

Theoretical-empirical Article

Entrepreneurial Experiences of Female Entrepreneurs in the Maldives: From Concept to Implementation and Beyond

Experiências de Mulheres Empreendedoras nas Maldivas: Do Conceito à Implementação e Além



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ABSTRACT

Objective: the number of women-owned SMEs in the Maldives has increased as a result of the recent popularity of e-commerce and the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, the purpose of this study was to describe the entrepreneurial experiences of female entrepreneurs in the Maldives in order to gain an understanding of the various stages of entrepreneurial process. **Theoretical approach:** the conceptual framework of this research was based theoretically on values derived from entrepreneurial theories and the components and features derived from the existing entrepreneurial process models. **Method:** this study employed a qualitative methodology, with semi-structured interviews conducted with five established female entrepreneurs. Purposive sampling technique was used to select participants. The data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis method. **Results:** the study's findings revealed that the conception of the entrepreneurial idea, the first stage of the entrepreneurial process, was primarily inspired by the entrepreneur's passion and hobby. In the second stage, it was discovered that no proper business planning had been completed, and the business was initially self-financed. In the third stage, it was discovered that the majority of entrepreneurs launched their businesses through social media and managed day-to-day operations as a small team. When it came to fourth stage, most of female entrepreneurs preferred both image and financial growth, with the majority of them relying on government funds for further business growth. **Conclusion:** this research will assist policymakers to gain insight into female entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial experiences and, as a result, in developing effective policies and programs to help them expand their business.

Keywords: female entrepreneurs; entrepreneurial experiences; entrepreneurial process; SMEs.

RESUMO

Objetivo: O número de pequenas e micro empresas de propriedade de mulheres nas Maldivas aumentou como resultado da recente popularidade do comércio eletrônico e em virtude da pandemia de Covid-19. Nesse contexto, o presente estudo busca descrever as experiências de mulheres empreendedoras no país, de forma a compreender os vários estágios do processo de empreender. **Marco teórico:** a estrutura conceitual do estudo se baseia em valores derivados de teorias do empreendedorismo e nos componentes e características oriundos dos modelos de processo empreendedor existentes. **Método:** A pesquisa adota uma metodologia qualitativa, com entrevistas semiestruturadas conduzidas com cinco mulheres empreendedoras. A técnica de amostragem proposital foi usada para selecionar as participantes e a análise de dados foi realizada pelo método de análise temática. **Resultados:** o estudo revelou que a concepção da ideia empreendedora, ou seja, o primeiro estágio do processo empreendedor, foi inspirada principalmente pela paixão e hobby da empreendedora. No segundo estágio, descobriu-se que nenhum planejamento de negócios adequado havia sido conduzido e a empresa foi inicialmente autofinanciada. O terceiro estágio mostrou que a maioria das empreendedoras lançou seus negócios por meio de mídias sociais e administrou as operações do dia a dia com uma pequena equipe. No quarto estágio, a maioria das empreendedoras preferiu tanto o crescimento da imagem quanto o financeiro, com a maioria delas contando com fundos do governo para o desenvolvimento do negócio. **Conclusão:** Esta pesquisa busca ajudar formuladores de políticas a compreender as experiências das empreendedoras e, como resultado, a desenvolver políticas e programas eficazes para ajudá-las a expandir seus negócios

Palavras-chave: mulheres empreendedoras; experiências empreendedoras; processo empreendedor; PMEs.

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INTRODUCTION

Background of the study

Maldives, an island state with a population of 382,751 (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2023), has a gross domestic product (GDP) of MVR 83,098 million, with the majority of income generated from the tourism sector. However, wholesale and retail trade contributes a significant portion to the GDP, accounting for MVR 5,496 million in 2021 (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2022). This wholesale and retail trade industry constitutes the majority of small and medium enterprises (SME's) in the Maldives.

Maldivian women make up 40 percent of the informal sector of the economy, compared to just 31 percent for men. The informal sector is dominated by women who engage in home-based income-generating activities and rural women who engage in traditional livelihood activities such as making rihaakuru and other traditional food (Mohamed & Hamid, 2020). However, the scale of operation of these businesses is small as they cater to a meager market and the income from such work is volatile as it is dependent on the market forces (Premaratne & Kudaliyanage, 2016). The majority of these women are self-employed, small-scale businesswomen who run businesses such as sewing, cake decorations, and catering food. In addition, most women prefer to do business from home while taking care of their families as the social expectation of women in the Maldives is refined to homemaking and household management (Premaratne & Kudaliyanage, 2016). Nevertheless, in the last three-five years with the popularity of e-commerce, the number of women-owned SMEs is on an upsurge. This has further increased during the Covid-19 pandemic, with a greater number of women turning toward e-commerce to facilitate their businesses (Ministry of Economic Development, 2020).

Problem statement

The participation of female entrepreneurs in the economy has rapidly increased over the last decade and studies have highlighted female entrepreneurship as one of the drivers behind the acceleration of economic growth in a country (Anwar & Rashid, 2012). Likewise, female entrepreneurs are making greater strides in boosting the economy by creating job opportunities (Zeb, 2018). Nevertheless, female entrepreneurs are still facing challenges and difficulties in business and their number is significantly low when compared to the opposite gender in most of the economies. According to the survey report published by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor in 2023 (Hill et al., 2023), female entrepreneurs still lag

behind male entrepreneurs in most of the economies even though they have taken a robust role in the expansion of economies. Moreover, out of 49 economies participating in the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor survey in 2022 (Hill et al., 2023), it was only in four economies that the female entrepreneurial activities surpassed that of male entrepreneurial activities (Hill et al., 2023).

Likewise, a study report published by El-Horr and Pande (2016), on understanding gender and inclusiveness in the Maldives, has highlighted the gender disparity in entrepreneurial activities in the country. According to the findings of this study, the reason behind the substantial disproportion in gender-related entrepreneurial activity is the lack of credit availability for women and their lack of mobility in the economy (El-Horr & Pande, 2016). In contrast, the recent livelihood assessment done by the Ministry of Economic Development post Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted a rapid increase in online businesses fostering new female entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, their assessment also showed that redundancy and complete loss of income were higher for women. In addition, their findings suggested that redundancy risks might drive many young women out of the labor force altogether (Ministry of Economic Development, 2020).

Furthermore, many pieces of research have highlighted the gender disparity in entrepreneurial activities and the difficulties and challenges of female entrepreneurs. According to Lin et al. (2018), the difference of entrepreneurial intention between male and female stem from the aspiration for females to perform multiple social roles in terms of raising the employment rate or helping the disadvantaged, rather than for corporate growth. Likewise, research done by Premaratne and Kudaliyanage (2016), based on small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the Maldives, showed that females undertook entrepreneurial activities on minor leftover economic areas. Besides, the main challenge that female entrepreneurs face is financing for longer terms and limited human resource for scaling up their businesses because of lack of collateral security and absence of entrepreneurial competencies (Premaratne & Kudaliyanage, 2016). Similarly, a recent correlational study conducted by Zulham et al. (2022) revealed that a number of factors such as lack of access to finance, social expectations, and a lack of networking were highly correlated with entrepreneurial success.

Though similar research has been conducted to gain insight into female entrepreneurship in other countries, there is a dearth of literature on female entrepreneurship in the Maldives, despite the fact that women account for 40% of the informal sector of the economy (Mohamed & Hamid, 2020). Furthermore, given the importance of understanding the development of entrepreneurship

in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) (Coy, 2023; Minto-Coy et al., 2016; Pounder & Gopal, 2021), it is anticipated that this study will provide important insights for female entrepreneurship development in SIDS and contribute to existing literature.

Therefore, considering the importance of female entrepreneurship in the Maldives economy, it becomes necessary to understand comprehensively the entrepreneurial activities undertaken by female entrepreneurs at different stages of entrepreneurial development. Thus, this study aims to describe entrepreneurial experiences of the female entrepreneur in the Maldives in order to gain insight into the different aspects of the entrepreneurial activities and to present recommendations for the relevant stakeholders to aid them in better crafting strategies for female entrepreneurs.

Research objective

The main research objective of the study is to describe the entrepreneurial activities that female entrepreneurs carry out in the different stages of entrepreneurship development.

In addition, the sub-research objectives of the research study are: (a) to identify the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in the Maldives in different stages of the entrepreneurial development; (b) to recommend the solutions that could be offered by the relevant stakeholders to overcome the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in the Maldives.

Research question

The main research question of the study is: What are the entrepreneurial activities that female entrepreneurs carry out in the different stages of entrepreneurship development?

In addition, the sub-research questions of the research study are: (a) What are the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in the Maldives in different stages of the entrepreneurial process?; (b) What are the solutions that could be offered by the relevant stakeholders to overcome the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in the Maldives?

Significance of the study

The research is significant at the national level for relevant stakeholders. As highlighted by the rapid livelihood assessment by the Ministry of Economic Development, there has been a boom in female entrepreneurship during the Covid-19 pandemic (Ministry of Economic Development,

2020). However, this boom could be sustained with effective policies and guidelines that will promote female entrepreneurship. Hence the findings from the research could be used by the Ministry of Economic Development of Maldives in developing and implementing interventions to assist female entrepreneurs in the development and sustainment of their businesses. In addition, this research will help to gain insight into the entrepreneurial activities of female entrepreneurs in depth and contribute to existing literature on female entrepreneurship in SIDS.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Entrepreneurship and Female Entrepreneurs

The term 'entrepreneurship' comes from the French term *entreprendre*, which means 'to undertake' (Rususup et al., 2012). Therefore, entrepreneurship can be defined as taking initiative, building innovations, taking decisions and being responsible for taking risks on economic activities (Cadaru & Badulescu, 2015). Entrepreneurship can also be defined as an activity that involves discovering, evaluating, and exploiting opportunities to come up with innovative products and services. Likewise, entrepreneurship is concerned with creating opportunities and meeting the needs of the customers (Ifabiyi et al., 2020).

Female entrepreneurship is considered an important driver in enabling social changes and female empowerment in society. In the recent decade, much focus has been given to female entrepreneurship as it has been marketed as crucial for increasing the quality of life of a female in the developing world (Anwar & Rashid, 2012). Likewise, female entrepreneurs are considered as potential forces to overcome the economic challenges in the global world. Moreover, a rise in female entrepreneurs can often lead to a raise in GDP and hence points to the importance of policy reform in favor of women (Zeb, 2018). Therefore, it can be said that the importance of supporting the female entrepreneurial movement has been pointed out by many researchers.

Similarly, literature and practice prove that the continuous rise of female entrepreneurs creates economic growth and advancement in society. This means conservative prejudices about the role of women in business should be reformed (Ramadani, 2015). However, though female entrepreneurs contribute significantly to employment and economic growth, male-owned businesses are still prominent (Hill et al., 2023). Therefore, it is critical to do in-depth research on female entrepreneurship activities in order to obtain knowledge and extend it beyond its current scope.

Entrepreneurial theories

In the last few decades, entrepreneurship researchers have developed a variety of theories, models, and frameworks. These theories have emphasized diverse aspects of entrepreneurship and are used to understand entrepreneurship and its development. They are categorized according to three different theory types: economic theories, sociological theories, and psycho-behavioral theories (Bhuiyan, 2015).

First, economic theories of entrepreneurship are considered. Economic theories are important in entrepreneurship because the final goal of business is profit generation. Schumpeter (1934, as cited in Bhuiyan, 2015) established a well-known economic theory of entrepreneurship in which he characterized an entrepreneur as an inventor who develops novel combinations of production elements. Furthermore, Baumol's (1995, as cited in Cherukara & Manalel, 2011) theory on entrepreneurship expanded Schumpeter's concepts by distinguishing between two entrepreneurial prototypes, namely the company organizer and the innovator in obtaining profit. Other comparable economic theories have also proposed characteristics and activities important for profit generation, such as entrepreneurial discovery (Kritzner, 1979, as cited in Bhuiyan, 2015), innovation (Casson, 1982, as cited in Cherukara & Manalel, 2011), and decision-making (Hayek 1937; Schackle, 1970, as cited in Cherukara & Manalel, 2011). Thus, it is clear that specific activities such as idea generation, innovation, and decision-making are important for profit generation in entrepreneurship.

Second, sociological theories of entrepreneurship are considered. These sociological theories are heavily focused on religious beliefs, value systems, and social stratifications within the community. These theories indirectly influence the growth of various ventures in a community. Theories such as Aldrich's theory (2001, as cited in Cherukara & Manalel, 2011) explored the intentional actions and solutions to actions of entrepreneurs and organizations whereas theories by Jenks (1949, as cited in Cherukara & Manalel, 2011) and Hoselitz (1963, as cited in Cherukara & Manalel, 2011) demonstrated how various social groupings such as females contribute to entrepreneurial growth. These sociological ideas are to some extent relevant to this research since it is being conducted from a feminine perspective.

Third, psycho-behavioral theories of entrepreneurship are considered. These ideas go deeply into the individual values and behaviors of entrepreneurs. Theories such as McClelland's needs theory (1961, as cited in Bhuiyan, 2015) emphasized accomplishment motivation as an essential component of entrepreneurial growth. Similarly, other theories, such as Kets de Vries' (1977, as cited in Cherukara

& Manalel, 2011), defined the psychodynamic model in relation to the individual entrepreneurial personality. As this research is about the examination of the variety of tasks performed by the entrepreneur at different phases of the entrepreneurial process, their decision-making and behavior in some situations are applicable from this theoretical perspective.

Entrepreneurial process

The entrepreneurial process is defined as the road from the entrepreneurial idea or conception to the business startup (Lin et al., 2018). Even though it has become widely acknowledged that entrepreneurship is the driving force in the economies of developed countries, there is little consensus about what establishes entrepreneurial activity and how the entrepreneurial process unfolds.

Researchers have proposed several models to explain the entrepreneurial process, encompassing various aspects of entrepreneurship. One widely recognized model is the Timmons model of entrepreneurial process, which focuses on the many variables related to the entrepreneur, the founding team, the opportunity, and the resources (Timmons, 1989, as cited in Yadav, 2015). The primary determinant of successful entrepreneurship in this particular model is the entrepreneur. Nevertheless, the model fails to provide a comprehensive account of the various actions encompassed under the aforementioned process. In a similar vein, other models such as the Wickham model of entrepreneurial performance (Wickham, 2001) and the entrepreneurial capital model (Erikson, 2002) provide a holistic comprehension of industry dynamics, efficient managerial strategies, proficient interpersonal skills, and a significant level of entrepreneurial motivation. These factors collectively contribute to the overall success of an organization. However, it is important to note that these models do not specifically delineate the individual entrepreneurial activities.

Moreover, the Hisrich and Peters model of entrepreneurial process (Hisrich & Peters, 2002, as cited in Rajput, 2011) explains the entrepreneurial process by including several aspects that have been examined in entrepreneurship research and organizes them into four distinct stages. However, it has controversial implications in the interplay of the four distinct stages of the entrepreneurial process. Similarly, the integrative model of entrepreneurship, as proposed by Morris et al. (2005, as cited in Rajput, 2011), describes the concept of entrepreneurship by highlighting the interplay among several elements, including the entrepreneurial process, the entrepreneur, the business concept, resources, and the organizational setting. This model employs a layered structure to explain the elements; yet, it exhibits restricted comprehensiveness in delineating

the complexities of the entrepreneurial process. Thus, based on the models examined, there is a need for outlining the activities carried out by entrepreneurs in depth at each stage of the entrepreneurial development process.

Conceptual framework

Based on the literature reviewed in the preceding subsections, it is reasonable to conclude that, theoretically, economic, sociological, and psycho-behavioral theories can be used to some extent to achieve the research's goal. Nonetheless, because the aim of the research is to delve deeply into the activities of the entrepreneur, some of the concepts discovered through the theories are expected to be presented only in the detail of the entrepreneurial process.

Furthermore, in order to develop the framework used in this study, the components and features derived from the previously described entrepreneurial process models were combined. This integration considered the many factors involved, resulting in the discovery of four different stages that are common to many of the models investigated. One of the key goals of this research is to offer a thorough account of the entrepreneurial activities carried out by entrepreneurs at each stage of their growth. Thus, the conceptual framework contained the following four stages: conception of the business idea (Timmons, 1989, as cited in [Yadav, 2015](#); Hisrich & Peters, 2002, as cited in [Rajput, 2011](#); Morris et al., 2005, as cited in [Rajput, 2011](#)), planning (Timmons, 1989, as cited in [Yadav, 2015](#); Hisrich & Peters, 2002; Morris et al., 2005, as cited in [Rajput, 2011](#)), execution (Hisrich & Peters, 2002, as cited in [Rajput, 2011](#); Erikoson, 2002), and growth (Hisrich & Peters, 2002, as cited in [Rajput, 2011](#)).

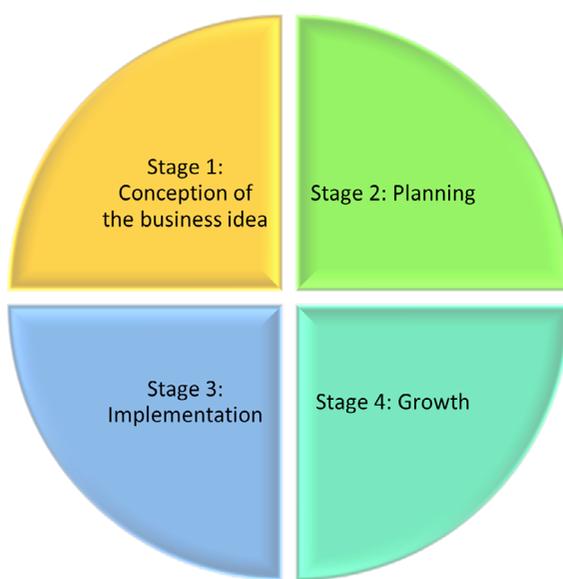


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study.
Source: Developed by the authors.

Challenges/problems for Female Entrepreneurs

Female entrepreneurs are increasing in number, as is their importance in the economy; more and more research is being conducted to investigate the challenges/problems that female entrepreneurs face. One significant challenge identified in research is a lack of access to financial services or capital, which is particularly problematic in developing countries such as Pakistan and the Maldives ([Alecchi, 2020](#); [Raheem et al., 2019](#); [Zulham et al., 2022](#)). A survey of female entrepreneurs in Pakistan revealed that one critical factor influencing their entrepreneurial startup was the availability of funds ([Raheem et al., 2019](#)). Similarly, a cross-sectional study of 100 female entrepreneurs in the Maldives found a strong correlation between a lack of finance and entrepreneurial success. Likewise, obtaining loans from financial institutions due to a lack of assets, as well as managing working capital, has also been identified as a challenge ([Premaratne & Kudaliyanage, 2016](#)).

A second challenge identified by research is balancing family and work-life demands, as females are expected to take care of their families ([Machado et al., 2016](#)). Similarly, getting approval from family members has been identified as a barrier for female entrepreneurs in conservative parts of the world. Female entrepreneurs seek affirmation and approval from their spouses and families during the early stages of their entrepreneurial development, according to a qualitative study of 78 female entrepreneurial stories ([Lin et al., 2018](#)).

The lack of training in entrepreneurship is a third challenge that many female entrepreneurs face. Most females have identified a lack of proper training and education as barriers to establishing a successful business ([Machado et al., 2016](#); [Premaratne & Kudaliyanage, 2016](#)). Other challenges for a female entrepreneur include strong competition from men, a lack of marketing knowledge and skills, living in a male-dominated society, and a lack of entrepreneurial aptitude ([Lin et al., 2018](#); [Premaratne & Kudaliyanage, 2016](#); [Raheem et al., 2019](#)). Furthermore, female entrepreneurs have identified a lack of confidence in their abilities, a lack of access to industry information, a lack of networking opportunities, and a lack of knowledge in business planning as challenges ([Machado et al., 2016](#)).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

The purpose of this research study is to explore the entrepreneurial experiences of female entrepreneurs at different stages of entrepreneurial process. In addition,

it sought to describe the activities they undertake and identify the challenges and recommendations from their perspective for better strategies for development of female entrepreneurship in Maldives. The study employed a qualitative basic research design to collect qualitative data in order to describe the phenomenon in depth. In this study, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were undertaken to collect insights and first-hand experiences from participants.

Target population and sampling

The target audience was female entrepreneurs in Malé City since data collecting would be easier and more accessible because the majority of female entrepreneurs live in the city. The sample for this research study was selected as five female entrepreneurs because the population of female entrepreneurs meeting the criteria listed below is limited in the Maldives, and also because the researcher wanted to conduct an in-depth analysis of the experiences to obtain a wealth of data.

The five female entrepreneurs were selected based on the following criteria listed below.

- The founder and the sole owner of the business was the female entrepreneur.
- The business was in operation for more than ten consecutive years.

The above-mentioned criteria were chosen to gain rich data on the various stages of entrepreneurial process to

describe the female entrepreneurial activities in depth and to identify the different challenges that they have come across. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants for the semi-structured interview.

Data collection and analysis

The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with female entrepreneurs selected for the study. The interviews were audio recorded with consent from the participants. These interviews lasted for around 30-45 minutes per individual participant. The interviews were conducted according to an interview guide developed by the research team. Several open-ended questions were used to initiate discussions about the participants' perspectives and experiences with entrepreneurial development activities. Likewise, questions were asked in order to identify challenges and recommendations related to entrepreneurial development and experiences. An inductive analysis approach was used to analyze the data collected for this study. The recorded interview was transcribed and analyzed by first identifying codes from each of the transcripts in relation to the research questions. Next, each of these codes was combined into categories. Finally, the combined categories were cross-combined with each developed theme. These themes were comprised of the study's main findings.

Profile of the female entrepreneurs

Table 1. Profile of the female entrepreneurs.

Name	Age	Type of business	Years of experience
Participant 1	36	Catering industry	10+
Participant 2	45	Fitness industry	15+
Participant 3	32	Traditional arts and crafts	12+
Participant 4	50	Fitness industry	20+
Participant 5	38	Catering industry	11+

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research study's findings are divided into each stage of the entrepreneurial process. The challenges identified for each stage are then followed by the entrepreneurs' recommendations for improvement.

The entrepreneurial activities that female entrepreneurs carried out in the different stages of entrepreneurship development

Stage 1

The first activity that female entrepreneurs engaged in was idea generation. It was intriguing to see that their business idea was closely related to their personal passion or hobby. *"I first got the idea from my passion of being a fitness instructor for the last fifteen years or so. One day I thought, why don't I start a business out of it? And that is how I thought of the idea to start my own fitness center"* (Participant 2, personal communication, July 30, 2023).

The next action they performed was opportunity identification. However, during this phase, most entrepreneurs engaged in informal research efforts with their friends and family to acquire their views on their business idea, while others engaged in formal research activities to discover prospective prospects. It was discovered that intuition and insights gained from their close interactions with family and friends impacted their decision-making more than a formal study. The final action they completed during this stage was a feasibility study of their business idea. Despite the fact that the activity was not carried out as a formal feasibility study, the smaller activities in which they participated indicated several tasks relevant to a feasibility study. Some participants, for example, recalled doing a small interview with a past client to see whether there is a market, while others performed calculations such as break-even analysis to determine the financial sustainability of their business idea. However, the majority of them acknowledged that they might have lost money at the start of their business because they did not assess the feasibility of their business idea at the initial stage.

Stage 2

It is worth noting that, in the second stage of planning, the majority of female entrepreneurs agreed that the first step they must do is business planning. It was surprising to observe, however, that none of the entrepreneurs interviewed were involved in any formal business planning. The female entrepreneurs did not write a formal business plan before launching their business because they thought they lacked the necessary competence. Similarly, they stressed the need of consulting an industry professional as a complementary activity to business planning. Following the business planning, the next activity they engaged in was the development of an implementation plan in order to identify people and financial resources. Once again, they went on their whim and approximated the amount of both financial and other resources that would be necessary for their business's startup. The last step of this stage was the acquirement of financial resources. It was observed that all of the entrepreneurs employed the bootstrapping technique to raise funds for their own businesses, utilizing personal savings as well as sponsors from spouses and family members. Furthermore, just the minimal resources were bought for the initial business establishment. *"I used my savings in order to buy the resources required to initially start the business. And yes, of course, additional cash was also received from my husband too. He helped me financially and in other ways too"* (Participant 3, personal communication, July 21, 2023).

Stage 3

During the implementation stage, all of the entrepreneurs interviewed agreed that the first activity they should undertake was to register their business. All of these businesses were registered as sole proprietorships with the Ministry of Economic Development of Maldives. This activity was completed by using information gathered from close acquaintances and information obtained from the relevant ministry. *"For registering my business, I went to the Ministry of Economics and Development. It is from there I found out the number of forms I need to fill and about the procedure in general. But yes, I got help from my spouse too"* (Participant 3, personal communication, July 21, 2023).

The next activity that followed was the actual establishment of the business. Some entrepreneurs chose to start their business from home, while others picked a smaller, more economical space. This was followed by the next activity, which was the official launch of the business. The majority of entrepreneurs began their businesses modestly, using word-of-mouth advertising among close friends and utilizing social media networks. However, when asked about the marketing strategy they used, they expressed a lack of familiarity with this specific business terminology and stated that they relied on various tactics driven by whim and personal experiences, deviating from adhering to a specific business or marketing strategy. *"Well, I did tell my friends and previous clients that I am opening my own business. So mostly I used the help from them to market my business in the beginning"* (Participant 4, personal communication, July 18, 2023).

However, all parties engaged agreed that their major focus was on growing their organization through great customer service and the supply of high-quality products or services. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of closely controlling and managing the daily operations of their business through micromanagement, despite the fact that they had their spouses or small teams to watch over the everyday business operations.

Stage 4

When inquired on the subject of business development and growth, all of the entrepreneurs expressed their focus on the expansion and growth of financial resources and the enhancement of their corporate image. They believed that the first step for this should be an additional business plan for expansion. Two out of five of the participants disclosed their use of external support in formulating business plans, with the aim of securing financial backing from banks and other financial institutions to facilitate business growth, rather than developing a business plan by themselves. *"Yes, I believe a business plan is important for expansion. Though*

I didn't make one when I initially started my business, for expansion I have sought help from someone" (Participant 1, personal communication, July 17, 2023).

Additionally, they highlighted their reliance on government loans and loans given by other financial institutions as a means to achieve business growth and

expansion. Consequently, they highlighted the importance of establishing a good relationship with industry players in order to expand their business.

Based on the findings, below is the identified entrepreneurial process with the distinctive activities undertaken by the female entrepreneurs in each of the stages.

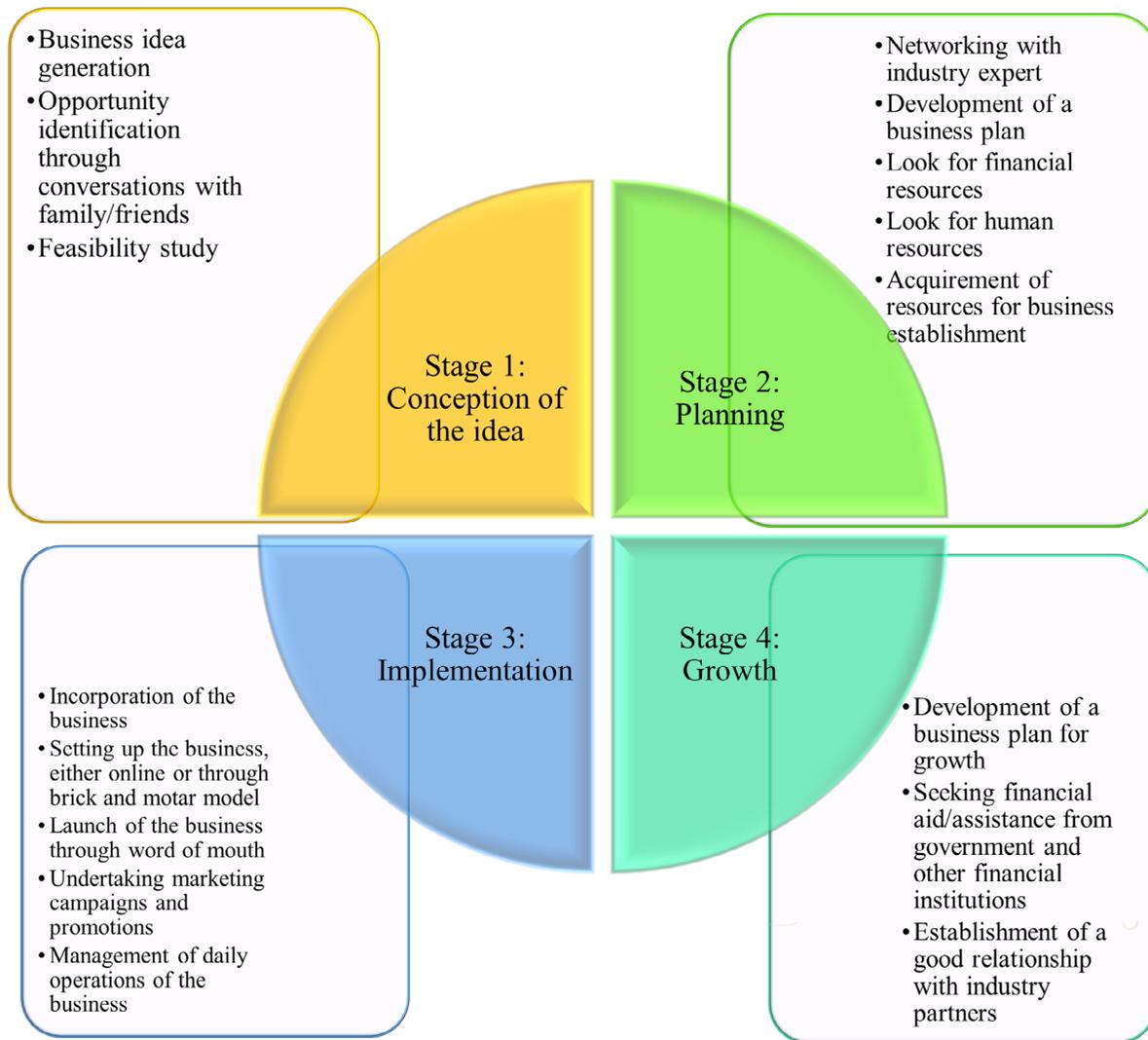


Figure 2. Entrepreneurial process with the distinctive activities.

Source: Developed by the authors.

Key findings from the entrepreneurial process

The study's findings revealed that the five entrepreneurs interviewed performed nearly identical activities. The reason for this could be that, as Maldives is a SIDS with a small population, the customary activities are more or less the same. In relation to relevant literature, it was discovered that

some aspects of the economic theory were observed, such as idea generation (Kritzner, 1979, as cited in Bhuiyan, 2015), innovation (Casson, 1982, as cited in Cherukara & Manalel, 2011), and decision-making (Hayek 1937; Schakle, 1970, as cited in Cherukara & Manalel, 2011), but the innovation factor pointed out as significant by Schumpeter (1934, as cited in Bhuiyan, 2015) is missing in female entrepreneurs in

Maldives. Another significant finding was their dependency on family and friends in seeking advice on financial assistance and other main operations of the business. This exhibits that, despite their freedom of choice and opinion, females in the Maldives still rely on their families' opinions and approval due to social values within the community. Similar findings were observed in research studies done on female entrepreneurs where approval from family and spouse was deemed as vital (Lin et al., 2018). In addition, there was hesitation in certain business-related tasks such as business and financial planning, which was attributed to a lack of knowledge and confidence. Hence, some of the activities in the entrepreneurial process were impeded or left incomplete because of this reason.

Furthermore, the importance of networking opportunities for females in the Maldives was evident in many of the activities highlighted during the entrepreneurial development process. Although observed to be lacking in the Maldivian economic industry, the availability of such

opportunities may have helped female entrepreneurs gain industry exposure while also assisting in the growth of their business. This demonstrates that in a SIDS like the Maldives, males have more opportunities for entrepreneurship and other forms of economic activity. However, one thing that stood out throughout the entrepreneurial process was the female entrepreneur's commitment and motivation. Although this factor is not mentioned specifically in the activities, it was observed in all of the female entrepreneurs interviewed. Hence, it can be said that from the main findings, certain aspects of the sociocultural and psycho-behavioral theories were observed.

The challenges/problems faced by female entrepreneurs in the Maldives in different stages of the entrepreneurial development

The challenges that hindered the female entrepreneurs in the entrepreneurial process were found as follows:

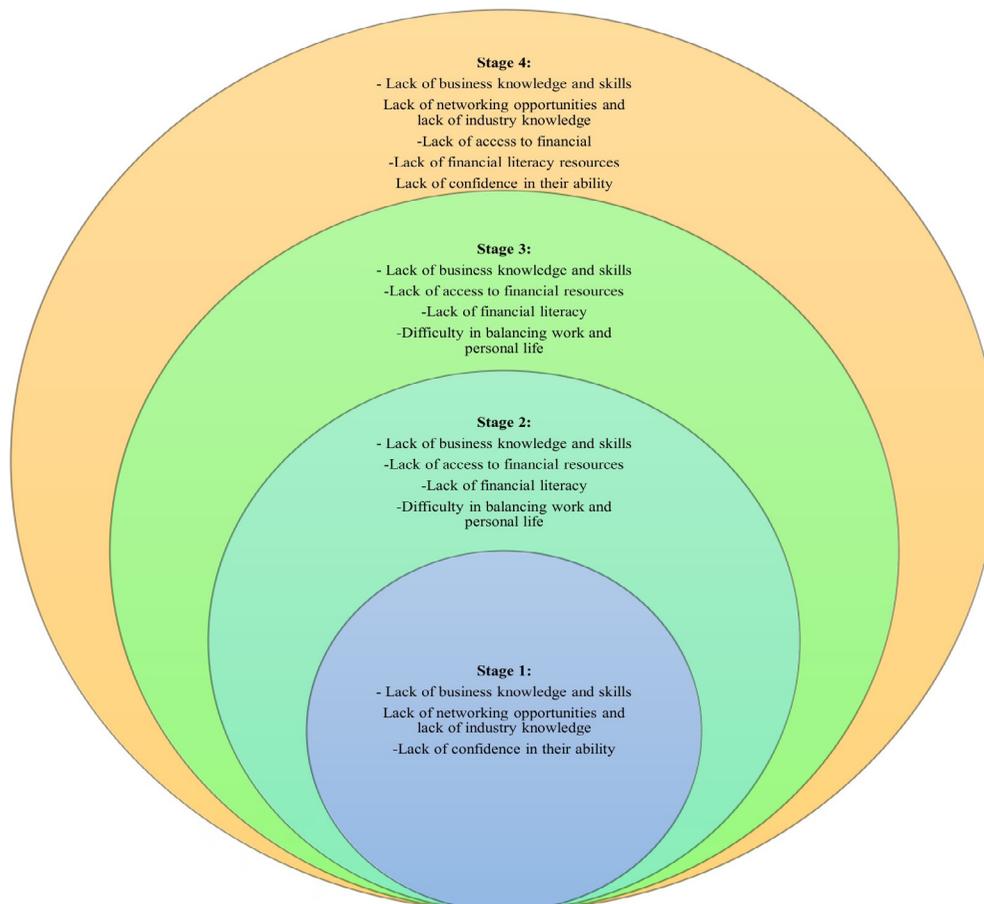


Figure 3. Challenges faced by the entrepreneurs in each of the stages of the entrepreneurial process.

Source: Developed by the authors.

A notable challenge that emerged in three of the four stages was a lack of business knowledge and skills. It was found that this factor had a role in the lack of research and business-related strategies employed by the majority of these entrepreneurs during the process of formulating, implementing, and expanding their businesses. Furthermore, the absence of industry knowledge was observed at two distinct stages, indicating the entrepreneurs' dearth of networking tools, unfamiliarity with conducting market research, and the lack of means to do so. This is consistent with earlier studies that found that the obstacles experienced by female entrepreneurs were related to a lack of sufficient training and education in the field of entrepreneurship (Machado et al., 2016; Premaratne & Kudaliyanage, 2016). This is due to causes such as lack of confidence in their talents, a lack of access to industry information, a lack of networking possibilities, and a lack of experience in business planning (Machado et al., 2016).

Furthermore, a lack of access to funds and financial literacy was observed across three distinct stages, elucidating the reasons behind the female entrepreneurs' reliance on external assistance for the development of financial statements. Additionally, this lack of financial literacy contributed to the absence of comprehensive financial planning throughout the stages and a limited understanding of how to access these financial resources. These findings are consistent with previous research studies that have identified similar challenges in studies done in developing countries such as Pakistan and the Maldives (Alecchi, 2020; Raheem et al., 2019; Zulham et al., 2022). Additionally, it is consistent with similar studies that have found that obtaining loans from financial institutions due to a lack of assets, as well as managing working capital, was challenging for female entrepreneurs (Premaratne & Kudaliyanage, 2016). Moreover, this could be because female entrepreneurs face strong competition from men due to their lack of industry knowledge as the industries are dominated by males (Lin et al., 2018; Premaratne & Kudaliyanage, 2016; Raheem et al., 2019).

Additional problems that were highlighted were the absence of comprehensive business planning, a deficiency in self-confidence regarding their capabilities, and the struggle to maintain a harmonious equilibrium between work life balance responsibilities. Similar findings were found in other studies where they have highlighted the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in balancing family and work-life demands, as females are expected to take care of their families (Machado et al., 2016). Similarly, getting approval from family members has been identified as a barrier for female entrepreneurs in conservative parts of the world. Female entrepreneurs seek affirmation and approval from their spouses and families during the early stages of their entrepreneurial development, which is consistent with

stories that have been heard in many such research studies based on females (Lin et al., 2018). Similarly, in this study it was observed that all of the female entrepreneurs sought approval from their spouse and families before embarking on their entrepreneurial journey.

The recommended solutions/interventions that could be offered by the relevant stakeholders to overcome the challenges/problems faced by female entrepreneurs in the Maldives

According to the female entrepreneurs who were interviewed, there is an apparent need for the government and relevant stakeholders to develop and implement policies, guidelines, and programs that are effective in supporting the growth and sustainability of enterprises owned by women. One recommendation put up was the implementation of policies aimed at facilitating the accessibility and utilization of financial resources; a particular focus on gender sensitive policy to reduce the barriers that limit women's mobility was emphasized (Alecchi, 2020; Selamat & Endut, 2020). Likewise, policies aimed at increasing social capital among micro entrepreneurs for national development and reducing unemployment inequalities are emphasized by Mamun et al. (2016) in their research findings, which could benefit a country such as Maldives. Equally, public policies that help women start businesses are critical too (Machado et al., 2016).

In addition, the interviewed participants suggested the need for equal access to financial and resource opportunities for female entrepreneurs, similar to their male counterparts. The female entrepreneurs expressed that they believed that males had greater access to opportunities compared to females. Hence, it is critical for the government to facilitate and smooth the process of female entrepreneurs by taking revolutionary steps such as establishing microfinance institutions, establishing business networks, organizing business forums, training centers, interconnecting networking groups, access to market intelligence, and establishing women-friendly legal systems and tax breaks, among other things (Raheem et al., 2019).

Additionally, comments were made about the implementation of financial literacy programs and upskilling initiatives aimed at fostering the growth of business knowledge and skills. Similar suggestions have been made by other studies where the establishment of entrepreneurial centers aimed at training and educating female entrepreneurs has been reported as important (Riebe, 2012). These centers will assist female entrepreneurs in receiving traditional business knowledge while also providing opportunities for growth and advancement. US universities have established

business centers where female entrepreneurs can be educated and trained (Riebe, 2012). Similarly, mentoring and capacity development programs are important for developing female entrepreneurs' knowledge, skills, and confidence (Premaratne & Kudaliyanage, 2016).

Limitation of the study

The research study aimed to elaborate in detail the entrepreneurial activities of female entrepreneurs at different stages of the study and hence is based on the experiences of females only; male perspective is not included at all. In addition, the study did not consider the external influences on the entrepreneurial journey; hence, factors such as the market, the industry, and the government influence are missing from the research.

In addition, despite the fact that the psycho-behavioral theories were taken into consideration for the purpose of understanding the activities that took place throughout each of the stages, less emphasis was placed on observing the individual characteristics and behaviors that were associated with the entrepreneurs. This is because the point of this research was to explore entrepreneurial experience to detail the particular activities performed by the female entrepreneurs.

CONCLUSION

The study's findings revealed that the five entrepreneurs interviewed performed nearly identical activities. The reason for this could be that, as Maldives is a SIDS with a small population, the customary activities are more or less the same. Nevertheless, it was also found that certain activities were impeded or remain unfinished as a result of insufficient knowledge, skills, and competences.

The main challenges that were discovered were a deficiency in business acumen, financial expertise, and limited access to financial and other pertinent resources. Therefore, it is crucial to prioritize the empowerment of female entrepreneurs in Maldives, particularly in terms of knowledge enhancement, equitable access to opportunities, and financial resources. This is especially important considering the increasing number of women venturing into entrepreneurship in the nation.

The recommendations put forth by the female entrepreneurs propose the implementation of a set of guidelines or policies aimed at fostering gender equality, ensuring equitable access to financial and other resources, and enhancing their competencies to advance their businesses, financial knowledge, and skills.

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