

THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN SHAPING WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP: EVIDENCE FROM SABAH, MALAYSIA

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Abstract: *Women's social environments are shaped by various cultural elements that influence their behaviour and actions in the public sphere. As such, this paper explores how socio-cultural elements in women's social environments influence their entrepreneurial activities. In-depth interviews with ten women entrepreneurs in the West Coast of Sabah were conducted. Although some cultural factors appear to assist women in pursuing their entrepreneurial activities, this study found that the factors also inhibit women entrepreneurs from realising their full business potential. The findings reveal that socio-cultural factors influence the business decisions made by women entrepreneurs. It becomes apparent that the concept of gender appropriate behaviour has given impact on women's businesses in several aspects: motivating factors, industry preferences and strong family commitment as well as patriarchal pressures on business. This paper concludes that socio-cultural factors are critical to understanding of women's entrepreneurship, thus, adding to the body of knowledge about the impact of culture on women's entrepreneurship.*

Keywords: *Culture, Entrepreneurship, Sabah, Women Entrepreneurs*

Introduction

Culture is a social system that develops through social interactions and processes (Connell, 2009). It is believed that the lifestyles, and ways of living of social members are associated with particular social groups as given culture (Bradley, 2007). Within this context, it is argued that cultural aspect shapes how women are represented in society (Connell, 2009). The significance of culture in influencing women's life can be highlighted in several ways. First, women's daily activities are determined by their biological conditions. In this regard, women are expected to carry out tasks that are in line with the expectations of the society in which they live (Hashim et al., 2011). Second, the element of power that exist in a culture has placed women at a disadvantaged position, particularly when men control most power resources (Bradley, 2007). Third, women must confront the cultural belief that 'society is man-made' (Hakim, 2006: pg. 279), which forces them to fight for their rights. Finally, it is argued that in the presence of significant cultural influences such as patriarchal societies, women struggle for their social status (Roomi & Harrison, 2010). Therefore, the use of culture in explaining women's entrepreneurship is relevant after considering the cultural factors that govern women's social environment resulting in a complex social interaction for women.

The idea of male-gendered entrepreneurship (Bird & Brush, 2002) serves as a challenge for women in business. Despite the fact that many business obstacles are shared by men and women entrepreneurs, the reality is that women are disadvantaged in the society in comparison to males which makes the challenges for women more comprehensive (Brush & Gatewood, 2008; Marlow, 2002). For example, while women entrepreneurs encounter gender-related challenges in running their businesses, men do not (Roomi & Parrott, 2008; Sadi & Al-Ghazali, 2010). Within this context, women entrepreneurs struggle in balancing responsibilities between family and business, which causes them to limit the time and mobility for business (Ahmad, 2011). In addition, women are perceived as less independent, gentle, and weak (Hashim et al., 2011) and this societal stigma has been tolerated as the status quo for a long time. However, these attributes contradict with the entrepreneurial values such as the need for women to be assertive. Furthermore, in some contexts, women are also expected to adhere to what society expects of them to have restricted mobility (Zehra & Achtenhagen, 2018) and perform women's traditional roles and seek their spouse's permission before acting (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2010). In this regard, it may be argued that while women are free to start a business, the success of their enterprise will be influenced by various socio-cultural factors.

Therefore, this paper investigates the influence of culture on the entrepreneurial journey of women entrepreneurs and specifically addressing the following research question:

- *How does culture influence women's entrepreneurial activities?*

The paper is structured as follows. The subsequent section discusses the literature review on women's social environment and how it has created the concept of gender-appropriate behaviour in women's entrepreneurial activities. Next, the research methodology is presented. This is followed by a discussion of the findings. Finally, concluding remarks are presented.

Literature Review

Men and women's responsibilities are defined in everyday life based on their biological positions, with a common understanding that women are associated with motherhood roles and that women's roles should not get mixed up with those of men (Connell, 2009). The idea of men's roles and women's roles appears as natural and desirable in society (Hashim et al., 2011). According to the classical social learning theory, gender-appropriate behaviour begins during the learning process when a youngster imitates his or her parent's behaviour (Oakley, 1981). During the learning process, a daughter is expected to imitate the behaviour of her mother and will be awarded for doing so whereas a son will be imitating his father's behaviour. The idea of gender appropriate behaviour that was instilled in the daughter or son at home has a big impact on the decision made by the daughter or son once he or she interacts in a larger social setting such as in selecting a field of study or future career. In the context of entrepreneurship, the significance of social influence via parents is crucial in influencing the entrepreneurial decision made by children (Chlosta et al., 2012). As such, there is a tendency that women's involvement in the current business is closely linked with the social learning process to which they were exposed to during childhood.

Previous research on women's entrepreneurship highlights that women's decision to start their own business was influenced by 'positive developments' or pull factors and a 'negative environment' or push factors (Ahmad, 2011: pg. 129). However, the influence of push factors on women entrepreneurs is more evident in the women's entrepreneurship literature. It is argued that women's involvement in business can be related to different types of disappointment that women face in the working environment. For example, women's dissatisfaction in the workplace involves concerns such as the glass ceiling, wage inequality of payment, and occupational segregation and discrimination (Van der Boon, 2005). In addition, women are mostly employed in the service industry which provides them with a low income and this situation has also led women to start their own businesses (Schmidt & Parker, 2003). On another aspect, the financial distress faced by a household also become a significant reason that push women into business. In the past, men are the sole bread winner of the family. However, in some situations where the family's financial demands expand, there is a consideration for the spouses to work together to provide income for the family (Ihuoma & Terrumun, 2015). In this sense, creating jobs by establishing a business venture becomes relevant for women. Meanwhile, women entrepreneurs are also motivated by positive factors such as being supported by family and friends as well as the desire to achieve personal fulfilment (McGowan et al., 2012). However, in explaining what motivates women to start businesses, less attention is given on the influence of socio-cultural factors (Topimin, 2015), offering a rationale for researchers to investigate the topic.

Even though entrepreneurship has been demonstrated to be highly rewarding, it is argued that the process is "trickier" for women than it is for men (McGowan et al., 2012: pg. 69). Within this context, women entrepreneurs are more likely to encounter various types of challenges that are rooted in their social environment. First and foremost, the idea of women as homemakers remains to be the greatest challenge for women entrepreneurs. It has long been debated that the gender divisions of labour within a household requires women to carry out domestic activities while performing productive works (Moser, 1993). The major effect of this practice is that women entrepreneurs struggle to balance their roles in business and at home. It is argued that the flexibility that an entrepreneurial career provides has caused women to 'devalue' their businesses (Marlow, 2002: pg. 89) as they only have a limited amount of time to devote to their

business (Ahmad, 2011). Furthermore, gender-related obstacles become more apparent for women entrepreneurs in the patriarchal societies. In a patriarchal society, men as the primary income provider must be respected, resulting women to seek men's consent to engage in any activities, particularly outside the home, such as entrepreneurship activities (Xheneti, Karki & Madden, 2018). As such, it is not easy for women entrepreneurs to make the best judgements for their businesses as their decision is subject to their husband's permission (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010). In addition, it is argued that patriarchal system provides women entrepreneurs with limited power in making business decisions (Selamat & Endut, 2020). Since entrepreneurship requires women to be agile in the decision-making process, it is more likely that women entrepreneurs in a patriarchal society will be at a disadvantaged position in optimising their business potential. These arguments indicate that patriarchal pressures on women entrepreneurs, which justifies exploring the influence of patriarchal systems on women's businesses.

Finally, there is an agreement that culture has a greater impact on women entrepreneurs in developing countries and non-Western environments (Mordi et al., 2010; Hashim et al., 2011). To understand the influence of culture on society, it is important for researchers to understand the national culture that governs the society. Generally, culture can be divided into two categories: collectivist and individualist. While individualist culture emphasises personal achievement, collectivist culture emphasises in-group goals (Schermerhon, 1994). People who live in a collectivist culture give priority to family and work group goals over individual desires, thus, resulting a harmonious relationship in society (Zawawi, 2008). In Malaysia, it is argued that a high level of tolerance is practised both within and outside the community (Selamat et al., 2011), suggesting that the conduct of women's businesses in this study could be influenced by the collectivist society. However, there is a scarcity of study on the relationship between cultural practises and women's entrepreneurship, and this gap is addressed in this study.

Methodology

This study focuses on an interpretivist approach and capitalises on in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2014) with ten women entrepreneurs. In this study, the use of an in-depth interview technique (Marshall and Rossman, 2011) is deemed acceptable since women entrepreneurs' opinions, perceptions, experiences, interpretations, and knowledge can be documented in their own words. The use of interviews as a data collection method provides a 'view from below' (i.e. the perspectives of women) and replaces the 'view from above' (i.e. the perspectives of researcher) (Mies, 1993: pg. 68). In this respect, women entrepreneurs' meaning, and experiences may be expressed in their own words. The use of semi-structured interviews helps to ensure that all relevant interview subjects are captured and asked in a consistent manner for all participants, as well as giving participants a lot of discretion in how they respond. Therefore, the comparability of data from all women entrepreneurs can be ensured while keeping the flexibility of the interview process.

All interviews with women entrepreneurs were recorded, but with their permission. By recording the interviews, full attention was given during the interview process, and the interview transcripts were accurately produced. All women entrepreneurs were identified using a list provided by an organisation that provides business support for women entrepreneurs in the research setting. In selecting women entrepreneurs for the in-depth interviews, researchers used a purposive sampling technique (Creswell, 2014) and relied on three selection criteria.

They are:

- a) Women entrepreneurs who have formally registered their businesses
- b) Women entrepreneurs who own micro and small businesses
- c) Women entrepreneurs who run a full-time business

Table 2 presents some demographic information of women entrepreneurs of this study. All ten recorded interviews were transcribed. The transcripts were then analysed under a thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The analysis process starts with the identification of three categories which were the ‘decision to start businesses under the code of ‘motivating factors,’ the ‘choice of business operation’ and the ‘conduct of business’ under the code of ‘business practices.’ Basic themes from the data were identified and made explicit and named as organising themes. The organising themes were constructed based on the issues that underlie the basic themes. Finally, the global themes that unify the organising themes were deduced. The global theme summarises the proposition of the four organising themes and the ten basic themes that reflect the qualitative data of this study. All themes that emerged from this study are as illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Themes Analysis-From Codes to Themes

Categories	Descriptions	Codes	Basic themes	Organising themes	Global themes
The decision to start business	References to motivating factors of women entrepreneurs	Motivating factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Family as a role model ✓ Skills possessed 	Pull factors	The gender appropriate behaviour
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Family financial distress ✓ Change of a marital status ✓ Minimum wage pays ✓ Relocation of work 	Push factors	
The choice of business operation	References to business practices	Business practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Industry preferences ✓ Non-business standpoint 	Family commitment	Patriarchal society
The conduct of business			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Women’s traditional roles ✓ Spouse consent 	Patriarchal pressure	

Findings

The findings revealed that culture has a substantial impact on how women entrepreneurs run their businesses. The impact of culture on women entrepreneurs is explored from three perspectives: the decision to establish a business, choice of business operations, and patriarchal pressure on business conduct.

The Profiles of Women Entrepreneurs

Table 2 shows the demographic profiles of ten women entrepreneurs, including their age, level of education, marital status, and the number and age of their children, to provide a better understanding of the participants in this study.

Table 2: The Demographic Characteristics of Women Entrepreneurs (WEs)

WE	Age	Marital status *			Education **			Number of children			Age of children (years)	
		S	M	W	P	S	U	0	1-3	≥4	7-17 ***	18+
1	32		/				/	/				
2	33		/				/		/		3	
3	33	/					/	/				
4	42		/			/				/	6	
5	51		/			/				/	2	2
6	37		/				/		/		3	
7	37			/			/		/		2	
8	47			/			/		/		2	1
9	41			/		/			/			1
10	44		/				/			/	2	2

* S=Single; M=Married; W=Widowed

** P=Primary Level; S=Secondary Level; U=University Level

*** Compulsory school age

The majority of the women entrepreneurs who participated in this study were in their 30s and 40s, with only one over the age of 50, indicating that they are of mature age. All of the women entrepreneurs in this study have obtained a certain level of academic qualifications. Seven of the women entrepreneurs have obtained university education, while three completed secondary schooling. In this study, the majority of women entrepreneurs are married (17), three are widows, and one is single. Women entrepreneurs who are married or widowed have children either between 1 and 3 (50 percent) or more than four children (30 percent). Most respondents have school-aged children, implying that they devote a considerable amount of time to engage in domestic duties such as school arrangements and child-rearing obligations. Research by Yusof (2006) has also revealed that Malaysian women entrepreneurs devote a significant amount of time and attention to children of school age and younger while running their businesses.

Business-related characteristics

The profiles of women entrepreneurs' businesses are described in detail in this section. It contains details such as age of business, type of business entity, number of employees, and the annual sales. Table 3 shows the characteristics of businesses owned by women entrepreneurs in this study.

Table 3: The Business Profiles of Women Entrepreneurs (WEs)

WE	Year of establishment	Age of business	Type of business entity	Number of employees		Sales (RM) '000	Sector
				FT	PT		
1	2011	10	Sole proprietorship	1	2	150	Service
2	2014	7	Private limited company	3	-	80	Service
3	2010	11	Sole proprietorship	3	Yes	60	Manufacturing
4	2015	6	Private limited company	1	Yes	50	Manufacturing
5	2003	18	Sole proprietorship	3	Yes	60	Manufacturing
6	2005	16	Sole proprietorship	10	Yes	360	Manufacturing
7	2009	12	Sole proprietorship	15	-	720	Service
8	1996	25	Private limited company	10	-	1,000	Service
9	2013	8	Sole proprietorship	5	Yes	2,000	Construction
10	2012	9	Private limited company	5	Yes	600	Manufacturing

FT=Full-time; PT=Part-time

The age of the enterprises owned by women entrepreneurs in this study ranges from 6 to 25 years, indicating the long-term survival of their businesses. Sole proprietorship appears as a prominent type of business ownership for women entrepreneurs. Table 2 shows that only three women entrepreneurs' firms are categorised as small businesses (5-50 employees) while the majority of them are micro businesses (less than five employees). In addition, employing part-time workers was found to be a common practice for women-owned businesses in this study. In most cases, the total numbers of part-time workers employed cannot be ascertained because it is dependent on the demands at the time. In general, women-owned businesses with a larger number of employees generate more sales than businesses with fewer employees. There are five women entrepreneurs in the manufacturing sector, four in the service sector, and only one in the construction sector. Those who are involved in the manufacturing and service sectors are engaged in food-based business operations. Women's high involvement in the food-based industry in the Malaysian context has been highlighted in a previous study (Musa et al., 2016) as this industry is closely linked with women's interest and domestic tasks.

The decision to start a business

Both pull and push factors appear to be important in encouraging women to start their own enterprises, with push dominating. Women entrepreneurs benefit from early exposure to entrepreneurial activities by family members because it creates a good environment that encourages them to pursue their interest in business. When asked what inspired them to start their firms, women entrepreneurs stated:

"I've watched my father run a business since I was a child. He appears to be having a lot of fun with his profession, and I've always wished to be like him" (WE1).

"It's all thanks to my mother. She's been running a business since I was six years old" (WE8).

"My mom has shown her success in business" (WE7).

These statements show that women entrepreneurs see their parents as good role models for encouraging them to start a business.

Meanwhile, the needs to generate additional income and improve their family's financial situation has become one of the most prevalent motivators for women to start businesses. For example, four women entrepreneurs expressed their concerns, stating that:

"... for the sake of my family's survival ... my husband's salary is insufficient ... the cost of living is increasing ... so I need to assist my husband, I didn't plan to start my own business" (WE2).

"... the cost of living is increasing ... I have six kids, each with their own needs" (WE4).

"My husband's salary is just enough to cover the basic needs of the family" (WE5).

"Everything was fine until my husband lost his job... I was worried about the future of my family" (WE6).

These statements show that even though women are not the breadwinners of the family, this study revealed that unforeseen situations have forced women to engage in business. Another women entrepreneur who resigned from her job added:

"I had been employed for more than 15 years when I was asked to relocate to another state. It is difficult for me to relocate to a new place ... then I decided to resign... and that was the start of my involvement in this business" (WE10).

Women entrepreneurs who were previously employed prior to their business establishment share the same views of *"small wages received at work"* (WE3) and *"low salary"* (WE6) as motivating factors for starting business. In addition, women entrepreneurs who are single mothers were motivated in starting a business due to the change in marital status as WE9 stated: *"being a single mother requires me to work."*

The choice of business operations

The findings revealed that women's business operation is being influenced by cultural-related factors in several ways. First, it is apparent that women entrepreneurs are more likely to engage in a business that is based on the concept of gender appropriate behaviour. In most situations, women entrepreneurs agree that their childhood exposure with household responsibilities influenced their current business choice. Women entrepreneurs share their views on how it was customary for them to assist their mothers with household duties, particularly cooking, which provided them with the technical skills they needed to start their current business. This situation can be found in their statements, such as *"Ever since I was a child, I have always helped my mother to cook"* (WE1), *"From a young age, I've always helped my mother to make banana chips, and I've now become an expert"* (WE2) and *"Why do I make jams in the first place? Because that was what my mother taught me"* (WE4). Another women entrepreneur who used to be a housewife added: *"My mother taught me how to sew when I was a teenager, so I know how to do it"* (WE2). These statements show how women's entrepreneurial activities have been shaped by gender acceptable behaviour they were exposed to as children.

Furthermore, when asked about their perspectives on business success, it was clear that women entrepreneurs are more prone to evaluate their accomplishment from a non-business standpoint, as evidenced by their statements. Women entrepreneurs stated that: *"I'm happy that my job allows me to watch my children grow up in front of my eyes ... it's a success to me"* (WE2), *"My success is when I can meet the needs of my children"* (WE4), *"I'm able to send my son to study abroad ... it's like a dream comes true"* (WE5), and *"Success is when I can meet the needs of my family"* (WE1) reflect the idea that women's business success is inextricably related to family life. Women over reliance on family aspects in describing the meaning of their business success indicates a strong commitment that they have towards their domestic responsibilities. One of the disadvantages of this circumstance is that it is difficult for women to realise their full business potential. In contrast, women entrepreneurs who set their company goals beyond the family aspect can generate larger income (WE6,7,8,9 & 10). These women have specific business goals in mind, such as *"to build a brand name"* (WE6), *"to improve quality and going digital"* (WE7), *"aiming for the highest profit"* (WE8), *"diversifying business"* (WE9) and *"going global and diversifying"* (WE10).

The patriarchal pressure on business operations

This study revealed that cultural issues have a significant impact on how women entrepreneurs run their businesses. Women entrepreneurs agree that the needs to conform to a certain social behaviour and the fear of being judged for their conduct has made it difficult for them to manage their businesses. Within this context, the issue of domestic roles brings a significant challenge for women in their business operations. The words of BWEs described their perception of this issue. For example:

"I do all of the housework, including picking up and dropping off my children at school. When I'm done with all these ... I'll go to my shop" (WE2).

"Although I own a business ... I give my full commitment to my kids. In the morning, I send them to school ... preparing their lunches, picking them up from school ... dealing with their school matters and so on" (WE4).

“It’s a lot easier now that the kids are all grown-ups. But it was difficult back then ... it was very challenging. I didn’t get any rest; I was like a machine that can be switched from one function to another at any time” (WE5).

Although these statements indicate the difficulty for women in striking a balance between domestic and business responsibilities, women entrepreneurs perceive this circumstance as a typical occurrence that they must deal with as part of their responsibilities. They stated that:

“No matter what we do outside our household, domestic responsibilities fall on women’s shoulder” (WE6).

Another women entrepreneur stated that *“... it isn’t a problem as all the women I know have to do the same thing [juggling domestic and business responsibilities]” (WE5).*

Furthermore, this study found that when it comes to executing managerial functions in their businesses, women entrepreneurs encounter a conflict that is rooted in patriarchal aspect. WE6 whom her husband has been involved in her business for several years commented:

“Sometimes ... I believe it will be beneficial if my husband does not work here. I give commands to my employees, telling them to do this and that. However, if I do the same to my husband, things will turn bad. He is irritated by my orders. Why? Because males, not women, are the ones who give instructions in our culture. So, switching hats will never be easy for me.”

WE8 also shares the same concern on the patriarchal pressure that she encounters. She stated:
“Being a woman ... the fact is that she is subordinate to her husband... there is no such thing as being on par with or above him. Isn’t this a widely held belief in our society? How do I survive in business then? I must be good at regulating my husband’s emotions.”

Although women entrepreneurs manage to overcome the patriarchal pressures that exist in their social environment, it is at their own expense. Often, women entrepreneurs need *“to live with it” (WE6), “to have inner strength” (WE8), and “to have patience” (WE5).*

A summary of the findings of this study is outlined in Table 4.

Table 4: Summary of Findings

Motivating factors of women entrepreneurs	
Cultural-related factors	Non-cultural related factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrepreneurial family culture (+) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Role models 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possession of related skills (+) • Family financial distress (-) • Financial hardship (-) • Unfavourable working conditions (-)
The conduct of women’s businesses	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender appropriate behaviour (+) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Provide specific technical skills, e.g. cooking/sewing (+) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business oriented (+) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Profitability/diversification/ Digitalization (+)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender appropriate behaviour (-) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Limitation of commitment in business (-) • Patriarchal pressure (-) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Family oriented (-) ➤ Spouse consent (-) ➤ Social stigma (-) ➤ Limitation in making decisions (-) | |
|--|--|

(+) positive influence (-) negative influence

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aims to investigate the influence of culture on women's entrepreneurial activities. The findings revealed that the culture-related factors which influence women's entrepreneurial activities are stemmed from two perspectives of culture: micro and macro. In this respect, the entrepreneurial activities of women entrepreneurs will be affected by their interactions and experience within the family environment (micro) as well as the social environment (macro). From the micro perspective, this study revealed that family culture is significant in influencing women to start their own businesses. The significance of culture in shaping the motivation to start a business can be seen in two ways. First, the business culture that has been inculcated in the family environment support the previous argument on the significance of family background in influencing the entrepreneurship decision made by the young family members (Chlosta et al., 2012). Therefore, being in the family that involves in entrepreneurial activities is significant in motivating women to establish their businesses, since they have been exposed to a family culture that values entrepreneurship. This finding is also in line with Eesley & Wang (2016) who found that parents' influence on entrepreneurial career options includes the transference of entrepreneurship skills and knowledge. However, this study revealed that exposure to women's specific tasks within the family environment (e.g. cooking and sewing) has provided women with technical skills needed to start their own business, supporting the long-held argument that gender appropriate behaviour has a significant impact on shaping women's lives (Oakley, 1981). In this sense, the dynamic interactions of women entrepreneurs within the family culture serve as a critical factor in promoting their decision to establish a firm as well as in selecting their business preferences. On the contrary, women's strong attachment to their family has led them to view their business from a non-business standpoint, limiting their ability to maximise their business potential.

Second, this study discovered a strong linkage between the cultural values that are embedded in the collectivist culture of Malaysia and women's decision to engage in entrepreneurial activities. One of the core values of collectivism is to support and help one another, and this value has motivated women to start their own businesses, as evidenced by this study. For example, in generating additional family income, which proved to be significant reason for women's involvement in business. Consistent with previous research, what emerged as the motivational factors for women's involvement in businesses is to provide a better life and to generate additional income for their families (Roomi et al., 2009). Although prior research suggests that women gain personal satisfaction from their income-generating activities (McGowan et al., 2012), this is not the case for the women in our study. This study revealed that women's involvement in business is to ensure the survival and well-being of their families and the urge to help their spouses in fulfilling the role as income providers due to unforeseen situations. This finding supports Ihuoma & Terrumun's (2015) argument that women are more likely to engage in productive works, helping their spouses to enhance the financial well-being

of the family. In this regard, the findings reveal that, contrary to past research (McGowan et al., 2012), women are not motivated to pursue personal fulfilment through business. Rather, their purpose is to keep the family together by supporting their spouses during times of financial hardship. For women entrepreneurs who become single mothers, the necessity to meet the family's financial obligations becomes even more important. Furthermore, the previous argument on women's receiving low payment in employment (Schmidt & Parker, 2003) also emerged as a relevant motivating factor for women in this study.

Meanwhile, this study found that the socio-cultural aspects that exist in women's social environments influence the conduct of women's businesses. From a macro perspective, this study demonstrates that culture requires members of a society to follow its cultural norms. First and foremost, this study revealed that despite engaging in entrepreneurial activities, women are expected to maintain their traditional responsibilities as homemakers. Within this context, women entrepreneurs perceive complying to societal norms as the right thing to do and as a way to avoid being judged by society for unacceptable pattern of behaviour. Consequently, women are continuously negotiating with cultural norms while juggling family and business responsibilities, with the former often taking the priority. This finding is consistent with previous argument that women tend to 'devalue' their businesses (Marlow, 2002: pg. 89), prioritising family obligations over business responsibilities (Ahmad, 2011). The conflicts that women entrepreneurs express in carrying out family and business responsibilities reflect and reinforce prior findings that cultural aspect has a significant impact on their entrepreneurial activities (Roomi & Harrison, 2010; Zehra & Achtenhagen, 2018). Another significant finding of this study is related to the impact of the patriarchal society on the conduct of women's businesses. Patriarchy is one of the elements of culture, though its existence is prevalent to some contexts, such as Malaysia. In a patriarchal society, women's conduct, particularly in the public sphere, must be approved by men, who are usually the household's head. This practice is evident in this study. The findings demonstrate that women cannot avoid the social stigma of being inferior to men. In this regard, the women entrepreneurs in this study agree that they will never be able to compete with their spouses in making decisions, and that this condition has left them with little possibility to maximise their business engagement. Being an entrepreneur requires women to involve in various types of activities outside their home. However, women's involvement in these activities is subject to the consent given by their spouses. As such, it is not easy for women entrepreneurs to make the best judgements for their businesses as their decision is subject to their husband's permission (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2010). In addition, there is great tension for women entrepreneurs if their spouses are also involved in operating the business. Although women own the business, giving orders to their spouses is difficult since in patriarchal societies, men are the ones who give orders. This finding corresponds with the argument that patriarchal system provides women entrepreneurs with limited power in making business decisions (Selamat & Endut, 2020). In addition, this study found that patriarchy restricts women's mobility. Again, this restriction can be lifted upon obtaining consent from spouses. These findings support the patriarchal society's image of women's subordination to men (Mordi et al., 2010) and the views that women are less independent, gentle and weak (Hashim et al., 2011).

The findings of this study imply that the extent to which women entrepreneurs' businesses are affected by socio-cultural factors will be dependent on how women are positioned in society. We conclude that the disadvantaged situation of women's entrepreneurship, as well as the expanding entrepreneurial gender gap that has been widely highlighted in the literature on

women's entrepreneurship, can be linked to the cultural factors that regulate women's home and social surroundings. However, we suggest that women's involvement in entrepreneurship should not be undermined based on how they are positioned in society. Rather, a more comprehensive approach to assisting women entrepreneurs in their entrepreneurial process that recognises women's differences from males can assist women in realising their full entrepreneurial potential.

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