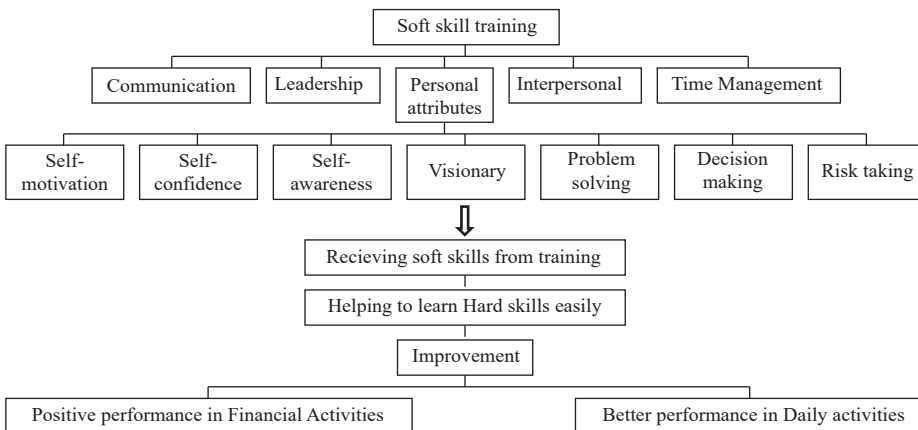


Figure 1.
Impact of Soft Skills Training on Women's Development.
 Source: Authors Derived Framework.



Figure 2.
Soft Skills Training (Independent variable) and Rural Women's Development (Dependent variable).
 Source: Authors Derived Framework.

3. Hypothesis

The significance of fostering business among rural women in Bangladesh cannot be emphasized within the given setting. Rural areas represent a substantial segment of the nation, wherein women residing in these localities frequently encounter distinctive socio-economic obstacles. However, there is a lack of research on the impact of soft skills training on the development of rural women's entrepreneurship in

Bangladesh. Rural women in Bangladesh have played a crucial role in the country's economy, actively engaging in diverse income-generating endeavors, with a special emphasis on agricultural pursuits. Nevertheless, the significant contributions they make in both the agricultural sector and non-remunerative occupations sometimes remain unacknowledged (Islam et al., 2022).

Since gaining independence in 1971, Bangladesh, a country with a historically patriarchal society, has experienced notable progress in terms of increased female participation in economic and industrial sectors. The rate of female labor force participation experienced a notable increase, rising from four percent in 1974 to thirty-six percent in 2019, indicating substantial shifts within society (Mamun & Hoque, 2022). The acquisition of soft skills is of utmost importance for women entrepreneurs in rural areas, as it has the capacity to mitigate the difficulties associated with low resources and gender-based societal expectations. This research investigates the impact of soft skills training on entrepreneurial success, empowerment, and socioeconomic development. It aims to fill a gap in the existing literature and provide guidance for the advancement of rural women's entrepreneurship. The following hypothesis are hereby proposed,

Hypothesis H_0 : *Soft skills trainings have no significant impact on rural women's development in Bangladesh.*

Hypothesis H_1 : *Soft skills trainings have significant impact on rural women's development in Bangladesh.*

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This research employs a mixed-method approach, incorporating both exploratory (observational) and, descriptive methods (cross-sectional). These methods encompass the use of structured questionnaires, semi-structured questionnaires, open-ended questions, and analysis of primary and secondary data. The objective of this study is to examine the effects of soft skills training on the development of rural women in Bangladesh. The study integrates pertinent secondary data derived from several research sources.

4.2 Population and Sample, and sampling technique

In this study, our target population is rural female entrepreneurs in Moulvibazar, Sylhet, Bangladesh. Convenience sampling is chosen due to its practicality and efficiency, aligning with the time and resource constraints of the research (Adetola, 2015). The accessibility of the chosen participants, characterized by place, availability, and willingness to participate in interviews, made convenience sampling the most feasible option. While acknowledging the limitations, including the potential for selection bias, the decision to use convenience sampling was justified by the need for availability (family-related restrictions), cost-effectiveness, quick response, and an efficient approach to addressing the research objectives. Due to the dispersed geographic locations of the participants, a small sample size of 18 female entrepreneurs in rural areas of Moulvibazar, Sylhet, Bangladesh, was utilized for the research.

4.3 Sources of Data & Questionnaire Design, and Variables

Source of data refers to where and how a researcher gets the data to be analyzed. There are two main sources of data which are primary and secondary source of data (Adetola, 2015). The research adopted a mixed-methods methodology, incorporating primary and secondary data sources. The collection of primary data involved the utilization of interviews, focus groups, and observations as research methods. These methods were employed specifically among a group of rural women entrepreneurs located in Moulvibazar, Bangladesh. The data collection process comprised of two distinct sections. The first section involved the examination of existing rural women entrepreneurs, with a focus on their profiles, age, and a range of inquiries related to soft skills. The second section concentrated on newly

established rural women entrepreneurs who had recently undergone training from the "eSheBee" enterprise. The questionnaires comprised of two questionnaires- questionnaire one consist of structured questions and another one consists of semi-structured questions. With the five or seven response options, Likert scales are perfect for evaluating subjective characteristics like attitudes, feelings, or opinions that lack quantifiable measurements (Bhandari, 2020). Likert scales are used in structured questionnaire to assess independent variables, which encompassed demographic details like age. Here soft skills trainings (soft skills) are independent variable and rural women's development is dependent variable.

4.4 Data analysis

In this study, descriptive analysis has been conducted including demography variables to know the respondent's insights. Besides descriptive analysis, exploratory analysis has been done. As it is qualitative research in nature basically, coding system is also used here.

5. Empirical Analysis and Discussion

This section provides a discussion of the empirical findings. Descriptive analysis is used to analyze the profile of the respondent female entrepreneurs.

Table 1.

Age of Rural Women Entrepreneurs.

Age Group	Frequency	% Frequency
16-25	16	88.89%
26-35	2	11.11%
Total	18	100%

Source: Authors' calculation

The sample consists primarily of people between the ages of 16 and 25 (88.89%), Table 1 is showing a demographic analysis that is heavily influenced by youth, while just a tiny percentage (11.11%) of participants are between the ages of 26 and 35.

Table 2.

Profession of Rural Women Entrepreneurs.

Profession	Frequency	Frequency%
Student	7	38.89%
Unemployed	1	5.56%
Tailoring business	6	33.33%
Tailoring and clothe business	1	5.56%
Tailoring business and teaching	1	5.56%
Tailoring business and trainer	1	5.56%
Tea gardening business and Photo studio	1	5.56%
Total	18	100%

Source: Authors' calculation

The sample population comprised 18 individuals, with the largest proportion being students (38.89%), followed by individuals involved in the tailoring industry (33.33%). Table 2 mostly focused on the profession of rural women entrepreneurs. The survey also included the representation of additional vocations, such as teaching and tea planting. Young women entrepreneurs residing in rural areas, including students and individuals who are now unemployed, exhibited a diverse set of practical abilities, which included competency in sewing, language, computer literacy, and culinary proficiency.

Table 3.
Soft Skills Received by Rural Women from Trainings.

Answers from Rural Women Entrepreneurs	Construct (Soft Skills)
How to talk or deal with suppliers or with customer or with related parties or family	Communication skills/Interpersonal skills/
Timely work	Negotiations skills/Leadership skills
How to lead employees	Time management
How to take decisions	Leadership skills/Interpersonal skills
How to be confident	Decision making ability
How to face challenges	Self-confident
How to set visions	Self-motivation
How to make future planning	Visionary skills
	Decision making/Problem solving/
	Critical thinking/Visionary skills

Source: Authors' calculation

Table 3 focus on the data obtained from female entrepreneurs residing in rural areas was subjected to coding in order to categorize a diverse range of soft skills. The aforementioned talents include communication, time management, leadership, decision-making, confidence, facing problems, and future planning.

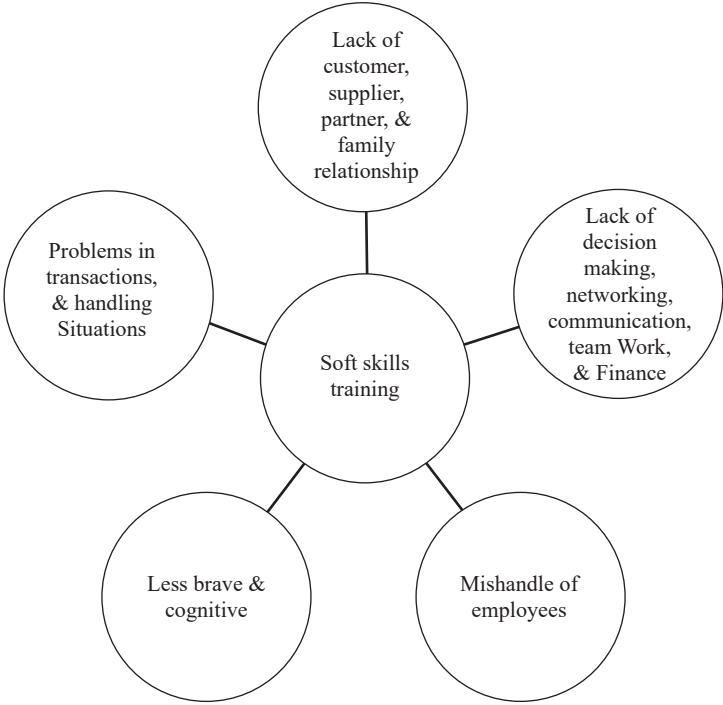


Figure 3.
Rural Women Facing Problems before Soft Skills Trainings.
Source: Authors Derived.

Prior to undergoing soft skills training, rural women entrepreneurs faced various obstacles including insufficient customer and supplier relationships, challenges in decision-making, deficiencies in networking, issues related to family persuasion, difficulties in managing employees, and poor communication and teamwork abilities. Nevertheless, these concerns were subsequently acknowledged and rectified through the implementation of the training Programme.

Table 4.

Problems before and after Soft Skills Trainings

Problems	Before	After
Networking Problems	✓	☒
How to Convince family	✓	☒
Lack of confidence	✓	☒
Lack of self-motivation	✓	☒
Time management problems	✓	☒
Lack of braveness	✓	☒
Lack of Communication skills	✓	☒
Lack of visionary skills	✓	☒
Lack of leadership skills	✓	☒
Lack of decision-making abilities	✓	☒
Lack of risk-taking abilities	✓	☒
Problems related to face challenges	✓	☒

Source: Authors' calculation

The chart provided presents a comprehensive overview of the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in rural areas both prior to and subsequent to their engagement in soft skills training. Based on the available data, it can be inferred that significant progress has been made in addressing the aforementioned issues. However, it is worth noting that the development of visionary talents continues to provide a persistent obstacle, even after undergoing training.

Table 5.

Business Problems after Receiving Soft Skills from Trainings

Problems	Percentages
Transactions related problems	0%
Problems in conducting business	0%
Problems with customers	0%
Problems with suppliers	0%
A little if any work pressure	80%

Source: Authors' calculation

The table 5 shown herein provides a summary of the business problems faced by female entrepreneurs in rural areas subsequent to their training. It is worth noting that a significant majority (80%) of those surveyed reported having minimum or negligible levels of job pressure. Furthermore, there has been a notable absence (0%) of issues linked to transactions, conducting business, consumers, and suppliers, indicating a significant improvement in these areas.



Figure 4.
Communication Skills helping to sell or to give Service to Customers.
Source: Authors Derived.

According to the pie chart, almost 60% of female entrepreneurs in rural areas showed notable proficiency in presentation and communication skills. The other 40% also displayed commendable performance, leading to a subsequent rise in their revenue levels subsequent to receiving training.

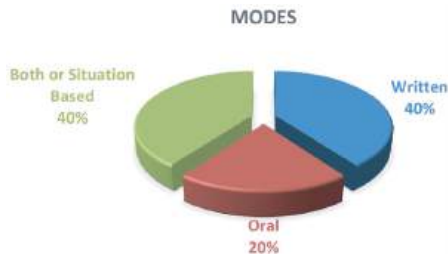


Figure 5.
Communications Modes.
Source:Authors Derived.

The provided pie chart depicts the distribution of communication modes utilized for daily activities, revealing that written communication accounts for 40% of the total, while oral and situation-based communication each constitute 20% of the overall communication modes.



Figure 6.
Satisfaction over Financial Transactions with Suppliers.
Source:Authors Derived.

Figure 6 depicts that 90% of rural women entrepreneurs are extremely satisfied with financial transactions, according to the pie chart, while 10% are just somewhat satisfied.

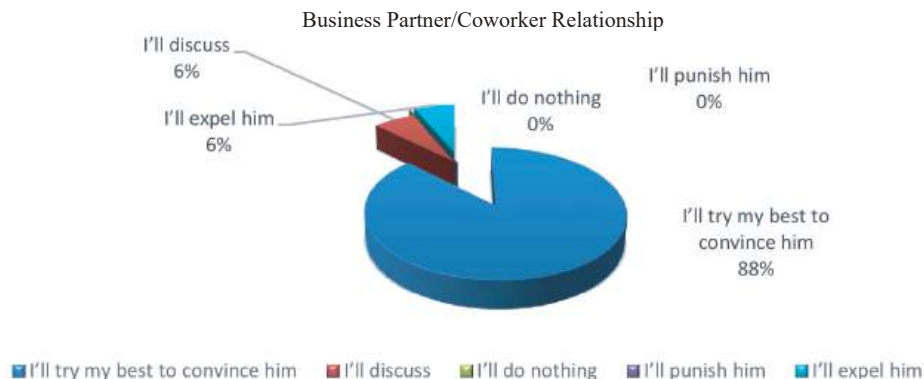


Figure 7.

Decision Making/Problem-solving if A co-worker/Business Partner is doing 100% Wrong in Business.

Source: Author's Derived.

Figure 7 shows that 87.50% of respondents would try to persuade a coworker or business partner who is utterly wrong in the workplace, whereas just 6.25% of respondents thought about bringing up the matter. Nobody said they were doing nothing.



Figure 8.

Delegating Responsibilities to a Manager.

Source: Authors Derived.

The majority of respondents (90%) said that they would delegate some authority while still keeping an eye on the work. Only 10% of respondents said they had delegated situationally; no one had complete authority or delegated without supervision.

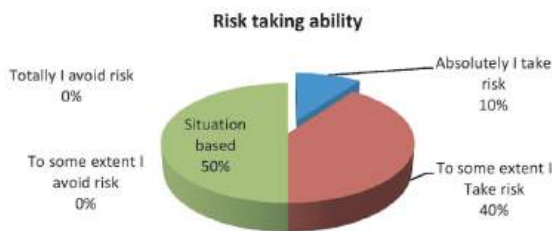
Table 6.

Decision Making on Reduction the Workforce to Reduce Cost in Financial Trouble.

Base	Percentage
Quality	70%
Discussion	30%
Total	100%

Source: Authors' calculation

The Table 6 shows that when faced with financial difficulties, 70% of rural women entrepreneurs choose to cut staff based on quality, while 30% choose to have conversations with staff members.

**Figure 9.**

*Risk Taking Ability.*Source: Authors Derived.

Source: Authors Calculation.

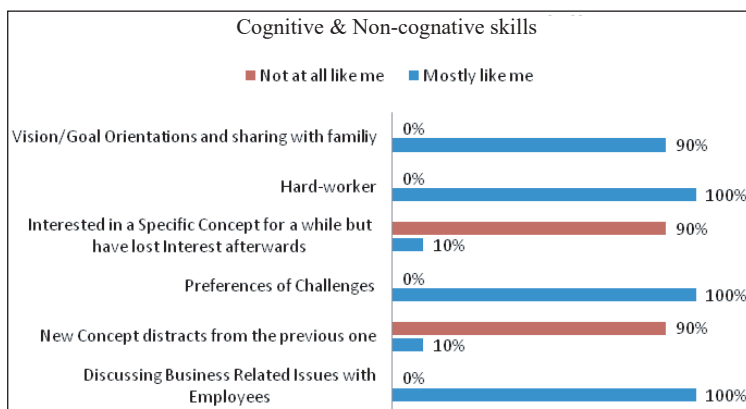
In terms of risk-taking prowess, the research indicates that 10% of rural women entrepreneurs fully embrace risk, 40% do so to some degree, and 50% make decisions dependent on the circumstances.

**Figure 10.**

Confident of being Successful as a Professional or as an Individual along with their colleagues.

Source: Authors Derived.

According to the research, rural women entrepreneurs have a high degree of confidence in their ability to succeed both personally and professionally. Of them, 10% think they are better than others, 80% feel they are simply better than their colleagues, and 10% are confident in their ability to succeed.

**Figure 11.**

Cognitive & non-cognitive Skills Rural Women Possess after Trainings.

Source: Authors Derived

Figure 11 illustrates the cognitive and non-cognitive skills possessed by rural women entrepreneurs after receiving training. It shows that these women are highly inclined to discuss business-related issues with employees (100%), prefer challenges (100%), are hard-working (100%), and maintain a goal-oriented vision (90%). Conversely, a majority is not easily distracted by new concepts (90%) and maintains their interest in specific concepts over time (90%). In contrast, the majority of individuals (90%) exhibit a notable resistance to being easily diverted by novel ideas and demonstrates a sustained level of engagement with particular concepts over an extended period.

Table 7.

List of Women Entrepreneurs' Opinions about the Benefits of Soft Skills Trainings.

Sl.No.	Benefits
1.	Helped to be a successful entrepreneur
2.	Firstly, soft skills are needed, then hard skills are helpful for business
3.	Improved For Business Performances
4.	Must need soft skills trainings
5.	Important to change them
6.	Becoming brave, effective, and hard-worker
7.	Increasing communication skills, leadership skills, Personal attributes and convincing power
8.	Finding out income source
9.	Increasing problem solving ability and decision making ability,
10.	Helping to set visions and visionary boards
11.	Increasing risk taking ability
12.	Increasing self-motivation and becoming self-dependent

Source: Authors Calculation

Table 7 presents a comprehensive overview of the perspectives expressed by women entrepreneurs regarding the advantages of receiving soft skills training. These benefits encompass enhanced company performance, greater leadership and communication abilities, heightened self-motivation, and the capacity to formulate visions and undertake risks. Ultimately, these outcomes contribute to the attainment of entrepreneurial success.

The empirical findings in table 3 and figure 11 identify the cognitive and non-cognitive soft skills received from training for instance communication, interpersonal, negotiations, leadership, time management, decision making ability, self-confident, self-motivation, visionary skills and critical skills which are necessary for rural women to thrive in their economic and non-economic endeavors. The empirical findings in table 4, table 5, table 6, and figure 4, figure 6, figure 7, figure 8, figure 9 and figure 10 show how rural women entrepreneurs overcome their problems such as problems of networking, convincing family, lack of confidence, self-motivation, braveness, communicating, leading, decision-making, managing time, taking risk, facing challenges, lack of proper relationships with customers, suppliers, and employees and how they are benefited mentioned in table 7. This is how it confirmed the proposed hypothesis 1 that soft skills trainings have significant impact on rural women's development in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the findings of the study suggest that almost 60% of female entrepreneurs in rural areas shown exceptional abilities in presenting and communicating, which played a significant role in achieving favorable outcomes in terms of product sales and service provision. A notable proportion of individuals additionally exhibited an elevated propensity for risk-taking, suggesting heightened levels of self-assurance and drive.

This study offers significant contributions regarding the advantages of soft skills training, encompassing greater communication aptitude, leadership proficiencies, improved problem-solving and decision-making competencies, as well as heightened self-motivation and self-reliance. In general, the research emphasizes the favorable influence of soft skills training on the development and entrepreneurial achievements of rural women. This stresses the need of implementing such programs in

order to facilitate their advancement and enhance their socio-economic empowerment within the context of Bangladesh.

6. Conclusion & Policy Implications

This study emphasizes the critical importance of soft skills training in enhancing the entrepreneurial capacities and overall progress of rural women in Bangladesh. This study combines empirical data analysis with ideas taken from current literature studies to shed light on the particular issues faced by female entrepreneurs operating in rural areas of the country. The study's findings provide important evidence that soft skills training plays a critical role in boosting women's confidence, leadership competences, and decision-making aptitude in Bangladesh as the country strives for socioeconomic growth.

This study recognizes the need of combining soft skills training into programs aimed at increasing women's empowerment across the country. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of taking into account environmental and cultural factors in Bangladesh in order to improve rural women's engagement and progression across multiple economic sectors. As a result of the study's findings, future initiatives and strategies should prioritize the enhancement of soft skills education in order to support the sustained growth and financial autonomy of women living in rural parts of Bangladesh.

Policymakers must prioritize the inclusion of soft skills training in projects aimed at promoting women's economic growth in Bangladesh's rural areas. This includes teaching in communication, leadership, and the development of decision-making skills. The goal is to give rural women entrepreneurs with training programs that are both accessible and tailored, with the goal of decreasing the gap between their current skill sets and the demands of their businesses. Policymakers must actively participate in attempts to reduce cultural barriers that prevent women from participating in economic ventures. This means creating an environment that is more welcoming and supportive to female entrepreneurs, hence increasing inclusion.

Policies should encourage women's empowerment, allowing them to succeed as entrepreneurs, supporting their economic autonomy, and increasing their overall economic effect on the nation. Policy measures aiming at increasing financial inclusion among rural women entrepreneurs have the potential to improve their access to critical resources, hence supporting the growth and development of their businesses. Recognizing and appreciating the significant contributions made by female entrepreneurs in rural areas to the economy and society is critical. Continuous research and data collection are critical in ensuring that policymakers are well-informed about the changing needs and challenges faced by rural women entrepreneurs. Collaboration among government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the corporate sector can improve the effectiveness of training programs and support mechanisms for women entrepreneurs. The policy implications offered in this discourse are developed from shared observations and are designed to accelerate the growth of rural women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh through improved soft skills training and support systems. Therefore, there is a compelling need for additional research in this field, specifically concentrating on the influence of soft skills training on the advancement of women. Additional inquiries may also offer valuable perspectives on the particular competencies and instructional methodologies that result in significant advantages for women across diverse settings.

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