

Volunteerism as a catalyst for female entrepreneurship: the experience of stay-at-home women in Ain Temouchent during the COVID-19 pandemic

العمل التطوعي كرافد لريادة الأعمال النسوية: تجربة المرأة الماكثة بالبيت بعين تموشنت خلال جائحة كوفيد-19

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• Abstract:

This article aims to present some results of an exploratory study conducted among a group of inactive women (housewives) residing in the city of Ain Temouchent during two distinct periods: the period of confinement linked to the health crisis resulting from COVID-19, and that of post-confinement coinciding with the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022. The objective of this study is to answer the question of how the voluntary work hated by these women during the period of confinement could become a revealing factor for entrepreneurship and profitable work ? To carry out this possible analysis, we relied on a qualitative approach based on individual interviews.

Keywords:

Female Entrepreneurship, Stay-at-Home Women, COVID-19 Pandemic, Volunteerism, Informal Economy.

• الملخص:

يهدف هذا المقال إلى تقديم وتحليل جملة من النتائج المستخلصة من دراسة استكشافية أُجريت على عينة من النساء غير النشيطات اقتصادياً، وبالأخص ربّات البيوت المقيمات بمدينة عين تموشنت، وذلك خلال مرحلتين زمنيتين متميزتين. تتمثل المرحلة الأولى في فترة الحجر الصحي التي فرضت في سياق الأزمة الصحية العالمية الناجمة عن انتشار جائحة كوفيد-19، بينما تزامنت المرحلة الثانية مع فترة ما بعد رفع إجراءات الحجر الصحي، الممتدة من نهاية سنة 2021 إلى بداية سنة 2022. كما تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى مقارنة الإشكالية التالية: كيف يمكن للأنشطة ذات الطابع التطوعي التي مارستها مجموعة من النساء خلال فترة الحجر الصحي، والتي لم تكن في الأصل ذات طابع ربحي، أن تتحول إلى مؤشر كاشف لإمكانات و احتمالية ريادة الأعمال ومصدر محتمل للعمل المنتج والمدّر للدخل؟ لمعالجة هذه الإشكالية ومحاولة تحليل أبعادها الاجتماعية والاقتصادية، تمّ الاعتماد على مقارنة نوعية ركزنا من خلالها على إجراء مقابلات شفوية فردية معمّقة مع أفراد العينة المدروسة.

كلمات مفتاحية: المقاولاتية الرسمية، النساء الماكثات بالبيت، جائحة كوفيد-19، العمل التطوعي، الاقتصاد غير الرسمي

The Algeria, much like other countries globally, has seen a rise in the number of women entering the field of entrepreneurship. Researchers often define a female entrepreneur as "a woman who has established, acquired, or inherited a business, taking on all associated financial, administrative, and social risks and responsibilities, while actively managing its daily operations"¹. In broader terms, female entrepreneurship transcends economic considerations and is also shaped by socio-demographic factors that drive women to embrace change and capitalize on opportunities. This process often involves creative and innovative use of available resources².

The success of female entrepreneurs is influenced by various factors. Social elements—such as family support and harmony—play a significant role in ensuring the sustainability of a woman's business. Psychological and personal traits, like self-reliance, competence, and the ability to manage risks, also contribute significantly to entrepreneurial achievement and the cultivation of innovation. Sociologists have categorized entrepreneurs across genders into three main groups. The first includes "large employers" or "heirs" who inherit capital and family-run businesses. The second consists of individuals who leverage their high-ranking positions in government institutions to launch and sustain their own ventures. The third group—central to this study—comprises entrepreneurs who fall outside these two categories, lacking both inherited wealth and institutional networks or connections, thus receiving no advantage from "blood ties" or privileged affiliations³.

Reviewing the relevant academic literature reveals three principal scholarly approaches that frame the entrepreneurship. The first, led by sociologists of work like (Zalio, Wagner, Dudouet, Grémont, Alter, Naudet, Jourdain, Marry, Pochic, Boni, and Rabier)⁴, examines social structures and gender roles among business leaders. The second approach emphasizes socio-economic factors, with researchers such as Boltanski, Chiapello, François, Lemerrier, and Lemoine (M. Offerlé, 2015) exploring the role of institutional capital. The third centers on the sociology of elites and uses ethnographic and quantitative methods. Notable scholars here include Pinçon-Charlot, Denord, Georakakis, and Michel Yseem, the latter of whom introduced the concept of the "inner circle structure" among business elites⁵, which will inform the framework of this research.

Against this backdrop, the current study applies these theoretical insights to data gathered during an exploratory field investigation conducted amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic. During this crisis, Algerian woman like their global counterparts grappled with fear, psychological strain, and

¹ D. Lavoie- Les Entrepreneures: pour une économie canadienne renouvelée- Conseil consultatif canadien sur la situation de la femme, Ottawa, Canada, 1988, p3.

² N. Dabbah -A Study of the Reality of Entrepreneurship in Algeria: 2000-2009- University of Algiers 3, Algeria, 2012, 37.

³ C. Comet, J. Finez - The Heart of the Elite Patron. Sociologies Pratiques, Presses de Sciences Politics- Paris IIX, 2010, pp. 49-66.

⁴You can see the summary found in Serge Bocs' manual, Stratification and Social Classes. French Society in Change, 7th edition, A. Colin, 2013.

⁵ M. Yseem- The Inner Circle. Large Corporations and the Rise of Business Political Activity in the U.S. and the U.K- New York, Oxford University Press, 1984, p19.

complex social challenges. However, they also demonstrated resilience and solidarity. Women across different educational backgrounds actively participated in grassroots support efforts: delivering hot meals to hospital patients and healthcare workers, sewing personal protective equipment like masks and gowns, and contributing to collective welfare, both individually and within organized groups.

Post-pandemic, many of these women have the potential to convert their voluntary work into income-generating enterprises, in this context, numerous studies such as (Ruiz-Rosa, I., García-Rodríguez, F. J., & Delgado-Rodríguez, N. 2021; Ma, D., & Wang, C. 2024)) have clearly demonstrated how involvement in volunteering significantly promotes the intention to undertake social entrepreneurship projects. The study aims to trace the journeys of women who transitioned from vulnerable social positions to become wealth-generating entrepreneurs within their families and communities. Key questions guiding this research include: Who are these women? What is their socio-demographic backgrounds? What opportunities did they identify? How did they alter their socio-economic status? And how did they showcase their talents and innovation?

To address these questions, the study employed two qualitative methods. The first was observation—initially informal and remote during quarantine, later becoming more structured and participatory to follow the women's economic development. The second method was interviews, which complemented the observational data, particularly in the post-pandemic phase, allowing the researcher to explore previously unidentified themes.

The study's focus on the city of Ain Temouchent was both practical and personal. The initial research community emerged from spontaneous observations made during the early lockdown phase (starting March 2020), when many unemployed or stay-at-home women in the city became actively involved in supporting those impacted by the crisis. The choice of location is also tied to the researcher's residence in the area and the mobility restrictions in place at the time.

1. Research methodology

1.1 General context and data analysis procedure

To begin, it is important to highlight the statistical data on women's participation in economic activity in Algeria, as reported in the most recent 2019 statistics from the National Office of Statistics (ONS). Women represent only 17.3% of the workforce, a significantly lower figure compared to the 66.8% participation rate for men⁶.

Interpreting these statistics requires a closer look at this majority segment—roughly 83%—of women not engaged in formal employment, regardless of their educational backgrounds⁷. This group includes women who are actively seeking employment, those who have left the workforce due to family obligations, health concerns, or other personal reasons, and others who, despite

⁶ ONS - Activities, employment and unemployment- N° 879, Algeria, 2019.

⁷ Ibid, 2019

having academic degrees or varying levels of education, possess valuable vocational skills such as tailoring, hairdressing, and cooking.

In this context and given the scarcity of academic research on this predominant demographic of women aged 15 to 60, it is essential to acknowledge and commend those who revealed their hidden capacities during the COVID-19 pandemic—especially during the period of full or partial lockdowns. Many of these women mobilized their skills in acts of volunteerism and solidarity, preparing meals and sewing protective gear like face masks and gowns for healthcare workers. This volunteer work was largely unanticipated. As one stay-at-home woman involved in sewing protective gear expressed:

“I never imagined I could offer any public or private service.

I have only modest sewing skills, which I used to help healthcare workers without expecting any payment... I used to make around 100 face masks per day.”

Others recounted how they prepared meals for healthcare professionals in their municipalities, offering services that fall clearly within the scope of community-based volunteer work. Yet, for many, this volunteerism soon transitioned into income-generating activity. This shift became evident through social media pages advertising services, including meal preparation, offered to a wider audience beyond health workers. One woman explained:

“I started as a volunteer in a charity, preparing healthy meals for doctors and nurses in our area... I never considered turning this into a business, but thanks to the experience I gained and the support of my son—who helped me launch a Facebook page to promote my services—I now earn a decent income.”

These cases are not isolated; they are widespread and deserve formal recognition. They highlight the potential to transform domestic volunteer efforts into productive, developmental initiatives that benefit both families and communities. This aligns with one of the core aims of volunteerism: “bridging service gaps and expanding the scope of social sufficiency by activating dormant skills and turning them into productive, contributing forces”⁸.

In line with national programs initiated by the Ministry of National Solidarity, Family, and Women’s Affairs—which aim to empower stay-at-home and rural women—there is a growing need to extend similar support to women across all regions. This includes designing mechanisms that facilitate their integration into the economic fabric of the country, such as granting micro-loans for purchasing tools and equipment related to their trades and guiding them toward establishing micro-enterprises. These enterprises could significantly help reduce unemployment by shifting women

⁸ S. Al-Maliki -The Extent of Female Graduate Students' Awareness of Women's Voluntary Work in Society- Master's Thesis, Umm Al-Qura University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2012, p37.

from a non-working to a productive status, contributing first to family welfare and then to national development. This would support the shift from informal to formal entrepreneurship.

This paper draws on findings from a field study that falls within the broader mission of the Socio-Anthropology of History and Memory Department's research initiative, "Citizenship and COVID-19." The purpose of the exploratory study was to identify key participants and themes related to how stay-at-home women transitioned from volunteer roles during the lockdown to entrepreneurial ventures. Conducted in the city of Aïn Témouchent between 2020 and 2022, the study aimed to gain insight into this emergent group of women entrepreneurs, especially those in the areas of cooking and sewing.

The participants were selected based on prior knowledge of their community involvement during the quarantine period, which began in March 2020. These women—unemployed or stay-at-home prior to the crisis—played active roles in supporting patients and healthcare personnel through hot meal distribution and the production of protective clothing such as face masks, gloves, and aprons. Their work was either carried out individually or within charitable organizations.

Given that entrepreneurship is broadly defined as "the process of establishing an innovative economic entity aimed at profit or growth, often under conditions of uncertainty and risk, and through the exploitation of new opportunities"⁹, this study sought to assess how well this definition aligns with the experiences of the women in question. Were they truly entrepreneurs—transitioning from an informal, spontaneous idea born out of a crisis to producing goods and services subject to market dynamics and demand?

2. Discussion of the results of the survey

2.1 Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

As previously stated, drawing on our prior knowledge of certain stay-at-home women who played active roles in volunteer and charitable efforts during the COVID-19 crisis—supporting patients and various healthcare workers including administrators, doctors, and nurses—this exploratory field study began by seeking their consent to participate. Once engaged, these women referred us to others within their networks, allowing us to broaden our research community. This initial phase resulted in five female respondents, whose profiles we sought to understand by addressing the following questions: Who are these women? What are their ages, education levels, and marital statuses (married, single, divorced, or widowed)? Do they have children? Are they supported by family members, or are they themselves caregivers? How did the idea of launching a business originate? Did the COVID-19 crisis play a role? And what mechanisms have they employed?

It is good to remember that this study utilized a qualitative methodology, focusing on a small, purposeful sample rather than a broad, statistical representation. The five women selected were all based in Aïn Témouchent. During the lockdown, they were deeply involved in voluntary service and have since transitioned into entrepreneurship, becoming heads of their own small businesses.

⁹ M.J. Dollinger - Entrepreneurship: Strategies and Resources, Homewood- IL: Austen Press, 1995, p391.

They are between 45 and 55 years old, with an average age of 49. Educational attainment ranges from middle school to university degrees. All are married with children, except for one who is single, as outlined in the table below:

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

	Participant1	Participant2	Participant3	Participant4	Participant5
Age	45 Years old	51 years old	48 years old	47 years old	55 years old
Educational level	3 rd year secondary school	3rd year secondary school	Licence University	DEUA University	3 rd year middle school
Civil status	Single	Married	Married	Married	Divorced
Number of children	/	03	02	04	01
Husband's profession	/	Daily worker	Employee	Employee	/

Source: the author survey results

A cross-sectional analysis of this data highlights the important role education plays in empowering women to engage in entrepreneurial activities, even within the constraints of family obligations. The presence of a spouse does not seem to hinder their pursuits—in many cases, it serves as a source of motivation and support.

2.2 Volunteer Work and Family Environment as Enablers of Women's Entrepreneurship

Based on prior observations during lockdown, we identified that these women initially offered services such as preparing hot meals, savory snacks, and a variety of traditional and modern desserts. As detailed in the table below, all of them eventually expanded their offerings and began marketing their products online with the help of a family member (usually a son, husband, or brother). Although they operated from their homes and not formal business premises, all expressed a desire to eventually open dedicated shops. Each employed at least one or more individuals regularly, providing fixed compensation.

Table 2: Data on the nature of work

Nature	Participant1	Participant2	Participant3	Participant4	Participant5
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of work	Hot meals Sales.	Selling various traditional sweets.	Selling salted appetizers, sweets and modern desserts.	Selling hot meals and traditional sweets.	Hot meals Sales.
Nature Of Marketing	Through her personal page on Facebook and Instagram	Through her personal page on Facebook and Instagram	Through her personal page on Facebook and Instagram	Through her personal page on Facebook and Instagram	Through her personal page on Facebook and Instagram
Number of individuals who work with them permanently.	03 individuals (for a fee)	01 one individual (for a fee)	02 two individuals (for a fee)	04 four individuals (for a fee)	03 three individuals P(for a fee)
Place of work	Home	Home	Home	Home	Home
Is there any desire to open a private shop ?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Is there any desire for a social welfare?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: the author survey results

2.3 The birth of an entrepreneurial work idea

All respondents indicated that their entrepreneurial journey began during the pandemic lockdown through involvement in volunteer efforts—many for the first time. Respondent 3 shared:

“I began as a volunteer in a charitable association preparing healthy meals for healthcare workers in our town. Initially, I had no intention of turning this into a business.

But after gaining experience and receiving support from my son, who helped me set up a Facebook page, I started receiving paid orders.”

Respondent 5 echoed a similar sentiment, noting that through volunteering, she gained organizational and management skills previously unknown to her:

“When I was part of a team preparing hot meals at hospitals, I learned how to manage quantities, organize distribution, and efficiently allocate time.

These were new skills that helped me transition to profitable work.”

2.4 Source of support

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was the critical role of family support—both emotional and practical—in enabling these women to launch and grow their micro-enterprises. Respondent 4 detailed how her son’s encouragement led her from volunteering to managing a growing customer base:

“I volunteered to cook for patients and staff at Hammam Bouhadjar hospital.

My 19-year-old son later urged me to keep working and offered to promote my meals among his colleagues. Eventually, he helped me create a Facebook page, and the requests have increased steadily since then.”

This clearly illustrates how the family environment played a foundational role in motivating these women to develop their skills, transition from informal to potentially formal economic activity, and contribute to their families and communities.

• Conclusion

The findings from this exploratory fieldwork reveal that the COVID-19 health crisis played a pivotal role in catalyzing the transformation of several stay-at-home women into entrepreneurs. The pandemic served as both a challenge and an opportunity, pushing these women to leverage their latent skills and contribute economically. Their prior experience in volunteerism proved essential in developing practical, managerial, and interpersonal skills that laid the groundwork for future business endeavors. Crucially, the support received from family—especially children and spouses—was instrumental in helping them make this transition. These women not only expressed a desire to formalize their businesses but also to register with social security (CASNOS), signaling a strong intention to transition from informal activity to legally recognized entrepreneurship. This suggests a broader socio-economic potential for integrating such informal labor into the formal economy, starting with the empowerment of women within their own homes.

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