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Review of female immigrant entrepreneurship research: Past findings, gaps and ways forward

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ABSTRACT

We conduct a review of the literature on entrepreneurship by females with an ethnic minority background based on immigration to a new country and focus on entrepreneurial resources, entrepreneurial strategies, outcomes, and context. The intersection of gender and ethnicity influences entrepreneurship in specific ways that we discuss. The literature review indicates that particular (human, social, and financial) resources help shape entrepreneurial strategies, which in turn result in particular outcomes at the individual, firm, and societal levels. These factors are influenced by the co-ethnic and host country cultural and institutional contexts that we review. Situating our study in the mixed embeddedness perspective, we organize and synthesize extant research on the business endeavors of female immigrant entrepreneurs and discuss important gaps that provide opportunities for future research. We also address policy and practice implications.

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1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship undertaken by females with an ethnic minority background based on immigration to a new host country (hereafter, termed *female immigrant entrepreneurship*) has garnered increasing attention from researchers. Authors have maintained that while the topics of female entrepreneurship on the one hand, and immigrant entrepreneurship on the other hand have seen a surge in research, the intersection of gender and ethnicity in studies of entrepreneurship deserves attention on its own (De Vita, Mari, & Poggesi, 2014; Essers & Benschop, 2007; González-González, Bretones, Zarco, & Rodriguez, 2011; Kwong, Thompson, Jones-Evans, & Brooksbank, 2009). Female immigrant entrepreneurship, despite sharing commonalities with other forms of entrepreneurship, also has its specificities. Some areas of social and business life may be different for females of particular ethnic groups compared to their male counterparts. For example, female presence in the public domain may not be acceptable in some

cultures, prompting females to find strategies that differ from those adopted by their male counterparts. Further, unlike female entrepreneurs from the ethnic majority in a country, female immigrant entrepreneurs from ethnic minorities may face their own set of opportunities (such as knowledge of the co-ethnic market) and challenges (such as discrimination from the majority population based on skin color and accent). These issues underscore the importance of attending to female immigrant entrepreneurship as a topic worthy of its own research. Interest in this topic has arisen in the context of increasing immigration, especially from developing-to-developed¹ countries, which makes a literature review on the

¹ Debate exists in the literature regarding definitions of developed and developing countries. For example, the WTO indicates that “There are no WTO definitions of ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries. Members announce for themselves whether they are ‘developed’ or ‘developing’ countries ... Developing country status in the WTO brings certain rights. There are for example provisions in some WTO Agreements which provide developing countries with longer transition periods before they are required to fully implement the agreement and developing countries can receive technical assistance.” (https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/devel_e/d1who_e.htm) Similarly, the UN provides a list of developing countries (<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49/>), and this website states: “The designations ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ are intended for statistical convenience and do not necessarily express a judgment about the stage reached by a particular country or area in the development process”.

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topic timely.

Our literature review started with an attempt to understand the business endeavors of female “immigrant” entrepreneurs, and in searching the literature, we soon found that there was lack of a comprehensive framework organizing the different aspects of business activities. We were also confronted with ambiguous terminology because some studies in our review were not specific about whether the female entrepreneurs were first or later generation immigrants, the length of time the entrepreneurs had been resident in their host country, and/or whether they had been assimilated into that host country culture. We use the term “immigrant” in this study and highlight this issue as a limitation in existing research.

We also found a paucity of studies on female immigrant entrepreneurs from developed countries as most research focuses on female immigrant entrepreneurs who move from developing to developed countries. Additionally, there is very limited research on female immigrant entrepreneurship in areas such as industrial and high tech sectors. We noted a concentration on what may be termed lower skilled, lower financial capital activities such as domestic help, beauty, and food services. These issues indicate a need for a review that ties together the different strands of knowledge, reveals areas of weakness in the literature, and points to directions for future research that enriches the discussion on this topic.

The objectives of this paper are to review the literature on female immigrant entrepreneurship, focusing on entrepreneurial resources, entrepreneurial strategies, outcomes and context, to highlight important gaps that provide opportunities for researchers to build on the platform of research undertaken to date, and to offer implications for policy and practice. Our literature review focuses on themes captured by the following research questions: What aspects of the macro host country and co-ethnic contexts influence female immigrant entrepreneurship? What particular resources help shape female immigrant entrepreneurial strategies? What are the outcomes at the individual, firm, and societal levels of female immigrant entrepreneurship?

We build on the mixed embeddedness perspective based on the work of Kloosterman and colleagues (Kloosterman, 2010; Kloosterman & Rath, 2001; Kloosterman, Van Der Leun, & Rath, 1999). They argue that immigrant entrepreneurship is best understood when considered from the perspective of the entrepreneurs’ resources and embeddedness in the social network of immigrants, and embeddedness in the politico-institutional, socio-economic environment of the country of settlement. “The concept of mixed embeddedness has been put forward as an interactionist approach to encompass both actors (the migrant entrepreneurs) and the opportunity structure in a more comprehensive analytical framework” (Kloosterman, 2010, p. 27). Consistent with this approach, in our review, we cast the spotlight on both the actors (the female immigrant entrepreneurs, their resources, and strategies) and the sociocultural, economic, and political structures that constitute the host country and co-ethnic context within which the actors operate. In our discussion of the reviewed articles, we also refer to broader conceptualizations of immigrant entrepreneurship (for example, Waldinger, 1989; Basu, 2010; Zhou, 2004).

Our study contributes to theory, practice, and policy. From a theoretical perspective, we highlight three contributions. First, we are not aware of any study that has comprehensively covered and organized the topics addressed in the literature on female immigrant entrepreneurs’ business endeavors, despite an increased interest in the topic. An article by De Vita et al. (2014) provided a review of female entrepreneurs in and from developing countries but focused mainly on female entrepreneurs in developing countries. Second, our review makes a contribution by uncovering pervasive tendencies in research on female immigrant

entrepreneurship and by highlighting overlooked aspects of this entrepreneurship. For example, we will show later that there is a tendency in the literature to focus on lower skill, low growth sector strategies, while higher skill, high growth sector strategies of female immigrant entrepreneurs do not seem to be actively pursued in research. Therefore, we argue that there is a need for a deeper and more balanced view of female immigrant entrepreneurship. Third, by situating our study in the mixed embeddedness perspective, we highlight how this perspective can help enrich and be enriched by more nuanced studies of female immigrant entrepreneurship. From a practice and policy perspective, this study is timely and widely pertinent, given the rise in the resettlement of populations across the globe. Female immigrants interested in entrepreneurship in a country of settlement can learn from research on the subject, and policy makers interested in encouraging female immigrant entrepreneurship will achieve a better understanding of issues that need to be considered and that foster such activities.

This paper is organized as follows. We provide an overview of the literature search and analysis process, followed by definition of terms used in this paper. We then provide a review of the themes associated with female immigrants’ entrepreneurial strategies. We conclude the paper by discussing limitations of the study and implications for policy, practice, and future research.

2. Literature search methodology, organizing conceptual framework, and terminology

With the help of a Librarian, we conducted a search of Web of Science (Social Sciences Citation Index [SSCI] and Arts & Humanities Citation Index [A&HCI]), ABI/INFORM, and Business Source Complete in 2015. The search terms used were the following: (immigration OR immigrant* OR migrant* OR ethnic OR ethnicity OR ethnicities) AND (woman OR women OR female* OR gender OR businesswoman OR businesswomen) AND (entrepreneur* OR SME OR SMEs OR small and medium enterprise OR small and medium enterprises). These search terms were applied to the title, abstract, and keywords. We did not filter for time.

The search yielded 261 articles. A reading of the titles and abstracts led to the elimination of articles that were clearly not pertinent, but when there was any uncertainty about relevance at the title and abstract-level sift, the article was carried forward, and the full text was read for inclusion or exclusion in the review. For example, we excluded articles that addressed female entrepreneurship and ethnic entrepreneurship as two separate categories. Another example of articles that were excluded involved indigenous communities such as aboriginal entrepreneurs. We excluded these studies given that our focus was on female entrepreneurs whose immigration was relatively recent, although in certain articles this was difficult to establish. We identified 54 articles that addressed all three aspects of interest conjointly (female, immigrant/ethnic, and business entrepreneurship). Appendix 1 provides information on these articles. Fig. 1, based on the articles we reviewed, shows an increasing interest in the topic of female immigrant entrepreneurship.

Articles were read separately by two co-authors, who identified the topics on female immigrant entrepreneurship addressed. To organize the themes in our review, we focused on Kloosterman’s (2010) work on mixed embeddedness and augmented it with elements elaborated by other authors given that no single theoretical framework provides a comprehensive view of female immigrant entrepreneurs’ business endeavors. Kloosterman posits that an understanding of immigrant entrepreneurship requires attention to the micro level of the individual entrepreneur and his or her resources, and the embeddedness of the entrepreneur in the co-

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