

# Women's Entrepreneurship in Iran

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**Abstract** Women account for half of the population in Iran, but in the last five years, the number of employed women has dropped by 14.2%, resulting in total women's unemployment rate of 19.8%. According to the 2015 World Economic Forum report, Iran is among the countries with a high gender gap in economy ranking 141 in terms of women's economic participation among the 145 countries. In the other hand, women's entrepreneurship does not seem to be enjoying an appropriate status in Iran and despite increased entrepreneurial activities by women, the ratio of businesses run by women to business run by their male counterparts are 2–10. Both contextual and structural factors influence entrepreneurial process; some are strengthening and some others are debilitating. So, if women and entrepreneurship are two important factors for growth especially in developing countries, it is particularly noticeable to understand what factors mobilize or prevent them from starting new businesses. The main contribution of this study are helping better recognition and understanding of ignored subject of women's entrepreneurship in Iranian context with distinctive socio-cultural characteristics and its specific requirements.

## 1 Introduction to Women's Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is a key factor in developing countries; so, many countries focus on entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs to promote and develop them in their countries. Women play an important role in entrepreneurial economy in terms of their ability to create jobs (Martins 2004).

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In 2012, an estimated 126 million women were starting or running new businesses in 67 economies around the world. In addition, an estimated 98 million were running established businesses (Kelley et al. 2012). Also, in 2012, French women created 38% of single-owner enterprises. In the same year in Italy, women fully owned or majority-controlled about a quarter of all companies—more than 1.4 million. In Canada, 16% of all SMEs were majority-owned by women and almost half had at least one female owner in 2007 (Piacentini 2013). While the MENA/Mid-Asia region reports the lowest average TEA (Total Entrepreneurship Activity) levels among women (4%). Developed Europe and Asia along with Israel also have low rates (5%). The highest regional female Total Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) levels can be seen in Sub-Saharan Africa, where 27% of the female populations on average are engaged in entrepreneurship. Latin America/Caribbean economies show comparatively high levels as well (15%). In only seven economies (Panama, Thailand, Ghana, Ecuador, Nigeria, Mexico, and Uganda), women have equal to or slightly higher levels of entrepreneurship than men (Xavier et al. 2013).

Both contextual and structural factors influence entrepreneurial process; some of these factors are strengthening and some others are debilitating. Recognizing these factors could facilitate entrepreneurship development. On the other hand, cultural beliefs about women vary across countries (Shane et al. 1991), but the majority of studies on women business owners have been carried out in the USA and Canada (Arenius and Autio 2006). So, if women and entrepreneurship are two important factors for growth especially in developing countries, it is particularly noticeable to understand what factors mobilize or prevent them from starting new businesses. Failure to understand these factors may result in the underutilization of women's human capital and thus the perpetuation of lower living standards and implementation of costly and ineffective policies (Langowitz and Minniti 2007).

In Iran, women constitute 49.25% of the population (Iran's population was 75 million people in 2010), while only 17.4% of them are economically active; this rate is far from the average rate of the economic activity of women throughout the world (30%). Also, unemployment rate is 10.4% (8.6% for men and 19.8% for women) (Statistical Center of Iran 2014).

Entrepreneurial activities in the past few years have shown good growth in Iran. According to the latest GEM report in 2013, TEA index has reached 12.3% in Iran and, in terms of this index, Iran has ranked 21st (among 70 countries), while rate of this index in 2012 and 2011 was 14.5 and 12.4% and Iran ranked 10th and 18th, respectively (Xavier et al. 2013).

In recent years Iranian women have had higher tendency to make both economic and social contributions; particularly in higher education, women have preceded men (more than 60% of university students are girls); but, unemployment rate is very high among Iranian educated women and this potential labor has not been efficiently used yet (Arasti and Akbari Joker 2009), so, it is essential to develop women's share in national economics and influence their unemployment crisis (Arasti and Akbari Joker 2009; Mirghafoori et al. 2010). The goal that could be achieved through developing women's entrepreneurship.

It is evident that there are numerous obstacles and problems on the way of business creation by Iranian women; so, studying women's entrepreneurship and barriers of women-owned businesses in this context could help to identify the existing restrictions, reform the future path, and ultimately increase women's individual and social efficiency.

This chapter presents how women entrepreneurs are motivated to enter business, how they finance their businesses and what are their obstacles, how they network with others in the society and what is the benefit of these networking, how they grow their businesses and what are their problems, how the socio-cultural context of Iran influences women's entrepreneurship, and finally how we can promote women's entrepreneurship in Iranian context.

## 2 Iranian Women Entrepreneurs and Their Motivations

Motivation is a response to the situation of a particular stimulus (Mc Clelland 1961). In the recent century, some psychologists, such as David Mc Clelland, believe that human has three needs including: *Needs for achievement*, referring to dynamics and trying to gain achievement based on specific criteria; *Needs for power*, as impelling people to act contrary to usual behaviors; and *Needs for affiliation*, meaning tendency to make connection and behave friendly with others (Mc Clelland, 1961).

Shane et al. (2003) investigated the role of motivation in entrepreneurship process; they studied the role of motivation in numerous human behaviors such as locus of control, tendency toward independence, perceptions, etc. They believe entrepreneurship is a process which starts by identifying opportunity and then continuing to generating ideas, evaluating opportunities, creating products/services, implementing human and financial resources, designing organization, and pursuing customer. Some or all motivations affect moving people from one stage to other stages of entrepreneurship process (Shane et al. 2003).

Despite the similarities in the motivations of women and men for starting a business, researches have shown many differences in this regard (Manolova et al. 2008; Jaimie et al. 1998). Some studies about women's entrepreneurial motivation are conducted on the sample of women entrepreneurs and some others are comparative studies between men and women. Men enter entrepreneurship to improve social status and family income, while women choose entrepreneurship to fulfill their aspirations (Jaimie et al. 1998; Hisrich et al. 2005), Kirkwood (2009) indicated that the primary theory development around entrepreneurial motivations has been to classify motivations into categories of push and pull factors. Push factors are characterized by personal or external factors (including a marriage break-up, or being passed over for promotion), and often have negative connotations. Alternatively, pull factors are those that draw people to start businesses—such as seeing an opportunity. In general, pull factors have been found to be more prevalent than push factors and businesses started by entrepreneurs who experienced push motivations are less successful (financially) than those built upon pull factors. While

men start business as job career choice, women choose it as life career (Gelin 2005). Men follow entrepreneurship to achieve financial goals; on the contrary, women enter entrepreneurship to achieve self-achievement (Lavoie 1992). Some research has pointed out that men enter business for financial issues, while women are motivated by the fulfillment of family necessity (Hisrich et al. 2005). According to many studies, the first reason for starting a business by women is self-independence (Hisrich et al. 2005; Buttner and Moore 1997). Other reasons are needing a flexible schedule (because women must balance work and family) and then more income. Indeed, push factors motivate women more than men (Stokes et al. 1995).

Global Entrepreneurship Monitor report divided entrepreneurship motivations into two opportunity-driven and necessity-driven categories. Opportunity-driven entrepreneurship refers to exploring the existing opportunities, while the necessity-driven one is the necessity of people in seeking opportunities. Women in the countries with low and average levels of income start business, because there is no other option in career for them and they enter entrepreneurship in order to make income for themselves and their family; in contrast, in high-income countries, they consider entrepreneurship owing to the opportunities (Kelley et al. 2011).

In Iran, Arasti (2006) studied 105 academic women entrepreneurs and showed that the most important motivations of women entrepreneurs were self-satisfaction and needs for power. Financial needs and security needs came later. In this study, a few women entrepreneurs mentioned “dissatisfaction with previous job” and “lack of progress in previous situation” as their motivations to start a business, while the majority of these women mentioned “identifying new opportunities” as an effective motive. These results indicated that, for Iranian well-educated women, entrepreneurship is opportunity- rather than necessity-driven. Also, according to Gelard (2007), motivations of Iranian women entrepreneurs include meeting economic needs and reaching job satisfaction, prestige, and power in the society, among which achieving job satisfactions is the most effective motivational factor. In a qualitative study by semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 10 women entrepreneurs, Arasti and Valinejad (2011) found the main motivational factors of Iranian women entrepreneurs include: need for an appropriate job, helping society, job independence, achieving aspiration, proving personal talents and abilities (self-proving), discovering opportunities, financial independence, providing better situation in personal life, needing progress, self-growth, need for flexible job because of family responsibilities, disease of a spouse or family member.

And finally in a comparative study on Iranian women and men entrepreneurs in the industrial sector in Golestan province,<sup>1</sup> Arasti et al. (2012a) investigated 24 women and 72 men and found that men enter to business for earning income, job creation, using opportunities, helping society, self-proving, inherent satisfaction, and independence, while for women, job creation, helping society, self-proving,

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<sup>1</sup>A northern province in Iran.

earning income, inherent satisfaction, independence, and using opportunities are respectively the main motivational factors Arasti et al. (2012a).

Although there are differences between motivations of men and women entrepreneurs, the group of women entrepreneurs is not a homogenous one (Hughes 2006; Shabbir and Gregorio 1996; Orhan and Scott 2001). Hughes (2006) categorized women entrepreneurs based on their motivation in starting business in three types including:

First, *classic entrepreneurs* with financial independence challenge: These women have more income and human capital, are active in traditional jobs, work out of home, and employ others.

Second, *work-family entrepreneurs*: They seek a work-family balance and flexibility. Unlike classic entrepreneurs, this group has low-time and less-income tasks and work alone in their house.

Finally, *forced entrepreneurs*: They are motivated by unemployment, loss of job, and lack of work opportunities. They work individually and are similar to work-family entrepreneurs in terms of income and classic entrepreneurs in terms of work time.

In another research performed by Shabbir and Gregorio (1996), motivation of women entrepreneurs was classified into three categories of:

First, *personal freedom seekers* as women with dissatisfaction and exhausted works, who tend to have freedom in choosing their work time, work place, and co-workers; so, they decide to create business.

Second, *security seekers*, as those women who start business because of personal issues like death or retirement of their husband. They try to improve themselves and their family situation. Flexibility in self-employment is the main reason which encourages these women to start business.

Third, *satisfaction seekers*, as women who seek satisfaction and are almost householders without any work experience. Their motivation is to prove their abilities.

In an Iranian study, Valinejad (2011) categorized women entrepreneurs based on their motivation in five groups of:

First, *idealist entrepreneurs*: for these women entrepreneurs, identifying and proving personal talents and abilities, more job independence, and making their aspiration are more important.

Second, *successful entrepreneurs*: For these women, the following factors are the most important motivations: need for development, more financial independence, achieving growth and development in the society, and needing an appropriate job. They follow entrepreneurship to prove their abilities and lack of progress in their previous job.

Third, *forced entrepreneurs*: The main reason for these women is the inappropriate economic situation of family forced by husbands' illness or death. Women start business to pursue their goals of providing the family.

Forth, *social entrepreneurs*: Women who use their creativity to solve social issues in the society, spread humanitarian activities, and increase social capital. The main motivation of these entrepreneurs is to help the society.

Finally, *flexible entrepreneurs*: Women who focus on their families and quit their work because of their family responsibilities and less flexibility in the work. These women follow entrepreneurship to have more flexibility and work–family balance.

This section presents motivations of women entrepreneurs, their similarities with and differences from their men counterparts, and some non-homogeneity in the group itself. The results could help policy makers to promote women's entrepreneurship considering these differences despite the similarities with men. Also, the group of women entrepreneurs is not a homogenous one and an accurate program is needed to promote women's entrepreneurship.

### **3 Iranian Women Entrepreneurs and Their Access Financial Resources**

One of the most important obstacles on the way of women entrepreneurs is capital access (Coleman and Robb 2009). Many empirical findings have demonstrated differences between men and women in terms of accessing financial resources. They discussed that women-owned businesses have lower capital to start their business (Rosa et al. 1994; Verheul and Thurik 2001). Some researchers have shown that women entrepreneurs are less likely to use external financial resources (Cole and Wolken 1995; Haynes and Haynes 1999; Coleman 2000) and others have pointed out that women-owned businesses utilize different financial resources compared to men-owned businesses (Hisrich and Brush 1987; Lerner et al. 1997). Many researches mentioned more difficulties of women in financing their businesses. They found that women believe it would be easier for them to borrow money if they were men (Hisrich and Brush 1984; Anna et al. 2000).

As indicated by Verheul and Thurik (2001), gender has direct and indirect effects on financing pattern. When women- and men-owned businesses with the same non-financial characteristics differ in terms of using financial services and bank shopping pattern, there is a direct effect; in contrast, indirect effect refers to the differences between women- and men-owned businesses considering non-financial business attributes; these differences in business attributes may lead to differences in business financing. Women start their business with different goals and different structures. For example, Arenius and Autio (2006) identified that women-owned firms tend to be both younger and smaller than men-owned companies and they are characterized with lower sale growth rates than those owned by men. Constantinidis et al. (2006) argued that entrepreneurship should not be studied from the perspective of the characteristics of firms and owners. He believed that financing women-owned business depends on two factors of attributes of female-owned firms (i.e. firms' characteristics and strategic choices) and characteristics of women owners and women approach in running their businesses (i.e. individual factors). He discussed that human capital (education, knowledge, and experience) is a determinant factor for investors' attitudes and decisions.

Carter et al. (2003a) found that having graduate education in any field is a significant predictor for firms' ability to secure equity financing. While, most women entrepreneurs have low level of education and are more likely to encounter problems in accessing financing than women with higher degrees of education; higher education and additional training help women run businesses mostly in traditionally male business sectors and it seem to be the most advantageous factor in terms of financing. In terms of experience, women business owners have less industrial experience than their male counterparts and investors may underestimate them and their work (Carter et al. 2003b). Women usually have less financial experience, which leads them to more difficulties than men business owners (Arenius and Autio 2006). Also, perception of less business management experience or less financial competence might lead bankers to reject the loan applications of women entrepreneurs (Constantinidis et al. 2006).

On the other hand, the success of women entrepreneurs in raising equity capital may also depend on who they know or their amount of social capital (Carter et al. 2003a). The overlap of the entrepreneur's network structure with that of venture capitalists is an important factor in determining the likelihood by which entrepreneurs will be able to find private equity funding. They have significantly fewer years of relationship with their financial institutions, reflecting that women have been deprived of strong financial networks (Orser et al. 2006). According to role investment theory, women's tendency to invest in household roles (parenting, homemaking, etc.) would imply gender differences in the investment of commercial activities and hence managerial experience, gender differences in social networks (thereupon, business relationships), and time allocations to business development (Orser et al. 2006), while gender discrimination causes differences between male and female business owners in terms of the availability of bank financing (Fabowale et al. 1995) and can impress the SME financing context in a variety of ways, including lower approval rates or differences in terms of financing and degree of difficulty presented in the application process (Orser et al. 2006).

In some cases, women-owned businesses are asked for higher collateral requirements and are charged with a higher interest rate than similar men-owned ventures when borrowing from banks or other financial institutions (Orhan and Scott 2001). Absence of collateral has been reported by women as important barriers to finding debt financing for their businesses (Constantinidis et al. 2006). Klapper and Parker (2011) discussed property laws and believe that married women may not be deemed creditworthy, since they do not possess the title to their land or house, which might be due to unequal laws of inheritance. Although women might not be legally prohibited from obtaining licenses required for accessing certain types of financing, evidence from Africa shows that, in many instances, only male heads of households are able to receive them successfully. Similarly, in many Middle Eastern and South Asian countries, women are required in practice to have a father or husband cosigns a loan, even though banking laws do not require it in principle.

Perceived discrimination, even if not founded, may result in "discouraged borrowers" syndrome in the equity equivalent and limit women owners' applications for, and access of, equity capital (Orser et al. 2006). Some studies have shown that

rejection rate is higher for women than men entrepreneurs. Canadian Bankers Association (CBA) in 1997 demonstrated that the rejection rate of bank loan applications amounted to 23 and 14% for women-owned businesses and men-owned ventures, respectively (Constantinidis et al. 2006), while Coleman and Robb (2009) indicated that women are no more likely to be turned down for loans compared to men. Orser et al. (2006) found that, in Canadian firms with controlled firm size and industrial sector, there are no differences between male and female loan applications. They discussed that there is no discrimination in terms of approval/turndown rates as to debt financing and differences in turndown rates can be accounted for by systemic differences between the characteristics of male- and female-owned businesses. Studies from industrialized countries including the United Kingdom, USA, Canada, and New Zealand and from certain developing countries, such as Ecuador and Peru, have found that women applying for funding generally do not face arbitrarily higher denial rates than men, suggesting that gender differences in the use of credit might be explained by differences in the demand for external financing (Klapper and Parker 2011). For example, women are less likely to apply for bank loans (Treichel and Scott 2006), they prefer to borrow using credit cards and thus avoid the necessity of dealing with banks or lending officers (Robb and Wolken 2002), they apply for significantly smaller amounts of capital than men and these loans are not enough capital to fund the growth of their firms (Alsos et al. 2006), and they tend to use internal rather than external sources of equity for their firms (Chaganti et al. 1995). Also, Carter et al. (2003a) used a sample of over 200 women business owners and found that only 17% of their sample had any type of equity investment. Also, in Diana Project, Brush et al. (2002) found that, between 1953 and 1998, less than 5% of total venture capital funding went to women-owned firms. They concluded that this low level of funding can be at least partially due to the relatively small number of women employed in the venture capital industry.

Constantinidis et al. (2006) found differences in both demand and supply side patterns when studying women entrepreneurs in Belgium. Ironically, although 86% of their loan requests were approved, almost 50% of the surveyed women indicated that they experienced barriers in their attempts to secure loans. When they categorized the firms by growth potential, the authors found that women in high growth or traditionally male-dominated lines of business encountered fewer gender-related barriers to borrowing than women in more traditional services or retail lines of business.

In an Iranian study on men and women entrepreneurs in the industry sector, Arasti and Kanani (2011) found that women apply for loan less than men. When asking about the priority of their reasons for lack of loan applications, *difficulties in process of loan application*, *long time to pay loans back*, *loan interest*, *heavy collateral*, and *fear of inability to pay back the debt* were respectively mentioned as the reasons. also, this study found there is no difference between men and women respondents about loan interest and time to pay back loans because of dependence on banking systems (which is equal for both genders); but rejection rate for women is more than men. 45.8% of women had their demands rejected at least once, while as for men, this percentage was 15.3%. However, in this study, there was no significant difference in education of men and women, while women had less



experience in industry and management than men. Also, women had less relationship with financial institutions and banks which led them to have a weak social capital compared to men.

In this section, the most important obstacles of women entrepreneurs are studied and gender differences are mentioned. These differences demand for an appropriate program to women's business financing which could decrease their difficulties in accessing financial resources.

#### **4 Iranian Women Entrepreneurs and Their Social Networks**

Network is defined as a special relationship between people, goals, or events which are related to each other (Seufert 2000). In entrepreneurship which is a social role, network is defined as "a supportive relationship by people in firms and organizations". Jack and Rose (2010) defined network building as "a system that enables entrepreneurs to access resources which s/he does not have control on it". O'Donnell et al. (2001) investigated networking in entrepreneurship studies and found two mainstream approaches: inter-organizational networks and personal networks. There are numerous definitions of personal networks; however, a comprehensive definition is: "In every competitive environment, each actor has a network of relationship which consists of people who know, are known, and those who know him/her, even s/he does not know them" (Širec and Crnogaj 2009).

In the process of value creation by identifying and exploring opportunities, entrepreneurs have to create social networking in order to access resources and information. Indeed, if entrepreneurs develop their social networks or could reach a better situation in the network, they will access more resources and opportunities which could then facilitate their business development (Hulsink et al. 2009).

Networks have a crucial role in increasing entrepreneurs' ability (Hulsink et al. 2009). American entrepreneurs, in the early start-up, allocate approximately half of their time to creating new relationships and networking with other entrepreneurs and the related firms (Aldrich and Zimmer 1986 cited by Arasti and Akbari Jokar 2007). Hampton et al. (2009) described network roles in entrepreneurial process as:

- Quickly providing information of precise and qualified opportunities
- Consulting in terms of evaluating and choosing ideas for exploitation
- Supporting entrepreneurs
- Motivating
- Decision making
- Role modeling
- Supporting entrepreneurs in providing resources.

Also, Gnyawali and Fogel (1994) cited by Arasti and Akbari Jokar (2007) mentioned four important effects of networks on entrepreneurship: motivating,

presenting role models, consulting with expert, and finally accessing opportunities, information, and resources. Networks have multiple effects on women business owners such as consulting, financing, accessing professional managers and employers, partnership, and relationship in a chain value (Kelley et al. 2011). Women entrepreneurs use information and guidance in their networks more than financial resource (Arasti and Akbari Jokar 2007). Although women and men entrepreneurs have different personal and social networks (Hampton et al. 2009; Dubini and Aldrich 1991), both join social networks in order to gather information and access resources. There is a difference in networking pattern between women and men entrepreneurs which is rooted in their differences in three life aspects of women including work environment, marriage and family, and finally social life (Renzulli et al. 2000; Rutashobya et al. 2009). Studies on women's entrepreneurship have shown that women entrepreneurs normally take their network members from spouse, male friends, and finally female friends (Renzulli et al. 2000). Most of the help that women entrepreneurs receive from their network is in terms of emotion, planning, daily assistance, physical and financial support, and introduction of proper people, and making new relationships (Kleyver 2008; Rustashobya et al. 2009). So, women entrepreneurs accept the people who have kinds of business skills lacking by the entrepreneurs as well as some experiences, especially in business (Hampton et al. 2011).

Hisrich and Brush (1987) found that participating in business associations and friend associations, especially with women members, is very important for emotional support and business guidance. While limited use of mentors by women entrepreneurs and their problems to penetrate into male entrepreneur networks are women's known barriers for developing successful businesses (Širec and Crnogaj 2009). A Canadian study found that women entrepreneurs knew the importance of membership in a business association; but, they did not have enough time to join these networks (Brush et al. 2004). Also, the 2011 GEM report showed that women in low-income countries have smaller networks with limited geographical access; so, they have more focus on personal, but strong, networks, while, membership of woman entrepreneurs in a larger group is important, because it enables woman to see more role models and access resources (Kelley et al. 2011). One of the reasons for less probability of entrepreneurship by women than men may be the weakness of women's networks in terms of presenting role models and helping access resources (Klyver et al. 2007).

An Iranian study on a sample of 105 educated women entrepreneurs found that spouse and children (for married) and parents (for singles), friends, business partners, consultants, potential customers, and relatives formed women entrepreneurs network (Arasti and Akbari Jokar 2007). Also, results showed that these women used networks respectively for emotional help, providing information and executive support, helping make proper relationships, long term planning, and finally financial help (Arasti and Akbari Jokar 2007). Although similar to previous researches, results of this Iranian study mentioned the importance of networks for women's entrepreneurship and its role in motivating, expert consulting, and accessing opportunities, information, and resources, but the important role of networks in providing role models was not

considered, which could be explained by the limited networks of Iranian women entrepreneurs to close relatives and inefficiency of existing networks of women entrepreneurs in providing information and proper support.

Another issue is the variation of women entrepreneurs' network based on the business lifecycle. For example, women, in the early start-up, mention the role of networks to access information and validate ideas, while women, in nascent businesses, emphasize the role of networks in avoiding isolation and create necessary support at the early stages of starting business. For established businesses, networks are important to develop business by providing customers through enhancing verbal credibility. However, at all the stages of business, networks have a considerable effect on time saving by providing information to decision making and validating their decisions (Hampton et al. 2009).

A qualitative Iranian study on a sample of 10 women entrepreneurs members of Tehran Chamber of Commerce investigated network of Iranian women entrepreneurs in terms of changes in four dimensions of network role, network combination, networking challenges, and perception of networking importance. This work tried to answer the following question: How do social networks of women entrepreneurs change over time from the early stage of business to establishment stage? Results of this study (Arasti and Tarzamani 2013) showed that role of networks in accessing opportunities, information, and resources is generally more emphasized in establishment phase than the early stage of business, while its role in motivating and supporting is more highlighted at the early start-up. Also, there is no difference in its role in terms of providing expert consulting in both business stages. Finally, its role in providing role models is marginal at both business stages.

Other findings of this research about the combination of women entrepreneurs' network showed that members of these networks are almost men at both business stages and the roles of family and relatives were reduced at the establishment stage; in contrast, more experts enter networks of women entrepreneurs. Results of this study showed that networking challenges of Iranian entrepreneurs at the early start-up were more caused by environmental-driven challenges with a gender discriminative outlook. Lack of positive attitude toward women, absence of credit for them and difficult nature of relationship with women entrepreneurs by men are the main environmental challenges. On the contrary, some barriers such as lack of motivation to communicate and difficulties in identifying expert people will appear at this stage. They also deal with individual challenges such as "lack of communicating skills" and "lack of trust in others" at both stages; "time limit" became more challenging at the establishment stage. Finally, the results of this study on the importance of networking for women entrepreneurs demonstrated that, over time, Iranian women entrepreneurs realized the importance of networking development for their businesses. Trying to have more internal and external relationships and communication from the early start-up to establishment stages could explain this finding. Also, women entrepreneurs' networks became more formal at the establishment stage (Tarzamy 2012).

In this section, networks of women entrepreneurs, their difference in networking pattern, and their difficulties in networking are discussed. This literature review

points out the importance of networking for the development of women entrepreneurship despite their barriers for networking. So, a concrete development program for women's entrepreneurship should consider these results to help women entrepreneurs to network more efficiently.

## 5 Iranian Women Entrepreneurs and Their Business Growth

Growth is one of the development business process stages which has never experienced by numerous businesses of women during their lifecycle (Morris et al. 2006). Although the number of women-owned businesses grows by three times more than men's, researches have shown that a major part of women's businesses is small and not developed (Buttner 1993; Reshmi 2002; Morris et al. 2006; Brush and Gatewood 2008; Roomi 2013). Morris et al. (2006) conducted a study entitled "Dilemma of Growth", in which they stated that lack of growth in women's businesses is a decisive choice of woman entrepreneurs. They debated the influence of entrepreneurs' growth orientation on business growth and believed that less growth orientation in women entrepreneurs could lead to less growth in their businesses (Morris et al. 2006).

Many individual and environmental factors affect women's business growth. Results of a qualitative study on a sample of Iranian experts on women's entrepreneurship (Arasti et al. 2012b) pointed out that growth orientation is a complex phenomenon which is affected by personal factors including goals (economic and non-economic), motives (push and pull factors), female identity (internal and external stakeholders), and individual characteristics (personality and demographic characteristics and personal attitudes and skills).

Business goals are the mental demand of entrepreneurs (Feizbakhsh and Dehghanpour 2002) related to organization or individual; individual goals refer to acquiring knowledge, skills, and potential abilities to improve operation. Research has shown that women with high growth orientation follow noble, real, and measurement goals (Gundry and Welsch 2001). Authors have believed that women make a balance between their economic goals such as sale and profitability and non-economic ones such as quality of products and creating social value. Most important non-financial goals for women entrepreneurs are *self-satisfaction*, *serenity*, and *helping others* (Morrison et al. 2003; Brush et al. 2006; Roomi et al. 2009; Brush and Gatewood 2008).

Motivations are the most important individual factors influencing women's growth orientation (Roomi et al. 2009). Women who are opportunity-driven have more growth orientation than necessity-driven ones. Indeed, internal motives affect growth orientation more than external ones (Morris et al. 2006). For example, Roomi et al. (2009) showed that motivations such as *earning sufficient income to support family*, *starting a successful firm*, *earning income with work-family balance*, *offering*

*a valuable service, and creating wealth* affect growth orientation of women entrepreneurs. Although entrepreneurial motivation is known as the predictor of success in entrepreneurship, there is no consensus on how motivations affect entrepreneurial efficiency (Arasti et al. 2012a). Roomi et al. (2009) found that pull factors motivate entrepreneurs for business growth. Also, motivations such as *tendency to be rich, long term financial security, and being in challenging* are related to business growth orientation and then affect business growth (Morris et al. 2006).

Arasti et al. (2012a) studied the influence of women's motivations on business growth. Results showed that the group of achieved entrepreneurs with strong motivations such as *social development, financial independence, and need for a proper job* attended to all aspects of business growth, while forced entrepreneurs whose major motivation for entrepreneurship was *making better family life* only had growth in sales, because they wanted to increase their income and help the family. Finally, the group of work-family entrepreneurs motivated by work and family balance controlled their businesses in terms of the number of employees and product diversity in order to balance work and family and increase market share and sales to make a better family situation.

Another Iranian study on a sample of 53 women business owners showed that pull motivations such as *self-proving, tendency toward being independent, wealth creation, work flexibility, better life, job creation for relatives, and internal stability* affect growth orientation, while push motivations including such as *death of spouse/divorce, dissatisfaction with previous job, unemployment, and being fired* are not effective (Panahi 2012).

Also, feminine identity affects the growth orientation of women entrepreneurs; it refers to how women business owners insist on relationship with feminine networks of customers, employees, partners, and business stakeholders in general. Morris et al. (2006) believed that the insistence of women business owners on relationship with the network of feminine stakeholders negatively influences growth orientation. The results of Panahi (2012) showed that tendency to attract women as internal stakeholders (employees and women partners) affects Iranian women's business growth orientation; but, it is not the same for external stakeholders (customers, suppliers, and investors). This study also showed that individual factors such as skills (technical and managerial), attitudes (attitude to growth and success and attitude to barriers), and personality (being energetic, self-devotion, risk taking, opportunity recognition ability, need for achievement, and moral commitment) influence women's business growth orientation.

On the other hand, environmental factors differently influence women's business growth orientation (McGregor and Tweed 2002; Brush et al. 2006). Results of a qualitative study on the growth orientation of Iranian women entrepreneurs concluded that growth orientation is affected by external factors including economic factors (conditions on the product market, conditions on the labor market, economic conditions, and accessing financial sources), socio-cultural factors (cultural norms and values, effects of social networks, and work-home conflict), and legal factors (banking rules and regulations, tax laws, and labor law) (Arasti et al. 2012a).

Another barrier in women's business growth is financial resources (Morris et al. 2006; Davidsson 1989). Morris et al. (2006) found that finding right partners, difficulty in accessing initial capital, liquidity guarantee, and lack of investors' trust in women's abilities are barriers on the way of women's business growth.

Also, socio-cultural issues could be important for women's business growth orientation. Stereotyping along with limited access of networks are barriers for managing women's business. Although some of these barriers are due to small businesses and their complexity rather than gender issues, women deal with special obstacles which are somehow personal or cultural (Morris et al. 2006). Some feminist theories confirm that growth orientation of women entrepreneurs is different from that of men; but, it is because of gender discrimination which women face over time. They believe that, if women have the same opportunities as men, they could have the same growth orientation (Cliff 1998). Some authors mention different responsibilities of women as an effective factor for their business growth (McGregor and Tweed 2002). McGregor and Tweed (2002) believed that conflicting roles of women business owners hinder them from growth and affect type of business and management.

The results of Rezayee (2012) on a sample of 53 Iranian women business owners showed that economic factors (product market situation, labor market, access of financial resources, and macroeconomic factors), socio-cultural factors (social networks, social beliefs and values, and conflict between work and family), and legal factors (rules of bank and taxation rules) are effective in women's business growth orientation.

This section on women's business growth shows some gender differences in growth orientation and some of the effective personal and environmental factors on it. So, women with different motivations for starting a business have different growth orientation, which is an important issue for policy makers in terms of promoting women's entrepreneurship.

## **6 Iranian Women Entrepreneurs and Their Socio-cultural Environment**

Socio-cultural factors influence women's entrepreneurship (Aldrich et al. 1989). Also, socio-cultural complexity such as ethnic diversity and religious value system are important factors for women's entrepreneurship in developing countries (Nilufer 2001).

It is important to note that social norms and traditional values are different in each region and country and acceptance of women's participation in entrepreneurship depends on expectations and their social values that are different in each country. For example, in South Africa, accepting male domination as well as considering house holding and children care as the first duty and responsibility of women hinders women from starting a business (Sekrun and Leong 1992). In the Philippines,

women have limitations in reaching high-level management posts because of the society's belief that they should marry and have family. This issue influences type of women's experience which is crucial to business success (Epstein 1993). Nilufer (2001) believes that generally in developing countries, women are exposed to traditions and socio-cultural issues that lead them to the lack of confidence and affect their decisions for starting a business, venture financing, bank's unwillingness to their projects, and disapproval of their decisions and loan guarantees.

Negative attitude of family and the society toward women has been usually mentioned as an obstacle for women entrepreneurs. For example, in the Indian society, women entrepreneurs state they have less support than their men counterparts (Shivani et al. 2006). Some older Iranian studies have mentioned negative reaction of the society to women's entrepreneurship, especially in governmental organizations, and some insecurity for women in the society related to traditional beliefs about women in Iranian society (Saber 2002). Moreover, Arasti (2006) found that educated women are supported by close friends and family members and this positive attitude is effective for women's decisions in terms of starting a business. Interestingly, women entrepreneurs could change some negative attitudes to positive ones by their performance in business over time. For example, only 60% of spouses support woman entrepreneur in the early start-up step, while this is changed to 82% after launching business. This issue may be due to time working flexibility in entrepreneurship compared with work as an employee that helps women balance work and family and bring more family satisfaction.

On the other hand, many researchers have referred to role model as an important factor in motivating women entrepreneurs (Brockhaus and Nord 1979; Reynolds et al. 2005). A survey in Canada showed that 33% of women entrepreneurs have their father in business (Hisrich and Brush 1984). Also, Hisrich and Brush (1984) studied 48 women entrepreneurs to show that 50% of respondents are first child and influenced by their parents as their role models. However, results of an Iranian study demonstrated that role model did not remarkably affect educated women entrepreneurs, because few women entrepreneurs had been recognized in the society at that time. Just 41% of the respondents had role models in their family and 52% knew an entrepreneur among their friends and relatives (Arasti 2006).

Work-family balance is another important issue for women entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship could facilitate this balance by more time work flexibility. De Bruin et al. (2006) believes that the main reason women choose self-employment is flexibility in time working and possibility of work-family balance. However, social values and society's expectations often affect woman's lives. The social values which assign house holding and child caring as the first responsibility for women along with the importance that women give to the welfare of their family and children lead to the conflict between work and family values (Gelard 2007). A study on 220 Turkish women entrepreneurs showed that, despite the effective impact of entrepreneurship on their social and economic life, they encounter many problems and difficulties such as stress, high expectation of family members, and lack of work-family balance (Ufuk and Özgen 2001). The results of Arasti (2006) demonstrated that 36% of women entrepreneurs mentioned work-family balance as

a vital problem in starting business. It was noted that 46% of responders had the responsibility of taking care of children during the early step of starting business and 70% worked in business more than 40 h in week.

Also, social values and believes are normally a barrier for women's entrepreneurship in traditional societies. Most researches in the Iranian society have referred to socio-cultural factors as barriers to Iranian women entrepreneurs. For example, Gelard (2005) found that environmental factors including economic, socio-cultural, political, and technological factors in Iranian context do not support women entrepreneurs. Also, Javaheri and Ghozati (2004) showed family, training and education system, stereotype beliefs, mass media, and social norms are environmental barriers to women entrepreneurs. Mirghafoori et al. (2010) identified thirty barriers on women entrepreneurs and classified them into five categories of family, education system, personality traits, financial and socio-cultural dimensions. But, another Iranian study (Arasti 2006) on a sample of women entrepreneurs with higher education degrees showed different results. In this study, socio-cultural believes concerning women's entrepreneurship, women in management, and women's work were studied as follows:

- There is no need to women's work if the family does not need their salary.
- Work of young women in the society is not allowed.
- There are some gossip about entrepreneurs (they are ambitious, ...).
- Men's position in the family is attenuated if women work.
- House holding is the first responsibility of women.
- Women's work in some occupations is unacceptable.
- Women's work in male-dominated occupations is not allowed.
- Women's work as a manager is not taken seriously.
- Society does not trust in women's ability at management levels.
- Women need to get their spouse's permission to leave the country.
- There are some insecurities for women in the society.
- Staying lonely in a hotel is not permitted for women.

Results showed that these social believes did not affect educated women's decision to start a business. The majority of these women found a solution for crossing these barriers and proving their abilities.

Also, in an earlier Iranian study on women's entrepreneurship, Arasti et al. (2012a) investigated the environmental factors affecting women's business growth orientation. In this study, the role of social beliefs and role conflict was mentioned by women entrepreneurs. Women tried to make a balance between work and family. Despite the fact that family life is not considered to hinder the career development of women, family responsibilities are a part of culture in countries like Iran with religious and traditional beliefs and women are continued to be viewed in this nurturing role. They experience greater family work conflict and it is too difficult for them to be a complete mother, wife, and manager. Therefore, they use special strategies to merge both business and family lives and manage them both effectively and intentionally. So, they try to keep their business small, because they



know they would have more conflicts if they grow their businesses. One of the consistent influences on female entrepreneurs' growth orientation throughout this study was the importance of cultural norms and values. Many female entrepreneurs reported that they have to work harder to prove their competence as business owners to customers, suppliers, and other resource providers. Actually, stereotypes and gender-based discrimination can affect women's economic activities, directly or indirectly. Beliefs such as "women managers are not good enough for big capitals", "women's mind is limited", "women are emotional", "women may leave their work, because the family is their first priority" directly affect the growth orientation of women entrepreneurs. On the other hand, according to the results of this study, these social values could also affect other issues such as business financing, finding a business partner or investor, and recruiting appropriate work force. In addition, values can make the process of obtaining loans more complicated because of the society's lack of confidence in women's ability (Arasti et al. 2012a, b).

In this section, the socio-cultural factors influencing women's entrepreneurship are discussed and an imperative need is demonstrated for dealing with these barriers to increase women's contribution in social and economic development, especially as a self-employed person or entrepreneur.

## **7 Developing Women's Entrepreneurship in Iranian Context**

Women's entrepreneurship is on the rise everywhere in the world and female entrepreneurs are succeeding in every imaginable field, even the most "masculine" ones. Clearly, the growth of female enterprises is good for economies and beneficial for societies and women themselves through increasing their self-esteem, life quality, life expectations, and so on (Coughlin 2002); but, it differs from country to country, because societies differ in their perceptions and customs about working women and working in business. Overall, levels of education and development can influence societal beliefs. In addition, social acceptance about child care while pursuing a career and the cost and availability of childcare can be of utmost influence. Also, the cooperation and willingness of stakeholders, like investors, creditors, employees, suppliers, and customers are very important. When these factors act as impediments, society misses an opportunity to gain from the entrepreneurial energy of half of its population (Kelley et al. 2011). Women entrepreneurs are vital contributors to today's economy and entrepreneurial activities among women continue to gain attention worldwide. In the United States, more than 9.1 million firms are owned by women, which employ nearly 7.9 million people and generate \$1.4 trillion sales in 2014. Women-owned firms (50% or more) account for 30% of all privately-held firms and contribute to employment by 14% and revenues by 11% (NAWBO 2014). In Canada, the number of women entrepreneurs in the past 15 years has grown by 50%, annually contributing by more

than \$18 billion to Canada's economy (CIBC World Markets 2004). In Europe, women constitute 52% of the total population; but, they are only one-third of self-employment or all business starters in the EU. Women thus represent a large pool of entrepreneurial potential in Europe; but, when establishing and running a business, they face more difficulties than men, mainly in terms of access to finance, training, networking, and in reconciling business and family (European Commission 2013).

In other parts of the world, women's entrepreneurship development in Asian developing countries has also a tremendous potential in empowering them and transforming society in the region. Today, businesses owned by women contribute to 82,600 or 16% of total 548,267 businesses in Malaysia. Yet, in many countries, especially those in which level of economic development reflected by the level of income per capita and degree of industrialization is still low, this potential remains largely untapped. Less than 10% of the entrepreneurs in South Asia, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, are women (Tambunan 2009).

Despite the growth number of women entrepreneurs all over the world, a significant gender gap exists in all countries for both early stage entrepreneurial participation and established business ownership. Compared to men, women's participation in entrepreneurship ranges from the ratio of 20:100 in Republic of Korea to 120:100 in Ghana. The lowest levels and ratios of women's participation can be found in the MENA countries, in which for every woman entrepreneur, there are about two to four men. Based on GEM data, Iran has a low level of female participation with 25–100 ratio (Allen et al. 2007).

The relatively low representation of women entrepreneurs can be attributed to many significant barriers that are still left for the women establishing and growing businesses; these barriers prevent or hinder the development and growth of firms (Sadi and Al-Ghazali 2012). One of the most important challenges of women entrepreneurs is in legal, traditional, custom, cultural, or religious terms which prevent them from opening their own businesses (Tambunan 2009).

Women entrepreneurs constitute only one-third of all entrepreneurs (Damwad 2007). An important question in entrepreneurship studies is whether women entrepreneurs face specific problems in setting up a business that are significantly different from those faced by male entrepreneurs or not. This question was discussed in the previous sections in this chapter. As indicated by Roomi and Parrott (2008), women entrepreneurs experience a number of problems and issues that are greater than those faced by small business people in general. However, there is a potential for enhancing the level of women's entrepreneurship (Damwad 2007) and, as indicated by Welter (2004), an integrated strategy for fostering female entrepreneurship needs to consider that there are shortcomings in the institutional (political and societal) environment, possibly restricting women's interest in entrepreneurship and thus determining the extent of female entrepreneurship.

In some Arabic Muslim countries, culture and attitudes may prevent women from playing a full economic role. It can be argued that the distinctive masculine-dominated culture of such countries is historically and religiously rooted

and thus strongly influences female participation. It seems that, in a general sense, while entrepreneurship is an attractive option for all young well-educated people, there remain considerable cultural constraints for females (El Harbi et al. 2009). Moreover, Westerners should be cognizant that Muslims, like Christians, Jews, or adherents to any religious or cultural group for that matter, are not a monolithic group. There are intra-group differences within Islamic countries. Without this understanding, the view of Muslim customs may become distorted. Although Islam is the shared religious base, not all Muslim countries are identical in terms of gender relations and conventions (Gray and Finley-Hervey 2005). The key point for consideration is that there is nothing in *Holy Quran* (Book for Muslims) which prevents women from working outdoors. *Holy Quran* cites the example of Bilqis (the Queen of Sheba) and reports her political skills, purity of her faith, and independent judgment. No specific Quranic injunction prohibits women from managing and owning an enterprise (Roomi and Parrot 2008). Muslim women were engaged in many kinds of trade and managed businesses. Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) himself promoted women in various spheres of activities, one of which was trade and commerce was one of them; his own wife as one of the biggest traders of that time was the testimony to this point (Abbas 2012 cited by Ullah et al. 2013). But in some Islamic societies, women are further discriminated and subjected due to socio-cultural values and traditions in the name of religion. Their restricted interaction with men apparently limits their opportunities to acquire business management and technical skills and consequently fully develop their entrepreneurial potential (Roomi and Harrison 2008).

A study in Middle Eastern countries has shown that socio-cultural norms in most of these Muslim countries restrict women's involvement in the market place and networking and limit their mobility. Also, the time involved in regular family work restricts women even in terms of thinking about other issues related to starting business. In this study, it is argued that social norms about women in all areas of life since their childhood create a timid mindset among them in general which can be seen in workplace or business. Apart from education, women lack guidance in selecting the career field and job and in other areas of life. Motivation among the women in the Middle East is low and various factors of motivation are few compared to other regions. Lack of education and suppressed conditions, combined with social norms, provides sympathetic corner toward women, which in turn creates dependency and lack of seriousness in undertaking work. Due to this reason, women in the Middle East are shying away from more responsibilities and the self-imposed duties needed for development and necessary for taking business activities in their life time. Also, lack of social networks in the society for housewives and working women acts as a barrier for motivating them in terms of undertaking entrepreneurial activities (Mathew 2010). The recently released gender GEDI (Global Entrepreneurship and Development Index) has found that, in nearly three quarters of the 30 examined countries, the conditions for female entrepreneurship and business growth are unfavorable. According to this report, the main weaknesses in the MENA region are low levels of women's equal rights, less favorable attitudes toward women in executive positions, and fewer women in

leadership positions. On average, only 11% of the managers and senior officials in these countries are women. Access to high-quality and affordable childcare is also relatively low (GEDI 2014).

Iran is an Islamic, but not Arabic, country. Recently, more and more Iranian women are entering the workforce to support economy of their families and are making gains through job opportunities (Gray and Finley-Hervey 2005). Women represent 49.1% of the 75 million people of Iran; but, only 11.7 of women are economically active. The number of young highly-educated women has increased in the past few years (women represent more than 60% of Iranian universities); yet, there are 205,000 unemployed highly-educated women in Iran; I.e. 43.6% of the young women aging 15–24 years old are unemployed (Iranian Annual Book of Statistics 2012). A number of initiatives have been recently taken by the government (Fourth Four-year Iranian Development Plan 2008; approved law of Iranian government 2005) to promote entrepreneurship in Iran; but, there is no supportive program specific to women entrepreneurs. As for women entrepreneurship in Iran, it is just beginning to interest the national community. According to GEM report of Iran, the 2012 indicator of total entrepreneurship activity (TEA) was 8.88 and Iran ranked 21st among 67 GEM member countries. This indicator was 6 for women and Iran ranked 21st in this regard (Xavier et al. 2013).

Like many societies, the Iranian society defines the role of women mainly through family and household responsibilities. Gender equality is codified in the Iranian constitution, but family's norm still favor the male breadwinner model. Research on women's entrepreneurship is very limited in the Iranian context. A case study on 20 Iranian women entrepreneurs has focused on different barriers for women entrepreneurs and presented the socio-cultural constraints in three aspects (Saber 2002): First, negative social reaction that causes barriers in women's presence in the society. The society does not believe in the managerial skills of women and most women entrepreneurs have suffered from this social attitude. Second, the improper behavior of related organizations; for many functionaries, it is so hard to accept that a woman could create a business without the help of a man. Third, social insecurity; social norms result in not only contradiction to women entrepreneurs, but also social insecurity of women in some aspects.

Meanwhile, studies on the Iranian context have demonstrated that the Iranian culture is complex. Hofstede (1980) pointed out that the Iranian culture is neither male- nor female-dominated; but, it is at the medium range, while 49% of entrepreneurs believe that the Iranian culture does not support personal success resulted from personal efforts (Zali and Razavi 2008).

Iranian women entrepreneurs, like other women entrepreneurs especially in developing countries, face many difficulties including access to financing (Arasti and Kanani 2011), networking, work-family balance, and gender discrimination (Javaheri and Ghazati 2004; Arasti 2006). However, they represent a large pool of entrepreneurial potential in Iran. The 2011 World Bank's report suggested that productivity and development could increase by as much as 25% in some countries if discriminatory barriers against women are removed. Removing barriers, such as discriminatory property and inheritance laws, cultural practices, lack of access to

formal financial institutions, and time constraints related to family and household responsibilities, will create greater opportunities for sustainable enterprises run by women. This issue in turn will contribute to women's economic empowerment and gender equality as well as helping to generate sustainable growth and jobs.

Different economies have different possibilities to solve such problems based on their economic, cultural, and political status. For example, the United States has solved this challenge by creating a governmental office of women's business ownership, with program delivery responsibilities such as women's business centers, informational seminars and meetings, and/or web-based information for women who want to start/grow a business. This activity also encourages the formation of a publicly-funded private-sector membership advisory group on the matters related to women's entrepreneurship, which provides women entrepreneurs and their organizations with an official voice in the policy and program development decisions affecting women's entrepreneurship. Canada has also chosen this solution (Storey 2004).

OECD countries have proposed to increase the ability of women to participate in the labor force by ensuring the availability of affordable childcare and equal treatment in the workplace. More generally, improving the position of women in the society and promoting entrepreneurship generally will have benefits in terms of women's entrepreneurship (European Commission 2013). In 2009, European Commission inaugurated the European Network of Female Entrepreneurship Ambassadors to serve as an inspirational role model for potential women entrepreneurs (European Commission 2013), which was followed in 2011 by the European Network of Mentors for women entrepreneurs, who voluntarily counsel women starting and running new business. Expanding networks of women entrepreneurship ambassadors and mentors was regarded important and creating/fostering female investors and networking among women entrepreneurs was deemed important (European Commission 2013). As indicated by Storey (2004), these networks are major sources of knowledge about women's entrepreneurship and valuable tools for its development and promotion. Cooperation and partnerships between national and international networks can facilitate entrepreneurial endeavors by women in global economy.

In another effort, European Commission launched an Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan and proposed actions at all levels (national, regional, and local) in 3 action pillars (European Commission 2013):

- Entrepreneurship education
- Environment where entrepreneurs flourish and grow
- Awareness and outreach to specific groups.

In this regard, Entrepreneurship platform for women entrepreneurs includes:

- Online mentoring, advisory, educational, and business networking platform for aspiring/women entrepreneurs
- Information on access to finance and markets and events, including stakeholders and private schemes

- Making online, deepening, and expanding the current networks of national ambassadors and mentors supports women entrepreneurship at national and regional levels by promoting the exchange of the best practices between Member State.

In Malaysia, MECD (Ministry of Entrepreneur and Cooperators Development) has specifically increased its training program and financial assistance for women. They are also given better access to new technology, modern methods, and potential economical activities. One of the MECD's agencies, INSKEN, functions to monitor training programs to all the working agencies involved in the entrepreneurship development. Furthermore, another agency, i.e. PNS, introduces franchise programs and monitoring schemes for women (European Commission 2013).

In 2012, European Commission made a proposal to improve the gender balance in boards of publicly-listed companies. Even though board membership requires different competences and skills from entrepreneurship, more women in senior management positions could serve as a role model for other women in general. The visibility of a bigger number of successful professional women will show other women that they have chances of success in the labor market (European Commission 2013).

Another American support for women's entrepreneurship is "The Women's Entrepreneurship in the Americas (WEAmericas) initiative and exchange" launched in April 2012 which leveraged public-private partnerships to increase women's economic participation and address four key barriers women confront when starting and growing small and medium enterprises: access to capital, markets, skills and capacity building, and women's leadership. The WEAmericas initiative includes an annual International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) exchange to the United States which allows women to explore a variety of mentorship, job shadowing, education, and skills development programs (ECA 2014). However, according to gender-global entrepreneurship development index (GEDI), the U.S. ranked 1st among 17 countries in terms of having the conditions that foster high potential female entrepreneurship (GEDI 2014). One of the other initiatives for promoting women's entrepreneurship is Global Entrepreneurship Week (17–23 Nov.), the world's largest international meeting of innovators and job creators. GEW was first started in 2007 with just 37 countries and today the week involves 150 countries, 25 million participants, and more than 115,000 activities throughout the week. This year, GEW helped drive a worldwide movement to engage and support female entrepreneurs with its partner organizations holding events in 150 countries that focused on celebrating and supporting female entrepreneurs. Female entrepreneurs took a center-stage this November as Women's Entrepreneurship was celebrated in 150 countries on November 19. The day provided an opportunity to celebrate, engage, and empower female entrepreneurs.

In the Iranian context, despite the recently growth of women's in business, many women experience internal and external barriers to start a business. Some of internal problems of women in business are related to their less self-confidence, less achievement motivation, more fear of failure, weakness in entrepreneurial networks,

and finally less knowledge and experience both in business and management. However, their external barriers are related to their access to financial and non-financial resources, social value about women's abilities in management and business, lack of role model in the society, and finally diversity of their responsibilities which cause difficulty in work-family balance.

Considering these diverse barriers of women entrepreneurs in the Iranian context, a holistic approach to women's entrepreneurship development is needed which could cover three action pillars including tailored entrepreneurship education to women, supportive environment to women's businesses start-up and growth, and finally development of entrepreneurial awareness among women.

Tailored entrepreneurship education for women should emphasize the development of their business leadership skills and improve their competencies in marketing, dealing with stakeholders, balancing work and family, etc. As women generally have lack of time to participate in education programs and networks, online education and mentoring have more efficiency in this matter.

In the second action pillar, a supportive environment to women's entrepreneurship should address first their access to financial resources. Simple process for loan access, developing business angels' network of women to serve women's businesses, and possibility of online networking with other women entrepreneurs at national, regional, and international level could help women in this regard. Also, improving social values about women in management position is essential which can be done by removing all forms of disparity and enforcing women's role in the society. Another supportive area is to help women entrepreneurs balance their work and family by providing more affordable childcare facilities and revising family's responsibilities in the favor of working women.

Finally, in the third action pillar, women's awareness about entrepreneurship could be developed by presenting more role models of successful women entrepreneurs in different fields from early age in schools to later in universities, media, books, etc. Also, Women Entrepreneur Day could provide an opportunity for improving social awareness about women's entrepreneurship.

In recent years, some women entrepreneurship communities have emerged to develop and promote women's entrepreneurship. For example, Association of Women Entrepreneurs was launched in 2004 by women entrepreneurs and women business owners/managers. They promote entrepreneurship, support to improve and alter policies to women entrepreneurs, help to organize related entrepreneurship activities, and help women entrepreneurs to make information and communication networks (Wenet 2004).

Also, national foundation of entrepreneurship development for women and youth for developing entrepreneurial culture and creative thinking and generating activities among women and youth supports some services in terms of educating and consulting (Founded 2008). Association of Women Entrepreneur Merchants is another active organization which tries to help women to have an effective role in developing business and economic areas (Ibwa 2008). Also, National Community of Women Entrepreneurship was established in 2006 to

empower women entrepreneurs, create a database of women entrepreneurs, and present consulting services for them (Nawe 2006). But, despite these activities, we are still beginning the way for the development of women entrepreneurship.

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