

## **DIGITAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP: EMPOWERING WOMEN IN YEMEN?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Digital entrepreneurship refers to the pursuit of business opportunities based on the utilisation of digital media and other information and communication technologies. The use of digital technologies provides an avenue of unleashing female entrepreneurs from the hierarchical and practice of obedience in a high cultural context. In this sense, the potential of digital entrepreneurship in promoting female entrepreneurship can be examined in terms of entrepreneurship as emancipation. Our research contributes to the women entrepreneurship literature on the use of digital technologies in the context of a very hostile environment such as in the case of Yemeni civil war. A semi-structured interview format will be used to gather information on a common set of questions focusing on how digital technology enabled the entrepreneurial activities. The researchers will adopt a qualitative interpretive methodology. This approach focuses on the participants' own reflections on their experiences.

### **Introduction**

The tribal and patriarchal system in Yemen along with the Middle East social and cultural norms play a major part in influencing and restricting female entrepreneurship in the country. The Yemeni civil war is an ongoing conflict that has adversely impacted household income, and pressed millions of people into deprived living conditions. The situation has become worse since 2016 as the payment of salaries in the public sector, which employed 30 per cent of working Yemenis, has been suspended due to its liquidity crisis (Moyer et al, 2019). A third of businesses in the private sector have closed, with many more cutting operations causing massive layoffs. The deteriorating economic situation in the country and the high unemployment rates have created a void and tremendous pressure on families struggling to survive. Amid this devastating civil war of the already fragile ecosystem, entrepreneurship emerged as a hope for Yemenis to face the challenges caused by the war and the geopolitical conflict. In particular, Yemeni females increasingly explore business opportunities through the Internet and new digital technologies such as social media. Digital entrepreneurship, where digital technologies shape entrepreneurial pursuits, presents a hope for females in Yemen beset by the conflict and limited employment opportunities. Thus, our study aims to explore how female entrepreneurs in Yemen can leverage technology to overcome the poor entrepreneurship

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ecosystem in the country. In doing so, we examine female entrepreneurs' engagement with digital technology to identify and enact entrepreneurial opportunities despite them operating in the challenging economic and socio-cultural environment (Rindova et al. 2009, Jennings et al. 2016).

Digital entrepreneurship refers to the pursuit of business opportunities based on the utilisation of digital media and other information and communication technologies (Nambisan, 2017). Digital entrepreneurship has been advocated as a great enabler for female entrepreneurship to overcome social and cultural constraints. For females, the Internet not only provides a safer platform than physical place, but it also enables them to challenge social and cultural norms that usually hinder their entrepreneurial aspiration (Dy et al., 2018; McAdam et al., 2020). The use of digital technologies provides an avenue of unleashing female entrepreneurs from the hierarchical and practice of obedience in a high cultural context of Yemen. In this sense, the potential of digital entrepreneurship in promoting female entrepreneurship can be examined in terms of entrepreneurship as emancipation (Jennings et al., 2016). Our research contributes to the women entrepreneurship literature on the use of digital technologies in the context of a very hostile environment such as in the case of Yemeni civil war.

The emancipatory perspective of entrepreneurship advocates that entrepreneurs attempt to overcome barriers and constraints embedded within the contextualized environment by pursuing new opportunities (Jennings et al. 2016). Research exploring the emancipatory potential of entrepreneurship for women has focused on how entrepreneurship enables liberation from constraints in the formal context (law and regulatory) and informal context (social and cultural norms) in which women are embedded (e.g., Al-Dajani and Marlow 2013; Sophie Alkhaled and Berglund 2018). The relatively low barriers to establishing a new digital business have created substantial possibilities for entrepreneurs to pursue business opportunities (Nambisan, 2017). For example, digital technology has been considered as an external enabler for new venture creation (McAdam et al., 2020). Since digital entrepreneurship requires investment, technical knowledge and access to resources and the Internet, this may hinder female entrepreneurship in the digital space (Dy et al., 2017, 2018) and in the war zone in Yemen, e.g., destruction of communication infrastructure. Such challenges for female entrepreneurs coupled with a high cultural context in Yemen remain an underexplored research area.

By focusing on a fragile country our research addresses information gaps, weak institutions and management practices of female digital entrepreneurs. For example, the role of women entrepreneurs in developing new e-commerce markets; how entrepreneurs exploit digital technologies in under-resourced information technology environments; the industry sectors driving demands using digital technologies; what business opportunities and investments can take advantage of digital technology.

Our consideration of economic and socio-cultural factors fits with the need for a fine-grained study on the microstructure of markets in least developed countries. Our study contributes rich and deep insights into cultural and behavioural issues to complement the current lack of published microeconomic data on women's digital entrepreneurship in

Yemen. This includes enriching our understanding of Middle Eastern culture and women entrepreneurs in a high context society such as how entrepreneurial activities are conforming to social norms; how digital entrepreneurs evolved and coped with the civil war; and the extent to which firm size and age influences growth trajectory as far as sustained growth is concerned.

### **Methodology**

The study will use a qualitative approach by conducting in-depth interviews with Yemeni female entrepreneurs who created a business reliant on digital technology in the previous five years. A main goal is to gain insights into digital entrepreneurship as emancipation by examining the economic, social, and cultural impediments for female entrepreneurs. In turn, this will shed new light on how female entrepreneurs explore business opportunities and navigate their business in a very hostile environment. Guided by the phenomenological research paradigm, our study will conduct relevant interviews to cover different types of entrepreneurial activities in different parts of Yemen until data saturation. We envisage that each interview will last between 30 and 90 minutes. A semi-structured interview format will be used to gather information on a common set of questions focusing on how digital technology enabled the entrepreneurial activities. The researchers will adopt a qualitative interpretive methodology (Creswell 2003). This approach focuses on the participants' own reflections on their experiences and how different circumstances might have contributed to the decision to pursue a digital entrepreneurship opportunity. Following this approach, we hope that we will be able to gather information not only focusing on pursuing digital entrepreneurship, but on the wider social and economic realities hindering female entrepreneurship in Yemen.

Apart from asking introductory and background questions, the main research questions are:

1. What drives female entrepreneurs to create digital new ventures in a very hostile environment?
2. How do entrepreneurs develop the digital skills and capabilities needed to establish and grow their businesses? What specific skills enable high growth entrepreneurs to leverage digital technology?
3. What challenges are facing the digital entrepreneurial process? How female entrepreneurs mitigate and/or overcome the challenges particularly through digital technologies?
4. What are the effects of the institutional voids in Yemen on female digital entrepreneurial activities? How can female entrepreneurs influence Yemen policies for successful development of the entrepreneurship ecosystem especially for sustained growth entrepreneurship?
5. What social and cultural factors influence female digital entrepreneurs? How do female entrepreneurs cope with social and cultural expectations in terms of social compliance?
6. What kind of support is needed to enable these new ventures to grow during and after the war?

**Keywords:** Female entrepreneurship, Digital entrepreneurship, Conflict and Hostile Environment, Emancipation theory

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