

# The Challenges of Women Entrepreneurs in Malaysia: A Systematic Literature Review

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## Abstract

*This study aims to conduct empirical research on the challenges of women entrepreneurs in Malaysia, to emphasize the research topics that have yet to get attention, and to propose potential for further research. This study aimed to conduct a systematic literature review (SLR) on ten scholarly papers published between 2019 and 2023 and focused on women entrepreneurs in Malaysia. Ten themes underlie the empirical research on women entrepreneurs' challenges in Malaysia. These themes are as follows: work-life balance, technology factors, e-business adoption, perceived privacy, perceived security, ICT, limited access to financial resources, legal constraint, gender inequality and mentorship. The scope of this review is restricted to women entrepreneurs in Malaysia. Scopus and Google Scholar were the only two databases that made it onto the SLR. This study is one study to employ a systematic approach to provide a complete overview of the current status of the literature on the challenges of women's entrepreneurship research in Malaysia..*

**Keywords:** *Women entrepreneurs; Women entrepreneurship; Challenges; Systematic literature review*

## ARTICLE INFORMATION

Received: 22 Apr 2024

Revised: 22 May 2024

Accepted: 05 Jun 2024

Published: 01 Jul 2024

## 1.0. INTRODUCTION

The expansion of Malaysia has been significantly influenced by the contributions of small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs), mainly when Malaysian economic reforms have been in effect. It has been reported by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) that women constitute 48.62 per cent of the total population of Malaysia (DOSM, 2021). According to Noraini (2022), there were over 180,000 small and medium-sized companies in Malaysia in 2021, and they substantially contributed to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) of roughly RM70 billion. In light of this, small and medium-sized make a substantial contribution to the economic development of Malaysia at large. For the past sixty years, the Malaysia Plan has been the guiding and directing force behind SMEs' strategy planning and development. The 12th Malaysia Plan (12MP) emphasizes women's empowerment in the economic sector by providing enhanced access to funding and training programmes, particularly to facilitate the use of technology by women entrepreneurs. In addition, the

12MP incorporates strategies for the Shared Prosperity Vision (SPV) 2030, the Fourth Industrial Master Plan (IMP4), the New SME Master Plan (2021-2030), and the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint.

The research predicts that there will be an increase in the number of women entrepreneurs in the future, bringing women closer to their male counterparts for business ownership. However, the percentage of women opting for entrepreneurial careers is lower than that of men (Elam et al., 2019), and this gap widens as the country's level of development increases (Coduras & Autio, 2013). In Malaysia, out of 907,065 businesses, 187,265 are owned by women, representing 20.6% of the total (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019). This indicates that the percentage of women entrepreneurs is relatively small, not exceeding 20.6% compared to men entrepreneurs, including their contribution to economic growth in the country. Although women entrepreneurs contribute less to a country's economic growth than men, research on women entrepreneurs in developing nations

like Malaysia still needs to be more extensive than in developed countries (Link & Strong, 2016; Ahmad et al., 2018). Women are believed to encounter more obstacles and challenges than men, hindering their participation in entrepreneurial activities (Mahat et al., 2021; Basit et al., 2020). Therefore, because the number of women entrepreneurs in Malaysia is growing, it is fascinating to observe the obstacles women face when they enter the realm of business. In order to make their way into the field of entrepreneurship, women are needed to overcome several predetermined challenges. There are many administrative roles women hold in Malaysia; however, due to the proliferation of new businesses, males have taken over (Flannery, 2013). According to Teoh and Chong (2014), it has been found that just twenty per cent of all business visionaries in Malaysia are considered to be women. According to Flannery (2013), the potential reasons behind this low incidence of women businesses are believed to be associated with the preferences of culture and financing professionals. Additionally, it has been determined that even though Malaysia is developing and that the role of women is shifting, Malaysian women continue to face abnormally high levels of inequality in the areas of business, informal communities, education, and access to money.

Several review papers have been written on women's entrepreneurship in developed nations as their primary focus (Guerrero et al., 2021; Cardella et al., 2020). A few review papers have focused on specific aspects of women's entrepreneurship like women entrepreneurs in the STEM field (Poggesi et al., 2020), work-family conflict (Narayanan & Barbanas, 2020), the well-being of entrepreneurs (Chatterjee et al., 2020; Banu & Baral, 2022), or factors of success (Rastogi et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2021). In the past, there have been very few review studies that have focused on countries like India (for example, Rastogi et al., 2022), Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2020), Botswana (Rudhumbu et al., 2020), Africa (Adula & Kant, 2022), Qatar (Al-Qahtani et al., 2022), and South Korea (Cho et al., 2021). A few review papers on women entrepreneurs are available in the Malaysian context (for example, Chipfunde et al., 2021; Mahat et al., 2021; Basit et al., 2020; Noor et al., 2022). These studies review the challenges of women entrepreneurs. Consequently, this article found a need for an SLR document that provides a summary and presentation of the status of research on the challenges of women entrepreneurs in Malaysia. Furthermore, this study concluded that an SLR of empirical publications on the challenges of women

entrepreneurs in Malaysia. A literature review was conducted in Malaysia, and the results of this study provide answers to one research question: What are the challenges of women entrepreneurs in Malaysia? This study provides the specifics of the keywords used for searching the databases and the procedure utilized to filter the articles obtained from the database search. The methodology utilized to lead the SLR is presented in the next section. The review's findings are presented in the next part, and the conclusion provides a summary of the directions that future studies should pursue. As seen in Figure 1, the procedure that was followed during the review is described.

## 2.0. WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN MALAYSIA: AN OVERVIEW

The term "entrepreneurship" is distinguished from other terms by the wide range of definitions currently available in the written word. According to Ramadani and Hisrich (2015), entrepreneurial activity is one of the fundamental drivers of the economy. This holding holds in both developed and developing nations. According to Shane (2003), entrepreneurship is identifying, analyzing, and capitalizing on opportunities to bring new products and services, processes, or, in some instances, an entirely new market. From the perspective of Timmons (1999), entrepreneurship can be defined as a manner of thinking, reasoning, and acting focused on opportunities, a holistic approach, and balanced leadership. Kuratko and Hodgetts (2004) state that entrepreneurship is "a dynamic process of vision, change, and creation."

Across the entirety of Malaysia, women and men alike are operating businesses in every commercial area. Malaysia is home to a large number of small businesses. For those interested in entrepreneurship in Malaysia, there is some fascinating information to consider. Over a decade, there has been a statistically significant rise in the number of individuals with higher levels of education, which has had a good impact on entrepreneurial endeavours. A further aspect that should be brought out in this context is that, in recent years, a more significant number of women than men have advanced degrees. The degree to which women engage in entrepreneurial endeavours differs from country to country, and as a result, their influence on innovation and employment creation varies. If women do not participate in the entrepreneurial process, the potential of fifty per cent of the world's population to generate employment opportunities is lost (Kelley et al., 2012).

Developing countries confront different challenges regarding entrepreneurship and SMEs than industrialized countries. Even in developing nations undergoing transformation, integrated finance or factor markets still need to be fully developed, and they frequently lack political stability (Dolles & Babo, 2003). According to Moghavvemi and Salleh (2014), the challenges that entrepreneurs face in developing countries are as follows: business environments that are unstable and highly bureaucratic; complicated business registrations and taxation systems; laws that are poorly designed and enforced regarding contracts and property; inadequate infrastructure; poor policies; limited access to capital; corruption; and a lack of managerial experiences. The establishment of private companies in Malaysia encourages business owners to cultivate political connections to improve their chances of success. This is because weak institutions in Malaysia are a barrier to development. Malaysian institutions operate in a completely different context from those in Western countries, characterized by a culture heavily influenced by Asian traditions.

According to Teoh and Chong (2014), another issue that may arise is a need for more information on the difficulties that women entrepreneurs experience. They may be unaware of the fact that long-standing cultural practices that are biased against women may appear to be “natural” in the culture. Hence, unpaid domestic chores may not be regarded as discriminatory. Furthermore, In Malaysia, Chipfunde et al. (2021) reported that inadequate family support, limited access to loans and financing, lack of mentorship, and poor individual traits, all of which diminish the overall performance of women entrepreneurs in Malaysia. They are also believed to encounter significant business challenges, including limited financial support, socio-cultural constraints, regulatory limitations, and insufficient education (Mahat et al., 2021; Basit et al., 2020). The following section will discuss the techniques and research approaches utilized to carry out the literature review effectively.

### 3.0. SLR AS METHODOLOGY

Researchers can gain a historical perspective of a research topic through the use of a literature review, which also serves to direct future research in that field. Although there are many other types of review papers, one of the most often accepted ways is a systematic literature review, which is also referred to as a “structured”

literature review. This method is particularly useful in business management research since it assists in describing, identifying, evaluating, and interpreting the research that is currently accessible on a subject (Tranfield et al., 2003). According to Linan and Fayolle (2015), SLR guarantees that the outcomes are methodical, objective, transparent, and susceptible to replication. An approved approach for conducting reviews in the subject of women's entrepreneurship is the systematic literature review (SLR), which has been recognized by academics (for example, Baral et al., 2023; Rashid & Ratten, 2020; Correa et al., 2022; Sagara, 2021). The review procedure will be broken down into a few steps in the following part.

### 3.1. Review protocol

The purpose of this study was to look for empirical publications, both qualitative and quantitative, that focused on women entrepreneurs in Malaysia. Hemalatha and Senthil Nayaki (2014) define women entrepreneurs as “women or groups of women who initiate, organize, and operate a business enterprise.” This description is the most comprehensive definition of women entrepreneurs that we have come across. The search was open from the year 2019 to December 2023. For the SLR, only Scopus and Google Scholar, which were published in English, were taken into consideration. The keyword combinations “woman” OR “women” OR “female” AND “entrepreneur\*” AND “Malaysia\*” were searched for in the title, keywords, and abstract fields of this study. Initially, this resulted in 1082 articles being obtained from the Scopus and Google Scholar databases. After reviewing the abstracts of the produced publications, the researcher made sure they were pertinent to the SLR. Additionally, a few duplicate articles were excluded from the list, resulting in seventy-two studies.

### 3.2. Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion of Articles

The paper had to be pertinent to the challenges faced by women's entrepreneurship in Malaysia to meet the qualifications for inclusion. The study did not include dissertations, theses, working papers, review articles, perspectives, trade journal articles, book chapters, or conference proceedings. This decision was made based on suggestions from prior review studies (De Vita et al., 2014). Within the scope of this procedure, a total of 28 papers were eliminated from the SLR, and ten papers were

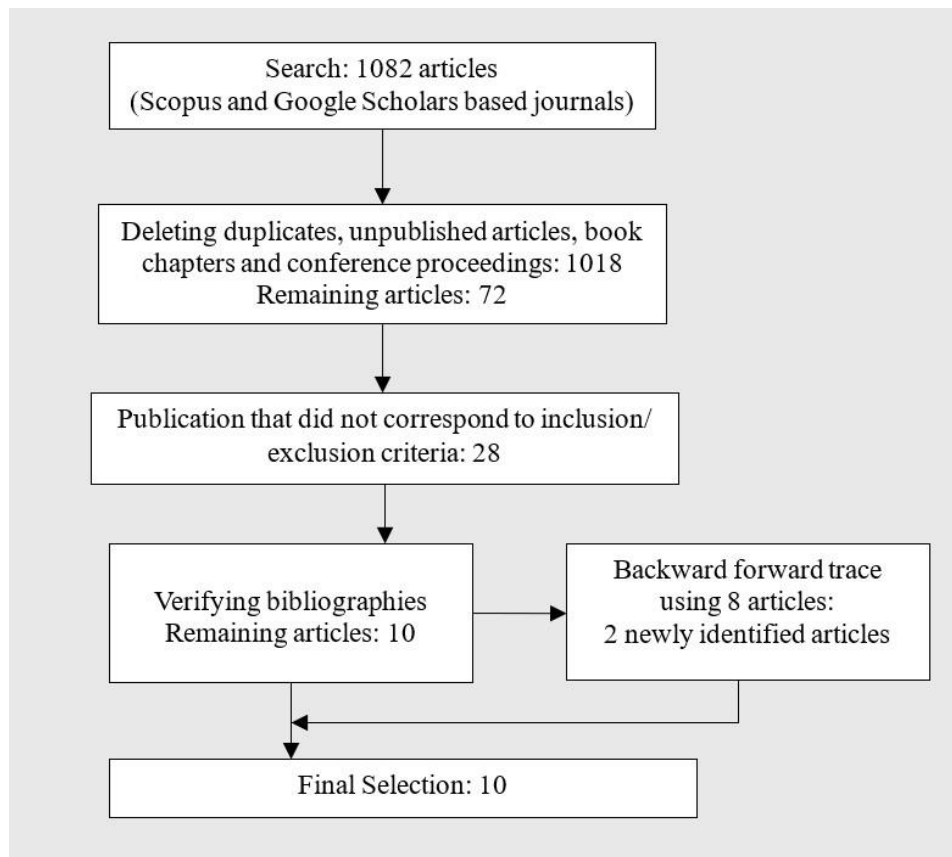


Figure 1: Flowchart for SLR Process

chosen for inclusion during the initial screening. These ten papers were subjected to a forward-backwards reference tracing to guarantee that no pertinent papers were overlooked or omitted due to oversight. During the backward search, the references that were included in each of the articles that were chosen were examined. During the forward search, all the publications that cited the chosen studies were examined. Using this manual procedure, it could locate two additional pertinent articles, resulting in the collection of ten articles. The lack of a star (\*) in the list of references indicates that the entire list of articles included in the SLR is presented there. An illustration of the selection procedure for the papers included in SLR is presented in Figure 1, a flow chart.

### 3.3. Data Extraction Process

The extraction of data from the chosen publications was accomplished through content analysis. A grid was constructed with the information regarding the articles that were chosen. This grid contained the following information: the study's title, the author or authors, the journal's name, the year of publication, the objective, and the findings. A reflective thematic analysis method was

utilized in this research project (Byrne, 2022; Linan & Fayolle, 2015) to analyze and classify the ten papers per the themes that surfaced from every one of them. Every paper is built on a foundation of essential concepts and arguments represented by the themes. These ten main themes contributed to the challenges women entrepreneurs encounter in today's business world. A comprehensive discussion of the specifics of the themes can be found in the following section.

## 4.0. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The paper's main goal was to present the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in Malaysia. The following section presents the themes of these challenges.

### 4.1. Theme I - Work-life Balance

It was difficult for most women entrepreneurs to balance their professional and family lives, and they frequently experienced conflicts between their work and personal lives (Uddin, 2021; Cardella et al., 2020). According to Panda (2018), this is a problem faced by women entrepreneurs everywhere. When it comes to

predicting work-life conflict, it was discovered that the stages of the family life cycle of women entrepreneurs play a significant role. According to Sehgal and Khandelwal (2018), younger women on the verge of entering family life face more challenges than older women with well-established families. Women need help with exploring jobs as entrepreneurs (Gupta et al., 2013). This is because the perception of opportunities and dangers is related to gender.

#### **4.2. Theme II - Technology Factors**

It has been reported by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2017) that the contribution of women-owned enterprises to the value of gross output and value added is less than five per cent. The contribution is significantly smaller when compared to businesses that men own. According to Ghouse et al. (2021), women-owned businesses typically contribute lesser profits and lower product quality than men's enterprises. Although Malaysia has a high rating in terms of digital readiness, its business digitalization status does not reflect this. Most conventional Malaysian small and medium-sized enterprises need more technical knowledge, preparedness, and skill.

#### **4.3. Theme III - E-Business Adoption**

According to Zhu et al.'s (2020) findings, small and medium-sized enterprises should implement e-business adoption at many process levels to develop the necessary capability to improve their competitive advantage. According to Huawei (2018), most SMEs in Malaysia have adopted e-business to optimize their administrative work. Emails, data entry, websites, and responses to inquiries from internal and external sources are all examples of activities that fall under the category of e-communication. Additionally, e-businesses can keep information about SMEs in a secure environment by limiting access to all confidential information to workers from the company (Thottoli & Ahmed, 2021). In addition, platforms such as Lazada and Shopee have become the primary choice for small and medium-sized enterprises to trade goods, services, or information and services. According to Depaoli et al. (2020), the virtual platform functions similarly to the traditional brick-and-mortar shopping experience, allowing customers to pick, view, transmit, and pay for online purchases. Since the

epidemic, there has been a notable rise in the significance of conducting business online.

#### **4.4. Theme IV - Perceived Privacy**

According to Rath and Kumar (2021), perceived privacy determines how secret information is to be protected and prevented from being disclosed to the general public. Small and medium-sized enterprises must have an understanding of the risks that are linked with the adoption of e-business in terms of privacy and prevention. According to Michota (2013), the disclosure of personal information is a sacrifice of privacy at the altar of profit, which prevents women from actively entering the adoption of e-business. As a result, the adoption of e-business by small and medium-sized enterprises has grown more difficult due to concerns about privacy (Narwane et al., 2020).

#### **4.5. Theme V - Perceived Security**

Perceived security has emerged as one of the most contentious concerns about the implementation of e-business (Ghouchani et al., 2020). This is mostly attributable to the fact that cyberattacks can cause irreparable damage, such as the disclosure of confidential information and commercial trade secrets. It has been said by Thottoli and Ahmed (2021) that organizations are concerned with perceived security because of the impact that it has on the reputation of the firm. Alsheyadi (2020), on the other hand, believes that adopting e-business can raise the level of security in planning and control among users.

#### **4.6. Theme VI - ICT**

According to Beninger et al. (2016), implementing information and communication technology facilitates opening new doors for women entrepreneurs, allowing them to connect with the global market, suppliers, and customers in a more organized fashion. If a company does not have a suitable system, it is possible that it will not have a standardized guideline for normal operations, which could result in financial losses. It has also been argued that the primary challenges that women entrepreneurs have when it comes to adopting information and communication technology include a lack of training, pricey equipment, and software packages (Bardan, 2014).

The confidence of women entrepreneurs in their ability to make full use of information and communication technology in their company activities might need to be improved and affected by these obstacles.

#### **4.7. Theme VII - Limited Access to Financial Resources**

For the most part, women encounter difficulties when it comes to collecting finances for their businesses; in some instances, they also suffer discrimination from financial institutions. It has been shown that a lack of capital in the beginning phases can have detrimental impacts in the long run (Akehurst et al., 2012). Access to funding and capital is a crucial component for the continued existence of businesses. This is because, in circumstances with insufficient financial support, business owners will be unable to generate new goods and services or create new employment opportunities (Akehurst et al., 2012). Many women must learn the official procedures to acquire bank financial backing to start businesses. This is in addition to the fact that they need to have the appropriate business education.

#### **4.8. Theme VIII - Legal Constraint**

As a result of the legal obstacles that the government imposes, women entrepreneurs are forced to contend with significant challenges. Regulations about businesses, taxation, and several other legal procedures are examples of potential obstacles. Even though these challenges are problems that women entrepreneurs encounter, this is because women need to have the level of education necessary to address the challenges posed by these legal obstacles (Vossenber, 2013). According to Jahed et al. (2011), the development of women entrepreneurs is hampered by several factors, including bureaucracy, inefficiency of large-scale production, a lack of initiative, and inadequate decision-making.

#### **4.9. Theme IX - Mentorship**

The significance of having a mentor cannot be overstated. A young woman entrepreneur needs to understand what she will be doing and to know precisely what she will be doing. This allows her to prepare if things do not go according to the plan. According to Sebikari (2014), this can only be accomplished if the female

entrepreneur has a mentor who can assist her in taking advantage of her instincts, skills, and initiative to construct a robust and long-lasting firm. It is very similar to the concept of motivation. As was explained earlier, one of the most significant factors that also influence women entrepreneurs in Malaysia is that most do not have any mentors, or when they do have mentors, those mentors are not fully committed to them. As a result, they do not gain anything at all, and they hardly perform beyond a certain level, even though they possess the necessary skills, management skills, and knowledge of how to run a successful business.

#### **4.10. Theme X - Gender Inequality**

Another challenge that women entrepreneurs have is unequal access to resources, such as financial resources, human resources, technological resources, and information resources. This is a difficulty that they face because of their gender. It is uncommon for financial institutions, for instance, to be hesitant when providing loans and funding to the business initiatives of women entrepreneurs who are just starting, regardless of the degree to which they are motivated to engage in a specific entrepreneurial activity. The failure rate, which is higher among women than men, is the root cause of this hesitation. As a result, loan and fund issuers are required to place more trust in male entrepreneurs' business ventures than women entrepreneurs' (Dauda, 2011).

### **5.0. IMPLICATION**

In addition to providing future researchers with study options, the purpose of this review article is to gain knowledge of the challenges that women entrepreneurs in Malaysia face and the significance that these challenges have for policymakers, practitioners, and aspiring women entrepreneurs. The benefits that the academic community receives from studying women's entrepreneurship in emerging economies such as Malaysia include a better understanding of the business environment and economy of the country, as well as the ability to conduct significant research that will assist them in incorporating emerging economies into the mainstream of entrepreneurship research. Having a full grasp of the sociological, institutional, and cultural barriers or limits, this paper provides a way for aspiring women entrepreneurs, government officials, and policymakers to evaluate the local institutional and regulatory regimes and make any required amendments. It is possible for women to

effectively build distinctive initiatives to affect their surroundings, laying the road for societal and attitudinal change towards women entrepreneurs, provided that these nuances are appreciated and acted upon. This review article aims to provide knowledge of the same, which can aid both present and future women entrepreneurs in overcoming several challenges through various resources. Even though the government of Malaysia has implemented programmes and initiatives such as the Micro Entrepreneur Business Development Programme (BizME), women entrepreneurs continue to face challenges when it comes to gaining access to financial resources, particularly in the context of SMEs.

## 6.0. CONCLUSION

This review took advantage of a manual content analysis technique to identify the most prevalent topics in the field of study on the challenges of women entrepreneurs in Malaysia. Further insights may be generated by resorting to thematic analysis. For this study, only articles from the Scopus database and Google Scholar were considered. There is the possibility that an additional limitation is the exclusion of literature, including book chapters and conference proceedings. Despite the limitations, the authors of this study hope that their findings will serve as a source of inspiration for authors and practitioners interested in women's entrepreneurship in the future. This research makes a few important contributions to the literature on women working for themselves in Malaysia. In the first place, this is one of the first studies to present a challenge that is being encountered by research on women's entrepreneurship in Malaysia. This research review focuses on women entrepreneurs in Malaysia. It provides a framework for the existing body of literature by categorizing the studies according to the primary topics investigated in each study. According to the analysis findings, ten themes may be used to categorize empirical investigations.

Additionally, the analysis reveals which issues have received little research attention. This study also finds many gaps in empirical research on women's entrepreneurship in Malaysia and suggests the potential for more research. It also recommends future research directions.

**Author Contributions:** Iklima Husna Abdul Rahim wrote the introduction, methodology, findings, results and

discussions, implications, and conclusion and was supervised by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Dzulkifli Mukhtar, Dr. Salwani Abdullah, and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Anis Amira Ab Rahman.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

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