



Women entrepreneurs in and from developing countries: Evidences from the literature



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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurship has a leading role in economic development worldwide and, although it has usually been considered as a male dominated activity, recent studies emphasize how significant the contribution of women today is: in 2010, almost 42% of entrepreneurs in the world were, indeed, women (GEM, 2010).

The role of the gender factor emerged in the academic literature on entrepreneurship in the late 1970s. Over the years, attention has been mainly devoted to the analysis of women entrepreneurs' characteristics in developed countries. Only recently have both the role of female entrepreneurship in emerging economies and the relevance of immigrant female entrepreneurs in developed countries appeared in international journals. Due to the relevance of these two issues for economic development and the still existing gap in the systematization of both theoretical and empirical findings, the authors of this work aim to fill this gap with a systematic literature review based on rigorous criteria.

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Introduction

Entrepreneurship is today considered to be a relevant vehicle for economic development and women contribute to it significantly worldwide: indeed, in 2010, 187 million women were involved in creating and operating enterprises, meaning that almost 42% of entrepreneurs¹ in the world were women (GEM, 2010).

The relevance of the female entrepreneurship phenomenon, for both research and practice, led us to develop a systematic literature review on the topic. As the last systematic analysis on this issue refers to those articles published up to 2000 (Ahl, 2006), we systematized the theoretical and empirical findings that have emerged in the female entrepreneurship literature since 2000 and identified areas for future research. Among those areas, two current and very challenging topics were highlighted: (1) the role of female entrepreneurship in developing countries and (2) the relevance of immigrant female entrepreneurs in developed countries.

Previous reviews on female entrepreneurs (e.g. Ahl, 2006; Brush, 1992; Gundry, Ben-Yoseph, & Posig, 2002) did not stress the relevance of these issues, focusing instead on women entrepreneurs' characteristics, psychology, motivations, networking activities, performance and growth in developed countries (in particular the US, Canada and the UK). This decision can be justified by the fact that studies on Latin America, Asia, Middle East and Eastern Europe and on immigrant women entrepreneurs from those countries only recently appeared in international journals.

In this vein, our aim is to deepen these recent and promising new streams of research for at least two reasons. On the one hand, by analyzing the characteristics of women business owners in and from less developed countries, it is possible to contribute to the advancement of the understanding of this multifaceted entrepreneurial phenomenon. The peculiarities of the country-specific socio-cultural and institutional environment have a primary role in determining women's opportunities to access the entrepreneurial path and their business' success, thus giving us the chance to test consolidated theories and investigate how belonging to certain cultures may differently affect female entrepreneurs' experiences and attitudes.

On the other hand, female entrepreneurship to date represents an important engine of economic growth for developing countries as it has a leading role in generating productive work, achieving gender equality and reducing poverty; thus, the analysis of its main characteristics can be useful for developing successful entrepreneurship-related policies and for understanding a country's competitiveness and growth potential. In line with these consider-

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¹ Over the years a number of different approaches have been used to interpret the term "entrepreneur" (see, for example, the reflections on entrepreneurship of two pioneer authors in the study of the topic: Say, 1816 and Schumpeter, 1949). In this paper, given the specific socio-economic context analyzed, we assume the entrepreneur to be the individual who establishes a new organization in response to identified opportunities (Onuoha, 2007).

ations, particularly interesting are the peculiarities of those migrant women entrepreneurs hailing from underdeveloped regions and now running a business in developed economies. Also, in desiring to support their country of origin and their societies through global trade and job creation (GEM, 2012), for these women the entrepreneurial path often represents the only survival strategy they can implement due to the “double discrimination” they frequently have to face in the host country. They are indeed women and they belong to a national minority; however, this interrelationship between gender and ethnicity can enrich the debate on entrepreneurship, thus making such aspects of entrepreneurship worth studying.

Given the relevance of these topics, either numerically – as the rate of female entrepreneurial activity in developing countries is equal to 45.5%, a percentage much higher than that generally registered in developed countries (GEM, 2010) – or socially – as the immigrant entrepreneurship phenomenon is today frequently considered to be a “quiet revolution”² – and the lack of categorization of the most important results, this work aims at systematizing both theoretical and empirical findings on the characteristics of women entrepreneurs both coming from and/or operating in developing countries, thus contributing to extending our understanding of the female entrepreneurship domain.

The analysis is conducted by adopting a cross-disciplinary approach, based on both a managerial and a sociological perspective. This choice is justified by the consideration that the existing gaps in the entrepreneurship research can be partially attributed to a strong foundation of entrepreneurial theory rooted only in economics (Hébert & Link, 1982; Shane, 2003), whereas some interesting features of women entrepreneurs may be successfully detected and investigated only by integrating different competencies, capabilities and theoretical approaches. Factors such as family constraints or gender differences, particularly investigated by sociologists, may indeed play a pivotal role in the choice of women to pursue, or not, the entrepreneurial path.

Some interesting results emerge. Although the degree to which the social structural dimensions, culture and values affecting women entrepreneurs rely on the country-specific context of those women, some “recurring” specificities for each geographical area seem to emerge. The influence of religion (in the East Asia and Pacific region); the need for professional training and the role of networking (in Eastern Europe and Central Asia); social segregation (in the Middle Eastern region) and the issue of societal legitimation to act as an entrepreneur (in South-Asia and sub-Saharan Africa) all appear to be pivotal factors in determining women entrepreneurs’ dynamics within developing countries. Moreover, the difficulties related to marginality with respect to the socio-economic context and the traditional barriers encountered, such as language difficulties, financial constraints and so on, also characterize the research on immigrant entrepreneurs. In addition, however, the intersection of different variables such as gender and ethnic origin seems to help in creating new entrepreneurial identities that could offer new possibilities for innovation and creativity.

Stemming from these considerations, our paper is primarily intended for those scholars and practitioners whose desire is to improve their knowledge about the state of the art of female

entrepreneurship in and from developing countries. In the next sections, we describe our research methods and then discuss the results. We finally draw on the main conclusions from this work for proposing potential avenues for the research agenda within this field.

Selection criteria and first evidences

Our previous paper on female entrepreneurship is based on a systematic literature review. Following its traditional process, we chose the Business Source Premier (EBSCO), ABI/Informs and Ingenta (including Science Direct) as the research databases. We established three restriction criteria: (a) only published peer-reviewed journal articles were considered in order to promote quality control; thus, books, chapters in books, reports, conference proceedings, working papers and other unpublished works were excluded; (b) articles had to be written in English; and (c) they had to be published in the time period January 2000–January 2012. We then selected articles that contain “female” or “wom*” or “gender” as keywords in their abstract. We, finally, ensured the substantive relevance of the managerial profile of each paper by requiring that the selected articles contain at least one of the following eight additional search keywords: “firm*” or “enter*” or “own*” or “business” or “corporation*” or “compan*” or “entrep*” or “venture*”.

Applying the previous steps of analysis and strict inclusion/exclusion criteria (see Appendices 1 and 2), our research final sample was composed of 191 papers.

As the purpose of this paper is to systematize both theoretical and empirical findings on the characteristics of female entrepreneurs in and from developing countries, the selected 191 papers were further reviewed according to one specific rigorous criterion for inclusion/exclusion: nationality. Specifically, we decided to include in the dataset only those studies on women entrepreneurs coming from and/or operating in developing countries.

In so doing, the final sample of our analysis resulted in 70 papers that are hereafter categorized according to:

- the distribution of the years of publication;
- the percentage of articles in each journal;
- the distribution of articles by research design;
- the distribution of articles by subject.

The distribution of articles published by year is shown in Fig. 1, which includes only complete yearly results.

Since 2000, research on female entrepreneurship in and from developing countries has grown substantially. Results show a total number of 14 publications in the period 2000–2005, while 5.4 papers were published annually in the period 2006–2011, with a peak of 15 publications in 2011, thus confirming the growing interest in the topic in recent years.

After analyzing the reviewed papers according to the journal in which they appear, the results from our dataset show that the 70 papers are distributed among 46 journals. To identify those journals most involved in the discussion, Table 1 categorizes the works per academic journal with more than two articles. In this table a list of 15 journals is represented, which includes only 22% of the papers in our dataset.

This fragmentation can be justified for two different reasons:

- Local interest in the topic. Research on women entrepreneurs in less developed areas has important implications for local economies, thus publication in country-specific journals, such as *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Journal of African Business*, *Development Southern Africa*, is reasonable.

² The expression “quiet revolution” is borrowed from the 70s and is mainly related to the increase in women’s involvement in the economy, which can be considered the most significant change in the labour market during the past century. The expression refers not only to the “evolution” due to women’s involvement in the labour force, but also to the fact that, thanks to their active participation to the economy, women have been able to find their own professional individuality and identity (Goldin, 2006). A similar trend is the one being registered today in less developed countries, where the “quiet revolution” of women deciding to run their own business has happened over the last few years and is continuing to grow.

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