

# WHY SOMALI WOMEN ENTER INTO ENTREPRENEURSHIP: CONCEPTUAL STUDY

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## ***ABSTRACT***

*Somali Women owned businesses are highly increasing in the economies of almost all regions in the country. The hidden entrepreneurial potentials of women have gradually been changing with the growing sensitivity to the role and economic status in the society. Death or unemployment for husbands and fathers, contribution to the family income, taking a role in the society, independence and adaptability in business are the main reasons for women to emerge into business ventures. Major objective of the study is to find out the factors that motivating Somali women entrepreneurs to enter in to entrepreneurship. The results are drawn from interviews with a group of 5 women who has business in Bakara Market in Mogadishu*

## **Introduction**

Gender perspective within Entrepreneurship study is not a new topic and plentiful academic publications about feminism research have been published in recent years. This matches the trend that the society has drawn more attention in gender equality, which to larger extent helps women eliminate their subordinate social status to men. It is doubtless that the rising

consciousness of gender equality lets people put more attention on female role in entrepreneurship.

A women entrepreneur is one who owns and runs commercial enterprise independently, often at a personal financial risk.

Women-owned businesses are one of the fastest growing entrepreneurial populations in the world. They make significant contributions to innovation, employment and wealth creation in all economies (Brush et al., 2006). Despite the growing importance of women entrepreneurs, they are understudied, and the paucity of research on the phenomenon of women's entrepreneurship is well documented (de Bruin et al., 2006, 2007; Baker et al., 1997). A gender gap continues in academic research compared to the significant proportion of business ownership.

Academics and governments appear to be concentrating on encouraging entrepreneurship, because it symbolizes innovation and dynamic economy. Female entrepreneurs have been identified as a 'major force for innovation and job creation' (Orhan, Scott. 2001). And therefore much research about women business owners has concentrated on their motivations to become entrepreneurs.

This explanatory article investigates the reasons for Somali female entrepreneurs starting their own business. The basic question to which this study addressed itself was: Why Somali women enter into entrepreneurship?

In depth interview survey was used primarily as a research methodology. Five Somali women entrepreneurs were selected from the difference businesses running at the market, among them there were women selling textiles, restaurants, fruit and vegetables, household utensils and groceries

Besides answering questions regarding their motivation factors to enter into entrepreneurship, respondents were also required to provide some information about them, e.g. educational background and of business founding.

## **Gender Roles in Somalia**

« *Talo naaged reer kuma tanaado* » (No family will prosper if it relies on women's decisions) as these quotations imply, Women's experiences in prewar Somalia were varied. Not surprisingly, women in urban areas led lives quite different from those of women who lived in rural areas, and women in pastoral settings had very different responsibilities from women in agricultural households. Ibrahim Nur, in a 2002 study of the Lower Shabelle, found that stereotypes and perceptions of what are considered women's naturally endowed qualities—particularly lower intelligence than men—contributed to the exclusion of women from social economic, and political power structures. In this region, Nur found these perceptions to be firmly ingrained in the minds of men as well as of women.

Women traditionally have had relative autonomy over household decisions about child rearing and other «womanly» duties. Occasionally women would make their views known to the men in their lives on important issues outside of the domestic sphere. Men, on the other hand, were expected to act as the public economic and political face of the household, serving as breadwinner and representative to clan decision-making structures. (Timmons, 2004)

Somali women are not, however, unacquainted with the idea of equality between women and men. During the 1940s and 1950s a national women's movement emerged as the country strove for independence from Britain and Italy. Women became increasingly aware of their subordinate

roles in the household and within the larger society and began a campaign to combat the oppression they suffered in their own spheres of influence. In 1959 and 1960 two national women's organizations were started to further the concept of women's rights in the political sphere. When Siad Barre took power, all social organizations not affiliated with the government were immediately outlawed, including these fledgling women's rights organizations. However, during the Barre regime the rights of Somali women gained wider public acknowledgement. The government introduced a number of laws that brought about significant changes in women's status. As a consequence of this legislation, as well as increasing access to education, Somali women were able, in the 1970, and 1980s, to break down some of the socio-political barriers that inhibited their advancement. New opportunities opened up for women in both private and public sector (CRD, 2004).

A small but significant number of women rose to executive positions in the government and to midlevel ranks within the armed forces. But the most dramatic change occurred in the number of women employed as clerks, teachers, nurses and veterinarians.

### **Women's economic structures in prewar Somalia**

Women's economic standing and responsibilities in prewar Somalia varied by location, Women who lived in urban settings might likely have had husbands who worked in industry or government and acted as sole breadwinners for the family. These women would be tasked with the activities of running the household and bearing and raising children. In pastoral families, women shared in some duties outside the household, including the care and feeding of animals, selling of milk, and in some cases herding of livestock. Women in agricultural communities also engaged in activities outside the traditional household duties, assisting in the cultivation of fields

and harvesting of crops. Women's work, in the sense of maintaining the household and bearing and rearing children, has historically been recognized as essential to Somali society. Some women have been able as well to secure and maintain control over independent economic resources through inheritance. By tradition, any livestock, jewelry, or other property inherited by a female from her father or older relatives can never be acquired by a husband upon marriage.

This tradition has afforded Somali women some access to property outside of the clan structure. Although some women effectively maintained property, women's contributions to the economic livelihood of the family and clan outside of household duties were largely discounted and ignored, and they did not give women any power within kinship decision-making structures.

### **War's Impact on Women in Somalia**

The prolonged civil war and insecurity following the collapse of the Somali state in 1991 have caused immense human suffering and material losses across the south-central regions, leaving physical and emotional scars on all aspects of Somali society. In addition to death and destruction, the violent conflict has resulted in widespread displacement of people both within and beyond the country's borders. Family relationships have been disrupted, traditional social values eroded, and roles and responsibilities within the family have undergone major fundamental changes (CRD/WSP, 2004),

In Somali society, women are traditionally seen as the backbone of the family, the primary caregiver looking after the household and children, while the man protects and provides for the family and acts as its decision maker and representative in the community. However, the lengthy civil conflict has eroded these traditional roles, forcing people to seek the protection of their clans. Men and boys were forced to fight or leave their home areas to seek work to provide income for their families; some, faced with an inability to protect or support their families, even

abandon them. The serious stresses placed upon the family system during this period led to an increased number of divorces, women-headed households, and abandoned children (a phenomenon that was rare in Somali society prior to the collapse of the state).

The well-documented emergence of women as the primary economic providers in the post-war period is not limited to women-headed households. Many married women have also become the main source of income for their households due to high unemployment among men. Generally, men are unwilling or unable to engage in low income opportunities, such as petty trade in local markets. Male unemployment is also compounded by the widespread chewing of khat, a mildly intoxicating plant.

A variety of studies have found that, across Somalia, women now run 80% of petty trade (micro business) and small businesses, as well as running their own households. It is sometimes argued that this dramatic socio-economic shift demonstrates an enhanced position for women – although there is little evidence that this has translated into changes either in their economic status or their decision-making powers outside the family (CRD, 2007).

In 1997 ACORD, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) conducted a study in Lower Shabelle that found that women in the region were working 30 percent more than men. By 2001 ACORD found that an estimated 70 to 80 percent of the region's households were dependent on women's earnings for the family's livelihood. Somali women faced with either the loss of a husband or a husband unable to find work found means of earning a living through petty trade and cooperatives established with other women. According to Powers-Stevens, at the household and sub-clan level, «there has been an increased level of respect for the important role women are playing in meeting the economic burdens of supporting the family. This is an area which women

will need to capitalize on in the future if they are to increase their voice in decision making (Timmons, 2004).

Instead, women's increased involvement in trade appears to be a reflection of economic necessity. In most cases, women lack investment capital, own few assets, and earn a subsistence income to support their families through work in harsh conditions and an insecure environment. In south-central Somalia, there are relatively few women owners of wholesale businesses or major corporations, and very few major Somali companies have a woman on their boards.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Women are becoming entrepreneurs due to several factors which may be grouped under "pull factors" and "push factors". Push factors refer to factors that push women to commence the business enterprises with liking to start a business, driven by financial need due to family circumstances.

This study is a survey based study which was conducted at Bakara market on December 2011. Five Somali women entrepreneurs were selected from the difference businesses running at the market, among them there were women selling textiles, restaurants, fruit and vegetables, household utensils and groceries. They were asked five questions to each woman. The questions were mainly related to what led them to start the business; the date they started the business; their educational status; what motivated them to start up and their expectations of the future continuation of the businesses they are currently running.

The first women interviewed was at a restaurant manager, she was divorced and started the business 7 years ago making tea at a public place. She said that she lived with her relatives in

Mogadishu and was attending at school, later on, she dropped the school due to lack of support from the family she lived with and dared to start business for survival. Her business is growing and she wishes to continue. In the textile market one girl was selected among the women selling female clothes traditionally called “Baati” she looked young and welcoming, she was enjoying the business she was in. Like the previous women interviewed she started the business 7 years ago. Her business is a heritage as her mother used to trade clothes. She inherited the business from her mother and she wishes to continue this business as she enjoys the work. The majority of the business people at the household utensils market are women and one of them was interviewed she told that she is married and started the business 12 years back because of pleasure for work and wishes to continue. At fruit and vegetables market in the west of Bakara, one girl who was in the business for 16 years was interviewed, she was divorced with children. The first time she started business was when her new and first husband abandoned her during the first born baby pregnancy without notifying her. She started making tea for the business people at the market to survive her life and the new baby expected to born without helping father. The business she started changed over time she turned into selling dry food like maize and beans and again switched into the fruit and vegetables which she said is the most profitable business she has ever experienced. Although this woman is enjoying selling fruit and vegetables she is the only one out of the other five women interviewed wishes to quit the business in the future with the condition of getting sufficient income quoting “I would stay at home, if I could get sufficient income”. Finally a woman with 2 years business experience was interviewed. Selling grocery shop at one of the main entrances of Bakara she told that she starts the business for economic independence though she is married. She wishes to continue her business as long as she is generating income.



According to this survey Somali women entrepreneurs are not educated and they start businesses due to pushing factors like generating income. Only one woman out of the five women interviewed started the business for pleasure for work whilst 20 percent said the business is inherited from her mother and the other three women do the business for socio-economic support to her family members like their children. One woman would like to quit the business if given sufficient income for her family whilst other wishes to continue the business.

From this study, it can be concluded that occupational choice of women is influenced by their family needs. Business ownership, in particular, is motivated by a higher need for economic contribution to family and achievement.

Since this is one of the few studies on women entrepreneurs in Somalia, it is hoped that these results will form the basis for future research to enable more to be made known about women entrepreneurship. Many thanks to my student Mr. Ismail Heile who made contributions especially in data collection stage.