Lived Experiences of Females With Entrepreneurship in Sudan: Networking, Social Expectations, and Family Support

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Abstract

Extensive research exists on female entrepreneurship in developed countries such as North America and Europe; however, there is limited research on women entrepreneurs in African nations, specifically in Sudan. This descriptive phenomenological research was designed to explore, discover, and describe the perceptions and lived experiences of successful Sudanese female entrepreneurs concerning overcoming the challenges and obstacles faced in the beginning and managing new businesses in the region of Khartoum, capital of Sudan. This article uses the salient theories and concepts of entrepreneurship value creation theory, social role theory, challenges, and barriers facing women entrepreneurs. All these theories and concepts have been instrumental in understanding the lived experiences of challenges and barriers facing women entrepreneurs in Khartoum, Sudan. Data gathered from 19 female entrepreneurs purposively selected across Khartoum, Sudan, revealed that women struggle (a) having to secure funds; (b) society’s perception of suitable work for women; (c) access to networking; and (d) inadequate support from the government. The research also revealed that factors that influence factors to be successful are women’s family support and motivation; adjusting to social expectations. In addition to the strategies used to manage a successful business, there is a need for training and development skills and being persistent and believing in oneself. The research results showed that women experience mixed feelings during establishing and operating the business. The experience of women with the barriers and challenges includes fear, frustration, stress, and anger when they begin to manage the business. However, women also experienced positive feelings include risk-taking, courage, passion for learning, empowerment, fearlessness, ambition, determination, persistence, and believing in oneself. The women in this research were creative and initiative and managed to begin and operate a successful business.

Keywords

Sudan, women entrepreneurs, challenges, obstacles, society perception, life–work balance, family support, government support

Introduction

Globally, in developing countries, women entrepreneurs are increasing rapidly (Derera et al., 2014; Kumar, 2019). However, women-owned businesses are small in size and generate less profit than their counterparts (Babiker et al., 2017; Edoho, 2015a; Javadian & Singh, 2012; Sheriff & Muffatto, 2015). There are shared challenges confronting women in developing and developed countries include gender discrimination, a paucity of business information, a lack of resources, access to funds, and the absence of professional support networks (S. Belwal et al., 2014; Godwin et al., 2006; Kumar, 2019). However, women in developing countries face more significant challenges, such as male-controlled culture, gender discrimination, attitudes, and social views (Kapinga & Montero, 2017). In developing countries, a significant number of women-owned businesses are thriving and contribute to the economy and supporting families (Babiker et al., 2017; Dhaliwal, 2019; Gibson et al., 2014; Welsh et al., 2013).

Sudan, an African country with a wide range of natural resources, has a high percentage of poverty (Yagoub, 2015). Since the 1980s and 1990s, Sudan had an enormous number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) because of internal conflicts, civil wars, and droughts (Abdelmoneim, 2016; Daud, 2009; Izeldeen, 2014). Most of the displaced people were women who moved to Khartoum state seeking minor jobs with minimal pay because families struggle to obtain and provisions of basic needs (Daud, 2009; Izeldeen, 2014; Steel, 2017).

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Women comprise more than half of the population in the Khartoum region, and a large percentage of women in Khartoum live in poverty (A/Rahman, 2008; Abd Elhabeeb, 2014). The problematic situation and lack of government support in Sudan forced women to seek alternative solutions to provide support for families and children (A/Rahman, 2008; Daud, 2009; Izeldeen, 2014). Sudanese women often engage in businesses related to services such as sewing, farming, crafts, handicrafts, personal services, catering, and retail (A/Rahman, 2008; Chinomona & Maziriri, 2015; Izeldeen, 2014; Steel, 2017).

There are many types of research on women entrepreneurs’ challenges and obstacles. However, most of the studies focus on women entrepreneurs in developed countries, including the United States, Canada, and Europe (Edoho, 2015b; Sheriff & Muffatto, 2015). Nevertheless, the focus of the current research on challenges and obstacles in developed countries focus on entrepreneurship attributes and ignoring the provision of frameworks to solve the barriers (Sheriff & Muffatto, 2015). There is limited research on the challenges and obstacles that encounter Sudanese women (Welsh et al., 2013). Welsh et al. (2013) expressed his concern on the lack of studies in the region of Sudan when conducting a study on Sudanese women and could not compare the findings since there were no studies on female entrepreneurs in the region. Welsh et al. (2013) recommended future research to examine the different geographical areas to understand the experiences of Sudanese women entrepreneurs.

The research problem was that there is a specific lack of information about challenges and obstacles from women entrepreneurs in Sudan and reasons why it is not easy to start or manage a new business (Welsh et al., 2013). Thus, the specific problem to be explored was that leaders, and women are unsure how to adapt programs and strategies to encourage new start-up businesses because the facts that influence the limited number of women entrepreneurs in Sudan is experiences in operating and managing businesses (Kalemei Tuzun & Araz Takay, 2017).

Research Question

This research was structured around one overarching research question and two subquestions. The central overarching research question was as follows: how do female entrepreneurs perceive and describe the lived experience of challenges and obstacles in operating successful businesses in Khartoum state capital of Sudan, Africa?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework was based on the Social Role Theory (Abdalla, 2015; Bullough, 2013; Koenig & Eagly, 2014; Lynch, 2007), Entrepreneurial Value Creation Theory (Di Gregorio, 2013; Memili et al., 2015), and the barriers and challenges facing women (Javadian & Singh, 2012; Welsh et al., 2013). The theories and concepts provide the framework to understand the challenges and obstacles that confront women entrappers to operate and manage a successful business in a country dominated by men. The conceptual framework served to understand how women entrepreneurs made meaning from lived experiences regarding obstacles and challenges to opening and managing a new business.

Social role theory indicates that individuals and groups are associated with certain behaviors that dictate the individuals and group social role (Koenig & Eagly, 2014). Lynch (2007) also mentioned that the individual’s roles could relate to gender, position in society, or formal or informal status, which dictate the society’s perception of the individual. The social role theory explains that each group and individuals have different traits, and each group has a defined role in society that describes what the group should do and should not do (Koenig & Eagly, 2014; Kray et al., 2017). The social role theory usually associated with gender stereotypes and the belief that men have authority and power over women, and women are the weaker gender in society (Abdalla, 2015; Bullough, 2013).

Di Gregorio (2013) mentioned that entrepreneurship value creation is vital for economic growth and national income development. The entrepreneurial value creation focuses on job creation, elevating communities, economic growth, and personal gratification (Di Gregorio, 2013). Memili et al. (2015) stated that value creation uses innovation and available resources to develop new business to generate profit, gaining rewards. Di Gregorio (2013) expressed the same opinion that value creation results from using opportunities, resources, and ideas to develop a new venture that provides value for inventors, investors, and consumers.

Globally, women entrepreneurs share several challenges and barriers. However, women entrepreneurs in developing countries face more challenges and obstacles that hinder women-owned business success (R. Belwal et al., 2012; Chiloane-Tsoka, 2013). The challenges and obstacles that inhibit women entrepreneurs include lack of support network, lack of technical knowledge and skills, gender discrimination, and cultural perception (Shah & Saurabh, 2015). The challenges facing female entrepreneurs differ based on location, culture, education, age, and ethnicity (Naidu & Chand, 2017). In Africa, the social and cultural perception of women affected the industries where women started a business, including retail, catering, trade, and female-oriented industries (A/Rahman, 2008; Cini et al., 2014).

Challenges and Barriers

In developing and emerging nations, entrepreneurship is essential for the development and growth of the nation’s economy (Derera et al., 2014; Faisal et al., 2017). Women engaged in entrepreneurship activities to generate revenue to
support their families (Di Gregorio, 2013; Steel, 2017). Hancock et al. (2014) found that entrepreneurship viewed as masculine traits. Women encounter gender discrimination and stereotypes when engaging in entrepreneurial activities, which affect women in starting and operating a business (Hancock et al., 2014). A similar opinion stated by Abdalla (2015) that the primary obstacles encountered by women entrepreneurs in developing countries are the authority, political, and social power men have over women. Women continue to engage in establishing, organizing, and operating new endeavors (S. Belwal et al., 2014). Kapenga and Montero (2017) found that in many developing countries, women’s roles are perceived as caregivers and responsible for household duties. Thus, women entrepreneurs in developing countries focus on retail and services industries that viewed suitable for women such as dressmaking, craftwork, and food processing (Babiker et al., 2017; Cini et al., 2014).

Financial availability and resources. Capital is crucial for entrepreneurship development and starting new endeavors (Babiker et al., 2017; Chinomona & Maziriri, 2015). Women entrepreneurs face many challenges, predominantly concerning access to finance (Babiker et al., 2017; Derera et al., 2014; Maden, 2015). Derera et al. (2014) found that lenders avoid providing women with loans as perceiving women entrepreneurs lack management skills and entrepreneurial knowledge. Lack of financial resources results in women using personal savings, which usually quite small to start a business (Babiker et al., 2017; Derera et al., 2014; Maden, 2015). This small investment affects the sustainability of women’s businesses and their ability to employ more significant people (Babiker et al., 2017; Derera et al., 2014). Chinomona and Maziriri (2015) also expressed that women entrepreneurs in developing countries suffer from a lack of financial resources and working capital and are often unable to access financial assistance because of the lack of substantial resources required by lenders. Derera et al. (2014) opinion was that several entrepreneurs drop out before formalizing or starting the business while others survive and establish the business due to lack of funding and resources.

Education and business knowledge. In developing countries, women often lack the skills and education relevant to business (Bandiera et al., 2020; Chinomona & Maziriri, 2015). The lack of education, skills, and business knowledge acted as a problem for women to be able to plan, organize, control, and operate a business (Sumathi & Gunasundari, 2016). Sivakumar and Sarkar (2012) also expressed that the primary challenge for women entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia is the educational systems that do not promote analysis, skills, and problem-solving, and the training focus on business areas are limited for women. In developing countries, women need assistance in analyzing, identifying the market requirement, innovation, and the creation of new business and services (Sivakumar & Sarkar, 2012).

Sudanese women entrepreneurs’ challenges. The Sudanese society is highly conservative since the introduction of the Islamic law “Sharia” in 1983 (Steel, 2017). The introduction of Sharia causes debate about women’s responsibilities and work. The debate focuses on if women should be inside the homes or outside, which affect the position of women in Sudan (Steel, 2017). The business and market were controlled and dominated by men. Sudanese women were defined to stay at home as housewives and caregivers (Steel, 2017).

Many Sudanese women in Khartoum state are displaced due to the civil war and national disasters (Abdelmoneium, 2016; Daud, 2009; Rahamtalla & Saeed, 2009). The challenging economy provided a hurdle for Sudanese women to find employment opportunities, financial aid, and education (Abdelmoneium, 2016; Daud, 2009; Rahamtalla & Saeed, 2009). Sudanese women have difficulties in finding capital to start a business, and the limited funds’ women have is not enough to support their basic needs (Babiker et al., 2017). Sudanese women and men have different contacts as women are less mobile and are not exposed to diverse business contacts (Babiker et al., 2017). Women entrepreneurs in Sudan encounter several constraints, including sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and the lack of education and government regulation (El Zein et al., 2008).

Women started businesses in the informal sector (e.g., vending, food processing, and essential services) to provide for the basic needs of their families (Abdelmoneium, 2016; El Zein et al., 2008; Rahamtalla & Saeed, 2009; Steel, 2017). Many women in the Khartoum area have started new businesses, which has had a positive effect on the well-being of the families of these individuals (El Zein et al., 2008). Women often struggle to lead successful businesses in Sudan because of discrimination, lack of access to finance, knowledge, and limited education (El Zein et al., 2008).

Design of the Study
This research used a qualitative method. When researchers have little information and require rigorous exploration of a research problem by learning from participants, qualitative research is appropriate (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A descriptive phenomenology approach enables a researcher to address details in terms of refinements and intended meanings. The phenomenological design followed philosophical assumptions that guided the research and supported an interpretive approach to understanding the participants’ lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Population and Sample
This research study investigated the perceptions and experiences of Sudanese women entrepreneurs regarding the challenges and obstacles in starting and managing a business in Khartoum, Sudan. The population in Khartoum state is
approximately 5 million people (Saadia, 2012). Women are approximately 66.5% of the total labor force in Sudan (Mansour, 2015). In Khartoum, 8.2% of the population are women who own small to large businesses. The target population for this research included Sudanese women entrepreneurs who operated a successful business for 5 years in the Khartoum state, the capital of Sudan.

Entrepreneurial success for women includes several aspects such as wealth, social status, profitability, survival time, stability, and performance, among others (Dhaliwal, 2019). The main factors that contribute to a successful business are profitability, survival time, and ownership (Dhaliwal, 2019). A successful business should be financially profitable, and business survival time should be more than 3 years to consider the business as successful. Ownership should be 51% or more of the business, and the women should be operating the business (Dhaliwal, 2019). Formal education and marketing skills contribute positively to the success of the business (Dhaliwal, 2019).

Participants were chosen based on the purposeful criterion sampling technique. The criteria for selecting interview participants were (a) Sudanese women entrepreneurs, (b) who operated a sustainable business for the most recent 5 years, (c) had at least a high school diploma, (d) between 21 and 55 years old, and (e) a resident in Khartoum, the state capital of Sudan. Successful Sudanese women are women who operate a sustainable and rewarding business for the last 5 years. The geographical location of the study was Khartoum, the state capital of Sudan.

A solicitation document was posted in the Sudanese Business Women Development Center in Khartoum to request volunteers interested in participating in this study. The Sudanese Business Women Development Center (SBWDC) is not for profit center for capacity building for women entrepreneurs. The center provides many services from workshops, mentoring, promotion, data resources, and access to capital (SBWDC). Women who would like to participate contacted the researcher to discuss the steps of their participation. Nineteen women were identified and met the criteria to participate.

Data Collection

The study employed open-ended, in-depth qualitative interviews to clarify the lived experiences of women regarding the challenges and obstacles in starting and managing a successful business (Seidman, 2013). Interviews allow individuals to describe meaning to the phenomenon they have experienced. The researcher employed a field process to test the interview questions. In this research, after 16 participants were interviewed, data saturation was achieved, to achieve confirmability, three additional interviews were conducted, thus ensuring data saturation. Participants were engaged in the open-ended interview as an instrument for data collection to explore their lived experience and to collect rich data to construct meaning from the participants’ lived experience (Giorgi, 2009; Osborne, 1994).

All interviews began with agreed permission to record the interview, followed by a short introduction explaining the merits of the study. All participants showed a cooperative, open, willingness, and passion for sharing their lived experiences. The interview included nine open-ended questions asked to each participant to ensure participants shared their lived experience concerning overcoming the challenges and obstacles faced in starting and managing businesses in the region of Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, Africa. Following the completion of the interview, checks were made to ensure the interviewees’ answers were appropriately recorded. After the completion of the interview, field notes, memos, journaling of thoughts, and ideas were recorded to ensure accuracy and relevance to each participant’s interview.

The women-owned businesses represented in this research cover a range of businesses that included beauty centers, clothing design, catering, food products, education (private school), engineering, entertainment, and event planning. Women participants in the in-depth interviews experienced operating a business between 5 and 30 years, with an average of 17.5 years. Participants’ age average was 38 years, and the age span was between 21 and 55 years. Twelve of the women interviewed were married, one was widowed, two were divorced, and four were single. Women interviewed demonstrated a range of educational backgrounds, two held a master’s degree, 11 had a bachelor’s degree, two had a postgraduate diploma, and four had high school diplomas.

Data Analysis

In this research, a modified van Kaam model was used for the data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Data analysis began after the completion of the interview and data transcription. After each interview, the interviewer wrote down a journal entry and made memos to ensure the research’s trustworthiness. Bracketing was used to enhance the validity of the finding while reading the transcribed interviews by writing down reflections, views, and thoughts while reading the interviews as a whole and stored in computer software “NVivo 11.” The memos acted as a reflexive document that helped to ensure a phenomenology attitude that reduced and mitigated researcher bias (Moustakas, 1994).

The transcribed data collected from in-depth interviews were organized into computer software, which helped categorize meaning units of the women entrepreneurs’ lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Each transcribed interview included a review to analyze the data collected by identifying common meaning units/themes of the female entrepreneurs lived experiences to understand the phenomenon from the thematic analysis, a description of “what” was experienced in textual information, and “how” it was experienced in structural information (Moustakas, 1994). Textual descriptions are recognized, and further meanings are explored from various perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). The interviews were read and re-read as its entirely, and each statement was
given equal value (Moustakas, 1994). Overlapping and repetitive statements were eliminated.

The coding process started by reading the interview, and each statement gave the same value. Coding data enabled the ability to add relevant notes. Reviewing the interview transcripts several times allowed the researcher to create new nodes. The researcher then categorized the nodes depending on their respective frequency. The coding process helped to identify significantly similar meaning units/themes among participants. The themes developed from the categories helped to identify the life experiences of the female entrepreneurs concerning challenges and obstacles in operating a successful business—the higher node related to themes that answer each of the researcher’s questions.

Textural descriptions from the data were used to make meaning of the phenomenon using specific quotes from the participants’ interviews. A summary of the analysis was sent to the study participants by email regarding the study findings to ensure the bracketing was accurate. Participants confirmed the results were valid. A textural, structural synthesis included the description of the phenomenon’s essence, which was the lived experiences and perceptions of Sudanese women entrepreneurs with challenges and obstacles faced in establishing and operating successful businesses (Moustakas, 1994). The description becomes the critical, invariant structure of the essence, capturing the meaning associated with the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

**Findings**

Participants shared lived experiences to add to understanding the phenomenon of women entrepreneurs faced with challenges and obstacles in operating and managing a successful business in Sudan, Africa. The analysis of the data revealed several findings. The central question and subquestions provided prominent themes and meaning units listed below:

**Having to Secure Funds**

Participants describe their experience when starting the business that there were no funds available, and women used their savings, selling their assets, and borrowing from family to start the business. Two participants revealed that they failed to secure a loan from the bank, which required them to borrow from friends and family. Businesswomen 13 said,

> We did go to the bank for financial aid, but they were not very helpful, so we decided to do it on our own... we borrowed from friends, family; we just kept it as private as possible so that we would not get into financial difficulties later on.

Another two participants revealed that after they started the business from their own savings, they managed to find local companies with a development initiative that supports women with low income to start a business.

**Society’s Perception of Suitable Work for Women**

Participants revealed that men view women as the person that should stay home and take care of the household and family responsibilities. Participants described that society sees women differently than men. Participants explained that society views specific businesses suitable for women and socially acceptable if women started a business in them, such as catering, teaching, fashion design, and beauty centers.

Two participants expressed that women have better chances for success if and when the women partnered with a man. Two participants expressed that working in some professions such as engineering reduce chances of success as the society prefer to deal with men in those type of businesses. Businesswoman 22 said,

> In the beginning, the problem was that I am a female. This was a major problem in the engineering field generally... working with different suppliers and workers was challenging because when they found out the engineer is a woman, they undervalue you, as you are a woman and you do not have a say.

**Access to Networking**

Women expressed that access to the business network was a challenge when starting the business. Women mentioned they do not have connections to facilitate the establishment and support of the business. Four participants described that building and having access to the business network will help women to expand their business. Participants also advised that women should focus on building their network in different areas in the market. Participants expressed that competitors use their networks to take contracts from them. Businesswomen 6 said,

> When I stared competitors stood against me, for example, if I got an offer from someone; right away, using connections, they take away the offer from me. They pay money to take this offer.

**Inadequate Support From the Government**

Participants believe that the government does not provide adequate support and create a problem rather than solving problems. Participants revealed that the government imposes high taxes and expensive permits for business owners and the frequent change of the business rules. One Businesswomen 13 said,

> We are facing a lot of difficulties; the government does not give us any aid at all. Everything we have to do by ourselves and they request a lot of money... getting nothing in return from the government at all.

**Family Support and Motivation**

Participants believed that family support, such as spouse, father, mother, and siblings, is the primary reason for success.
Participants described that the support and motivation they got directly from family and extended family encouraged them to work harder and move forward. Women revealed that their families' financial and emotional support and motivation were the main reasons for their success. Women felt that family support and motivation pushed them to focus more and encouraged them to translate their ideas into a real business. Businesswomen 5 said,

I think I got to this stage as my business grew well, because my family were supporting my business so much specially my mom. She used to encourage me to do what I love . . . My whole family, my brothers and my sister even the extended family, they were always encouraging, and they were the first to buy from me as supporters.

**Adjusting to Social Expectations**

Participants believed that to be successful, women should adapt to social expectations. Participants described that ensuring household responsibilities are covered will reduce the conflict with the spouse, which will help the husband support the women’s business. Businesswomen 12 said, “In our society, the man could not allow the woman to work, this is not fair. She wouldn’t be able to be a businesswoman if men are controlling what she can do or can’t do.”

Participants expressed that balancing between family responsibilities and work contributes positively to businesswomen’s success. Participants revealed that before starting a business, women should evaluate and ensure that the business will not affect her household responsibilities. Businesswomen 19 said,

You have to have time to be able to do business, and you should not affect your responsibilities at home as expected from you . . . Women should select business that will not take time on the account of her house and children.

**Need for Training and Developing Skills**

Participants described their lived experience that training and updating their skills were essential for the success of their businesses. Participants advised that newcomers need to engage in training and continually update their skills. Participants revealed that women should understand and study the market and use the internet and training courses to add new skills and knowledge to benefit the business. Participants expressed that engagement in training, developing, and updating skills will allow businesswomen to adapt to the change in the market and provide customers with current services and products. Businesswomen 21 said,

Search the internet, look at what is published on the groups and gain new skills. Get an idea from here and there. Ask about the new things you have seen which you don’t know how to do and train yourself.

**Be Persistent and Believe in Oneself**

Participants described their lived experience that women should be persistent, take a risk, and do not be afraid when starting and managing the business. Participants revealed that persistence and risk-taking was a factor in the success of the business operation. Two participants expressed that determination and believed in oneself helped them in being successful in their business. Four participants advised newcomers to take a risk and do not be afraid of starting new businesses as successful businesswomen are risk-takers and do not stick to a day job. Participants revealed that being persistent and believe in oneself will help women entrepreneurs to succeed in business and life. Businesswomen 4 said,

So, if you want to start, start right away and believe in yourself, and be willing to take a risk. Do not be afraid that you don’t stick to a nine to five job. Do not be afraid that you would not have money in the beginning, do not be afraid from basic things that people usually get afraid of, because successful businesspeople are the people who usually the ones who take a risk and believe in themselves.

**Discussions**

At the beginning and operating businesses, women faced several challenges and learned several techniques to overcome the challenges. The women lived experience with challenges provides insights and in-depth understanding of the barriers, strategies, and influences that kept them going and managing a successful business.

**Having to Secure Funds**

Women felt vulnerable, depending on their spouses to provide financial support. Women expressed the desire for independence and support themselves. Women also expressed feeling helpless when the family needs financial support, and they could not provide it. Businesswomen 6 mentioned,

My husband had problems and stopped working, and I couldn’t help him because I didn’t have money, I felt weak because didn’t know how to help till the idea of using my hobby to make a business. I sold my jewelry and borrowed money from my brothers to start the business.

Women revealed that they experienced obstacles in securing funds to start new ventures. Participants expressed that limited finances forced them to start the business tiny with limited funds. Women expressed failing to obtain loans from banks without the back provide any reasons for declining the loan.

The research findings supported the findings of Ghouse et al. (2017) that women face difficulties to start new ventures because of lack of funds. McGowan et al. (2015) concluded that the failure to begin a business attributed to difficulties in
securing and obtaining finance. Welsh et al. (2017) also found that financing is vital for the success of women entrepreneurs who own a small personal capital.

Women have the ability and desire to start new ventures, but the ability to secure funds hinders female entrepreneurs from deciding to start a business. For that reason, women began small businesses with minimum funds. Iakovleva et al. (2013) found that female entrepreneurs encounter difficulties in securing funds from financial institutions limiting the entrepreneurial opportunities for women, which support the finding of this research.

Literature explicitly documented that securing and lack of funds as the main challenge for female entrepreneurs in developed and developing countries (Ghouse et al., 2017). In addition, the data from the research remains consistent with the assertion in past literature.

Society's Perception of Suitable Work for Women

Women believed that society views women as households or in working in specific jobs such as office jobs. Women felt that men were controlling their lives and directing what women's actions and looks should be in society. Women expressed anger and unfairness that society dictates the type of suitable work for women. Participant BW16 expressed that society judge the engineering work is not suitable for women because what women wear when they go to work. Businesswomen 16 stated,

As a construction engineer I wear pants for work, and people aren't okay with this . . . since the moment you come out of your house, people do not accept what you wear and look at you in a strange way in the transportation, on the site and so.

Olatunji (2017) concluded that female entrepreneurs feel gender has a significant impact on the success in beginning new ventures. Olatunji (2017) found two aspects of gender differences that affect women entrepreneurs: the male counterpart's point of view of women and women's perceptions of gender differences hinder women from seeking entrepreneurial opportunities. In addition, Olatunji (2017) found that gender roles in society explain why women focus on business, such as trade, education, and services, scared to seek other opportunities or sectors which align with the social role theory. In this research, 89% of participants operated businesses in the service sector perceived suitable for women. The findings remain consistent with Ghouse et al. (2017), who confirmed that family ambivalence, gender bias, and social norms act as obstacles to female entrepreneurial ability.

Similarly, past literature found that women entrepreneurs face gender discrimination and gender stereotypes (Koenig & Eagly, 2014). Past literature found that several societies view entrepreneurship as a masculinity role, and women encounter problems when starting and operating a business (Hancock et al., 2014). The research findings remain consistent with past literature.

Access to Networking

Women expressed that limited access to network restricted their ability to compete in the market. Women felt fear and stress when they started the business because they did not know people in the business field. Women conveyed their concern about losing business from the lack of business networks and not knowing people in the right places. Women revealed that they spend more time in building networks and trying to figure out how to get things done in a male-dominated environment. Businesswoman 22 said,

There is something really important, your relationship with suppliers . . . If you don’t know people, then you will not manage to work. As a woman it hard to have access to suppliers easily. You have to build your network of suppliers in the market and know people.

Bogren et al. (2013) confirmed the research findings and concluded that female entrepreneurs lack access to business networks, and to overcome the lack of access to the business network, women depend on their social networks to expand in the market. Xie and Lv (2016) also found that limited access to networking minimizes the profitability of female entrepreneurs and the success of their new ventures. Women used their personal contacts to support their business and build new customers. Xie and Lv (2016) supported the findings of this research and concluded that female entrepreneurs focus on the social network in maintaining and starting the business.

Past research supported the findings and presented that women entrepreneurs struggle to access and to engage in business and support networks (S. Belwal et al., 2014). The entrepreneurship value creation theory depends on several factors including internal social network and connection, which has a significant role in value creation (Memili et al., 2015). However, in this study, women entrepreneurs revealed the access to networking is a challenge, which minimized their value creation in operating and expanding the business.

Inadequate Support From The Government

Women’s experience with government support is inadequate and create problems than solving their problem. The government frequently change the rules and regulation without providing any update to businesses. Women entrepreneurs expressed that dealing with the government is demotivating and frustrating as the government lacks the proper organization to support people. Women avoid dealing with the government and keep it to the minimum unless it is necessary. Businesswomen 11 said, “One day the government tells you something, tomorrow they tell you something different totally, so you really don’t know what to do.”
Iakovleva et al. (2013) found that women distance themselves from the government because women perceive that the government does not provide adequate support and complicates their business by not setting clear policies and standards. Agarwal and Lenka (2016) confirmed that in addition to other support systems, official supporting bodies are essential for women to start and undertake entrepreneurial activities. The research, supported by Lindvert et al. (2015), concluded that government support is crucial for entrepreneurship; yet women perceive that the government will not provide adequate support and thus avoid asking for assistance.

Ghouse et al. (2017) found that female entrepreneurs identified that support and incentive from the government are difficult to find, supporting the findings of the study. Di Gregorio (2013) found that value creation emerged from the opportunities and resources available to develop new business and increase revenue. The findings revealed that women perceived that the government is not useful, with no opportunities nor support available (Ghouse et al., 2017), which hindered women from value creation.

**Family Support and Motivation**

Women expressed that support and motivation from family members made them feel fearless and powerful and encouraged them to begin new ventures. Women’s experience with family support was a factor in their success as entrepreneurs. Women conveyed that family support lessened some of their household responsibilities and allowed them to focus on the business. Businesswomen 4 said, “My family encouraged me to start my business and provided me with all the support I needed to establish the business... That makes me feel fearless and powerful.”

The research findings related to Welsh et al.’s (2014) conclusions that family support encourages female entrepreneurs to succeed in new businesses and flourish within the business, also empowering female entrepreneurs to overcome challenges and personal problems which increase performance. Mari et al.’s (2016) findings support the research findings that family support and motivation help women entrepreneurs during the creation and establishment of the business in strengthening women’s performance and profitability. Di Gregorio (2013) concluded that entrepreneurship value creation theory indicates that starting a new business increases the business performance and generates revenue to help in job creation and well-being of communities and entrepreneurs.

Women expressed that emotional and financial family support was crucial for success in beginning and operation a successful business. Mari et al. (2016) found that family support enabled women to balance their responsibilities at home and work, supporting the study findings. Bogren et al.’s (2013) results related to the research findings, which help female entrepreneurs with a high level of family and relatives support and motivation to operate a successful business.

**Adjusting to Social Expectations**

Women believed that adjusting to social expectations will help women to feel more comfortable and belong to society and not considered as someone going against the flow. Women expressed that adjusting to social expectation is a type of coping mechanism and strategy to overcome the challenges and obstacles that might face them in starting and operating a business. Businesswomen 21 stated, “Yes, this work is suitable for women and you can start from home in the beginning which make it easy and acceptable in the society.”

Women expressed to be successful; women should balance between household responsibilities and their business and engaged in a business that allows them to take care of their household responsibilities. Women described balancing between household responsibilities and work lessened the conflict with their spouse. Businesswomen 15 stated, “I chose this business because it is suitable to be near my children and so, which means it does not affect them in any way.”

Rehman and Muhammad (2012) supported the research findings and found that the balance between work and life is vital. Rehman and Muhammad (2012) added that women should engage in businesses that balance household responsibilities and business. Rehman and Muhammad (2012) also found that achieving work–life balance was a primary influencer for women to start businesses. Rehman and Muhammad (2012) concluded that women recognized that to achieve entrepreneurial success, they should balance between household responsibilities and work.

Heilbrunn and Davidovitch’s (2011) findings support the research findings as they concluded that balancing work and life is essential to avoid conflict between household responsibilities and the business. For that reason, most women businesses are home-based, confirming that family and spousal support are crucial for balancing work and life. Rehman and Muhammad (2012) concluded that cultural norms in various societies are complicated and affect women in balancing between work and household responsibilities. In their research on Pakistani women, Rehman and Muhammad (2012) found the Pakistani society view women roles as a wife, mother, and the one responsible for the household. Rehman and Muhammad’s (2012) findings support the research findings, aligned with the social role theory.

**Need for Training and Developing Skills**

Women showed that training and developing skills helped them to be creative and initiative in their business. Women highlighted that newcomers should continually learn and acquire new skills to increase their market share and be leaders in their field. Successful women revealed that researching, studying, and educating are a significant step to achieve
success in business. Businesswomen 9 stated, “I worked hard and studied to help myself. I go to the university and sit in lectures with students, I attended lectures even I am not a student anymore to find out what is new you know.”

The research findings were related to Drine and Grach’s (2012) conclusion that female entrepreneurs should engage in flexible and short-term training, which will improve their skills and know-how. Drine and Grach (2012) found that female entrepreneurs need to master new techniques and skills to enhance their business’ competitive environment, which relate to the research findings. Improving the competitive environment of business help business to be successful and increase revenue (Drine & Grach, 2012), which aligned with the entrepreneurship value creation theory.

**Be Persistent and Believe in Oneself**

Women stressed that being persistent, believe in oneself, and risk-taking are compounds to create a successful business. Women expressed that being ambitious and determined are essential to be successful. Women expressed that newcomers should start as soon as possible and be open to learn from their mistakes and be persistent and determined. Businesswomen 5 stated,

I always say if there is a will there is a way. This means if you are really ambitious and want something and have a passion for something . . . just go for it. Don’t hold yourself from something you love, or something you see yourself in . . . be determined to achieve what you want . . . So, if you want to start, start right away and believe in yourself.

Women expressed that focusing on business with low risk fearing to lose their capital and not to be able to sustain the business. Javadian and Singh (2012) confirmed the findings and concluded that women are averse to risk because of the fear of failure. Javadian and Singh explained that women’s ability to take a risk and not fear failure is critical to business success.

Ekpe et al. (2013) concluded that women entrepreneurs should have a positive attitude toward risk-taking to achieve and expand the business, which supports the findings of the research. Also, the results can be related to Fernandes and Mota-Ribeiro (2017) findings that self-determination is a significant aspect of successful women entrepreneurs’ lives and success. Determination helps women to overcome gender discrimination and an attribute of successful women entrepreneurs.

**Conclusion**

The experience of women in this research indicated that women could transform and change their situations and become an active contributor to the economy. The women in this research dared to begin a new business, given all the negative barriers, for example, a government unwilling to provide support and the perception of society toward working women. Also, during establishing and operating, the businesswomen experienced fear and stress, frustration, and anger. However, women felt powerful, fearless, and motivation through support received from family. Women in this research had a passion for learning and need to enhance skills, which led to developing new ideas and manage a sustainable business. The women in this research were creative and innovative and changed the status quo of how women are perceived in Sudan. The businesswomen were ambitious and determined to materialize and move ahead with their ideas and begin new ventures.

The experience of women in this research identified that women took risks and believed in their ability to overcome challenges and obstacles, such as securing funds, inadequate government support, and adjusting to social perception to begin a business. Women in this research took the risk and dared to face the odds and norms of the society to succeed in operating successful businesses, which allowed for positive outcomes in their personal and community lives.

The experiences of the women in this research have the potential to be a multiplier for others, for example, gaining financial independence, empowering women, and improving the economy. The experiences of the women in this research provide examples of how other women can transform and become successful entrepreneurs, which will lead to contribute to the economy of Sudan and the well-being of their families.

In summary, the result of the research showed more than one essence regarding women’s experience with facing barriers and challenges to operating a successful business. The essence of the experiences in this research includes risk-taking, courage, passion for learning, empowerment, fearlessness, ambition, determination, persistence, and believing in oneself. During the establishment of the business, the experience of women identified from the experiences also includes fear, frustration, stress, and anger. Despite the adverse essence of experience, women went against the perception of women in society and managed to transform and make something of themselves through starting and operating a successful business in Sudan.

**Implications**

Research showed that women became entrepreneurs to overcome challenges and become leaders and balance between life and work as corporate career women face such difficulties as glass ceiling (Ezzedeen & Zikic, 2012). Although women focus on entrepreneurship still facing different challenges and barriers to advancing their business, this research showed insights into the challenges and obstacles female
entrepreneurs encountered in engaging in entrepreneurial activities. So perhaps leaders can develop models and strategies to overcome barriers and problems in starting and operating successful businesses in Sudan and probably in other underdeveloped countries.

From this research emerged implications for practice. The primary implication of this research is that female entrepreneur needs to work collaboratively through networking to support each other better. The findings of this research identified that in Sudan, female entrepreneurs need to work with community and business leaders who will extend guidance on the challenges and obstacles to overcome in starting new businesses. Leaders should understand the challenges and obstacles facing women and work jointly to establish mechanisms to support female entrepreneurs and provide an appealing environment to attract newcomers to start-ups.

Another implication of the findings of this research is that dedication and patience will aid females to overcome challenges and obstacles facing female entrepreneurs. Women who exercise patience and commitment will be able to bring their ideas to fruition and achieve success. Women entrepreneurs should also be determined and not give up based on their initial failure and to keep trying and learning from their mistakes.

Finally, the literature review presented that there is a gap in the literature. This study is significant as much available research tends to focus primarily on female entrepreneurs in developed countries (Sheriff & Muffatto, 2015). Researchers need to conduct additional studies in underdeveloped/developing countries and particular Sudanese female entrepreneurs to understand better the motivational factors which push women in Sudan differently to start and operate businesses.

Limitation

This research used descriptive phenomenological analysis, which presents several limitations, which is consistent with all research endeavors. A limitation of this was the sample size, which was restricted to one geographical location Khartoum state, capital of Sudan, and no claim of generalization can be made for a larger population. A second limitation was the interpretation of that data depends on the researcher’s understanding and perception of the participants’ lived experiences. Rigor in qualitative research could be challenging to maintain. A potential source of bias might be the researcher’s gender, which is opposite to the participants.

Another limitation is that the sample was obtained by advertising for participation in the Sudanese Business Women Development Center, which supports women in starting and developing their businesses. This might have left out other women who experience more challenges and obstacles in starting and operating their business. A final limitation was that the interviews were conducted in Arabic, the language of the participants, and translated into English. Therefore, there was a potential for some misrepresentation in the translation process of translation.

Future Studies

The findings of this research remain consistent with the literature on female entrepreneurs’ challenges, obstacles, and barriers facing women entrepreneurs. The research process, data analysis, and results showed other potential aspects for future research.

Future research is recommended to repeat the study with the same design and method in other geographical locations in Sudan. Conducting quantitative research on the challenges and obstacles facing female entrepreneurs in various areas may help better understand the magnitude of the problem facing women in Sudan.

Another recommendation for future research is to conduct a quantitative study to learn about the most significant challenges and obstacles that female entrepreneurs face in starting and operating a successful business for a larger geographical area. The research may help in learning, which are the top challenges facing women in beginning and managing businesses to support the government to establish comprehensive strategies and models to help women across Sudan.

A final recommendation is to research and investigate female entrepreneurs’ management practices, including the methods and strategies used to manage employees and workers. The investigation may determine the procedures and best practices women entrepreneurs used to control and deal with male employees. The results may help women entrepreneurs struggling with coping with male employees and worker, in addition to assisting newcomers to cope and overcome the challenges with male counterparts, employees, and workers.

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