Challenges Facing Women Entrepreneurs in the Kingdom of Bahrain

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the challenges Bahraini women entrepreneurs face in Bahrain, to improve the understanding of these challenges and promote an environment where both female and male entrepreneurs can thrive. The problem is that there is a knowledge gap due to the scarcity of studies. Previous research has been done about this topic in different contextual settings, but none of them is contemporary and done in Bahrain only. Therefore, this research will attempt to fill the knowledge gap by studying the challenges faced by today's Bahraini women entrepreneurs in Bahrain only. Hence, the research question is what are the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in the Kingdom of Bahrain? The researchers chose the topic of women entrepreneurship because it contributes to the development of individuals, societies and the country's economy. It aids in utilizing the talents and skills of half of the population. This is why it is important that Bahrain identifies the challenges today's Bahraini women entrepreneurs face in order to be able to eliminate them and allow women to succeed and thrive. It is evident that improvements have been made, but much still need to be done to help women entrepreneurs succeed in their fields. Yet, there is a knowledge gap in research about the topic and therefore this paper suggests a method composed of interviews, surveys and a comprehensive review of existing literature to fill the gap. However, the suggested method does not include asking the participants for recommendations and it would be suitable to hire the same professionals to interview and analyse the interview responses.

Keywords: Bahrain, Challenges, Discrimination, Entrepreneurship, Gender-bias, Women, Women entrepreneurs.

Introduction

Entrepreneurship is recognized globally as being of great benefit to individuals and countries as it is a critical driver of growth and job creation [1]. In Bahrain, entrepreneurship is encouraged by policies and the establishing of semi-governmental bodies such as Tamkeen [2].

Thus, becoming an entrepreneur in Bahrain became easier and more achievable. However, does this apply to both men and women who want to start their own business? Recently the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimated that women entrepreneurs make up a quarter to a third of the world's entrepreneurs [3]. According to Vinesh, entrepreneurship has been a male-dominated phenomenon [4]. This is even more noticeable in patriarchal societies like Bahrain's [5]. This is due to the culture that expects women to take care of the house duties and raise the children while men provide income for the family [5].

Women in the Middle East including Bahrain, have always been facing hardships since they entered labour market [2]. Problems from gender-bias, discrimination and the glass ceiling are things they faced constantly. Nevertheless, Omair stated that the situation is improving and women in the Middle East can no longer be described as inferior in work [6].

They now demand to be presented with the same opportunities that men have, to create a source of income and/or to pursue their dreams. According to the Supreme Council for Women in Bahrain, the percentage of women in the labour force has increased to 29.8% and women entrepreneurs have become more prominent [7]. This is why the topic is important because, as time changes, women are seen as more powerful individuals that are able to run successful businesses and defy the odds stacked against them.
According to Das, women are willing to turn to entrepreneurship to enjoy greater satisfaction and flexibility and cope with the ‘glass ceiling’ that seems to prevent them from reaching top managerial levels in organisations [8]. Their willingness should be awarded with opportunities and elimination of challenges so that they can contribute to improving the economy of Bahrain [2].

Hence, these challenges must be identified to be diminished where possible. Thus, the research question is “What are the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in the Kingdom of Bahrain?” The researchers’ hypothesis is that women entrepreneurs in Bahrain face challenges that men entrepreneurs face in addition to others that are related to being females in a male-dominated society.

Answering this research question will provide clarity as to what the contemporary challenges that women entrepreneurs are currently facing in Bahrain. Identifying the challenges will help in eliminating them which will allow for more growth and expansion in the business sector in Bahrain [1]. Therefore, the study set out to identify and improve the understanding of the major challenges women entrepreneurs face in Bahrain as well as highlighting the effects of these challenges. In addition to contributing to the lacking body of knowledge about this topic in the Kingdom.

Literature Review

Concept of Entrepreneurship

Before studying the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs, it is imperative to start by defining the concept of entrepreneurship. According to Chinomona, Maziriri and Moloi, entrepreneurship refers to initiating, creating, and building, expanding and sustaining a venture. In addition to gathering the necessary resources to exploit an opportunity in the marketplace for long-term wealth and capital gain [10]. From this definition, it can be deduced that entrepreneurship is the ability and readiness to create and operate a business unit in order to make profit.

Women Entrepreneurs

More specifically, women entrepreneurs are defined by Manerkar as women who initiate and organize a business enterprise [11]. However, this definition lacks some important elements such as the fact that women entrepreneurs own, operate, manage and take risks in their business [12].

In other words, Chinomona stated that they are the female front-runners of a business, who are effectively responsible for its day-to-day activities [1]. Moving on, women entrepreneurship was defined by Arakeri as the enterprise owned and controlled by a woman. It has a minimum financial interest of 51 percent of the capital and gives at least 51 percent of the employment generated in the enterprise to women [13].

Challenges Facing Women Entrepreneurs

Sarri and Trihopoulou stated that much research from all over the world was done regarding the topic of women entrepreneurship and it has shown that many interventions need to be made to make progress in the development of women entrepreneurs [14]. These studies showed several common things. For instance, O’Neil, Viljoen, Wasilczlik and Zieba conducted two different studies and both concluded that the most important obstacle is raising finance [15-16].

Discrimination

Moreover, Mitchell claimed that in addition to the risks all entrepreneurs face, women face other problems due to being females in a male-dominated society [17]. Similarly, Mandipaka stated that most women entrepreneurs are discriminated against which creates barriers against their success [18]. Discrimination refers to distinguishing unfavourably or the detection of the difference between one thing and another [18]. However, the definition does not include a crucial part which is that discrimination is usually done according to certain characteristics such as gender, religion or race [19].

Education and Training

Furthermore, many studies pointed out the lack of education and training as another large obstacle. According to Phillips, Moos and Nieman, running an enterprise is risky for all entrepreneurs, but even more so for women entrepreneurs. This is because in addition to having to survive in a male-dominated environment, they also often do
not have the appropriate education and training in this field [20]. Likewise, Jalbert stated that operating a business can be more challenging for women entrepreneurs in both formal and informal sectors because they are often ill-equipped educationally and they lack skills [21]. Based on these researchers’ statements, it can be concluded that women entrepreneurs’ lack of training and education creates challenges in the setting up and operation of businesses.

Women Entrepreneurship in the Region Although the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs are international, women in the Middle East face other obstacles as well. According to Marinakou, Middle Eastern societies have more patriarchal norms and the people are more conservative [5].

Hartmann defined patriarchy as “relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women” [22]. Therefore, it can be deduced that women entrepreneurs in the Middle East deal with more discrimination and gender-bias.

According to a research by the International Finance Corporation (IFC), women in the region cite similar challenges, including learning financial management skills, retaining employees, access to capital and access to general business training and support. The women surveyed also identified balancing work with family as an extremely difficult task. More than 74% of them said that they worked more than forty hours a week which makes it challenging to spend time with their families [23]. It must be noted that various research papers written over time found that societal norms and expectations for women in the Middle East include marriage, child-bearing and specific career options [5].

This acts as a large barrier because women who work are still expected to prioritize their families. Since many women entrepreneurs find it difficult to balance work and family, they are likely to be pressured by these societal expectations. Like in all other Middle Eastern countries, women entrepreneurs in Bahrain face many challenges. According to a research by the Supreme Council for Women in Bahrain, women entrepreneurs identified discrimination, inability to manage work and family life, misinterpretation of religious beliefs and lack of confidence and trust in them as the most prominent challenges [7].

Interestingly, it can be noticed that even in IFC’s research, difficulty to raise capital, despite being one of the biggest obstacles to other women in the MENA region, was considered less of a female-based challenge in Bahrain [23]. Unlike in other countries, such as South Africa, where women entrepreneurs deal with the unwillingness of banks to grant them loans because of gender-bias [1].

This is because Bahrain has various institutions that aid women entrepreneurs. These include Tamkeen, Bahrain Development Bank (BDB) and the Supreme Council for Women [5]. Yet, Sinha found that other challenges such as the gender-bias embedded in society still limit women from active economic participation and access to business and development services [23].

However, according to IFC, the importance of women's entrepreneurship for economic growth is increasingly recognized in Bahrain and the Middle East generally. It creates jobs, which is essential in a region with a young population and high unemployment [24].

Moreover, women entrepreneurship provides a productive outlet for a well-educated and underutilized talent pool of females in Bahrain. This not only benefits women entrepreneurs themselves, but it also contributes to the well-being of their families, communities, and countries’ overall economic development [24]. Hence, it is vital that the challenges women entrepreneurs face are identified so that the barriers that hinder their thriving and success are eliminated.

Knowledge Gap in the Topic Yet, there is limited research about this topic in Bahrain, and most of the studies done are relatively old. With the vast changes that happened in the business world in this decade as well as the changes in the social norms and attitudes caused by globalization [5], it is important that a new research about the challenges today’s women entrepreneurs face in Bahrain is conducted so that the knowledge gap is filled. As it is not sufficient to rely on studies done in other countries to create solutions.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is evident that the Bahrain’s business world today has improved immensely compared to a decade ago.
However, research shows that despite the increasing involvement of women in entrepreneurship, there are still challenges that hinder their success. Due to the nature of the culture, the challenges that face women in Bahrain, as a country in the Middle East, are to some extent different from those faced by women in other regions. These challenges include lack of adequate training and education and difficulty in accessing financial resources. Furthermore, there are cultural barriers including both social and legal restrictions limiting female business activities. In addition to the gender gap that forms a critical problem for women in all countries, but more specifically in countries with patriarchal societies like Bahrain’s.

Therefore, many interventions need to be made to better the situation. This can only be done by conducting research to recognize and understand these contemporary challenges and their sources in the country. As it is ineffective to use research conducted a long time ago or research from other regions to solve this problem. Thus, this research is expected to act as a catalyst for further discussion with regard to the involvement of women in business activities in Bahrain that will aid in improving the position of women entrepreneurs in Bahrain and perhaps in other similar countries surrounding including GCC countries. Despite the expected contribution of the study to the body of knowledge, it has its own limitations. One of which is that the study’s focus is only on identifying the challenges faced by Bahraini women entrepreneurs. It would have been more insightful if the surveyed and interviewed entrepreneurs are asked for recommendations about how these challenges can be eliminated. Another limitation is that the researchers could have hired the same professionals for both interviewing and analysing the interviews responses for better understanding of the responses.

Moreover, literature on women’s entrepreneurship in the region is rare. Hence, it would be difficult to find papers for collecting background information and comparing the research’s results with similar publications. Also, comparing the research’s results with the outcomes of studies conducting in different contextual settings from different regions could be misleading.

Moreover, the study does not intend to use all the established variables in investigating the topic of women entrepreneurship in Bahrain, this is likely to reduce the generalizability of the outcomes. Finally, in order to carry out the research and fill this knowledge gap, this paper proposes that a research method composed of approximately 15 interviews and 140 surveys are carried out with female Bahraini entrepreneurs. In addition to conducting a comprehensive literature review.

References


