

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN'S PUBLIC UNIONS IN SUPPORTING AND PROMOTING WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP: CONTRIBUTIONS AND CHALLENGES

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### **Abstract:**

This study examines the essential role of women's public unions in advancing women's entrepreneurship to promote economic empowerment and achieve gender equality. This study is guided by the following central research question: *How do women's public unions support and promote women's entrepreneurship, and what structural and contextual challenges do they encounter?* This study explores how these organizations act as catalysts for women's active participation as entrepreneurs in economic life. Women's public unions provide a range of services, including tailored training programs on entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and digital skills, as well as initiatives focused on capacity building and leadership development.

This paper also highlights their advocacy efforts, support for access to financial resources, and the creation of networking opportunities through mentorship and peer-learning platforms. Special attention is paid to targeted interventions for women, youth, and marginalized groups. Activities such as forums, exhibitions, and community engagement campaigns are organized to increase the visibility of women entrepreneurs and enhance their market reach, creating platforms for peer-to-peer learning and mentorship from successful entrepreneurs. Despite these positive contributions, this study identifies significant barriers that limit the potential of these unions, including financial constraints, sociocultural norms, and institutional challenges.

Using qualitative case studies and policy analysis, this paper offers actionable recommendations to improve the impact and sustainability of women's public unions. Ultimately, this research contributes to broader dialogues on gender-inclusive economic development, the role of organizations, and the dynamics of civil society in supporting women-led enterprises.

**Keywords:** *women's entrepreneurship; empowerment; gender equality; women's public unions*

### **Introduction**

In recent decades, women's entrepreneurship has gained increasing attention as a vital component of economic development, social inclusion and innovation. Women worldwide are increasingly starting businesses across various industries, playing a dual role in boosting their family incomes and contributing to broader economic development at the national level. Despite their growing participation, women entrepreneurs continue to face specific barriers, including restricted access to funding, limited professional networks, and weak institutional backing, which collectively constrain the growth and long-term viability of their businesses (Jamali 2009). According to Hassan (n.d.), women's involvement in entrepreneurship strengthens their influence in both family and community spheres and plays a key role in questioning and redefining traditional gender roles.

In this context, women's public unions, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), associations, and civil society networks, have emerged as key actors in promoting gender equitable entrepreneurship ecosystems.

Despite their growing relevance, the actual contributions and effectiveness of these public unions remain underexplored, especially in local or developing contexts where state support mechanisms are limited or inconsistently implemented. Moreover, the voices of women entrepreneurs regarding the support they need, the assistance they have received, and the barriers they continue to face are often overlooked in policy discussions.

This study explores the perceived role, contributions, and challenges of women's public unions in supporting women entrepreneurs, drawing on in-depth interviews with ten female entrepreneurs. It seeks to understand not only what types of support are most valuable, but also how such support can be expanded, improved, and institutionalized. By integrating qualitative insights with the existing literature, this study aims to offer a nuanced understanding of how civil society actors can contribute more effectively to gender-inclusive economic development.

### *Institutional Framework and Local Context*

In Azerbaijan, government agencies such as the Small and Medium Business Development Agency (SMBDA or KOBIA) (Small and Medium Business Development Agency of Azerbaijan) have contributed to supporting the entrepreneurial ecosystem through targeted initiatives. Although the effectiveness and reach of these programs vary, promoting women's entrepreneurship remains a key priority for the agency. The SMBDA has implemented various measures aimed at encouraging women's participation in small and medium businesses and increasing their presence in the sector. The Women's Entrepreneurship Development Association is actively involved in the Public Council under the Agency and plays a significant role in shaping and supporting these efforts.

The SMBDA also promotes the growth of social entrepreneurship in Azerbaijan, working in collaboration with relevant government bodies and the private sector to launch projects and initiatives in this area. The development of women's entrepreneurship is pursued through dedicated state-entrepreneur platforms, with the Public Council under the SMBDA being a central mechanism for coordination and dialogue. Within this framework, the Women's Entrepreneurship Development Association plays an active role.

Regular awareness-raising events organized by the SMBDA aim to inform women about entrepreneurial opportunities, recent developments, and support mechanisms. Notably, 30% of the participants in these events were women entrepreneurs, reflecting an encouraging level of engagement. In addition, SMB development centers—regional units of the Agency—work to equip women with business knowledge and practical skills, contributing to notable success stories in female entrepreneurship and self-employment.

Training programs such as "Plan Your Future" on financial literacy and sessions on Social Media Marketing (SMM) (Small and Medium Business Development Agency of Azerbaijan) have specifically targeted women entrepreneurs seeking to enhance their online business presence. These sessions provided detailed guidance on key topics such as advertising budgets, the 4R principle, content creation, writing persuasive ad copy, growing social media followings, and managing customer feedback. Female participants gained practical knowledge to promote their products and services more effectively, with all questions addressed during the training.

### *Methodology*

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the contributions of women's public unions in supporting and promoting women's entrepreneurship and the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in accessing such support. Primary data were collected through **semi-structured interviews with ten women entrepreneurs** actively engaged in various sectors across the country. A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure diverse representation from diverse backgrounds, including the service, trade, craft, and wellness industries. The selection criteria focused on women who had either previously engaged with public unions, NGOs, or associations or had the potential to benefit from such support structures. The age range of the participants varied, and both new and more experienced entrepreneurs were included. Interviews were conducted individually, either in person or via online communication platforms, depending on the participants' availability and preferences. Each interview lasted approximately **20–30 minutes**. Respondents were asked open-ended questions organized into four thematic areas:

1. The type of institutional support they believe would be most beneficial to the state.
2. The forms of support they expect from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), women's associations, and other public unions.
3. Their past experiences with public or private support programs.
4. Their perspectives on how women's entrepreneurship can be better supported at the societal level.

The questions were designed to elicit personal experiences and broader reflections on structural support mechanisms. The collected responses were **thematically analyzed** to identify recurring patterns and insights. The key themes were categorized under contributions of women's unions, perceived challenges, and suggestions for improvement. Direct quotations and paraphrased summaries were used to capture the participants' voices while maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. All participants provided **informed consent** before the interviews. They were assured that their identities would remain confidential and that the data would be used solely for academic and analytical purposes only. No personal identifiable information was disclosed in this study.

### ***Limitations of the study***

There are several limitations to this study that must be taken into account when analyzing the results. First, the qualitative design and limited sample size ( $N = 10$ ) restricts the generalizability of the results. Although purposive sampling was employed to capture diversity across sectors and entrepreneurial experience, the sample does not represent the full spectrum of female entrepreneurs in the national context.

Second, the use of self-reported data through semi-structured interviews introduces the possibility of response bias, including recall inaccuracies and social desirability effects. Furthermore, the study primarily included participants with prior engagement in public unions or non-governmental support structures, potentially excluding the perspectives of women entrepreneurs who lack such connections or are unaware of institutional support mechanisms.

Third, the data collection process involved both in-person and online interviews, which may have influenced the depth and nature of the participants' responses owing to differences in communication style and contextual dynamics. Additionally, the study did not systematically account for regional, sociocultural, or economic differences, which may also shape access to entrepreneurial support and institutional engagement.

Despite these limitations, this study offers valuable insights into the role of women's public unions in promoting women's entrepreneurship. Future research would benefit from a larger, more representative sample and the inclusion of mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to enhance the robustness and transferability of the findings.

### ***Discussion and Data Analysis***

This section presents a thematic analysis of the qualitative data gathered from 10 interviews with women entrepreneurs. The responses provide insights into the types of support women entrepreneurs expect, the role of public unions and NGOs, past experiences with such initiatives, and suggestions for broader societal improvements in supporting women's entrepreneurship.

Regarding institutional support expectations from the state, the dominant theme emerging from the interviews was the need for structured and sustainable support mechanisms. The current study found that participants highlighted several specific expectations. First, free educational courses and awareness programs were recognized as vital instruments for equipping women with entrepreneurial knowledge and boosting their self-confidence. Second, financial assistance and tax incentives emerged as recurring themes, highlighting the financial vulnerability and economic challenges faced by many women entrepreneurs. Jamali (2009) notes that many women entrepreneurs identify undercapitalization and the lack of early financial support as some of the most critical obstacles they face when starting or growing their businesses.

Third, respondents stressed the significance of mentorship, professional development, and hands-on training, noting that access to these opportunities remains limited or insufficiently widespread. So, as mentioned "education and training are the most important investments in human capital" ("HUMAN\_CAPITAL\_A\_Theoretical\_and\_Empirica," n.d.)

Finally, participants highlighted the need to cultivate a collaborative and encouraging entrepreneurial environment among women, addressing issues such as internal competition and the lack of mutual support.

The findings underscore the need for women entrepreneurs to receive a broad spectrum of support services that go beyond financial aid, including capacity building, mentorship, and access to strong peer networks. Effective institutional strategies should integrate capacity-building initiatives, improve access to resources, and foster strong community networks to establish a truly supportive environment. Additionally, there is a clear call for cultural transformation, shifting from competitive dynamics toward a culture of mutual support and **empowerment among women**. The findings of Shahin et al. (2021) and Ismail et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of designing and delivering entrepreneurship education programs that cater to a broad spectrum of educational sectors. A critical factor in fostering entrepreneurial intention among young female students is the cultivation of an entrepreneurial attitude or mindset, which aligns closely with the development of soft skills, such as creative problem-solving.

Regarding expectations from NGOs, Women's Associations, and Public Unions, this study found that they can play a crucial role in promoting entrepreneurship. The current investigation found that respondents acknowledged that women's public unions and NGOs could serve as critical enablers of entrepreneurship through national and international promotion of women-led businesses, providing networking and partnership opportunities to help overcome the isolation often experienced by solo entrepreneurs, and offering business consulting, market access strategies, and experience-sharing platforms. Organizations like "Women's Development and Education Support" were also named as positive examples of useful civic initiatives by the participants.

Another key finding is that NGOs and women's public unions are viewed as connectors, promoters, and advocates. Hassan (n.d.) emphasizes that policymakers must take a proactive role in advocating for women entrepreneurs and eliminating the structural obstacles that impede their progress.

These institutions have the potential to fill the gaps left by the state, especially in terms of visibility, strategic guidance, and community-based collaboration. However, the scope and reach of these services must be expanded and made more inclusive to benefit a broader group of women entrepreneurs.

When asked about past involvement with support programs, a few respondents reported no direct benefit from either government or non-government initiatives. On the other hand, others highlighted positive experiences such as participating in fairs, seminars, and community events where they gained exposure and built connections. They also mentioned that women's associations were instrumental in their personal and professional growth, particularly through opportunities to offer their services and present products.

These experiments confirmed that this mixed feedback suggests a gap between the existence of support mechanisms and their accessibility or awareness among potential beneficiaries of such support. It also points to a lack of structured follow-up or long-term engagement in many programs, leading to limited impact or visibility among women entrepreneurs. (Panda, 2018) identified seven key constraints faced by women entrepreneurs in 90 developing countries: gender discrimination, work-family conflict, financial limitations, poor infrastructure, unfavorable policies, lack of training, and personality-based challenges.

One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that respondents offered diverse and thoughtful recommendations for improving the societal environment for women entrepreneurs. These data suggest that this can be achieved through increasing awareness-raising campaigns and sharing success stories of women in business to break down stereotypes; establishing more women-focused community centers or support hubs that can provide consistent training, advisory services, and psychological support; promoting gender equality and working to eliminate structural barriers that disadvantage women in entrepreneurship; and allocating targeted financial resources while improving media and marketing platforms for women-owned businesses.

The findings reported here shed new light on how participants perceive entrepreneurship, not just as an economic activity but also as a **social and cultural process** that requires visibility, recognition, and collective support. Public unions and civil society organizations are positioned to play a transformative role in advocating for these changes, especially through campaigns, policy engagement

and community outreach. A literature review, international case studies, and interviews with female entrepreneurs reveal common challenges, such as limited access to finance, networks, markets, and persistent gender bias (Veckalne and Tambovceva, 2023). Jaiswal (2022) highlights that while various programs improve women's access to credit, gaps and barriers persist.

Overall, this study strengthens the idea that the interviews reveal that while women's public unions and NGOs have made notable contributions—particularly in education, networking, and empowerment—there remain significant challenges related to sustainability, reach, and institutional collaboration. (Jamali, 2009) (Jaiswal, 2022) emphasize that women entrepreneurs often struggle due to limited community and institutional support, which restricts access to assistance from family, friends, and their wider network. The lack of access to expert advice further exacerbates these challenges. Another important finding by Jaiswal (2022) highlights that many women entrepreneurs lack adequate support and guidance from authorities, leading to a decline in their self-esteem and motivation. This lack of support can make women less inclined to take risks or pursue new opportunities in their careers. Many respondents still lack access to consistent support, and existing resources are not always tailored to their needs. Strengthening the role of these organizations, improving inter-institutional cooperation, and promoting inclusive outreach strategies are crucial for advancing women's entrepreneurship meaningfully and equitably. In general, this means that initiatives such as training centers, mentorship programs, and government policies provide women with the skills and confidence needed to succeed (Prabhu, 2020). Raghunandan (2018) suggests that fostering women's empowerment can be effectively achieved by enabling women to support themselves and by encouraging mutual assistance. This can be achieved through two primary methods: 1) collaborative efforts among women, where they combine resources to create enterprises that enhance their empowerment, and 2) strategic partnerships involving institutional support from the private sector or government entities. These approaches can significantly contribute to women's empowerment.

In summary, Cardella et al. (2020) highlighted that social entrepreneurship, with its focus on collaboration and mutual assistance, aligns well with women's needs and working styles, which prioritize quality relationships, work-life balance, and equal opportunities.

### ***Challenges Faced by Women's Public Unions***

Despite their critical role in supporting women's empowerment, public unions led by women continue to face persistent challenges. The findings, structured around four key questions, reveal the multifaceted nature of the obstacles limiting the effectiveness and sustainability of these programs.

#### *What challenges do women's public unions face in sustaining their activities?*

Many women's public unions operate with limited financial resources, making it difficult to maintain consistent programming or implement long-term initiatives. Most rely on short-term grants or donor-funded projects, leaving them vulnerable to shifting funding priorities. The lack of stable financial support also affects their ability to hire professional staff, invest in organizational infrastructure and plan strategically for growth. Consequently, even impactful grassroots work often remains small-scale and under-resourced.

#### *What institutional or legal barriers limit their operations?*

The institutional environment for women's public unions is weak. Women's public unions frequently operate without official inclusion in policymaking processes and are typically excluded from discussions on economic or gender policy reforms. Legal and bureaucratic processes, such as registration, compliance reporting, and access to public funding, are often complicated, particularly for newer or smaller unions. These barriers not only slow down their operations but also discourage informal women's groups from seeking formal recognition.

#### *How do cultural and social factors affect their work and influence them?*

Social norms and cultural attitudes continue to pose significant barriers. In numerous communities, women in leadership positions continue to face doubt or opposition. Public unions that focus on promoting gender equality or questioning conventional gender norms may encounter social resistance, limited backing from their community support, and even marginalization. These dynamics limit their outreach, affect volunteer retention, and reduce their influence on male-dominated decision-making structures.

#### *What kind of support do these organizations need to strengthen their impact?*

Respondents emphasized the need for comprehensive support, beyond financial aid. They highlighted the importance of capacity-building programs focused on leadership, advocacy, strategic planning, and digital communication. There is also a strong call for more inclusive platforms that enable cooperation among NGOs, government agencies, and the private sector. Increased visibility through the media, inclusion in public councils, and recognition of their contributions would help strengthen their legitimacy and effectiveness.

The analysis reveals that women's public unions are vital but under-supported in the development ecosystem. Their ability to advocate for change, mobilize communities, and support women's entrepreneurship depends not only on funding but also on institutional recognition, cultural acceptance, and collaboration opportunities. Addressing the identified challenges through a structured, multi-stakeholder approach is essential to amplify their role in achieving gender-equitable development.

This study demonstrates that although women's public unions and related organizations in Azerbaijan significantly contribute to advancing women's entrepreneurship through training, advocacy, and networking, their effectiveness is curtailed by institutional, structural, and cultural constraints. Governmental support—such as that provided by the Small and Medium Business Development Agency (SMBDA/KOBIA) (Small and Medium Business Development Agency of Azerbaijan)—has enhanced visibility and access to resources for women entrepreneurs, with at least 30 % of beneficiaries in various programs being women Gomółka, K. (2021). However, critical challenges remain, including constrained funding, inadequate institutional representation, fragmented services, regulatory complexity, and persistent gender stereotypes.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, women's public unions play a vital role in fostering economic empowerment; however, their full potential can only be achieved through cohesive, institutionalized, and culturally sensitive support.

Women's public unions and NGOs have made notable contributions, particularly in education, networking, and empowerment, which are the main elements of sustainable development.

Women's associations have played a vital role in their personal and professional development by providing platforms to showcase their products and services. Capacity-building programs focused on leadership, advocacy, strategic planning, and digital communication are very important components in developing women entrepreneurship.

By implementing strategic recommendations, such as promoting cross-sector partnerships and strengthening the organizational and technical capacity of women's associations, existing supportive measures can be transformed into a robust and equitable entrepreneurial ecosystem—strengthening women's public unions, enabling sustainable economic inclusion, and advancing national development goals.

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