

**EXPERIENCES WOMEN SME ENTREPRENEURS DURING COVID
19: A CASE IN INDONESIA****Agus Fernando***Faculty of Business, President University, agus.fernando@president.ac.id***ABSTRACT**

COVID-19 has impacted the business journey of SMEs worldwide and in Indonesia, where most of the economy is driven by SMEs. This article aims to construct an understanding of the impact created by the COVID-19 crisis. The author focuses on the capabilities and tendencies of women SME entrepreneurs in continuing their business. This research used the descriptive method with quantitative and qualitative approaches. The research was conducted in Bogor Regency, with a sample of 60 women SME entrepreneurs. Data was collected through respondents who were asked multiple-choice and open-ended questions when completing the survey. The study's findings include the resiliency of women SME entrepreneurs, their enthusiasm to contribute to the community during COVID 19, and their desire to seek and accept help from their colleagues. Furthermore, the author presents statistics describing women SME entrepreneurs, their experiences during COVID 19, and their actions to continue their entrepreneurial journey. The findings of this study shed fresh light on the resources and methods employed by women SME owners during COVID 19. The information was gathered at times of significant uncertainty for the entrepreneurs and when their availability was highly constrained.

Keywords: *Women entrepreneur, SME, COVID- 19, Indonesia.*

1. Introduction

The pandemic COVID-19 that hit the world has impacted the socioeconomic decline (Liu et al., 2020; Pak et al., 2020; World Bank, 2020). This impact is experienced by all people, especially women (Bhargava, 2021). Likewise, women in Indonesia. In Indonesia, the spread of COVID-19 until January 30, 2022, there were 4,343,185 cases and 144,303 deaths (COVID-19 Handling Task Force, 2022). Facing the pandemic COVID-19, the Indonesian government has implemented several policies, including reducing mobility (working from home) and social distancing in large-scale populations (Syafarina et al., 2021). This policy impacts many micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises. Based on UNDP (2020), many SMEs experience a decline in income and even close temporarily, of which women control 58% of the SMEs.

Lower revenue and an uncertain global environment have made it challenging for existing and newly started businesses to keep their financial wheels turning during COVID-19. This impact is experienced by small and medium-sized enterprises and start-ups, which may have insufficient capital and low margins to deal with unanticipated ups and downs in enterprise operations. The current strategies aim to maintain sustainability, prevent risks, be responsive, innovate, and implement new financial policies, including asking for government aid (Kuckertz et al., 2020).

The pandemic COVID-19 has significantly impacted business operations. (Winston & Strawn, 2020; Lee et al., 2021). Enterprises use a variety of strategies to recover and demonstrate resilience, such as modifying their business model or reorganizing internally (Kuckertz et al., 2020). Resilience is a firm's ability to continue operations in difficult times. However, it is also defined as the enterprise's ability to deal with conditions before the crisis, when all resources must be gathered, during the crisis, and during aftershocks (Williams et al., 2017). According to Alesch et al. (2001), when an enterprise fails to battle a crisis, it seeks resilience as a strategy to survive.

This COVID-19 has created severe challenges for women entrepreneurs. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how women-led enterprises, especially MSMEs, respond to the pandemic. What impact have they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic? Furthermore, what actions did they take to survive? This study

highlighted the experiences of women SME entrepreneurs who faced obstacles during the pandemic and analyzed the strategies they used to survive.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Impact of COVID-19 on SMEs

MSMEs are the global economy's backbone, with MSMEs contributing to more than two-thirds of global employment. MSMEs in low-income countries provide 80-90 percent of employment (World Bank, 2020). For most countries globally, SMEs have very high job creation; they serve as suppliers to medium and large enterprises, participate in global value chains, and export directly and indirectly (World Bank, 2020). Therefore, SMEs are considered essential for socio-economic development. These SMEs are the sector most vulnerable to shocks during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, due to their lower capacity to absorb shocks than larger companies (UNCTAD, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has harmed the manufacturing sector worldwide (Kumar, 2020). It is because many factories are closed. UNCTAD (2022) shows that COVID-19 caused foreign direct investment (FDI) to shrink globally by 5–15 percent. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), SMEs account for 96 percent of the total business in the Asia-Pacific. Millions of workers were unemployed as MSMEs operations closed (ADB, 2020). COVID-19 has significantly impacted the industrial industry, resulting in layoffs, order cancellations, input and raw material shortages, and limited transit movements. The impacts have harmed productivity and severely limited industrial activity, resulting in widespread unemployment.

2.2 Impact of COVID-19 on Women Entrepreneurs

Due to worsening production levels, the pandemic COVID-19 has had a catastrophic impact on self-employed and informal workers, frequently suppliers to the manufacturing industry, threatening their lives. The crisis affected 42 percent of women working in the informal economy, compared to 32 percent of men (ILO, 2020). While women make up 39 percent of manufacturing employees worldwide, they also have a relatively high presence in the manufacturing sector's export division. As a result, deep-seated structural gender inequalities result in unequal access to infrastructure, credit and financial services and incentives, productive resources, ICT services, and disrupted access to national and international value chains, data, government support programs, and procurement opportunities for women entrepreneurs.

MSMEs are particularly sensitive to the pandemic's impact and are frequently more vulnerable since they have tiny enterprises working in low-margin industries that are more prone to supply chain disruptions that result in severe financial gaps (Estrada et al., 2021). Women own around 8–10 million formal SMEs globally, accounting for roughly one-third of all formal SMEs (United Nations, 2020). While the pandemic has affected all MSMEs, women-led MSMEs have seen a more significant number of layoffs. Women-owned enterprises are 5.9 percent more likely to fail than male-owned businesses worldwide. The epidemic has exacerbated the numerous challenges women entrepreneurs face in obtaining financing. The pandemic's dwindling finance market has further limited the working cash accessible to SMEs.

In developing nations, the task of starting and expanding a business is more significant for women than for males. Before COVID-19, women-owned and managed firms faced an estimated credit shortage of approximately \$1.5 trillion globally. Current liquidity limitations increase an unmet credit deficit, resulting in numerous business bankruptcies (Kipnis & Rana, 2020). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has created opportunities to rebuild better. It also motivates women-led MSMEs to lead the shift towards greener, gender-equal, and more sustainable economic development by addressing challenges such as lack of liquidity—shrinking demand, labor turnover, deteriorating equipment and stock, and collapsing supply chains, among others.

2.3 Impact of COVID-19 on Indonesia's Women Entrepreneurs

In Indonesia, the MSME sector comprises 64.2 million companies working around a 107.2 million national workforce and is considered the most prominent job producer. Women entrepreneurs contribute to the Indonesian economy and own 56 percent of microenterprises, almost 34 percent of medium-sized enterprises, and 34 percent of small businesses (Ministry of Cooperatives, 2021). Women own MSMEs and collectively account for 60 percent of the industrial output (Ministry of Finance, 2020). The pandemic has caused a decline in MSME income by 56 percent. Around 70 percent of women entrepreneurs have reported that they experienced a decrease in income due to COVID-19 (Ministry of Cooperatives, 2020). Over two-thirds of small and growing women-led firms are considering permanent closure in Indonesia. As more women lose employment, Indonesia's low female labor force participation rate may fall even more. Women's burden of unpaid domestic labor and care has also increased significantly. Furthermore, it is underlined that women entrepreneurs require improved financial assistance, soft skills, and digital literacy for their enterprises' reborn. The private sector should invest in women-

led firms as a reasonable business choice. Investing in a woman-led firm is not a charitable act but rather a wise one

3. Research Method

We use a descriptive method with both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explain the experiences of women entrepreneurs on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their businesses. Sixty women entrepreneurs were surveyed to collect information on the impact of COVID-19 on MSMEs in the Bogor Regency area through field visits and telephone. A random sampling procedure was used to determine the sample size. Random sampling is a sampling strategy in which each sample has an equal chance of being chosen. Samples were randomly selected to serve as unbiased representations of the total population. However, this represents the industries and difficulties women entrepreneurs face in the research region. The intended sample size does not adequately reflect the countrywide impact of COVID-19. Presenting a comprehensive view of the impact of COVID-19, it was initially chosen to cover numerous sectors managed by women entrepreneurs in the Bogor Regency region. This sample size was limited to 60 due to unforeseen problems such as fear of infection, limited COVID-19 travel rules, and unwillingness to connect with strangers.

3.1 Data Collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews by telephone and in-person with 60 participants who agreed to be interviewed. The following two questions identify the direct implications of the pandemic on women entrepreneurs and the response activities they are taking to alleviate these problems.

1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted business?
2. How do they adapt their business and operating model to stabilize the business and adapt to changing markets?

3.2 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. First, data analysis began with repetitive coding to build the code, and this analysis was conducted using recorded telephone conversations. In the second phase, we analyzed the data to confirm that the produced themes were accurate. Existing themes and constructs are evaluated to verify that they represent the study's objectives.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Respondents characteristics

The respondents' mean age was 37.33 years, with a standard deviation of 7.22. Education is assessed in years of schooling, and the school mean is 4.03, with a stated standard deviation of 4.50. Most women entrepreneurs are married (78.3 percent) and have business experience, with an average of 9.46 and a standard deviation of 4.95.

Table 1. Respondents characteristics (n=60)

Variables	Coding and description	Mean	SD	N	%
Age	Respondents' age in years	37.33	7.22		
Schooling	Schooling in years	4.03	4.50		
Marital Status	0 = Single			13	21.7
Business Experiences	1 = Married Business experience in years	9.46	4.95	47	78.3

Note : SD = Standard deviation

Source: Authors own calculations

The types of women's business sectors are shown in Figure 1. and Table 2. Most businesses are engaged in the restaurant sector, followed by garment and textile businesses, handicraft businesses, retail stores, travel agencies, and education and services.

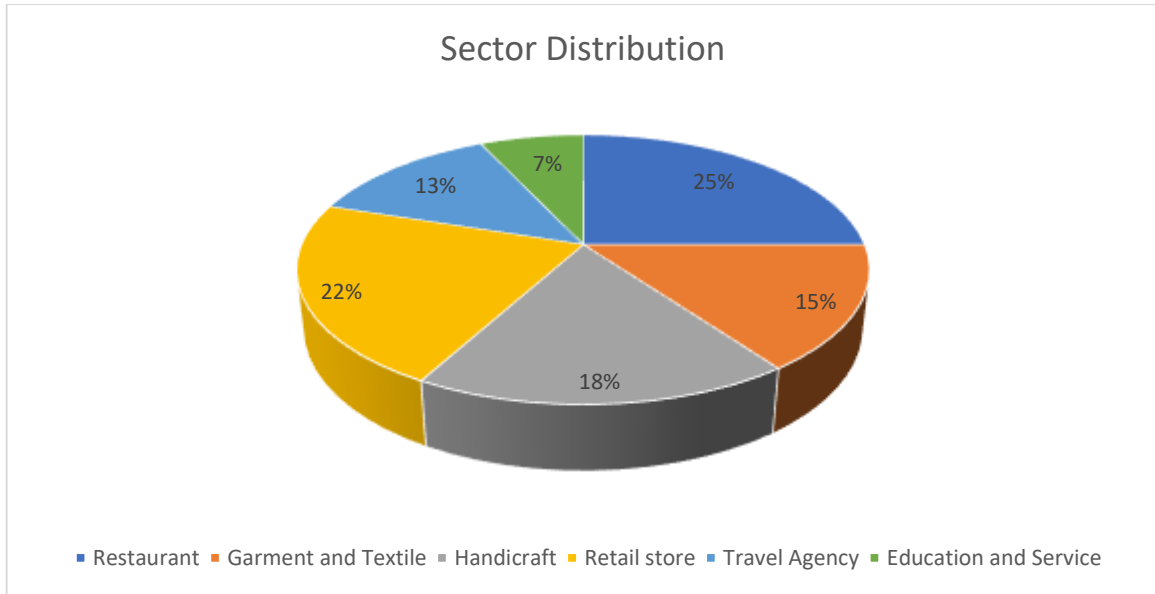


Figure 1. Distribution of business sector (n=60)
(Source : Author own computation)

Table 2. Distribution of business sector (n=60)

Sector	Restaurant	Garment and Tekstil	Handicraft	Retail Store	Travel Agency	Education and Service
Total	15 (25%)	9 (15%)	11 (18%)	13 (22%)	8 (13%)	4 (7%)

Source : Author own calculation

Furthermore, based on the results of interviews regarding the experiences of women SME entrepreneurs, the results of the themes and categories are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. The theme, Main Categories Impact COVID 19 and Action to address

Theme	Main categories	Categories
Experiences women entrepreneur adversely affected due to COVID-19	Impact of COVID 19 on business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decrease in consumer demand • Financial instability • Operational disturbance • Limited access to market • Distributing disturbance • Inventory issues
	Action to sustain business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital Marketing Attempt • Variety of distribution channels • Adjustment of product or service offerings • Re-adaption operation • Revising the financial model • Invest in business development. • Supply chain optimization • Revise pricing strategy <p>Actions should be taken:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External assistance • Community involvement in supporting livelihoods. • Business network expansion

Source : Data analysis

4.2 Impact of COVID 19 on women entrepreneurs

The experiences of women SME entrepreneurs as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic are classified into six categories. Figure 2. shows the level of presentation of the impact categories of COVID 19 experienced by women in SME Entrepreneurship.

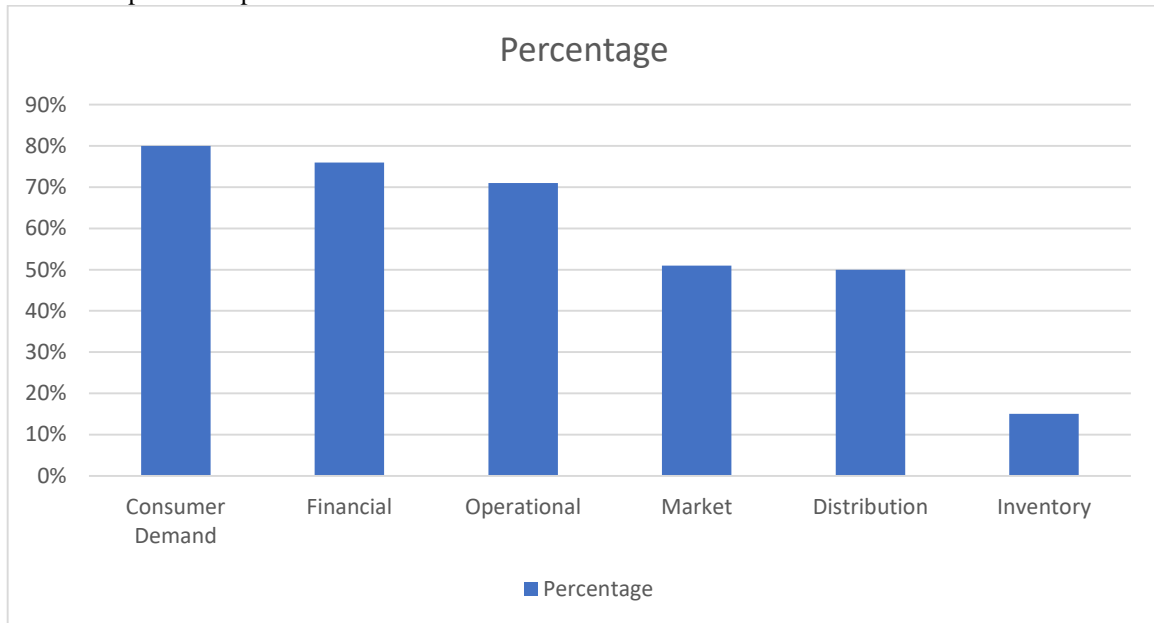


Figure 2. Impact of COVID-19 on women's SME entrepreneurship (Source : Author calculation)

a. Decrease in consumer demand

The significant impact of COVID-19 on women entrepreneurs may be detected in shifting client demand patterns. According to this study, decreasing customer demand has the most significant influence (80%). Because of national and international travel limitations, 82 percent of travel agency entrepreneurs reported a considerable drop in demand and, in many cases, a complete absence of interest. Similarly, buyers often want to touch and see the material before purchasing in the textile and handicraft sections. Other factors influencing demand are delivery constraints, crowded online marketplaces, and changing customer demands. Immensely few female entrepreneurs have profited from COVID-19's shifting demand patterns.

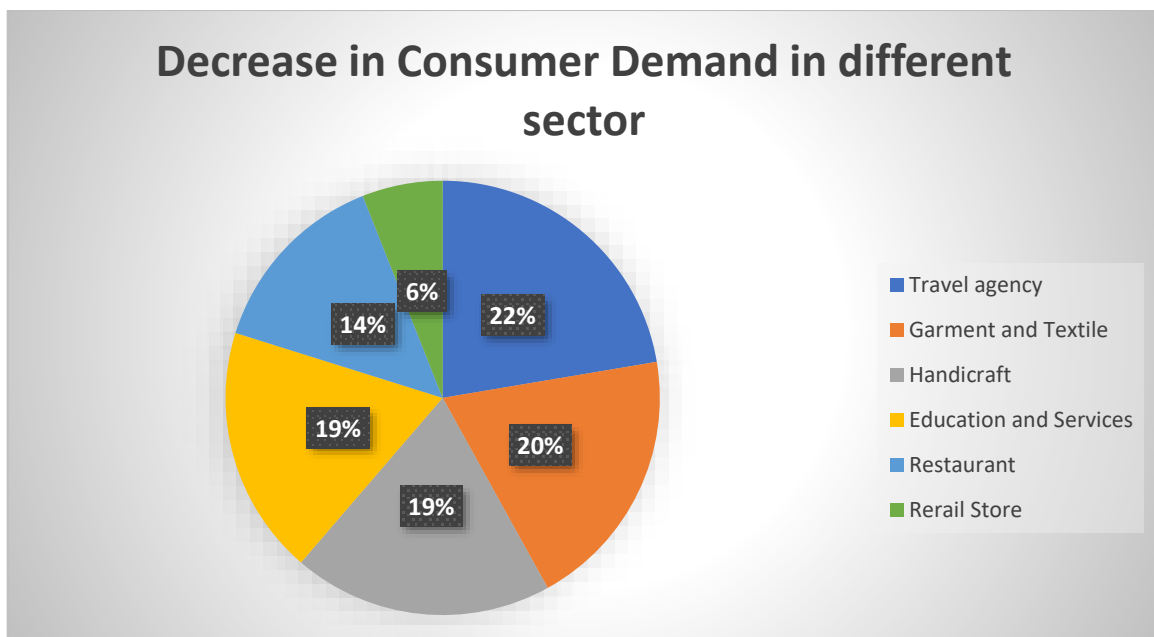


Figure 3. Decrease in Consumer Demand in different sector

(Source : Author calculation)

b. Financial instability

The COVID-19 crisis has significantly influenced women entrepreneurs' financial capabilities. The consequences result in a cash flow crisis, reduced working capital, and the inability to meet costs and continue operations. The study noted that financial instability was the second impact they felt, with a recorded response of 76%. Several factors found in this study that cause financial instability in women entrepreneurs are described in Figure 4. Reduced or no sales are the primary cause of financial insecurity. Women who sell tangible commodities incur inventory losses, typically due to lost food or unsold goods.

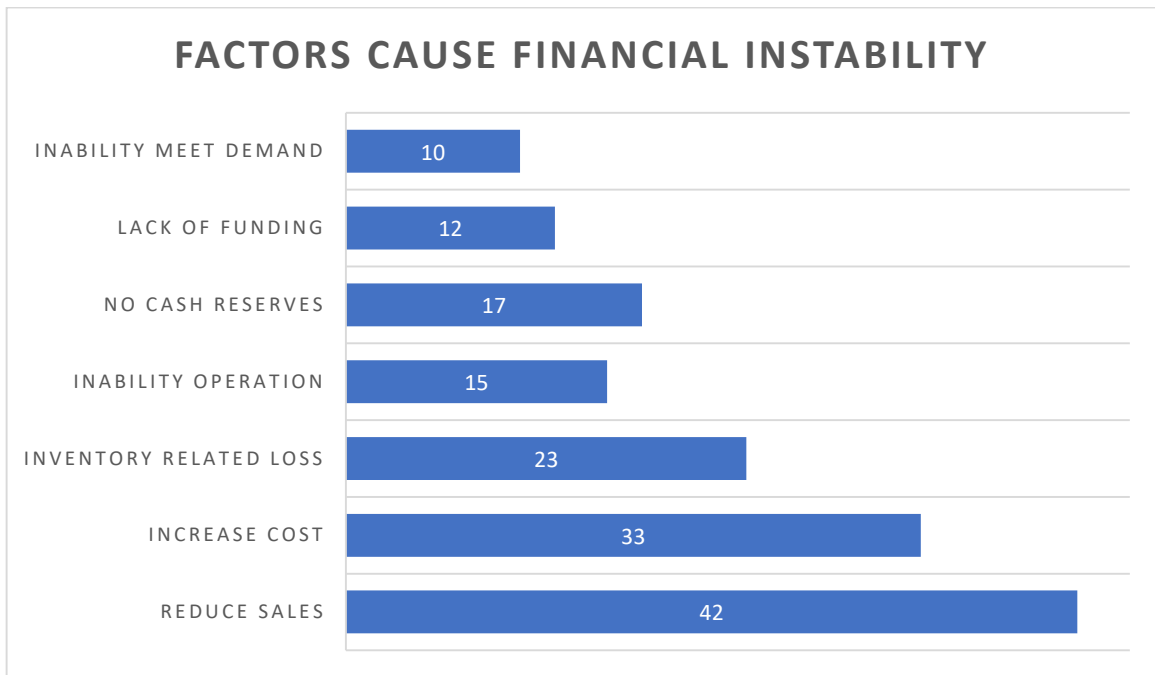


Figure 4. Factors cause financial instability
(Source: Author Calculation)

Women earn less than their male peers for the same work and are more likely to be affected by income shortages due to traditionally-operated roles and industries. The unfavorable financial arrangements of women entrepreneurs make them more likely to tap into personal or family cash reserves than their male counterparts. (Deepshika & Jain, 2020; Mastercard, 2020). As a result, many women entrepreneurs' firms end up with little or no savings because they shift revenue to other family members or spend it on care-related concerns. With financial reserves drying up, some women entrepreneurs cannot cover all costs, resulting in increased payments made by unpaid payments such as loan repayments and credits.

c. Operational disturbance

The COVID-19 outbreak has disrupted operations in most women-led enterprises (71 percent). As a result, many entrepreneurs opted to scale down operations to keep expenses low until the situation improved, and others even discontinued operations entirely. In addition to movement restrictions, several factors contribute to operational disruptions. Among them are lack of supply and demand, inadequate working capital, absence of employees, and accessibility and connectedness issues. Travel agency operations were the worst affected, with 100 percent of women entrepreneurs affected. The majority (53 percent) were obliged to halt operations completely, while nearly a third (27 percent) were able to restart at a slower pace. Bookings for hotels, buses, and other forms of tourist transportation were canceled due to international and national travel prohibitions, with no new clients expected for several months. No longer available to the public, restaurants must find ways to entice consumers through takeout and delivery services. Garments and textiles (80%), followed by handicrafts (66%), were the top four industries encountering operational difficulties.

d. Limited access to market

Many businesses have traditionally depended on physical distribution routes to serve their clients with goods and services. In 66 percent of cases, the pandemic and attendant laws impede these routes, making it difficult to access their typical markets. According to the report, 51% of the women entrepreneurs who took part had difficulty accessing their market.

The difficulties support several studies finding that lockdown measures, social distancing, and changes in buying behavior lead to inadequate market access for women entrepreneurs (Chawla, Sahni, & Sadhani, 2020; Tiwari, 2020; Valenti et al., 2020). Many entrepreneurs engaged in the handicraft, garment, and textile sectors who usually distribute their products directly can no longer do it. Those operating in travel agencies can no longer serve their clients internally, and switching to online sessions is problematic. Delivery service is another obstacle in market access. Most shipping channels and partners are overbooked, shipping crashes, and a lot gets lost in transit. In some cases, customers refuse packages due to delays.

Travel (80 percent), handicrafts (61 percent), and apparel and textiles are the top three industries where women-led firms face market access challenges (61 percent).

e. Distributing disturbance

Almost half of the entrepreneurs encounter supply chain disruptions, most of which are caused by transportation concerns. Trade and transportation stood at a standstill during the social distance, resulting in supplies stalling or being lost en route.

f. Inventory issues

Inventory management is another issue that affects 15% of the women entrepreneurs surveyed. Problems related to inventory management primarily affect businesses in the garment and textile industries (34%), handicrafts (20%), and restaurants (10%).

The inability to sell products causes stockpiles to accumulate (34%), which reduces the entrepreneur’s liquidity. It is difficult to refill supplies and resume operations with limited space and financial resources.

4.3 Actions to sustain business

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women mentioned above is to know how they respond to it. How did they respond to operational disruptions? Are they able to seize possibilities created by changes in their business environment? Given the gender-related conditions under which women-led businesses operate, the evidence shows that their recovery will be delayed. (Valenti et al., 2020).

Following are the findings on responsive steps taken by women entrepreneurs.

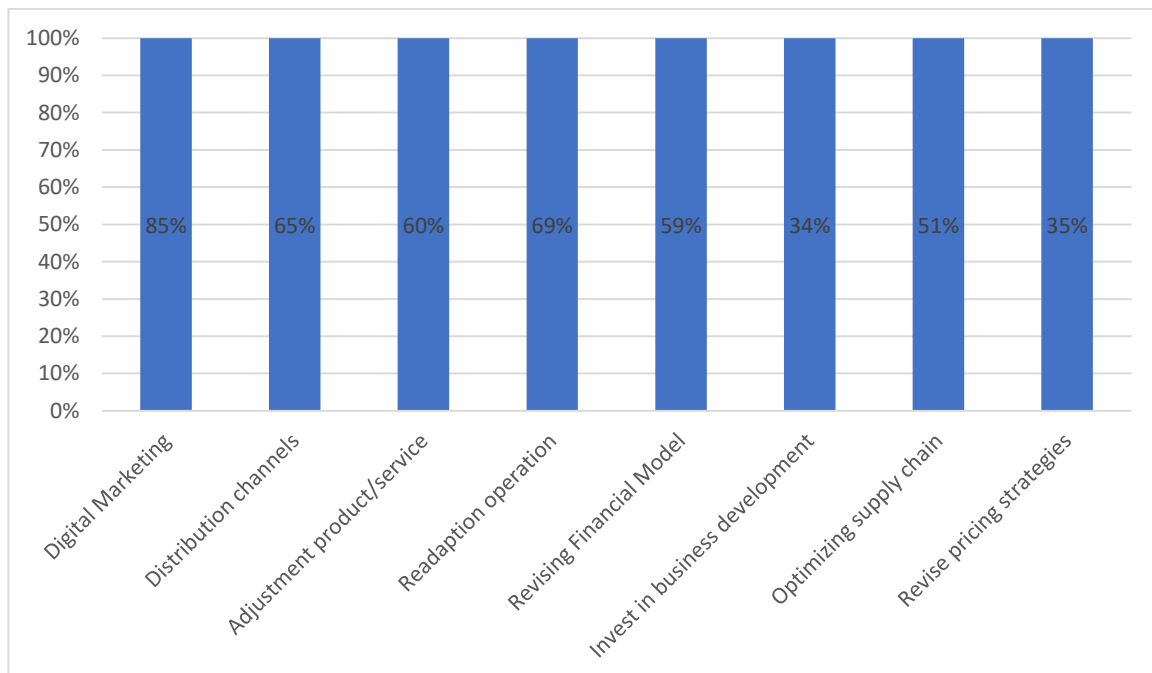


Figure 5. Action to Sustain business

(Source: Author calculation)

a. Digital Marketing Attempt

The findings of this study indicate that 85% of the respondents plan to expand their marketing activities. They are redesigning their marketing strategy by engaging in new digital solutions. They create new accounts on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to communicate with consumers and broaden their reach. With physical touch and word-of-mouth marketing almost non-existent, the apparent focus of most female entrepreneurs is on extending their online marketing opportunities—transforming their online presence from a passive presence to an active marketing tool. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 epidemic, it has undoubtedly empowered women SME businesses to comprehend and leverage the potential of internet marketing. Brand collaborations with local partners or other female entrepreneurs were recognized as possibilities for increasing brand recognition through cross-selling and marketing.

b. A variety of distribution channels

Most women entrepreneurs must redesign their distribution strategy to lead their businesses through the epidemic. Unsurprisingly, digital channels are the most prevalent method for ensuring a consistent distribution plan (65 percent). The majority of business owners use internet distribution methods. Social networking has proven to be their most effective method of marketing a product or service. Because of their simplicity of transaction and high consumer usage, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp are the most prevalent platforms.

Outside of social media, several women entrepreneurs start-up online storefronts. This step enables them to offer clients a more organized manner, giving a clear overview of the product variety, alternatives for online payments, and transparent terms and conditions. Collaboration with e-commerce platforms is another strategy for developing distribution networks. Compared to owning a personal website, partnering with Shopee, Tokopedia, and other platforms allows women SMEs to increase their company's reach, serve clients across Indonesia, and reduce the technological know-how necessary.

Aside from digital innovations, general adaptability to distribution networks is critical to providing market access despite the pandemic's constraints. Some women entrepreneurs have altered their distribution approach, relying on various channels. Moving away from one-dimensional distribution, they began offering clients online and offline to maximize sales. Almost one-third of them offer delivery to consumers directly or with shipping companies. This proved a critical breakthrough, allowing businesses to service clients at their homes when they could not purchase in person. Employers work to improve and smooth the process when delivery is disrupted due to a crisis. Women entrepreneurs can service additional districts or areas, decrease risk via diversification, and overcome interruptions created by the epidemic by extending their network of distributors.

c. Adjustment of product/service offerings

Women develop new features, designs, or product lines in every industry investigated to attract more consumers. In addition to extending their product offers, many entrepreneurs improve their present goods by upgrading features to ensure high quality and demand. Diversification includes new culinary tastes in modern apparel collections, home décor sets, and instructional assistance sessions. Customers' health is critical during the epidemic. Many companies have responded by providing immunity-boosting or healthy foods, hand sanitizers, face masks, mental health sessions for pupils, or yoga treatments for anxiety. Given a consumer's time at home, many ladies concentrate on home decor goods or transition from party to casual clothes. Some female entrepreneurs focus on technology-based services to meet society's digital development demands. They offer digital training to kids and parents, digital marketing and social media webinars, and online cookery lessons.

d. Re-adaptation operation

The considerable operational interruption caused by the pandemic necessitated revamping internal systems to maintain ongoing business flow. Sixty-nine percent of female entrepreneurs report altering their procedures to improve business efficiency. The vast majority of them are concerned with enhancing and simplifying. This involves simplifying manufacturing and strengthening communication connections via digital platforms. To lower the danger of infection among students and instructors, firms in the education sector are reducing the teacher-student ratio and implementing pick-up practices. Women entrepreneurs in the travel agency industry streamlined the ordering procedure, while others in the craft industry created design templates to speed up manufacturing. Despite the challenges of digital improvements, some entrepreneurs prefer to do business online, engaging with team members or partners via video conferencing.

Most entrepreneurs invest in new equipment when it comes to product modification. Some have also invested in digital gadgets to improve their online company operations. An entrepreneur in the craft industry provides used iPhones to artists to facilitate communication. To improve accessibility for employees and

consumers, many companies are redesigning workplaces, rearranging production or distribution facilities according to social distancing norms, or even moving to new office facilities. Inventory management must be improved for entrepreneurs that sell physical goods. They upgrade monitoring systems, extend inventory space, or invest in refrigeration equipment to minimize future loss or build-up stock.

e. Revising the financial model

Women entrepreneurs who designed their financial plan focused on boosting income (59%) by introducing new product lines, introducing best-selling items, and investing in internet marketing. Some businesses are introducing new revenue streams to mitigate the danger of financial drought. Others change their pricing tactics in order to regain financial stability. Some companies also focus on selling stacked goods at reduced prices to free up warehouse space and boost liquidity to cover expenses (overwhelming). While reservations for their guesthouses are on hold, entrepreneurs in the tourist travel sector have begun selling ceramics from local artisans or organizing hiking trips for locals.

Aside from income generation, cost reduction was critical for recovering financial stability. The majority of female businesses cut manufacturing expenses. Some cut supply costs by investing in bulk orders or identifying and replacing raw materials more vulnerable to supply interruptions. Some organizations hope to renegotiate fixed expenses and gain flexibility by shifting to a variable cost model.

Before the pandemic, relatively few female entrepreneurs planned for the unexpected in their financial plans. One-third of them devote more time and resources to financial planning. Many companies update their budgets, examine their cost structures, and reassess their key performance indicators (KPIs) to track financial success and plan for hidden or unforeseen expenditures to avoid future financial gaps. Some people save money in order to survive and respond to future catastrophes. Others do sales analysis to focus on development areas or increase their value chain by producing multifunctional items. Some firms look into or extend their use of external capital to finance operations and ensure liquidity.

f. Invest in business development

Some women entrepreneurs use lockdowns to analyze the market, while others do business analysis. Exploring new business prospects can lead to discovering new income streams, consumer groups, or delivery methods. Is the business model still viable in the light of the "new normal"? What scenarios must be developed to help firms navigate the pandemic? They revamped their income-generating techniques, developed marketing plans, and reevaluated their competitive advantages. Several female entrepreneurs modify their company concepts to remain lucrative and competitive in the market. Some align remote sections by transitioning from a B2C to a B2B firm, for example, to prevent direct consumer interaction or from manufacturing to trading exclusively to save costs and supply interruptions. Others are venturing into whole new business areas.

g. Supply chain optimization

Women entrepreneurs changed their internal strategy and supplier connections to address supply shortages induced by the epidemic (51 percent). Backward integration, or taking over the production of commodities previously supplied from outside sources, has proven to be a helpful strategic adjustment to deal with growing costs and a lack of suppliers or raw materials. Most companies updated their sourcing strategy internally, finding products of better quality and cheaper rates, purchasing in bulk to save money and prevent shortages, and constantly matching supply with demand trends. A female entrepreneur established a horticulture section in the restaurant industry to minimize future vegetable shortages.

Supplier ties become crucial in a crisis to keep the firm viable and ensure the continuing supply of materials. While many women businesses relied on a single supplier before COVID-19, they expanded their network after the pandemic to decrease the risk of supply shortages or escalating material costs. One of the primary causes of supply chain disruptions is transportation and delivery issues. As a result, one-third of female businesses chose to employ local suppliers to cut transportation routes and lessen the likelihood of such disruptions. Efforts to develop supplier relationships include using fixed supplier contracts and focusing on increasing communication with suppliers to reduce unanticipated risks and losses. Many business owners undertake supply chain analysis to detect hazards and explain how to assure consistent sourcing.

h. Revise pricing strategy

A third of female entrepreneurs are modifying their pricing methods in reaction to the pandemic's reduced sales, higher costs, and shifting client behavior. Most of them provide discounts or build product or service bundles to attract customers and stimulate purchasing behavior. Entrepreneurs in the service industry were supplying intangible items, such as travel and education agencies, which relied on delivering service bundles to boost the desirability of the offering itself. Some companies lower their pricing to generate at least some client purchases

and create liquidity. Nearly one-third of entrepreneurs provide several pricing alternatives to satisfy more clients. Low-cost or premium lines help businesses attract clients from all segments, enhancing their profit margins and customer base. While entrepreneurs in all business sectors updated their pricing tactics, those in services, tourism, and hospitality were the most prominent. This might be because handicrafts, restaurants, clothes, and textiles have better pricing flexibility and profit margins.

4.4 Responsive actions beyond the alignment of business models

a. External assistance

While company operations change is a critical response to the COVID-19 epidemic, women entrepreneurs go above and beyond to promote their enterprises and help the community. Despite these proactive steps, some entrepreneurs seek outside assistance to keep their firms solvent (23 percent). Foreign investment and other liquidity sources follow the suggested government assistance programs and loans. Only 4% seek financial assistance from family or friends. Smaller parts go into innovative financial help options such as crowdsourcing initiatives.

Several variables might explain the low number of female entrepreneurs seeking external assistance. It has been noted that women in the study region avoid financial aid, particularly debt. Skepticism abounds, as many people do not believe they are qualified for a loan, do not trust funds, and are afraid of the loan payback compliance criteria. Ecosystems do not provide many credit ties for women, and government plans are distributed and accessed unequally. According to the 2020 Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurs, women prefer to use personal or family financial reserves or halt output rather than seek debt-causing monetary assistance. At the same time, many women are hesitant to borrow money from family and friends because they lack support and faith in their business. Being an entrepreneur is regarded as secondary, with their primary duty remaining in family nurture. Non-financial requirements account for one-third of all external help requests. During a lockdown, most employers seek technological assistance from outside specialists to enhance company procedures or rely on family and friends to manage distribution and delivery.

b. Community involvement in supporting livelihoods.

The epidemic has affected everyone. Women entrepreneurs are actively involved in aiding other women and underprivileged populations and guaranteeing their businesses' sustainability (12 percent). Many are dedicated to providing chances for underprivileged social groups to earn a living (52 percent). Many firms provide staff and student health exams and counseling sessions in the education industry.

c. Business network expansion

For a small number of women entrepreneurs, networking has proven to be a route out of the epidemic. They participate in online forums and cooperate with industrial networks, cooperative groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and civil society to sustain and develop firms through partnerships.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study focuses on how the epidemic has affected female entrepreneurs and the proactive efforts to lead their firms through it. The findings lead to many conclusions:

1. *Digital use for the future*

With another wave of the pandemic predicted, digital will still be around. Online marketing and remote work options are critical for establishing robust business operations. Despite mobility limits, they assist in improving reach, developing a client base, and ensuring operating efficiency. Women entrepreneurs in Indonesia are nevertheless hampered by a lack of digital infrastructure, particularly in outlying regions. Closing the digital gender gap requires researching possibilities and providing digital training to employees and customers.

2. *Resilience requires flexibility*

Women entrepreneurs must keep their businesses as flexible as possible, coping with rising costs and fluctuating demand. The variable cost model and flexible work structure allow rapid adaptation to the business environment.

3. *Customer education fosters engagement.*

Sharing content on social media that goes beyond typical marketing messaging enhances client engagement and loyalty. Women entrepreneurs may raise awareness of their products or services and improve client interest and desire to buy by sharing knowledge in health or sustainability.

4. *Diversification minimizes risk.*

Diversification of product or service offerings, supplier networks, distribution and marketing channels, and distribution and marketing channels decreases risk. They will be able to respond to crises more flexibly since they will not rely on a single functioning style.

5. *New financial sources are required.*

Given the adverse environment and lack of credit ties for women-led firms, other funding options must be identified. Organizing a crowdfunding campaign may assist women entrepreneurs in overcoming the constraints associated with traditional sources of financial assistance and may become a vital instrument for producing liquidity and driving development.

Despite the challenges posed by the epidemic, the women entrepreneurs polled remain hopeful. Most could keep their businesses running by changing their business models to take advantage of the current advancements. Some even see opportunities to expand their business during times of crisis. It should be highlighted, however, that the COVID-19 epidemic is far from over. Most of the acts detailed in this study are short-term responses by female entrepreneurs in Indonesia during the initial wave of the epidemic in 2020. To recover from the losses inflicted by the crisis, they must continually monitor and adapt to change to keep their companies viable in the market. A long-term pandemic response requires a healthy environment. Government agencies and funding organizations should create gender-specific assistance programs to meet the changing demands of women entrepreneurs and enable Indonesia's long-term economic and socio-cultural growth.

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