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STRIVING DIGITALLY

Understanding the Challenges of Malaysian Women Entrepreneurs



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Striving Digitally: Understanding the Challenges of Malaysian Women Entrepreneurs.
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Introduction

This report assesses the digitalization challenges and limitations faced by micro and small women entrepreneurs (MSWEs) in Malaysia. The insights gained will inform the design of the Mastercard Strive Malaysia program, a collaborative effort between the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth and The Asia Foundation. This program aims to elevate micro, small and medium entrepreneurs (MSMEs), with a specific focus on women entrepreneurs, through skills development initiatives, facilitation of digitalization, and support for their growth via the Strivers' Hub – a one-stop-shop digital platform.

The Strivers' Hub platform is designed to cater to the evolving needs of Malaysian small businesses, particularly women entrepreneurs, by providing them with easy access to essential tools, networks, and resources, thus fostering a more enabling business ecosystem. This report summarizes the challenges and requirements of MSWEs in Malaysia and outlines the subsequent steps for Mastercard Strive Malaysia.

It is a condensed version of an extensive study conducted by the Unit for Research on Women and Gender (KANITA), Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang.

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Digital Gender Divide and Women Entrepreneurship In Malaysia

In today's world, digital skills are essential for navigating businesses because they improve business efficiency through the automation of processes. Digitalization in micro and small enterprises (MSMEs) refers to the use of online processes for product marketing, bookings, payments, and customer service. These processes can take place in a variety of devices, including mobile phones, advanced computing devices, and applications.

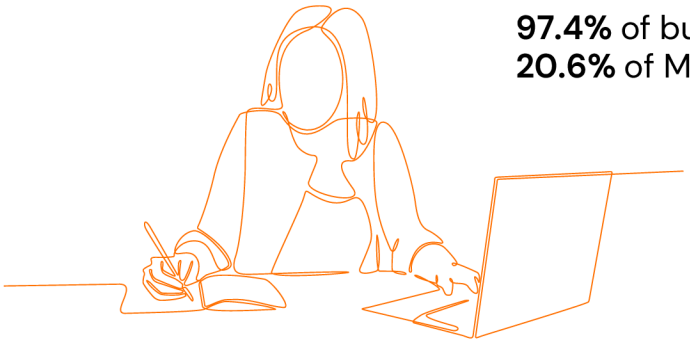
Malaysia is at the forefront of digital entrepreneurship, having established its own innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem 25 years ago and recognizing the value of digital technologies as an industrial and economic driver. Beginning in 1996, national policies were developed to advance Malaysia's information and communication technology (ICT) and digital economy. The Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC), a government agency, was established to carry out and oversee the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) Malaysia and its supporting facilities and incentives. The National Policy on Science, Technology, and Innovation, the National Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) Policy, the National Entrepreneurship Policy 2030, and the Malaysian Start-up Ecosystem Roadmap (SUPER) are the primary building blocks in the current government's policy framework on innovation and entrepreneurship.[1]

Despite significant policy progress, Malaysia continues to face a gender digital divide. In 2022, the country's internet penetration rate was 96.8%, with 48.6% of social media users being female and 51.4% being male.[2] Given that technologies have the power to both create more equitable gender relations and reinforce current inequalities, addressing gender disparities in the digital sphere is imperative. Malaysia has a high digital readiness rating, but this is not reflected in the digitalization of its business sector. Many MSMEs in Malaysia are still unprepared for this digital shift, resulting in significant challenges for female entrepreneurs.

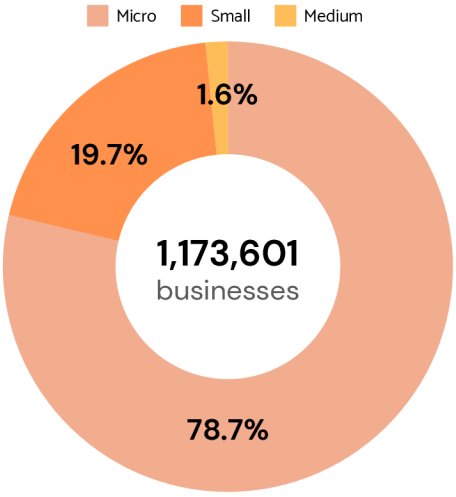
1. MEDAC. National Entrepreneurship Policy Malaysia: An Outstanding Entrepreneurial Nation 2030. 2019.
2. DOSM. Micro, Small & Medium Enterprise. 2022.

In Malaysia, MSMEs contribute 38.4% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), with 97.4% of business ventures being MSMEs with a total of 1,173,601 establishments in year 2022.[3] Women-owned companies, defined as enterprises that are at least 51% owned, managed, and controlled by one or more women, account for 20.6% of MSMEs, translating to an estimated 241,767 women entrepreneurs.[4]

MSMEs are the backbone of the economy.



97.4% of businesses in Malaysia are MSMEs.
20.6% of MSMEs are women-owned.*



* **Women-owned company:** At least 51% of the equity held by women; CEO/MD is a woman that owns at least 10% of the equity.

84.7% Services

7.9% Construction

5.6% Manufacturing

1.4% Agriculture

0.4% Mining & Quarrying

Data from Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022. Women-owned MSME data from SME Corporation Malaysia, 2019.

Previous research has documented a variety of challenges faced by female entrepreneurs, including a lack of peer support networks, insufficient capital, and limited access to financial assistance.[5] Aside from that, family responsibilities, as well as patriarchal norms and ideology,[6] which place women under the double burden of managing their businesses and caring for their families, have been cited to contribute to the persistent gender divide.[7]

3. NESDC. Economic Performance and Outlook 2022/23.
4. Chipfunde, D. et al., The Determinants Influencing the Performance of Women Entrepreneurs in Malaysia. 2021.
5. Maliani et al., Malay Women Entrepreneurial Success. 2017; Aini Suzana et al., Enhancing Women Entrepreneurship Development Framework. 2021; Mazlina et al., Challenges and Success Factors of Female Entrepreneurs. 2016; Loveline et al., Women Entrepreneurship in Malaysia. 2014.
6. Xavier, The Transition from Corporate Careers to Business Ownership. 2011.
7. Agarwal and Lenka, Study on Work-life Balance of Women Entrepreneurs. 2015; Rehman and Roomi, Gender and Work-life Balance. 2012.

Recognizing the need for better inclusion of women in the digital economy, the Malaysian government has developed some programs focusing on women's digital upskilling. Initiatives such as MDEC's MyDigital and the National Digital Skills Training Program prioritize inclusion to ensure equitable access to resources and training in digital technologies for women. The public and private sectors have also collaborated to produce training grants, scholarships, and targeted initiatives that equip women with the skills necessary to succeed in the digital economy.

Although these initiatives show a common commitment to gender parity in the IT sector and are essential in advancing discussions about women's contributions to Malaysia's digital revolution, more work needs to be done in this area. To achieve global gender parity in digital upskilling, gender-sensitive initiatives must be leveraged and scaled up to reach more female entrepreneurs and accelerate their business growth. To fully address these challenges, a comprehensive plan that includes workplace action, mentorship programs, and educational reform is required. By fostering an environment that embraces diversity and inclusivity, Malaysia can take advantage of the full potential of its female workforce and move the nation closer to a more creative and equitable digital future.

Understanding the specific needs and constraints faced by women entrepreneurs is a critical step in increasing their participation in business digitalization and, as a result, bridging the digital gender divide. Furthermore, there is a need to understand the enabling factors that can help women's businesses expand.



Needs Assessment Objectives

The study sought to achieve the following objectives:

1. Identify and document challenges hindering MSWEs' access to talent, information, and resources,
2. Examine the accessibility and effectiveness of available resources, programs, and initiatives targeting MSWEs,
3. Assess MSWE's digital literacy, financial, and technological capacities, and
4. Identify gaps in resources, services, and best practices in order to provide better tools and opportunities for women-owned businesses to digitalize.

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Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods. Data collection involved a survey, in-depth interviews (IDI), and focus group discussions (FGD) with both women entrepreneurs and stakeholders who have worked closely with women entrepreneurs, including micro-finance institutions, university research centers, and government agencies.

There was a total of 1,471 respondents participating in the study, comprising 1,405 e-survey participants, 31 IDI participants from among MSWEs, and 35 participants in the stakeholder FGDs. The e-survey was distributed to government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), micro-finance institutions, and women entrepreneurship associations that have direct contact with women entrepreneurs.[8]

Number of Respondents by Zone

	Survey	*Interview (IDI/FGD)*
Northern Perlis, Kedah, Pulau Pinang & Perak	**219** MSWEs **21** stakeholders	**5** MSWEs **10** stakeholders
Central Selangor, Kuala Lumpur & Putrajaya	**237** MSWEs **22** stakeholders	**5** MSWEs **5** stakeholders
Southern Melaka, Negeri Sembilan & Johor	**205** MSWEs **23** stakeholders	**5** MSWEs **5** stakeholders
East Kelantan, Terengganu & Pahang	**202** MSWEs **25** stakeholders	**5** MSWEs **5** stakeholders
Sabah & Labuan	**214** MSWEs **15** stakeholders	**5** MSWEs **5** stakeholders
Sarawak	**202** MSWEs **20** stakeholders	**6** MSWEs **5** stakeholders
	1,405	66
	1,471 Total Respondents	

8. To recruit MSWEs, the research team collaborated with government agencies and organisations such as Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM), TEKUN, Persatuan Usahawan Wanita Bumiputra (USAHANITA), Jabatan Pembangunan Wanita (JPW), and Lembaga Kemajuan Negeri/Wilayah.

Sociodemographic Profile of Survey Respondents (MSWEs)

Ethnicity

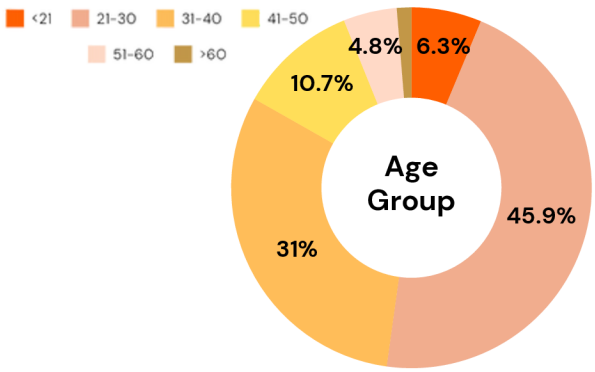
73.1% Malay
4.1% Chinese
1.3% Indian
21.4% Other bumiputera

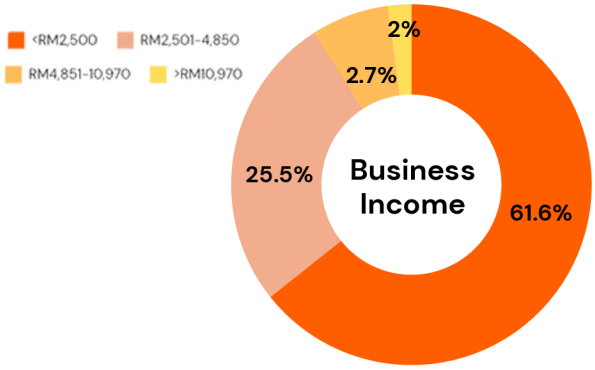
Marital Status

38.3% Single
56.9% Married
4.5% Divorced/ Widowed/Separated

Location

72.9% Urban
25.6% Rural





Sector

55.5% Food & Beverage

16.7% Wholesale/Retail Trade

8.2% Beauty & Fashion

8% Art, Entertainment & Recreation

7.7% Health

3.3% Education

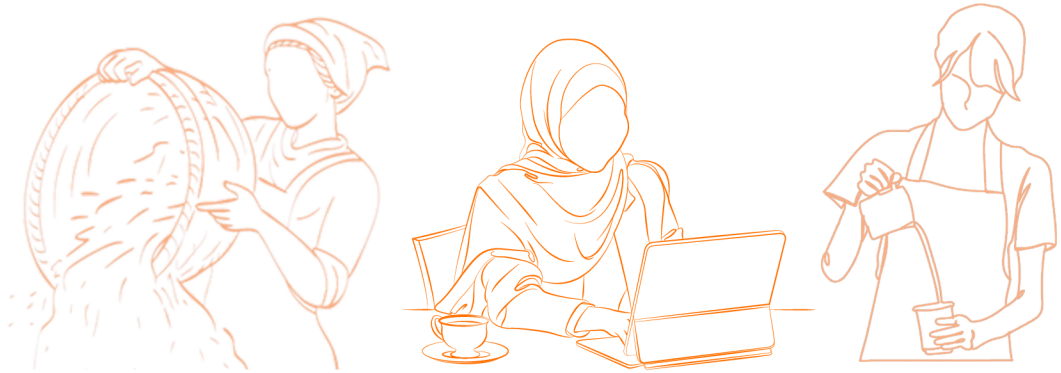
2.2% Information & Communication

Full time on Business

67.4% Yes | **32.5%** No

Main breadwinner of family

35.7% Yes | **63.5%** No





Key Findings

The needs assessment identified three key domains in challenges and barriers faced by MSWEs:

1. Time Poverty and Gender Norms
2. Digital Literacy and Utilization in Business
3. Financial Literacy and Management

Main Domains	Subtopics
Time Poverty and Gender Norms	• Limited and fragmented available time • Role of husbands in influencing MSWEs' businesses
Digital Literacy and Utilization in Business	• Suboptimal application of digital tools in business
Financial Literacy and Management	• Challenges in accessing financial knowledge and market information • Complex procedures for applications of loans and grants • Lack of knowledge in loan management and fear of debt

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1. Time Poverty and Gender Norms

Key findings highlight that time poverty is cited as the biggest challenge for a majority (97%) of MSWEs, with as many as 73% agreeing that they need to juggle business, childcare, and household responsibilities. This reflects the broader issue of a double or triple burden, where working women are also expected to shoulder most household responsibilities. Their multiple overlapping responsibilities in the professional and personal spheres limit the MSWEs' ability to devote necessary time and attention to their businesses. These challenges are deeply rooted in gender norms, where there is a strong sense of responsibility to be the primary family caregiver, as expressed by up to 90% of the participants. This feeling is driven by prevailing gender roles, social expectations, and personal aspirations.

a. Limited and Fragmented Available Time

Approximately 73% of respondents expressed difficulty balancing business activities, caregiving, and household responsibilities. Furthermore, 38% said that family tasks kept them from focusing on their business. The multi-burden borne demonstrates how restricted women's capacities are to participate in upskilling programs and business growth efforts, resulting to high dropout rates in training initiatives requiring long-term commitments. Limited time availability also limits networking opportunities and prevents access to financial resources, thus deepening the digital gender divide.

For example, during an in-depth interview, a respondent from Johor shared her struggles in balancing her full-time job, business, and household responsibilities. These demands leave her with little time to attend any online classes or training, as well as other areas such as content production to market her business.

> **As a primary school teacher, I also sell household products as a side income to supplement my husband's income. Our five children, ages 11–17, assisted me in this business, as do 32 of my dealers and agents. I am constantly rushing to get the kids to school and deal with my agents. So, I don't have time to attend any online courses or training. I even have to squeeze in my time to create business content to post on Facebook.**

b. Role of Husbands in Influencing MSWEs' Businesses

In Malaysian society, husbands wield significant influence over women entrepreneurs' decision-making, according to research findings.[9] Our research also underscores that spouses play a crucial role in shaping entrepreneurial behaviors and performances. Husbands often provide valuable support, offering administrative assistance, emotional encouragement, and assistance with product delivery and financial matters. However, around 35% of survey respondents reported that their husbands tend to discourage business expansion efforts.

Qualitative findings further highlight how women entrepreneurs seek their husbands' advice, opinions, and permission when making important business decisions, including expansion plans. Some respondents expressed concerns that expanding their businesses might lead to neglecting family responsibilities, reflecting a prevailing sentiment of sufficiency with current business scales or achievements. Strategic plans for further expansion were not actively pursued due to these perceived trade-offs.

9. Musa M et al., A Study of Women Micro Entrepreneurs in Malaysia. 2016; Selamat NH et al., Bargaining with Patriarchy and Entrepreneurship: Narratives of Malay Muslim Women Entrepreneurs in Malaysia. 2020.

For instance, one respondent from Kelantan expressed a sentiment shared by many. This quote underscores the delicate balance women entrepreneurs must strike between business ambitions and familial obligations in Malaysian society.

> **[I feel]...satisfied with what we have now. Don't be so busy that you neglect your husband. We don't want to be seen as prioritizing business over family.**

2. Digital Literacy and Utilization in Business

MSWEs acknowledge the potential advantages of integrating digital technology into their business operations, anticipating benefits like enhanced marketing strategies and improved customer engagement. Over 80% of MSWEs agree that digital technology is crucial for increasing business flexibility, accelerating processes, and accessing information.

One respondent from Johor highlighted the impact of digital tools on her sales strategy:

> **Online digital presence is extremely beneficial to the sales of my product [washing powder]. For example, when I first held my product, I had no idea how to begin explaining it to everyone. People who are not good at speaking or creative writing only need to upload one picture through social media to directly affect viewers.**
>
> **Since I didn't provide any explanation, social media users begin to wonder what product I am displaying. My followers began to inquire about the product. So, I started explaining the product from there and managed to sell an average of seven boxes in one day.**

Our research indicates that over 80% of MSWEs possess the ability to search for information online and maintain multiple digital accounts on platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. This underscores their proficiency in basic digital tasks and communication through various online channels. However, their use of these digital tools is predominantly for personal purposes rather than business.

a. Suboptimal Application of Digital Tools in Business

In comparison to financial literacy, we see a gap in MSWEs' ability to apply these skills for business growth. Approximately 60% of MSWEs stated that they used social media for their businesses, suggesting a small amount of disconnect between their level of digital literacy and how it is used in their entrepreneurial pursuits. This limited translation of digital skills into tangible business benefits suggests that possessing digital knowledge does not necessarily equate to effectively leveraging it for business growth.

Further analysis suggests that MSWEs are mindful of their digital skill limitations. Fewer MSWEs reported having knowledge in areas such as resolving technical issues (63.5%), protecting their enterprises' digital content and assets (64%) and interpreting copyright information (66.1%). This indicates that despite their ability to surf the internet and interact with digital platforms, they lack confidence in securing their business' online presence and dealing with any technical issues that arise.

Moreover, often their actual use of these tools remains suboptimal. This gap in awareness and utilization can be traced, in part, to the time limits imposed by managing both business and domestic responsibilities, as indicated by the findings on time poverty and technology adoption among female entrepreneurs.

In addition, qualitative interviews revealed that MSWEs' perceptions of dilemmas about marketing on online platforms, describing business digitalization as 'maybe good but costly'. Respondents pointed out specific challenges, such as the high percentage fees associated with platforms like Shopee, as well as increased postage costs, which are particularly burdensome for entrepreneurs operating in rural areas.

3. Financial Literacy and Management

Financial literacy among MSWEs is relatively low, with 50% or fewer expressing confidence in their financial knowledge and skills. Many MSWEs' financial knowledge are limited to basic expense tracking and income records, with many lacking understanding of broader financial concepts such as dynamic markets or funding applications. This indicates that while MSWEs have a strong sense of financial responsibility, they face significant challenges in business performance, loan management, and have low financial market awareness.

There are three key gaps identified.

a. Challenges in Accessing Financial Knowledge and Market Information

Seventy-eight percent (78%) of respondents expressed the need for more information on financial institutions, especially compared to their knowledge in digital areas. This is consistent with research among stakeholders, who noted that MSWEs are more knowledgeable in keeping written records of income and managing expenses than in understanding financial markets and investment, potentially attributed to time poverty as well as lack of networking and wider exposure to the markets.

During the FGD with stakeholders, it was noted:

> **There are many digital programs available from government agencies and entrepreneur associations. Unfortunately, information is not fully available to MSWEs. Many are facing challenges in accessing resources and opportunities. They also lack financial and business planning knowledge.**

b. Complex Procedures for Applications of Loans and Grants

Research findings indicate that MSWEs encounter significant challenges in navigating the complex procedures required for loan applications, with 68% of respondents identifying this as the primary financial barrier. This complexity deters many from seeking formal financial support, which is further exacerbated by additional obstacles. For example, 60% of MSWEs reported lacking the necessary collateral to secure bank loans, posing a critical hurdle in accessing traditional financial resources. Furthermore, 59% of respondents expressed a lack of confidence in dealing with financial institutions, stemming from unfamiliarity and apprehension about formal financial processes. These factors collectively hinder MSWEs from securing the financial support essential for business growth and sustainability.

c. Lack of Knowledge in Loan Management and Fear of Debt

Many MSWEs are dissuaded from applying for loans due to a pervasive fear of debt. For many, the prospect of accruing debt represents a significant source of stress and uncertainty. They worry about their ability to repay loans and prioritize maintaining a debt-free status to avoid financial stress. The overwhelming majority of MSWEs, approximately 95%, rely on personal and family savings to finance their startup endeavors. While micro-finance options like Amanah Ikhtiar and TEKUN exist, they are under utilized, reflecting MSWEs' preference for self-financing and aversion to external debt. Based on an IDI in Kelantan, one respondent stated:

> **Why do I want to worry about paying back a bank loan? I'm afraid that I won't be able to pay it back. No debt, peace of mind. Enough of what is there now. The capital so far is enough. There is no plan to make a bank loan. I don't want to take the risks.**



Business Life Cycle Challenges Faced by MSWEs

In understanding the challenges encountered by MSWEs, we have categorized them according to the stages of the business life cycle. These challenges, as delineated in the next page, shed light on various aspects of entrepreneurial endeavors.

Stages of Business Life Cycle

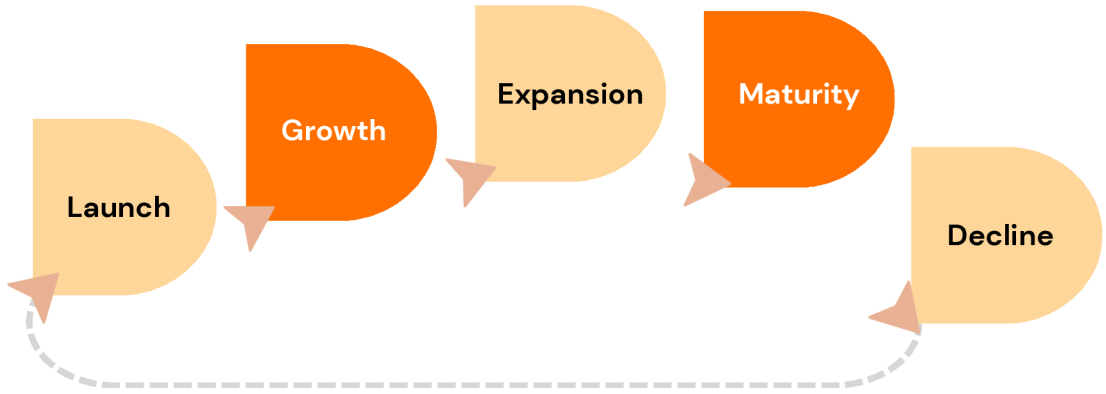


Photo © Canva

Business Life Cycle Challenges Faced by MSWEs

Stages	Key Challenges	Findings
Launch	Financial and Management Skills	At the outset of their businesses, entrepreneurs often grapple with a lack of financial acumen (71.4%), which encompasses understanding cash flow dynamics and financial management basics.
Growth	Access to Capital and Human Resources	During the growth phase, the primary challenge revolves around securing skilled labor (71.4%), essential for scaling operations and sustaining momentum.
Expansion	Competition	As businesses seek to expand, they encounter hurdles associated with managing competition (71.4%), navigating market dynamics, and securing a position among competitors.
Maturity	Risk Management	Enterprises reaching maturity face the imperative of effective risk management (68.2%), including identifying and mitigating potential threats to sustained profitability. Networking assumes significance at this stage.
Decline	High Cost of Raw Materials	In the decline phase, enterprises contend with the escalating costs of raw materials (83.7%), which erode profit margins and pose a formidable obstacle to viability.

These stages show how businesses evolve. Based on this study, most MSWEs are currently in the expansion phase, followed by the growth and launch phases. Each stage brings its own set of challenges, as analyzed by stakeholders who have closely supported entrepreneurs in building their businesses.

Future Prospects

Our findings reveal an optimistic outlook, showcasing clear opportunities for growth and development.

High Motivation for Self-Improvement

An impressive 88% of the MSWEs demonstrate strong motivation and a personal interest in self-improvement. The findings show that they have a high motivation to improve themselves, indicating openness and willingness to learn.

> **I have gone through ups and downs in business. I just have to be strong, persistent, and always grateful to Allah. My special son gives me the courage to go further.**

Good Support System from the Family

In addition, many MSWEs consider themselves to be in supportive surroundings where their communities are willing and able to provide assistance, creating a ripe environment to grow their businesses. Family, particularly parents, emerge as primary sources of financial and emotional support, nurturing resilience, and motivation among MSWEs. Additionally, family members are often willing to lend a helping hand with childcare responsibilities, further supporting MSWEs to focus on their businesses.

Government Initiatives and Continued Interest

Similarly, the Malaysian government has diligently provided entrepreneurs with programs across various online and offline platforms, including initiatives such as Bantuan Kewangan Swasta (E-Biz) and the Rural Economy Funding Scheme (SPED), as well as other incubators. However, despite these efforts, over 80% of MSWEs have not utilized these initiatives due primarily to time constraints. Nonetheless, among those who have accessed financial support, more than half (59.3%) found the initiatives helpful.

Further exploration of MSWEs' needs underscore continued interest in government programs. Requests for expanded training programs include diverse delivery methods, such as face-to-face and online training, initiatives tailored to specific needs, and more flexible, long-term programs for effective knowledge transfer.



Next Steps for Mastercard Strive Malaysia

In line with Mastercard Strive Malaysia's objective to meet the evolving needs of Malaysian small businesses by providing them access to essential tools, networks, and resources while cultivating a more supportive business ecosystem, a one-stop-shop digital platform, Striver's Hub, can undertake the next steps that fall under the three categories of Educating, Connecting, and Mentoring.



Educating | Connecting | Mentoring

Photo © Canva

Next Steps for Mastercard Strive Malaysia

Educating	• Empowering MSWEs to overcome stigma associated with gender roles in entrepreneurship and fostering confidence • Providing curated micro learning content on loan procedures and financial management • Enhancing understanding of market dynamics and digital business strategies
Connecting	• Facilitating exposure and networking opportunities with other business owners to widen business networks • Expanding MSWEs' knowledge base through collaborative learning experiences • Establishing a community for MSWEs to foster collaboration and mutual support
Mentoring	• Cultivating motivation and confidence through personalized mentorship • Learning from experienced entrepreneurs to address specific business challenges • Inspiring women entrepreneurs through supportive mentor-mentee relationships

Via the in-country Striver's Hub, there is merit in segmenting the MSWEs though building an assessment tool, hence providing targeted content based on the stages of entrepreneurship, as outlined by SME Corp Malaysia, a Central Coordinating Agency that formulates overall policies and strategies for MSMEs and coordinates the implementation of SME Development Programs across all related ministries and agencies.

Stages of Entrepreneurship



Aspiring

The Aspiring stage marks the inception of the entrepreneurial journey, encompassing ideation, opportunity discovery, and early planning as entrepreneurs initiate their businesses.



Managing

The Managing stage encapsulates both the initial startup and subsequent phases, focusing on day-to-day operations, resource allocation, and addressing immediate challenges to ensure the business's stability.



Growing

The Growing stage corresponds to active expansion and scaling, with entrepreneurs concentrating on increasing market share, entering new markets, and achieving sustainable growth through strategic planning and operational scaling.

Furthermore, alongside the Strivers' Hub, the project will advocate for gender-sensitive policies and initiatives that promote inclusivity and support for women entrepreneurs at both local and national levels, fostering continuous learning, growth, and expanded opportunities. Through advocating for their interests and addressing systemic barriers, we can cultivate an enabling environment conducive to the prosperity and advancement of MSWEs.

MSWEs in Malaysia display grit and dedication despite the challenges faced in their daily environment. With targeted support that harnesses their strengths and addresses key challenges, Mastercard Strive Malaysia can play a role that allows Malaysian MSWEs to embrace digitalization and step forward to a more promising future for themselves, their families, and communities.

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Mastercard Strive Malaysia

Mastercard Strive Malaysia is a collaborative effort between the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth and The Asia Foundation, which aims to digitalize and support the growth of 100,000 small businesses in Malaysia, with a particular focus on women-owned and women-led businesses. The program seeks to address various challenges faced by small businesses in the country and empower women entrepreneurs to thrive in the digital economy.

The Asia Foundation

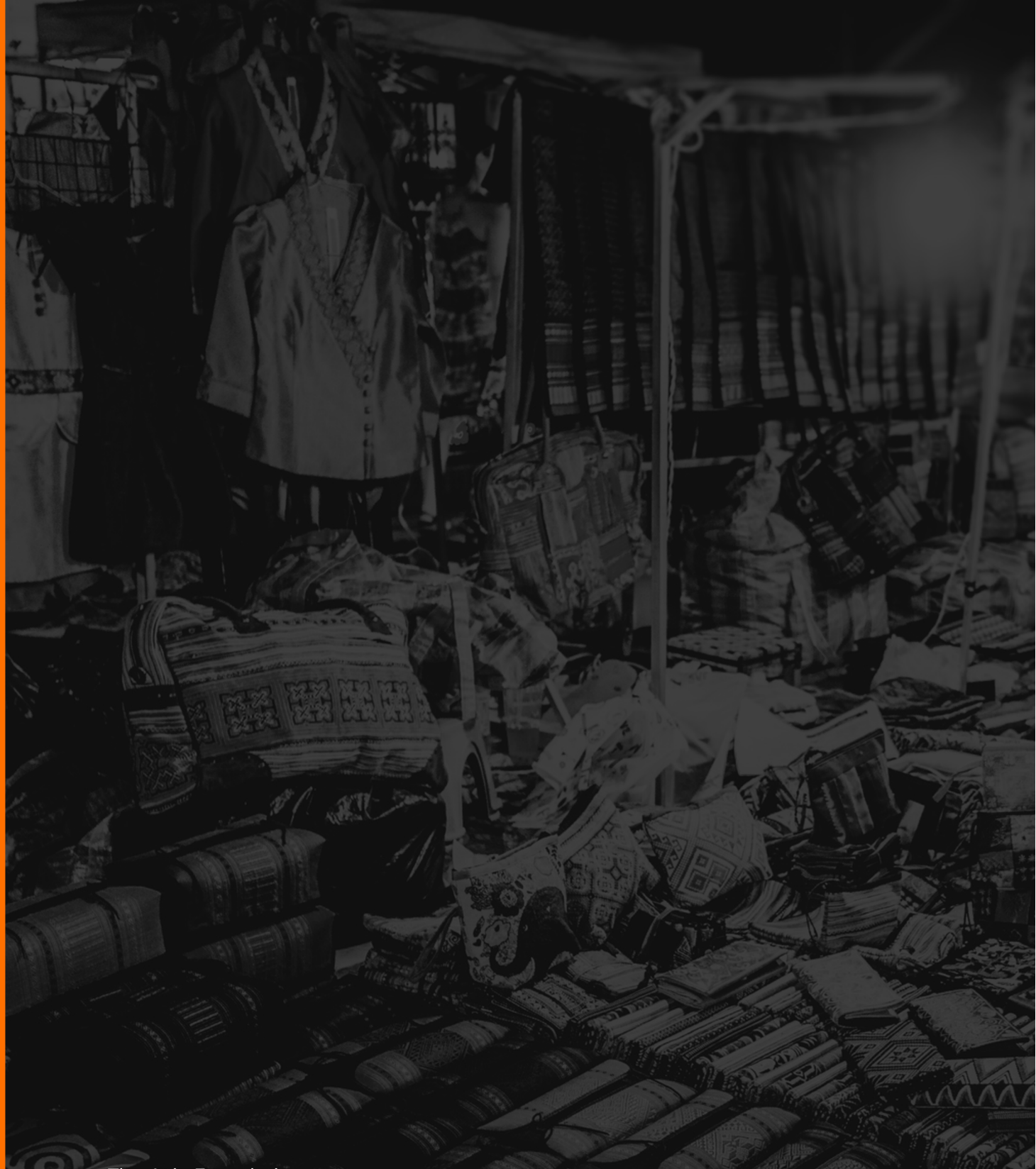
The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives and expanding opportunities across Asia and the Pacific. Informed by 70 years of experience and deep local knowledge, our work is focused on governance, climate action, gender equality, education and leadership, inclusive growth, and international cooperation. We work in more than 20 countries through our 17 permanent country offices and programs across Asia and the Pacific, supported by a headquarters in San Francisco and an office in Washington, DC. Our funding comes from a diverse array of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals.

Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth (CFIG)

The Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth (CFIG) advances equitable and sustainable economic growth and financial inclusion around the world. The center leverages the company's core assets and competencies, including data insights, expertise, and technology, while administering the philanthropic Mastercard Impact Fund, to produce independent research, scale global programs, and empower a community of thinkers, leaders, and doers on the front lines of inclusive growth.

Unit for Research on Women and Gender (KANITA)

KANITA is a dedicated research unit housed within the School of Social Science at Universiti Sains Malaysia. This unit is committed to conducting research, facilitating knowledge transfer, advocating for women and children, and engaging with the community through an inclusive gender and social equality framework.



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