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Author(s): Vivian Besem Ojong and Vaneetha Moodley

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Leadership and issues affecting the productivity of women entrepreneurs in KwaZulu-Natal

Vivian Besem Ojong and Vaneetha Moodley

abstract

This briefing highlights the opportunities that are available for women entrepreneurial leaders in a country that has an imbalanced economic empowerment history with a discriminatory past. We discuss the leadership styles of women entrepreneurs and the opportunities that are open to them, as well as the challenges they face in increasingly competitive economic activities. We also focus on how women are exposed to violence, which impacts on their productivity as entrepreneurs. We synthesise leadership from a cross-cultural perspective to exhibit the commonalities and differences affecting women entrepreneurs and how they have struggled to achieve their present success.

keywords

leadership, entrepreneur, women-owned business, violence

Introduction

Although focused effort to include more women in decision-making positions in big business can be observed, the glass ceiling still exists and women do not necessarily have the freedom to lead based on their intuition, vision and experience. This research is based on our ethnographic study of 30 African women from a cross-cultural background, comprising both African migrant women from other African countries and South African women living and working in KwaZulu-Natal. Based on the nature of the research, we utilised qualitative methodology including in-depth interviews and participant observation. The snowball method of sampling was used since the women entrepreneurs were in contact with each other and it was a hard-to-find group as the majority of these types of businesses are owned by migrant men. Among the women, 2 are based in Empangeni; 1 a Nigerian and the other, a Zulu. In Richards Bay, there are 2 women; 1 Nigerian and 1 Zulu. In Durban, there are 26 women; 18 are Ghanaian women, 2 are Nigerian women, while 6 are Zulu women. Among the women, 8 run their businesses jointly with their husbands, while 22 run their businesses by themselves. Of the 30 women, 2 run clothing retail shops, 2 run bakeries and 26 run hairdressing salons. Although these businesses are considered to be an extension of women’s traditional roles, the financial and infrastructural resources required to set up and run these types of businesses, make it difficult for women to enter into these sectors as individuals. This briefing is also informed by the experiences of Vuka Uzithathe, an organisation for gender and economic development, based in KwaZulu-Natal and founded to address the gender imbalances in entrepreneurship.

Background

Being an entrepreneur means being a leader in the area of business ownership and being
involved in the day-to-day management of the business. Entrepreneurship, the act of business ownership and business creation, is a concept that has a long history in Africa, although previously often called 'market-trading' (Harper, 1987).

The motivations of African female entrepreneurs are becoming increasingly complex and heterogeneous. The different strategies employed by these female entrepreneurs are important facets in determining how successful they are. Entrepreneurial success, however, depends on the type of business activity carried out by these women. It may be difficult to bring out the dynamics of this distinction because no one factor can completely account for entrepreneurial success.

Gundry (1997) emphasises that the increase in the number of female-owned businesses and their substantial contribution to economic growth in the last decade have led to a greater focus on the woman entrepreneur and the influences on the start-up and growth of female-headed businesses. Women choose entrepreneurship for a variety of reasons. Many desire greater independence and discretion in decision-making than is present in their employment by someone else. Others seek increased flexibility and balance in their work lives, with control over how they work and on what they work. Some are frustrated by limited opportunities for advancement and recognition and are motivated by the opportunity to reap the rewards of their own performance. Women entrepreneurs start and grow businesses around a creative idea or in response to an opportunity they discern in the marketplace. In Africa, and South Africa in general, some women are forced into entrepreneurship by poverty, while others, especially Ghanaian women, go into entrepreneurship by choice (Ojong, 2005).

Evidence from many countries suggests that entrepreneurship is important to economic development and that women have been pivotal in trading activities (Harper, 1987). Harper further remarked that female-owned trading enterprises have a very long history in many parts of the world, as is the case in West Africa. Among Africans, a very large share of market trading, selling as well as buying, is left entirely to women (Boserup, 1970). In South Africa after the fall of apartheid, entrepreneurship has provided opportunities for women leaders.

Although it is still a contested space because of cultural practices in KwaZulu-Natal, (such as, women are still expected to be subordinate to men as indicated by the women in our sample) women are establishing themselves in the area of business leadership. Stoner and Freeman (1992) define leadership as the process of directing and influencing the task-related activities of group members.

A key objective of this research was to develop an understanding of the dynamics under which women conduct their businesses, in relation to the opportunities that are available to them and the challenges they face as leaders on the basis of their gender.

Women choose entrepreneurship for a variety of reasons

Woman entrepreneurs in KwaZulu-Natal

KwaZulu-Natal is predominantly a patriarchal society, like most societies in the world, with men dominating in all spheres of life. This male dominance is embedded in the culture of the Zulu-speaking people, who form the majority in this province where the research was carried out. According to Zulu culture, a man is seen as superior to a woman and should be respected. Although sexism is practised all over the world, in some societies like the matrilineal Akan of Ghana, men are adjusting to changes in gender stereotyped roles. However, it would be misleading to believe that males dominate in all spheres of life in all African societies and that all women accept this domination. Women who take up the challenge of leadership come from societies in which, as
Leadership and issues affecting the productivity of women entrepreneurs in KwaZulu-Natal

Briefing

part of the socialisation process, they are expected to be strong, motivated and to strive for success (Ojong, 2005). Ashanti women from matrilineal Akan in Ghana have a great deal of economic independence and are capable of pooling resources for business ventures. Some Akan women have migrated to South Africa where they are currently running businesses in KwaZulu-Natal. The Akan culture encourages women to ‘reach out and take opportunities for entrepreneurship’. All the Ghanaian women who are included in our study are Akan and are permanently residing in KwaZulu-Natal and contributing to the local economy.

Our focus here has been on explaining the relationship between culture and the development of leadership skills for African women and by so doing, highlighting a shift in the normative thinking about entrepreneurship and portraying a deeper understanding of female business leadership. Societies have been structured in a way that roles are attributed to different sexes. If you are a woman, it is accepted that you should freely perform the reproductive and catering role that reflects the need of the family. However, roles change with changes in social life. In a patrilineal society such as in KwaZulu-Natal, most men fail to recognise these changes in the status and roles of women. Writing about western culture, Biddle and Thomas (1966) highlight that women were long pictured as naturally more stupid, delicate and emotional which justified their exclusion from better occupations and subordination to men generally. However, with changing gender constructions and women ascending to positions of leadership, the balance of power as far as entrepreneurship is concerned, is changing with women-led businesses.

The old power centres have shifted, and the women of power have not only shifted with them: they have helped this shift; indeed, they have been responsible for it by silently putting the weight of their ability where it will count, instead of just being counted (Miles, 1985).

For the African women from other countries who form part of our sample population, whether they are married or single, entrepreneurship in South Africa has meant a shift in terms of decision-making in their lives. The money they earn from their activities is administered by them. Having access to money and complete control over it is very important because it contributes to a woman’s independence (Pellow, 1997; Dei, 1994). Their parents or husbands play a less significant role in the decision-making process. Most of the women we interviewed have separate bank accounts from their husbands (for those who are married) and they are the sole signatories to these accounts. They usually provide for the daily food and clothing requirements in the family. Other issues like house rentals and medical requirements are shared with their husbands. The women believe that school fees are the responsibility of men and they will only pay should the child be about to be expelled from school. The women often expressed their reluctance to allow their spouses to have complete access to their finances. Abner (a Ghanaian businesswoman in Durban) expressed her feelings concerning the administration of her finances:

I came to this country alone, suffered, and now that I have managed to establish my business I cannot allow my husband to control it. You know, if a man has control over your finances, he has control over you. I assist him with the paying of rent. If he asks for money, I give it to him. If I allow him to control the money, then anything I want I will have to ask from him. No, I have passed that level. Anything I want now I just go and buy.

Abner is happy that her entrepreneurship has enabled her to be self-reliant and non-
dependent on her husband for economic survival. She doesn’t feel that having control of her own money means having control over her husband. She said that it just helps her to have an equal say in the day-to-day running of the family’s finances. She and others are pleased that they add to the family’s income. These women have developed a high level of self-esteem for themselves. The fact that they are very creative and always bring in new business ideas helps their businesses to prosper, at times more than those of their husbands.

In terms of power relations, which have to do with the stereotype of the man being the main breadwinner, these women who are high achievers are seen by men as ‘bossy’. They are not prepared to lay down their achievements simply to boost their husbands’ masculine pride. Thus, they are prepared to negotiate with their husbands as long as it doesn’t tamper with their economic independence. In line with Miles (1985) and her golden rule of ‘control the thing yourself’, these women entrepreneurs are plunging themselves wholeheartedly into their businesses, against great obstacles, some resulting from the fact that they are women, and have employed men to work in their businesses.

Davies (1994) stated that the position of women does not exist in a vacuum, because it exists only in relation to the position of men. This, she explains, means bringing about a change in the balance of power between men and women. Men often see themselves as those who make the rules for women and, if this is reversed as in the case of women who own businesses, the men who are employees may often choose to either be disrespectful or try to invade the space of the woman concerned. This impacts negatively on the productivity of the woman, as an entrepreneur. Davies (1994) remarked that male domination in patrilineal societies is built into the social and cultural systems and that even if a woman is brave enough to challenge these and tries to step out beyond the traditional female role, her husband can still exercise his ultimate control through force and re-establish the status quo, at least for that moment. In our study, it was found that it is not only the husbands who tend to exercise male control – boyfriends and even male employees often tried to renegotiate the status quo. The end result of this power struggle is often violence against the women entrepreneurs. Violence is experienced both at the workplace and at home, which impacts on their productivity as women, as leaders and as entrepreneurs.

A 44-year-old widow, Makhosi is a South African businesswoman in KwaZulu-Natal. She owns a hair salon, Salon Makhosi, which is one of the biggest and oldest in Empangeni. Established in 1993, just before the first democratic elections in South Africa, she now has six employees: four women and two men. She reported that it is much easier for her female
employees to take instructions and learn from her than it is for her male employees. As a leader and the owner of the business, she demands that her employees arrive at work on time and that they explain any absence from work. She says this is ‘a tough road’ as far as her male employees are concerned. The men come to work whenever they want to and if they are absent from work, they refuse to give reasons. When asked why she employs men, she said that she is obliged to employ men for two reasons. Firstly, some male customers refuse to be attended to by women and expect men to shave their hair. Secondly, because female-owned businesses are easy targets for burglary, she employs men to act as security for her business.

Makhosi’s predicament is common across cultures for all female-owned businesses.

Angela is a 42-year-old Nigerian woman who owns a bakery in Richards Bay. She had been a secondary school teacher, teaching science until 2003, when she decided that she had had enough working under the leadership of men and started her own business. She went into this business jointly with her husband but she is the one managing the business on a daily basis. She has 11 employees: 4 men and 6 women. She says that as a woman running a business, she encounters many problems, from both Zulu men whom she employs, who expect not to take instructions from women and from her Nigerian husband who expects to have total control of all income, despite the fact that they jointly own and she runs the business.

The type of leaders entrepreneurship creates in women

Instead of aping the leadership styles of men, women in business are introducing a different type of leadership tailored towards meeting their needs as women, and as entrepreneurs. For most of the women, the situation determines the style to be used, as they deal with men and women across racial and cultural lines. Further, people’s personalities irrespective of the above-mentioned factors determine the approach. A few women treat their employees as mothers treat their children. These women are more concerned about the development of their employees and at times forget that they are merely employees. At other times, it is the friendship paradigm that is used, especially with female employees, extending their responsibilities beyond the working environment. For instance, they provide counselling at both professional and personal level. At the other extreme, women believe that to be a good leader you must emulate men since it is the only way to earn the respect of men and women (Miles, 1985).

In most of the female-led businesses, male employees attempt to invade women’s space and tell them how the business is to be run. For instance, in Angela’s bakery, when she asks the men to bake bread, they busy themselves making buns. Sometimes she will then start baking the bread and, when she does so, the men will join her. At other times, she takes over what they are busy with in order to emphasise her expectations to them.

Obstacles faced by women

Women face obstacles which range from access to financial assistance to violence, which impact on their productivity. Women face violence perpetrated by men at the workplace and in the home. At the workplace, any attempt to dismiss a male employee can easily lead to violence towards the woman concerned. When dismissing a male employee, it is mostly done openly in the presence or vicinity of other employees, because of the vulnerability to attacks. However, this is no guarantee that violence will be prevented because once fired, men often organise with their friends, who steal money and other valuables. Even those who are
Leadership and issues affecting the productivity of women entrepreneurs in KwaZulu-Natal

still employed may be involved in breaking into the business and stealing money and equipment. The question arises: How is a woman expected to perform at her maximum potential in the economy when she is being violated at the domestic and business environment?

Power struggles often occur as men fail to draw the lines between being husbands at home and being partners in business with their wives. They believe that women are incapable of taking the right decisions, despite the fact that they are running the business. Men who are in joint businesses with their wives, often expect that all daily sales be given to them or be deposited into their personal accounts despite the fact that the businesses have separate accounts. The African perspective is that a woman is subordinate (Krige, 1962) and our informants believe that joint business ventures are used as strategies to maintain male dominance. Like Abner, when a woman goes into business alone, it is difficult for a man to subdue her economic independence.

A common problem that women who own businesses jointly with their husbands face, is verbal abuse. When the woman refuses to deposit all the money earned from the business into her husband’s account, she is addressed as a thief in the presence of her children. As entrepreneurs, these women feel like quitting at times since their husbands are only interested in using them to make profit. To be able to succeed under such circumstances, some women have decided to ignore their husbands and do what they believe is right for the wellbeing of the business and their future.

At home, the women face violence because their husbands or boyfriends are intimidated by their financial independence and become aggressive. This happens often in situations where the women earn higher incomes than the men. Such men feel that whatever they give the women is insignificant. They feel threatened and resent other men talking to these women, even physically abusing the women if they see them talking to other men. On 12 March 2005, Makhosi was seriously beaten by her boyfriend because she decided to take control over her finances. She still has scars on her mouth and face from the abuse. Presently, she is scared of being involved with a man because she believes she can be violated again. When men approach her ‘for love’, she asks them whether they want her or the Makhosi salon.

Conclusion

Stoner and Freeman (1992) view leaders as born and not made and in this regard, Zulu men need to accept and adjust to the fact that women can be born leaders. Among our sample population, Ghanaian men are supporting their wives who are established leaders in the area of hairdressing and are reaping the benefits of their leadership. There is no reason why other African men cannot support their wives and other women who have the predisposition to leadership. We believe that this can be possible through imbizo (open forums for discussion). African women in KwaZulu-Natal, through their entrepreneurial engagement, have been strategic in the introduction and transmission of skills. Faced with the challenges of employing people from across cultures and sexes, they are introducing new styles of leadership that are capable of dealing with gendered hardships in the new South Africa.

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Leadership and issues affecting the productivity of women entrepreneurs in KwaZulu-Natal


Vivian Besem Ojong is an anthropologist lecturing at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College campus. Currently, she co-edits the newsletter for Anthropology Southern Africa and is a member of the executive committee of that body. Email: ojong@ukzn.ac.za

Vaneetha Moodley is a founder and Executive Director of Vuka Uzithathe – Institute for Gender and Economic Development. She serves on many boards and committees. She is currently conducting research for University of Cape Town on the impact of the Economic Management Systems and Entrepreneurship syllabi in KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape Schools. Email: vukainst@iafrica.com