

Women's entrepreneurial intentions in the UK and Lebanon: a 2014-2024 comparative study

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Track 9: Gender in Management

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1. Introduction and Theoretical Overview

As defined, entrepreneurship (or business ownership) is the creation of a new venture whereby a person starts their enterprise (Gartner, 1988). Accordingly, an entrepreneur is someone who needs achievement (McClelland, 1961) and has the capability for innovation (Schumpeter and Swedberg, 2021) or is a community developer (Shell and Davig, 1981). However, starting a business is not a simple process; rather, a person thinks about it first and stages a plan for it ahead of time, assessing different factors that influence their decision to create their own business (Krueger et al., 2000). Thus, “entrepreneurship is a type of planned behaviour” (Krueger et al., 2000), for which “intentions” constitute an important opportunity to increase a person’s ability to understand and predict that behaviour (Krueger, et al., 2000). Entrepreneurial intentions, the focal point of this study, represent the fact of aiming to start a new business before finalising this decision (Davidsson, 1995).

Entrepreneurial intentions have been considered an attractive area for investigation by many researchers and academics, to understand different factors on which individuals base their decision to start their venture (Krueger et al., 2000). Nevertheless, what has been gaining significant importance in this area of study is “women’s entrepreneurial intentions” in particular, knowing that women have lower entrepreneurial intentions than men (Shinnar et al., 2012). Females are greatly nowadays engaged in entrepreneurial activities and intend to develop their businesses. One-fifth (20.5%) of all new company incorporations in 2022 in the UK were all-female-led, in comparison to 16% in 2018. Besides, in 2022, women in the UK developed over 150,000 new firms – more than twice as many as in 2018 (Rose Review Progress, 2023). However, the presence of females in entrepreneurial activities is still less dominant in comparison to males. This can simply be related to specific factors that several authors have been investigating. For instance, women’s lower experience and reduced propensity to risk (Fairlie and Robb, 2009), the lack of training opportunities and institutional support, and the lower access to the social and financial capital needed for the identification of market opportunities, are some common reasons (Thébaud, 2015). However, there have been several facilitators that stimulated women to start thinking of developing their businesses, where there has been significant progress. As an example, the lowering of the obstacles to engaging in entrepreneurship and the availability of abundant information that the Internet offers, are considered to result in nontrivial advantages for females that have not been traditionally included in male-dominated entrepreneurial practices (Ughetto et al., 2020).

Despite this progress in women’s participation in entrepreneurship, there are still some barriers that they face across different contexts, and that can be the reason behind their lower presence in entrepreneurship. As an example, women’s occupation of low employment positions by which they would not accumulate the necessary experience and professional skills to help them in their entrepreneurial activity (McAdam, 2013), can still be among these factors. Also, their lack of job (managerial) skills, compared to men (Kirkwood, 2009) as well as the conflict that arises from their inability to manage their time between employment and family, have necessitated them to quit their employment and become full-time caretakers, and hence not engage in entrepreneurship. This is because their domestic responsibilities often take precedence over any economic activity to be engaged in, including entrepreneurial activity (McAdam, 2013).

While studies in the literature have shed light on obstacles and facilitators related to female entrepreneurship in different contexts (McAdam, 2013; Laffineur et al., 2018; Cullen, 2020; Ughetto et al., 2020; Alhajri and Aloud, 2023; Mouazen and Hernández-Lara, 2023; Oladipo et al., 2023), there is still some lack of clarity whether women still face some barriers or whether there are many antecedents these days that stimulate their entrepreneurial initiatives. Accordingly, this study seeks to explore factors motivating women to start their businesses, and to check whether women still face some barriers, and if so, how they overcome them. Besides, and in particular, this research aims to understand how women in high managerial positions think in terms of starting their own business and how their long office hours employment influences them to start their own business in light of family duties.

2. Methodology

This study will refer to some data collected through ten semi-structured interviews in 2014 to highlight the barriers and facilitators that women reflected on at that time. However, the current research plan is to collect further data through around additional twenty semi-structured interviews to understand whether women still face the same barriers or new ones, how they deal with them and what antecedents affect their entrepreneurial intentions.

In terms of the sample of the data collected in 2014, ten females were interviewed in total, their ages ranged between 23 and 58, and seven of them were based in the UK (as the study focuses mainly on females in the UK); but the remaining three were based in different countries, including one in the US, and two in the MEA area (Lebanon and UAE respectively). Thus, in the current study, and to make it more focused, we will focus on the UK and Lebanon by conducting around twenty interviews across these two countries. Lebanon would be an interesting context to be studied in this field, where women's educational enrolment has continually increased, approaching 50% in post-secondary educational programs in both the private and public educational institutes and over half in terms of university graduates (53% in 2001) (Haidar, 2018). Even though this percentage is still low, there are more Lebanese women highly established in all kinds of institutions in comparison with most MENA countries (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2020). Also, consistent with the study conducted in 2014, some of them will be entrepreneurs, others will be occupying high managerial positions in the corporate sector, while some others will simply be a "stay-at-home mom". While women entrepreneurs' respondents will be reflecting on their experience with the process, women in high managerial positions and non-working women will reflect on their perception of becoming entrepreneurs in the future, in terms of facilitators and barriers. Besides, including women in high-managerial positions will shed light on specific factors that may play an important role in this process, in terms of barriers and/or facilitators. Interviewees will be from various educational backgrounds and sectors/fields.

In terms of the data analysis method, barriers and motives identified by the females will be rearranged and grouped into categories, for which each will be given an appropriate name called "code" or "label" (Basit, 2003). Through open coding (Basit, 2003), each theme is assigned to a category to highlight the main concepts under each. Therefore, a thematic analysis will also be undertaken to interpret the data (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Throughout the analysis, data will also be presented in verbatim quotes.

3. Initial Findings

As per the findings from the study in 2014, (1) women perceive several motivators when tending to start their own business, mainly classified as “push” and “pull” factors (Hughes, 2003). Some of them are motivated by a need for more flexibility to manage their time between family and work - considered as a push factor, while some others are motivated by personal attractiveness such as perceiving entrepreneurship as a challenge, seeking more independence, accomplishing a dream, growing passionate about having their own business – all these considered as pull factors. Interestingly, none of the interviewees has taken the social perceptions barrier for female entrepreneurship into consideration. For the influence of high managerial positions (2), women have explained how such roles allow them to understand the big picture of running a business, develop some personality traits within them, strengthen their job skills, and meet professional people. However, women have shown that such high positions might influence their intention negatively in terms of the support they have in their employment and the high standing they have reached. This means that they perceive entrepreneurship with some difficulties in gaining support from their employment and that it requires much time to reach again the high standing they have in their employment. Finally, in terms of the “nine to five” office hours (3), they have shown how it influences their intention positively, to seek more time for their private life with entrepreneurship.

4. Research Plan

We plan to expand the research conducted in 2014 and collect more data so we can do a comparative study to explore and understand whether facilitating factors and barriers are still the same, or they have changed over the last 10 years. Thus, this study will also highlight key factors examined in 2014 to evaluate whether they have changed over the last 10 years and hence to highlight what new factors have emerged. Equally important, this will enable us to assess whether factors such as COVID-19 and further technological development have played a role in this process. Digital entrepreneurship can offer females access to market research, reaching the global market (Hair et al., 2012), and minimising business operations costs (Nambisan, 2017). In addition, Cyberspace offers females substantial opportunities to succeed in a place where gender segregation is eliminated. Its low entry barriers distinguished digital entrepreneurship in comparison to traditional entrepreneurship (Chae and Goh, 2020) reducing financial and social barriers (McAdam et al., 2019). Besides, during adverse times such as the COVID-19 pandemic, female-led digital businesses were more prepared than other businesses to deal with the outcomes of the crisis (Alhothali and Al-Dajani, 2022). As a result, these two factors may have played a facilitating role in entrepreneurial activities.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Our comparative study is thus expected to have theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, we aim to contribute to the literature on gender and entrepreneurship and in particular female entrepreneurship. Despite several studies being conducted in the field, there is still some lack of clarity about the factors behind having fewer females engaged in entrepreneurship in comparison to males. At the same time, while there has been some more engagement over the years of females in entrepreneurial activities, it would be interesting to understand what antecedents stimulate the procedure. Also, through our study, we aim to contribute to the literature related to females occupying high managerial positions to shed light on whether this facilitates starting up a new business or simply results in sufficient achievement and a higher level of convenience in terms of the nature of work in comparison to being

an entrepreneur. Our findings will also highlight whether entrepreneurial intentions related factors tend to be the same across countries or do differ.

Besides, our research aims to contribute to practice so that women can understand what factors can help them develop their businesses as many women have business plans and have not taken the initiative yet. It will also help them understand how they can overcome barriers in this journey. In addition, through our study, different areas could be highlighted as a potential for further research in this field as there is still a lot to be explored in this topic and different contexts.

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