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PRELIMINARY REPORTS

## **Women Entrepreneurship in the Time of COVID19 Pandemic: Opportunities and Risks (The Case of Perm Region, Russia)**



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### **ABSTRACT**

*The article is devoted to the analysis of the level of development of women's entrepreneurship in the context of the pandemic and the crisis of 2020. The thesis that women's entrepreneurship was most affected by the COVID19 pandemic was verified. The article presents the results of an original focus group interview with female entrepreneurs of the Perm Region (Russia), conducted with the aim of studying their social well-being and adaptation to the conditions of the pandemic. Despite negative assessments of socio-cultural conditions and measures to support women's entrepreneurship in Russia, there is a high adaptability of Russian female entrepreneurs to crisis conditions. Female entrepreneurs find new opportunities for business development, expect the further development of women's business communities and the reduction of gender inequality. Based on the results of the focus group the qualities that contribute to the more successful adaptation of female entrepreneurs to the conditions of the COVID19 pandemic were*

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*highlighted: the ability to establish and maintain social ties (networking), focus on the social importance of business, flexibility in making new decisions and focus on learning.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Women's entrepreneurship, pandemic, COVID19, small and medium-sized businesses, risk factors, opportunities*

## **Introduction**

The crisis caused by the COVID19 pandemic has significantly affected private business, primarily small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as individual entrepreneurs (Zaitseva, Kokina, & Pecheritsa, 2020). In terms of the depth and scale of its impact, this crisis can be compared to a humanitarian catastrophe. The pandemic's economic crisis hit women's entrepreneurship particularly hard (UN Women, 2020; WE Forum, 2020). UN and World Bank reports show that female entrepreneurs have suffered more than men from the crisis: 64% versus 52% (SME Competitiveness Outlook 2020: COVID19, p. 32). Thus, it was feared that COVID19 pandemic could significantly reduce the economic empowerment of women, further increasing the gender gap.

An increasing number of studies are now focusing on gender differences when analyzing the impact of the pandemic on private entrepreneurship (Koltai and Geambasu, 2020; Vasilić, Popović-Pantić, & Semenčenko, 2020; Manolova et al., 2020). This is critical because women-owned small and medium-sized enterprises tend to be more vulnerable to economic shocks, especially in developing countries, although governments try to provide them with a variety of support (Floro, Tornqvist, & Tas, 2009; UNAIDS, 2012; Mingaleva et al., 2014). The high vulnerability of women's businesses is explained by a number of objective reasons.

Firstly, the business of female entrepreneurs is mainly concentrated in the types of activities that are most strongly dependent on the state of the regional and global economy - tourism and hospitality, retail and wholesale trade, the service sector (SME Competitiveness Outlook 2020: COVID19, p. 32).

Secondly, compared to men, women run younger, smaller, and therefore most vulnerable businesses (Vasilić, Popović-Pantić & Semenčenko, 2020).

Thirdly, traditionally women are more focused on housekeeping, caring for children and other family members (Cesaroni, Pediconi & Sentuti, 2018; Jackson, 2019). This functional role of women intensified during the lockdown, when schools, kindergartens, after-school activities places and nursing homes were closed. As a result, women have been given most of the responsibility for family care, including the care of elderly relatives (Koltai and Geambasu, 2020; Vasilić, Popović-Pantić & Semenčenko, 2020, Radović -Marković & Živanović, 2019).

Fourthly, during the lockdown period increased the “pre-existing gender disparity in business, spanning inferior digital skills, financial marginalization, lack of access to education and disproportionate domestic duties” (The Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurs, 2020, p. 6).

The Russian economy is characterized by many global trends caused by the COVID19 pandemic. According to the results of the survey of Russian entrepreneurs (N = 1500 people), conducted at the end of March 2020, female entrepreneurs are more likely to report the negative consequences of the pandemic for their businesses than men: 90% and 82% respectively (Post-pandemic business: recovering from shock, 2020). At the same time, two-thirds of women's businesses (68%) are small organizations with up to 15 employees involved in services, culture, sports and event organization sectors.

## **Theoretical Background**

According to the results of the annual study of the Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurs (MIWE), in 2020 Russia is ranked the 22nd out of 58 surveyed countries in the overall ranking of countries with the best conditions for women entrepreneurs (in 2019 - 29th place). At the same time, the international ranking of Russia is improved from the 16th to the 3rd place in terms of an indicator reflecting the strengthening of the women's position in the society (by reducing the gender gap in business from 47% to 16%). In terms of indicators of women's access to finance and knowledge (Knowledge Assets & Financial Access) Russia moved from the 19th to the 17th place in 2020. In terms of socio-cultural conditions and measures to support women's entrepreneurship (ease of doing business, cultural perceptions of entrepreneurs, quality of governance, entrepreneurial supporting factors), Russia still remains at the bottom of the ranking (46-47 place) (The Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurs, 2020).

There was an increase in female entrepreneurship in Russia before the pandemic. However, in the most cases the reason for women's motivation was the need to provide a source of income in the absence of other work options (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor Russia National Report, 2020). This is confirmed by various studies of Russian scientists. In the process of a survey conducted among Perm entrepreneurs (N = 120 people) at the end of 2019 - beginning of 2020 it was found that female are twice as likely as male to have forced motivation (24% versus 12%), although both women and men are dominated by voluntary choice of entrepreneurial activity (67% and 75%, respectively) (Seletkova & Lazukova, 2020). Forced motivation for entrepreneurial activity is a factor that hinders the adaptation of female entrepreneurs to crisis conditions. Forced motivation in general negatively affects various aspects of labour and entrepreneurial activity, reduces the initiative of people in business and hinders entrepreneurship (Mingaleva, Deputatova, & Starkov, 2016)

Global Entrepreneurship Monitor Russia 2018 and 2019 results allow us to conclude that Russian female entrepreneurs react more sharply to the changes in the socio-economic situation. During the crisis they are more focused on the transition to employment compared to male entrepreneurs. On the other hand, these results indicate that women are better able to adapt to long-term unfavorable economic conditions and find opportunities for entrepreneurial initiatives (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor Russia National Report, 2020). Although, some experts have questioned the traditional gender concepts of crisis response, in which women seek to reduce risk while men seek to take advantage of opportunities and make no distinction between the sexes (Maxfield, Shapiro, Gupta & Hasset, 2010; Manolova et al., 2020; Eagly & Carli, 2003).

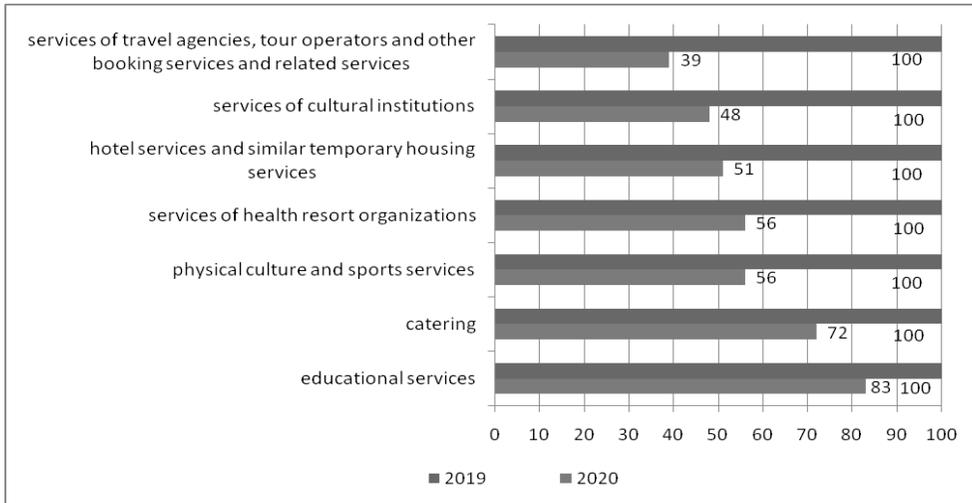
According to a study by the All-Russian public organization of small and medium-sized businesses "Support of Russia" there was a decrease in the index of female entrepreneurial activity because of the COVID19 pandemic in 2020 (Women Business Index, 2020). The lowest scores in 2020 were obtained for such an indicator as the "entrepreneurial ecosystem" and the highest - for the indicator "personal qualities" that contribute to entrepreneurial activity. At the same time, 58% of the surveyed female entrepreneurs (N = 400 people) received additional education during the last 6 months. This indicates that even in times of crisis women are focused on developing their professional competencies.

Moreover, experts note that some women entrepreneurs are trying to reap the benefits associated with the awareness of new opportunities in a situation of pandemic and lockdown. In particular, they try to adapt to extreme conditions, change old business models and offer new products and services. There are successful stories of female entrepreneurs responding creatively to the challenges of the COVID19 pandemic (Manolova, et al., 2020). For example, 42% of female entrepreneurs have shifted to a digital business model, 37% are developing an area of business to meet local or global needs and 34% have identified new business opportunities since the pandemic (The Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurs, 2020).

Due to the pandemic the situation in the Perm Region (Russia) is also unfavorable for female entrepreneurs. A self-isolation regime was introduced in April 2020 in the Perm Region. Many companies were forced to suspend or restrict their activities. Restrictions on business were gradually removed from May 2020, but they remain in some areas (mass events, organization of concerts) so far.

During the lockdown and the pandemic, the structure of small and medium-sized businesses in the Perm Region has changed as follows. The number of small and micro-enterprises in the Perm Region was 92.9% of the values on 03/10/2020 (calculated by the authors based on the data of the Unified Register of Small and Medium-Sized Businesses of the Russian Federation (The Federal Tax Service, 2021). At the same time, in January-December 2020 there was a decrease in retail trade turnover (turnover in comparable prices amounted to 94.7% by 2019), catering turnover (71.5% by 2019), sales of paid services to the population (83.4% of the 2019 level) (Socio-economic situation of the Perm Krai in January-December 2020, 2021). The largest reduction in the volume of paid services in the Perm Region is observed in areas typical for female entrepreneurship: tourism and hotel business, culture. The dynamics of the reduction in the volume of paid services in typical “female” types of entrepreneurship in the Perm Region in 2020 is shown in Figure 1.

*Figure 1: Dynamics of the volume of paid services in industries typical for female entrepreneurship in 2020, Perm Region (Russia) (data for 2020 in% to 2019 in comparable prices)*



*Source: Compiled by the authors based on the report "Socio-economic situation of the Perm Region in January-December 2020, 2021".*

The regional specificity of the processes under study is determined by a number of factors: 1) the regional structure of the economy and the structure of female entrepreneurship, 2) the forms and timing of restrictions imposed in connection with the COVID19 pandemic, 3) business support measures implemented in the region.

## Material and Methods

A study was conducted in March 2021 using the online focus group discussion method to assess the social well-being female entrepreneurs in Perm and their adaptation to the pandemic. Online focus group was conducted in real-time using the web conferencing service, which is pretty much in line with the traditional face-to-face focus group method (Kite and Phongsavan, 2017). Focus group is one of the qualitative research methods that do not allow to determine the prevalence of a particular opinion and calculate the shares, percentages, but make it possible to investigate in more depth social attitudes, motives and factors influencing decision-making and

people's behavior, focusing on subjective experience and perceptions of study participants.

The research methodology was developed on the basis of data from previous Russian and world studies and reports: «COVID19: The Great Lockdown and its Impact on Small Business» (SME Competitiveness Outlook), «The impact of COVID19 on women» (UN Women), The Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurs, Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, «Post-pandemic business: recovering from shock» (NAFI Research Centre), Women Business Index ("Support of Russia"). The experience of applying qualitative research methods (online focus group and in-depth interviews) was also used to determine strategies for adapting Russian small and medium-sized businesses to the conditions of the pandemic (Small business crash test, 2020). This research was carried out with the support of the All-Russian public organization of small and medium-sized enterprises "Support of Russia".

The study was conducted with the aim of identifying the characteristics of the social well-being of female entrepreneurs in the context of the pandemic's the impact on the business sector. In this regard, the main objectives of the focus group interview were:

- 1) to determine the characteristics of female entrepreneurship, incl. motivation and barriers to starting a business;
- 2) to study the subjective assessment of the favorableness of social conditions for female entrepreneurship: the attitude from the social environment, the business environment and the state;
- 3) to highlight the main problems faced by female entrepreneurs in the context of the pandemic, as well as options for responding to these problems;
- 4) to determine the factors that contribute to and hinder the adaptation of female entrepreneurs to the conditions of the COVID19 pandemic (in comparison with men entrepreneurs);
- 5) to identify the ideas of entrepreneurs regarding the prospects for the development of female entrepreneurship.

The participants in the discussion were seventeen representatives of the Perm female entrepreneurship, who run their business as the main type of activity that constitutes their main source of income. The business ladies had more than 10 years of business experience, and their age was 35-55 years old. The main areas of their business activities are the beauty and

sport industry, crop production, retail trade, accounting services, and the manufacturing sector.

## **Results**

The results of this study show that the main motives for women entering business are self-realization, the desire for financial independence and contribution to family well-being. Often business for a woman is not an end in itself and not a means of earning, but a tool for creating socially significant services and products (education and upbringing of children, meeting the needs of women in the field of health and beauty, etc.). Generally, Russian women come into business after the birth of children.

External support is extremely important for women to enter entrepreneurship, as they are less self-confident, less inclined to take risks and often have to overcome psychological barriers associated with the place and role of women in society (Jianakoplos & Bernasek 1998; Rigolini, Gabaldon & Le Bruyn Goldeng, 2021; Rubio-Banona & Esteban-Lloret, 2016; Eagly, 1987). According to the respondents who participated in the study opposition to women's business activity is widespread both in families and in the society. Counteraction is expressed in mistrust of women's initiatives, disdain for women's abilities, restraint in the form of an appeal to "female" household roles, and in some cases, intimidation. A similar attitude in the family, among business partners, landlords and other contractors significantly reduces the number of women who are involved in entrepreneurship.

According to the observations of the participants, who for three years have participated in teaching free business education under the "mother-entrepreneur" program, not only opposition, but even a simple lack of support is blocking female business activity. In such a situation, the position of society is extremely important - even a little help or advice provided at the start often plays a decisive role.

However, along with these issues, it can be noted that the COVID19 pandemic has highlighted a number of strengths of female entrepreneurs. For example, focus group participants note that, according to their experience, men are less adaptive, more withdrawn and more vulnerable due to excessive male pride. Women tend to have a more flexible and active approach, a more positive outlook on things. At the same time, they show a higher level of social responsibility, they are ready to take care of children

and elderly relatives not out of a sense of duty, but at the behest of their hearts.

The respondents confirm that women entrepreneurs have experienced more significant losses in business than men. This is due to the concentration of women in precisely those spheres of activity that were most affected by the pandemic - tourism, the beauty and fitness industries, retail trade, catering, and educational services. At the same time, all respondents noted that the peculiarities of women in doing business have become not a source of vulnerability in the context of the COVID19 pandemic, but on the contrary a key resource for overcoming the crisis. Women actively create communities, take an active position in any interactions, build relationships with all parties involved in business processes, which ultimately creates an ecosystem of mutual support, information, partnership. These are the ecosystems that have become the basis for finding creative solutions, new ideas and obtaining relevant information. At the same time, as a rule, men refused this format of cooperation. This is especially noticeable with the example of landlords. Judging by the experience of the participants, female landlords went towards tenants and significantly reduced payments, helping to keep the business, winning in the long term, in contrast to male landlords who did not change conditions, were tough, adamant and indifferent to the problems of tenants.

Another feature of female entrepreneurs that helped them overcome the consequences of the lockdown and the pandemic is the willingness of women to improve their professional skills and to learn. The respondents note that in all offline and online business courses the vast majority of participants are female. In their opinion, self-esteem does not allow male entrepreneurs to attend educational courses, especially if the teacher is a woman. They prefer to learn from their own mistakes.

For the further development of female entrepreneurship, the respondents consider it extremely important to provide women with a real opportunity to choose between entrepreneurship and other forms of organizing their lives. A prerequisite for this is the gradual removal of society from stereotypes about the abilities of women, the traditional "female share" and other constraining factors. It should be noted that in comparison with the older generation young people (20-30 years old) are already largely freed from the influence of such stereotypes, which indicates the presence of clear positive dynamics.

This is also related to the leveling of conditions for doing business for women and men. Participants note that gender equality is observed in matters of government support, business management procedures, fulfillment of obligations and compliance with requirements. However, women meet enormous resistance from society, rejection and even disrespect at the stages of the start of new ideas, directions, in situations of any negotiations, in the context of the manifestation of initiatives even at the formal level (the respondents cited examples of legislative initiatives of women's communities). This makes entrepreneurial conditions unequal for male and female participants. According to the businesswoman of the Perm Region the solution is to develop networking among women entrepreneurs and female business communities in addition to eliminating stereotypical perception in society.

In general, the respondents see positive prospects for female entrepreneurship, since more and more women has come into this sphere, and the state of the social environment has a positive trend in terms of reducing the role of stereotypes and eliminating inequality. In addition, in the context of the expanding automation of work and everyday life, more and more time and effort for women is freed up for active work, including entrepreneurial. At the same time, business areas, which are predominantly female often prioritize not the company's profit, but social value, created utility or problem solving. This approach is becoming one of the most important business trends in the modern globalizing world. In connection with the above circumstances female entrepreneurship is perceived as a promising and socially significant part of business. The conditions of the pandemic are testing predominantly female spheres of business (due to the peculiarities of these spheres themselves), however, the very feminine approach to doing business contains resources for overcoming crises and using new business opportunities that are opening up.

## **Conclusion**

The results of a study on the behavior of female entrepreneurs in Perm Region during the COVID19 pandemic has showed the following. Firstly, the situation in female entrepreneurship in Perm Region is in line with the global trends. The consequences of the pandemic had a more negative impact on female entrepreneurship for objective and subjective reasons: female entrepreneurs in Russia and in Perm Region do business in the

sectors of the economy most affected by the pandemic and do not receive sufficient (subjectively expected) social support. The pandemic has greatly increased the vulnerability of female entrepreneurs.

At the same time, female entrepreneurship is characterized by qualities that contribute to a more successful adaptation to the conditions of a pandemic - the ability to establish and maintain social ties, an orientation towards the social significance of business, flexibility and readiness to master new competencies and types of activities. One of the ways to overcome the crisis for female entrepreneurs is additional education. The research participants have demonstrated a pronounced focus on professional development, training in offline and online courses.

Women who have managed to keep their businesses amid a pandemic positively assess their prospects, expect further development of women's business communities and a decrease in negative stereotypes towards female entrepreneurship in society.

The focus group method allowed to find out the opinion of the most active part of female entrepreneurs who were able to maintain their business in the context of the pandemic and even develop it. However, the application of this method has objective limitations for research since it allows to cover only a small part of female entrepreneurs and does not allow quantitative assessments of phenomena and processes. However, the results obtained reflect the main risks, problems and opportunities that small businesses face as a result of the pandemic. The data obtained will be used in the future to develop a quantitative (standardized) survey of different groups of women entrepreneurs. In particular, it is planned to interview female entrepreneurs who have closed or mothballed their businesses, female entrepreneurs who are experiencing current difficulties in doing business, female entrepreneurs who intend to change the field of business and other groups.

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