

FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS IN THE COVID 19 ERA: A RETURN TO TRADITIONAL ROLES

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ABSTRACT

During the last two years, the world has experienced an unprecedented health crisis, and in addition to health and social issues, the economy has been severely affected, with all its actors, particularly the VSEs-SMEs¹ created and managed by women. The main objective of this study was to assess the degree of impact of family responsibilities of Moroccan women entrepreneurs on their efficiency in managing their businesses in difficult times following the Covid 19 pandemic. To do this, we used a qualitative approach and interviewed a sample of thirty women entrepreneurs running VSEs-SMEs. Interviews with these women show that because of this crisis, women have finally chosen and sometimes even been forced to return to their traditional roles of taking care of the home and children especially during the period of lockdown, which has lowered their performance and efficiency in saving their businesses from this crisis. Our results can provide empirical support for support structures to adapt their programmes to the real needs of Moroccan women entrepreneurs, including personalised support, more than technical and financial assistance.

Keywords: *Female Entrepreneurship; Covid 19; Family Responsibilities; VSEs SMEs.*

INTRODUCTION

According to the World Bank (2009), Morocco is considered an attractive country for new business creation. Female entrepreneurship has also been developed over the last ten years as a potential for economic and social development of the country. Moroccan women entrepreneurs' number between 10 and 12% (ILO 2019), and they are increasingly present in the economic life of the country, either through their formal or informal work. However, in recent years, more and more of them have invested in the labour market or developed an economic activity that creates wealth, particularly in rural areas where the women, gathered in cooperatives, participate in the economic support of their families and their region. For this reason, Morocco has invested a great deal in the legal aspect, particularly in gender equality, but unfortunately, the few figures that we find on the ground testify to a great deal of social and traditional resistance to the participation of women in economic and entrepreneurial activity.

The objective of this work is to assess the degree of impact of family responsibilities of women entrepreneurs on their work efficiency as entrepreneurs during the period of the Covid 19 pandemic, particularly in the region of the economic capital Grand Casablanca (Morocco), this choice of region is justified by the fact that Moroccan women

entrepreneurs are mainly concentrated on this axis (ILO 2019). To meet this objective, we followed a qualitative methodology based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 30 women entrepreneurs belonging to the greater Casablanca region, leading VSEs-SMEs and operating in two sectors, namely trade and services, as these are the sectors most exploited by Moroccan women entrepreneurs (ILO 2019).

The structure of our paper is as follows. Firstly, we will synthesise the existing literature on women's entrepreneurship and secondly on women entrepreneurs in the Moroccan context. We will also present our qualitative research methodology and finally we will present the analysis of our results.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND FRAMEWORK

Nowadays and for the last thirty years, women's entrepreneurship has been one of the fastest growing phenomena in the world, given its importance as one of the main sources of economic and social development. We are thus witnessing a considerable increase in the number of businesses created by women around the world. According to World Bank statistics (June 2016), 19% of businesses worldwide are run by women and about 50% of SMEs in Africa are run by women.

Women entrepreneurs contribute to job creation, innovation and the development of countries' gross national product (Allen et al. 2007). Recently, a great deal of research has been conducted to better understand women's entrepreneurship (McLaurin and Kuchta 2008), including women's entrepreneurial behaviour, barriers, and obstacles such as inequalities in access to finance, and institutionalized discriminatory societal values in some contexts (Robinson 2001; Carter, Anderson, and Shaw 2001).

Several studies have shown that women's entrepreneurial activity is the result of the intersection of individual and contextual factors, notably the social environment (Gasse 2003). Gender is also considered to be a determining factor in terms of involvement in professional networks, access to finance, human resource management, and work-family balance, which may even influence women's entrepreneurial intention (De Vita, Mari, and Possesi 2014).

In relation to the profile of women entrepreneurs, much work has attempted to profile women entrepreneurs, most of whom have had some form of education prior to engaging in entrepreneurial activity (Andersson et al. 2007).

The entrepreneurial path of women entrepreneurs is generally marked by work stoppages in favour of the family, including the division of family and parental tasks in society (Guyot and Lohest 2007), which is generally considered in most regions to be a purely female task, influencing the work/life balance (Léger-Jarniou 2013). The entrepreneurial path is rich in values and social norms that constitute obstacles for the female entrepreneur in developing her entrepreneurial project (Brush, De Bruin, and Welter al. 2009).

The contextual factor is one of the reasons for the poor performance of women's enterprises compared to those created by men (Andersson et al. 2007), as well as their choice of small businesses (Cornet and Constantinidis 2004; Lee-Gosselin, Housieaux, and Villeneuve 2010) and low growth sectors such as the services sector and trade (GEM 2010; Saleh 2011; Metaiche 2013).

In most developing countries such as Morocco, women entrepreneurs play an important role in creating income-generating activities, and they also represent an important potential that is largely underestimated in Morocco (Rachdi 2006). Moroccan women entrepreneurs are three times smaller than Moroccan men entrepreneurs, while they represent over 51% of the population.

Currently, and following legal changes in favour of women, female entrepreneurship in Morocco has become increasingly encouraged. Moroccan women entrepreneurs are increasingly present in the economic life of the country, they participate in the economic support of their family and community either through their formal or informal work, particularly in rural areas, but unfortunately, they are few with a percentage that does not exceed 12%, a percentage that does not include the informal sector. In Morocco, the definition of female entrepreneurship depends largely on the recognition of the economic sectors and activities in which women are involved. Some consider only formal sector enterprises, which considerably limits the number of women who can be considered as entrepreneurs since a large majority of them are present in the informal sector and carry out activities at home.

One reason for the low participation of women entrepreneurs is the problem of access to equity and financing. Financing constraints can be summarised in a few points: the very high cost of credit imposed on women entrepreneurs, the collateral required by financing institutions and the lack of specific credit lines for women entrepreneurs.

The existence of public and private support structures for strengthening women's participation in economic life is still not well known to Moroccan women entrepreneurs. The transition to the formal sector, the expansion and consolidation of their activities, unfortunately comes up against their lack of knowledge of the opportunities presented by the market in terms of programmes and initiatives to promote female entrepreneurship.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the generalized containment put in place by the Moroccan government, has led to a paralysis of entrepreneurial activity across all sectors. While there are entrepreneurs who have been quick to identify new opportunities despite the crisis, there are those who simply cannot be resilient despite the efforts of public authorities and other bodies such as the National Agency for the Promotion of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, with 512 technical assistance and consultancy projects that have been implemented for the benefit of selected SMEs as of the end of January 2021.

According to a study conducted by the Moroccan Confederation of VSEs and SMEs, the structures most affected by this pandemic, are VSEs with 90%, SMEs with 8% and cooperatives with 2%. The impact on the Moroccan economy is quite significant given that this category of enterprise represents 95% of the country's economic fabric.

This health crisis affected all sectors without exception, led by the business services sector with 21.9% and trade with 20.6%. As most Moroccan women entrepreneurs are owners of mainly VSEs and cooperatives and SMEs, operating in the service and trade sector, they are therefore among those most affected by this health crisis.

METHODOLOGY

Our Data collection was collected through documentary analyses, and semi-structured interviews. The analyses of institutions' documents allowed us to structure the study as a first approach.

Thus, interviewees consist mainly of thirty women entrepreneurs. Interviews as a documentary source, were the subject of our systematic content analysis. Thereafter, we will illustrate some of our remarks with transcripts that reflect the exact expressions of the people surveyed (verbatim).

The contents of the interviews were analyzed according to the classic qualitative methods of data analysis, in particular the method of " the content analysis " which is the most used method to study the interviews or the qualitative observations (Krippendorff 2003; Miles and Huberman 1991), the objective is to investigate the situation of these

women entrepreneurs interviewed during the pandemic period, and how they manage the issue of reconciling family and work.

The number of women entrepreneurs interviewed was dictated by the empirical saturation of our data so that we would have "the impression of learning nothing new about the sociological object of the investigation" (Bertaux 1980). The comments collected have been transcribed. Also, to keep the anonymity of interviewees, we made some small adjustments on the stated quotes. Finally, to gain a better understanding of the different developments in our research field, we conducted several interviews with experts working in support structures.

So, the characteristics of the study's sample are:

- Moroccan women entrepreneurs, married, with children.
- Women entrepreneurs who own specially VSEs and SMEs.
- Activity sectors: services and trade, we have chosen these sectors because these are the sectors most exploited by Moroccan women entrepreneurs and they are the most affected by this pandemic.

Our study concerns just the region of Casablanca, most women's businesses are in this region. Women in this region are characterized by a high degree of independence and a strong capacity to lead both their personal and professional lives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The objective of this work is to assess the level of impact of family responsibilities of women entrepreneurs on their work efficiency to save their business during the period of the 2020 pandemic in the region of the economic capital Grand-Casablanca (Morocco). We present here the results of a set of interviews with thirty women entrepreneurs in the Casablanca region.

In this regard, and during the pandemic period, according to the entire sample of women entrepreneurs interviewed, women not only endure difficulties at the level of their business (total or partial stoppage of activity following the lock-down, loss of customers, payment default, ...), but they also have to take on other responsibilities such as taking care of their children and E-learning, with very limited means in terms of equipment and access to the internet, as well as taking care of elderly people. According to most of the women entrepreneurs interviewed, this situation made them feel that they had failed in

their dual family and professional life which affected their mental health "I felt so weak even in the simple management of the house, I was depressed all the time...". Knowing that, for most Moroccan women, having their family happy around them can be a decisive element in their professional success.

These women also state that due to a lack of resources, including time and equipment to telework, they have not been able to follow coaching and mentoring sessions or support and funding programmes offered by support structures to overcome this crisis and limit the damage.

This health crisis has affected not only the daily lives of Moroccan women entrepreneurs, but also women in the rest of the world. For example, according to a study conducted in Canada, women reported spending 53% more time during the pandemic period caring for children, compared to only 12% more for men.

All of the women interviewed stated that they were unable to manage this crisis situation well, *"...I felt unable to manage both the children and the employees, especially in the absence of my household help, given the distancing measures imposed by the government, ...in the end I chose the health of my loved ones first and I stopped my work temporarily ..."* because for them the family is a priority, in addition to the anguish they experienced because of the disease and the danger it posed to their small family but also to their parents and the large family *"I was responsible not only for my children and my husband, but also for my husband's parents"*. Some of our interviewees mentioned that during the lockdown they were obliged to stop all professional activity at the request of their husbands, and to return to their traditional role of looking after the children *"... my husband does not accept that I work to the detriment of the family, he is adamant! ..."* because it was a condition to remain at the service of the family in the first place so that their husbands would agree to let them work, which shows that the Moroccan woman entrepreneur, even with a degree of independence, is still blocked by social and cultural factors that impede the development of her professional activity.

Loss of client contracts, total cessation of activity, financial difficulties, bills coming due, lack of time and teleworking infrastructure, family conflicts are the damages caused by the Covid 19 pandemic on the entrepreneurial activity and the psychological state declared by all our interviewees. They also stated that they urgently needed personalised support, as well as a form of mentoring that went beyond technical and financial assistance

to emotional and social support “... *now I just need to rest, ... I don't need money, I can manage it if I find myself psychologically...*”.

A study conducted by the World Bank in 2007 in the MENA region showed that women are more confronted with social and cultural obstacles than with administrative ones in carrying out their entrepreneurial activities. The lack of trust and credibility of the various strategic partners are also barriers that Moroccan women face in the start-up phase of their entrepreneurial project.

Women's entrepreneurship in Morocco is still confronted with several social and cultural factors that do not allow women to flourish in this field due to, among other things, limited access to information, training and support institutions or discriminatory social and cultural practices.

In Morocco, as in other countries of the world, the gender division of labour means that domestic work is a task mainly assigned to women (Cered 1995), and when women decide to enter the professional world, they are obliged to reconcile several constraints, notably those related to their family and professional status.

The marital status of the Moroccan woman entrepreneur is an important factor in her professional life, as it has been developed in several works (Brière et al. 2014; De Vita, Mari, and Possesi 2014), the family environment is considered one of the factors that weighs most in the entrepreneurial path of the woman.

Indeed, to be successful in her career, she must build a permanent balance between her family life and her professional life. Marital status plays an important role in the decision to start a business and in the development and sustainability of the business created.

The life/work dilemma is in some respects problematic for women entrepreneurs, particularly those who own microenterprises or cooperatives and come from poor or very middle-class backgrounds. These women do not have sufficient financial resources to hire a domestic helper. However, in some cases, these women find recourse to their family circle to look after their children while they are at work.

Many studies have been carried out in Morocco and around the world that address the impact of the covid 19 pandemic and containment on business activity in all sectors, but these studies lack information about women entrepreneurs. Working conditions have become difficult for all entrepreneurs, but women entrepreneurs have witnessed a great

psychological impact, which for some women interviewed has even caused great conflict in the family (a strong increase in divorce cases in Morocco in 2020).

One very important thing to mention is that at the beginning of the pandemic the majority of respondents had difficulties managing their family and work commitments at a time when it was really a return to their traditional role as a mum, but as the situation improved, they began to regain control of their commitments, knowing that a significant proportion of the women entrepreneurs interviewed said that they were able to overcome all the difficulties linked to their professional activities from the beginning of the pandemic even with their family responsibilities, but these women declare that they were either surrounded by their family who supported the whole house " ... *I admit that having my mother by my side in this difficult situation saved my family and my business ...*» or belonging to a family business which was in their favour even when they were at home.

CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study was to understand, during this period of pandemic, how the family commitments of women entrepreneurs can hinder the development of their entrepreneurial activity. As mentioned previously, this health crisis has primarily affected small businesses, as well as the service, trade, and construction sectors. We started from this observation as Moroccan women entrepreneurs are more present in these sectors (trade and services) and mainly manage VSEs and SMEs.

The interviews conducted with the thirty women show that following this period of crisis, women have finally chosen and sometimes have even been forced to return to their traditional roles of taking care of the home and children, especially during the period of lockdown, which has lowered their performance and efficiency in saving their businesses from this crisis, which has further amplified the gap between the men and women in the business world, as it disproportionately affects women entrepreneurs (Manolova et al. 2020).

The results of the study are expected to be significant in the coming years and will increasingly reinforce the influence of the social and cultural environment on women's performance in the workplace.

It should be noted that the results were different when it was a family business, which opens another path for our future research on women entrepreneurs in family businesses,

reaching out to other regions and other sectors, particularly the informal sector, which will provide a broader reality about Moroccan women entrepreneurs.

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