

Challenges and Opportunities for Women Entrepreneurs in India during Covid-19 Pandemic

Shefali Nandan¹, Anjali Kushwaha²

¹Assistant Professor, University of Allahabad, eshefali@gmail.com

²Research Scholar, University of Allahabad

Abstract

Covid 19 pandemic has deeply affected people all over the world. Women owned businesses have been hit harder. The study aims at identifying challenges and opportunities for women entrepreneurs in the wake of the pandemic. An exploratory, multiple case study based approach has been adopted for the study. Four cases of women entrepreneurs were selected. It was found that women were undeterred by the challenges posed by the pandemic. They focused on the opportunities and sought to leverage them to grow their business. It was found that that the important challenges faced by the women were-declining sales, operational disruptions, technology adoption and work-life fusion. Opportunities recognized and exploited by the women included -adopting new business model, cost cutting, innovations in offerings, and expanding market

Keywords: Women entrepreneurs, Covid-19, Multiple case study, work-life fusion, business model, technology adoption, innovation

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Corresponding Author: Shefali Nandan, Assistant Professor, University of Allahabad, eshefali@gmail.com

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Introduction

There has been a deep and prolonged impact of the Covid 19 pandemic both on lives and livelihood of people all over the world. Economies worldwide found themselves struggling with “the worst global crisis since the Second World War” (ILO, 2020). Markets and supply chains have been disrupted and there has been a demand shock resulting into closure of businesses or scaling down of business operations. The situation is expected to be grim for the already struggling sectors such as women owned businesses (McKinsey & Company, 2020) that are concentrated in the industry sectors

most severely affected by the economic shutdown. The problems of such women-owned businesses that work with limited resources are expected to be compounded by unique restrictions demanded by the Covid-19 pandemic. Even temporary closures caused by the pandemic are problematic as it causes huge losses to revenue. These businesses find it tough to withstand the uncertainty and ambiguity of the business environment accentuated by the pandemic. Studies have reported disproportionate impact of the Covid-19 on women entrepreneurs in India, where the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women-led micro businesses has exacerbated the

vast socio-economic gap. Since the situations created by Covid 19 pandemic are 'beyond normal', women entrepreneurs need to make extra efforts and craft new strategies to keep their ventures running.

Literature review

Evidence from past economic and health crises suggests that tremors of the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic often impact men and women differently (Rubery & Rafferty, 2013). This is due to various factors, one of which is gender differences in distribution of domestic responsibilities between men and women, where women shoulder greater proportion of housework (Jackson, 2019; Mohamadi & Ertemsir, 2020). Maintaining a balance between entrepreneurial work and responsibilities of home is a major challenge for women entrepreneurs. (Ihugba & Njoku, 2014). In the absence of school, childcare or eldercare services women entrepreneurs bear the majority of the burden of family care (OECD, 2020). Similarly, any increases in time spent in the home due to confinement resulting from quarantine are likely to lead to increased routine housework. This will constrain their ability to work (UN, 2020; OECD, 2020). It has been reported that during pandemic women many entrepreneurs were unable to focus on their business activities as home and family care consumed a lot of time (Vasilić, Popović-Pantić & Semenčenko, 2020; Abebe, Alibhai, Buehren, Ebrahim & Hailemicheal, 2020). COVID-19 pandemic is expected to amplify women's unpaid work burdens (UN, 2020). This will constrain their ability to work (OECD, 2020).

Hired assistance for domestic chores helps women attain work-life balance (Mukhtar, Faiz & Asad, 2020) but due to containment requirements, this assistance remained unavailable. It has been reported in pre-pandemic studies that very few

women entrepreneurs are able to divert most of their energy to their business rather than their families (Starcher, 1996). Increased care activities and household work during quarantine further diverted their time away from their businesses (Abebe, Alibhai, Buehren, Ebrahim & Hailemicheal, 2020). It has been reported that family support was a deciding factor for many women in closure or continuity of their business (Jaim, 2020). In this regard, Alon et al. (2020) believe that due to the shift to remote working is that, many men may increase their unpaid household work through the crisis, which might be a beginning of a trend which may potentially help trigger a shift in gender norms around unpaid domestic and care work. In a 10-country study, it was found that work-life conflicts and problems among women-owned businesses is highest in developing countries (Kaciak & Welsh, 2020). Corona pandemic also opened new challenges for women entrepreneurs also in terms of raised level of insecurity, restlessness, loneliness, financial loss, stress, (Gwatidzo & Chazovachii, 2020).

It has been reported that low educational level of women entrepreneurs hinders their financial literacy (Halkias et al., 2011) important for running business. Women entrepreneurs' lack of access to information and communication technology (Ewere et al., 2015) coupled with inability to use it for the business growth hinders sustainability of women owned businesses (Motilewa et al., 2015). Business networks are a potential source of identifying business opportunities (Nooteboom & Gilsing, 2004) but women entrepreneurs have weak networks (Villaseca, Navío-Marco & Gimeno, 2020). Pandemic has exacerbated the problem as it has resulted into a shift towards virtual meetings. This could be particularly detrimental to women entrepreneurs as could be less technologically prepared for on-line networking activity.

Gender differences have been reported in business opportunity identification (Eckhardt & Shane, 2003). Since capability to identify opportunities gives competitive advantage (DeTienne & Chandler, 2007), these gendered differences put serious limitations to venture growth capabilities of women owned businesses.

Despite challenges many women are turning into digital entrepreneurs by adopting innovative ways of doing business (Olsson & Bernhard, 2020). Women entrepreneurs did not compromise with their business activities (Onoshakpor, Etuknwa & Karamalla-Gaiballa, 2020). The first-generation women entrepreneurs have been reported to be high on morale and were very positive about the future of their businesses (Rawal & Rajguru, 2020).

Research Gap

Since the information about the impact of Covid 19 pandemic on women entrepreneurs is still very limited, this research was undertaken to explore the perspectives of women entrepreneurs on opportunities and challenges in the Indian context and the strategies adopted by them to salvage their business in times of crisis.

Objectives of the study

Objectives of the study are to explore the perceptions of women entrepreneurs regarding

- Challenges faced by women entrepreneurs during Covid-19 pandemic
- Opportunities perceived and exploited by women entrepreneurs during Covid-19 pandemic

Research Methodology

An exploratory case study based approach was

found to be appropriate due to novelty of the context (Eisenhardt & Graebner, –2007). Since the multiple case study method makes the study more robust (Herriot & Firestone, 1983), it was decided to study the phenomenon through multiple case studies.

Four cases of first-generation women entrepreneurs were selected. Purposive sampling method was adopted for the study and cases were selected based on attributes and characteristics (Smith, 1983) such that there is diversity along with some common attributes. They all were first generation entrepreneurs and were at least has graduation degree but differed with respect to the nature of their products. Entrepreneur 1 offered wellness training, Entrepreneur 2 offered physical fitness for women, entrepreneur 3 had a bakery and entrepreneur 4 sold handicraft products. Interview method was used for data collection. Telephonic interviews were conducted in 2-3 rounds during January-February 2021. Notes taken were transcribed by the researchers.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for the study passed through the five steps - data reduction, data display, exploration of dimensions, coding reliability, and drawing of conclusion.

Data Reduction

Open Coding: Open coding is used to reduce the transcript of each case into smaller sections of labelled text (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For better reliability, two coders independently coded the same transcript and a common coding scheme was developed through discussion. Through this process, two constructs of the study were identified, namely (1) 'challenges' and (2) 'opportunity recognition and exploitation'. Texts which depicted these two constructs were coded as

'CH' and 'ORE' respectively.

Sub-coding was done to identify the dimensions of each one of the two constructs 'CH' and 'ORE'. Thus, *sub-coding* reduced the large transcripts into countable numbers of sub-codes.

Exploring common dimensions across the cases

All the codes and sub-codes were compared across cases and if they were found to be reflecting the same theme, they were grouped under the same dimension. If no pattern emerged across the cases, a separate dimension of that single subcode was created in that specific case.

Data Display

Huberman and Miles (1994, p. 429) have defined data display as “an organized, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and/or action taking”. Tables were used for display of coded data. On the basis of *open-codes* and *sub-codes* two table were prepared, one for 'challenges' and one for 'opportunities', to display the dimensions of the two constructs. The columns represented the dimensions of the construct of the study (CH and ORE) while rows represented texts of the interview transcript representing different dimensions of each construct. As suggested by Oliver and Kandadi (2006), the dimensions that found mention in least three out of four cases, were finally retained. Thus, four dimensions were finally retained for 'challenges' and five dimensions for opportunities recognition and exploitation.

Coding Reliability

Cross-checking the reliability of the dimensions identified in the step 1-2 was done using the qualitative approach proposed by Wasco and Campbell (2002). The first researcher listed the

descriptive titles of all the dimensions generated in the step 2 above, and also printed the coding units (e.g., for the descriptive title “CH-Declining Sales”, coding units were 'reduced number of customers', “reduction in sale”, “problem in procuring orders”) on cards. The second researcher was asked to sort the cards into groups on the basis of descriptive titles of the categories. This second researcher's solution to the sorting task was compared with the original solution. Disagreement was found in case of only two coding units. This was indicative of high level of reliability of the original solution. The disagreements were reasoned out and a consensus was reached for both the coding units.

Findings and Discussion

After an in-depth analysis of data, a total of 09 dimensions of the two constructs- Challenge (coded as CH) and Opportunity Recognition and Exploitation (coded as ORE) -were extracted, of which 04 dimensions were grouped under CH and 05 dimensions under ORE.

Challenges

Women entrepreneurs in all the four cases faced unique challenges in running their business due to Covid-19 pandemic. Four dimensions of challenges were identified: 'declining sales' (coded as CH-declining sales), 'operational disruptions' (coded as CH-operational disruptions), 'new skill development' (coded as CH- new skill development) and 'work-life fusion' (coded as CH-work-life fusion).

Declining Sales

In all the four cases women entrepreneurs registered a sharp decline in demand and sale of their products/services during the initial periods of pandemic, which led to diminished revenues. The

number of customers were already limited since the business in all the four cases was limited to small area and the pandemic led to sudden and drastic decline in the number of customers/clients during lockdown periods. While Entrepreneur 1 faced the cancellation of her previous bookings, Entrepreneur 2 had to find out ways of continuing fitness classes as her fitness studio had to be temporarily closed due to the restrictions mandated by Covid 19. Entrepreneur 3 experienced reduction in demand for bakery products due to restrictions on gatherings/parties, and also with shifting focus to immunity boosting food. In case of entrepreneur 4 the demand for handicraft products declined as customers could no longer visit/avoided visiting the shop to personally select the items and ordering on phone was not a preferred way of purchase for handicrafts. Sharp decline in revenue posed a threat to sustainability of the ventures as expenses are required to meet the fixed and variable costs.

Operational Disruptions

Managing basic business operations was quite challenging by women entrepreneurs due to restrictions on movement of people, particularly during lock down periods, to curb the spread of infection. Due to disruptions in supply chain, problems were experienced in procuring materials/equipment and manpower essential for business. This disruption indirectly contributed to decline in sales. Entrepreneur 1 could not conduct her seminars/lectures due to restrictions on gatherings and movement. Entrepreneur 2 faced problems in procurement of necessary equipment and inputs for continuing training session from home, since supply of inputs had been disrupted. Entrepreneur 3 and 4 faced difficulties in completing their orders as well as maintaining the quality of their products with limited supply of ingredients/raw materials.

Technology adoption

Before the pandemic, businesses were run in a traditional manner in all the four cases, with almost no intervention of technology. Covid-19 restrictions made it impossible to continue the business with traditional modes of operations. All the four women entrepreneurs were forced to shift their office to home and in Case 3 and Case 4, production site was also shifted to home. The need was felt to integrate technology with business to ensure its sustenance. Day-to-day activities like placing orders for inputs and raw material, making payments, banking procedures, procuring orders, rendering services to clients/customers (particularly in Case 1 and Case 2) etc. had to be done in distance mode due to fear of infection. These women were not at ease with the use of modern technology and had never tried any major use of technology for business. Covid-19 pandemic left no choice for these women entrepreneurs but to adopt technology for carrying out various business activities. They were required to learn about specialized applications and software relevant and useful for running business.

Work-life Fusion

Since all of the business operations were handled from home with stay-in family members, women entrepreneurs in all the four cases experienced blurring of boundaries between work and home which seemed to merge with each other. Space restrictions, lack of proper work environment, distractions emerging from the needs of family members- all affected the work. The pandemic resulted in additional responsibilities at home due to requirements of maintaining health and sanitation. In all the four cases women entrepreneurs were handling the household work like cooking, cleaning etc., without any outside assistance due to quarantine requirements and social distancing norms. They were making extra

efforts to maintain hygiene and sanitation at home and prepare healthy food and drinks that may boost immunity of family members. This new life situation resulted in increased stress, in addition to the fear and stress of pandemic.

Entrepreneur 2 shared that,

“There is no disturbance from family members while I am at work but the work seems endless with lot of multitasking required”.

Entrepreneur 4 said,

“work-load is overwhelming”.

In all the four cases, women felt that their workload increased tremendously and experienced a mental fatigue due to disappearance of separating line between work and personal life, although in 3 out of four cases, active support was received from family members which at least helped them to find some time for business activities.

Opportunity Recognition and Exploitation

It was found that the women entrepreneurs in all the 04 cases focused on recognising and exploiting unique opportunities created by the crisis situation. The pandemic gave them an opportunity to rethink modalities of running their business. They experimented with new ideas. Five dimensions of the construct ORE were identified from data analysis which are discussed in the following sections:

Adopting New Business Model

Business model provides a framework within which a firm operates to create and deliver value to its customers. Women entrepreneurs in all the four cases explored and experimented with the novel ways of managing business operations with the

limitations imposed by Covid 19 pandemic. Shifting the office base to home, either wholly (Case 1 and Case 2) or partially (Case 3 and Case 4) was a major change. In all the four cases, entrepreneurs began making extensive use of information and communication technology for running their business. In pre- pandemic period, their business operations were totally based on physical interaction with vendors/ customers/clients. After outbreak of pandemic the business became ICT-integrated either wholly (as in cases 1 and 2) or partially (as cases 3 and 4). Chatting applications on mobile phone were more intensively used for networking with suppliers and customers/clients. They began displaying their products and services on social media. New networks were created for product delivery in Case3 and Case 4.

Cost Cutting

In all the four cases the entrepreneurs believed that the most important opportunity offered by the pandemic was to explore and find out prospects of reducing the costs of running business. Three out of four entrepreneurs (in Cases 1, 2 and 4) shifted their business completely to home that saved various fixed and variable costs involved in maintaining rented spaces from where they operated before the pandemic. Adoption of ICT also helped in saving resources and reducing costs involved in carrying out routine activities (like commuting, saving time and cost of organising meetings, etc.) operations.

Entrepreneur 3 experimented to create new recipes in bakery using the limited ingredients (due to interrupted supply of goods) to manufacture quality goods with less ingredients and cost. She says,

....online business offers a better and cost effective way of selling and marketing”.

Entrepreneur 4 revealed,

“I organise online events for marketing my products.”

All women entrepreneurs agreed that till the time before pandemic, they never actively explored the ways of cost reduction in their business.

Innovation in offerings

In all the four cases, women entrepreneurs saw the opportunity to bring innovations in their offerings, which was also a requirement for viability of business. They also saw an opportunity to diversify the business. For example, Entrepreneur 2 recognised the a new opportunity since the concern for health among people has increased ever since pandemic broke out. She planned to diversifying the business and incorporated sessions on nutrition in her fitness programmes.

She was affirmative that

“I will continue to expand my online business”

Entrepreneur 3 began offering an add-on facility of delivering birthday cakes at midnight, while Entrepreneur 4 started online and offering online training sessions in handicraft, further expanding the scope of her business activities.

Expanding Market

Before the pandemic, the geographical expanse of business of all the four entrepreneurs was limited to their locality or city. After adopting online mode of selling goods/services, the market size in all the four cases increased gradually as it became easier to reach customers at far off places area. Customer/client base for entrepreneurs in all the four cases has increased manifold since then. Going online has particularly helped entrepreneur

1 and 2 in reaching out to new clients in far off localities and cities. Entrepreneur 2 says,

“It (online mode) has given me a global presence” (Case 2).

Training on nutrition helped her attract a new category of customers who are interested in nutrition and proper diet training. In cases of entrepreneur 3 and entrepreneur 4, the customers used to visit their shops for purchase. Due to restrictions on mobility after the outbreak of pandemic, both the entrepreneurs started taking orders though mobile and social media. They created started home delivery of products.

Skill Development

Women entrepreneurs were very quick to realise that a lot of learning was required to acquire new skills- both hard and soft skills - to cope up with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 for business. Skill development was considered both a challenge as well as an opportunity.

Entrepreneur 4 said,

“It is the right time to learn new skills.”

The women entrepreneurs believed that crisis taught them to be resilient and face stressful situations calmly.

Entrepreneur 1 made extensive use of social media platforms for communication purposes with different stakeholders. Moreover, both of these entrepreneurs learnt about the use of various virtual platforms and use of different software and mobile apps for delivering services to clients in online mode.

Entrepreneur 3 worked on improving her baking skills and started accepting orders online through social media platforms. Entrepreneur 4 worked on

producing more creative handicraft items. She began active marketing on social media platforms, and learnt to create content for online workshops on handicraft uploading it on her Youtube channel and social media platforms

Conclusion

Women entrepreneurs in the study responded to the crisis quickly and strategized to reduce risk and seize new opportunities so as to recover from this shock and maintain the viability of their business. They pivoted their business models along three dimensions—skillsets, operations and technology, quickly tailored the offerings of their business and adopted new business models. They did this by recognising new opportunities, leveraging their current resources and capabilities, and training and retraining themselves to develop new skills and capabilities. This is contrary to previous studies which reported that women are less likely to adopt information technology (Orser & Riding (2018) and social media could act as a barrier for women entrepreneurs Mack et al. (2017).

Though the literature considers work-life balance as a major challenge for entrepreneurs but in the current study, maintaining this balance did not emerge as a major concern. The challenge was more of work-life fusion due to working from home that resulted in stress, work overload and interruptions in the flow of professional work.

Contribution of the study

The research on challenges and opportunities faced by women entrepreneurs during Covid 19 is still in nascent stage. Present study furthers this research by exploring perceptions of challenges and opportunities for women entrepreneurs during the crisis time of Covid 19 pandemic. It explores attitudes of women entrepreneurs in crisis situation and affirms that women entrepreneurs remodelled

their business by readily adopt ICT, taking calculated risks and exploited new opportunities.

Limitations and directions for future research

The study has the limitations of telephonic survey conducted during the lockdown. Even though previous research has been used to complement analysis of the challenges and opportunities created by COVID-19 pandemic for women entrepreneurs, the findings are still based on insights from 04 case studies. Second, all the four cases were selected on the basis of some common characteristics in terms of socio-demographic backgrounds so that relevant comparisons may be drawn, but this also becomes a limitation as perceptions of challenges and opportunities could be different for women entrepreneurs with different demographic characteristics, or those running bigger or smaller size of businesses. Additionally, not all information could be triangulated since the information was self-reported. Accordingly, there is a need for further research to probe the applicability of our findings in different contexts.

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