

**WEIFORWARD & Global WEP  
Women's Entrepreneurship Policy Round Table  
21<sup>st</sup> February 2023**

**Having Nothing and Giving Much: Sub-Saharan African (SSA) Women Entrepreneurs  
Thriving in the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**Context**

The COVID-19 pandemic was a shock to societies and economies, highlighting society's dependence on women at home and at work while revealing systemic gender disparities in every sector (McKinsey, 2020 & UN Women, 2021). This situation was heightened in the context of women in the Global South, given the more pronounced segregation of gender roles and entrenchment of patriarchal structures in the region. According to UN Women (2020), in times of crisis when resources are stretched and there is limited organisational capacity, women face inordinate impacts with far-reaching consequences. Therefore, responding to crisis concerns not only addresses long-standing inequalities but also creates a resilient environment for everyone, with women at the centre. This session focused on the findings of a study which explores the experiences of women in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) entrepreneuring in a crisis. An additional layer is a context of high demand and scarcity of resources and where the burden of care and support for the community falls on women. While entrepreneuring in a crisis is not alien to SSA women, and women's resilience is well documented, the Western narrative on Africa has focused on challenges rather than accomplishments. This round table told the stories of women that reflect a coherent sense of self-worth, allowing them to adapt to disruptions caused by the pandemic through the strategic use of agency.

The roundtable generated a conversation on Sub-Sahara African (SSA) women entrepreneurs and their experiences of starting, running and growing their businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic while, at the same time, flattening the curve. Unlike women in developed countries, who benefited from government support - furlough schemes, for example – most of these women had no support from their governments. Yet many of them sustained their businesses, immediate families, employees, and *their* extended families during lockdowns across the continent.

Panellists engaged in a conversation based on empirical narratives provided by women entrepreneurs from Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria, Tanzania, South Africa, and Zambia, the analysis of which was presented at the British Academy of Management Conference 2022 in Manchester, UK.

**Question 1.**

**What IMPACT did COVID-19 have on female entrepreneurs in Sub-Saharan Africa and how did female entrepreneurs in Sub-Saharan Africa RESPOND to the threat of COVID-19?**

**The impact was wide ranging:**

**Regulatory challenges, with weak entrepreneurial eco-systems generally. Differential SSA governments' intra- and inter-country responses to COVID-19: Partial lockdowns** in Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia; **No lockdown** in Tanzania. **Ghana** had a partial lock down, but work continued in essential sectors only (production, distribution, and marketing of food, beverages, pharmaceuticals, medicine, paper and plastic packages; transport); strict in two cities and very relaxed



in others. Partial lockdown in **Ethiopia** (all economic activities continued, and public transport providers were expected to operate at half-capacity). Tax exemptions for landlords who provided rent holidays or discounted rents to businesses. **Ethiopia** prohibited firms from terminating active contracts with their workers. No lockdown in **Tanzania** – all economic activity continued.

**Difficulties in accessing available support** due to corruption and bureaucracy in, and lack of information on, COVID-19 relief efforts for businesses – all countries. **Fragmented support** for women's businesses across the continent:

**Ghana** – govt help went to larger businesses – most likely male-owned. Help came from informal personal networks, e.g. families and friends. **Nigeria & South Africa** – Help came from formal personal networks - e.g. churches, religious organisations. **Ethiopia** - help came from formal support institutions that target women-owned businesses e.g. WEDP and WISE in Ethiopia providing special lines of credit and training for women entrepreneurs and Women's Empowerment/Development Fund, Prospero in **Zambia** — but most of the women had not heard about it. **Tanzania** has an overarching female entrepreneurship policy which provides a framework for the support of women business owners.

**Financial challenges included, Sales uncertainty (Nigeria and Ghana), Revenue uncertainty (South Africa)** predominantly, but deja-vu experience for all women across the 7 countries) – paralyzed capital assets; loss of capital. **Decline in demand**, led to a reduction in sales and profit (**Ethiopia**). **The threat of business closure (all countries)** – 72% felt fearful of losing their businesses.

**Operational challenges saw Supply chain difficulties** – e.g. land borders closed in Ghana – no informal import trade. **Contested home space** – additional costs to adapt home to office space, contesting for space with the family.

**Skills challenges included, Digital skills** - only 25% of women felt they had the necessary skills for digital adoption. **Information gathering skills** – 68% relied more on others to gather the required information. **Business crisis management** – little or no knowledge of managing crises strategically.

**Cultural challenges that exacerbated women's experiences (all countries).** The **informality** of women's entrepreneurial ventures. **High levels of female-led households (South Africa)**, making the successes of entrepreneurial women's businesses crucial to the entire family. **Domestic responsibilities** – “as a woman” - additional responsibility for ensuring the safety and welfare of immediate and extended family members and employees and their families. **Cultural norms that delegitimize women entrepreneurs** and exclude them from business networks. **Mental health challenges** (anxiety, fear of losing businesses) – cultural taboo, so no support or recognition of the problem, therefore no support systems in place.

## The Responses

**Survival** (“had to do what they had to do”) 17% of **South African** women; 24% of **Ghanaians** (highest). Looked for multiple streams of income – some went back into employment. Few lay-offs, and in some cases, hours were adjusted. Salaries were cut to reduce costs and increase income.

**Adaptation** (65% of the women) Supported employees and their families through the crisis – further depleting funds.



Business expansion on hold - capital diverted to take care of immediate and extended family members and employees and their families. Flexible payment options to help struggling members of the community survive. Employment of family members.

**Innovation** (pivoted their business) **New delivery channels** – home deliveries. **New marketing channels** - to other markets with online sales via Facebook & WhatsApp: **Enhanced customer support** e.g. online skincare education when physical sales of products were not possible (**Zambia**); virtual viewing for real estate businesses (**Nigeria**).

**New business start-ups/product offerings** in sectors more suited to the pandemic/health services: e.g., production of PPE by dressmaker (**Ghana**); Interior designer retailing citronella candles (anti-malaria) at a time when health was at the front and centre of people's minds and lockdown meant people were spending more time in their gardens (**Ghana**)

**New supply chain lines** - Use of local raw materials in the light of closed borders (**Nigeria**)

**Personal development included** - Training and supporting other women in getting through the pandemic. Excitement about the opportunities discovered in COVID-19. High dependence on 'spiritual support' – however defined. Generally, 'learning on the go'

## Question 2

**How should female entrepreneurship policies in post-COVID-19 Sub-Saharan Africa help support recovering women-owned and run businesses?**

**Strengthening the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (Policy, education, and support)**

Establishment of **national policy frameworks (gender impact assessed)**

**Collaboration/networks of support - women's businesses, women policy holders and women academics** to facilitate knowledge exchange and innovation in the female entrepreneurial ecosystem.

**Support for finance**

**Financial initiatives** specifically targeted at women entrepreneurs. **Credit extension and liquidity support** measures to ensure business continuity. **The provision of loans** to women entrepreneurs with collateral requirements is contextually contingent. **Financial literacy** support and training

**Training and mentoring**

**Embedding different levels of entrepreneurial training through the education system** - formal education training, pre-start-up technical training, and intermittent training during the different phases of developing and expanding a business

Specific **business crisis-management training** in the light of Ebola and (less so) COVID. **Facilitation of informal business networking. Help non-traditional business-support channels** in their support of women entrepreneurs, e.g., churches