

UDK: 005.336.1-055.2  
JEL: B54, L26  
COBISS.SR-ID: 215908620

ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

# Images of Success of Women Entrepreneurs: The Impact of Religion on Launching, Operating and Sustaining a Business Venture



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## ABSTRACT

*This paper describes an empirical investigation undertaken with the purpose of examining whether religion beliefs and faith impact on the launching and the operations of women's owned businesses. This qualitative study focused on the women's perception whether religion, as a major component of culture, played a role in the decision of starting up their business, as well on their testimonials whether this perception influence the way they view their business and the success generated from it.*

*Twenty six American women business owners participated in this study and were interviewed with a view to examining whether, according to their views, their religious background had any influence on their businesses. The results support the existence of a strong link between religious beliefs and women's entrepreneurial motives and the findings are consistent with past studies. The women's testimonials and perceptions demonstrated that their strong tie with religious beliefs and God fosters the desire to be successful with their ventures. In this study, there is support for the idea that, religion, as a robust cultural dimension, does in fact influence these women's entrepreneurial processes and aspirations.*

**KEY WORDS:** *women entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial ventures, motivation to launch a venture*

## **Introduction**

Women entrepreneurs have been increasing in large numbers and although women's participation in the creation of entrepreneurial ventures have been well documented in global reports (GEM, 2014), the perception and the images of success held by these female entrepreneurs, as it relates to the reasons why they enter the enterprising process, is still a work in progress.

A strand of research analyzed the impact of cultural dimensions on the women's perception of success and motivation to launch a venture (Anderson, 2010; Galbraith et al., 2004; Cousins, 1996) and it has been reported that religion plays an important role in women's entrepreneurship (Holland, 2014).

## **Images of Success and the Research Questions**

Although patriarchal cultural heritage encountered in certain societies precludes female entrepreneurship (Jonathan & Da Silva, 2007), especially in certain developing nations, women's owned businesses still flourish at a very high speed. But the questions remain: *What motivates these women to establish and grow a business besides the usual financial motivator? Is there any underlining robust cultural factor that strongly fosters entrepreneurship? What are the women's perception and images of success? Does religion, as a strong cultural component, play a major role in female entrepreneurship?*

The main objective of this study was to investigate whether, religion, as a major component of culture, impact on women's reason to launch, operate and sustain a business venture. Other factors such as perception of success, were also examined.

## **Literature Review**

Entrepreneurs carry a series of behavioral characteristics of the person carrying out the act of enterprising (Holland, 2010). Conditions leading to entrepreneurial activities range from personal, cultural and institutional and are impacted by external competitive forces, levels of business innovation, variety of offerings (products and services), and individual entrepreneurial efforts (Wennekas & Thurick, 1999).

Past studies indicate that *enterprising* is deep rooted in social and cultural contexts and it is impacted by societal possible stereotyping and preconceptions (Fonchingong, 2005; Pelegrino, 2005). A woman's desire for self fulfilment, independence and self- actualization have been indicated as factors associated with the desire to own her own business (Orhan & Scott, 2001; Deakins et al, 2002).

A strand of research reveals that entrepreneurial women often list some type of 'critical incident', there is, a critical moment in their lives that triggered the venture creation (Scheinberg & MacMilland, 1988). Critical incidents vary from lack of employment, dissatisfaction with a regular job, or an encounter with God (Holland, 2014).

## **Religion and Entrepreneurship**

Religion has been considered an important component of entrepreneurial motives and culture. The United States has been considered a religious traditional society and the spirituality of the American entrepreneur is reflected in many successful entrepreneurs such as S. Truett Cathy, founder of Chick-fil-A restaurants who died at the age of 93 in 2014, Mary Kay (Mary Kay Cosmetics) and Estee Lauder (Valtonem, 2007). Chick-fil- A is a nationwide chain of restaurants that have a tradition of not opening on Sundays for religious observation purposes. This practice is widely accepted by the community, whose members tend to view Turett's business as a role model for other businesses.

One of the strong foundations of the Protestant ethics, which is largely adopted in the United States, is the glorification of God through hard work and the creation of wealth. Therefore, religious motivation to launch an enterprising venture have been popular and well documented. (Valtonem, 2007).

Carter & Cannon (1992) indicated that 'women generally regarded success [of their business] in terms of how well the business met individual needs" (p. 50). These individual needs are often above the conventional measures of success such as high profitability and financial gains and may include spiritual needs.

Religion is embedded in social and cultural contexts by developing values that shape attitudes and behavior (Anderson: Drakopoulo-Dodd, 2000). The act of enterprising is not isolated from societal cultural values,

therefore religion, as a critical element of culture, should be closely investigated while exploring entrepreneurship.

Max Weber (1930) in the Protestant Work Ethic, argues how the Protestant values and belief shape entrepreneurship. Religion as an explanatory variable for entrepreneurship has been discussed in the literature through the works of Dana (2010), Lumpkin and Dess (1996), and Farmer and Richman (1965). Historically, this relationship has been well documented. Farmer and Richman (1965) posit that the relationship between Calvinist and economic development through entrepreneurship is clear, by arguing that, as back as 1958, fifteen countries with higher per capital income followed Protestantism, with the exception of France and Belgium.

Galbraith et al (1997), on examining Catholic Hispanic entrepreneurs in the United States, concluded that most Hispanic business leaders were also leaders in their religious community, thus establishing a robust link between entrepreneurship and religion.

Although religion does not seem to always necessarily foster or prevent individuals from the act of *entrepreneurship* (Dana, 2010), it promotes and teach cultural values that may consequently be embedded in entrepreneurial ventures.

Methodists accept the division between wealthy and poor, but the rich may be charitable (Dana, 2010). For Chandler, the founder of Coca Cola Company, making money through entrepreneurship was a form of religious worship (Dana, 2010).

Farmer and Richman (1965) argue that religious values have a direct impact on the perception of work achievement. Some religious values may create needs and these needs can be sources of enterprises. When Chick-Fil-A is closed on Sundays for religious observation, other fast food restaurants benefit from this. When the Amish community in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, cannot drive modern automobiles, the selling of bicycles flourishes in the area.

Religion can also shape the types of ventures. For instance, the Amish are usually owners of small ventures (stores) that meet the needs of the Amish community, although some businesses occasionally grow into larger businesses.

Interestingly, certain religions do not foster entrepreneurship at all. Buddhism promotes after life and this religious value might even prevent individuals from pursuing the entrepreneurial path. (Cousins, 1996).

Therefore, different religious view the act of enterprising and values entrepreneurship differently.

Carswell and Rolland (2004) posits that ethnic diversity and religious values enhance start-up rates.

Emphasizing the importance of the impact of social and cultural environment on entrepreneurship, Ronning and Ljunggren (2007) concluded that all entrepreneurs are product of their environment, and therefore, the external environment will influence the venture. For instance, if starting up a business in a community is rare, then fewer individuals will pursue entrepreneurship. On the other hand, if entrepreneurship is a popular and acceptable occupation, then entrepreneurship will flourish in the society (Ronning & Ljunggreen, 2007).

Stigma and stereotypes can also be translated into a business opportunity. Malheiros and Padilla (2014) examined how the idea of body aesthetics (a cultural element) becomes a resource for Brazilian female immigrant entrepreneurs in Portugal. The perceived possibly negative image of sensuality helped to foster the creation of beauty related enterprises.

In general, the literature indicates that, cultural values and specifically, religious values, greatly impact on the rate and type of start-ups. But the question remains: How do religious values really impact on the launching and success of women entrepreneurs?

## **Methodology and Methods**

This study uses a methodological stance based on a phenomenological approach, which focuses on understanding experiences and will enable the researcher to relate to and use the women's experiences and stories to answer the research questions.

The phenomenological methodology is associated with interpretive inquiry as opposed to normative inquiry, which is linked to quantitative methods (Cohen, 1987). The phenomenological approach aims to understand the subject world of individuals (Husserl, 1970). Due to the nature of the sample, this study is generalizable to theoretical propositions only, not to the entire population of women's entrepreneurs. It is recommended that further studies be developed to validate the findings generated from this study.

This qualitative research applied the techniques of face to face and telephone interview with twenty six women small business owners in South Carolina, United States.

This study is about exploring meanings and gaining understanding of the respondents as it relates to images and perception of success, as well as the influence of religion on their ventures; it was not intended to test or measure theory or the women's behavior or actions in regards to the competitiveness of their businesses.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This qualitative exploratory study investigates the phenomenon of women's entrepreneurship in the context of religion as a strong cultural component. This was done by first reviewing the literature, and then by analyzing the responses from face to face and telephone interviews with twenty six American women who owned and operated their own businesses. The female participants were selected with the help of a non- probability, judgment sampling techniques, known as purposeful sampling (Marshall, 1996). The sample exhibited the qualities the researcher wanted to explore, which included: (a) the women started and operated the business, (b) The women own at least 50% of the business and the enterprise was active at the time of this research.

Snowballing sampling was also used, that is, the researcher asked the participants for additional respondents that exhibited the qualities sought after by the researcher. Thus, the respondents themselves helped to shape the actual study from the beginning.

The data collection process was focused on capturing the women's stories and the interview questions were established in order to obtain response intended to understand the women's experiences.

The method of thematic network analysis (Sirling-Attride, 2001) was used to group the results and analysis of the data. The unit of analysis of this research was the understanding of the impact of religion, as a cultural component, on the women's images of success and motivation to launch and operate a business.

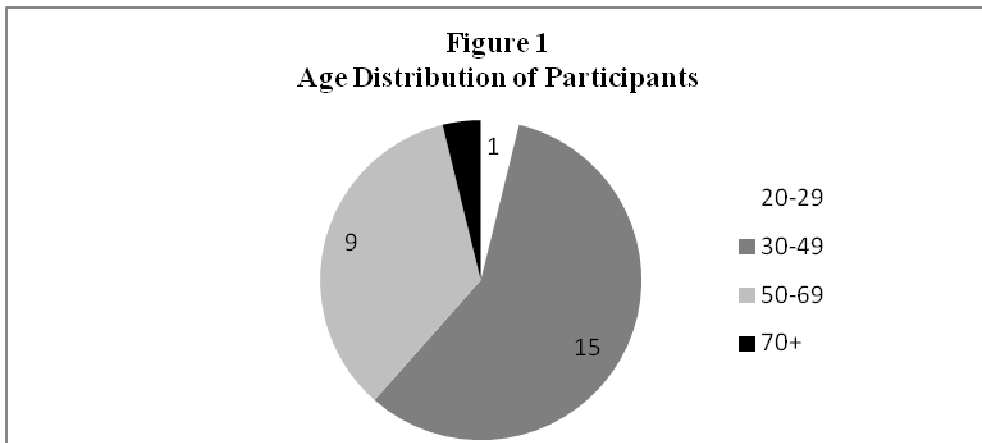
The initial sample, before the 'snowballing took place, was drawn from a list of participants at a self-employment seminar offered by the Bamberg County in South Carolina, USA.

Questions related to demographics, age of participants, age of business and location, were asked, but the main questions the researcher was interested in were “*In your opinion, what is the key for your business success?*”, and “*Does religion plays (played) a role in your business?*”, with a view to listening to women’s stories and the underlying motivators for their business ventures. The researcher was also interested in the impact of the recent economic developments on the women’s business.

The face to face interviews lasted about 30 to 45 minutes and were conducted, when possible, at the participants’ business premises. The interviews were not recorded, per participants’ request. The open ended questions focused on the understanding the women’s feelings, stories, perceptions and experiences.

From the data generated from the interview transcripts, the method of content analysis, followed by the technique of thematic analysis with aid of thematic networks (Sirling-Attride, 2001) were used.

Figure 1: Illustrates the age distribution of participants



The average year in operation was 5 ½ years, with 42% of the women holding a higher education degree. Most businesses were merchandise retailing and service retailing activities. The number of employees average 1 per business.

During the interviews, when asked about their perceptions and images of success, several recurrent themes, such as ‘*help others help themselves*’, ‘*make a difference in somebody else’s lives*’, ‘*being a role model*’, and ‘*inspiring others*’ were extracted from the women’s answers.

Yolanda, one of the participants residing in Bamberg, South Carolina, stated that “[*success*] is being able to achieve and bring others along with you... it is not only a personal thing... other people depend on what I do... ”.

Another participant, Marion, explained, ‘*teaching my employee is the most important thing... give a man a fish and he will for a day, teach a man to fish and he will eat for a life time...*’. Marion believed that her religious background fostered this perception of business success.

Most women strongly perceived that religion played a major role in their businesses. They believed that their close relationship with God triggers the launching of the business venture. For some, their entire purpose in life was to start a business to glorify God.

Wanda, an owner of a dog sitter and grooming business, perceived that God played a major role in her business venture. She describes her experience:

*...” I was working as a dog groomer and administrative assistant for the business owner that taught me everything I should learn about the business... then, he died and the business literally fell on my lap... it was God...and I can tell you...it was God. Now, twelve years passed and the business is solid as it can be...”*

Gloria affirmed that “[*the key to my business success*] is trust in God...with this trust one can reach anything.

Melinda perceived that “[*the key to my business success*] is first have faith in God, have Jesus Christ as my chief executive’.

Cecilia (Cici), a hair dresser from Orangeburg, South Carolina, proudly affirmed that “*I use my business talent because it is the purpose of my life given by God... I know God wants me to do this...*”

## **The Impact of the Recent Economic Developments on the Women’s Businesses**

During the conversations with the participants, many mentioned that their faith in God and trust in their entrepreneurial abilities, were strong ammunitions to face the current economic scenario. Although the USA economy is now recuperating from the great recession of 2007-2009, jobs are still not abundant and many of the participants started their business as a salary substitute enterprise, guided by their strong faith and trust in God.



Wanda mentioned that “*looking for a job in this current [economic] situation after the recession, would not be an easy thing... I am happy I have my business and God's blessing... business is not good as it was before 2007, but I am glad I can make a living...*”

## **Conclusions**

Studies have showed a direct link between religious and entrepreneurship (Anderson & Drokopoulos-Dodd, 2000; Dana, 2010; Farmer & Richmond, 1965; Carswell & Rolland, 2004). The academic literature also demonstrated that religious beliefs and their influence on business are continuously observed across many different societies and ethnic groups (Galbraith et al, 1997). The findings are consistent with these views. The results of this empirical study support the existence of a strong link between women's religious faith and the desire to launch, operate and succeed in business. The participants showed a strong religious background and faith, incorporating their images of success into their religious views.

In the participants' words, their strong religious views helped them to ‘weather the storm’ and go through the great recession of 2007-2009, with some sort of salary substitute businesses to earn a living. Their strong ties to their societies' cultural dimensions, especially to religion, greatly influenced their perception of success. In fact, it was observed, that religious motives impacted on the business launching and overall operations.

Although the results of this qualitative study suggested that religion impacts on women's entrepreneurial process, the findings cannot always be generalized due to the size of the sample. It is recommended that other variables such as education, age, and ethnicity, be also examined in future studies.

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## **Prikazi uspeha žena preduzetnika: uticaj religije na osnivanje, poslovanje i održavanje preduzeća**

### **APSTRAKT**

*Ovaj rad opisuje empirijsko istraživanje sprovedeno u cilju ispitivanja da li verska uverenja i vera utiču na osnivanje i poslovanje preduzeća u vlasništvu žena. Ova kvalitativna studija je fokusirana na žensku percepciju vezano za to da li je religija, kao značajna komponenta kulture, odigrala ulogu u odluci o pokretanju njihovog poslovanja, kao i na njihove izjave o tome da li ova percepcija utiče na način na koji one posmatraju svoje poslovanje, kao i na ostvareni uspeh.*

*Dvadeset šest američkih žena vlasnica firmi su učestvovala u ovoj studiji, i bile su intervjuisane sa ciljem da se ispita da li je, u skladu sa njihovim stavovima, njihova verska pripadnost imala bilo koji uticaj na njihovo poslovanje. Rezultati ukazuju na postojanje jake veze između verskih uverenja i ženskih preduzetničkih motiva, što je u skladu sa nalazima iz prethodnih studija. Ženska svedočanstva i percepcije su pokazale da je njihova jaka povezanost sa verskim uverenjima i Bogom podstakla želju da budu uspešne u svom poslovanju. U ovoj studiji se daje podrška ideji da religija, kao robusna kulturna dimenzija, stvarno utiče na preduzetničke procese i aspiracije ovih žena.*

**KLJUČNE REČI:** *žene preduzetnice, preduzeća, motivacija za pokretanje poslovanja*

Article history: Received: 17 February, 2015

Accepted: 31 March, 2015