



## Exploring the Possible Influence of Women's Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) on Their Decision to Opt Out from Organizational Career to Self-Employment

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the possible influence of women's entrepreneurial orientations (EO) on their decision to opt out from organizational careers to self-employment. It examines how women account for these transitions, reasons for opting for self-employment and experiences of self-employment. This research employs the qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews as the main data collection tool. The study revealed that the entrepreneurial orientations of the women under study are commonly associated with the generally successful entrepreneurial behaviour of risk-taking, creative, proactive, competitive, aggressive and confidence. This suggests that enterprises and their women owners may benefit from efforts to increase their levels of entrepreneurial orientation in order to survive the dynamic, fast-paced and complex business environment characterized by shorter life cycles, globalization, and continuous improvements in technology. Hence for the women under study with higher entrepreneurial orientation levels, their transitions from their organizational career to self-employment or small business ownership are seen as attractive career moves.

*Keywords:* Women's careers, entrepreneurial orientation, opting out

### INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to explore the possible influence of women's EO on their decision to opt out from organiza-

tional careers to self-employment. Malaysia has made significant progress over the past six years to increase the number of women in the workforce due to government initiatives that sought to enhance the contribution of women to the economy and to promote greater inclusiveness in the workforce. Estimates based on the World Bank Malaysia Economic Monitor (Nov 2012), the female labour participation rate (FLPR) increased to 54.1% in 2015 from 46.8% in 2010. In Malaysia, it is proven that the

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entrepreneurs are agents of change by spurring economic growth and it is the simplest kind of self-employment. Entrepreneurs are individuals who recognize opportunities in chaos, contradiction, and confusion. Self-employment is a result of this innate ability in an individual and it can be developed further as it is related to an individual characteristic of seeking opportunity, taking risks, and giving tendency to push an idea (Kuratko, 2005). Most studies argue that entrepreneurship experience is associated with EO and that EO provides a positive impact on organizational performance deemed as crucial for survival and growth of an organization leading to enhanced economic position for any nation. EO is the process of entrepreneurship at a firm's level and it refers to attitude, behaviour, methods, practices, and decision-making styles that managers adopt to act entrepreneurially when undertaking a new venture. The most frequent assumption when women leave organizations is because of family reasons. Although it may be true that many women leave work to care for their families however not all women leave organizations for those reasons alone. Women reported they were leaving for the same reasons as male managers such as lack of career opportunities and other work related predictors of turnover like job dissatisfaction and low organizational commitment. Generally, when opportunities for career advancement exist, women remain as loyal as men. The lack of advancement opportunities may be the foremost reason why women leave organizational career to self-employment. The career construction theory (Savick-

as, 2005) postulated that new technology, globalization, and job redesign require workers to more actively construct their careers. They change jobs often and make frequent transitions, each time repeating the cycle of orientation, exploration, stabilization, management, and disengagement. According to Mallon & Cohen (2001), self-employment is a concept in transition and has been described as a "major shift to an independent, more mature mode of employment" by Halal (1997). In this study, feelings of satisfaction and accomplishments are proxy measures of career success that affect these women's decision making. Historic patterns of discrimination, as well as current discriminatory attitudes and behaviour, add to the uncertainty experienced in the choice making of women (Melamed, 1995 & 1996). Feelings of non-satisfaction with their current jobs or positions in the organization leads them to self-employment often seen as the most viable choice to help women deal with the issues they face in organisations (Marlow & Carter, 2004).

The above argues that entrepreneurship is the simplest kind of self-employment. There have been numerous researches which evidenced in industrialized countries that many individuals who are currently employees prefer to be self-employed. Entrepreneurship is defined as a systematic innovation consisting in the purposeful and organized search for change and it is the systematic analysis of opportunities such changes might offer for economic and social innovation. It highlights the close relationship between innovation and entrepreneurship.

It also suggests that much can be learned about innovation and entrepreneurship and that systematic application of this knowledge can lead to success.

## METHODOLOGY

For this study, qualitative research design is used because it is able to explore the issue into deeper levels. Data is collected via semi-structured interviews to investigate the possible influence of women's entrepreneurial orientation on their decision to opt out from organizational career to self-employment. The structured interview guide is adopted from the dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation of innovativeness, risk taking, pro-activeness, autonomy and competitive aggressiveness (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996 and Morris, 1998). This study utilized purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling is a non-probability method that selected respondents based on the characteristics of a population and the objectives of the study. In addition, re-

searchers who use qualitative methods needs to explain the situation in detail and needs to have deep understanding of one's personal experience (McLeod, 2003). Snowball sampling is utilized as in theory once you have the ball rolling, it picks up more snow thus becoming larger and larger along the way. It is used in this study because there is no comprehensive data from relevant agencies regarding the study's informants. Therefore, the potential informants in the population are identified by asking those informants to recruit other people. These steps are repeated until the needed sample size is found. In this study, the required sample size is achieved once the data obtained reached a saturation point where there appears to be no new responses. The saturation point for this study is eight women who already opt out from organization career to self-employment and have set up their own businesses are selected. The data is then analysed using thematic analysis.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

**Table 1: Demographic background of informants**

No	Age	Religion	Ethnicity	Marital Status	Highest Education Level	Working Experience in Organization (Years)	Last Position Held	Number of Years In Self-employment (Years)	Type of Business
1	40	Islam	Malay	Married	Diploma	8	Officer	12	Manufacturing
2	45	Islam	Malay	Married	SPM	15	Account Officer	9	Food & Beverage
3	44	Islam	Malay	Married	Degree	17	Ketua Pen. Pengarah	2	Education
4	62	Islam	Malay	Married	Sekolah Bidan Sijil Tinggi Agama	26	Ketua Pengasuh Pegawai Penguatkuasa Agama	7	Education
5	44	Islam	Malay	Married	Degree	19	Manager	2	Multi-Level Marketing
6	46	Islam	Malay	Married	Degree	22	Manager	9/12	Financial Planner
7	39	Islam	Malay	Single	Diploma	9	Dress Maker	8	Fashion
8	43	Islam	Malay	Married	Degree	16	Regional scheduler	3	Food & Beverage

**Table 2: Women's creativity and innovativeness**

Question	Findings	Informant
Personally, do you prefer products/services with R&D/technological leadership/innovations?	Products/services with R&D/ technological leadership/innovations	1,2,3,5,6,7,8
	Marketing of tried-and-true products and services	4
Have there been changes to your products/services since your first introduced them? How do you describe these changes?	Changes usually been quite dramatic	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8
	No changes/changes been mostly of a minor nature	

**Table 3: Women's pro-activeness**

Interview question	Findings	Informant
In dealing with the competitors, do you respond to actions which competitors initiate?	Respond to actions which competitors initiate	2,3,4,6,7
	Initiate actions to which competitors then respond	1,5,8
In introducing new products or ideas, do you have a tendency to be ahead of other competitors?	Have a tendency to be ahead of other competitors	1,2,5,6,7,8
	Follow the leader	3,4

The demographics of the study's informants are summarised in Table 1. Almost all except for one informant believe that products based on research and development or technological leadership or innovation can go further and are of better quality (Table 2). Utilizing technology can reduce the cost of the product argued the informants. However, the study found that changes to the informants' products or services are mostly minor in nature. This could be due to the products or services are still in the early stages of their lifecycle, are still new in the market and the informants' businesses lack experience. In addition, the changes made are based only on customer needs. These changes are consistent with the value proposition canvas of Osterwalder & Pigneur (2009). In this

study, the respondents use this canvas as a visualization tool to interconnect between customers' needs and products. The study also found that many of the informants fail to acquire the right skills to develop their small enterprises successfully. The participation of informants particularly in the technology sector is still low and this can be observed as the changes made are only based on the customer needs and underrepresentation of women in the technology sector. Hence, the women in this study must be innovative, imaginative and have the initiative to push their business forward with new ideas. It's not enough to come up with a new idea for a business venture, they must also make sure that there's a market for their own products or services. And, the best entrepreneurs are innovators

**Table 4: Women's risk propensity**

Interview question	Findings	Informant
In marketing new products or ideas, do you prefer high-risk projects with chances of very high returns?	High-risk projects with chances of very high returns	1,5
	Low/medium-risk projects with normal and certain rates of return	2,3,4,6,7,8
When confronted with decision-making situations involving uncertainty, do you adopt an aggressive posture?	An aggressive posture	1,3,5,6,8
	A cautious, 'wait-and-see' posture	2,4,7

who know how to identify, disrupt and capitalize on markets. They also need drive, determination and enthusiasm to make them reality and it may influence their decision for business as self-employment. For women entrepreneurs, technology skills and access to technology greatly improve productivity, lower costs and advance their businesses into higher value-added activities, thus enhancing their market competitiveness.

Only three informants are pro-active in initiating actions ahead of competition whereas the rest are mainly reactive to the actions of their competitors (Table 3). Nonetheless the women in this study believe that with their own actions and behaviours they can still control their environment and thus their fate. Based on that belief, they can still be successful entrepreneurs. According to Kolvareid (1996), it is related to an internal locus of control that most previous researchers found as generally associated with and have strong relationship with success as an entrepreneur. The results show that seventy five percent of informants have tendencies to be ahead of other competitors in introducing their new products or ideas (Table 4). Most of informants be-

lieve that it is good to be leaders in the market consistent with the findings of Lumpkin & Dess (1996). They believe that competition is necessary and in order to move forward in business they need to have the ability to predict the future opportunities so that they can control the environment such as demand and supply in the market. They opined that being the first to introduce a new product will give a competitive advantage in business. Based on the results, it is clear that most informants have high internal loci of control in anticipating future opportunities. In dealing with competitors, it is not an issue of who initiated new ideas first but the important thing is a healthy competition. Becoming leaders in the market will give competitive advantages to women when competing with men in the future. These informants believed that when they can control their environment and their fate they can be successful entrepreneurs in the future. This influences their decision to opt for self-employment.

The results show that seventy five percent informants prefer low to medium-risk projects with normal and certain rates of return. Taking risks is intimidat-

ing, especially for new entrepreneurs. However risk taking is more complicated than just doing something that might turn out bad. To feel more comfortable in taking risks and making more informed risk-based decisions, most informants in this study are more likely to opt for projects only when the risks are calculated which normally involve series of knowns that allow informants to reasonably predict the odds of success. So if these projects do not go as planned, informants are able to control and compensate accordingly. However, the findings of this study appear to contradict previous studies that entrepreneurs tend to be more willing to take risks, appear to be more innovative and proactive that leads to increased performance (Ahl, 2006; Zimmerman & Brouthers, 2012). The majority of informants are involved in micro businesses. According to Bradley (2007), the types of enterprises chosen by women are influenced by their labour market history and the associations between femininity and lower value work. Women are more likely to set up small firms in similar areas which become translated into low margin entrepreneurship (Marlow et al., 2009). Low capital needs of the enterprises constrain the opportunities for funding, which in turn restricts the entrepreneurs to areas that do not require much innovativeness and substantial investment. Thus, women predominantly run part time, home based firms which generally have lower capital requirements that can be easily gained from informal sources of funding (Marlow & Swail, 2014). The study is consistent with related previous findings that risks have been found to result in wom-

en's businesses starting small and continuing to be very small and often under-capitalized (Marlow & Carter, 2004). The majority of informants stated that they had experienced lack of financial support. This supports previous research which has found that obtaining banking finance can affect women's potential to become successful entrepreneurs (Gill & Ganesh, 2007).

The findings also support previous findings that in starting businesses, women often have more difficulties than men related to basic aspects such as access to finance and, at a more fundamental level, being taken seriously as a business operator (Mirchandani, 1999; Still & Guerin, 1991; Still & Walker, 2006). Hence, gender has been found to be a disadvantage in the market for start-up capital as well as in the general evaluation of their entrepreneurial success (Carter et al., 2007; Marlow & McAdam, 2012). However, the result contradicts the findings of Mattis (2004) that self-employment enhanced the opportunities for women by allowing women to escape from the glass ceiling and reducing gender role stereotypes (Calais *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore according to Pitt & Kanne-meyer (2000), entrepreneurs have greater capacities to tolerate uncertainty in their lives.

This study shows that most informants (62.5%) adopt aggressive postures except for three informants (37.5%) who adopted cautious, 'wait-and-see' positions. This is possibly due to their decision making styles. It is clear that most of the women in this study are prefer low

to medium-risk projects with normal and certain rates of return. It is also support the findings stated that women are more likely to set up small firms in similar areas which become translated into low margin entrepreneurship (Marlow *et al.*, 2009). Confidence to take risks and responsibility in their decisions, as well as the appetite to network with individuals and other organisations may influence their decision for self-employment.

Eighty seven percent informants reported themselves to be very aggressive and intensely competitive in taking businesses away from their competitions. A company's competitive aggressiveness is influenced by the ability of its top management team to observe and to catch the

(2005) the motivation for achievement is a prevalent predictor of entrepreneurship. Indeed, in this study, the majority of informants reported themselves as having the need to achieve something significant in their self-employment. A high need for achievement is a characteristic of many successful leaders, not just entrepreneurs. Clearly, there is enough evidence in this study that a high need for achievement may influence an individual's decision to opt out from organization to become an entrepreneur as self-employment. In order to gain more achievements, they need to be competitive and aggressive as well although gender has been found to be a disadvantage by previous research.

**Table 5: Women's competitive aggressiveness**

Interview question	Findings	Informant
How aggressive and competitive are you in taking business away from your competition	Very aggressive and intensely competitive	1,2,3,5,6,8
	Makes no effort to take business from competition	4,7

**Table 6: Women's autonomy**

Interview question	Findings	Informant
In pursuing business opportunities, do you make your own decisions without constantly referring to others?	Make your own decisions without constantly referring to others	1,7
	Expect to obtain advice/approval from others before making decisions	2,3,4,5,6,8
Do you believe the best results occur when the management team plays a major role and decide for themselves what business opportunities to pursue?	The management team plays a major role and decide for themselves what business opportunities to pursue	6,8
	The management team play a minor role and works together with the employee to decide what business opportunities to pursue	1,2,3,4,5,7

hints from the relevant business environment (Ferrier, 2001) and there are several studies on the links between entrepreneurship and the need for achievement. According to Apospori *et al.*

Most informants still prefer to obtain advice from others such as their spouse, friends and family members before making decisions (Table 6). The study also found that the desire for autonomy was

framed as one of the main motivators for moving into self-employment. The findings indicated that autonomy and independence come from their own experiences and substantial freedom in their jobs such as decision making, freedom of expression in work and freedom from the bureaucratic process. Informants believe that with the autonomy, they can implement their self-concept and live out important values (Table 5). Entrepreneurship as self-employment allow for self-determination, time management and financial independence. This is proven when most informants said that they opt out from organizational jobs mainly due to micro-management of senior executives in the previous jobs. Meanwhile eighty seven percent informants believe the best results occur when the management team works together with employees to decide what business opportunities to pursue. Most of them said that when the management team works together with the employees, many ideas can be obtained through the discussions. Many of them believe they can assess the strengths and weaknesses of each employee by evaluating their knowledge and skills.

Being one's own employer by owning and managing a business is an alluring proposition, one that more and more aspiring entrepreneurs worldwide are acknowledging (Choo & Wong, 2006). In this study, determination and self-discipline to enjoy making their own decisions and comfort with the prospect of hiring and managing employees may influence their decision for self-employment. However, instead of asking

how does autonomy influences women's decisions to opt out from organizational career to self-employment the following inter-related questions should be asked instead. First, why they left or resigned from their last position or organization? Second, why they opted for self-employment rather than simply changing organizations? Third, what has been their experience of self-employment? The findings and prior discussions reveal that self-employment offers the prospect of opportunities for women. The data indicates that the women describe self-employment as giving them opportunities for autonomy, to be authentic and to build on their experience and apply their capabilities, of which the need for autonomy and independence is the most pronounced. This finding supports the conclusions of Benz & Frey (2008) that suggest the main attraction of entrepreneurship is work satisfaction and independence, irrespective of income and hours worked. Becoming an entrepreneur as self-employment can also be influence by other factors.

This study also found that some women feel pushed into self-employment because of barriers they face in organizations. Majority of the informants in this study was 40 years old and above. The results are consistent with the previous research by Walker & Webster (2007) that shows that midlife women see business ownership as a positive employment option. The data indicates that women in this study desire to succeed both professionally and personally and see self-employment as a way to achieve their aspirations.



Most informants had no business background but left their organizations in positive spirit in order to pursue self-employment portfolio approach to their career. Majority of the women in this study decided to leave organizational employment but only did so when they had self-employment arrangements in place or in an advanced stage of planning. None of them left without any plans made for their future. Becoming entrepreneurs can also be influenced by a number of environmental conditions and experiences such as job loss (company downsizing) and job dissatisfaction. Over the past three decades, waves of corporate downsizings and mergers caused millions of workers to experience the loss of their job.

A popular reason to explain why women are leaving their jobs are because for family reasons. Bruni et al. (2004) identified women's primary role as taking care of family and domestic responsibilities. A fundamental contribution of women's entrepreneurship research lies in the notion that entrepreneurial activity is embedded in a family system (Jennings & Brush, 2013). The central contributions are that decisions and processes are not only influenced by, but also have an impact upon family-level factors. However, this contradicts previous studies of Duberley & Carrigan (2013) that women entrepreneurs did not view their businesses as separate entities but rather as endeavours entwined with their familial relationships and responsibilities. The results show that the study's informants came to the realization that

organizational life was fundamentally incompatible with their family roles and responsibilities and this conflict became the sole reason for their decisions to become self-employed. The prospect of an employment context in which both personal and professional dimensions of life could be accommodated was described as a powerful trigger.

Although it may be true that many women leave work to care for family, not all women are leaving corporations for that reason alone. Instead, women reported they were leaving for the same reasons as male managers, lack of career opportunities in their current company and other work related predictors of turnover, such as job dissatisfaction and low organizational commitment. From the findings, twenty five percent of the informants stated that they had moved to self-employment because they were dissatisfied and disappointed with their previous jobs at organizations in which they had worked. They said they were not recognized by their organizations through stories of anger, bitterness and even despair about their organizations. These experiences were underlined by urgent desire to leave organizational situations that caused them much personal or professional pain. These informants took their dissatisfaction with organizational life to the point of exit unlike managers in other studies who express similar concerns (Goffee & Scase, 1985; Hecksher, 1995; Marshall, 1995). An informant explained how she felt frustrated by what she saw as few opportunities for professional development within her organization, in terms of promotion through or-

ganizational hierarchies as well as professional learning and growth. Work had lost its challenge. Feelings of stagnation, being stifled, wasting time and being stuck were cited as triggers for change. Some people are destined to be entrepreneurs. For others, starting a business is a scary, intimidating notion. There are too many unknowns to take the plunge. Even the most motivated women entrepreneurs can struggle with deciding on the right business idea.

Beyond the various individual characteristics and environmental elements highlighted in this study, there are other reasons why women are prompted to pursue being entrepreneurs as self-employment. It is suggested that some women in this study embark on an entrepreneurial career as self-employment because of personal zeal for a specific type of product or activity as stated by Bounds (2007), Nuts Are Good! Inc., was established because of its owner's love of peanuts and almonds. The allure of certain product or activity can be a strong motivator for entrepreneur. Women with the passion to create something new or something difference may decide to start the business as self-employment. Clearly, there is enough evidence in this study that half of the women turned their passions to create something new and difference into successful business. Although they may be very creative their personalities display a preference for quick fixes and instant rewards. Personality also affects areas of passion as indicated by the study's informants. Similarly, people who are highly creative and imaginative may express passion in their

unique ways, such as cooking may decide to open a restaurant or start a catering business. In sum, the objects of desires and the ways passions are shown to others are as diverse as human personalities.

## CONCLUSION

The women in this study had substantial experience in organizations before going out on their own. The period of employment gave them ample time to develop their managerial and leadership skills and to develop networks that yielded valuable contacts during business start-ups. Perhaps most importantly they had time to develop their competence and self-confidence, a sense of purpose about their career and clarity about professional and personal values and priorities. Having made the decision to move to self-employment, all the women mentioned that they derived a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction from being their own boss and doing work which was aligned to their own values. However, the women also reflexively identified the risks of being self-employed. From this study, the idea of being your own boss may sound wonderful, but self-employment also has its financial challenges. Financing the business through external sources, especially banks, continues to be a challenge for women entrepreneurs. It is proven, most of the women's in this study were in micro businesses that is employing less than 5 employees. The results also show that the women in this study still have the problem to adapt with the technological leadership. Underrepresentation of wom-

en in the technology sector is recognised as a significant problem globally. Although women are often early adopters of new technology, they are rarely at their inception. In addition, women interest and enthusiasm in digital entrepreneurship and leadership are often eroded over time by stereotyping, cultural discouragement, peer pressure, and lack of inspiration and role models resulting in a lack of confidence to engage with entrepreneurship, leadership and technology. Establishing their performance capability is time consuming and often at the cost of their personal life, which means that an emotional support system is important. For most women in this study, support came from spouses, family and friends. The women repeatedly cautioned those interested in starting their own business not be to mesmerize by a dream and understand that things are changing rapidly. Thus, women who are considering leaving organisations need to consider the implications of setting up on their own and the challenges they will face.

This study was designed to guide further research and inform organizational practices. The contexts of most of the studies on entrepreneurship mainly originate from the United States and the United Kingdom (Ahl, 2004). There exists a paucity of literature which directly discusses the possible influence of women's entrepreneurial orientation (EO) on their decision to opt out from organizational career to self-employment, particularly in Malaysian contexts. The dominance of studies from the US and UK means that understandings of how women experience entrepreneurship in different con-

texts are limited. Thus, one essential area for research is to discuss and explore on the concept of EO and how does a women's level of EO affect their decision for self-employment in Malaysian context could be expanded. In addition, there exists very limited previous research addressing the question of why individuals report that they have chosen self-employment. Current literature providing large scale survey evidence on why individuals choose self-employment is very limited. There is a preponderant of literature on who chooses self-employment but lesser on reasons behind these choices.

In addition, this study might provide information on the understanding of the women's EO and how it is influence their transition from organizations to self-employment. By investigating various characteristics of women' EO, this study also provides the understanding on career adaptability especially to women. She should be prepared to interact with others and with the environment to seek to influence the future, finding out what is happening out there in order to see whether it might be relevant to the business, being prepared to try out new ideas, being optimistic about the future and having confidence in herself and her ability. This study might help other researchers to study on the nature, scope, and meaning of self-employment, particularly on women's perspective.

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