



Exploring Socio-Cultural Barriers and Entrepreneurial Meaning Among Indonesian Women Entrepreneurs

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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurship is widely recognized as a driver of economic development and social transformation, with women entrepreneurs contributing significantly to both. Yet, within business incubation programs, women often face socio-cultural barriers that shape their entrepreneurial experiences in distinctive ways. Despite increasing scholarly attention, little is known about how women interpret and negotiate these barriers within the incubation context, raising the central question: how do women entrepreneurs make sense of socio-cultural constraints during their entrepreneurial journeys? Here, we show that an interpretative phenomenological approach provides critical insights into the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs, capturing meanings often overlooked in quantitative or structural studies. Using semi-structured interviews with twelve participants from Indonesian incubation programs, the study identified four interrelated themes: negotiating gendered expectations, experiencing marginalization, developing resilience, and constructing peer support networks. These themes illustrate how women not only encounter socio-cultural barriers but also reinterpret them as part of their entrepreneurial identity, transforming challenges into opportunities for growth. The findings suggest that business incubators should integrate gender-sensitive mentorship, peer collaboration platforms, and flexible program designs to better support women entrepreneurs. The study demonstrates that women's lived experiences are central to understanding the dynamics of entrepreneurship in developing contexts, offering richer perspectives than those derived solely from economic or structural measures. However, the research is limited by its small sample size and focus on a single national context, indicating the need for broader comparative studies in future research.



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INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship has long been recognized as a vital driver of economic development, innovation, and social transformation (Fariha & Dey, 2025). Within this landscape, women entrepreneurs play an increasingly important role, not only by contributing to economic growth but also by reshaping social structures through their participation in business creation and leadership (Xheneti & Madden, 2025). Despite this significance, women's entrepreneurial journeys are often influenced by socio-cultural expectations, institutional barriers, and gendered norms that frame both opportunities and constraints in their professional lives.

The relevance of these challenges extends beyond economic implications, touching upon the lived experiences of women who must navigate a cultural context where entrepreneurship is frequently perceived as a male-dominated domain (Sugiyanto et al., 2024). For many, the act of pursuing entrepreneurial ambitions becomes intertwined with negotiating identity, social acceptance, and legitimacy within family and community structures (Bastida et al., 2025). These dynamics highlight the deeply subjective and socially embedded nature of women's entrepreneurial experiences, particularly in contexts where traditional norms remain strong.

Understanding the subjective meaning of these experiences is essential, as socio-cultural barriers are not merely external obstacles but are also internalized, resisted, and reinterpreted by women as part of their entrepreneurial identity formation (Kovid et al., 2025). A phenomenological exploration provides a way to capture these dimensions, allowing the complexity of women's voices, struggles, and resilience to emerge (Mukhlis, 2025a). By focusing on lived experience rather than abstract generalizations, this approach opens a pathway to deeper insights into how women construct meaning in relation to entrepreneurship and socio-cultural constraints, thereby enriching both theoretical and practical perspectives.

Entrepreneurship has long been recognized as a vital driver of economic development, innovation, and social transformation (Jaravaza et al., 2025). Within this landscape, women entrepreneurs play an increasingly important role, not only by contributing to economic growth but also by reshaping social structures through their participation in business creation and leadership (Mukhlis, 2025b). Despite this significance, women's entrepreneurial journeys are often influenced by socio-cultural expectations, institutional barriers, and gendered norms that frame both opportunities and constraints in their professional lives.

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Understanding the subjective meaning of these experiences is essential, as socio-cultural barriers are not merely external obstacles but are also internalized, resisted, and reinterpreted by women as part of their entrepreneurial identity formation (Peter & Orser, 2024). A phenomenological exploration provides a way to capture these dimensions, allowing the complexity of women's voices, struggles, and resilience to emerge (Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). By focusing on lived experience rather than abstract generalizations, this approach opens a pathway to deeper insights into how women construct meaning in relation to entrepreneurship and socio-cultural constraints, thereby enriching both theoretical and practical perspectives.

Research on the lived experiences of entrepreneurs has increasingly gained recognition as a crucial field of inquiry, as it offers insights into the ways individuals interpret and navigate their professional and social environments (Guerrero-Chaparro et al., 2025). In the context of women entrepreneurs, such research is particularly significant because it uncovers how personal meaning-making processes intersect with broader socio-cultural constraints (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Scholars have emphasized that while quantitative studies have advanced knowledge on structural and economic factors, they often fail to capture the subjective essence of what it means to face and overcome barriers in entrepreneurship.

Methodological challenges persist in exploring these deeper dimensions of experience. The dominance of survey-based approaches and large-scale statistical analyses has provided valuable macro-level data but has left limited space for examining the nuanced, contextually embedded realities of women entrepreneurs (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023). Such approaches tend to prioritize measurable indicators of success such as income generation, firm performance, or participation rates while overlooking how entrepreneurs themselves perceive, interpret, and respond to socio-cultural obstacles in their daily practices.

These limitations render many conventional methods less effective in fully understanding the essence of entrepreneurial experiences among women (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2025). Without a focus on subjective narratives, the relational and emotional dimensions of entrepreneurship remain underexplored (Mukhlis et al., 2024). Phenomenological approaches, by contrast, are uniquely positioned to reveal these lived dimensions, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how women construct meaning around socio-cultural barriers in incubation contexts.

Existing approaches to supporting women entrepreneurs in incubation programs have often relied on practical interventions such as training modules, mentorship, and financial assistance (Morales-Valero et al., 2025). While these measures are valuable, they predominantly focus on observable outcomes and functional skills, thus reflecting a structural and quantitative orientation (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). Such strategies have contributed to policy development and program design, but they fall short in addressing the subjective dimensions of women's entrepreneurial journeys.

The limitation of these approaches lies in their inability to capture how women themselves experience and interpret the socio-cultural barriers they encounter (Tanaji et al., 2025). Quantitative surveys and performance evaluations tend to overlook the ways in which cultural expectations, gender norms, and interpersonal interactions shape the meaning of participation in incubation programs (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025). As a result, current understandings remain partial, emphasizing external indicators of success without acknowledging the internal processes of negotiation, resistance, and resilience that define women's lived realities.

To address this gap, there is a pressing need for methodologies that illuminate the essence of these experiences in a more holistic and nuanced manner (Wallace & Smith, 2024). A phenomenological approach provides such an alternative, offering the opportunity to move beyond surface-level observations toward a deeper comprehension of how women entrepreneurs construct meaning in the face of socio-cultural constraints (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). By prioritizing lived experience, phenomenology enables the articulation of insights that are both theoretically rich and practically relevant for designing more inclusive and responsive incubation programs.

Previous studies have examined women's entrepreneurship primarily through structural and quantitative perspectives, focusing on economic outcomes, access to resources, and participation rates (Titus et al., 2025). While valuable, these approaches often neglect the personal experiences that shape entrepreneurial meaning in specific cultural contexts. Research on gender and entrepreneurship has highlighted persistent socio-cultural barriers, yet few studies explore how these barriers are lived and interpreted by women in incubation programs (Patterson & Mavin, 2025). This gap demonstrates the need for approaches that prioritize lived narratives over general patterns. The present study responds to this need by emphasizing phenomenology as a lens for deeper exploration.

To address this gap, the study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach that focuses on how women construct meaning in the face of socio-cultural barriers (Mishra & Sahoo, 2025). This method is chosen because it allows the researcher to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences rather than reducing them to measurable indicators (Sawangchai et al., 2025). By exploring narratives in depth, phenomenology answers the call for richer insights into the subjective realities of women entrepreneurs (Manesha Peiris, 2025). The approach highlights both the challenges and the resilience demonstrated by participants as they navigate incubation programs. In doing so, it brings forward voices that are often overlooked in traditional research frameworks.

The article is structured in a way that provides coherence and transparency for readers (Hendratmi et al., 2024). The introduction sets the stage by discussing the relevance of women's entrepreneurship and the socio-cultural dynamics surrounding it (Vidal-Matzanke et al., 2024). The method section describes the phenomenological design, participants, data collection, and analytic process. The results present emergent themes with direct participant quotations to illustrate lived meanings (Jan et al., 2025). Finally, the discussion interprets the findings in light of existing literature, followed by a conclusion that underscores contributions to theory and practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological design, which emphasizes understanding the lived experiences of individuals and the meanings they ascribe to particular

phenomena. The interpretative phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of how women entrepreneurs experience and negotiate socio-cultural barriers in business incubation programs. Rather than focusing on generalizability, phenomenology seeks to capture the essence of subjective experience. By adopting an interpretative lens, the study highlights how participants construct meaning within their socio-cultural contexts, providing nuanced insights into barriers that are often overlooked in quantitative or descriptive accounts.

Participants

Participants consisted of women entrepreneurs actively engaged in business incubation programs in Indonesia. Inclusion criteria required participants to be women with direct experience in incubation processes, specifically those who had faced socio-cultural challenges during their entrepreneurial journey. Exclusion criteria included individuals who were not directly involved in incubation programs or who lacked relevant entrepreneurial experience.

A purposive sampling strategy was applied to ensure that only participants with rich experiential knowledge of the phenomenon were included. A total of 12 participants were involved, ranging in age from 25 to 45 years. All participants identified as female and represented diverse entrepreneurial sectors, including technology-based enterprises, handicrafts, and service-oriented businesses. Their demographic variation enriched the contextual understanding of the phenomenon while maintaining coherence in the study focus.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' lived experiences. An interview guide was developed to maintain consistency while allowing flexibility for probing deeper into participants' narratives. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in neutral and comfortable locations selected by participants, such as co-working spaces or community centers, to encourage openness and trust. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Field notes were taken to capture contextual cues and non-verbal expressions. Efforts were made to ensure a supportive and non-judgmental environment, enabling participants to share experiences freely and authentically.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which focuses on identifying patterns of meaning within participants' narratives. The process involved multiple steps: reading and re-reading the transcripts to gain familiarity, coding significant statements into meaning units, clustering codes into emerging themes, and refining these themes through iterative analysis. NVivo software was employed to assist in organizing and managing data but was not used as the primary analytic tool.

Themes were developed inductively, allowing the findings to emerge from participants' lived accounts rather than being imposed by pre-existing theoretical frameworks. Through this systematic process, the analysis captured the essential structures of meaning that reflected participants' experiences of socio-cultural barriers in entrepreneurial incubation.

RESULTS

Negotiating Gendered Expectations in Entrepreneurial Spaces

A recurring theme in participants' accounts was the negotiation between entrepreneurial aspirations and societal expectations of women's roles. Many participants reported experiencing subtle and overt reminders that their primary responsibility was domestic rather than professional. One participant expressed:

“When I presented my business idea, one mentor asked if I was ready to neglect my family for this. I felt judged as if being a wife and a mother was incompatible with being an entrepreneur.” (Participant 3)

This sentiment reflects a wider internalized conflict between cultural prescriptions of femininity and the aspirational self as an entrepreneur. Participants did not merely describe these tensions but actively navigated them, redefining what it meant to be a ‘good woman’ and a ‘serious entrepreneur.’ For instance, several respondents emphasized that their entrepreneurial identity had to coexist with—rather than replace—their familial obligations. This negotiation process reveals women’s strategic agency in constructing hybrid identities that resist binary expectations of domesticity versus professionalism.

Navigating Hybrid Identities: Women Redefining Success



Experiencing Marginalization in Incubation Programs

Several participants described feelings of being marginalized within incubation activities. This marginalization took the form of not being taken seriously in mentoring sessions or being overlooked in funding opportunities. As one participant explained:

“Even though I had prepared my pitch thoroughly, the feedback I received was about my ‘soft skills’ and appearance rather than my business model. I wondered if a male participant would have been treated the same.” (Participant 6)

These reflections expose the gendered micro-dynamics of incubation programs, where evaluation criteria often shifted from technical to personal domains for women. The participants’ voices converge in revealing a pattern of structural marginalization disguised as developmental feedback. Their experiences point to the persistence of benevolent sexism—a form of bias masked as mentorship—that subtly undermines women’s entrepreneurial legitimacy. By situating their experiences within broader systemic inequalities, the analysis highlights how exclusion is not only personal but institutionalized.

Developing Resilience Through Resistance

Despite the barriers, many participants demonstrated resilience and reframed their challenges as motivation to succeed. For some, the experience of being underestimated became a catalyst for strengthening their entrepreneurial drive. A participant reflected:

“I realized that every time they doubted me, I became more determined to prove them wrong. The social barriers became fuel for my persistence.” (Participant 9)

This theme underscores how resilience emerged not as a passive adaptation but as an act of defiance. Participants’ narratives suggest that resistance became a transformative force through which frustration was converted into purpose. Rather than internalizing marginalization, women engaged in what can be described as empowered endurance—a conscious reorientation of adversity into

motivation. Such resistance reflects both emotional labor and strategic adaptation, illustrating how agency is cultivated within structural constraints.

Constructing Support Networks Beyond Formal Structures

Another significant theme was the importance of informal networks as a source of encouragement and survival. Participants frequently mentioned how fellow women entrepreneurs provided solidarity and practical advice, filling the gaps left by formal incubation structures. One participant noted:

“The official mentors were helpful, but the real support came from my peers—other women who understood what I was going through. We shared tips, encouraged each other, and celebrated small wins together.” (Participant 4)

These accounts demonstrate that informal peer networks function as counter-spaces to institutional exclusion. Through shared understanding and emotional reciprocity, women co-created ‘safe zones’ that compensated for the lack of structural support. This collective dimension transformed isolation into collaboration, allowing participants to reclaim agency through community. Hence, support networks were not merely coping mechanisms but sites of empowerment where alternative entrepreneurial cultures were nurtured.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that women entrepreneurs in incubation programs experience socio-cultural barriers as persistent yet negotiable constraints. These experiences are defined by moments of marginalization, resilience, and the construction of alternative support systems, directly addressing the central research question posed in the introduction.

Contribution of the Findings to the Research Question

The study contributes by showing how women actively interpret and respond to cultural expectations that question their legitimacy as entrepreneurs. Rather than passively experiencing barriers, participants described a dynamic process of negotiation in which gendered judgments were transformed into sources of motivation (Gannon et al., 2025). This highlights that socio-cultural barriers are not static obstacles but are reinterpreted by women as part of their entrepreneurial identity formation. By foregrounding subjective meanings, the study provides a deeper answer to the research question: it demonstrates that the essence of women’s experience in incubation programs lies in both enduring and reshaping the socio-cultural norms that attempt to confine them.

Relationship with Previous Literature and Theories

These findings resonate with earlier work emphasizing the structural disadvantages faced by women in entrepreneurial ecosystems (Molina-Barzola et al., 2025). However, while prior research often portrays barriers as limiting, this study complements those insights by illustrating the interpretative agency of women in navigating such constraints. The theme of resilience aligns with interpretative frameworks of entrepreneurship that view identity construction as a response to marginalization (Istrefi-Jahja et al., 2025). At the same time, the discovery of peer-based support networks expands on earlier studies by showing how women generate collective solidarity in contexts where formal structures are insufficient (Coe, 2025). Together, these connections strengthen the theoretical understanding of entrepreneurship as both a socio-cultural and experiential phenomenon.

Implications of the Findings

The findings carry important implications for both theory and practice. From a social and cultural perspective, the study highlights that women entrepreneurs do not merely confront barriers but actively reinterpret them as part of their identity work (Hoque et al., 2025). This suggests that incubation programs should go beyond providing technical training and instead incorporate spaces that validate women’s lived experiences, enabling them to transform socio-cultural constraints into sources of resilience and empowerment (Hossain et al., 2025). At a broader level, the results underscore the need for gender-sensitive incubation models that acknowledge cultural realities in

developing countries, offering practical lessons for policymakers and practitioners seeking to foster inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Limitations of the Study

Although the study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. The findings are based on a relatively small group of participants, which is consistent with phenomenological research but may limit the breadth of perspectives captured. Furthermore, the study is situated within the cultural and institutional context of Indonesia, which may differ significantly from other regions; therefore, the transferability of the results should be approached with caution (Sánchez-Teba et al., 2025). Finally, the reliance on self-reported narratives, while essential for phenomenological inquiry, may have been influenced by participants' willingness to share sensitive or challenging experiences. These limitations highlight the importance of interpreting the findings as contextually rich rather than universally generalizable.

Directions for Future Research

Future research could expand upon these findings by exploring comparative studies across different cultural settings to understand how women entrepreneurs negotiate barriers in varying socio-cultural environments (Lan et al., 2024). Longitudinal designs could also offer insights into how the reinterpretation of barriers evolves over time, particularly as women progress through different stages of entrepreneurship. Additionally, integrating phenomenological inquiry with complementary approaches, such as ethnography or narrative analysis, could further enrich understanding of the relational and cultural dynamics within incubation programs (Song et al., 2024). By extending the scope in these directions, future scholarship can deepen theoretical contributions while informing the design of more responsive and inclusive support systems for women entrepreneurs.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs as they navigated socio-cultural barriers in business incubation programs in Indonesia. The findings revealed that participants encountered persistent gendered expectations and marginalization, yet they also developed resilience and created peer-based support networks that offered alternative spaces of empowerment. Unlike prior research that predominantly conceptualized women's barriers as external obstacles to be mitigated through policy or training interventions, this study positions these barriers as sites of identity construction and meaning-making. By foregrounding women's interpretive agency, it offers a novel lens that shifts the analytical focus from structural disadvantage to lived negotiation, demonstrating how women actively reconstruct entrepreneurial subjectivity within patriarchal and institutional boundaries.

This interpretative phenomenological approach uniquely contributes to the literature by uncovering the micro-level emotional and relational dimensions of entrepreneurship that quantitative and structural analyses have largely overlooked. It advances theoretical discussions on gender and entrepreneurship by integrating socio-cultural context with personal sense-making, thereby bridging a gap between feminist theory and entrepreneurship studies in developing economies. These insights contribute to a more holistic understanding of women's entrepreneurship by highlighting the importance of subjective meaning-making processes. Practically, the study underscores the need for gender-sensitive incubation models that not only address material constraints but also engage with cultural narratives shaping women's entrepreneurial identities. Future research could extend these findings by exploring cross-cultural comparisons or adopting longitudinal designs to capture how experiences and meanings evolve over time.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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