

# An Overview on Immigrant Female Entrepreneurship in Italy



Federico de Andreis and Francesco Antonio Rusciani

**Abstract** Analysing the number of companies led by foreigners can be a useful parameter to measure the labour integration of immigrants in the countries of destination and their participation in the production system.

In our country, non-Italian firms are a structurally significant reality. They appear to be characterized by a certain liveliness, often even greater than that of native companies, showing flexibility even during the pandemic, suffering its effects on a par with Italian enterprises but subsequently registering a new momentum.

A further fact to highlight is the female component in the number of foreign-owned companies, which confirms the above-mentioned vitality.

Thus, the aim of this paper is to carry out a literature review to investigate immigrant entrepreneurship with particular reference to female-owned activities, answering the following issues:

RQ1. Which is the quantitative dimension of immigrant entrepreneurship businesses in Italy?

RQ2. Which are the push factors of the phenomenon?

RQ3. How many women are among immigrant entrepreneurs, i.e. which is the quantitative dimension of immigrant enterprises led by women?

Specifically, the aim is to analyse the dimension and the reasons of the phenomenon in Italy and the presence of women in foreign entrepreneurship.

Literature searches have been conducted, using a set of selected keywords and selected papers have been analysed in an attempt to identify main topics and results.

This paper contributes to expand the literature on foreign entrepreneurship in Italy and immigrant female entrepreneurship, investigating the extent of the phenomenon, its motivations and possible implications and, furthermore, it aims to help the foreign

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entrepreneurship universe to become aware of the immigrant enterprise phenomenon.

**Keywords** Entrepreneurship · Immigrants · Social integration · Immigrant female entrepreneurship

## 1 Introduction

The topic of immigrant entrepreneurship is increasingly addressed in literature, particularly in Economics and Management due to the growing intensity of migration flows to the more developed, or strongly developing countries (Collins and Low 2010).

Investigating the phenomenon of immigrant enterprise offers important insights, since the presence and growth of companies led by foreign immigrants are elements that have profoundly changed the framework of entrepreneurship and do not seem destined to end in the short term (Kerr and Kerr 2016).

In the observation of the phenomenon and its evolution, we are witnessing a growth in business activities led by female immigrant as a probable consequence of the reduced difficulty in networking, but also the possible driving effect on the emergence of other women-owned businesses.

The role of the women in society, as well as in entrepreneurship, has deeply changed in the last 50 years, mainly in the north of the world, despite the fact that the gender gap is a relevant issue in every study area (Knight 2016).

Many studies provide evidence that the enterprises carried on by woman are increasing in all countries of the world, so the entrepreneurship is no longer a male-only business, and especially that the main features of women like resilience, imagination, and flexibility are what enterprises need to emerge from crisis periods, like the one due to the Covid-19 pandemic that we are living nowadays (Fairlie 2020).

Literature has often associated the entrepreneur with the archetype of the successful white man, almost elevated to a hero; without considering that there can be female entrepreneurs as well as immigrant women (Essers et al. 2010). Studies about female immigrant entrepreneurship come from two fields of research that provide answers on the topic incidentally, and not directly. The research focuses on female entrepreneurship or on immigrant entrepreneurship, there are not many surveys focused on the combination of these two conditions of obvious disadvantage, taking into consideration both conditions that immigrant women entrepreneurs face at different stages of their lives (Collins and Low 2010).

The topic of female immigrant entrepreneurship has been associated with the theory of intersectionality: in fact, this topic has often been addressed in the context of studies on feminism, rather on immigration; the theory of intersectionality has allowed the notion of ‘female ethnicity’ to be developed (Essers et al. 2010). Indeed, the topic of female immigrant entrepreneurship, in the context of business and

economic studies, is still little addressed in the literature, even though the phenomenon is rapidly growing (De Vita et al. 2014).

From here, the aim of this paper is to carry out a literature review to investigate the presence of immigrant enterprises in Italy, also by using empirical data, and the incidence of female enterprises.

To summarize, the aim is therefore to answer the following issues:

RQ1. Which is the quantitative dimension of immigrant entrepreneurship in Italy?

RQ2. Which are the push factors of the phenomenon?

RQ3. How many women are among immigrant entrepreneurs, i.e. which is the quantitative dimension of immigrant enterprises led by women?

The research is structured as follows. In the following Sect. 2, the method of the literature review is set out. Next, the findings of the literature analysis are shown in Sect. 3 and, in Sect. 4, a context analysis is presented. Furthermore conclusions and implications for future research are presented in Sect. 5.

This paper contributes to expand the literature on connection between gender studies and female entrepreneurship, emphasizing the topic analysed as emerging issue, which gives us the possibility to identify new trends and future directions for research.

The research therefore aims to help the foreign entrepreneurship universe to become aware of the immigrant enterprise phenomenon and wants to provide a mapping of the existing reality in Italy.

## 2 Research Approach and Methodology

In the present research, a qualitative analysis of the phenomenon of female immigrant entrepreneurship was used, using an exploratory descriptive qualitative (EDQ) analysis with reference to the Italian context-specific part and a literature analysis with reference to the general context.

EDQ is a qualitative methodology suitable for addressing research objectives that aim to provide a direct description of phenomena. In particular, this methodology allows scholars to get to know the subjects involved, their characteristics and the locations of the phenomenon of interest (Caelli et al. 2003).

The 12 papers taken into account in the research to outline the general international context are the result of a structured literature analysis, which provided for the subdivision of the papers extracted from Scopus according to the following classes.

The papers included in the analysis refer only to economic and business subjects.

Considering only research-related results, the 12 paper analysed papers belong to the article focus reported in point A1, Table 1 and in order to carry out an analysis of actual scientifically relevant material, just those papers with more than 20 citations. Then, in order to deepen the contextual analysis on the Italian area, articles were taken from Google Scholar, taking into consideration those having the article focus

**Table 1** Classification system from Paoloni–Demartini framework

A. Article focus		G. Geographical area	
A1	Female entrepreneurship	G1	Africa
A2	Corporate governance	G2	Asia
A3	Gender equality	G3	Central and South America
A4	Other	G4	Comparative
<b>M. Research method</b>		G5	Europe
M1	Literature analysis	G6	Middle East
M2	Other	G7	No geographical focus or countries belong to different areas
M3	Qualitative research	G8	North America
M4	Quantitative research	G9	Oceania
M5	Research mix	G10	United Kingdom

Source: Paoloni and Demartini (2016)

on ‘Immigrant entrepreneurship’ and offering the broadest qualitative and descriptive approach.

## 2.1 *Scopus Results Selection of 12 Papers About Entrepreneurship*

The classification system deriving from Paoloni and Demartini (2016) framework is based on the identification of four categories of documents (point A, Table 1) in which are included specific sub-classifications of documents (point M and point G, Table 1). Female entrepreneurship seems to be not relevant for the study in the articles with a focus on points A2, A3, and A4.

## 3 Literature Analysis

The presence and growth of the enterprises led by foreign immigrant citizens are phenomena that have profoundly changed the framework of entrepreneurship in the EU and that do not seem destined to end in the short term.

Italy, as is well known, has been fully immersed since the 1990s in the centre of migratory flows that have made it a strongly settled country, with a process of growth of the foreign population with very accentuated trends. These flows have made the foreign presence an unavoidable component and a structural feature of Italian society.

Since the 1990s, foreign entrepreneurs have always increased, maintaining a positive trend even during the crisis years.

In order to understand the interpretative perspectives of the phenomenon, we need to refer to different scientific disciplines such as ethnic studies, sociology, economic and urban geography studies, business studies, economic policy, which in their breadth of investigation allow us to reach a complete level of analysis of a complex phenomenon.

The first important element to investigate are factors underlying the start-up of the entrepreneurial activity, which we can group into subjective and environmental (Giaccone 2014).

Subjective factors include those aspects related to the entrepreneur and his or her propensity towards entrepreneurial activity, such as the psychological, religious, socio-cultural background of certain ethnic groups, as well as the sharing of values such as the propensity to take risks, the desire for self-fulfilment, frugality, independence, and self-discipline (Chaganti and Greene 2002).

In the environmental factors we can group economic-institutional factors, such as existing legislation, the tax system, infrastructure, institutional barriers, government policies for entrepreneurship, and the tax system and economic-social factors, including business opportunities for foreigners' accessibility to employment, competitive barriers, the culture of welcoming immigrants, and culture of entrepreneurship. In particular, economic-institutional factors include the territories' ability to attract foreign entrepreneurs through appropriate policies (Clydesale 2008). In there is a marked link between immigrant entrepreneurship and the host territory deriving from factors such as aptitude for entrepreneurship, easy access to the acquisition of resources, perception of market opportunities, relative advantage in the labour market, and a role of influence towards entrepreneurship (Levie 2007).

More specifically, economic-social factors include business opportunities arising from belonging to a social network/network (strong immigrant community). The community of belonging, through internally developed relations, can in fact support the new enterprise by providing economic support or human resources and representing a first reference market. It, therefore, plays the role of a spontaneous business incubator as it can foster the start-up and development of entrepreneurial initiatives through the activation of informal relationships.

In summary, we can therefore state that the main theories constructed in relation to the study of immigrant or minority entrepreneurship generally refer to two basic starting points: the role, so to speak, of 'ethnic specificity' and cultural factors; and the importance of the supply side in defining a market for immigrant entrepreneurs (Barberis 2008).

Continuing with the main theories analysing the presence of immigrant businesses in our country, we can see three approaches that have tried to explain the origin of the phenomenon.

Firstly, we can consider the cultural approach that sees ethnicity as the central point, considering cultural particularities as facilitators of an ethnic group's specialization in particular market segments or entrepreneurial activities, tending to exclude non-members of the ethnic community and passing on, through relationships of trust, activities to members of the same community (Liebersson 1982). The approach evolution sees in the relations between social networks, which behaviour has

economic implications (social embeddedness: maximization of social resources available in a given social group) an element of lower economic risk of entrepreneurial activities, as they are characterized by a greater sharing of values and social capital.

In summary, the culturalist approach sees cultural factors as the main explanatory elements of the immigrant entrepreneurship phenomenon, lending itself to several criticisms. Among the main ones is the complete lack of attention to the changes and characteristics of the labour market (Engelen 2001), as well as to the dynamics related to the supply and demand of goods and services.

A second approach useful to analyse the phenomenon is the structuralist one, which focuses on the structural factors that influence the creation and stabilization of immigrant entrepreneurial activity. These factors include the institutional and legislative framework; access to capital; economic market conditions and related entry barriers to industrial sectors; the level of competition; elements of (racial) discrimination, and the situation of international markets.

This approach, based on social, political, and economic circumstances (Cole 1959), relates the possibility of undertaking entrepreneurial activity to the structure of opportunities available to the foreigner.

Finally, the immigrant enterprise can be described by taking a multidisciplinary approach, that of mixed embeddedness (i.e. incorporation). In order to propose an interpretation of immigrant entrepreneurship that goes beyond the differentiation between autochthonous structural elements and allochthonous relational and cultural aspects, this third analysis of the phenomenon pays attention to both group resources and the structure of opportunities present in the destination society, also taking into account the institutional dimension, immigration policies, laws on flows and permits, and the political-cultural project of integration.

This approach, which appears to be more comprehensive and clarifying, takes into account three elements as cultural and relational aspects that characterize the immigrant entrepreneur and his community and, at the same time, how these factors interact with the local reality and community; specific characteristics of the target market and, finally, structural factors and dimensions of the public policy system and in relation to both entrepreneurship and the regulation of migratory flows. For a better understanding, it should be noted that this approach is based on the assumption that structural and cultural components influence the strategies that immigrant entrepreneurs implement in order to establish an economic activity in the host country, where strategies are to be understood as the resultant between group characteristics and the structure of territorial opportunities (Aldrich and Waldinger 1990).

This theoretical model argues that the success of immigrant entrepreneurial activities depends on the complex interaction between the structure of opportunities, the resources that can be activated by the community of origin, the individual characteristics of the entrepreneur and the entrepreneurial activity and, finally, the regulatory and political system of reference concerning market organization and migration policies (Kloosterman and Rath 2001).

It follows, from the multidisciplinary perspective mentioned above, that the choice of location in which to start a business depends on the favourable conditions, structural and/or cultural that a geographical area offers.

In the phenomenon of immigrant enterprise, therefore, the territorial dimension can be seen as a structural element, i.e. the area most suited to the start of an entrepreneurial activity, as a culturalist element, i.e. the rootedness in the territory of ethnic communities of belonging (Barberis and Solano 2018).

Conceptualizing better the figure of the immigrant entrepreneur, it emerges that he/she is not simply the foreign national entirely influenced by his/her ethnic roots, or as a profit-oriented entrepreneur, but as the combination of both elements.

Moreover, another innovative aspect of the theories pertaining to the mixed embeddedness approach can be found in the inclusion of individual elements that influence the immigrant entrepreneur's determination to continue his enterprise in the host country. In other words, these elements identify those characteristics and capabilities of the entrepreneur outside the cultural dimension, which can influence the ability to do business.

These aspects include level of education, age, previous entrepreneurial experience, as well as the migration experience and level of integration in the host country.

## 4 Context Analysis

Moving to a more quantitative analysis of immigrant entrepreneurship shows that one out of 10 enterprises in Italy is foreign (Unioncamere 2021). Immigrant entrepreneurship, in fact, is a reality that drives more than 630,000 enterprises, of which 3 out of 4 are sole traders.

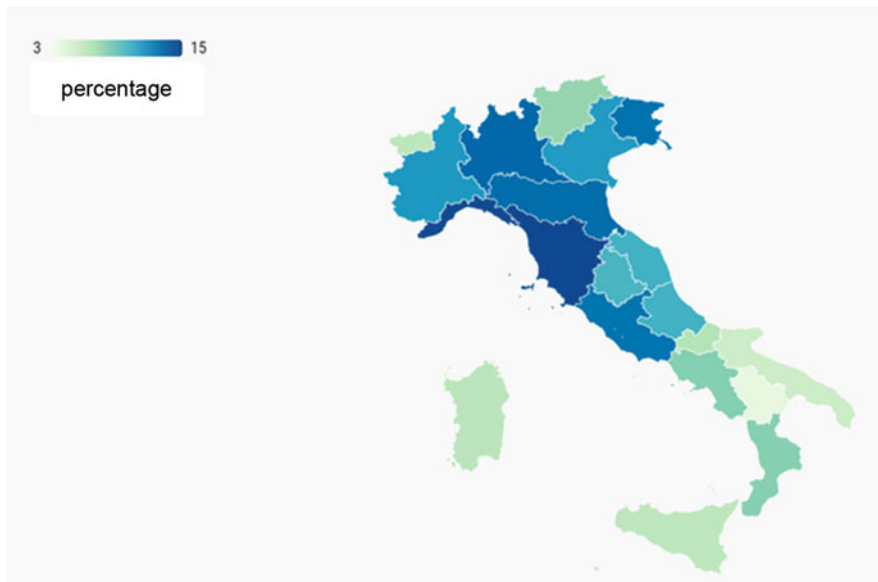
Entrepreneurs from Nigeria, Pakistan, and Albania in particular are on the rise, while those from China and Morocco are in more marked decline. Together with the Romanians, however, they remain in absolute terms the largest foreign business community in our country.

A classification can be made by dividing by sector, legal form, location, nationality, and size form/class.

Concerning the sector, it emerges that retail is the activity in which 1 in 4 foreign enterprises engage. But it is in the telecommunications and clothing sectors that immigrant entrepreneurs achieve the highest weight in the total number of enterprises in the various sectors (32.8% and 32.5%, respectively).

Non-EU entrepreneurs are mainly concentrated in wholesale and retail trade (42.2% of the total) and in construction (21.7%), while the remaining share is distributed among the other sectors and mainly in manufacturing activities (8.0%), in rental, travel agencies, business support services (6.3%) and in the accommodation and catering services sector (6.1%).

As legal form that of the sole proprietorship is the most widespread, with more than 480.000 enterprises or 15.4% of the total number of sole proprietorships



**Fig. 1** The percentage of foreigners' enterprises out of total enterprises in Italian regions (2020).  
*Source:* Openpolis

operating in Italy. While joint stock companies constitute a residual part and slightly exceed 100.000 units, followed by partnerships (39.000).

Proceeding in the analysis, the localization aspect also plays an important role. Tuscany (14.4%), Liguria (14%), Latium and Lombardy (12.8%), Emilia Romagna, and Friuli Venezia Giulia (12.5%) are the regions that have seen a greater penetration of foreign companies in their production base. However, in absolute terms, Lombardy, Lazio, and Campania top the list in terms of the number of enterprises led by immigrants (Fig. 1).

With reference to the nationality of business owners, in absolute values the largest number of companies is found in the case of Moroccans (63.813), Chinese (52.534), Albanians (34.730 units), and Bangladeshis (31.048).

Finally, with reference to size form/class, 70.0% of the enterprises with a non-EU foreign owner have 1 employee, 4.2% between 2 and 5 employees, 12.8% 0 employees, and 1.9% between 6 and 9 employees. These are, therefore, companies in which there is predominantly only one employee in addition to the entrepreneur who runs the business.

Returning, however, to the above-mentioned reasons, we cannot disregard the evaluation of the vocation for entrepreneurial activity through data. In fact, there are some countries that are characterized by a more pronounced 'vocation' for entrepreneurship. More than 40.0% of all foreign-born entrepreneurs, in fact, come from four countries: Morocco, China, Romania, and Albania.



Moroccans, Chinese, Romanians, and Albanians rank first in terms of number of business owners; Bangladeshis, Senegalese, Egyptians, Pakistanis, and Tunisians are also in the top positions.

While the option to open a business seems to be inherent to the migrant condition, the country of origin determines a selection of sectors in which to exercise one's entrepreneurial vitality and, consequently, produces a sort of 'ethnicisation' of businesses that is particularly evident in some sectors. It is no coincidence that three different countries appear at the top of the list of foreign-born business owners in sectors where foreigners are very present (such as trade, construction, and accommodation and catering).

In the construction sector, the most active are the Romanians, who own 29.845 companies, i.e. 26.1% of the total of 114.322 companies managed by foreigners; they are followed by the Albanians, who own 22.175 companies (19.4%) and, at a great distance, the Moroccans, among whom there are 9.192 (8.0%) construction entrepreneurs: 53.5% of foreign construction entrepreneurs come from these three countries.

The ranking of traders is led by the Moroccans, numbering 46.924 and representing 25.8% of the total number of wholesale or retail traders of foreign origin working in Italy; they are followed by the Bangladeshis, totalling 19.986, the Chinese, amounting to 19.280, and the Senegalese, who are 16.749: 56.6% of the total number of traders of foreign origin working in Italy belong to these four communities. Finally, in the accommodation and catering sector, Chinese entrepreneurs excel, who number 7.151 and represent 25.9% of the total number of foreign-born owners active in this sector; they are followed by 2.838 Egyptians (10.3%) and 2.185 Romanians (7.9%).

However, if instead of starting from the sectors of activity we consider the country of origin, we find that 68.1% of the 64.690 Moroccan entrepreneurs in Italy chose to start an activity in retail trade (fixed or itinerant location): for them all the other options are residual, with the only, partial exception of the owners of firms carrying out specialized construction work, who represent 12.8% of Moroccan citizens who own a business.

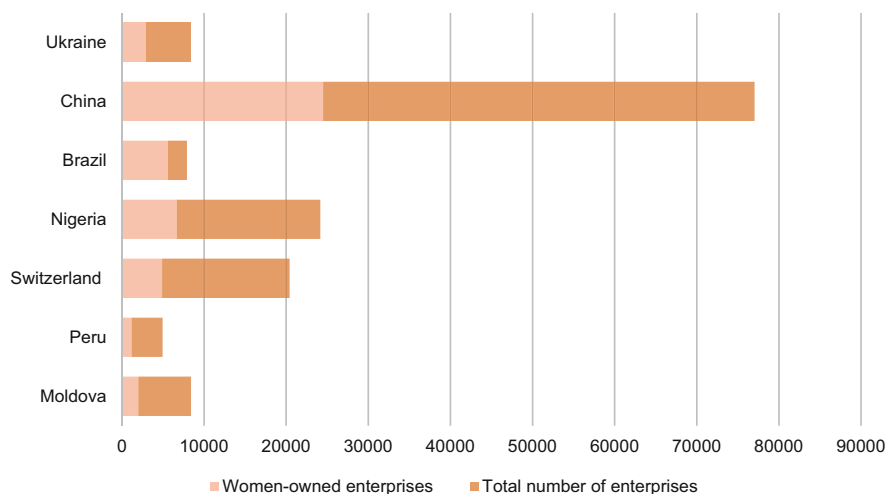
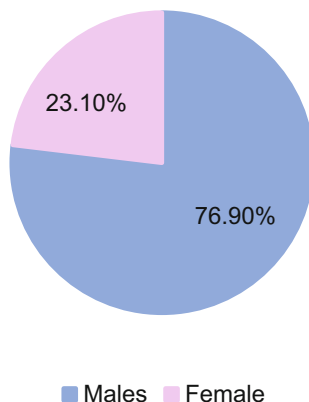
The business options of the 50.899 Chinese entrepreneurs are more distributed, among whom there are 14.324 retail traders (28.1% of the total), but also 11.643 owners of garment or leather goods manufacturing companies and 4.119 leather goods manufacturers), 7.001 restaurateurs an activity in which the Chinese have specialized, and 4.906 wholesale traders.

Among the Romanian business owners, entrepreneurs engaged in specialized construction work (26.182 owners, who count for 54.6% of the total) or building work (3.598) prevail, while traders (3.335 who represent the 7.0%) and restaurateurs are less numerous.

The entrepreneurial presence of Albanians is less articulated; in fact, about two thirds of the 31.425 owners have a business active in the building sector.

Finally, the 29.685 Bangladeshis are mainly present in retail trade (64.7% of the total) and in business service activities.

**Fig. 2** Non-national born owners of active enterprises by gender (2020). *Source:* data Telemaco-Infocamere compiled by the authors



**Fig. 3** Women’s enterprises on the total. Most representative countries of origin (2020). *Source:* data Unioncamere-Infocamere compiled by the authors

As part of immigrant entrepreneurship, the female component, although in the minority, has shown a steadily increasing trend over time. The same trend has been shown by foreign enterprises in Italy, where female foreign enterprises are constantly growing, and representing just over 23% of the total number (Fig. 2) (Censis 2019).

A gender reading of available data reveals a conspicuous presence of women in the case of some nationalities (Fig. 3).

For example, the female component is very high among citizens from Ukraine (54.0% of the total), China (46.6% of the total), Brazil (41.6%), Nigeria (38.1%), Switzerland (31.5%), Peru (31.1%), Moldova (30.7%).

Trying to understand what is behind the dynamics of migrants' enterprise formation, with particular attention to the gender perspective, the question arises as to how much the existing group of foreign enterprises constitutes an attractive factor for the formation of new 'similar' initiatives, i.e. with the same country of origin of the owner, or with the same province of destination or type of activity.

Despite these growing values, it appears that there is a less powerful network effect for women than for men. One explanation for this result could lie in the lower possibility of women to form useful networks of relationships.

This network effect is greatly influenced by the degree of gender inequality in migrants' countries of origin. Men and women who come from countries that tend to be egalitarian show no significant differences in the network effect, whereas women who come from countries with pronounced gender inequality have a much smaller network effect than men. Women's ability to network is thus crucially influenced by the gender culture ingrained in them (Colombelli et al. 2020).

Additionally, women immigrant entrepreneurs, from what emerges from the literature, are a particularly disadvantaged category due to the socio-economic context, having to deal with both the condition of women, in relation to the context of origin and that of arrival, and secondly, that of immigrants (Chreim et al. 2018).

The socio-economic context of the host country is also significantly relevant in order to identify and analyse the obstacles faced by female immigrant entrepreneurs: in fact, as two social aspects such as gender and immigration intersect, the context in which the phenomenon is observed conditions the evidence that emerges from observation.

A culturally open and evolved environment, which combines economic conditions and social values with favourable regulations, will facilitate access to the world of entrepreneurship even for a disadvantaged category such as immigrant women.

However, even in the most developed countries, the conditions of women and immigrants constitute barriers to entry (Munkejord 2016): access to credit is the main obstacle in starting a business, as the ethnic environment from which they struggle to break free. In fact, Munkejord (2016) points out that the religion to which a woman belongs also constitutes an impediment in starting a business and work activity in general: in some cultures, the female role is associated with domestic tasks and subordinated to male needs.

Women who emigrate to developed or developing countries often do so to follow their husbands and children, suffering the consequences of others' choices. Therefore, not being driven by their own self-interest, they face cultural, economic, and language barriers.

These barriers lead women to undertake business activities, particularly in the service sector, where the need for start-up capital is lower, by employing members of their own family or ethnic group. Therefore, the role of female entrepreneurs may not be accepted in the ethnic community they belong to, which, as Munkejord (2016) observed, is the context from which they draw resources and sell their product or provide services.

## 5 Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

From what has been observed, it emerges that this topic in the scientific literature, in the subject areas of ‘Business Management and Accounting’, and ‘Economics, Econometrics and Finance’ is still not a well-defined object of study.

However, research in this field leaves ample opportunities for studies on this topic because both intersecting themes are increasingly addressed.

The research shows that the number of immigrant enterprises is growing strongly, particularly in Italy where there are more than 630,000 immigrant entrepreneurs.

Within immigrant entrepreneurship, female entrepreneurship is of particular interest. In fact, the results showed a strong and consolidated growth over time, both in terms of the number of female entrepreneurs and the interest shown in the literature.

However, female immigrant entrepreneurs still face greater difficulties than men due to gender differences rooted in their culture of origin.

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has accentuated differences, including gender differences (Fairlie 2020). Therefore, it is to be expected that there will be a considerable increase in research addressing the impact of the economic crisis from the pandemic also in the field of immigrant female entrepreneurship.

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