
Issues and Perspectives in Business and Social Sciences

Women supporting women in entrepreneurship: Examining the role of women in empowering each other

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Abstract

In a world where women entrepreneurs continue to face systemic barriers, the support of other women entrepreneurs becomes not just a choice but a necessity for driving meaningful change and creating a more equitable and inclusive entrepreneurial landscape. Women entrepreneurs have experienced a significant 114% growth over the last twenty years, resulting in women owning one-third of businesses globally. Despite substantial progress, there is still a lack of knowledge regarding the successful development and support of women entrepreneurs. An important focus is analysing the impact of other women in supporting women's entrepreneurship. This study uses the social identity theory as the framework and conducts online in-person interviews with 17 women entrepreneurs from four locations in Malaysia: Melaka, Selangor, Johor, and Negeri Sembilan. The emphasis is on investigating the role of other women in the entrepreneurial process. The findings show five essential roles women entrepreneurs offer to other women to sustain their businesses in various settings. Compared to other roles, women serve as role models that are substantially more important. This study explores the broader consequences of supporting women in promoting women entrepreneurs.

Keywords:

Women entrepreneurs;
Women support;
Social identity theory;
Entrepreneurship;
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1. Introduction

Women entrepreneurs' contribution to the economic landscape is undeniable (Kotkar & Chavhan, 2021), and they have been making massive strides (Khan et al., 2021) in the entrepreneurship sphere. However, women in entrepreneurship have distinct challenges and obstacles (Magd & Thirumalaisamy, 2021), while also possessing various potentials for growth and success (Arjune & Srinivasa Kumar, 2022). Society must recognise that men and women confront distinct challenges while attempting to achieve the same level of success in entrepreneurship. It is impossible to exaggerate the impact that successful women entrepreneurs have on the global economy since they serve as a source of motivation for other people. Successful businesspeople of either gender can indeed motivate women in the business world (Llados-Masllorens & Ruiz-Dotras, 2022). Nevertheless, the impact of shared experiences, capacities, and obstacles among women entrepreneurs magnifies the potential influence of their achievements (Huq et al., 2020).

In Malaysia, there has been increasing governmental and organisational assistance for women entrepreneurs due to their notable impact on the economy (Abd Wahid et al., 2021). Although women entrepreneurship is rising in several countries worldwide, Malaysia ranks 102nd out of 146 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index in 2023, falling behind neighbouring nations, including the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia (World Economic Forum, 2023). The index emphasises the existing gender inequalities and showcases the competitive environment that women entrepreneurs must traverse. Women entrepreneurs always face the challenge of balancing family obligations with their entrepreneurial endeavours in the face of societal norms and the competitive business landscape (Abd Wahid et al., 2021; Shastri et al., 2019). Women entrepreneurs in Malaysia are resilient enough to overcome hurdles and maintain their enterprises in a male-dominated small and medium enterprise (SME) sector.

This study examines the various roles women entrepreneurs attribute to other women in their networks from a social constructionist perspective. Moreover, this study focuses on how women entrepreneurs determine and distribute positions for other women within their entrepreneurial ecosystems, considering the distinctive environments in which their enterprises function. Hence, this study attempts to create a framework explaining how women entrepreneurs support other women entrepreneurs. Specifically, this research aims to explore how women entrepreneurs might encourage various roles among women in their surroundings, promoting women's entrepreneurship in Malaysia.

This study investigates the roles of women in the entrepreneurial ecosystem and the impact of other women by analysing qualitative data obtained from interviews with 17 women entrepreneurs from four states in Malaysia: Melaka, Selangor, Johor, and Negeri Sembilan. This research is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What responsibilities do women entrepreneurs take on in an entrepreneurial environment?

RQ2: How do these roles influence women's entrepreneurship in Malaysia?

This study attempts to shed light on the important roles that women entrepreneurs play in supporting and empowering other women entrepreneurs in Malaysia. By comprehending these dynamics issues, policymakers, groups, and entrepreneurs can develop strategies to create a conducive setting for women's entrepreneurship, thereby aiding in economic growth and gender equality.

2. Literature review

2.1 Social identity theory and women entrepreneurs

Social Identity Theory (SIT,) a psychology theory, emphasises how individuals develop their self-concept through affiliation with various social groups (Steffens et al., 2021). SIT seeks to explain that individuals categorise themselves and others as a group. In SIT, in-groups are groups to which they belong, and out-groups are groups to which they do not belong (Huq et al., 2020). How individuals are perceived in terms of their status and importance within these social groupings is another factor contributing to forming their sense of self-worth and value.

Women entrepreneurs categorise themselves and others according to their gender identification when conducting business (Balachandra & Dublisch, 2019). This classification significantly impacts how individuals view themselves and their position within the community of women entrepreneurs. Other women may view women entrepreneurs as in-group members. This identification fosters solidarity and shared identity among members of the in-group (Steffens et al., 2021). There is interdependence between women entrepreneurs and other women entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs acknowledge the resemblance in their experiences,

challenges, and objectives (Huq et al., 2020). Women entrepreneurs who identify with a group are more likely to experience a sense of belonging and to work together as a team (Hahn, 2020), resulting in reciprocal help and collaboration.

The social support that women entrepreneurs provide to one another within their respective entrepreneurial circles is valuable (Cooke & Xiao, 2021). Such support can manifest in various ways, including mentoring, advice, guidance, opportunities to network, and emotional encouragement. An individual's sense of identification and belonging within the entrepreneurial community is not solely enhanced by supporting other women entrepreneurs (Koomson et al., 2021). When it comes to nurturing relationships and forming commercial activities within the community of entrepreneurs, women may choose to focus their attention on their gender identity to bolster, enhance, and elevate the business activities of other women (World Economic Forum, 2023). The gender identity of women entrepreneurs will be pushed to the forefront when they inspire, serve as a source of inspiration, and motivate other women entrepreneurs.

As a foundation for understanding how women entrepreneurs construct their identities based on their gender and how they manage their social contacts within the community of entrepreneurs, SIT provides a paradigm for understanding these processes. In a nutshell, by appreciating the significance of social identity processes, policymakers, organisations, and women entrepreneurs may work together to create an atmosphere that is supportive and inclusive, which improves the success of women entrepreneurs and advances gender equality in entrepreneurship.

2.2 Overview of women's entrepreneurship

In Malaysia, women's entrepreneurship has been increasing in momentum (Chipfunde et al., 2021), encouraged by measures taken by the government, policy reforms, and growing awareness of gender equality and women's empowerment (Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives, 2020). The Malaysian government has approved various funding for local entrepreneurs who are owners of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), with priorities given to women entrepreneurs (see Bernama, 2024). These initiatives include microcredits, startup grants, and equity financing programmes. Women's entrepreneurship has become an increasingly important topic, with the objective of empowering women in the business sector (Cho, Li, et al., 2020). Although women comprise approximately twenty percent of Malaysian SME owners (Isa et al., 2022), they are confronted with unique challenges. These challenges include discrepancies in the duties that they have at work and home (Abuhussein & Koburtay, 2021), problems with finances (Baporikar & Akino, 2020), and societal expectations (Prandini & Baconguis, 2021) that frequently hold them back from making progress.

2.3 The impacts of unconscious bias on support networks

Support networks have become highly substantial, especially in the dynamic landscape of women's entrepreneurship (Cho, Park, et al., 2020). Support networks offer access to resources, new clients, and new partnerships, besides providing supportive encouragement. Establishing these networks provides a secure environment in which the women entrepreneurs community can openly discuss their difficulties and issues, attempt to find solutions to problems, and empower one another (Basit et al., 2020). Ultimately, this support network contributes to the myriad expansion of successful businesses. It also offers women entrepreneurs with mentorships (Chipfunde et al., 2021), possibilities for finance (Klapper & Lusardi, 2020), and inspiration (Malik et al., 2021) that significantly contributes to the growth of women entrepreneurs.

Unconscious biases have the potential to influence on the distribution of resources, opportunities, and support options within the entrepreneurial networks (Arjune & Srinivasa Kumar, 2022). For instance, decision-makers in a funding organisation or business network that have unconscious

preference towards male entrepreneurs tend to overlook women entrepreneurs' needs for resources and support, making it more challenging for women entrepreneurs. Unconscious biases has also been found to affect the availability and effectiveness of mentorship and support networks for women entrepreneurs (Coleman et al., 2019). Unconscious biases therefore significantly influence the effectiveness of support networks. Mentors or advisers who have unconscious biases against the capabilities or potential of women in business may be less effective towards women entrepreneurs compared to their male counterparts.

3. Methodology

Participants of an Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) seminar conducted by an organisation for young entrepreneurs called Persatuan Usahawan Muda (PUSMA) were identified as the potential participants for this study. This seminar was attended by women entrepreneurs. Seventeen women entrepreneurs from the seminar have been invited and agreed to participate in this study. These participants were from four states in Malaysia, specifically Melaka, Johor, Negeri Sembilan, and Selangor. The interview was conducted using an online platform in a semi-structured format, with each interview taking about 30 to 52 minutes. Each interview session was recorded with the agreement of the participants.

The implementation of qualitative methodology made it possible to conduct a comprehensive investigation into the experiences, opinions, and insights of the participants about networking, entrepreneurship, and other topics surrounding these topics. The primary research question investigated in this study is: What responsibilities do women take on in a women entrepreneur's entrepreneurial environment? Sub-questions within this broad question include (1) Do other women entrepreneurs play a role? If the answer is yes, please explain the nature of it. (2) Do women in various entrepreneurial environments share similar responsibilities or exhibit distinct differences? In order to elicit thorough comments, open-ended questions were utilised.

The interviews included four primary subject areas, which are the background of the entrepreneur – including their reasons for attending the seminar and their experiences of networking, the history of their business, perspectives on women supporting women in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, and recommendations for women who are planning to start their own businesses in the future. The participants shared personal narratives that account for their lives and the products and services they offer. Fifteen interviews were performed in the Malay language, and two were conducted in English, as the interviewees preferred. Table 1 presents a summary of the participants' profiles.

An in-depth analysis was performed on the interview data in order to find pertinent insights that could be used for further investigation. Several processes were necessary to complete the data analysis for this study. First, each video recording from the semi-structured interviews was carefully reviewed. A thematic approach was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns within the data. This thematic approach enabled the study to systematically categorise and interpret the data, providing deeper insights into how women support each other within entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Table 1: Participants' profiles

Participant	Location	Sector	Age	Year of business formation	Number of employees**
1	Melaka	Food and Beverage*	28	2020	0
2	Melaka	Education (Tutor)*	32	2018	0
3	Melaka	Manufacturing	46	2007	20
4	Melaka	Construction	43	2010	13
5	Melaka	Food and Beverage*	38	2018	0
6	Melaka	Food and Beverage*	37	2015	0
7	Melaka	Food and Beverage*	32	2019	0
8	Melaka	Food and Beverage	35	2017	3
9	Melaka	Manufacturing	42	2010	18
10	Selangor	Food and Beverage*	39	2013	0
11	Selangor	Education (Tuition)*	27	2020	0
12	Negeri Sembilan	Food and Beverage	34	2016	14
13	Negeri Sembilan	Manufacturing	39	2011	21
14	Negeri Sembilan	Manufacturing	40	2010	25
15	Johor	Food and Beverage	41	2010	3
16	Johor	Education (Kindergarten)	44	2008	13
17	Johor	Manufacturing	49	2004	20

* Home-based business; ** Number of employees includes permanent, part-time, and contract employees.

4. Results

The study identified five distinct categories: networking and relationships, mentorship and coaching, providing support and encouragement, role modelling, and information exchange and skill development. We posit that diverse entrepreneurship settings facilitate or impede distinct roles for women, contingent upon environmental factors. The roles attributed by women entrepreneurs to other women exhibit diverse characteristics, illustrating the significance of these individuals within their respective entrepreneurial ecosystems. Table 2 delineates the array of roles and elucidates how interviewees articulated the multifaceted roles of these women within their entrepreneurial frameworks.

4.1 Networking and relationships

This study aligns with the results of studies by Cho and Park et al. (2020), Huq et al. (2020), and Sufian et al. (2022) by demonstrating the significant impact of networking and relationships on women entrepreneurs. Many participants felt overwhelmed by traditional networking events but found comfort when connecting with other women entrepreneurs who can guide and support them through the process. Additionally, some Muslim participants mentioned that their spouses are supportive of them working exclusively with women, highlighting the importance of a supportive network in their professional lives but still maintaining boundaries by prioritising the concepts of halal and haram.

Discussions with other women entrepreneurs were acknowledged as a valuable opportunity to gain and share insights. These engaging discussions provide a platform and channel for the participants to openly share their business challenges in terms of financial management, current business developments, and experiences, fostering a sense of understanding among participants. Furthermore, group networking events were seen as energising and rejuvenating, offering a confidence boost and a sense of community.

Overall, there is a strong connection among women entrepreneurs beyond traditional networking events. These connections provide a nurturing and refreshing atmosphere where women entrepreneurs can feel at ease and comfortable with each other while gaining valuable insights and openly exchanging their true experiences. These networks also provide tailored or customised resources, mentorship opportunities, and a community of peers who understand the unique challenges of being a woman entrepreneur. Tailored resources are the support and materials specifically provided to address women entrepreneurs' unique issues, challenges, and obstacles. These resources are made with a deep understanding of gender-specific dynamics that impact women in the business world. Contrary to generic support, tailored resources offer specialised resources linked explicitly to women entrepreneurs' needs, such as strategies and solutions for overcoming common barriers, including gender biases, achieving work-life balance, and financing matters.

Table 2: Derived themes

Themes	Sampled quotes	Participant
Inclusion and equality	"I'm introvert. I find networking a bit overwhelming. I'm more comfortable when other women entrepreneurs guide me through it."	1
	"My husband is comfortable with me working exclusively with women."	3
	"Engaging in discussions with group of women entrepreneurs enables us to actively gain and share insights."	5
Networking and relationships	"These networks offer more than just support based on gender; they also provide tailored resources, mentorship opportunities, and a community of peers who understand the challenges and complexities of being a woman in business."	8
	"Group networking provides a platform for women to openly share stories of their problems and challenges with other women entrepreneurs who have similar experiences."	6
	"Running a business is tiring! Group events can boost confidence and rejuvenate myself."	2
Mentorship and coaching	"I need more practical advice on several aspects of entrepreneurship."	17
	"I'm looking for someone who can provide a listening ear and offer support, empathy, and motivation during challenging moments."	15
	"Successful entrepreneurs can help me, yes indeed, Set goals that are realistic with action plans to achieve each goal".	8
	"In my opinion, other women entrepreneurs can provide valuable feedback to assist in overcoming self-doubt."	7
	"Professionals have the ability to foster a growth mindset."	9
Support and encouragement	"Each success story of a woman entrepreneur serves as a reminder to all women."	11
	"Women entrepreneurs become beacons of hope."	2
	"Having women's support can greatly enhance confidence levels."	10
	"Balancing business and motherhood is tough. I feel like being a good mother should always be my top priority. I need support and guidance to figure out what's most important for me."	6
	"Starting and running a business can be tough. Offering a caring ear and understanding support can ease stress and lift spirits."	15
	"Support by other women entrepreneurs can encourage self-care, prevent burnout, and maintain balance in our lives."	14
Role modelling	"We're still living in a world where men hold most of the power, and it would be great to see more women stepping up, making a difference, and breaking through the barriers that hold them back."	2
	"It's important to share the valuable insights gained from the experiences of women entrepreneurs, not just for the sake of sharing, but to help shape the future and change how women are perceived on a global scale."	7
	"Success stories of women entrepreneurs inspired me."	4
	"The absence of women entrepreneurs who serve as inspiration is an important reason in why women may feel discouraged from pursuing it as a career."	12
	"I like Vivy Yusoff a lot. But those famous people don't usually inspire me every day. I like role models that are more like me."	8

	"Having more women role models can help show girls that they can be slaying in the industry."	13
	"Other women entrepreneurs success becomes the roadmap for others."	9
Information exchange and skill development	"Interactions within women entrepreneurs make us connect comfortably, share experiences, and learn from each other."	12
	"For me, sharing knowledge and skill-building programs can help tackle the gender gap by offering personalized help and resources."	16
	"Stronger and supportive entrepreneurial community."	1

4.2 Mentorship and coaching

The qualitative data demonstrate that mentorship and coaching emerge as significant roles that women entrepreneurs play in supporting other women entrepreneurs, which is in line with Bakhtiar et al. (2021). Women entrepreneurs highlighted the need for practical advice, hands on practices, and guidance in various aspects of entrepreneurship, expressing the value of having a mentor or coach who can provide actionable insights (Cooke & Xiao, 2021).

Participants point up the importance of having motivators who can lend an ear and provide support, empathy, and motivation during challenging and tough moments. Inasmuch as emotions are concerned, women have a better understanding of other women than men do, without any negative judgment or wrong interpretation of feelings (Adom & Anambane, 2020). This highlights the emotional support aspect of mentorship and coaching, which can be crucial in navigating the ups and downs of the entrepreneurship journey.

According to the participants, successful women entrepreneurs are seen as respectable mentors who can help to set relevant and realistic goals with action plans and consistent strategy to achieve them. Their experience and expertise can provide valuable guidance in overcoming diffidence and fostering a growth mindset among mentees. Mentorship and coaching provided by women entrepreneurs offer practical advice, emotional support, goal-setting assistance, and feedback to help other women entrepreneurs navigate the complexities of entrepreneurship. Bakhtiar et al. (2021) find that mentor-mentee connections provide empowerment, growth, and resilience which in returns enhance to the mentee's success in business.

4.3 Support and encouragement

According to the qualitative data gathered through the interviews, the supply of positive vibes and encouragement from women entrepreneurs presents a significant role in determining the success and overall well-being of their counterparts who are engaged in entrepreneurial endeavours. The results aligned with the findings of previous research carried out by Magd and Thirumalaisamy (2021) and Khan et al. (2021), which was particularly highlighted in their studies that were carried out in Oman and Pakistan, respectively. In both studies, the researchers insist on the significance of such supportive dynamics in the presence of unanticipated internal and external challenges that are encountered within entrepreneurial environments.

Each success story is a guiding light of hope, inspiring and motivating others to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams. Having support from other women entrepreneurs can greatly enhance confidence levels and provide a sense of unity in addressing challenges. Participants 2, 3, 6, 7, 11, and 14 mentioned the importance of balancing business and motherhood, expressing the need for support and guidance in navigating these responsibilities. They emphasised that being a good mother should always be a top priority, and support from other women entrepreneurs can help them figure out what is most important for them.

Starting and running a business can be tough (Afshan et al., 2021); nevertheless, offering a caring ear and understanding support can ease stress and lift spirits. Support from other women entrepreneurs can encourage self-care, prevent burnout, and maintain balance in their lives, ultimately contributing to their overall well-being and success in business (Participants 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 10, 11, and 14). In brief, support and encouragement from women entrepreneurs play a crucial role in empowering and uplifting other women entrepreneurs. By sharing success stories,

offering support, and encouraging self-care, women entrepreneurs create a supportive ecosystem where women can thrive and succeed together.

4.4 Role modelling

Women entrepreneurs are important role models for other women entrepreneurs (Andriamahery & Qamruzzaman, 2022; Koomson et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2021). In a world where men still hold most of the power, seeing more women stepping up, making a difference, and breaking through barriers is inspiring and empowering for other women.

Participants expressed the importance of sharing valuable insights gained from the experiences of women entrepreneurs to help shape the future and change how women are perceived globally. Success stories of women entrepreneurs marked as an inspiration and motivation for others, showing that it's possible to succeed despite challenges and obstacles. However, it's not just about famous or well-known role models. Participants indicated that they are inspired by role models who are more relatable and similar to themselves. Having more successful women entrepreneurs as role models in this ecosystem can help convincing other women that they also can succeed and thrive, paving the way for future generations of women entrepreneurs.

In conclusion, women entrepreneurs serve as role models for others by sharing their experiences, business triumphs, and insights. Their success stories become roadmaps and inspiration for others as a source of motivation. Since entrepreneurship is known as a male-dominated sector, other women entrepreneurs' success serves as achievements and indirectly helps to empower pursuing their entrepreneurial dreams and break through barriers in the business world.

4.5 Information exchange and skill development

The exchange of information and the development of skills among women entrepreneurs are essential for the purpose of promoting growth, fostering connections, exchanging experiences, and facilitating learning opportunities. Participants highlighted the importance of knowledge sharing among women entrepreneurs. They emphasise that they feel more ease and comfortable in their learning process by exchanging experiences and insights with each other. This response demonstrates the importance of creating a supportive and collaborative atmosphere where women entrepreneurs may gather to exchange ideas, knowledge, and insights.

Moreover, a recent study conducted by Egbo et al. (2020) agreed that knowledge-sharing and skill-building programs could be considered effective tools for addressing the gender gap in entrepreneurship. These findings align with the statements made by the participants; "For me, knowledge sharing and skill-building programmes can help tackle the gender gap by offering personalised help and resources". These programmes can empower women entrepreneurs to overcome challenges and succeed in their businesses by offering personalised and tailored resources (Sholevar & Harris, 2020), directly contributing to building a stronger women entrepreneur community. These also provide a supportive entrepreneurial platform among women. By facilitating connections, sharing experiences, and providing learning opportunities, women entrepreneurs can empower each other to thrive and succeed in their entrepreneurial endeavours.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Based on the findings of this qualitative study, the authors conclude the role of women in empowering each other. Figure 1 represents how women involved in an entrepreneurial ecosystem can contribute to the advancement of women's entrepreneurship in the future. After

examining the roles of women entrepreneurs in connection to other women entrepreneurs, this conclusion is reached from discussing those roles.

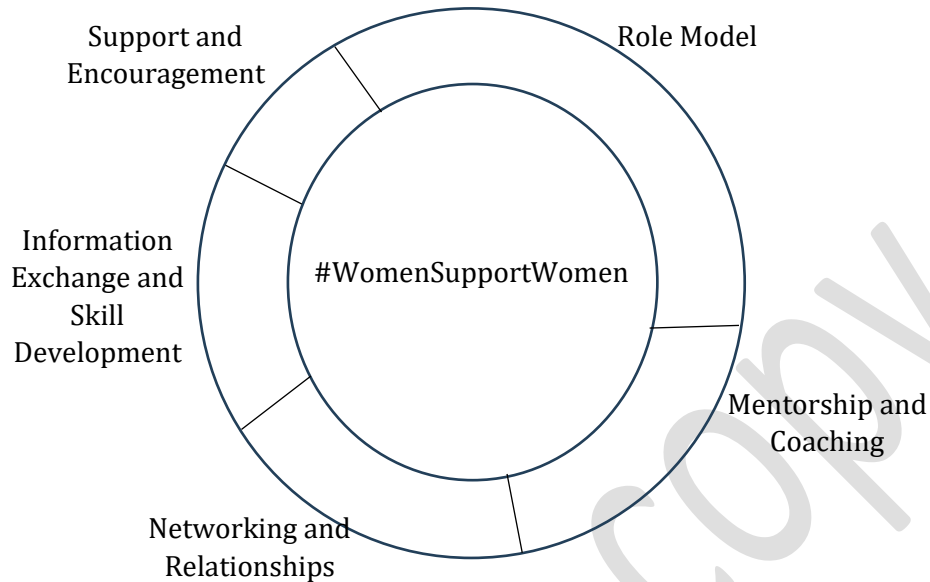


Figure 1: Role of women in entrepreneurship

It is not merely a matter of companionship when women support other women in entrepreneurship. Instead, it assists women-led teams in building their business acumen and overcoming the unique challenges and barriers women confront in the business world. This study has discovered critical insights that have led to the identification of essential roles that other women play in women's entrepreneurship. These roles have been identified as being essential: networking and relationships, mentorship and coaching, support and encouragement, role model and exchanging knowledge and developing skills.

Women entrepreneurs are catalysts for sustainable growth. They are the world's talent across a variety of sectors and industries. Women entrepreneurs are confronted with systemic biases and impediments that can block their efforts to become successful entrepreneurs. In entrepreneurship, the support and encouragement of other women entrepreneurs becomes a crucial lifeline. Not only can women mentors, peers, and allies offer practical help and resources, but they also offer emotional support, empathy, and validation of experiences that all parties involved have had in common.

When women encourage other women to grow and succeed together in entrepreneurship, it ultimately sparks a chain reaction of empowerment and motivation among the women involved. Women can challenge preconceptions, eliminate barriers, and create chances for future generations of women to flourish as affluent entrepreneurs if they work together to support and empower one another. Consequently, they assume the role of agents of change, propelling the entrepreneurship ecosystem in the direction of greater gender equality and diversity. The development of a positive attitude among women is necessary to foster the expansion and development of women's entrepreneurship worldwide.

This study's limitation lies in its focus on participants from four specific states only, resulting in an uneven distribution of participants. Future studies can include a larger sample from more locations to gain a more comprehensive perspective.

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