

Unpacking Vietnamese Female Entrepreneurs' Complex Motivations: A Critical Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

This study employs a critical feminist approach and a classical push-pull theory to explore the start-up motivations of female entrepreneurs in Vietnam. This research focuses on female entrepreneurs from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those affected by geographical marginalisation, minority ethnicity, and single parenthood. The initial findings of this study identify multi-dimensional start-up motives among female entrepreneurs, driven by their passion for value creation and transformation, as well as their desire to leverage regional heritage, fuelled with the financial needs of their families. Additionally, the study investigates how they navigate their gender roles as mothers and daughters while establishing their businesses, as well as how their interests, expertise, and experiences influence their start-up journeys. Furthermore, this study reveals how the marginalised nature of demographics—such as ethnicity, social class, educational background, and social norms—shapes the entrepreneurial motivations of female entrepreneurs. Our research findings contribute to advancing the current understanding of women's entrepreneurial motivations embedded within their socio-cultural contexts. This paper also offers practical insights to inform the design of appropriate policies and support for female entrepreneurs, particularly those from disadvantaged groups.

Key words: Motives, Female Entrepreneurs, Critical Feminist approach, Push- Pull Theory, Vietnam.

Track: Entrepreneurship

Word count (excluding references): 3178

Introduction

The role of entrepreneurs is crucial for economic development, a fact that is widely recognised. Research shows that many entrepreneurial activities are primarily carried out by men (Yousafzai, Aljanova, and Omran, 2024; Isaga, 2019; Brush and Cooper, 2012; Estrin and Mickiewicz, 2011). Some opponents argue that it stems from resource accessibility and gender-based discrimination (Deng, Liang, Wang, and Zhang, 2025; Modarresi et al., 2016), as well as the socialisation process (Khattar, and Agarwal, 2023). Despite these constraints and challenges, the number of female entrepreneurs has risen in both developed and developing countries, contributing to socio-economic development, ensuring growth and job creation, and improving the standard of living. According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor's 2023/2024 estimates, 6.2% of women own established businesses compared to 9.5% of men. Notably, as reported by the ASEAN Post (2019), Vietnam has 31.3% of women-owned businesses, positioning it as a leading country in female entrepreneurship, particularly among developing countries.

Like many other developing nations, Vietnam acknowledges the crucial role that female entrepreneurs play in driving economic growth. In response to this awareness, several policies and programs have been implemented to increase the startup rates and improve the performance of women-owned businesses in the country. Notable initiatives include the Agency for Enterprise Development and the Northern SME Supporting Centre.

Despite the significant involvement of women in entrepreneurial activities and the availability of supportive programs, many female business owners continue to struggle with achieving economic stability (Darnihamedani, and Terjesen, 2022; Amine and Staub, 2009; Nziku and Struthers, 2018; Panda, 2018). This is due to considering entrepreneurship as a gendered phenomenon, which can lead to differences in traits and motivations among women based on societal beliefs, values, and relationships (Yousafzai, Aljanova, and Omran, 2024; Jennings and Brush, 2013). Supporting this perspective, some studies indicate that many female entrepreneurs operate as sole owner-managers and tend to have modest ambitions for business growth to prevent neglecting their family responsibilities (Brush et al., 2004).

Researchers have widely employed motivation theories to explore these motivations, distinguishing between "pull" and "push" factors (Ghatak and Bhowmick, 2022; Isaga, 2019; Reynolds et al., 2005). Previous studies indicate that female entrepreneurs are often motivated by push factors when starting their businesses, leading to a comparatively low desire for growth (Fatoki, 2014; Brush et al., 2012; Brush et al., 2006).

Despite the increasing body of literature, there is still a gap in understanding the start-up motives of female entrepreneurs, particularly from a critical feminist lens in developing countries, including Vietnam (Yousafzai et al., 2024; Marlow and McAdam, 2015). As more women in Vietnam launch new businesses, it becomes essential to comprehend the reasons behind the initiation of their entrepreneurial efforts. This is important because personal motivations are critical individual factors that play a key role in business performance (Naguib, 2024; Hasan and Almubarak, 2016). Additionally, more research is needed to consider specific national and cultural influences on female entrepreneurs, particularly in developing countries, to better understand their challenges and motivations (Co et al., 2007; Ghouse et al., 2017) which can inform a better policy formulation in this perspective. Women have various motives for becoming entrepreneurs, and these motives can vary significantly from one country to another, influenced by economic, educational, geographical, and cultural differences (Gabrielsson and Politis, 2011).

As such, the conditions that support women's ability to start and grow businesses may be unique to each context. Therefore, research that helps to identify the local factors influencing women to start their businesses is crucial for enhancing our understanding of female entrepreneurs in developing countries (Ogundana, Simba, Dana, and Liguori, 2021; Minniti and Naudé, 2010). Studies (Atarah, Finotto, Nolan, and Van Stel, 2023; Agrawal, Bakhshi, Chandani, Birau, and Mendon, 2023) have indicated that female entrepreneurs face different constraints and problems, which are also specific to their respective contexts and statuses. Because of these differences, a strategy that works in one context may not necessarily work in another; thus, each government must identify the most effective strategy for its country. Hence, our context-specific study of entrepreneurs in two specific regions in Vietnam is much needed, particularly in providing insights into their lived experiences, which can support the country in improving gender equality and achieving its Sustainable Development Goals.

Considering the specific regional, social, cultural, religious, and geographical influences, this study aims to examine the factors that motivate women to become entrepreneurs, guided by a critical feminist theory in congruence with the classic motivational push-pull theory. The classical push-pull theory illustrates that individuals become entrepreneurs either due to push (negative) factors (e.g., necessity, unemployment, dissatisfaction) or pull (positive) factors (e.g., opportunity, desire for independence, passion), or a combination of both (Kuvshnikov and Kuvshnikov, 2024). Despite being widely adopted, the push/pull pathways tend to oversimplify the start-up motivations of female entrepreneurs, particularly in emerging economies. Women's decisions to start a business are often shaped by a complex interplay of personal aspirations and structural constraints. Many are motivated by push factors such as limited employment opportunities, gender discrimination in the labour market, or household financial pressures, while also being drawn by pull factors like the desire for autonomy, self-fulfilment, or contributing to social change (Henry et al., 2022; Yousafzai et al., 2021). These motivations are rarely static or singular; instead, women often experience hybrid motivations that evolve and are influenced by life stages, family responsibilities, and societal expectations (Welter, 2011; Nowiński et al., 2020). Furthermore, the push-pull framework tends to ignore deeper motivational dimensions such as identity building, empowerment, and the pursuit of collective wellbeing—factors increasingly evident in women's start-up narratives (Eib & Huber, 2023; Korsgaard et al., 2021; Ahl and Marlow, 2012). As such, understanding female start-up motivation requires more context-sensitive, gender-aware approaches that go beyond binary classification of necessity versus opportunity. Critical feminist theory considers feminine perspectives of entrepreneurship for examining the motivational factors behind female entrepreneurship. In addition, this lens enables a re-examination of entrepreneurship as a gendered practice embedded within patriarchal (Phan, 2019) and neoliberal structures (Yên-Khanh, Phelan, and Gray, 2022; Cooke and Xiao, 2021), which provides much nuanced understanding of how women's start-up and entrepreneurial motives are embedded in specific cultural, social, and institutional environments. This study builds upon this body of work by examining how women entrepreneurs challenge, adapt to, or reproduce existing power relations in their pursuit of social and environmental goals.

Therefore, this study is grounded in a classical push-pull and critical feminist perspective, which interrogates power structures, gendered inequalities, and the systemic barriers faced by women entrepreneurs in emerging economies. Thus, the research question is: What factors influence the startup motives of female entrepreneurs in Vietnam?

Further, this study is important for several reasons. It enhances our existing understanding of the complex factors influencing women's entrepreneurial activities and motivations through the use of entrepreneurial motivation theory and a critical feminist lens. Furthermore, female

entrepreneurship is a vital part of the Vietnamese economy, but is under-researched, particularly in exploring startup motives. Thus, the findings of this research have the potential not only to assist in the development of policies and programs that encourage and promote the economic growth of the country but also to address issues of female empowerment and economic engagement.

In the following section, relevant literature concerning female entrepreneurs and their startup motivations will be discussed, followed by a presentation of the methodology. The findings will then be presented and discussed, accompanied by a conclusion.

Literature Review

Motivation is widely acknowledged as a core psychological element in entrepreneurship, playing a fundamental role in entrepreneurship research (Delmar and Wiklund, 2008; Henning and Akoob, 2017). This construct centers on the elements that propel individuals to initiate and sustain business activities. In entrepreneurship literature, the theory of motivation, particularly the concept of achievement needs, is most frequently applied (Shane et al., 2003; Aramand, 2012).

Startup motives for businesses emerge from a confluence of economic and non-economic factors. These include the desire for achievement and independence, personal development, and the pursuit of enhanced social status and community recognition. These motives are generally categorised into “pull” and “push” factors, both of which can be examined through a critical feminist lens. These factors influence the motivation levels of entrepreneurs, consequently affecting their business success.

Pull motives refer to attractive factors that draw individuals into entrepreneurship, such as the desire for autonomy, self-governance, elevated social standing, and enhanced personal agency (Kirkwood, 2009). Conversely, push motives are those that drive individuals toward entrepreneurship due to adverse circumstances like dissatisfaction with existing employment, low wages, or economic necessity (Nchimbi, 2002).

While much of the existing literature has explored these motivations, many studies fall short of applying a critical feminist analysis that moves beyond the traditional push–pull dichotomy. This gap underscores the need to investigate entrepreneurial motivations within a broader, more nuanced framework that considers the intersectionality of gender, socio-economic status, and cultural context.

Female Entrepreneurs’ Motivations

There have been diverse perspectives of researching entrepreneurial motivations in women in the extant literature, utilising various motivation theories such as extrinsic or intrinsic motivation, opportunity versus necessity, while push and pull factors remain the most frequently used theoretical lens to examine female entrepreneurs’ motivation. Several studies (Rey-Marti et al., 2015; Fatoki, 2014; GEM, 2010; Brush et al., 2006) highlight that women are motivated by push factors to start their businesses and, as such, have low motivation to grow their business. This suggests that women entrepreneurs often prioritise balancing family obligations with business responsibilities, which may lead to lower business growth expectations compared to male entrepreneurs. Another stream of researchers (Meyer and Landsberg, 2015) argues that women are motivated by pull factors to start their businesses. Minniti (2009), Dawson and Henley (2012); GEM (2012) found that men and women are equally motivated by pull factors.

In developing countries, women are often driven into entrepreneurship due to various factors. Sobhan and Hassan (2024) and Lassale and McElwee (2016) noted that women are pushed into these activities, while Coughlin and Thomas (2002) attributed this to inadequate government support. Meyer and Landsberg (2015) found that South African women pursue entrepreneurship for independence and social freedom. Fatoki (2014) highlighted that both push and pull factors motivate female entrepreneurs, with push factors being more significant. Lock and Smith (2016) and Kuiper (1993) identified economic burden, family situations, and the need for economic independence as key motivators for African women. Aramand (2012) observed that Mongolian women are mainly driven by pull factors, influenced by their culture of feminism and adventurism. Lastly, Nziku (2012) and Kuzilwa (2005) found that Tanzanian women often start businesses due to a lack of education compared to men.

In Vietnam, research by Nguyen, Phuong, Le, and Vo (2020) shows that female entrepreneurs are driven by a mix of push and pull factors, including job dissatisfaction, professional passion, a sense of accountability, confidence, and a desire for independence. Another study by Van Trang, Do, and Luong (2019) finds that higher education level, social contact with entrepreneurs, skills, and lack of fear of failure motivate female entrepreneurs to do business. Studies from Vietnam and other developing nations (Sobhan and Hassan, 2024; Corrêa et al., 2022) have continued the discourse around whether push or pull factors are the predominant motivations for female entrepreneurship.

It is also identified from the previous studies that most of the studies mainly rely on the framework of push and pull factors. There remains a lack of research that investigates entrepreneurial motivation from a feminist-critical standpoint, which would consider more complex social, cultural, and gendered dynamics beyond the binary model. Therefore, this study aims to fill this research gap and identify the startup motives for female entrepreneurs in the Vietnamese context, where 31.3% of businesses in Vietnam are owned by businesswomen (Nguyen et al., 2020). Despite the growing prevalence of female entrepreneurship in Vietnam, it is crucial to understand the startup motives of female entrepreneurs to aid in policy formulation designed to support female entrepreneurs and foster their career development.

Methodology

A feminist epistemological stance guided the research design, privileging women's voices and experiences through qualitative, participatory methods. The research process emphasised reflexivity, relational ethics, and an awareness of the researcher-participant power dynamics.

To bridge the research gap and align with the study's nature, we adopted a qualitative research approach (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2010; Thomas and Magilvy, 2011). This method enables us to critically scrutinise the motivations of female entrepreneurs in starting their businesses. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with 20 Vietnamese female entrepreneurs, specifically those running micro and small enterprises in two regions in Vietnam. The choice of these locations aligns with both national and local research needs to inform policy design in these areas.

Given the study's nature, we employed purposive sampling techniques (Isaga et al., 2015). We conducted semi-structured interviews with Vietnamese female entrepreneurs who met the following criteria: (a) owning and running micro-, small-, or medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), (b) having businesses located in or residing in Buon Ma Thuot and Thai Nguyen, Vietnam, and (c) having at least one year of experience in owning and running a business with up to 50 employees. Participants were selected based on their ownership and management of a business

for at least one year with up to 50 employees. This criterion ensured that they had moved beyond the start-up phase and could reflect meaningfully on their entrepreneurial experiences. Focusing on businesses with fewer than 50 employees allowed the study to capture insights from micro and small enterprises where the entrepreneur plays a central role in daily operations. This is particularly relevant in Vietnam, where SMEs represent 98% of all enterprises, and women-owned SMEs face distinct structural and gender-based challenges (Maheshwari et al., 2025; VCCI, 2023).

A semi-structured interview questionnaire was prepared in English and translated into Vietnamese for data collection. A pilot test was then conducted with a sample of three individuals to ensure the questions were understandable and answerable, and to test the reliability and validity of each question in capturing the desired information (Kim, 2011).

These interviews, conducted either in-person or via video conferencing, lasted between 55 to 150 minutes and followed the same structure as those in the main study. The pilot aimed to ensure the appropriateness of the interview questions in eliciting meaningful insights into the gendered dimensions of entrepreneurship, as well as the participants' social and environmental engagement. Based on the feedback, minor adjustments were made to refine the language and sequencing of several questions, enhancing their clarity and alignment with the study's critical feminist approach (Harding, 2004). Given the richness and relevance of the pilot data, and the consistency in format, these three interviews were incorporated into the main analysis, forming part of the final sample of 20 interviews.

The participating entrepreneurs represented a range of industry sectors, including food and beverage, retail, education, health and wellness, textiles, tourism, and digital services. This diversity was intentionally sought to capture a breadth of entrepreneurial experiences and to explore female entrepreneurs' motives across different sectors in Vietnam's SME landscape (Maheshwari et al., 2025; VCCI, 2023).

In addition to interviews, observations were conducted in twenty participants living and business settings during scheduled visits. These observations allowed the researcher to better understand the participants' working environments, entrepreneurship practices, and interactions with employees and customers. Field notes were taken during these visits, and observational data were used to triangulate and enrich the interview findings, ensuring a deeper and more holistic understanding of the entrepreneurs' day-to-day realities. The primary aim of these in-depth interviews and supplementary observations was to obtain rich, contextualised insights into the experiences of female entrepreneurs (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

To improve transparency and accessibility, the methodological process and participant characteristics are summarised in Tables 1 and 2 below. These tables provide an overview of the research steps and contextual information on the sample.

Table 1: Summary of Methodological Process

Step	Description
Research Design	Qualitative, interpretivist, critical feminist lens
Sampling Criteria	Vietnamese female entrepreneurs with ≥ 1 year in business, ≤ 50 employees
Pilot Study	Conducted with 3 participants; refined interview guide

Step	Description
Data Collection	20 semi-structured interviews (including 3 pilot interviews), 20 observations
Interview Duration	From 50 minutes to 150 minutes
Observations	Conducted at 20 living and business sites
Data Analysis	Thematic analysis with NVivo; iterative coding aligned with feminist and push-pull framework

Table 2: Sample Characteristics

Sector	Years in Business	Location
P1 Food & Beverage	2	BMT
P2 Retail	15	BMT
P3 Education	15	BMT
... ..	7	TN
P20 Digital Services	5	TN

Findings

A structured thematic analysis approach was used to analyse qualitative data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. These phases included: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. NVivo software was used to facilitate the organisation and coding of the interview transcripts and field notes. An initial round of open coding was conducted to identify recurring ideas and patterns, which were then grouped into broader categories through axial coding. These categories were refined into higher-order themes through iterative comparison, informed by the study's push-pull and critical feminist lens.

To enhance transparency, a coding tree is provided in Table 3, illustrating the data structure from initial codes to final themes. This structured approach ensured analytical rigor and consistency in interpreting participants' narratives.

Table 3: Coding Tree

Theme 1: Responsibility for Family	Code • Need to support household income • Desire for flexible work-life balance • Taking over family business responsibilities
Theme 2: Social Responsibility	Code • Desire to create jobs for women and/or disadvantaged groups.

	• Motivation to address social issues in the community • Embedding social values in business mission
Theme 3: Interest and Expertise	Code • Turning a personal hobby or passion into a business • Applying professional skills in a self-directed way • Seeking personal fulfilment through entrepreneurship
Theme 4: Breaking the Stereotype	Code • Challenging gender norms in business • Proving women can be successful entrepreneurs • Desire to be a role model for other women
Theme 5: Pandemic Effect	Code • Business as a response to job loss during COVID-19 • Identifying new opportunities during lockdown • Shift from employment to self-employment due to the crisis

The themes were derived through iterative coding using NVivo, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. The coding tree in Table 3 illustrates how initial codes were grouped into six key themes related to the start-up motives of female entrepreneurs.

The above-illustrated themes of start-up motives for female entrepreneurs in Vietnam are discussed below.

Responsibility for family

Participants emphasised that their main motivation for launching their businesses stemmed from a deep sense of responsibility toward their families. This commitment not only involved dedicating more quality time to their loved ones but also creating job opportunities for other female relatives within the family. One participant shared that,

“The initial motivation was to provide jobs for my birth mother and sister-in-law, who were unemployed at the time. What began to support my family gradually developed into a larger startup.”

Social responsibility

Participants passionately emphasised the critical importance of creating job opportunities for marginalised individuals within the community, particularly focusing on those who are poor, disabled, or elderly. Furthermore, several participants shared that their entrepreneurial journeys were inspired by their own experiences, highlighting how they have directly benefited from the products or services they provide. One insightful participant stated that,

“As drinking this herbal tea saved me from a serious stroke, I thought that it should be available so that more people can get the health benefits”.

Interest and expertise

The women entrepreneurs in our sample conveyed that their interests and areas of expertise played a pivotal role in motivating them to launch and establish their businesses within the framework of this study. One participant expressed that her passion for her field, coupled with her specialised knowledge, was instrumental in driving her entrepreneurial journey as follows,

“The opportunity for my current business came when a book street opened, and I was asked for a space to run kids' activities and teach them about figurines. Recognising the potential, I started to run the kids' clubs. Furthermore, I enjoyed making handmade clay flowers and paintings, found the clay suitable for children and safe to work with.”

Breaking the stereotype

These studies identified that Vietnamese female entrepreneurs are motivated by push versions of factors, which include gaining confidence, achieving financial independence, forming their identity, gaining social status, proving their business abilities to husbands and in-laws, and breaking stereotypes. One of the participants stated that,

“Before running my business. I used to rely heavily on my husband's opinions, but as my revenue grew, I became more self-assured in my decisions of doing business decisions.”

Pandemic effect

Due to the significant impact of the pandemic on economic activities, participants in our study indicated that, as their businesses struggled, they started new ventures that became more successful. One of the participants mentioned that,

“The pandemic led to economic changes and difficulties maintaining our kid playground, so we decided to open a new tea/coffee shop at the kid playground. This year, spirit we also opened a second shop near Xuan Huong Lake.”

Discussion and conclusion

This study delves into the motivations of female entrepreneurship in Vietnam, drawing on qualitative data from women in two regions. The findings expose a blend of push and pull factors alongside other essential elements that motivate these ventures. Interestingly, many of these are not merely related to the participants' gender roles but also encompassed by their perceptions of social obligations, personal interests and expertise, regional resources, and the pandemic's influence. This suggests that Vietnamese female entrepreneurs have strong entrepreneurial drives rooted in their connections with the wider environment.

The full version of this paper aims to enhance the conceptualisation of these motives, correlating them with prior research to offer a comprehensive framework, utilising the critical feminist perspective on women's entrepreneurial motivations. Furthermore, we will critically examine how faith, geography, and context interplay to shape female entrepreneurship.

Acknowledgment: We would like to express our gratitude to the British Academy for funding the larger research project through its 2024 scheme, of which this study is a part. Their funding allows us to pursue important inquiries and fosters collaboration and innovation in our field, contributing to advancements in knowledge and understanding.

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