

Navigating Disadvantage: The Intersectional Challenges and Strategies of Vietnamese Women Entrepreneurs

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the potential challenges faced by Vietnamese women entrepreneurs running micro and small enterprises in Buon Ma Thuot and Thai Nguyen, using an intersectional lens and examining how women negotiate challenges through creative response strategies. The sample includes women from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as ethnic minorities, single mothers, and those in geographically marginalised areas. The findings show that gender intersects with ethnicity, religion, marital status, education and socio-cultural norms to create challenges, including limited access to resources, restricted entrepreneurial opportunities, role conflict, and social prejudice. Participants navigate these challenges by leveraging family and community support, engaging in local networks, and using digital platforms for low-cost marketing, self-learning, and challenging discrimination. Further, we foreground the salient role that women's spiritual capital (encapsulating values such as respect for tradition, moral values and wisdom) acts as a driving force for their motivation and defies prejudice.

Keywords: Vietnam, women entrepreneurs, micro and small enterprises, intersectionality, challenges, strategies.

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Introduction

Recent entrepreneurship research has increasingly recognised the importance of context in influencing both opportunities and constraints for entrepreneurs. Scholars have highlighted the need to examine how contextual factors are gendered and how they shape women's entrepreneurial experiences (Welter, 2020; Tillmar et al., 2022). Intersectionality has become a valuable framework in feminist-informed entrepreneurship studies, offering deeper insights into the experiences of women entrepreneurs, especially those from marginalised groups (Rugina & Ahl, 2023; Corrêa et al., 2024; Weldon, 2008). Intersectionality provides a lens through which to analyse systemic inequality by recognising that individuals embody multiple identity dimensions such as gender, race, class, and ethnicity, which do not operate independently of one another (Collins, 2015).

Despite the growing contribution of intersectionality to gender and entrepreneurship research in challenging essentialist notions of women entrepreneurs and highlighting the complex interplay of multiple identities, Jones et al. (2025) observe that the adoption of intersectionality remains uneven, with most studies focusing on gender in isolation. Moreover, intersectional analyses face methodological challenges, particularly in disentangling the effects of overlapping identities (McCall, 2005). To realise its transformative potential, intersectional feminist research must address both the underrepresentation of marginalised women in the Global North and the underrepresentation of Global South perspectives (Jones et al., 2025).

Our study responds to this call by expanding the scope of the intersectional lens to include women entrepreneurs in Vietnam, a context that has received limited attention in the literature. Women entrepreneurs in Vietnam own nearly one-third of businesses, a proportion higher than in many other Asian economies (Nguyen et al., 2020). Scholars have focused mostly on the motivations and challenges encountered by women entrepreneurs in Vietnam concerning access to resources and appropriate help due to prevalent cultural practices and the policy framework (Nguyen et al., 2020). They note that among Vietnam's women entrepreneurs lack of skills and knowledge in the areas of corporate governance and limited networking opportunities for business development. Despite their significant contributions to economic growth, there remains a limited understanding of their gendered experiences, particularly the gender-specific challenges they face, focused on intersectionality. Yet, our study, as one of the few, extends the intersectional research on Vietnamese women entrepreneurship by mapping the unique challenges faced by female entrepreneurs, particularly those from disadvantaged groups, at the intersection of gender, religious orientation, marital status, ethnicity, which interacts with social and cultural norms.

Specifically, we explore their potential of creating, up-cycling and innovating resources for their enterprises to thrive in light of religion, ethnicity, socio-cultural, family context and individual factors. This signifies another unique contribution of our study to the extant literature on women's entrepreneurship which has put significant attention on reporting barriers to women's entrepreneurship growth and how such challenges become the causes of entrepreneurial withdrawal (citations disadvantage and discriminations faced by individuals from oppressed groups can lead to lower growth prospects, higher exit rates, lower levels of internationalization and limited agency despite a strong engagement in entrepreneurship (Al-Dajani et al., 2019; Jayawarna et al., 2020). It is argued that challenging contexts present constraints and disadvantages to the business growth of this vulnerable group. Yet, there is little evidence of how such contexts can also produce affordances and triggers which can help

generate approaches and strategies to mediate the challenges and survive. Thus, understanding the obstacles encountered by Vietnamese women entrepreneurs and the way they cope with challenges is essential for designing support strategies that can improve their business success. It also offers valuable insights for supporting other marginalised entrepreneurial groups.

Literature review and theoretical underpinnings

Intersectionality and women's entrepreneurship

Intersectionality as a framework examines the interconnections between various identity categories, such as gender/sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, and social and economic status, and how these categories create multiple layers of privilege or disadvantage (Holvino, 2010). Rather than viewing these identities in isolation, intersectionality emphasises their (in)separability within specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts. This approach has gained traction in entrepreneurship research, particularly in exploring the experiences of women, refugees, and migrant entrepreneurs (Essers & Benschop, 2007; Barrett & Vershinina, 2017).

Intersectionality enables a more nuanced understanding of how women negotiate multiple identities, often shaped by gender, ethnicity, and religion, to sustain their ventures (Essers & Benschop, 2007; Dy et al., 2017; Maharjan et al., 2024). For example, Essers and Benschop (2009) studied Moroccan and Turkish women entrepreneurs in the Netherlands and found that their identities were influenced by the combined effects of gender, ethnicity, and religion. These women used entrepreneurship to navigate conflicting cultural expectations and negotiate their multiple identities.

Entrepreneurship research has increasingly moved beyond focusing on single identity categories, such as gender, and has started to examine the intersections of multiple identities influencing entrepreneurial opportunities and outcomes (Jones et al., 2025). Women entrepreneurs face various obstacles in starting and developing their businesses, including business-related issues such as limited access to resources, financial constraints, and a lack of skilled staff; limited entrepreneurial skills and knowledge; family-related issues such as work-family conflict and lack of family support; and socio-cultural challenges such as gender discrimination and cultural barriers (Panda, 2018). These challenges are often not isolated but rather shaped by intersectional and overlapping identity factors that define women entrepreneurs' experiences. Scholars have studied barriers to entrepreneurship that arise from intersections of gender with age (Stirzaker & Sitko, 2019), class (Constantinidis et al., 2019), race (Dy et al., 2017), and migration (Al-Dajani et al., 2019).

This paper draws on the intersectionality framework to examine the interplay between gender, with many social identities such as ethnicity, marital status, religion, and contextual elements including culture, location. This approach not only highlights the challenges but also emphasises the adaptive strategies employed by Vietnamese women entrepreneurs, providing insights that can guide more inclusive support policies.

Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to identify challenges faced by Vietnamese women entrepreneurs in starting and running businesses and how they navigate these challenges in the Vietnamese context. Adopting a social constructivist perspective, this research views women entrepreneurs as socially constructed realities shaped by their actions, which are framed by everyday social interactions as they navigate multiple roles, routines, and societal expectations. The interview and analysis process followed the six stages of the thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke

(2006). The research design involves in-depth interviews and observations with women-owned micro and small enterprises in Buon Ma Thuot and Thai Nguyen, Vietnam, that have started at least a one-year business with a maximum of 50 employees. Data collection was conducted using purposeful sampling and the snowball method.

Findings

Challenges facing women entrepreneurs

The findings reveal that gender intersects with socio-cultural norms, ethnicity, and educational background to shape distinctive challenges of Vietnamese women-owned micro and small enterprises.

Gender norms and domestic expectations

Participants indicated that there is still a belief that women should prioritise domestic responsibilities over entrepreneurial ambitions. These biases create barriers for women to engage in professional networks and pursue entrepreneurial opportunities. As one participant stated: “Prejudices like what can women do, women stay at home to take care of their husbands and children, cook, clean the house, do the laundry, what can they do outside? There are still many prejudices.”. Some women also reported difficulties in obtaining their husbands’ support when starting their businesses. This lack of support increases the tension between fulfilling family obligations and engaging in entrepreneurial activities, resulting in role conflict and increased feelings of guilt.

Intersecting barriers of ethnicity, family poverty and limited education

Ethnic women entrepreneurs in the sample come from the Êđê (pronounced as ‘e-de’) community. They run businesses with products associated with Êđê heritage, such as traditional Êđê costumes or brocade clothes, working with their co-ethnic staff. They experience low confidence and prejudice due to limited education. One entrepreneur recalled scepticism about her online business, with villagers doubting her abilities:

“When I returned to the village, people said that I was a scammer in the online business. Because people said, for example, selling at a price... doesn’t mean I don’t know the market. Then they didn’t believe in my ability because I was not well-educated. In general, there was a lot of sarcasm and criticism. When I filmed the videos, the villagers thought I was idle; they believed that farming was the only source of income. So, I was under a lot of pressure.”

Resource constraints and limited entrepreneurial skills

Many women highlighted the initial challenges of starting a business, particularly in attracting customers and developing products that were both beneficial and meaningful, such as preserving authenticity and good-quality products. The findings indicated that some women faced a shortage of skilled employees, especially COVID-19 pandemic. Several noted that previous work experience and qualifications were not directly applicable to entrepreneurship. A participant recalled: “Because I come from a social background, not an economic one, I had no business experience.”

Women entrepreneurs’ strategic responses

Our analysis indicates that participants in this study employed various strategies to navigate challenges.

Navigating role conflict and enhancing capabilities and resources through family and social support

To mitigate role tension, women adopt strategies such as dedicating weekends to family time or seeking assistance from partners and extended family for sharing household and childcare, labour support in business. A woman mentioned seeking help from her family to care for their children:

“This is a children's playground, so it will be open in the evenings and on Saturdays and Sundays. In the morning, I pick up and drop off my children and cook. On regular weekdays, I continue to cook at home. Only on Saturdays and Sundays do my sister-in-law and mother-in-law help me cook and feed my children.”

Many women leveraged external networks and resources to strengthen their entrepreneurial knowledge by joining women's enterprise groups or local business clubs. These networks facilitate knowledge sharing, peer mentoring, and free training courses. Some also seek recognition and funding by participating in local startup competitions.

Leveraging digital platforms for learning and community engagement

Digital platforms, particularly social media, are powerful tools for building confidence and challenging discrimination. Participants in the study actively leveraged platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Zalo for low-cost marketing, customer interaction, and supplementary income generation. One participant shared:

“I interact and write articles regularly. I always post on Facebook, TikTok, and Zalo. For example, I often organise mini games in my own group. For example, one ran continuously for 30 days to foster a love for handwriting. This not only builds a community but also positively develops the handwriting field. It's not just me, but other colleagues as well. Everyone has a different style. I benefit from having a strong reputation, so when I initiate something, many join in and want to learn.”

Spirituality and work orientation

The finding reveals that participants come from diverse religious backgrounds, predominantly Christianity and Buddhism, with religious beliefs shaping the way women do business. Some invoked a moral attitude that underpinned spiritual values in personal life and in running a business. They employed an altruistic mentality derived from the traditional cultural values of Vietnam to do charitable activities and support vulnerable employees. Christian participants, for example, often perceived financial and professional success as gifts from Jesus. Women with spiritual beliefs use them for tension resolution work to defy prejudice, they use spirituality to maintain a positive mind and adhere to the law of cause and effect (karma) to treat others.

Self-care and emotional well-being strategies

Participants engage in self-care activities like yoga, religious practices, and listening to audiobooks to reduce stress and seek positive emotions (e.g., mumbling the Bible/Buddhist

Sutras, and medications). For example: “While working, I listen to audiobooks. I find them very helpful. They motivate me and provide knowledge. They help me a lot in creativity and dealing with difficult situations.”

Discussion and conclusion

This study examines multiple challenges faced by Vietnamese women entrepreneurs, exploring how gender and other social constructs intersect to shape their challenges. Consistent with existing research, participants experienced obstacles such as gender norms, domestic expectations, limited entrepreneurial knowledge and resource constraints. However, our research extends this understanding by highlighting how factors such as ethnicity, marital status, religion, and geographic marginalisation intersect to create these challenges. The findings offer important practical implications for supporting Vietnamese women entrepreneurs, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, including ethnic minorities, single mothers, and those living in geographically marginalised regions and women employing vulnerable workers such as people with disabilities.

Participants actively mobilised both internal and external resources to sustain their ventures. Support from husband, extended families, and community networks played a critical role in managing role conflict and addressing resource limitations. Women also benefited significantly from engagement in business clubs and women’s enterprise groups for skill development and knowledge sharing, and seeking entrepreneurial opportunities. Digital platforms, especially social media, also emerged as critical tools for cost-effective marketing and customer engagement. Through an online platform, many women reached new customers and challenged traditional stereotypes by gaining more autonomy and independence in business decisions. Furthermore, the study reveals the significant role of religious beliefs in shaping entrepreneurial motivation and ethics. Spirituality provided psychological strength and moral guidance, especially during difficult periods.

Within the scope of this developmental paper, we intentionally put more focus on highlighting the intersectional challenges of female entrepreneurs, which have not been reported widely in the extant literature. Such challenges are related to the stereotyping and discrimination of their minor ethnicity, marriage status, nature of businesses (digital business), as well as the lack of resources impacting their micro businesses. In the fully developed version of this paper, we will further conceptualise these challenges, relating them to other challenges (which have been reported in previous studies), to offer a more comprehensive framework to assess the intersectional challenges of women entrepreneurship. Furthermore, we will uncover the ability of female entrepreneurs to up-cycle and utilise resources embedded with their families, local communities, networks and especially religions.

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