

The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Women's Enterprises: Analysis of a Pilot Case



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Abstract Purpose The pandemic has imposed unconventional ways of working, reorganised company structures and significantly altered people's daily routines. The purpose of this article is to analyse the impact these new flexible working arrangements have had within women's enterprises and the effects they have had on their business models.

Design/Methodology/Approach The study is qualitative in nature and was conducted through a pilot single case study.

An unstructured interview was conducted with the CEO and leader of a female enterprise operating in the agri-food sector in a region of Northern Italy.

Originality/Value Direct case analysis relates the activities of a female entrepreneur running a business, and the difficulties she encountered during the pandemic period, with a focus on the delicate lockdown phase. From the analysis, organisational skills and resilience emerge in the attempt to reconcile the complexity of business management with family care.

Keywords Female Entrepreneurship · Flexible Working · Work–life balance · Female resilience

1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has imposed flexible working models that have impacted on the organisation of companies and their productivity.

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This has generated the need for many companies, particularly women's companies, the protagonists of this study, to review their business models in order to adapt them to the new evolving scenario.

It is believed that such labour agreements may partly help to reduce the gender pay gap as well, as these instruments may help women to maintain their employment position after childbirth (Chung and van der Horst 2018; Fuller and Hirsh 2019; Piasna and Plagnol 2018; Van der Lippe et al. 2018).

Specifically, however, it also seems to emerge that while working remotely, women perceive that they spend more time on domestic activities and childcare than their partners, due to an asymmetric division of roles typical of traditional Italian welfare (Paoloni et al. 2022).

Thanks to the enormous transformative capacities of digital technologies (Dunleavy et al. 2006), the slogan of anywhere-anytime, no time or space constraints, is spreading: to be connected (even limitless) and have everything at the touch of a smartphone or PC in order to facilitate the work-life balance, sparing employees the stress associated with the home-work commute and the work environment itself. Similarly, the employer would have an increase in competitiveness, lower absenteeism and a high level of productivity (Bloom et al. 2009).

Given that, the research aims to answer the following Research Question (RQ):

RQ1: How have women's enterprises adapted to flexible working models and what impact have they generated on their business?

The paper is organised as follows: literature review, methodology, presentation of results and finally conclusions and implications.

The literature review shows that the COVID-19 pandemic, and specifically the flexible work models imposed during the health crisis, have significantly reshaped work and its social representations, as well as all aspects of business organisation (Anderson and Kelliher 2020).

Many studies state that remote work, particularly from home, is a source of stress (Kraut 1989; Moore 2006) as a result of role conflict, where women are more likely than men to experience greater tension and blurring of boundaries between the domains of work and family (Chung and van der Horst 2018).

Despite the growing volume of literature on women entrepreneurs, there is evidence that the issue of objectively assessing the factors that contribute to promoting or undermining the well-being of women entrepreneurs is scarce.

Thus, it emerges that the well-being of women entrepreneurs is once again linked to the achievement of work-life balance and the satisfaction they derive from their employment (Lepeley et al. 2019), elements that were definitely undermined during the intervening pandemic crisis.

To answer the research question, a qualitative methodology is used, based on a case study of a pilot women's company active in the Italian food services sector. The empirical data were obtained from unstructured interviews.

2 Literature Review

The idea of entrepreneurship is closely related to those who create or seize opportunities and then develop organised economic activities that add value to both themselves and society (da Silva et al. 2015). Thus, the entrepreneurial function is defined as playing a key role in stimulating economic activity by transforming technical ideas and inventions into innovations, whether commercial or organisational in nature. This concept is based on the idea that entrepreneurship is a value generator for society. The characteristics of female entrepreneurship are examined for their uniqueness and perceived challenges (da Silva et al. 2015). Since colonial times, women have been subjected to a moralism that seeks to subject them to various restrictions. One of these restrictions is the difficulty for women to obtain higher-level positions within an organisation and secure pay comparable to that of men in the same position (Lages and Regina 2005).

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of women working in sectors related to business creation and development (Hisrich and Peter 2004). Consequently, research on the characteristics of women entrepreneurs has attracted the interest of academic researchers in the field, revealing that women share certain traits with entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurial ventures led by women have created value and fuelled innovation on a local and international scale. The increase in the number of women-led businesses in recent years has had a significant impact on employment and business competition. For example, these enterprises account for between 25 and 33% of all formal enterprises operating today on a global scale and are believed to play an even more significant role in socio-economic systems and informal markets (NFWBO 2001).

One of the main motivations driving women to entrepreneurship is the search for flexibility, which does not mean working fewer hours, but rather controlling working hours by reconciling them with private life (Patterson and Mavin 2009).

Thus, women's well-being in entrepreneurship is closely related to self-employment, work–life balance, work–family balance and economic prosperity (Paoloni et al. 2022).

Similarly, Tomlinson and Durbin (2010) highlight how female managers often seek a balance between career aspirations and career mobility but at the same time the introduction of flexible policies is perceived to hinder future career and development prospects.

The pandemic has increased the interference between work and family due to domestic work policies, and the closure of schools for children has increased the burden on women who are responsible for maintaining the home (Paoloni et al. 2022).

In particular, Lagomarsino et al. (2020) through an interview with 300 women from different Italian regions show how women themselves perceived blocking and smart working as increasing the time they spent on domestic activities and childcare

compared to their partners. As the age of the children decreases, the workload falls on the woman herself.

Similarly, Doria (2021) addresses the issue of the intrusion of work into the dynamics of private space, no longer freed from work time, but invaded by it. In particular, the author emphasises how complex it has been for women to enter the labour market, the reconciliation of work and family care and how smart working can be an instrument of overlapping and alienation with the risk of a return to home and asymmetries that have never been resolved.

As a result, according to Hilbrecht et al. (2008), female workers have the illusion of being more autonomous due to the availability of remote work options, accepting that the majority of domestic and care responsibilities fall on their shoulders.

Thus, this transition period provided new learning opportunities for entrepreneurs, who became courageous enough to handle any uncertain situation and maintain the survival of the business. However, the most significant and immediate learning was that of self-fulfilment, which enabled them to recognise their own strengths and weaknesses (Afshan et al. 2021).

The literature review generated few contributions on the topic of female entrepreneurship and the impact of flexible working arrangements on female entrepreneurs. This paper is proposed as a contribution to bridging this gap.

3 Research Methodology

The paper uses a qualitative methodology suitable for achieving research objectives that aim to provide a direct description of phenomena (Sandelowski 2004). The analysis is supported by a single case study (Yin 2014).

The analysis by means of business cases may concern the observation of a single business reality or multiple cases depending on the purpose. If the aim is specific knowledge of a business system, the single case is sufficient, whereas if the aim is to generalise certain considerations, it will be appropriate to consolidate one's statements by preparing the analysis of an appropriate number of cases.

The "single case" is comparable to the isolated experiment and only makes sense when it represents a critical case in the verification of a well-formulated theory. To confirm or disprove the theory in the single case, all the conditions for testing it must be met. The single case is also used when we are in the presence of an extreme or unique case that is unrepeatable or has never occurred, or if it is a revelatory case, i.e., a case that has never been examined before because it was inaccessible to scientific investigation. A single case can also be the pilot case, which, however, is only the first part of a multiple case analysis (Paoloni 2021).

The authors selected an Italian women's SME active in the six-food services market in the Trentino Alto Adige region; this represents a pilot company for the study, selected for its relational proximity to the researchers and, therefore, for its ease in finding useful and in-depth information. The data were collected through an unstructured interview conducted directly with the CEO of the company.

COMPANY MASTER DATA AND PERSONAL PROFILE ENTREPRENEUR

- Legal form of company
- Activity
- Location
- Personal information

COVID-19 IMPACT ON COMPANY BUSINESS MODEL

- New sales channels
- New organizational approach to work
- Business networking: the importance of relationships

IMPACT OF FLEXIBLE WORKING MODELS ON CORPORATE ORGANIZATION

- Smart working
- Corporate digitization

NEW POST-PANDEMIC ORGANIZATIONAL SET-UP

- Return to headquarters of workers

THE IMPACT OF REMOTE WORKING ON WOMEN

- Role conflict
- Reconciliation of private and working life

Fig. 1 Unstructured questionnaire outline. Source: Authors

The use of the pilot case in our investigation supported the development of new and important questions by providing us with clarifications and clarifications regarding the object of the research. It also led us to the formulation of a more structured questionnaire suitable for the information needs of our analysis to be applied to subsequent cases (Paoloni 2021).

The unstructured questionnaire (Fig. 1) with broad questions gives the respondent the opportunity to expand on specific questions:

1. Company details and information on the personal profile of the entrepreneur
2. How has the company's business model changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How have flexible working models impacted on business operations?
4. Has the new post-pandemic organisational structure been maintained even after the health crisis has passed?
5. As a woman, how did you experience remote working?

4 Results

Through the answers provided by the entrepreneur to the unstructured questionnaire submitted, it is possible to make some observations.

Company biographical data and information on the entrepreneur's personal profile

It was possible to gather basic information on the company under study but, above all, on the distinctive characteristics of the entrepreneur.

Below is the answer given to the first question: *"My name is Lorella and I am the owner of the company (xxx) which for privacy reasons I prefer to keep anonymous. It is a limited liability company (SRL) active in the food distribution sector in the region of Trentino Alto Adige. We have been operating as a trading company in the food service market for over 20 years and supply mainly the hotellerie-restaurant-café (Horeca) channel. I play the role of managing director, so I am a female entrepreneur over 40 years old, married and with two minors to take care of"*.

Having defined the main characteristics of the company and therefore the personal profile of the entrepreneur, it was then possible to submit the following questions in order to obtain information to answer our research question.

How has the company's business model changed following the COVID-19 pandemic?

The entrepreneur states that her business model has undergone changes as a result of the health crisis that occurred, two are the main changes introduced: a new e-commerce sales channel and entry into a national purchasing network.

Specifically, she reports: *"In order to strengthen our purchasing power on the national and international market, it was a far-sighted move to join a national purchasing group. This is a group to which about 15 companies active in the same sector and tending to potential competitors located in different Italian regions currently belong. There is no overlap of companies belonging to the same region joining the same purchasing group. Joining this enlarged group has allowed the company to strengthen its bargaining power in the market, especially in the foreign market, for the import of containers of products following the increase in transport costs dictated by the immobility that characterised the months of the pandemic. Being part of the purchasing group is also a valuable opportunity to relate and compare notes with colleagues who strive every day to pursue the same goals as me"*.

The third question was then put to the CEO:

How have flexible working models impacted on the company's operations?

The entrepreneur states that the sudden halt in operations and the imposition of flexible working models have generated considerable organisational changes. In detail, Lorella, the young owner, reveals: *"About 60 per cent of our workforce kept their operations from home, i.e., in smart working, the remaining 40 per cent continued to come to work in attendance with hours and shifts that ensured that there were no crowds. The workforce that remained active on site are manual workers that perform warehouse and goods delivery tasks. Instead, the employees*

active in smart working are marketing, administration, quality control and insurance management". Clearly, to make the new operational set-up efficient, the entrepreneur states that considerable investments were necessary: "We took the unwanted event of the pandemic as a good opportunity to question the company's level of digitalization. To ensure the operability of our smart working staff, we invested in IT equipment: PCs, tablets and monitors. A release of the management system was carried out in order to allow remote connection to the various users in the company management system. A cloud system for data storage was implemented".

The fourth question was then submitted to the entrepreneur:

Was the new post-pandemic organisational set-up maintained even after the health crisis had passed?

As a result of the pandemic and the imposed company reorganisation, many companies, like the selected female entrepreneur's, underwent organisational restructuring. The entrepreneur interviewed stated that some of the innovations introduced were maintained even in the post-pandemic scenario, while other old operations were restored. Specifically, Lorella states: *"We felt it was important to bring back staff to work in presence. So today all our staff work in presence 5 days a week. One day per week of flexibility has been maintained to request remote work, so that this can be perceived as a tool to help reconcile private and working life".*

Finally with reference to the last question:

As a woman, how did you experience remote working?

Before answering the last question in our questionnaire, the entrepreneur provided further details about her private life that can undoubtedly influence the management of work at home. Specifically, Lorella states that she is married and lives with her spouse and two young children. Her spouse is a full-time employee at a private IT company and therefore usually spends few hours in the marital home.

The entrepreneur says: *"Living and working all within the same house for such a long period as the months of the pandemic was a social experiment for me. It was quite complex to be able to maintain one's productivity in such a noisy setting as the home. Despite collaborating with my husband to carry out household tasks, I perceived an increased workload especially related to childcare and a consequent increase in stress".*

Lorella's experience therefore confirms the findings in the literature that flexible working methods increased women's perception of unpaid workload. Thus, such alternative working methods have exacerbated gender differences, especially for women and men in top positions. Specifically, the pandemic emergency seems to have isolated workers within the home by imposing close cohabitation with other members of the household (Paoloni et al. 2022).

Companies have also had to experiment with alternative working methods in order to ensure productivity without negatively impacting their business.

5 Conclusions

The analysis conducted shows that the topic of female entrepreneurship has become increasingly popular in the literature, involving a growing number of research articles, with a consequent increase in the number of interconnected analyses on this topic.

The Coronavirus epidemic, especially in the West, has demonstrated the value and capacity of working from home for both employers and individuals, with different consequences and impacts on men and women.

Indeed, men and women are used to using their time differently when it comes to organising family activities, due to the conventional separation of tasks (Rafnsdóttir and Heijstra 2013).

While flexible working arrangements have long been seen as a way to create work–life balance by giving employees greater discretion over when and where to work (Hilbrecht et al. 2008), the sudden relocation of all household members within the home has resulted in a sudden and compulsory transition of work outside the normal context, making temporal and spatial boundaries between paid work and caring for others non-existent (Craig and Churchill 2021).

In a regime of gender asymmetry, where welfare remains family-based and domestic and care work falls mainly on women's shoulders, it is necessary to contextualise remote work, as it emerges that it does not necessarily reduce inequalities and improve women's working conditions.

The Covid-19 pandemic has thus forced different ways of working from traditional ones, a restructuring of business organisations and thus a profound change in individuals' routines.

A structured analysis of the literature (Paoloni et al. 2022) revealed a gap in research regarding the analysis of the effects of the pandemic and specifically of smart working in women's businesses.

To fill this gap, the present work, by means of a single pilot case study, aimed to investigate the impact of flexible working models on the business of women's enterprises and thus how they have adapted to these changes.

In order to answer research question RQ1, a pilot case was used: a female enterprise that has been in the market for more than 20 years and is active in northern Italy in the distribution of food to the Horeca segment. An unstructured questionnaire was submitted to the CEO of the small female enterprise who provided comprehensive answers.

Specifically, it emerged that the COVID-19 pandemic had profoundly impacted on the company's operations and thus imposed changes on the existing business model. In order to maintain/enhance its market position, it was necessary to activate an additional sales channel, e-commerce, to sell products directly to the end consumer. Significant digital investments were made by the company, an intervention to modernise digital equipment such as computers, laptops, monitors and tablets in order to ensure full operability even for workers working remotely. Similarly, interventions were implemented to update and modify the company software, to

ensure a remote connection to the management system and the inclusion of a cloud storage system. This technological transition process proved necessary due to the imposition of remote working for a large part of the employees. In fact, the entrepreneur noted that only the manual workers in the warehouse department and thus the carriers continued to work onsite for almost the entire period of the health crisis, the others, employees in the marketing, credit insurance administration and finance departments, instead worked entirely remotely throughout the months of the pandemic emergency.

It still emerges that in the post-pandemic scenario, some of the innovations introduced were retained while other good old practices were reinstated.

In fact, the entrepreneur claims that in the post-pandemic scenario, she considered it appropriate to encourage staff to return to face-to-face work, guaranteeing them the opportunity once a week to remain active remotely. The e-commerce channel has been maintained; a new division has been set up specifically for online business.

The company owner also stated that, in order to strengthen its market power, the company joined a national purchasing group, which includes similar companies operating in various Italian regions. Belonging to a network of companies proved to be a far-sighted choice for the initiation of relationships and shared development strategies that brought positive effects on its business.

Finally, it emerged from the study that the female entrepreneur experienced an increase in stress and a perceived increase in unpaid workload to be managed and reconciled with work activities.

This pilot case highlighted the need for further research on the topic of relationship networks, as it was shown that such networks sometimes provide easier access to supply markets, outlet markets, financial markets and the entire external environment.

All relationships (formal, informal, temporary, permanent, internal and external) are of fundamental importance for the survival and growth of the enterprise and in turn influence, shape and characterise the factors that distinguish and personalise individual enterprises. To this end, one of the possible scenarios of future research could be oriented towards the analysis of such relational relationships and thus the analysis of the results through the application of the CAOS model ("Characteristics, Ambience, Organisation, Start-up") (Paoloni 2021).

From a theoretical perspective, the research contributes to studies on female entrepreneurship, with a focus on flexible working methods. In particular, it increases the literature on the impact of flexible work on women and women entrepreneurs. Furthermore, it can enrich studies focusing on the adaptation of traditional business models to the organisational changes dictated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

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