



## **Challenges and Success Factors of Female Entrepreneurs: Evidence from a Developing Country**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Entrepreneurship is claimed as an important element to stimulate growth and development of most countries. It is also posited that female entrepreneurs took part and played a vital role in the economic development and helped to stabilize the economy particularly during the economic recession periods. Thus, this paper attempts to explore the success factors of women entrepreneurs in Malaysia, one of the developing countries in Asia. In addition, it also examines the challenges faced by these women in conducting their businesses. Interviews were conducted with ten successful female entrepreneurs. The interview results appear to indicate that support from family members is important and contribute to the sustainability of their businesses. In addition, their internal motivation and creativity help them to attract the customers and compete in the market. This study provides information to the regulators and government agencies about the training, support and financial resources needed by this group of entrepreneurs.

**Keywords:** Entrepreneurship, Female Entrepreneurs, Challenges, Success Factors

**JEL Classification:** L26

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Entrepreneurship has become an important element for growth and development of most countries, especially after the financial crisis and economic downturn (Sowmya et al., 2010). Entrepreneurship is also claimed as the major driver of economy in the developed and developing countries (Ramadani et al., 2015; Hisrich et al., 2006). It is also reported that entrepreneurship curriculum area is growing rapidly in business schools around the world. This indicates that a lot of countries have emphasized and promoted entrepreneurship to support their economy. The opportunity to create profit and being their own employer has attracted many people to be entrepreneurs (Rose et al., 2006).

Malaysia also is not an exception; Malaysian government supports and encourages the growth of entrepreneurs because entrepreneurial activities are considered as mechanism to improve the distribution of income, to develop growth of nation economy and to reshape the economic structure (Abdullah, 1999).

Entrepreneurship activities become popular in Malaysia after the economic crisis in Asian countries in 1997. Malaysian government plays a vital role in enhancing and supporting the entrepreneurial activities (Ariff and Abubakar, 2005). Various entrepreneurial plans and policies were conducted by the government such as Vision 2020, New Economic Policy (1971-1990), new economic model and National Development Policy (1990-2000) to develop the entrepreneurship interest in Malaysia (Othman et al., 2012).

Othman et al. (2012) claim that entrepreneurship in Malaysia is growing rapidly and steadily. However, Salleh and Osman (2007) claim that a women-owned business was least apparent as entrepreneurship has always been associated with men and masculinity. It is claimed that the percentage of women involved in entrepreneurial jobs is still considered small in number in Malaysia. Even though, the importance was given to the entrepreneurial activity, Alam et al. (2011) claimed that female growth is still significantly lower than men and the percentage of women entering new ventures is still considered small. This is

supported by Rozy (2009) which find that Malaysian females make half of the total population of the workforce in Malaysia, but only 15% of the Malaysian females have their own business venture. In addition, it is claimed that female entrepreneurs and their role in the economy are of interest to researchers, policymakers and the general population (Byrne and Fayolle, 2013; Ramadani et al., 2015).

Hence, this study is carried out to examine the female entrepreneurs' involvement in businesses. Specifically, it attempts to explore the factors that have motivated and influenced the success of female entrepreneurs in Malaysia. In addition, the study also examines the challenges that the women have to go through to be successful entrepreneurs.

The subsequent parts of the paper are structured as follows. The next section describes the relevant literature while Section 3 describes the methodology used in the research. Section 4 presents research's findings and discussions. Finally, the last section concludes the research.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sowmya et al. (2010) posit that entrepreneurship has the greatest force and has a big impact on growth, recovery and societal progresses by fulfilling the innovative criteria, job creation and social empowerment. Enterprises perform various measures to motivate and promote individuals to improve their skills to become successful entrepreneurs (Mason, 2006).

Despite the contributions of entrepreneurs to the economic development, it is claimed that there are differences between male and female entrepreneurs, the females tend to use the human capital differently compared to their male counterparts. It is also claimed that male entrepreneurs are more likely to challenge and depart from industry norms, while female entrepreneurs are more likely to engage in routine learning process and in accordance to the norms which helps to enhance their confidence (Ekanem, 2015). In addition, it is claimed that females view on their businesses are totally different from the way male do (Teoh and Chong, 2008). Some researchers claim that female entrepreneurs aim to achieve their intrinsic goals rather than maximizing the profit, they tend to perform less well on quantitative measures such as job creation, sales turnover and profitability. Some argue that these are due to the challenges that females have to go through in running the businesses. Thus, this study attempts to explore some of these challenges and their motivation factors.

### 2.1. Challenges Faced by Female Entrepreneurs

Davidson and Burke (2004) reported that although there is high rate of female participation in self-employment, but very limited study focus on them and only a few challenges were identified. It is found that many female entrepreneurs are still facing a lot of obstacles to start the business and during development phase of their enterprises. Halkias et al. (2011) posit that Nigerian women from small and micro scale industrial sectors were facing challenges such as low productivity, hard to get finance or capital and low labor force to enhance their businesses. Not

only in Nigeria, a study conducted by Jamali (2009), found that similar constraints were faced by female entrepreneurs from other developing countries. Problems such as work-family conflicts, difficulties to assess finance and entrepreneurial education, were found in the service sectors and retail businesses where women were involved (Itani et al., 2011). An earlier study by Tambunan (2009) found that similar challenges were faced by the female entrepreneurs in Indonesia. Among the challenges were low level of education and lack of training opportunities, heavy household chores, legal or cultural constraints and lack of access to formal credit. Tambunan further reported that female entrepreneurs in Nepal have low self-confidence and high risk of sexual harassment. In United Arab Emirates (UAE), most of the female entrepreneurs reported that their main constraints were low financial aids, low knowledge of industries and low management skills (Itani et al., 2011). In addition, it is reported that women have a lot of family responsibilities. Married female entrepreneurs with children are found to be more difficult to manage their family and business compared to those not married (Winn, 2005).

### 2.2. Motivation and Success Factors to become Successful Entrepreneurs

Itani et al. (2011) claimed that three major factors which contribute to women entrepreneurs' success include family support, self-confidence to achieve their target and increased profits. Prior studies posited that females are influenced to start the business either due to pull or push factors or combination of both (Brush, 1999; Buttner and Moore, 1997). It can also be due to either internal factors including personal life (such as divorce) or external factors (such as job redundancy, higher rate of unemployment) that made them push ahead (Itani et al., 2011). Other pull factors include their strive to get self-satisfaction or to maintain social status and their independence (Sarri and Trihopoulou, 2005). The push and pull approach can be used together, for example, women turn to business ownership in both factors because of job dissatisfaction and market opportunity (Ramadani et al, 2015; Hisrich and Brush, 1987).

Family is a crucial part and most important to a woman's throughout their life (Alam et al., 2011). Most women start up their businesses and expand them with the helps from family and their peer supports. Without them, the entrepreneurs may find difficulties to manage their daily businesses. Even though they are motivated themselves, they still need family full support to become successful in their businesses due to women plays an important role to both sides; working in their workplace and at home (Alam et al., 2011). A lot of women-owned enterprises are family-based business where family members, relatives and close friends are part of the work team (Ahmad, 2011). According to Javadian and Singh (2012), majority of the entrepreneurs referred to their close family members as their main source of financial, informational and emotional support. Brindley (2005) stated that the main source of support and aids came from family and their friends during the initial business phase. This notion is supported by Golrod (2005) which suggest that support provided by family and friends contributes to women entrepreneurs' success in Iran. Family members such as husband and/or father played an important role in their success (Javadian and Singh, 2012). Alam et al. (2011)

also found that there is a significant relationship between family supports and the success of a woman entrepreneur.

Previous studies identified social network as one of the tools frequently used by the female entrepreneurs (Teoh and Chong, 2008). Female entrepreneurs get access to their potential investors and customers and obtain various ideas to develop their enterprises through social network (Aldrich et al., 1987; Teoh and Chong, 2008). This communication is a powerful tool to discuss problems and exchange their opinions through a team or group of social networks (Alam et al., 2011). This is supported by Buttner (1993) who claimed that this network is very important to update their knowledge in gaining access to loans, advisory from the related organization and information needed in forming new venture.

Another factor which is claimed to be important to be successful entrepreneurs in previous studies is internal motivation (Murphy et al., 1996). It is posited that entrepreneurship success resulted from external factors has low relevance if the entrepreneurs do not see themselves as successful. A highly motivated female entrepreneur will perform well by putting more initiatives since she has interest to develop her business (Alam et al., 2011). It is considered as one of the pull factor that motivates the entrepreneurs to act positively (Naser et al., 2009). Orhan and Scott (2001) claimed that female entrepreneurs were motivated to achieve based on their needs and wants. Jamali (2009) claimed that women able to overcome their problems through a combination of personal attitudes such as their passion, determination, hard work, perseverance, ambition, strong personality, self-confidence, autonomy, and devotion to work during their business development. Kirkwood (2009) supported this notion by claiming that entrepreneurs' lack of self-confidence may hinder them from growth and business development.

Prior studies defined female entrepreneurs as passionate, positive, optimistic, and driven to pursue her ideas but later on, they were best described as a person full of curiosity, plenty of ideas and has high solving problem skills through creative solutions (Orser et al., 2011). Creative individual who can provide more innovative products is recognized as an important competitive advantage (Bertoncelj et al., 2009). This concept is associated with being creative thinker/problem solver and the abilities to use their imagination and creativity to innovate as well as generate new ideas in order to solve problems smartly. Kandasami and Tibbits, (1993) reported that female self-employers tend to be more motivated to start their new own businesses as they want to be their own boss, to gain economic independence, as well as to get job satisfaction and opportunity to be more creative.

Revolution of modern technology has rapidly emerged and the internet becomes one of the important tools in business environment (Alam et al., 2011; Qureshi et al., 2014). The use of technology is vital for business owners today to get updated information and sharpen their strategies in running their businesses (Teoh and Chong, 2008). Technology provides greater access of market, networking opportunities and greater capabilities which is a competitive advantage for female entrepreneurs (Teoh and Chong, 2008). Computerization and office automation using Internet have facilitated great advantages to business companies

such as high productivity, job freedom, work quality improvement, and nurture good responsibility on one's own work (Millman and Hartwick, 1987; Alamer, 2015).

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employed data collected via primary source. Ten female entrepreneurs from small and micro scale businesses in Selangor were interviewed to get more insight of the issue. These selected entrepreneurs must have been in business for at least 1 year.

Prior to the interviews, the samples chosen were contacted via telephone to obtain their agreement to participate in the interview. Before starting each interview, the participants were informed about the purpose of the interview and the related research objectives. A permission to record the interview was put forward before the interview session begins. The participants were also assured of the confidentiality of the information.

A semi-structured questionnaire was utilized as a guideline for the interview, where the questions were revolving on the entrepreneurs experience, the challenges and motivation for their success in their businesses. The interviews, which were conducted in January 2013, ranged in duration from thirty minutes to forty five minutes for each interviewee. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### 4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Ten interviews were conducted with female entrepreneurs who have been in business for at least 1 year. Two of them are single mothers and another eight are married. All of them have children. Three of them have been in business for <5 years, another three have been in business between 5 and 10 years, and another four have been in business for more than 10 years. They are providing beauty and bridal services, tailoring, hair saloon, wedding decoration services, and managing a grocery store. These businesses are their first own businesses except for two entrepreneurs who claimed that these are their second business after the loss of the first one. All of them started the business on their own except for one who inherited the business from her family. Two of them have diploma, while the others had their secondary education.

#### 4.2. Interview Results

Interviews attempt to gain information and feedbacks from the respondents about their personal experience in building their businesses. Besides that, the qualitative data collection also focused on the major challenges that faced by the female entrepreneurs to start their new businesses and throughout their businesses.

##### 4.2.1. Motivation to form the business

From the interview results, it was found that majority of them started the business from their own interest in that field. This

interest motivated them to start learning about the business and some of them attended short courses to sharpen their skills. While a few others started to gain experience in the field by working with others and when they are confident and have the needed capital they started the business on their own, which at first in small scale.

*"It is my dream to open a salon. I am very interested to form this business. Previously I worked at other hair salon shop as an assistant. I gained so much experiences and skills related to hair cutting" (Mrs. G).*

*"I am so interested to open the bridal shop. I had undergone few courses regarding arts such as bridal arts to develop my skills and to become an expertise. I should take more courses to sharpen my skills" (Mrs. A).*

*"...I am very interested to open the business. I like arts and beauty care such as henna arts, nail arts, body and face treatment. My curiosity leads me to form the business. Before I start to form the enterprise, I worked with others to gain experience. At the same time, I studied part time for 2 years and take related courses to develop my skills" (Mrs. C).*

*"I took some related courses to improve my skills after my SPM" (Mrs. E).*

Most of them agreed that this interest is their main driver and motivator which lead them to their success in their businesses. They claimed that they are successful because they are passionate about what they are doing and really focus on it.

In addition, they claim that as they are doing things that they enjoy and of interest to them, these businesses also give them self-satisfaction.

*"This is my dream since I was in secondary school. Thus, when, I open the business I get self-satisfaction" (Mrs. C).*

*"...I start my own business for my self-satisfaction. I have so much time and bored being a housewife" (Mrs. D).*

However, two of the respondents disagreed that the major reason for starting a business is due to interest and self-satisfaction. They argued that some may get involved in the business because they are trusted by their family to take over the business or maybe they have no choice but to start a business to support their family. They commented that:

*"I inherited the business and open a new branch to assist my father after my SPM. I'm not really so interested to open one, but I have to take the responsibility as I am the oldest in the family. I just want to help my father. That's all" (Mrs. F).*

*"I need to support my family ...I believe that by having my own business it can lead to a better future for my family....." (Mrs. H).*

Some of the comments also show that these women have the determination to be successful in their fields. They make sacrifices,

willing to take risk and really work towards their objectives. One of the respondents cited that:

*"Now I am 23 years old and I owned a hair salon. I quit from my secondary school after form 2 because I'm more interested to own a business. With the help of my mother, I achieved my dream and I have been in this business for 5 years" (Mrs. G).*

The above comment also indicates that the support of people around them, such as their parents, husband and siblings are important for their success. This fact is supported by other respondents too.

*"My father and my husband are fully supportive of me. They understand me and assist me to develop my business" (Mrs. A).*

*"... I decided to open a new business after I discussed with my family and husband" (Mrs. D).*

*"...my husband encouraged me to form the business. He is always there for me. I'm so lucky to have such a good husband" (Mrs. E).*

*"... Currently my father and I have our own businesses. Initially, I often get involved and helped my father since I'm young. Then I inherited the business and open a new branch to assist my father after my SPM. My father is always there to support and guide me if I need advice" (Mrs. F).*

*"When I was small, I learned to sew dresses and clothes because my whole family including my grandmother and grandfather do tailoring jobs. They are always there to help and support me if I have problem" (Mrs. J).*

Some of the respondents also cited that they do not want to work under the direction of others and would like to be the boss. Being their own boss give them the flexibility to manage their own time and family matters. They commented that:

*"...I don't want to work for others. I believe that by having my own business can lead to a better future for my family" (Mrs. H).*

*"...I don't want to work for others. I would like to have my own business. I would like to be self-employer" (Mrs. B).*

*"...Being the boss give me more flexible time.... Nobody can scold me if I go out for personal matters or come in late for work" (Mrs. A).*

#### 4.2.2. Challenges faced by female entrepreneurs

The respondents were also asked about the challenges that they have to face in the running of their businesses. Most of them highlighted that financial problem was the most challenging part to get their business on the road. Seven out of 10 female entrepreneurs faced problems in getting capital to start their businesses. They tried to get bank loans but as the businesses have just started and due to non-existence of track record they cannot get the loan. They commented that:

*"I found difficulties during start up time and throughout my business. I tried to get a loan from the bank. But they asked for bank balances and some documents to support the business stability. But that time I have just started and my business do not have good record yet"* (Mrs. C).

*"I did not have enough capital before I start my business. I tried to apply to so many banks to get loan but they will only give loan after 2 years of business establishment"* (Mrs. E).

*"I have financial problem to open up my business and to buy things"* (Mrs. H).

This finding is consistent with an earlier study by Itani et al. (2011). Itani et al. (2011) found that the female entrepreneurs in UAE were also facing the problem of getting the start-up capital for their businesses.

The second biggest challenge for these women is their time management. In order to attract the customers and get repeat orders they have to ensure that their customers are satisfied with their services. They claim that they have problem dividing their time between family, business and customers. This is especially when their nature of business and demand from customers may require them to work at odd hours to satisfy their customers. They are all mothers and have children to attend to. They claim that at times they go to work before their children wake up and come home after everyone is in bed. They commented that:

*"The most challenging experience was to allocate time to meet customer demand. My work is uncertain because I may have to work during day time and night. I prepare myself to fulfill my customer demand no matter what time. For example, wedding ceremonies sometimes are in the morning or night. If it is in the morning, I have to go early to make-up for the bridals"* (Mrs. A).

*"I couldn't balance my time with my family and my work"* (Mrs. B).

*"I have problem to balance my time with family, my career and my business"* (Mrs. C).

This finding is consistent with an earlier study which reported that women entrepreneurs found difficulties in balancing their family responsibilities and their business obligations (Winn, 2005), which at times may compromise the success of their businesses.

Another challenging part is the tough competition in their business field. Most of the respondents said that due to high competition their profit is low. This causes them to shift their business to another area for their business survival. Four out of 10 agreed that their customer demand decreased due to competitiveness of the business.

*"I faced a lot of problem at my first place because that area has many competitors. It gives impact to my profit levels"* (Mrs. H).

The interview results also appear to indicate that these ladies may need assistance to increase their knowledge and their skills in their business. For example, one of the respondents cited that:

*"I have difficulty in setting prices for our services. I always follow the market price but customers said that the prices are very high"* (Mrs. H).

*"I have limited knowledge to open the business, but I am not sure where should I go to sharpen my skills"* (Mrs. B).

These comments indicate that they need additional training or courses to understand how to run their businesses efficiently and to attract their customers, such as how to do the costing and setting of prices for their products so that they can offer attractive prices. The related agencies and ministries may need to pay more attention to them.

#### 4.2.3. How do they overcome the problems?

The women were also asked about how do they solve the problems above.

Most of them claimed that they solved their financial problems by borrowing from their family members, and close friends. Some of them do multiple jobs to get more money to solve the financial problem.

*"I get financial support from my close friend. She is my business friend also. She lends me some money for my business development. Besides that, I worked as a part timer to earn extra income"* (Mrs. C).

*"At first, I could not get loan from the bank. As a result, I tried to sell the prayer items by selling directly to the customers. That time I haven't established my business yet"* (Mrs. B).

*"My mother supports me by lending me some money to open my business and purchases of business assets"* (Mrs. G).

*"Before I form the business we did small product sales in my residential area. From the money I saved. I also get financial support from my family especially my husband, they are so helpful and supportive"* (Mrs. H).

These comments indicate that they do not get much assistance from local bank in financing their businesses. Possibly, this is one of the areas that can be improved and need further attention from the authority to help these small scale entrepreneurs to move forward and sustain in their businesses.

When asked about the time management, the women mentioned that they tried their best to spend more time with their families. And again the help from family members play a role. Some of them manage to get their mothers and mother in laws to help them taking care of the children. Those who cannot get any help from anywhere just make the best of what they have.

*"My mother-in-law agreed to take care of my children. I try to allocate my time to spend and teach my children"* (Mrs. B).

*"My children are under my family-in-law custody. Somehow I allocate my time for my husband and my children"* (Mrs. C).

*If I work my husband will take care of our baby and when I'm free I will take care of him. My husband is always there for me" (Mrs. E).*

In order to overcome the competition in the market, these entrepreneurs use their creativity in promoting their products by offering at discounts at certain seasons and use technology. Besides using pamphlets, e-mails and SMS, they also use face book and Instagram to market their products and reach wider location of customers. They commented that:

*"In order to increase my sales, I use technology such as Facebook. This helps to get more new customers after seeing my services in that network. It is easier for me to promote latest products, customer feedback, obtain various ideas and so on. I always aim for customer satisfaction" (Mrs. D).*

#### **4.2.4. Success factors for female entrepreneurs**

Among the last questions asked to these entrepreneurs are about the back bone and main supporters of their success. A few factors were suggested to them and they were asked to decide which one is the main contributor to their success today. Among the factors suggested are family support, good social network, their own internal motivation (such as creativity, self-confidence and skills) and technology (such as face book, Instagram, etc.). They are also encouraged to add in other factors which they felt have motivated and contributed to their business sustainability. Nine out of 10 respondents ranked family support as the most important and the main contributor to their success. They commented that:

*"My business is fully supported by my family, my close friends and my husband. They are the backbone of my success" (Mrs. A).*

*"Without my husband, I could not make this achievement. Thanks to him" (Mrs. D).*

*"My husband is the backbone of my success. Without him I cannot imagine what would happen to me. He is always there for me" (Mrs. E).*

*"My father is my hero. I'm so lucky to have him. My husband also was supportive before he met in an accident" (Mrs. F).*

*"My mother and my husband are the primary reason for my success" (Mrs. G).*

There are two single mothers among the interviewees. These are their comments:

*"When my husband left me, my mother was the only support at that time. Now she is getting older. Thanks to my mum for everything. She is the backbone of my success" (Mrs. J).*

*"I don't get anyone's support. I develop my business on my own. Somehow I manage my capitals, licenses, shop lots and other matters. I guess my determination to ensure that my children's welfare are taken care of contribute to my success. One should have high inner motivation first then only, work for it. I think nothing is impossible to do" (Mrs. I).*

This finding is consistent with the claim that strong support from insider (family) is very important for female entrepreneur (such as husband or parents) than outsider supports such as former employers and business collaborators (Teoh and Chong, 2008). In the case of female entrepreneurs, husband is the closest person in a female's life, thus easier to share her ideas, get aids, advice and emotional support (Krishna, 2003). And the push factor, such as divorce or welfare of children may also be the reason for female success.

The interview results also appear to suggest that the combinations of internal motivation, creativity and use of technology are other factors which contribute to their success. They commented that:

*"I use Facebook to promote my services to my customers and friends and I get many customers from there. I always improve my service by taking into consideration all the feedback from customers. People come to me because of the uniqueness of my products" (Mrs. A).*

*"I am successful today because of my initiative, my efforts and hard work. I am very creative in giving my services to the customers" (Mrs. A).*

*"I am highly motivated and my characters made me successful. I'm very friendly to customers and I get high demand on seasonal time such as Hari Raya, school holidays and so on. I have high self-confidence. Without that, I could not achieve this level" (Mrs. G).*

*"I like to do arts such as Kolam design and like to surf internet to get more ideas. Customers always expect me to offer more alternatives. In order to satisfy them, I like to be more creative and imaginative. This is because my business needs differentiation from my competitors. It is an advantage for me over competitors" (Mrs. F).*

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The results from the interviews appear to suggest that pull and push factors can contribute to the female entrepreneurs' success. Pull factors such as their strive to get self-satisfaction and to maintain their independent, and the push factors such as divorce and hardship in life make these women determined to work hard and achieve their objectives. In addition, the result from this study is also consistent with the earlier findings by Alam et al. (2011) and Javadian and Singh (2012), which claimed that strong support from insiders, such as parents and/or husbands is very important to female entrepreneurs. Other factors such as creativity, skills and internal motivation also assist them in attracting their customers.

The most challenging experience in the running of their businesses appears to be the insufficient/lacking of financial support especially during the early start of their businesses. This finding provides information to the related agencies and the government about the requirement of this group of entrepreneurs and hopefully more financial assistance can be arranged and be provided to them. The finding also highlights the insufficient knowledge in certain areas which may be required to ensure the sustainability of their

businesses. More training may be considered to be provided to small and micro scale entrepreneurs and the responsible agencies must ensure that the information reach them timely.

The study has several limitations which suggest the implications for further research. The major limitation of the study is the extent to which the study can be generalised to wider population of small businesses since it was based on only ten interviews. Future studies can include more samples from various races and states. Secondly, instead of interviewing, future research can employ and develop questionnaire to specifically address the issues/factors highlighted in this study. Future research also may explore the kind of assistance needed by this group of entrepreneurs.

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