

## Chapter 16

# Women Entrepreneurship Through the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The chapter investigated the COVID-19-induced challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe, the strategies used by women entrepreneurs to survive the COVID-19 crisis, and the government support needed by women entrepreneurs to recover from the pandemic. A quantitative research approach using a structured questionnaire was adopted for gathering data. Empirical findings illustrate that women entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe faces a multiplicity of challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, findings indicate that women entrepreneurs are cutting down costs, have introduced new delivery channels, and have reviewed their business models to become more resilient. However, women entrepreneurs also expect the government to offer readily accessible finances, arrange for skills and capacity-building training in response to the new normal, and craft economic recovery policies and packages that are tailored to specifically respond to the needs of women entrepreneurs. The study has both theoretical and practical implications.*

### **BACKGROUND**

Women entrepreneurship is an important economic activity in any economy worldwide (Terjesen, Bosma & Stam, 2016; Jaim, 2020). Women entrepreneurs are the backbone of many economies around the world (Price, 2020), most crucially in low and middle-income countries where women-run businesses have a key role in poverty reduction, employment generation, and economic diversification (Koltai & Geambasu, 2020). According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) (2019), across the 59 countries of its focus, at least 231 million women are starting or running businesses, and women-owned enterprises account for approximately 30-37 percent of all SMEs in low-income countries. Therefore, the socio-economic development of low-income countries is hinged upon the survival of women's

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entrepreneurial ventures (Ngoasong & Kimbu, 2018; Jaim, 2020). Despite seeming improvements in women's entrepreneurial participation in different industries, the women's business sector is stifled by a multiplicity of obstacles that compromises its sustainability and growth (Moses, Olokundun, Falola, Ibidunni, Amaihian & Inelo, 2016). The challenges faced by women entrepreneurs are rooted in unequal opportunities between men and women, especially in Africa (Bomani & Derera, 2020). As such, Bomani and Derera (2020) note that men have far greater access to economic resources, and men have more decision-making powers than women. Rudhumbu, du Plessis and Maphosa (2020) agree and add that the challenges confronting women entrepreneurs are deeply rooted in socio-cultural issues which view women in a patriarchal context.

The existing challenges have been worsened by the impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and the government's desire to combat the spread of the virus through the implementation of national lockdown measures (Mashingaidze, Bomani & Derera, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic emerged for the first time in China in December 2019, and as of 19 May 2020, Zimbabwe had 46 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 4 deaths (Price, 2020). The unprecedented spread of COVID-19 infections led to the enforcement of lockdown regulations from the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). The implementation of the national lockdown banned all social gatherings, enforced social distancing of 1.2 meters between 2 people, people were mandated to regularly sanitize their hands and wear face masks in public places as precautionary measures (Price, 2020). These measures have led to the closure of many businesses, retrenchments of employees, among others, as a result of business losses (Popović-Pantić, Semenčenko, Vasilić, 2020).

According to Greene and Rosiello (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an economic crisis of a magnitude unprecedented in current times. Notably, the pandemic has amplified social and gender inequalities (Manolova, Brush, Edelman & Elam, 2020). The pandemic has had a significant impact on the women providing services whose micro-businesses were closed for some period at the beginning of the crisis leaving them without any income (UN Women, 2020; Sangem, 2020). Some African countries, including Zimbabwe, declared a state of emergency during the first wave of the pandemic, starting in March 2020. During that period, approximately 65% of women entrepreneurs reported that the pandemic negatively affected their business activity, 27% stated that their business activity was not yet affected by the pandemic but that they expected negative impacts in the following 2-5 months (Mhlanga & Ndhlovu, 2020). For the majority of women, it was not easy to avoid the negative effects of the COVID-19 crisis caused by the closing of the borders between countries (Hambloch, Homann Kee Tui & Ochieng Ojiewo, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis has exposed the vulnerabilities of women entrepreneurs, calling for a rethink of how women-led businesses are led or managed (Sangem, 2020).

Before COVID-19, in 2019, women entrepreneurs were already experiencing a slowdown in growth due to economic challenges faced in Zimbabwe (Derera & Bomani, 2020). While researchers note the longer-term direct and indirect consequences of the pandemic, particularly its impact on women entrepreneurs, there is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic is going to be part of our daily lives shortly (Mashingaidze et al., 2021). The current crisis could erase years of development gains that the sector had accrued, and take time for the development and growth of women entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe.

Given that Zimbabwe is an awakening giant in Southern Africa, with women and youth making up the main actors in the economy (Rice, 2020), it has also been subjected to an increase in business closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Rice, 2020). Besides, the negative effects of the social distancing, lockdown measures, cancellation of important events (e.g., trade fairs), and the general concerns over health and safety have been felt by women entrepreneurs. Despite a potential recovery expedited by the

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