

# Distinction or Discrimination?

## A Qualitative Study of Sustainable growth of Women-Owned Technology based SMEs in Malaysia

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**Abstract**— Technopreneurship development and its significance in economic growth has led world's economies to identify the potential role of growth-oriented women-owned technology based SMEs for economic gains. The existing literature on growth among women owned firms, however, exclusively elucidates dearth of empirical research of this phenomenon particularly in transitional economies. This qualitative study is an attempt to reveal the most significant factors that influence the sustainable growth of women owned technology SMEs in Malaysia. The findings from semi-structured interviews from policy makers explain that sustainable growth among these women owned technology based SMEs appears to be entwined in both personal factors related to distinctiveness of these firms as well as external factors associated with socio-cultural discrimination. Several practical and managerial implications have been provided to enlighten policy makers and women technopreneurs on one hand and enhance theoretical knowledge of researchers in the field of technology, innovation and gender.

**Keywords**— Sustainable Growth; Technopreneurship; Women-owned SMEs; Human Capital; Social Capital

### I. INTRODUCTION

With the growing global trend of women technopreneurship development [1], ensuring sustainable growth of women-owned technology-based SMEs in transitional economies of South East Asia has been a major concern, lately [2]. Sustainable growth of the firm is a buzz word in today's highly competitive industrial world and is attributed as the foundation of long term strategy to gain economic benefits [3]. This growth challenge grows more vigorous in more tumultuous, fast changing and competitive technology based markets and is impossible to accrue unless special attention is given to two most important dimensions of building up growth strategy and growth capability, simultaneously and interactively [4].

According to feminist theorists, women entrepreneurs' decision making regarding growth of their SMEs is influenced by external factors like government, society, business sector, macro-economic, culture on one hand and internal factors like personal motivations, knowledge and skills and social networking (linkages) and strategy orientation, on the other and [5],[6],[2]. In strong corroboration with the 'female underperformance hypothesis' and identical growth

preferences' [7], women entrepreneurs in Asian developing countries are generally attributed with paucity of personal resources [6], [8]. Hence, need to identify factors that may unleash their innovative competence for their long-term survival in the business world has been sturdily called for [9], [2].

### II. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### A. Women owned Technology Based SMEs in Malaysia

SME development in Malaysia is fundamental for women entrepreneurship development in Malaysia as well, as most of the women entrepreneurs prefer to opt for SME venture start-up as their entrepreneurial career [6], [2]. Knowing the importance of the 'fair sex' in entrepreneurship and economic development, Government of Malaysia has been trying hard to foster women entrepreneurship through investments in entrepreneurial education, training and financial assistance by different government agencies [10]. Establishment of Ministry of Entrepreneur and Cooperative Development (MECD), Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MFECD) and Small and Medium Industries Development Corporation (SMIDEC) has promoted women entrepreneurship in the region [11]. Due to

the predominance and mushroom growth of SMEs in the developing regions of the world there is still a tremendous potential and need to raise women entrepreneurship in traditional as well as technology based sectors to uplift their national economies [6], [2]. Due to astounding significance of SMEs in Malaysia and transition from traditional to technology entrepreneurship development [12], the need to give special attention to women for development of high innovative and growth oriented technology-based firms is raised in the literature [2]. Entry of women entrepreneurs in technology industry is a factor of economic and social help by the government, policy makers and funding agencies on one hand [1], [2] and the intensity of their personal perceptions about working in a more highly competitive male dominated technology industry so far [13]. With the growing need of technopreneurship development in Malaysia, increased number of studies related to technopreneurship development, technoprises and technopreneurs are found in context of Malaysia recently [14]. However, the astounding potential of highly innovative [14] and growth oriented women owned technology based SMEs in Malaysian economic growth [2], [15] has remained empirically untapped until now. Moreover, there is no significant explanatory study found which exclusively tries to uncover the factors influencing growth among women-owned technology based SMEs in Malaysia [15]. Hence the purpose of the study is to find answer to the research question “What are the key factors that may influence sustainable growth of women owned technology-based firms in Malaysia?”

#### B. Sustainable Growth and Women Owned Technology Based SMEs

According to [16], role of women in entrepreneurship is widely seen as their capacity to contribute in the economic growth and for that reason it is crucially important to study the factors and fix the problems associated with the underperformance of this untapped source of economic growth [17]. [18] explained that the performance of women owned SMEs can be examined through two divergent of liberal feminist theory and social feminist theory. According to liberal feminist (LF) theory, women owned businesses (SMEs) are likely to have less performance and success due to the socio-economical discrimination and biasness they face. On the other hand, social feminist (SF) theory, explains the difference in the business performance of male and female entrepreneurs is due to their intrinsic and discrete patterns of socialization and approach to their businesses.

Most of the literature on under performance of female owned businesses [18] [7] is in line with the liberal feminist theory arguing that if the socio-economic impediments are removed, women owned SMEs do not show any underperformance as compared to their male counterparts. A few studies have tried to explore social feminist viewpoint of the differences in performance based on survival and

success of women-owned SMEs due to differential effects of both discrimination and socialization processes [19]. [13] and Shane (2007) in their studies on finding the differences of male and female entrepreneurs argued that although gender of the entrepreneur doesn't affect the performance of the venture, however, male and female entrepreneurs certainly differ in their choices, motivations and structural differences of starting and managing their businesses. This corroborates with the social feminist perspective of growth in small firms elucidating the autonomous agency of women entrepreneurs based on their early experiences of socialization and consequent deliberate choice for balancing their solidaristic approach to entrepreneurship [16].

### III. METHODOLOGY

For qualitative component, the most ‘information rich’ participants (policy makers) from renowned government organizations for women-owned SMEs development were approached for interviews. 8 semi-structured interviews from policy makers were carried out in order to maintain a balance between too small and too large sample size and the related risks to data saturation and informational redundancy. As there are no particular government organizations for women owned technology based firms, the interviewees are purposively selected from renowned government organizations for SME development in Malaysia according to their experience and hierarchical position regarding policy making for SMEs in Malaysia as well as relevance of position and knowledge regarding innovation and technology. Data is manually coded by using qualitative content analysis techniques of categorizing themes through data immersion, reduction and interpretation. The coded data was analysed by using qualitative content analysis technique of open and axial coding where themes assembled in open coding with similar meaning and theoretical correspondence were merged into one main code by axial coding.

### IV. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The thematic approach used for the content analysis of the data revealed relatedness of sustainable growth among women owned technology based SMEs with both personal factors related to women technopreneurs and external factors of the firm.

#### A. Personal factors of Women Technopreneurs

Human, social and psychological capital of women technopreneurs appeared as most significant factors regarding their firms' sustainable growth. The template is designed so that author affiliations are not repeated each time for multiple authors of the same affiliation. Please keep your affiliations as

1). *Human Capital*: In line with the previous literature [1], a unanimous viewpoint of interviewees illustrated that women ‘should have more education and experience to sustain

growth of their firms.’ Corresponding to [15], It is also highlighted in interviews that the relationship of education and success of business among Malaysian women technopreneurs, is inverse as women with more education tend to use degrees as ‘stepping stone’ for opting salaried jobs than striving for a successful business and ‘most of them who are successful are having just secondary school education.’ Hence, relationship of human capital with firms’ growth can be explained in light of corroborating previous literature that inconsistent effect of education and experience on firms’ growth is mostly conditioned to its execution intensity by the entrepreneur [20] and contextual factors like gender and culture [21]. Findings also elucidated that in addition to formal education and work experience, women technopreneurs ‘need to sharpen their skills’ especially technical skills for achieving their firms’ sustainable growth. This put focus on the importance of elevating specific human capital among women entrepreneurs for their firms’ growth rather than working on their general human capital only [21], [9]. Qualitative analysis also pointed out important role of learning skills in determining strength of human capital among women owned SMEs. This is in line with the significance of refurbishing existing human capital based on education, knowledge and experience through active and continuous learning in order to gain sustained success in businesses [22]. According to the findings, women entrepreneurs in Malaysia have strong learning skills and they are ‘more willing to learn than men’ yet their less contribution in growth oriented technology businesses can be explained by need for more ‘proactive learning’ to implement effectiveness and efficiency in women owned SMEs [23]. Hence, summing up the inferences from findings it is conjectured that education and experience of women technopreneurs can be helpful in the growth of their firms provided they have appropriate entrepreneurial and technical learning and skills nourished by their strong internal motivation and external facilitation.

2) Social Capital: Qualitative analysis explained ‘socialization’ and ‘networking’ as two different dimensions of social capital, with different consequences. Being more relational than men, these women technopreneurs are found strong in socialization especially among their strong ties comprising of ‘family and friends’, but they are ‘very weak’ in networking. This corroborates previous literature on ‘lack of appropriate social capital’ ([9]) and greater reliance of women entrepreneurs on strong ties ([11],[23],[24], which although helps them in gaining support and resources for venture start-up [14], are insufficient for long term growth [25],[24]. This illustrates significance of exhibiting not just intensity but also density of social capital to achieve long term growth among women owned businesses [11],[9],[8],[24]. In technology based firms seeking growth,

women entrepreneurs are required to move from ‘identity based’ to ‘calculative’ networks in order to fulfill the requirement of intangible information and tangible resources through strategy ([26]). Building well-managed ‘multiplex ties’, i.e. both strong ties and weak ties are hence, of significant importance for growth among women-owned businesses [24]. Furthermore, the qualitative analysis shed light on diversity in formal networks as another significant dimension of strong social capital. Explicating exclusive inclination of women technopreneurs in building homogenous social networks i.e. only among females, it is contended in interviews that ‘for successful company women would require mixing with men and making teams’. This is in strong corroboration with concept of homophily as explained by [25] in building networks among women owned firms in developing countries and its detrimental effects on growth by reducing access to instrumental information [26] in an uncertain and turbulent environment. In sum, the social capital of women entrepreneurs is found to be highly related to their firms’ growth; however women technopreneurs are extremely required to look into issues of density and diversity attached with social capital for better growth prospects [27].

3) Psychological Capital: Findings from qualitative analysis illustrated sustainable growth of women owned firms as factor of their ‘passion’, ‘confidence’, ‘inner strength’, ‘focus’ and ‘motivation’. Women technopreneurs are described as more focused and willing to compete and the successful ones are those having the ‘right education, right skills and right confidence’ to compete in male dominated sectors. Furthermore, qualitative analysis depicts that women technopreneurs in Malaysia are less but equally and sometimes more competitive, committed, managed and successful than their male counterparts. However, in agreement with interviews findings, their scanty participation in technology based sectors in comparison to other traditional sectors can be explained by their instinctive proclivity for simple businesses mostly related to services [6] on one hand and their perceived risks on the other. As, described in interviews, women are found to have a different ‘psychological makeup’ from their men counterparts and as mentioned in literature, understanding these psychological differences and related growth aspirations are hence crucial for uplifting their firms’ growth [28]. This relates to earlier studies explicating that women chose less risky and less demanding business sectors due to their distinct preferences, motives and constraints [5],[2]. Women entrepreneurs generally and those from technology businesses specifically are demonstrated as ‘calculative in taking risks’ especially when it comes to gaining financial support from government. This significantly relates to disparate risk cues among women as [4] argued that ‘they

are not afraid of risks but they do not treat risks lighter either'. It is also highlighted in interviews that despite the fact that women entrepreneurs are good in paying back debts than male entrepreneurs, they fear venturing into riskier and more capital demanding technology businesses. From interviews it is also elaborated that work-family balance is one of the growth risk factors for Malaysian women technopreneurs. It is in corroboration with earlier studies emphasizing that 'Entrepreneurs are not atomistic actors' [26]:4 and they are rooted in 'family context' which has greater impact on women than men regarding growth process of their firms. Hence, women entrepreneurs are mostly vigilant and conservative and strive for a controllable rate of growth in order to keep within their set threshold levels of keeping quality of life, work-family balance and satisfied clientele [29]. Moreover, women require their internal strength, achievement need and confidence to be acknowledged, appreciated and trusted in order to buttress their psychological capacities and firms' performance due to their greater reliance on relational episodes in their lives [28].

#### B. External Factors of Women Technopreneurs

In addition to the predicted factors, important role of some additional factors in sustainable growth of women owned technology-based firms have appeared from the supplementary qualitative analysis. From qualitative findings, emerging role of external factors (culture, religion, social mindset and government's policies & programs) of women entrepreneurs in their firms' growth gels with the notion that entrepreneurs and their businesses do not operate in vacuum and entrepreneurial behaviors as well as actions are intensely context based [9], [30].

1) Culture: As depicted in interviews, innovativeness and growth in women owned businesses is highly context based and is significantly affected by the cultural domain [31]. Malaysia is a multi-ethnic yet collectivist society where women entrepreneurs' primary responsibility is towards family. High gender differentiation in this society constrains women entrepreneurs to focus on their traditional roles and limit their innovativeness and growth intentions [31]. This cultural barrier is equally illustrated in interviews explicating that women entrepreneurs are more considerate regarding their self-image as woman and want to safe their face in society by not being so over ambitious for their career or firms' growth [9]. Effect of culture gets fortified with the addition of religious factor especially regarding Muslim women entrepreneurs in Malaysia.

2) Religion: Findings from interviews reveal that religion is one main factor in determining the level of aspirations for growth among women as following Islamic traditions women entrepreneurs generally prefer being 'supportive element to their family' and not the leader. It is also in strong corroboration with the previous literature depicting

patriarchy and gender differentiation prevailing in developing societies where women's ambitiousness and capabilities do not direct them being leaders but cheerleaders for their male members of the family [31],[32]. The paradox between women entrepreneurs' competencies and Islamic traditions does not only influence their spatial mobility and occupational opportunity but also their growth aspirations [32].

3) Social Mindset: Qualitative findings also revealed strong effect of social mindset on women's perceptions and aspirations for growth. This is inclined with previous literature commenting that gender and technology in intertwined in socially constructed structures influenced by behaviors and attitudes of all the actors involved and less contribution and growth of women in technology based businesses is not solely due to their personal characteristics [27]. It is also concurrent to previous literature commenting that women entrepreneurship in Malaysia is destined to the prevailing Confucian social mindsets exhibiting strong adherence to engendered patriarchy, hierarchy and authority given to male members of the society [30]. Qualitative findings also elaborated that the stereotypes, presumed expectations and scepticism regarding women entrepreneurs do not allow them perform comfortably in the male centred model of non-traditional entrepreneurship which effects high growth among women-owned technology based firms [9]. It was conferred that social mindset in Malaysia needs to be changed regarding women and they are required to given 'space and opportunity to show their abilities'. This also leads to their impediments in getting trust and legitimacy in their businesses that are crucially needed for raising finance for growth of their businesses [30].

4) Government's Policies & Programs: In addition to the socio-cultural and religious factors, role of government's policies and programs also appeared to influence growth of women-owned technology based firms. Role of government is illustrated as an important factor in determining growth of women owned technology-based firms in terms of trust, special focus, funding, customized trainings and programs to uplift their technical and marketing skills, and technology adoption. Results of interviews revealed that although personal factors of women are helping them increase their firms' innovativeness and they are more willing to register and commercialize their products, yet 'they don't know how to get them accomplished so this is where they need facilitation'. This corresponds to the existing literature on management of innovative capability demonstrating it as function which is not always 'internal to the company' and both 'hard' (technology, commercialization and market) and 'soft' (knowledge sharing, learning, skill development) determinants of innovative capability need to be revisited at continual basis taking in account all actors involved in the

innovation system [33]. As elucidated in interviews, current policies are not sufficient to foster women technopreneurship in Malaysia, government's focused facilitation in this regard is deemed essential. Previous studies also reflect that putting innovations into effective firms' growth requires proper commercialization of these innovations which rely on facilitation regarding information, finance and legitimacy from building social networks with government and industry [34]. Although government of Malaysia is working hard to uplift women entrepreneurship, women technopreneurs are not sufficiently being focused and facilitated. From interviews trust emerged as one basic need to provide financial facilitation in fostering women's contribution to technology based businesses as well as their firms' long term growth. This is strongly in tandem with the existing literature on importance of trust relationship among different actors involved in business ecosystem for successful technopreneurship [35]. Hence, any facilitation from external parties like government agencies, policy makers and strong as well as business ties can alleviate their confidence to succeed in more competitive and non-traditional markets.

### C. Policy Recommendations

1) Promoting Islamic gender-egalitarian approach: In order to counteract their limitations regarding social, cultural and religious barriers, government agencies should help build the strong social image of modern Muslim woman. Promotion of progressive gender-egalitarian approach in Islam and portrayal of highly esteemed and competent Muslim women role models in the field of entrepreneurship, like Hazrat Khadija R.A., should be adopted by government agencies to change the existing mindset and behavior of all the actors involved in the entrepreneurial ecosystem of women technopreneurs.

2) Ensuring impartiality in business environments: To decrease perceptions for occupational sex segregation among women and their social circle, government should create indiscriminative business environments where women based on their innovative skills can have equal chances to grow as easily and rapidly as their men counterparts. The impediments regarding social mindset of agencies and society towards women technopreneurs need to be removed in order to generate trust and legitimacy for this equally competent and essential group of women technopreneurs.

3) Nurturing Relational & Structural Trust: Government agencies, specifically those oriented towards women owned firms, need to diminish the perspective as well as practical gap between women technopreneurs and funding agencies regarding awareness and acquisition of finance for adoption and upgradation of technology in their firms. This can be achieved through nurturing a relational as well as

structural trust among the actors involved and ensuring transparency in the funding process.

4) Arranging motivational forums: Putting faith and confidence in capabilities and entrepreneurial efforts of women technopreneurs, regarding their WTBFs, can also bring about positive performance and growth outcomes. Hence, arranging motivational forums introducing success stories related to women technopreneurs can muster up positive motivational tendencies as well as elatedness regarding feminine role models among male dominating industry.

5) Building specific human capital: As the need for specific human capital is raised for growth among technology based firms, women technopreneurs should be assisted in providing industry specific education and experience in addition to general entrepreneurial education, experience and skill development workshops. Where their general human capital based on their entrepreneurial and technical education and entrepreneurial experience will help them enter smoothly in technology industry, training programs regarding technological expertise and networking development will help them better adjust and progress in the technological industry.

6) Using homogeneity as opportunity: Business strategist organizations can perform better by changing threats of homogeneity among female networks into opportunities. Taking in account women's more reliance on and compliance with homogenous networking, mentoring and business development services (BDS) and trainings with the help of women facilitators and achievers should be rendered to these new as well as existing women owned technology-based firms.

7) Improving strategic networking: Women technopreneurs can be better facilitated regarding network facilities if government networking programs are designed not only to improve general networking skills but also to assist strategic networking among the actors by recognizing their specific needs and appropriate resources for them. Hence, trainings forums and advisory services should be provided for improving strategic insight of female technopreneurs regarding business networks.

8) Increased and flexible funding: Women are more meticulous and sensitive about their financial liabilities in case of failure; government should render big and easy loans with flexible installments to women technopreneurs to facilitate technology acquisition, upgradation, implementation and commercialization.

### V. CONCLUSION

selected from renowned government organizations for SME development in Malaysia according to their experience and hierarchical position regarding policy making for SMEs in

Malaysia as well as relevance of position and knowledge regarding innovation and technology. Data is manually coded by using qualitative content analysis techniques of categorizing themes through data immersion, reduction and interpretation. The coded data was analysed by using qualitative content analysis technique of open and axial coding where themes assembled in open coding with similar meaning and theoretical correspondence were merged into one main code by axial coding.

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