Entrepreneurship as therapy for necessity-driven women entrepreneurs. A Case Study of the entrepreneurial and institutional level in Chile

Track: Entrepreneurship, family business, and Human Resource Management

Keywords: women entrepreneurs, emerging countries, entrepreneurship education

Abstract

Necessity-driven women entrepreneurs often start a business because of family reasons. Desperately they tried to generate an income that supports the basics needs of their families. But the entrepreneurial activity ends up being a process for healing and recovery: i.e., "therapy".

We collect qualitative data on necessity-driven women entrepreneurs by conducting a focus group and five group interviews after an entrepreneurship course from a publicly funded organization in Chile. This study identifies the elements on how can the entrepreneurial activity and the support of an organization facilitate women's "therapy or healing process". We found that the entrepreneurial activity provides women with a) the opportunity of staying active, b) discovery and development of new skills, that c) the ability to reach a state of flow. The organization also provided a safe space with social support in the form of: a) feedback and positive reinforcement; b) sharing their similar experiences and building a common entrepreneurial identity; c) tearing down old limiting beliefs; d) creating a professional network, and e) staying social and breaking down their tendency of isolation. We offer practical implications for entrepreneurship educators, policymakers, mentors, and women in entrepreneurship.

Keywords: women entrepreneurs, emerging countries, entrepreneurship education, women empowerment, sensemaking, social identity.

Introduction

Entrepreneurship provides "freedom", "autonomy" and "empowerment" for women entrepreneurs because they detach from male-dominated structures (Gill & Ganesh, 2007). Context is a key element to study entrepreneurship as a social phenomenon affected by gendered social beliefs, norms and practices (Ahl, 2006; Brush, de Bruin, & Welter, 2009; Calás, Smircich, & Bourne, 2009). Identifying its variables help us explain female entrepreneurial intentions, and moreover, the incidence of the family configuration and practices. The 5M model (Brush et al., 2009) explains how market, money, management conditions, meso/macro variables (public policies, cultural beliefs) and motherhood (domestic and familiar context) are all interconnected and affected by gender. Motherhood has been found to be determinant for entrepreneurial activity among women in vulnerable social conditions.

The Chilean context

Often, entrepreneurship is the only option available for generating income for women at social risk in Latin American countries (CEPAL, 2010; Comunidad Mujer, 2016). This trend has been growing in the last decade (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2015), particularly for women with full responsibility for their families (McGowan, Redeker, Cooper, & Greenan, 2012). Nevertheless, they find a way to survive starting-up a home-based business (CEPAL, 2010). Therefore, necessity-driven business is based on skills women already have or learning new skills that are within their reach. Yet, women are not necessarily looking to satisfy a market opportunity. These skills are framed in traditional sectors with low margins, a form of horizontal segregation (CEPAL, 2010; Comunidad Mujer, 2016; Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2014; OECD, 2016), since potential markets are not relevant to them. Globally, male and female entrepreneurs work in different sectors. Female entrepreneurs are overrepresented in the retail and service sectors, in particular in personal services (OECD, 2016). Women often start in sectors with low capital requirements, like the service sector. Banks are often

reluctant to lend money to these sectors characterized by a high mobility (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2015). In Chile, two-thirds of women micro-entrepreneurs start necessity-driven businesses, achieving an income level below the minimum wage, and working from home or by street vending (INE, 2017).

The Aim of this Study

Following a course that we taught to women in necessity-driven entrepreneurship, we realized that the entrepreneurial activity has other unexplored benefits, in addition to economic relief for the family. We found that this social risk (in terms of low income, discrimination, or even gender violence) group of women find "therapeutic benefits" in their entrepreneurial activities. According to the Oxford dictionary, "therapy" is defined as a *"treatment intended to relieve or heal a disorder"[1]*. We present a case study conducted in a public foundation that trains women of this vulnerable profile in Chile.

We found that entrepreneurial activity ends up being a process for healing and recovery. We wanted to know why these women associate "entrepreneurship" with "therapy". Moreover, we explored how these entrepreneurial activities (supported by a public policy) facilitate women's "therapy or healing process".

Finally, we show how women make sense of the way in which their entrepreneurial activities enhance wellbeing including the creation of spaces to foster social interactions.

Literature Review

This section reviews the literature on the elements that have the potential for adding to the entrepreneur's wellbeing and therefore, to the metaphor of "entrepreneurship as a therapy".

Skills discovering and development and the potential of "flow"

Individuals, when thinking about their future, tend to place value on personal growth, which is related to their capacity of overcoming daily life obstacles. Yet, Brunila (2012) relates this skill set development as a "therapeutic ethos", and argues that the entrepreneurial activity is a good way to discover and develop those skills. Particularly, "soft skills" have a direct causal effect on people's success in life (Heckman & Kautz, 2012).

State of flow is an important component of wellbeing. "Flow" also plays a key role in entrepreneurial activity. Flow is the state of total involvement in an autotelic activity, which is characterized by providing immediate intrinsic reward. In a state of flow, one action follows another without one's conscious intervention. While certain types of activities are likely to provide flow, such as games, sports and the arts, individuals can experience flow state in work activities, as well (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990, 1997).

Social support: Creating network, building friendship and sisterhood

Several studies suggest that the establishment of contact networks is affected by gender: men and women have different networks (Minniti, Koellinger, & Schade, 2013); Hanson and Blake (2009) emphasize that business networks are important for entrepreneurship because networks facilitate the mobility of resources between and among entrepreneurs and the community. This requires a combination of informal and formal networks, that includes stakeholders from the social and professional (or business) contacts. These differences could be attributed to patterns generated by status differences which intervene in gender relationships; therefore, there is no equal access to opportunities and women are impacted negatively.

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[1] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/therapy

However, as Minniti (2013) argues, this affects women more than their male peers, and also will depend on their socioeconomic status.

It is interesting to note that social context (networks, family, and households) and institutional (business networks) of women entrepreneurs overlap, and have a spatial dimension (Brush, de Bruin, & Welter, 2014). Personal and business contacts are integrated and also part of the same space. In this way, women are changing the places where they live through entrepreneurship, generating professional networks in their social networks area (Hanson, 2009).

Those from lower-class environments are often more prosocially motivated with higher levels of empathy (Piff, Stancato, Martinez, Kraus, & Keltner, 2012) than people from the upper-class. Evidence suggests that minorities and women are more likely to occupy lower social class positions than men and those in ethnic and racial majorities (Institute for Research on Poverty, 2015; US Census Bureau, 2015). Household activities of women ("double assignments") and other social obligations may lead to more isolation than men typically experience (Moore and Buttner, 1997). This implies that women spend less time on networking. Moreover, the members of both formal and informal networks are not always open to accepting women.

Networks and social cohesion are factors that directly affect the welfare of people; in fact, this concept composes 1 of the 5 indicators to measure multidimensional poverty. Support networks facilitate family care, cooperation and access to material, cultural, and economic resources; they facilitate the reach of equal treatment and safety, which are necessary factors to strengthen the quality of social harmony, access to opportunities in daily life, as well as freedom and confidence (Observatorio Social, 2018).

Social support studies have been subject to many approaches, but there is consistent empirical evidence suggesting that exchange of social support by social networks influence health and wellbeing (Heaney & Israel, 2008). It is a multidimensional concept -structural, evaluative, functional- referring to resources provided by community, social networks and confidence people (Lin & Ensel, 1989). According to functional content of the relationships, social support can be classified into four types of supportive behaviors: emotional support -like empathy, trust or caring-, instrumental support -tangible aid, help services-, informational support -advice to solve problems- and appraisal support -feedback and affirmation- (House, 1981).

Byrne, Shantz, & Bullough (2018) found that an entrepreneurship training program with a gender perspective assisted women victims of gender violence. The program allowed women to have a new perspective, advance in their self-knowledge, rebuild their self-esteem, and increase their self-efficacy. Social support becomes a way to create networks but also encouraging companionship or even sisterhood. Gender perspective provides a common issue to discuss and share experiences, so group dynamics in women entrepreneurs' courses are useful to chat about common concerns, topics of interest, and to help each other in a safe place (Bizkaia Foru Aldundia, 2016; Byrne et al., 2018).

The second wave of feminism appropriated the term "sisterhood" to describe the support and union between all women, of any ethnicity or class, based on a common interest: gender equality (Morgan, 1970). In Latin America, the term "sorority" was coined, as a "pact between women", meaning a specific form of solidarity, both at the companionship level and collectively, with the common axis against misogyny (Lagarde, 2000). Anthropologist Marcela Lagarde redefined it:

> "Sorority is an ethical, political and practical dimension of contemporary feminism, it is an experience of women that leads to the search for positive relationships and the existential and political alliance, body to body, subjectivity to subjectivity with other women, to contribute with specific actions to the social elimination of all forms of oppression and mutual support to achieve generic power of all and vital empowerment of each woman" (Lagarde, 2006, p. 126).

Feedback and feedforward as collective learning processes

Social networks research found constructive feedback as a form of social support, useful for self-evaluation purposes (Heaney & Israel, 2008). In education, constructive feedback is a regular practice in group dynamics to encourage students to adopt a more in-depth approach to learning (Candy, 1991). Research evidence suggests that cooperative learning achieves positive interpersonal relationships, cohesion, increased self-esteem, integration and social development (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994). Oosthuizen and Mentz (2016) found that cooperative learning increases social interaction, learning of social skills, ability to give and receive help, and encourages to idea of peers as resources.

Pendleton (1984) provides in-depth analysis of feedback processes developing a 4 rules method that helps in giving balanced feedback. It has been widely applied in medical education (Archer, 2010; Kieran Walsh, 2005). The method consists first in highlighting what has been done well; then by explaining what could be better, and finally talking about ways to improve. This last part is in itself a concept that goes beyond evaluation, which could be conceptualized as "feedforward" (Conaghan & Lockey, 2009). These authors support Pendleton's rules and draw our attention to the need to provide feedback content, not only empty comments (e.g. "you were great"). However, literature review in Archer (2010) highlights the need to understand feedback as a complex and contextual concept, with different types, which must be integrated in a context of feedback as continuous learning to be effective. Lately, Tepper and Flyn (2018) formulate a compendium of appropriate feedback and feedforward techniques.

This background allows us to understand that effectiveness of feedback depends on the context, characteristics of recipients, and other variables such as level of specificity: from emulated feedback (without "technical" content) to constructive feedback (a full content and feedforward).

A collective experience and the identity building

Women's self-employment has been identified as a tool to assist in alleviating poverty and empowering individual women. The process of empowering women includes a boost in their self-confidence (Amatucci & Crawley, 2011), self-efficacy (Harley et al., 2018), positive self-concept, and self-esteem (Falck, Heblich, & Luedemann, 2012; Swail & Marlow, 2018; Vesalainen & Pihkala, 2000) (Morris et al., 2006; Torrado and Vidal, 2015), as well as the construction of a new entrepreneurial identity (Falck, Heblich, & Luedemann, 2012; Swail & Marlow, 2018; Vesalainen & Pihkala, 2000). An example on how empowerment can be accomplished collectively was the study conducted in rural areas in India. There, self-help groups have been successful in empowering rural women through entrepreneurial activities and skill development: increases in income, expenditures, and saving habits of rural women were observed (Sharma and Kanta, 2008).

Al-Dajani and Marlow (2010) studied home-based women entrepreneurs in Jordan. They found that although these women make a critical contribution to family incomes, their entrepreneurial activities are constructed around the preservation of the traditional family form such that while some degree of empowerment is attained, challenges to embedded patriarchy are limited. Women must be empowered by enhancing their awareness, knowledge, skills and technology use efficiency (Sharma and Kanta Varma, 2008).

Methodology

Procedure and data collection

We collected the data from women participating in Prodemu Foundation. Prodemu is a public organization that provides formation and support to women in vulnerable conditions along the Chilean territory. Among the programs (e.g., formation of community leaders, assistance and mentoring for women in rural areas), there are specific programs targeted to

supporting women who are starting an informal business in urban areas. This study used a convenience sample with one focus group after a Pitch course, and five group interviews after women were presenting their businesses held during December 2017 and June 2018 in Santiago de Chile.

We were particularly interested in how this group of women frame their entrepreneurial activity as a therapy, and to what extent the programs in Prodemu enhance this process. The specific questions we asked were:

1) How do you think that the entrepreneurial activity serves as a therapy or healing process?

2) How the Prodemu Foundation facilitates "the therapy or healing process"?

The sessions were audio-recorded and these audios were transcribed and analyzed. The moderator of the session explained the goal of the research project and the ethical considerations. All agreed to participate enthusiastically. A consent form was delivered and signed by each participant.

Sample

Although the sample is not representative of the female population in Chile, these women illustrate the reality of women entrepreneurs from low-income districts in Santiago. Although normally the women participating in this organization have low levels of formal education, this group have all completed secondary education (mandatory level in Chile), and 20 percent have attained university education. Yet, they still represent the profile of "broken stairs" as described by the UN Women (2017). That is, even with medium educational levels, they have not attained a sustainable lifestyle, mainly because they have high home demands, or when they are retired, they have low pensions (CEPAL, 2014; Comunidad Mujer, 2016; UN Women, 2017). According to data retrieved from the provincial agency where these women participate, at least 70 percent of the sample has been victim of gender violence. This sample also shows low previous entrepreneurial experience. Similarly, to what has been found in the SMEs literature, these women usually engage in smaller networks consisting primarily of women (Brush, 1992). Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the women and their business.

Table 1: *Characteristics of the sample*

Participant ID	Event	Sector	Age	Max. education	Marital Status
D.G.	Focus Group	Retail	53	Higher education	Divorced
I.E.	Focus Group	Handicraft products	41	Secondary education	Married
R.C.	Focus Group	Handicraft products	52	Secondary education	Married
I.C.	Focus Group	Services	55	Primary education	Divorced
M.C.	Macul Group	Handicraft products	42	Secondary education	Married
M.CH.	Macul Group	Food products	52	Secondary education	Married
C.D.	La Reina Group	Handicraft products	53	Secondary education	Separated

A.R.	La Reina Group	Clothing manufacturing	76	Secondary education	Widower
T.S.	La Reina Group	Clothing manufacturing	73	Primary education	Divorced
S.F.	Ñuñoa Group	Services	59	Secondary education	Married
A.S.	Ñuñoa Group	Handicraft products	60	Higher education	Married
C.V.	Ñuñoa Group	Cosmetics	38	Higher education	Divorced
B.R.	Ñuñoa Group	Food products	44	Higher education	Married
A.L.	La Granja Group	Clothing manufacturing	37	Secondary education	Married
C.M.	La Granja Group	Services	26	Secondary education	Married

Theoretical Framework and Analysis

We performed a thematic content analysis of women's narratives during the sessions, supported by an awareness of the intersection between gender, entrepreneurship and context (Berg, 1997) using an inductive approach.

Sensemaking is the process by which people give meaning to their collective experiences, which in turn represent the meanings of their decisions that are enacted in behavior. We found through our study that "entrepreneurship as a therapy" is a metaphor (sensemaking) that can also be used to communicate with others and gain their support (sensegiving) (Hill and Levenhagen, 1995). According to Social Identity Theory, individual and collective entrepreneurial identities interacts with each other and merge over time (Downing, 2005). We argue that the space created by Prodemu may support women with their identity building, where they identify themselves as "entrepreneurs" rather than "housewives" (Down & Warren, 2008). We also acknowledge the effect of the researcher on how women put their experiences into words (reflexivity), as we have moved from the position of an "outsider" to the position of an "insider" over the course of the study, and we also have some familiarity with their entrepreneurial experiences (Berger, 2013).

Considering these frameworks, we have analyzed their discourses and organized their arguments to better understand what these women mean when they argue that entrepreneurship is a therapy.

Results

The results show findings around "entrepreneurship" and "therapy", by identifying the way in which entrepreneurial activity and 2) the support of a public organization, facilitate women's "therapy or healing process". Figure 1 summarizes the elements that support women's metaphor or "entrepreneurship as therapy".

Figure 1: Entrepreneurship as Therapy Model
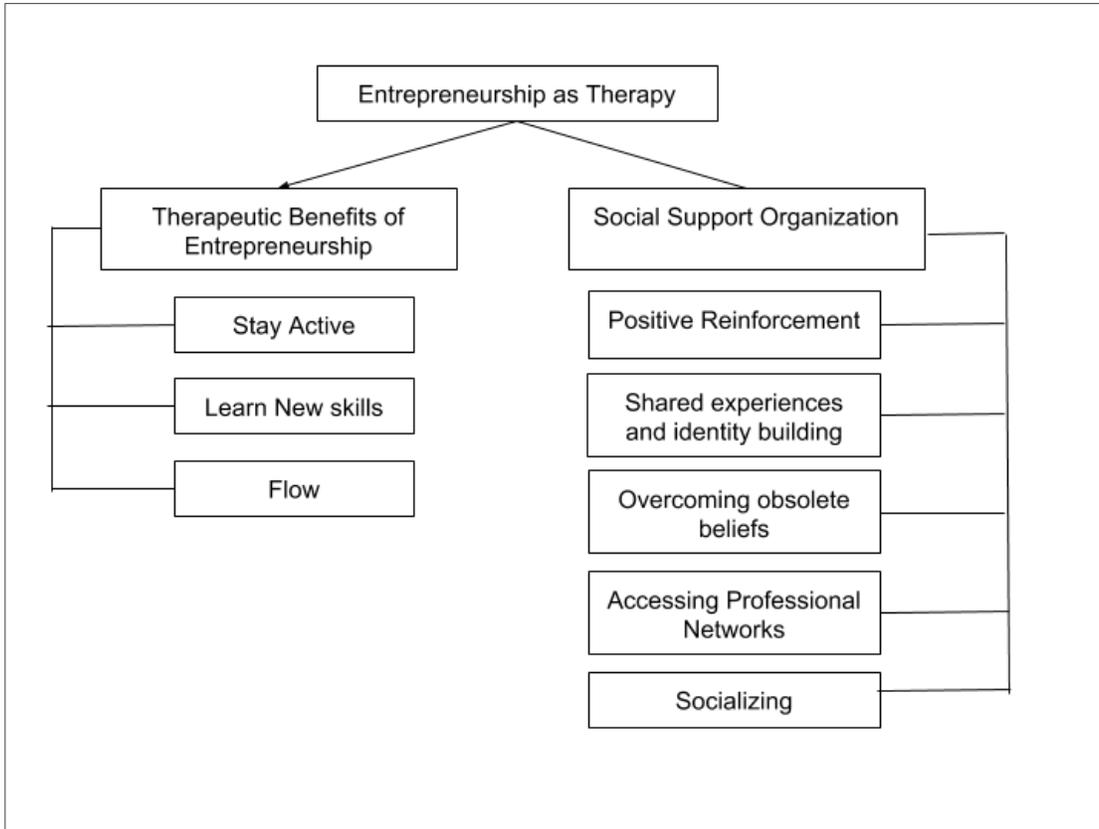
We have selected quotations that illustrate each element.

The therapeutic benefits of entrepreneurship

Stay active

Most participants in our study, but especially older women, argue that focusing on a business keep them active, and therefore "useful" for the society.

"In part, I do this out of necessity, but also to feel useful at my age (...) I want to show them that I can still take care of myself; make my own money and be useful. That's it, feeling useful" AR, clothing manufacturing (76).

Learn new skills

Women discover and develop their skill set, and by training, they may also reach a state of flow.

"(My business) it even worked as a therapy for me, because mosaic crafting requires you to work on your tolerance, your patience, everything related to fine motor skills and all that stuff." IE, handicraft products (41).

Flow

Related to the previous element, the state of flow (feel absorbed by the activity) is healing because it temporary changes the focus from the problems to a satisfying activity.

"Yes, many times I wish I could wake up and start working on my stuff (entrepreneurial project) and from then until dusk, without ever having anyone telling me "you have to do this, do that", being able instead to let my mind fly and create." MC, handicraft products (42).

"I do this because I like it, it's entertaining and I find it relaxing, and it occupies my mind. And many women do the same at home (...) and they say "as soon as I start working, I forget about everything I've done during the day" CM, services (26).

Some of them verbalize this state of flow like a way to relief, forgetting their pains and temporarily avoiding their problems:

"On a personal level, it has helped me immensely, because I think -I have never seen a psychologist- that this is my psychologist (...) all my jobs have helped me, they have provided for me, and they serve as release for all my sorrows as a mother, problems at home… having a child with cancer is not easy." MC, handicraft products (42).

"The product arose from the desire to get ahead and grow professionally (...) the appeal of crafts (her entrepreneurship), I have always liked doing arts and crafts, I absolutely love it, that's how I unwind, and the world around me ceases to exist." SF, services (59).

However, other women express it as a way of coping with their problems. They relate it to personal growth:

"Entrepreneurial projects help our mood and our spirit... everybody, working with our hands, with our minds, having an attitude, believing in something that helps us to grow… It helped me a lot, that is, not just lying down in my bed, receiving medication [chemotherapy], being constantly thinking of my cancer. [My stone crafts] has helped me to not think of my illness." AS, handicraft products (60).

The opposite is also true. The therapy becomes an entrepreneurial activity: sometimes they start an activity trying to find this state of flow, to move forward from a trauma, and this activity becomes later a business:

"Once I was divorced I restarted my needlecraft courses as it was a therapy to me, especially cross stitching, because (...) you really have to concentrate a lot to do it. It was a therapy (...) Later, when I saw that I could... that I could go on, (I became an entrepreneur) to produce for other people." TS, clothing manufacturing (73).

Social Support Organization

Positive reinforcement

During a Pitch course, women have been taught about feedback and encouraged to provide feedback to their classmates: They simply emulated feedback and "feedforward" techniques (Conaghan & Lockey, 2009), without giving them specific content. In a context of women with low self-esteem, simple comments of approval were widely applauded by women; so apparently, there is positive reinforcement that boosts self-confidence among the participants.

"A very professional presentation, congratulations, you manage your brand very well, keep going, everything is going to go very well for you because it's evident that you make great, high-quality products." BR, food products (44).

"I became emotional when I heard her...it's wonderful...she believes in what she does... she's very enthusiastic about her product... many congratulations." AS, handicraft products (60).

"I congratulate you, with what you've got on your table, you convey your joy (...) you are self-taught and I find that amazing." BR, food products (44).

"I find that our colleague is very frank when she speaks, she is very sincere, and she really loves her business, and she puts her whole being into it and so...it shows!" AL, clothing manufacturing (37).

Shared experiences and identity building

During group dynamics in training sessions, women entrepreneurs share their experiences and support each other.

"We get together to relax to forget about the problems that we have at home and our illnesses." CM, services (26).

Feeling that they are not alone, that there are more women entrepreneurs like them with many things in common, makes them feel that they have found a place to relate with, to build their "new" identify as entrepreneurs.

"I believe that what we all have in common is the way we decided to start a business. I don't know why, but every time I get together with others and we're all women, [it turns out that] we started after a painful experience (breakdown). Then, we decide (to start a business) after something big happens… a family trauma, an illness or whatever, or losing our job." IC, services (55).

Overcoming obsolete beliefs

The course provided by Prodemu became a space where women question their reality and collectively try to go forward, relying on the containment or support they receive from their peers. This allows them to tear down limiting beliefs or cognitive barriers.

"(The course) was a healing, reflexive and liberating experience for me" DG, retail (53).

"The project arose from the desire to get ahead and grow professionally. Being a housewife...we also have dreams, not (just) having a husband and children." SF, services (59).

Accessing professional networks

Beyond the Pitch sessions, the participants created a WhatsApp group (their own chat) called "Woman entrepreneur" (*Mujer emprendedora*). They use this chat as a contact network but also to support each other professionally to produce, attend trade markets and other tasks often related to balance work and family.

"I am already exhibiting, together with R.C. and [another member of this group] at the Christmas market" IE, handicraft products (41).

Socializing

As this group of women is often socially marginalized, the organization (not the entrepreneurial activity) offers them a space that breaks the tendency to isolate themselves.

"Yes, so, above all, because you get to make friends; you get to the point where you just stay locked up in the house and you do absolutely nothing else... Yes, so, then, no, here you make friends and meet people with great hearts, yes." MCH, food products (52).

Conclusion

As shown in Table 2, necessity-driven women entrepreneurs developed their existing skills. As they do what they want, they feel that the activity is therapeutic. The participants of this study stay in their comfort zone, and they are not interested in moving into a high-growth activity that requires more resources (i.e., time, skills, energy). This finding is the main obstacle for transforming necessity-driven into opportunity-driven entrepreneurship, the main objective of the educational programs created by Prodemu. This result is not unexpected but it will challenge policymakers around the globe.

Table 2: *Comparison between necessity and opportunity-driven entrepreneurship*

Necessity-driven ent.	Opportunity-driven ent.
supply-focused	demand-focused
they developed their skills, they do what they want.	they need to "adapt" their skills to what the market wants.

The activity chosen by a woman entrepreneur is based on her preferences and skills. It is not a market opportunity for the project that drives her to start a business, nor is it the main focus either.

"*...start an entrepreneurial project is closely linked to do what we enjoy the most; to discover what we like and do it... not as a job! but as a pleasure; (we love) to do something we enjoy within our necessity*" CV, cosmetics (38)

Sense of wellbeing provided by necessity-driven entrepreneurship

As shown in this study, necessity-driven entrepreneurship begins with developing a skill that the enterprising woman previously possesses or can learn fairly easily. They adapt to their own preferences with respect to learning and entrepreneurial experience, whereby they receive *social support*. Practicing the activity drives her to a *state of flow* that contributes to a sense of wellbeing.

This study explores why these women associate "entrepreneurship" with "therapy", by identifying 3 elements: 1) how can the entrepreneurial activity; and, 2) the support of a public organization, facilitate women's "therapy or healing process". We found that the entrepreneurial activity provides women with: a) the opportunity of staying active; b) discovery and development of new skills; that c) enables them to reach a state of flow. The organization also provide a safe space social support in the form of: a) feedback and positive reinforcement; b) sharing their similar experiences and building a common entrepreneurial identity; c) tearing down old limiting beliefs; d) creating a professional network; and, e) staying social.

Implications for Public Policy

Gender perspective is key to transform social identity. Innovative training activities in entrepreneurship, specifically those created for startups (usually ventures driven by opportunity) can be successful in training programs aimed at entrepreneurs of traditional and vulnerable groups (usually projects originated by necessity), through an adapted methodology with a gender approach.

Practical Implications for Practitioners and Entrepreneurship Educators

Similarly, to what happen in formal education (Hoffmann and Oreopoulos, 2009), this study also reports the "same-sex instructor effect". Apparently, women instructors create a "safe environment" for these vulnerable women. We recommend that this effect be examined experimentally.

Practical Implications for Women in Entrepreneurship

This case study shows that vulnerable women in entrepreneurship question the traditional gender roles and patriarchy after participating in a program focusing on gender. This, in turn, tears down their limiting beliefs, gives them back the control over their lives, and empowers them. They no longer feel that they are "bad mothers" or that "business and money is for men only". As such, they shake off their guilt. In sum, entrepreneurial activity enables women to "break free"

from particular gendered constraints; similar narratives have been reported for Swedish and Saudi Arabian women (Alkhaled & Berglund, 2018).

Additionally, these women found that they are not alone. There are many other women in the same situation or similar circumstances. And, since some women are striving for "success" in their business and personal lives, they serve as role models for women having a difficult journey or who are just starting their business. Role models provide motivation and strength for struggling women to continue with their businesses.

We conclude that entrepreneurial activity among women does not only improve economic autonomy or financial freedom, but it also contributes to general autonomy, physical, political, and economic wellbeing.

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