

GENDER SENSITIVITY AND ENTERPRISE SUPPORT PROGRAMMES: THE EXPERIENCE OF BUMIPUTERA WOMEN HANDICRAFT ENTREPRENEURS IN SABAH

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ABSTRACT

Women's experience in accessing entrepreneurial support programmes remains largely unexplored. This paper addresses this gap by investigating the perceptions of women entrepreneurs on the extent to which the concept of gender sensitivity is incorporated into the implementation government entrepreneurial support programmes (GESPs). This study was contextualised within the experiences of Bumiputera women handicraft entrepreneurs (BWEs) in Sabah, Malaysia: the leading state in the country in terms of the number of handicraft producers. This study adopts an interpretative approach and uses semi-structured interviews as the main data collection technique in exploring the perceptions and views of 21 BWEs and five government officials (GOs) on GESPs. The findings revealed that there is a lack of gender sensitivity in the way GESPs are designed and implemented. Not only that GESPs are being implemented based on the male-oriented approach, the study also revealed that GOs are less sensitive towards gender issues that confront BWEs. This paper shows the importance of incorporating the gender issues into the process of implementing entrepreneurial support programmes for women entrepreneurs. This paper contributes to the literature on entrepreneurial support programmes for women entrepreneurs in a non-Western context.

Keywords: *government entrepreneurial support programmes, gender sensitivity, Bumiputera women entrepreneurs, handicraft industry.*

SENSITIVITI GENDER DAN PROGRAM SOKONGAN ENTERPRISE: PENGALAMAN USAHAWAN KRAFTANGAN WANITA BUMIPUTERA DI SABAH

ABSTRAK

Pengalaman wanita dalam mengakses program sokongan keusahawanan masih belum banyak diterokai. Makalah ini membahas jurang ini dengan menyiasat persepsi para usahawan wanita tentang sejauh mana konsep sensitiviti gender dimasukkan ke dalam pelaksanaan program sokongan keusahawanan kerajaan. Kajian ini dikontekstualisasi melalui pengalaman para usahawan kraftangan wanita Bumiputera di Sabah, Malaysia: negeri yang terkenal di negara ini dari segi jumlah pengeluar kraftangannya. Kajian ini mengambil pendekatan interpretatif dan menggunakan temuduga separa berstruktur sebagai teknik pengumpulan data utama dalam meneroka persepsi dan pandangan 21 usahawan wanita Bumiputera dan lima pegawai kerajaan tentang program sokongan keusahawanan kerajaan. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa terdapat kekurangan sensitiviti gender dalam cara bagaimana program sokongan tersebut direka dan dilaksanakan. Bukan sahaja program tersebut dilaksanakan dengan berasaskan pendekatan yang berorientasikan lelaki, kajian ini juga mendedahkan bahawa pegawai kerajaan kurang sensitif terhadap isu gender yang dihadapi oleh usahawan wanita Bumiputera. Makalah ini memperlihatkan pentingnya menggabungkan isu gender ke dalam proses pelaksanaan program sokongan keusahawanan untuk usahawan wanita. Makalah ini menyumbang kepada kesusasteraan mengenai program sokongan keusahawanan bagi usahawan wanita dalam konteks bukan-Barat.

Kata kunci: *program sokongan keusahawanan kerajaan, sensitiviti gender, usahawan wanita Bumiputera, industri kraftangan.*

INTRODUCTION

The significance of gender policy in helping women to achieve gender equality is agreed upon by scholars (e.g. Moser, 1993; Schofield and Goodwin, 2005; Teghtsoonian, 2003); however, the effectiveness of such policy is debated (Alsop, 1993). On one hand, women are seen as participants or recipients of a development process (Alsop, 1993), thus strengthening the idea of women as 'voiceless' and belonging to a 'homogenous group' (Morrison and Jütting, 2005: 1066). As such, any agenda of particular initiatives for women is set by providers without acknowledging the reality of women's life. Alternatively, it is argued that rather than seeing women as beneficiaries, they should be recognised as active participants that could improve the outcomes of initiatives that affect their lives (Huq and Moyeen, 2008). In this sense, a strategy that bring gender sensitivity to policies or programmes at both the national and international level is crucial (Kim and Kim, 2011). Therefore, it is the focus of this paper to explore the extent to which gender sensitivity is incorporated into the implementation process of entrepreneurial support programmes for women entrepreneurs. This paper addresses this issue by exploring the experiences of Bumiputera women entrepreneurs (BWEs) in the handicraft industry in Sabah, Malaysia in accessing government entrepreneurial support programmes (GESPs). As such, this study has responded to the need for conducting research that can increase the understanding on the significance of government initiatives on women entrepreneurship development (Caputo, Mehtap, Pellegrini & Al Refai, 2016; Ming Yen Teoh & Siong Choy Chong, 2014) and responds to the calls for investigating the effectiveness of the initiatives to women entrepreneurs (Braidford, Stone & Tesfaye, 2013; Lee, Sohn & Ju, 2011).

This paper is structured as follows. The following section explains about the handicraft industry and the institutionalisation of government support for women entrepreneurs in Malaysia as a backdrop to investigating BWEs' experiences in accessing GESPs. This is followed by a discussion of the methodology adopted. Next, the findings and discussion are presented. Finally, concluding remarks are presented which highlight the study's contribution and implications for future directions in women's entrepreneurship research.

CONTEXT

The great majority of the handicraft producers in Malaysia are women. One possible reason for the high involvement of women is related to the characteristics of the industry (e.g. home-based, minimum requirement of overhead expenses and infrastructure) that hold advantages for them in starting their businesses ('Full potential of handicrafts', 2012). The significance of the handicraft industry in the economic development can be seen through the introduction of various initiatives by the Government. It is believed that women's entrepreneurial capacity and capability can be enhanced through strong and comprehensive government support (Habib Shah, 2004). The Malaysian government was officially involved in the development of the handicraft industry through the establishment of the Rural and Industrial Development Authority in 1951 (Redzuan & Aref, 2011). At the time, the focus was to develop rural industries by extending the rural-agricultural sector to the non-agricultural sector. It was only in the Fourth Malaysia Plan [1981–1985] that the industry was recognised as a sector due to the major positive growth of the industry through its export activities (Redzuan & Aref, 2011). The significance of the handicraft industry in the economic development was further strengthened in 1979 by the establishment of the MHDC, an agency under the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage. However, despite government initiatives, it is argued that the size of BWEs' businesses are relatively small, and mostly located in a traditional and vulnerable industry such as the handicraft industry (Habib Shah, 2004). Therefore, there is a need to investigate the extent to which GESPs facilitate the development of BWEs' handicraft businesses. This study was conducted in Sabah, Malaysia. It was reported that 99.6% of handicraft producers in Sabah are represented by the Bumiputera group and out of 2,182 handicraft producers in the area, 83.8% are women (MHDC, Sabah, 2008). Therefore, the selection of Sabah as the research site is practical, as the presence of so many handicraft entrepreneurs could have a considerable impact on its economic development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The influence of gender on women's social lives is well established in gender literature (i.e. Bradley, 2007; Connell, 2009). It has long been discussed that women have different interests and needs which are a critical consideration in designing intervention programmes for women (Alsop, 1993; Molyneux, 1985; Moser, 1993). Within this context, it is suggested that in the effort to implement gender policies, programmes and projects require the person responsible for the implementation to understand the importance of incorporating the gender issues into the process (Moser, 1993). Moser (1993) argues that this understanding helps to increase gender awareness and provide an appropriate approach to addressing women's needs. In this respect, there is a possibility of failure in the implementation of particular initiatives which are designed for women if the issue of gender is ignored. Due to the complexity of women's social environments (Bradley, 2007), men and women could face different types of business challenges, and it is unwise to assume that what works for men also works for women entrepreneurs. This argument is significant in the context of providing entrepreneurial support programmes for women entrepreneurs, particularly when the appropriateness of using men's experience to measure the entrepreneurial activities of women has long been debated (Brush, 1992; Carter, 2000).

Therefore, it is argued that the appropriateness of programmes that are developed for women entrepreneurs will be subjected to the integration of gender-specific perspective at the design stage of the programmes (Ariffin, Baqutayan & Mohd Mahdzir, 2018). One way of doing this is to integrate gender in enterprise development programmes in which women entrepreneurs will be viewed as 'agents of change' and not mere 'beneficiaries' (Huq and Moyeen, 2011, p. 327). To ensure the strategy is useful in helping women to confront gender issues, women's involvement at the policy planning stage is required and women's voices should not be neglected (Cornwall, 2003; Debusscher, 2011). By involving women in the gender planning process, their specific needs and interests can be captured in the development of initiatives which are designed for them (Teghtsoonian, 2003). In this sense, women are seen as 'shapers or makers' of development initiatives and not simply the 'users' of such initiatives (Cornwall, 2003, p. 1326). Within this context, it has long been debated that 'a social

audit' on gender planning initiatives must be conducted with a focus on identifying who the targeted groups are, what the assumptions made about them are, what the objectives of the interventions are and whose interests are being promoted (Goldey, Le Breton, Martin & Marcus, 1997).

In order for entrepreneurial training and support initiatives to be relevant for women entrepreneurs, the programmes should meet the needs of the group (Mohamad & Bakar, 2017) and take into account various gender related issues that they face (Loveline, Uchenna & Karubi (2014). However, it is argued that while it is not uncommon for training and advisory services to use the male-oriented approach (Carter, 2000), such services also lacking of female entrepreneurship model (Drine and Grach, 2012). In this respect, the support programmes are unable to accommodate women entrepreneurs' experiences. As such, it is suggested that any initiatives to support women entrepreneurs through mentoring schemes must be provided by mentors that are appropriate for the target group (Fielden, Davidson, Dawe & Makin, 2003). Unlike men, Madsen, Neergaard & Ulhøi (2008, p. 358) argue that women's roles and identities influence their entrepreneurial activity; therefore, the more sharing of experience by women entrepreneurs on how they 'construct and reconstruct their identity' in entrepreneurship can foster women entrepreneurship. In fact, it was identified that the gender needs of Malaysian women entrepreneurs includes women entrepreneurs as role models in mentoring schemes and trainers in training programmes provided by government (Teoh and Chong, 2008). To challenge the male-oriented approach in entrepreneurship development programmes, the programmes must address the needs of women entrepreneurs and they should be involved in the design of such programmes (Abdul Mutalib, Arshad, Ismail & Ahmad, 2015). Furthermore, it is suggested that the person who leads the women entrepreneurship programmes must have a high level of gender sensitivity (Huq and Moyeen, 2011) and knowledgeable enough to answer all issues that are related to women entrepreneurs (Teoh and Chong, 2014). In addition, it is suggested that hiring officials who have empathy for and experience in dealing with micro enterprises is significant in order to understand the needs of women in micro enterprises (Sandberg, 2003). The review of the literature indicates the strong relations existing between public support and women entrepreneurs. However, in order to be effective, the initiatives should be able to meet women's expectations. Also, the perception of women entrepreneurs as a single homogenous group should be avoided, particularly because the complex institutional influence that governs women contributes largely to their very different experience in business.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted based on the inductive research strategy (Blaikie, 2000) to allow for the exploration of BWEs' interpretation about their experience in accessing and utilising GESPs. This study adopts a qualitative research design (Creswell, 2014) that focuses on an interpretivist approach (Mason, 2002) and capitalises on the in-depth interview strategy (Patton, 2002). The use of an in-depth interview strategy is useful in accessing 'people's perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality' (Punch, 2005, p. 168) and allowing researchers to enter into the individual's perspective (Patton, 2002). Since the individual's perspective cannot be observed, formal conversations between the researcher and the individual on predetermined research topics could bring the researcher into the respondent's world (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). Also, the interview method has become the principal means of understanding women's lives by replacing the 'view from above' (i.e. researcher's view) to the 'view from below' (i.e. women's views) (Mies, 1993, p. 68). A purposive sampling technique (Patton, 2002) was adopted in selecting the 21 BWEs. The selection of BWEs was made based on the criteria that they: hold Bumiputera status; are small and medium enterprise owners; are involved in the handicraft industry and have established their businesses for more than 3.5 years- a classification for an established women-owned business given by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) 2010. Meanwhile, the selection of five government organisations was based on the fact that they are involved in the entrepreneurship development programme in the research site. The head of the section or unit of these organisations that is responsible for entrepreneurship development programmes was interviewed. Data from 26 interviews was transcribed and analysed under a thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

FINDINGS

a. The profiles of GOs

The age of GOs varies from 31 to above 51. The period of employment of GOs within the respective government organisations varies between six and ten years. However, in relation to the number of years that they have been working in the entrepreneurship unit, it appears that male GOs have held their position longer than female GOs. In addition, the appointment of female GOs involves a situation that can be seen as placing women at a disadvantage to men. For example, one female GO works with a government organisation that was established with the main purpose of helping the development of women in their socio-economic activities. With its current employment of 26 women out of 28 employees, the appointment of female officials in the organisation is expected. Meanwhile, the other female GO has headed the entrepreneurship development unit for far less time (<4 years) than other male GOs. These findings indicate that men have priority over women in the context of institutions and entrepreneurship. The data reveals that the younger GOs had some informal work experience in entrepreneurship as opposed to the older GOs. In relation to the personal entrepreneurial experience of GOs, only two had some experience during their youth.

b. The attitude of GOs in charge of GESPs

BWEs' opinions of GOs are related to their competency and the extent to which the GOs are aware of their specific needs.

Competency

BWEs view that GOs lack competency in providing them with sound business advice. Any communication and interaction between BWEs and GOs takes place during BWEs' participation in training or other programmes conducted by government organisations and during GOs' field visits. The first situation provides more opportunities for BWEs to interact directly with GOs than the latter because GOs are not necessarily involved in each field visit; in most cases GOs are represented by their staff for field visits. However, BWEs did not see both means of contact as significant for their businesses. BWEs stated: *"They did ask me about my business but didn't offer any advice. Filled in the form and they head back."* In addition, it was evident that BWEs doubt the abilities of GOs in providing advice for their businesses. They commented *"they sometimes don't expect me asking what I asked them. So, I said ... I don't really have to ask for any advice"* and *"they often talk about the same thing when they come to visit"*.

Gender sensitivity

All GOs seem to have the same view of BWEs and their business-related problems such as lack of *"strategic location for business premises"*; *"packaging problem"*; *"inconsistency supply of raw materials"*; *"weak management practice"*; *"financial knowledge is pretty weak"*; *"marketing issues"* and many other business-related problems. However, the female GOs addressed another perspective of the problems faced by BWEs. The female GOs shared various difficulties that are faced by BWEs to participate in GESPs such as *"I can't come, I have a young child"*, *"my mom doesn't let me go anywhere, I'm still living with my mom, so I can't leave home"* and *"there's no one to look after my mom"*. Another female GO highlights that women entrepreneurs *"do not know the person who can help them"*. On the other hand, male GOs are less likely to discuss women-specific issues. There is an indication that male GOs in this study have little understanding of the needs of BWEs and how they are different from entrepreneurs in general. The male GOs commented that *"Personally, I'm not sure what the problems are for women"*, *"They have attitude issues"* and *"Entrepreneurs [BWEs] would also need to change their attitude, they can't just wait there doing nothing."* One obvious similarity between these comments is the tendency of male GOs to view the current problems faced by entrepreneurs in general and BWEs in the handicraft industry in particular as caused by their attitude, thus indicating that they are less sensitive to the gender issues. Unlike female GOs that relate BWEs' situation with women-specific issues, it can be seen that the male GOs are unable to see this aspect as significant in the context of BWEs, which gives the impression that female GOs have more understanding of BWEs than male officials.

c. The design process of GESPs

This theme pertains to GOs' comments about how the process of designing GESPs is carried out by their respective organisations.

Women's involvement

It is common practice in the GESP design process that a committee is set up to discuss the proposed GESPs. However, it becomes clear that a woman will be one of the members of the committee only if she holds the top position in one of the units in the particular government organisation. GOs agreed that women will be automatically included in the committee only if she is "*the head of the department*". Since fewer women holding top management positions in government organisations than men in Malaysia, only a small number of women are members of the committees involved in designing GESPs in the government organisations in this study. This situation is confirmed by GOs that stated "*I must admit there are more men*" and "*The number of women at other districts is only about two to three whilst the total members of membership in a committee is usually 30.*" Meanwhile, one of the female GOs works with an organisation that employs 26 women out of 28 employees, and this organisation can be referred to as a women's organisation (Moser, 1993). Thus, more involvement of women in the design process of GESPs is expected. On one hand, this situation increases the opportunity to address women's issues in designing GESPs. However, further investigation into the issue provides other evidence that GESPs provided by the women's organisation may have less impact on BWEs in the handicraft industry due to the "*lack of financial resources.*"

Women entrepreneurs' involvement

The common practice among the respective government organisations is that the design of GESPs is treated as an internal matter, thus there is no requirement to include people external to the organisations such as entrepreneurs in the process. One of GOs stated that "*This is only an internal committee, that's why we don't invite outsiders*". However, this situation may affect the appropriateness of GESPs to BWEs. For example, one of the reasons pointed out by BWEs that contributes to their unpleasant experience in utilising GESPs is the lack of involvement of entrepreneurs in the programmes. In sharing her experience in utilising GESPs, BWEs commented that "*There isn't any slot to share experiences among women entrepreneurs*" and "*If they are well-known entrepreneurs and offers advice to you, it'll motivate you even more*". These statements express BWEs' concerns on the importance of having guidance from successful entrepreneurs in general, and female entrepreneurs in particular.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study found that GOs are less sensitive towards gender issues that confront BWEs, although it is more prevalent among male than female GOs. The negative responses of BWEs in relation to the quality of contact with GOs suggests and supports previous claims that success in implementing policies, projects or programmes for women relies on the role being given to a person who understands the importance of incorporating gender issues into the process and has a high level of gender sensitivity (Huq and Moyeen, 2011; Mohamad & Bakar, 2017; Moser, 1993). The long standing argument that a female project leader provides a business counselling service that fulfils the needs of women entrepreneurs better than male project leaders (Nilsson, 1997) is confirmed by the finding of this study. Apart from this issue, the study revealed that the ineffectiveness of GESPs is seen by BWEs as relating to the competency and quality of advice given by GOs. GOs who are responsible for the implementation of GESPs in their organisations were found not to be inculcated with adequate knowledge and skills in entrepreneurship. Consequently, BWEs have little faith in the abilities of GOs to provide advice for their business, an issue that is also highlighted by Teoh and Chong (2014). Other research (Sandberg, 2003) also confirms that hiring officials who have empathy for and experience with micro enterprises is significant, an argument which is relevant for BWEs in this study where the majority of the GOs are involved in micro handicraft enterprises.

The study also recognises that the issue of gender sensitivity receives less consideration in the design process of GESPs. The study found that women are less involved, with no recognition on the

importance of women as part of the design team of GESPs and as role models to BWEs in the implementation of GESPs. While it is argued that the success of incorporating gender issues in women's initiatives is subject to women's involvement in the planning process (Debusscher, 2011; Abdul Mutalib et al., 2015), the low representation of women on the committees that design GESPs in this study may place BWEs at a disadvantage due to insufficient women's voices. This is consistent with McEwan's (2003) finding that women have to confront the hidden barriers that exist in the institutionalised participation process. The statements of BWEs express their concerns on the importance of having guidance from successful entrepreneurs in general, and female entrepreneurs in particular. This finding corresponds with Madsen et al.'s proposition (2008) that women entrepreneurs construct and reconstruct their identity and this experience is significant and should be shared with other women entrepreneurs. In addition, this finding supports the criticism that training and advisory services for women entrepreneurs lack female perspectives (Carter, 2000). Given that BWEs in this study face various personal, organisational and institutional barriers in conducting their business, the need to share their experiences with other successful women entrepreneurs becomes important. This finding is consistent with other research (Fielden et al., 2003; Huq and Moyeen, 2011) that found mentoring systems which involved successful women entrepreneurs were helpful in inspiring and building the confidence of women entrepreneurs. Also, this study supports Teoh and Chong's (2008) proposition that more women entrepreneurs should engage as trainers and facilitators in entrepreneurial training programmes organised by government organisations in Malaysia. This study revealed that the implementation of GESPs has still not moved away from the issue of adopting a male-oriented approach in understanding women entrepreneurs and neglects the importance of accommodating women entrepreneurs' experiences in the programmes (Drine and Grach, 2012). At the same time, there is an issue of credibility with women-only programmes and women's organisation in facilitating the business survival of BWEs, particularly in terms of funding or budget allocation. The insufficient budget allocation has reduced this organisations ability to support BWEs in running their business.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While this study provides fruitful insights into the experiences of BWEs in accessing GESPs from a non-Western context, it will inevitably have some limitations. The data of this study was collected from a sample of BWEs in the handicraft industry in Malaysia. It is suggested that future studies should include other industries that have major involvement of BWEs to enrich the understanding of women's experiences in accessing GESPs. Taking Malaysia into consideration as a multi-racial country, similar studies could be extended to other non-Bumiputera groups, such as Chinese and Indian women, to see whether they face the same issues as BWEs in relation to government initiatives for women entrepreneurs. This study has conducted in-depth interviews with GOs in exploring the status of GESPs that are provided by their respective organisations in facilitating BWEs' entrepreneurial activities. However, to improve the understanding of the impact of GESPs on BWEs and the factors that contribute or constrain the implementation process of the programmes, it is suggested that case study analysis on the individual programmes offered by each organisation should be conducted. The use of other qualitative methods of collecting data such as case study might increase the understanding of the linkage between BWEs' entrepreneurial activities and GESPs that are not covered by this study.

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