Experiences of black African women entrepreneurs in the South African male-dominated entrepreneurial environments

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Abstract

In the current study, we examined how culture, gendered roles, and societal expectations shape South African black African women's entrepreneurial experiences in male dominated entrepreneurial environments. Utilising a life story technique approach, we interviewed 12 Black African women entrepreneurs regarding their experiences in diverse South African male-dominated sectors. Overall, these women perceived three themes to characterise their experiences in a male-dominated entrepreneurial environment: (i) societal identities and challenges; (ii) entrepreneurship-life balance; and (iii) the support mechanisms. The women said to experience slow entry into the male dominated sectors due to patriarchy, culture blockages, and having to continuously upskill. However, the negotiation strategies and support mechanisms were suggested by the participants to benefit their businesses.

Keywords: African culture; black African women entrepreneurs; identity; patriarchy; renegotiation of gendered roles

Introduction

Entrepreneurship has historically been defined as a male archetype of being active, risk-takers, strong-willed, courageous, rational, driven, visionary, energetic, daring, achievement-oriented, and leaders (Bruni et al. 2004; Orlandi, 2017; Pret & Cogan, 2019). When women become entrepreneurs, they are rarely given the accolades men receive (Tran, 2014; Welch et al., 2008). Moreover, women entrepreneurs in entrepreneurial industries receive little recognition (Essed, 1994; Mead & Liedholm, 1998; Olarenwaju & Olabisi, 2012; O'Neil & Viljoen, 2001)

In the African business sector, women's chances of leadership in male-dominated sectors face challenges from societal as well as institutional prejudice (Fesharaki, 2019; Godwin et al., 2006; Haupt & Ndimande, 2019; Winkler & Case, 2014). They experience enormous challenges gaining acceptance (De Vita et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2015). Even successful women in corporate executive positions are judged first by gender, and only secondarily on their capabilities (Booysen, 2007; Nyakunda et al., 2016; Segalo, 2011, 2015). Black African women are particularly disadvantaged due to the double jeopardy of historic racial disadvantage and patriarchal culture (Diale, 2016; Essed, 1994; Rogerson, 1996). We aimed to explore black South African women's entrepreneurial experiences and their negotiation in the male dominated entrepreneurial industries.

Challenges faced by women entrepreneurs

In the patriarchal African culture, women experience cultural barriers to pursue entrepreneurship or any career growth (Botha, 2006; Boyce-Davies, 2002; Nfah-Abennyi, 1997; Rasego, 2011). They are a "silenced courtesan" unlike their male counterparts. As examples, women entrepreneurs may be denied of the accolades reserved for men such as a "lonely hero" and "conqueror of unexplored territories" (Eddleston & Powell, 2008; Mattis, 2004; Uzuegbunam & Uzuegbunam, 2018). This masculinisation of entrepreneurial identity marginalises the female entrepreneur, rendering her invisible (Eddleston & Powell, 2008). Lack of recognition of women entrepreneurs due to prejudice, harm women's chances of having a well-established business in male-dominated sectors (Godwin et al., 2006). As a disempowered business minority, women are expected to embrace "men's thinking" to excel in their entrepreneurial skills (Redien-Collot, 2009).

According to previous research, women, in general, are at high risk for marginalisation and segregation to "feminine" industries such as hairdressers, interior designer, social uplifters, catering, wedding planning, fashion design, and beauticians (Dagut, 2000; Godwin et al., 2006; Mead & Liedholm, 1998). They are thus denied the business experience in sectors other than service types (McClelland et al., 2005). Male-dominated enterprises are within chemical, electronics, machinery and equipment, metallic products, wood and wood products, agriculture, mining, manufacturing, construction, motor trade, transportation and storage, finance and business services, refurbishment, recycling, furniture, tombstones, exports, engineering, trucking, tourism, and information technology (Bardasi, 2008; Bardasi et al., 2011; Hanson & Blake, 2009; Moodley, 2012; Small Business Alert Project [SBP], 2013; Status Quo Report, 2011; Welch et al., 2008).

Women entrepreneurs experience diminished business success from denial of access to markets and land, and a lack of mentors and network opportunities (Calás & Smircich, 1999; Dagut, 2000; Deborah et al., 2015; Fesharaki, 2019; Fischer et al., 1993; Godwin et al., 2006; Grant, 2013; Haddad, 2006; Hamilton, 2013; Haupt & Ndimande, 2019; Mclelland et al., 2005; Quisumbing & Pandolfelli, 2010; Thomas & Davies, 2005; Winkler & Case, 2014). This denial of access has the effect to demoralise and demotivate women (Herrington et al., 2010). Further, South African women entrepreneurs experience work life imbalances due to work overload (Fatoki, 2018; Moosa & Coetzee, 2020), and role overload or role conflict in being home carers and business leaders (Fielden & Davidson, 2005; Madzivhandila & Dlamini, 2015; Preisendoerfer et al., 2014). Historically, men have been perceived as providers and breadwinners while women do house caring (Fielden & Davidson, 2005). Women entrepreneurs, however, enter the competitive business culture despite sexism and prejudices against them (DTI, 2013; Rogerson, 1996).

Support mechanisms for South African women entrepreneurs

Among the programmes the empowerment scheme formulated, was the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). The empowerment was introduced to bypass and redress some past inequalities in accessing opportunities. BEE is the offspring of reconstruction development programme which was introduced to ensure that black African individuals have business ownership, are represented fairly in the organisational hierarchies, as well as to ensure that empowerment in terms of black enterprise suppliers and development is on balance (Chiloane-Tsoka, 2013; Gouws & Galgut, 2016; Hamann et al., 2005; Ponte et al., 2007). There are also training programs in entrepreneurship, supported by business advisers, tailored to specific

needs of business ventures (Botha, 2006). Influences of these support mechanisms on the business success of black women in the male dominated industries is less well studied.

Goal of the study

We aimed to understand the experiences of black African women negotiating their entrepreneurial identity in the male-dominated South African entrepreneurial environments. To this end, we explored the entrepreneurial life stories of black African women with the following three research questions:

1. What challenges do black African women entrepreneurs experience in male-dominated environments?
2. How do black African women entrepreneurs negotiate their entrepreneurial identity in male-dominated environments?
3. What are the experiences of black African women with regards to entrepreneurial support mechanisms in male-dominated business environments?

Method

Research design

We employed a qualitative interpretivism research paradigm. Interpretivism aims to understand problems, ideas, and situations from the perspectives and experiences of people (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Hammarberg et al., 2016; Saunders et al., 2015), providing a detailed description of experiences and perceptions of those individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach was appropriate for an in-depth understanding of black African women entrepreneurs' experiences, culture, norms, and identity in diverse male-dominated entrepreneurial environments.

Participants and procedure

As indicated in Table 1, our participants were 12 black South African women entrepreneurs with diversity in age, marital status, home language, educational backgrounds, size of the company. and the number of years in predominately masculine sectors. We recruited them through snowballing or referrals from pre-identified black African women entrepreneurs in predominantly male-dominated sectors. A strict consent process was followed before contacting the participants through snowballing technique. The interviews were conducted in English. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data collection

The participants completed an in-depth semi-structured interview regarding their perceptions and experiences of gendered entrepreneurial expectations in male-dominated business environments. For data credibility and trustworthiness, we utilised an interview protocol to ensure consistency of the procedure with all the participants (Tracy, 2010). In addition, we followed the procedures by Tracy (2010) for rich rigour using a clear data collection plan aligned to the objectives of the study.

Table 1. Participants profile

Participants	Age (yrs.)	Marital status	Husband's age (yrs.)	Highest qualification	Entrepreneurial experiences	Venture experience	Husband occupation	Ethnicity	Continuation with venture	Entrepreneurial sector
P1	50–59	Married	50-59	Grade 8	6-10 years	6-10 years	Unemployed	Xitsonga	Yes	Manufacturing (Carpentry)
P2	21–29	Single	N/A	Diploma	< 1	< 1	N/A	Sepedi	Yes	Paving and stormwater
P3	21–29	Single	N/A	Diploma	< 1	< 1	N/A	Tshivenda	Yes	Paving and stormwater
P4	21–29	Single	N/A	Post-graduate	1–5 years	1–5 years	N/A	SiSwati	Yes	Photography
P5	40–49	Single	N/A	Post-graduate	15 years+	6–10 years	N/A	Xitsonga	Yes	Petroleum
P6	40–49	Married	40–49	Post-graduate	6–10 years	6–10 years	Entrepreneur	Setswana	Yes	Law
P7	50–59	Married	50–59	Post-graduate	1–5 years	1–5 years	Attorney	Sepedi	Yes	Tourism
P8	30–39	Married	30–39	Post-graduate	5 years	6–10 years	Investor	Sepedi	Yes	Construction/project management
P9	50–59	Single	N/A	Grade 11	6–9 years	6–9 years	N/A	Xitsonga	Yes	Agriculture& community service
P10	21–29	Married	21–29	Degree	1–5 years	1–5 years	Engineer	Sepedi	Yes	Construction
P11	40–49	Married	40–49	Diploma	15 years+	15 years+	Entrepreneur	IsiZulu	Yes	Construction
P12	30–39	Single	N/A	Post-graduate	6–10 years	6–10 years	N/A	Sepedi	Yes	Construction

Table 2. Selected proof quotes from participants [Black African women entrepreneurs] in the current study in strengthening the life story approach

How it started	Reasons in entering male-dominated entrepreneurial ventures	How participants negotiated own identity
From doing manual work at the previous employment, childhood interest of drawing and arts to entrepreneurship.	Childhood interest and travelling experience." (Participant 7)	Celebrating wins and success with family members add to motivation." (Participant 1)
Innovation is the main factor to enter the entrepreneurial environment.	Finding some innovation and distinctive features to leave people surprised, standing out from the crowd (Participant 10)	Gender role renegotiation began from gran parents and cascaded down, nuclear family independent from societal strictures and adoption of matriarchy (Participant 6 & 11)
Embedded to (entrepreneurship-life balance)	Not wanting to add to the oppressed system imposed on women. (Participant 6, 10, 11, 12)	Gender roles shared between partners form the identity of husbands being house husband, mutuality, and reciprocity (Participant 6 from the legal environment)
Severance package/early retirement packages and own money as start-up capital.		
Selling of valuable and possessions, i.e., house and car to finance own ventures.		
Educational level, business short courses and mentoring		

Data analysis

We thematically analysed the data following the guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2019), including reading the interviews to get a general sense of the information; content analysis by study objectives; theme construction; and descriptions. For dependability of interpretations, we cross-checked interpretations against archival data on black South African women entrepreneurs from South African state programs or support policies, guidelines, and frameworks (see also Table 2 for sample statements).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Pretoria (ref: 15324461). The participants individually consented to take part in the study. We informed the participants of their rights to withdraw from the study without penalties or negative consequences, and of the confidentiality of the data collected.

Findings and discussion

Three themes emanated from the data: (i) societal identities and challenges; (ii) entrepreneurship-life balance; and (iii) the experiences with regards to support mechanisms in male-dominated entrepreneurial environments.

Theme 1. Societal identities and challenges

The participants experienced challenges of gendered roles and how to behave ascribed by the society and male competitors.

> *As a woman, I need to go the extra mile and prove I can do the job as a woman in a male dominated environment.* (Participant 12, construction)

> *The distorted views of women not being able to do "man's work" served as a challenge for me operating in a male-dominated entrepreneurial environment. ... Male counterparts think that I am just a pretty face; other companies think I am representing another company, that I am just a front, and they think that having a female as the one doing presentations will soften decision-makers. There is a perception that you bring a woman to avoid harshness in business deals.* (Participant 8, construction)

> *The women in the current study perceived that those men are still at an advantage.*

> *We don't start at the same level [as males]. As a female, there are dynamics that put you at a disadvantage. Men don't get pregnant, take care of children, and drop them at school. Men still continue. Even if you are working for yourself and get to determine the hours, in order to excel in what you do, you need to put in a lot of hours.* (Participant 6, legal environment)

It is evident from the results above that our participants faced challenges both from societal and entrepreneurial ventures. Patriarchy serves as a major challenge for these women in male-dominated entrepreneurial environments. This finding echoes previous studies (Chiloane & Mayhew, 2010; Godwin et al., 2006; Rodgerson, 1996; Mandipaka, 2014a; Mandipaka 2014b). Not only do women negotiate their identities in the in-home domain, but they also must

negotiate their identities in entrepreneurial professional lives (Chiloane & Mayhew, 2010; Rasego, 2011). The perceptions of women not being equal to men emanates from the effects of historical factors of segregation, feminism, and power or glass ceiling effect (Botha, 2006; Deborah et al., 2015; Greer & Greene, 2003; Mandipaka, 2014a; Mattis, 2004; Nyakudya et al., 2018).

Theme 2. Entrepreneurship-life balance.

Participants reported work-life balance, or what the current authors refer to as entrepreneurship-life balance, which may hamper women entrepreneurs. However, entrepreneurship-life balance was perceived to be something manageable by the participants. We offer few narratives explaining the entrepreneurship-life balance:

> *Women are housewives in a lot of instances, and clients call, hours are insane, for lack of a better word. So, I have been negotiating with my husband that I need to try getting in at 5 am so that at 2 pm I can pick up the children ... As an African woman, having children is part of life it is not an option to say I do not want to have children. [Talks will start, talks such as who is going to look after you, should you think of not having children] Those comments and questions arise when you are an African woman ... I belong into the church where husbands are encouraged to be part of their children's upbringing. (*Participant 6, legal environment*)*

> *I spend a lot of time with my children, especially my daughter, and do rounds with her as I believe in nurturing and grooming her from a young age. ... I do homework with my children every day. Before getting into the house, I take off the hat of being a businesswoman and put on a hat of being a mom.*

> *... For me, 24 hours is a lot, and I hear people saying it's not enough. I don't really like TV. I don't see the point of wasting three hours watching TV. I still find time to address youth at my church in the busy schedule I might have. (*Participant 11, construction*)*

> *Support and schemes are there, but systems in place also serve as an obstacle in one's progression. For me, Black economic empowerment is just on paper. We are not there yet. We would want to be where we are entitled to be, but we are not there yet. It is just on paper. (*Participant 8, construction*)*

> *Why must I belong to a certain political party to make it in business? I am not interested in joining one; my skills in business should be enough. (*Participant 10, construction*)*

Past research provides evidence of the challenges that may hamper women's success, especially women in business, in the sense that they also need to attend to home duties (Mandipaka, 2014a). However, women in the current study stated that they can push back, and entrepreneurship-life balance is something that can be managed. Managing the entrepreneurship-life balance is negotiated by our participants through social support and minimising distractors. This is similar to previous research findings (Bobat et al., 2012; De Klerk et al., 2012). This optimum balance and maintaining the best of two worlds is something they learned over time (Nina-Gunnerud, 1997; Welch et al., 2008; Wheadon & Duval-Council, 2018), enfolding their confidence, assertiveness, and innovativeness (see also Bobat et al., 2012; Deborah et al., 2015; De Klerk et al., 2012; Kiggundu, 2002; Moosa & Coetzee, 2020).

Theme 3 Experiences with regards to support mechanisms

Participants reported disruptions and renegotiation of gender roles in the male-dominated business environment, which they negotiate on an ongoing basis. For example, participants said:

> *You are away from home for weeks, constantly on the road; for a woman, that is a challenge. The kind of a role my husband plays, in other typical African families, they will name him or label him as (gullible or accepting) as he spends most of his time with our children. It would be a role that I would play; he drops them at school and picks them up if I cannot do it. This is the support I have from my husband ... My husband used to say that if I could get pregnant, I would, but biology doesn't allow that. That is the type of husband I have (smiles).* (Participant 6, legal environment)

> *As an independent person, I don't want to walk in the old steps of a typical African woman, and I don't want anyone to take care of me. There is culture, roles, and values, but I can say no to them* (Participant 4, photography services)

> *I had to sell my car to finance the business; refinanced my house to get guarantees in order to start working on my business venture.* (Participant 11, construction)

> *I had to sell socks and other soft goods such as sweets.* (Participant 12, construction)

> *[Although] I learned about best practices from established businesspeople with the help of Government initiatives [I need to] put in extra effort to ensure the work gets done.* (Participant 1, carpentry)

These findings are inconsistent with previous studies on prejudices and stereotypes that hinder women's chances of having well-established businesses in male-dominated sectors (Dagut, 2000; Deborah et al., 2015; Fesharaki, 2019; Godwin et al., 2006; Grant, 2013; Haddad, 2006; Hamilton, 2013; Haupt & Ndimande, 2019; Mclelland et al., 2005; Winkler & Case, 2014). Although there were some challenges raised regarding the Government's support, women in the current study, on the other hand, benefited from business programmes and workshops hosted by the state which contributes to the non-financial support wing.

Conceptual model on black women entrepreneurs

The participants in the current study shared experiences of societal challenges and patriarchy in their entrepreneurial journey which they managed through balancing between their entrepreneurship and life pillars. In summarising the results, we created a conceptual model encompassing challenges and probable support mechanisms for black South African women entrepreneurs in a male dominated business world (see Figure 1).
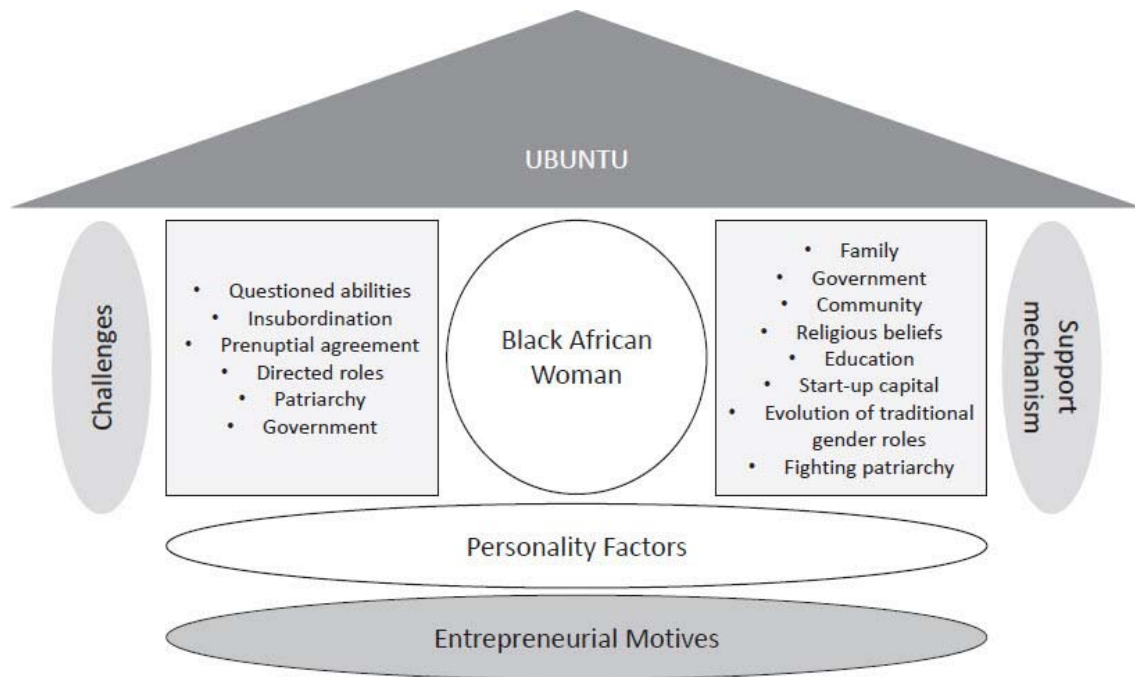
Figure 1. Success factors for black South African women entrepreneurs

The model is designed to portray a storyline of a black African woman entrepreneur negotiating the male-dominated entrepreneurial environment. The model follows a story line to say when starting out a business operation in the male dominated industries, black women experience gendered roles regardless of affirmative action policies (Chiloane-Tsoka 2013; Essed, 1994; Godwin et al., 2006; Mandipaka, 2014a; Rasego, 2011; McClelland, 2005). To minimise these challenges to their success as entrepreneurs, black women need to identify support mechanisms for renegotiation of gender roles to navigate their entrepreneurial journeys (Botha, 2006; Chiloane-Tsoka, 2013; Hamann et al., 2005; Ponte et al., 2007).

Limitations and conclusion

The findings are limited by the small convenience sample of black South African women entrepreneurs. The small sample does not allow generalisation of findings to the wider population of black businesswomen in male dominated industries. A further limitation is that participants can choose to withhold some of the relevant information out of social desirability. Future research could collect data from black women, family members, and business partners for inclusivity. Nonetheless, black African women' experiences in a male-dominated entrepreneurial environment are stifling due to patriarchy, culture blockages, having to continuously upskill negotiation strategies, and gender insensitive support mechanisms.

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