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## How Has the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected Nigerian Women Entrepreneurs in the UK?

### Abstract

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the policy of lockdowns, on business in general, and certain sectors of the economy, has been widely discussed during the last year. Less is known, however, about the impact on specific groups of economic actors within the UK economy. This small-scale research project explores the impact that the pandemic and lockdown has had on Nigerian women entrepreneurs with enterprises in the UK. The paper considers the context in which these women were operating before the pandemic, the additional challenges created by lockdown and the disruption to many of their businesses, and the impact it has had on these women's lives and their businesses. It concludes that more business support is needed for this highly resilient and versatile group of female entrepreneurs during this uniquely challenging period.

Keywords: women entrepreneurs, motivation, embracing change, virtual work practices, crisis of COVID-19, ethnicity

### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of the current changes and how African women in the UK are motivated to embrace changes in business practices to sustain their businesses, regardless of the damage caused by the current pandemic. The women referred to here are Nigerian female entrepreneurs who are based permanently in the UK managing their own businesses, ranging from hair dressing, media, care homes, recruitment, restaurants and any registered UK form of recognised businesses. The approach for the data collection is derived from coaching work with female entrepreneurs, on business planning and management, also an entrepreneur, a media and publicist for celebrities. The paper highlights some of the challenges currently impacting on female entrepreneurs and their motivation to use the virtual aides working from home to sustain their businesses.

### Background

#### *Entrepreneurial culture and motivation*

Drawing from the concepts of entrepreneur culture, seen as “a set of values, beliefs and attitudes commonly held by society which supports the notion that an entrepreneurship is desirable and supports the search for effective entrepreneurial behaviour” (Gibbs, 1996, in Ajekwe, 2017), therefore the success of every female entrepreneur depends on balancing the culture of the local customers, global and national (Durowoju, 2014), and this can have both negative and positive impacts. Schumpeter's Theory of Innovation identifies entrepreneurs as innovators that

propel the economy to a new level of development by breaking the routine circle flow of the economy, not a man ordering management ability, but one who introduces new business ventures (Hagedoorn, 1996).

The Uncertainty Risk Bearing Theory of Knight originated in 1921 is based on entrepreneurs seen as a risk bearer and this can impact on the business profit which he has to bear. With the COVID-19 pandemic, it is certain that all the risks associated with the business are the responsibility of entrepreneurs and some of the female entrepreneurs could not bear the risks for long. The theory of Frank Young provides the notion that the initiatives of entrepreneurs are conditioned on changes in the group (Ameh & Udu, 2016). It goes on to say that the entrepreneur is not individual based function but as a direct manifestation of his groups. The economic theory of entrepreneurs proposed by Paparek (1962) and Harris (1970) is of the opinion that economic incentives and gains that propel the entrepreneurship to diverse initiatives and through which economic growth takes place in favourable (Kumar, 2020).

Motivation is the drive that makes an individual go the extra mile to do things and in return, expects a form of reward, of which all business owners are set up to be rewarded in one way or the other. It is seen as factors that initiate, direct and sustain human behaviour through time. Motivation classified as a natural human desire or an impulse rising from an external concept towards making individuals work hard for gains. Motivation is an internal process that stimulates an individual to maintain a particular way of behaving towards achieving set goals (Baron, 1991).

Others have viewed motivation as the movement of the fear of failure for the gain of external gains. For Hertzberg (1987), also, motivation is seen as the growth function for external rewards that enables the individual stimuli for an action for growth from external factors (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Most of the female entrepreneurs in this study are motivated and dedicated to their business success and therefore would be demotivated if the success does not come with the business. Motivation is the driving force in an individual that compels them physiologically and psychologically to pursue one or more goals to fulfil their needs (Lam & Tang, 2003).

It is clear from the literature and experience that the motivation of the female entrepreneurs is the power, incentive, enthusiasm and interest for the human behaviours which the action leads to a reward or consequence for the individual. In the case of the female entrepreneurship motives and desire to do a business the power of being the boss, get monetary reward and other incentives, hence the determination to stay in business to achieve their goals (Equity theory). The level of motivation has a great impact on human behaviour (Huang, 2016). Maslow's Hierarchy of needs theory emphasises the need to fulfil the basic needs of life and the moment the need is satisfied; food and safety become key to entrepreneurship. Herzberg's (1987) hygiene theory also helps with the understanding of motivation to aspire in life of which running a business to achieve success is key to entrepreneurship ventures.

### *Female Nigerian entrepreneurs in the UK*

Women have been in business for decades and more and more women are becoming entrepreneurs every year including Nigerian women in the UK. COVID-

19 suddenly began to affect the UK in March of 2020 and it has highly affected women in business in many ways. Many offline businesses had to close temporarily or permanently due to the pandemic. This includes huge changes in economic, social, domestic, environmental, education and businesses for women entrepreneurs. Many female-led businesses had to close on many high streets across the UK, this included beauty salons, hair salons, women's clothing stores, shoe shops, stationery shops, food stores which affected many of their businesses and has led to a crisis in so many ways and changes to how women work.

Most of the Nigerian female entrepreneurs in the UK own their business to meet the basic needs and also, to gain finance reward. With the current challenges of the pandemic, most of the urge to aspire and be successful is now threatened and some having to close down their businesses. Other challenges imposed on female entrepreneurs in London concerned about cost of premises, business rates, regulatory agencies and taxation has resulted in higher costs of running the business as the costs in most cases outweighs the benefits. Childcare is one of the issues confronting the female entrepreneurs at the present time, most of the schools are on lockdown leaving parents to work from home and look after their children and teaching them hence combining the business and childcare demands.

On the positive side, there are some opportunities associated with running their business, for instance, those on essential business like food stores are able to tap into the local resources, develop knowledge and skills and opportunity to access the local customers (Sasangi, 2005, in Durowoju, 2014).

### *The COVID-19 pandemic*

In 2019, Coronavirus (COVID-19) was discovered in a marketplace in a city called Wuhan in China. The initial clinical results of the scientists proved that the transmitted virus could be easily spread to affect the entire world from a person to person (Zhu et al., 2020). The WHO announced it that the world was in crisis of a virus based on testing carried out with the rapid spread of the disease. The announcement resulted to the world lockdown to reduce the spread of the disease (WHO, 2020). The social distancing known as 'mindful increase of physical gap between humans to limit the spread of the virus (Red Cross, 2020) has meant that all involved in education to comply to the strict government rules and regulations.

The statistical evidence indicates that 95.1m cases and 2.03m deaths worldwide from disease (WHO, 2020), with the high spread of the virus found in Italy, America, Brazil, UK and India having the most number of reported cases. In the UK, the impact extends to all businesses, and has hit many small businesses particularly hard.

## **Methodology**

Drawing from the work of Saunders et al. (2015) played a key role on our choice of approach to the work. Research methodologies provide philosophies and strategies of which the researchers become capable of conducting research in a systematic approach or vast manners. The combination of both primary and secondary were useful steps followed to gather the data. The gathered data is analysed below in a small scale and hope to progress the research to a higher level. Data analysis based on comments of the entrepreneurs. Targeted entrepreneurs that

accepted to be part of sharing ideas on motivation and demotivation to sustain their business at the current pandemic and how they are coping with the changes in business operations has helped to understand the degree of the challenges and impact.

## Findings

Coaching some of the women from African that own their businesses, most of them seem highly motivated and positive to work for themselves, either to work online and from home. This has meant that women have had to increase their multi-tasking skills and combine their businesses with their home life, particularly those with children. With government initiative of lockdown to reduce the Coronavirus, most of the women now work from home online and also at the same time making sure that their children are educated. Women entrepreneurs that are married with kids have had to teach their children which are compulsory working with their teacher's online, cook, clean and work virtually using their laptops and platforms like Zoom and social media platforms instead of taking their kids to school and having their regular time allotted to focus on their businesses.

The impact has led to domestic issues such as an increase in stress, feeling overwhelmed, frustration, anxiety and in some cases abuse and domestic violence. However, some women have been able to leverage the virtual world in powerful ways: they have had an increase in clients, sales, income and still somehow been able to relax, de-stress from their offline businesses and spend quality time with their families, as well as saving money from transport and petrol.

COVID-19 has had both positive and negative impact on the female entrepreneurs all over the world and mostly for the participants in this survey as they share their experiences with the crisis of pandemic. Their comments are presented with consideration to ethical issues and compliance to Data Protection Act 1989; hence I have represented the comments using the word A1-A10. The comments from the participants were chosen to share based on the importance attached to them.

A selection of comments from the research interviews:

### *Q1 What has motivated you to become an entrepreneur?*

*I have always wanted to work for myself and not for anybody, because of control and doing my own things as I would want it to be. I work for me and I feel satisfied that I have my own business with four people that I manage and they are loyal to the business. Unfortunately, I laid them off because of affordability at the current time. The shop is locked up and I try to sell a bit on line but nothing much is happening than incurring more expenses. (A1)*

### *Q2 How would you classify your business and for how long in business?*

*I am into catering business and with a restaurant which is affected by lockdown. We hoped that the business could be recovered after the first lockdown, we expected to open which we did try around the Christmas, and the second lockdown has not helped at all. We understand that it is about protecting our health and safety and to reduce the spread of the virus, however, when you also compare it to the financial stress and losses; you feel that the world is over. However, we hope that vaccine will do the job to get people back to the business. I am busy online given more customer*

*care and health and safety training to my employees preparing them for the future as I want to continue with the business after the pandemic. I can't wait to get back to work. (A2)*

**Q3** *What are the key challenges that you have faced as an entrepreneur since the lockdown?*

Another comment was challenges of child care, as parents:

*We are now home tutors, working from home and also teaching the kids. I have four young children and both myself and husband work from home. Although, we both take it in turn to teach the children liaising with the teachers on what to teach, also preparing food, clean the house and time to get them to bed, also working from home can be demotivating. However, some aspects of working from home has kept me motivated being in close touch with the family. (A3)*

Another interesting comment that emerged was on racial issues, as stated, the support for the Black female entrepreneurs in the covid period is very limited. It could also be because of the fear of many dying; black people may not have opened up or sorted help to support their businesses, Nigerian women are usually comfortable, hardworking and very proud to ask for help or do not want to be turned down when asked for help. For instance:

*My sister applied for the government loan, she did not qualify for it because of the criteria attached to qualify for the loan as her business did not make enough profit. She became demotivated and decided to close down the business for peace and inability to sustain the business, she is now looking for a full time job which is also difficult to get. More black women would like to do their own business but the support has never being there for them to grow, it is not only in the covid period, it is a long history. I would recommend more support for the black women in business mainly the enterprising Nigerian women; they work very hard and need more support to grow. (A4)*

**Q4** *Briefly outline some of the positive and negative challenges you have experienced since the first and second lockdown*

Despite the negative comments, one of the entrepreneurs has had positive experience as commented:

*I have had a positive experience making an online sales resulting to business growth and making more money than expected. This has being my only motivation since the covid period, but lost grandmother which results to demotivation facing a family bereavement, regardless of the covid turbulent, the business is doing well on-line that could not have being the case. However, I could do with more financial support especially after the pandemic. (A5)*

On the negative, another has stated how she quite her business and decided to work to make the ends meet:

*I decided to quit for a new job as no booking from the clients as a coach. People are not booking for training now due to holding on to their money because of the fear of the unknown. It is a tough time at present, getting clients, as people are worried about the fear of unknown, but I refuse to be demotivated, move on with what is available which is now job hunting. (A7)*

**Q5** *How are you embracing the digital technology to support your business?*

*I must admit, it is not easy, on the other hand, it helps to connect me with more people out there but knowing how to use it is the problem. I prefer the face to face experience which is not great online. For me I need more training to embrace online advertising, however, I am learning how to embrace virtual marketing to promote the business. It is not easy for me because of my poor IT backgrounds. It is a big challenge for me embracing online marketing and getting clients online is a big issue at present. (A10)*

## Conclusion

The above approach has enabled conclusive thought about some of the challenges currently impacting on the female entrepreneurs and their motivation to use the virtual aides working from home to sustain their businesses. All the entrepreneurs interviewed agreed that they are part and parcel of the society and support the local community provide job opportunities, no matter how big or small their businesses may be presented. The majority of the entrepreneurs interviewed (9 out of 10) felt highly demotivated due mainly to financial losses, childcare issues, working from home due to lockdown which cannot be underestimated. Some of the female entrepreneurs (3 out of 10) said they are unlikely to sustain the business any longer and are likely to close down in few weeks due to financial constraints. The most interesting result is that some have made good money selling with their businesses seen as essentials.

The purpose of this work is to present some of the positive and negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic on women entrepreneurs living permanently in the UK and suggests measures to support women entrepreneurs in their business venture, the motivation and demotivate experienced in their coping in this burning period of economic downturn caused by COVID-19. It is therefore recommended that the Nigerian women in business living in the UK be supported and encouraged in their business ventures, considering that they are part of the UK growing economy. Training and development opportunities and motivation incentives will help with their motivation.

These women have shown that they are highly versatile and able to take on multiple roles, in business and in their home lives, but they have also faced considerable strains because of the pandemic. A key question for further research is: What does the future hold for the African Nigerian female entrepreneurs in the UK?

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