

Women Entrepreneurs in Small and Medium Businesses in Russia and Kazakhstan: Do Family Ties Help?

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Abstract

The paper addresses the issues of the current state and prospects of women's entrepreneurship in the modern economic environment. The purpose of the study is to provide a comprehensive assessment of women's entrepreneurial activity and preferences in starting a business in Russia or Kazakhstan in the postCOVID-19 period and during the subsequent social and economic instability. The research was conducted using a review of theoretical literature and the descriptive and interpretive method; the empirical methodology included a questionnaire survey and transcription of respondents' interviews, analysis of the methodological base and adaptation of the INTERGEN international project methodology, use of mathematical and statistical methods of data processing. A conceptual framework for assessing and synthesising key information from the in-depth interviews and questionnaires is proposed and tested. A number of specific characteristics, drivers and barriers to women's entrepreneurship have been identified. In particular, it is shown that for most women entrepreneurs, the choice is driven by a desire to fulfil their potential and to find their own occupation which would bring moral satisfaction as well as income.

Keywords

entrepreneurship; women; business; SMEs; family; Russia; Kazakhstan

JEL codes: L26; J16; J24

Introduction

It is widely recognised that entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in the development and well-being of societies (Herrington et al. 2017). The modern conditions of states determine the relevance of the development of entrepreneurial systems. Their activities aim

at regional development, meeting the needs of the population, as well as ensuring the growth of socio-economic well-being and adequate representation of the entire economically active population. Therefore, at least in theory, various stakeholders, including governments, state-owned entities, political parties, and non-profit organisations, should be interested in the development of business institutions and the promotion of diverse entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Today, there is a trend towards women's entrepreneurship in many countries around the world. This phenomenon involves gender and sociological aspects, which makes the nature of the problems interdisciplinary (Poggesi et al. 2016; Cardella et al. 2020). At the same time, in many well developed and in most developing countries, the proportion of women's businesses is significantly below that of men's (Brostrom et al. 2019; Ughetto et al. 2020). Therefore, understanding potential barriers, constraints and difficulties faced by women entrepreneurs is necessary not only to increase their participation in entrepreneurship but also to improve business performance.

This paper reviews the current data on women's entrepreneurship in the Russian Federation (RF) and in the Republic of Kazakhstan (RK), obtained as part of a study aimed at a comprehensive assessment of women entrepreneurs' preferences for starting their own business in Russia or Kazakhstan. The authors identify the most obvious gaps in the existing set of perceptions of women's entrepreneurial activity, propose to consider a conceptual framework to assess and synthesise the underlying data, and identify a common set of challenges that women entrepreneurs face in these two countries in the post-COVID economy and during increased political turbulence, as well as the way these challenges affect the overall performance of their businesses.

The paper is structured as follows. The introduction briefly explains the relevance and outlines the purpose of the study. The main section presents an analysis of relevant literature that served as a theoretical and methodological basis for the study; a characterisation of the methods of primary data collection; a discussion of the results obtained at the first stage of the study. The conclusion presents the findings and the areas of future research.

Literature review

Based on the study of literature on the subject matter, we can identify several priority guidelines that are common to most of the papers.

Economic and Business Performance of Women-Owned Businesses

Many researchers have noted that businesses founded and managed by women entrepreneurs have relatively "weak" economic characteristics and show relatively low performance. The most characteristic indicators of the "lagging behind" are as follows (Bardasi et al. 2011; Mayr et al. 2021):

- A smaller enterprise size;
- A lower profit;
- A lower growth rate, more likely to go out of business;
- Women are less willing or able to mobilise external financing.

A study based on data from the SINE electronic database of over 48,000 French start-ups found that women are still “largely confined to traditionally gendered sectors” and start smaller projects, even if they have access to larger finances, while often outperforming men in terms of quality of management (Vial and Richomme-Huet 2017). It can therefore be assumed that the reasons for most of the above “lagging behind” indicators can be explained by the typology of their choice of a sector (industry) of the consumer economy where women entrepreneurs have traditionally put their efforts:

- services, especially hospitality, leisure, and basic education;
- retail and small wholesale trade.

These sectors of the consumer economy tend to be highly competitive, where supply far exceeds demand, goods and services offered are low margin, and the markets are highly localised and lacking in dynamic growth (Vaja 2015; König et al. 2019). Therefore, researchers face a question of why women entrepreneurs choose specifically these sectors of the consumer economy and to what extent their choices are predetermined.

The answer to the question of choice predetermination, according to a number of researchers (Bird and Sapp 2004; Nguyen 2023), can be found by comparing “male” versus “female” businesses. This consideration is subject to ongoing debate. On the one hand, it is hardly correct to assign gender to business (Marlow and Swain 2014), much less so that in reality the case of exclusively “female” or “male” businesses in combination with an identical business environment is extremely rare, while similarities (gender similarities) in values regarding lifestyle and occupation are becoming increasingly prominent in many countries around the world (Mishina et al. 2024).

On the other hand, the way women and men interpret success can be considered a key difference (Allen and Truman 2016; Wach et al. 2016). This is why it is important to take this factor into account when assessing women’s business performance. Whereas men mainly refer to numbers, financial terms and indicators (revenue, profit) as they define their personal success and the success of their business, women tend to perceive stability of their position and a sense of being in control over their destiny as the key signs of success. But these success criteria are not the only ones. For women entrepreneurs, success is also about building long-term and mutually beneficial relationships with their clients and partners and maintaining a decent standard of living for their employees and colleagues. These, again, do not make the list exhaustive – according to several studies, achieving a certain status in the community and in the family is essential for women entrepreneurs (Byrne et al. 2019), even if this success criterion is rarely explicit.

The difference in terms of success criteria is not the main focus of research of women’s entrepreneurship. Women entrepreneurs and their businesses are very diverse. In order to structure the approach to studying the different forms of women’s businesses, an original taxonomy of drivers was proposed that best reveal the motivations of women entrepreneurs (Carranza et al. 2018):

1. choices and preferences;
2. endowments, which include education, property, social status, connections, and networking;
3. external constraints, i.e. laws and a set of social and societal norms and attitudes;
4. internal constraints, i.e. one’s own assessment of the combination of one’s intellectual, moral and physical attributes and capabilities.

By revealing these drivers, the authors explain why women tend to prefer employment to owning a business or various forms of self-employment. Women are much more likely

to become entrepreneurs under the pressure of external circumstances, when economic necessity forces them to engage in a particular type of business, i.e. their objective is, first and foremost, the need to support their families. Much less often women become entrepreneurs because they saw a “window of opportunity” or a “unique chance” that promises quick enrichment and high profits.

Another distinctive feature of women’s entrepreneurship is the tendency to take a slow and thorough approach to business development, with relying on owned resources, while avoiding risk and staying away from new “hype” business areas; women’s risk appetite is generally lower (Maxfield et al. 2010). The social status, especially the level of education, has a significant impact on the ability to start a business and the propensity to take entrepreneurial risks, as Chilean researchers showed in their recommendations and policies for entrepreneurship development: “Programs that introduce the principles of business administration, which are focused on specific groups like young unemployed workers or housewives who want to start a small family business as a second source of income, should be developed seriously” (Sepúlveda and Bonilla 2011, p. 78).

External constraints most often refer to a system of institutions that establish a set of formal (codified) and informal (uncodified) rules to be followed by all economic agents; these rules regulate economic behaviour and influence economic choices. For example, a number of countries still have legal restrictions on women’s right to independently dispose of property or require their husbands’ or family members’ authorisation for certain forms of independent activity (including legal representation, carrying out financial transactions, etc.). Much more common are uncodified restrictions and prohibitions, which are usually in keeping with certain traditions that prevail in certain local communities and are an expression of a quasisocial ‘social norm’. All this has a negative impact on women entrepreneurs and significantly limits the possibility of women’s economic activity. Such social norms and restrictions imposed on women need to be understood in order to know how and why women and men work in different sectors of the economy and shape their preferences and interests in entrepreneurship differently. A detailed analysis and assessment of social norms of women’s behaviour is given in “Norms of women’s behaviour: traditional and modern models” (Klecina and Ioffe 2019). Such social norms can result in a system of discriminatory economic relationships, most clearly manifested in restrictions on free access to finance (Marlow and Patton, 2005) and inequality in the labour market. Gender inequality can lead to women’s reduced participation in the labour force, which is why they lack qualifications, skills and experience required to start a business of their own. In Russia, the situation is somewhat different, with women holding 41% of management positions, one of the world’s highest proportions (Muhortova 2021). At the same time, according to a survey conducted by the analytical centre of Synergy University in 2021, “51.2% of Russians are reluctant to work under a woman manager. The opposite opinion was held by 20.6% of the respondents. 28.2% of the respondents were confident that the boss’s sex does not matter much” (RIA Novosti 2021). According to the authors’ assessment, this is another type of social norm that discriminates against women.

Indian researchers identified six factors that positively influence the performance of women entrepreneurs (Jha and Alam 2022): motivation; networking; socio-cultural environment; business environment; training and development; and financial capacity.

Motherhood is one of the external constraints that are considered to significantly reduce women’s entrepreneurial opportunities. At the same time, parental responsibility is not

a constraint for women to create or manage their businesses, as shown in the study by the Brazilian researchers: “Interesting finding is that the presence of children does not interfere in the activities and participation of female entrepreneurs within the network, thus indicating that motherhood is not either a positive or negative issue in this context” (Moletta et al. 2023).

Women entrepreneurs’ behaviour (self-confidence, risk appetite and motivation) as well as external factors significantly influence business performance (Venotha and Alex 2023; Yap et al. 2023; Heriberta et al. 2024). A set of internal constraints is an extremely complex and controversial topic. It is generally accepted that women are less confident than men. However, a number of studies indicate that this self-assessment is subjective: for example, for the same professional and educational level, men have a higher assessment of their competence in finance than women (Hisrich and Brush 1984). Lower self-esteem makes women less likely to start a business, mainly due to doubts such as: “I don’t have enough competences, I don’t have enough experience, I don’t have the strength to cope”.

However, researchers into women’s entrepreneurship in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America do not completely agree with this assessment and the impact of internal constraints. For example, in the case of Iran, researchers have found that women generally consider the factor of some “internal constraints” as far-fetched or insignificant (Javadian and Singh 2012). The reason for this is that they face institutional violence, disregard for legal norms, and poor public health and safety in their daily lives, i.e. their self-confidence comes from their daily struggle for existence.

Nechemias and Bahry (Nechemias and Bahry 2021) conclude that despite their high educational level and professional experience, women lack confidence in their ability to start and run a business; there is a lack of information and knowledge in the field of entrepreneurship – therefore, there is a need for educational programmes to fill the gap. In the case of Russian women entrepreneurs, these authors emphasise that “...they lack self-confidence in their ability to start and run a business to a greater extent than their benchmark counterparts” (Nechemias and Bahry 2021, p. 75).

How correct is this conclusion? In our opinion, this matter requires further research, including further understanding of the forms of business organisation and entrepreneurial activity in which women entrepreneurs primarily participate.

The issue of differentiation of business forms used by women entrepreneurs

In considering the arguments to explain a lower performance of women’s owned businesses, some researchers (Mamburu 2017) categorise the forms of participation of women entrepreneurs into (a) part-time self-employment; b) self-employment; (c) participation in small or medium enterprises (SMEs); and (d) participation in high-growth firms (HGFs).

It has been noted that women entrepreneurs are mainly engaged in self-employment or part-time self-employment. There is considerable debate as to whether or not this should be considered a business at all. While self-employment is indeed a form of business activity, it does not allow for the creation of an independent asset that can later be divested through sale. Consequently, a person engaged in self-employment, especially part-time self-employment, cannot claim a status of full-fledged economic agent. Hence the under-performance of this form of business activity, the impossibility of capitalising the business or attracting external funding, and a number of legal restrictions. O. Light and R. Munk analysed the

characteristic features of employment, self-employment and entrepreneurship and concluded that in the overwhelming majority of cases (65% for men and 71% for women) self-employment cannot be identified as an independent form of business ownership (Light and Munk 2015).

At the same time, women entrepreneurs relatively rarely choose to participate in the HGF-type of business (Mamburu 2017). The literature defines high-growth firms as a small group of highly innovative firms that together influence around 80% of all economic activity in a country or region (Monteiro et al. 2019; Turnbull and Richmond 2018), including job growth, poverty reduction, creation of significant wealth for owners and the economy, promotion of innovation, and “formalisation of the informal sector” (Ahmad and Hoffmann 2008) in developing countries. The Wildberries case can be considered to illustrate a rather complex definition of HGF offered in the above papers. Tatyana Bakalchuk, the founder and owner of the Wildberries online retailer, created not just an online shop, but a marketplace that formalised the small business retail sector of the Russian Internet. According to SPARK, Tatyana Bakalchuk owns 100% of the company, “while in fact it is a family business. It started with selling clothes from German catalogues, which the Bakalchuk couple picked up and delivered themselves. In 15 years, the part-time job grew into a billion-dollar business” (BFM 2023).

However, the Wildberries case is still more of a lucky exception than a widespread practice. The vast majority of Russian women entrepreneurs, in full accordance with global trends, belong to the self-employed or part-time self-employed groups. In Russia, the number of women among the self-employed has increased by 15% since 2019. According to a study by Opora Rossii and the self-employment platform YAZANYAT, the proportions of women in the total registered self-employed were 27% in 2019, 31% in 2020, 37% in 2021, and 42% in 2022. Women most often register as self-employed to provide financial services (19%), renting out accommodation (16%), provide advertising and marketing services (14%). El-Sibai and Ganebnykh in (El-Sibai and Ganebnykh 2019), a paper on entrepreneurial activity of women with young children, note that the main difference between the entrepreneurial activity of young mothers in depressed regions of Russia and the respective cases in the Western countries lies in the causes of the phenomenon. Financial need is often the reason, while earlier publications indicate the desire of European women to spend more time with their children, combining childcare and self-development. I. Molodan and L. Ivanchenko believe that the institution of self-employment in Russia can become a factor in the expansion and development of small business. At the same time, they admit that “several issues related to the implementation of the experiment (introduction of the institution of self-employment) remain controversial, requiring additional consideration” (Molodan and Ivanchenko 2021). In particular, there are doubts about the significant restrictions on annual income and hiring, and there are questions about the 277% growth of the self-employed between 2020 and 2021 as the number of registered SMEs remained the same. This growth may have been driven by the mass transfer of employees to remote work during the COVID-19 and the desire of actual employers to optimise their taxation by transferring employees to self-employment.

While respectfully considering all points of view on the significance of the forms of women’s entrepreneurial activity, we are inclined to exclude self-employment and even more so, part-time self-employment, from the focus of the study.

The question then is what criteria should be chosen for differentiating the forms of entrepreneurship. The proposed (minimum) criteria are as follows: owning or renting the premises

es, employing hired staff, having no restrictions on the turnover or form of business activity. It is compliance with these criteria that will become a filter to identify, study and define women's entrepreneurial activity.

Women entrepreneurs' responsibility to family, parents, household

A common thesis running through the vast majority of studies goes as follows. In virtually all modern societies, women continue to bear unequally higher responsibility for family and household care. This makes it more difficult for them to maintain paid employment in the formal sector due to its inflexible schedules. In developing countries, this problem is exacerbated by high economic inequality, lack of childcare and limited access to time-saving household appliances. Self-employment may be the only way to provide women with flexibility that may not be available in employment (Minniti and Arenius 2003). Unequal sharing of family responsibilities may, on the one hand, encourage women to become entrepreneurs and, on the other hand, limit their potential as business owners.

For example, Jamali (2009) found that the need to combine work and family was referred to as the main obstacle mentioned by Lebanese women entrepreneurs. In another study amongst married women entrepreneurs in Turkey, the respondents reported a role conflict in their personal and professional lives, noting that working as an entrepreneur negatively affects their family life, while having a positive impact on their social, economic, and personal life (Ufuk and Özgen 2001). Many authors argue that increased family responsibility is one explanation for the lower profitability of women-owned firms (Longstreth et al. 1987; Rosa et al. 1996). Self-employed women are much more likely than men to work shorter hours on a fragmented and flexible work schedule (Bradley et al. 2007).

As S. Marlow and M. McAdam argue, such responsibilities are socially conditioned and historically attributable, therefore, women do not make a (*real*) choice reflecting their limited entrepreneurial ambition or limited capital as they do their part-time housework but respond instead to social imperatives and prescribed roles. They argue that “gendered socio-economic positioning ensures that women-owned businesses demonstrate constrained performance, but this is not synonymous with under-performance” (Marlow and McAdam 2013, p. 114).

Let us try to interpret the above statement. The authors effectively argue that women are following social imperatives and prescribed roles as they decide on running a business of their own (even part-time) because they strive to provide the best possible socio-economic conditions for their families, children, and parents.

Materials and methods of research

The method of research included a theoretical review of literature, a descriptive and interpretive method, while the empirical part included a questionnaire surveying (QS) and respondents' interview transcription (IT) based on the contingency table and the chi-square test, an analysis of the research methodology base INTERGEN; also mathematical and statistical methods of data processing (descriptive statistics, percentage determination, the Likert scale) were used. The findings were statistically processed using the Statistica software package.

Methodology of the INTERGEN research consortium

In September 2018, the international academic research consortium INTERGEN was established to include academics from Albania, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Russia, and Serbia. The main goal of the INTERGEN academic consortium is to support various efforts to preserve the family in a “respectful way”, using the following example as a visualisation of intergenerational business ties:

- grandparents grow grapes;
- parents produce wine (including using their parents’ grapes);
- children set up an online store and also sell grapes and wine produced by their relatives.

The pioneering study by D. Pavlov, M. Sheresheva, and M. Perello “The Intergenerational Small Family Enterprises as Strategic Entities for the Future of the European Civilization – A Point of View” (Pavlov et al. 2018) served as a theoretical basis for the consortium’s research, which presented an original vision of certain theoretical components of a new understanding of the role that young people play as the initiators of intergenerational family businesses. The authors believe that these new components could further inform international research on intergenerationally driven small family business development. As a result, the consortium set out to explore how the neoclassical concept of intergenerational family business could be used as a tool for entrepreneurial stress management. The main objectives of the project are:

1. Exploring college students’ general attitudes towards their career development.
2. Examining the impact of the new concept on their entrepreneurial attitudes.
3. Exploring how the new theory can reduce the level of entrepreneurial stress.
4. Exploring how the new theory can improve welfare.

The methodological basis for the research was a research system developed by the INTERGEN team with the participation of the authors of this paper, designed to compare young people’s attitudes towards staying in their home country versus pursuing their career and development abroad, as well as their intention to start a business versus their preference for being employed at a large company, and their willingness to involve their family, relatives and friends in their plans. Furthermore, the study includes the assessment of indicators of perceived well-being. The source material (questionnaire findings) was further processed using the factor analysis, correlation analysis, ANOVA, T-test, and paired samples t-test. The outcome was a questionnaire consisting of 40 questions. The survey conducted in 2018–2019 involved 1,420 participants (undergraduate students) from 12 universities in Albania, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Russia, and Serbia. The authors of this paper were responsible for the Russian portion of the field study.

The key findings of the study are as follows:

- In general, undergraduate students have a clear idea of where they want to work and live. They prefer to pursue a career in their home country. Nevertheless, they generally believe that their countries have too many barriers for career development, which is not conducive to starting a business while their prospects abroad could be much better. Overall, they show equally positive attitudes towards both getting employed at a large company and starting a business. The undergraduates are willing to share business ideas and are also inclined to continue and improve their family business (if any).
- Replication of certain traditional stereotypes takes place. For example, men are goal-oriented but also recognise the need for support from friends and family. Women

are more likely than men to foresee continuing their careers in their home country, they are more focused on where they want to work and what they want to do, and they consider transparency of the economic and political system an important factor for small business development.

- Men are much more willing than women to rely on friends for their business. Women are more likely to believe that success results from a combination and expansion of the product/service offering. Women are more likely to share the belief that their family will support them in any way they can, although their general attitude is that they need to rely on their own efforts to succeed. Following traditional gender roles, women are more likely than men to seek advice from relatives for their decision making and to share their problems with friends.

The new INTERGEN-2 project is designed for the period 2021–2024. The range of the participants has been expanded to include 25 universities from 14 countries. It is expected that more universities in more countries would join the research later on.

Adjusting the methodology for the research objectives

Taking the INTERGEN research methodology as a basis, including its set of questions in the questionnaire, we decided to expand the scope of the research by conducting a survey among women entrepreneurs. The target group of the study was women entrepreneurs owning a business in the Russian Federation or the Republic of Kazakhstan. The contacts of women entrepreneurs were taken from their social network accounts. The questionnaires were automatically emailed to the contacts selected using the Google search engine and the VKontakte social network.

The study was divided into two phases:

1. *Preparation and a test survey;*
2. *Pilot interviews.*

Once we started, we almost immediately encountered challenges in applying the original questionnaire.

The first phase of the study revealed the following challenges:

1. A high rate of refusal to respond to the survey. Most of the respondents who did agree to participate were unwilling to disclose their personal data and especially personal information (marital status, presence of children, etc.).
2. Most women entrepreneurs were unwilling to spend their personal or working time filling in questionnaires received by e-mail (or as an attachment via messenger). They always have higher priority tasks to attend to and a research task will always lose out in the competition for time and attention.
3. Those who agreed to the conditions of the survey took the research objectives and the questions most seriously. Moreover, they provided feedback in the form of comments or opinions (usually by expressing doubts as to the appropriateness of the exercise).

The test mailing included 20 questionnaires, of which 15 were ignored, three respondents offered a motivated refusal, while the remaining two respondents literally got stuck, with each question having to be clarified to them, while getting distracted by “other issues” (Fig. 1). “Other issues” meant a generally negative attitude towards the socio-economic situation of the COVID-19 and post-COVID periods.

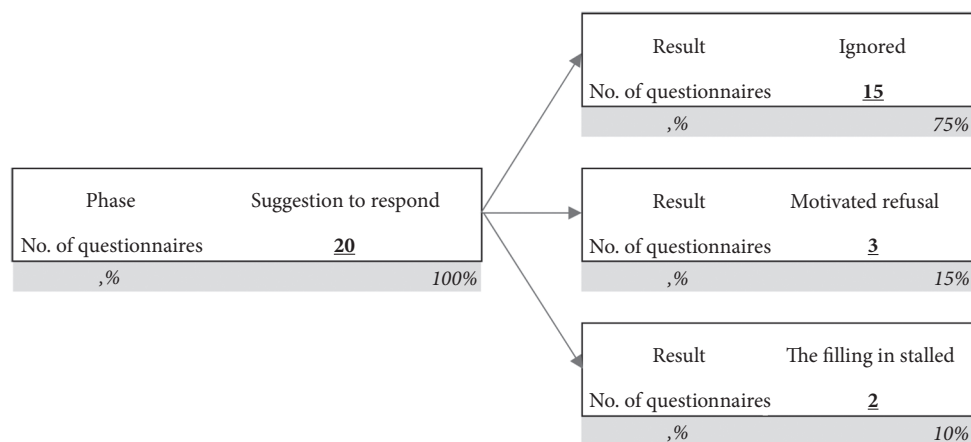


Figure 1. Phase 1 – test mailing of the questionnaire

Although we had in effect obtained a null result and considered Phase 1 to be a failure due to the behaviour of the potential respondents described above, we were nevertheless able to confirm our intuitive assumption that Russian or Kazakhstani women entrepreneurs aged 35-45 with higher education will react differently from university undergraduates aged 18-24 both to the request to fill in a questionnaire and to the particular questionnaire developed by us as part of the INTERGEN consortium. It turned out that the standard survey and questionnaire technique proposed by the INTERGEN project did not work in this case.

Then we decided to adapt the questionnaire survey process to the new target group of respondents, i.e., women entrepreneurs. Prior to the survey, a series of in-depth pilot interviews was conducted, which did not impose the rigid, predetermined framework of the questionnaire on the respondents but allowed them to give their own emotional response to the issue in the course of the conversation (Langley and Meziani 2020).

Accordingly, the process was divided into several stages:

1. Preparation: A list of questions to be asked at the interview was sent out along with a cover letter requesting to preview the questions and containing brief information on the details of the interview, i.e., its format and duration.
2. Interviewing: An in-depth interview was conducted via Zoom videoconferencing. With the respondent's consent, the videoconference was entirely or partially recorded for eventual transcription. During the interview, it was preferable to stick to the predefined list of questions, but where the respondents raised other issues, they were not stopped as much as possible; however, when the conversation strayed too far from the issues at hand, the interviewer gently brought it back on track. Once the interview was completed, it was necessary to obtain the respondent's consent to filling in the questionnaire and to agree on a timeframe for transcribing and finalising the wording.
3. Post-interview: Receiving the completed questionnaire, agreeing on the interview wording, obtaining the consent to use the interview text and data. Obtaining a feedback from the respondent was mandatory.

Thus, the INTERGEN methodology adjusted for the research objectives served as the research basis. Since the initial period of the research showed that it was impossible to directly apply the original methodology, it was decided to adapt the questionnaire process to the new

target group of respondents and to add an interviewing stage based on a semi-structured guide, which did not impose a rigid, predetermined framework on the respondents instead allowing them to give their own emotional response to the topic during communication. The set of questions was expanded to better fit the characteristics of women entrepreneurs.

The second stage of the research – the interview.

The target group of the study were members of the entrepreneurial community (EC) that experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and/or political turbulence in Russia or Kazakhstan in the current decade, whose family or family members owning an over 50% stake in the company and one or two family members being actively involved in the management of the company. Respondents' willingness to participate in an in-depth interview via videoconference (Zoom) to be recorded and subsequently transcribed was also considered. The interview format included 12 free-form questions with respondents being able to share their extended comments (Annex 1). Each of the respondents agreed to fill in the questionnaires and give an in-depth interview (see Annex 2 for key excerpts from the interviews).

1. It should be noted that nearly all the respondents started their business from scratch, with no start-up capital (which could have been provided by their parents) or any previous entrepreneurial experience. Also, the choice of business was in no way related to the older generation's experience, which could have been gained by working as a child in the family business. In other words, the stereotypical story of a family business in Western countries where children from early childhood help adults in the family business does not apply to the two countries in question at all. The impact of external factors (e.g., the special military operation) on doing business is an objective reality.
2. One of the most interesting topics in the whole series of interviews is how women entrepreneurs make decisions and whether or not they are willing to delegate authority and thus share the responsibility for their business. Here are the most interesting findings:
 - Perhaps the most telling response is, "For me, family support is meant to be sympathy and empathy, while my business issues are my business and my decisions."
 - Where a business is owned and managed by a married couple, the business is clearly divided into "blocks" of which one or the other is the sole "ruler".
 - Surprisingly, women entrepreneurs prefer to work with male counterparties. We wonder why. Apparently, this should be the topic of further studies.
3. The use of modern information and communication technologies is a prerequisite for doing business. All the respondents noted that in one way or another they try to control all aspects of business and are extremely reluctant to delegate authority. This may be due to the peculiarities of doing business in Russia or Kazakhstan, where it is necessary to be "alert" and ready to react promptly if things go wrong.
4. Question 4 indirectly implied that some of the respondents might say that their relatives and/or the older generation are involved in working with external counterparties. The respondents, however, demolished this assumption. Only the owners themselves or hired managers deal with counterparties. On a separate note, the respondents place a very high value on their reputation and carefully build communication channels for customer feedback.
5. The respondents generally share the following common view supported by their life experiences: no friends or parents in your business. That said, parents' help with household chores is needed and actively welcomed, especially help with the children. Another interesting observation was the absence of the so-called collective leader-

ship or (formal or informal) collegial decision-making. One-person rule only. Where a married couple runs the business, there are distinctive areas of responsibility for each of them and just a handful of matters are subject to joint decision-making. In a sense, it mirrors the state system in miniature.

6. It is noteworthy that all the respondents indicated in one way or another that their personal and business connections “did not help at all”. This is entirely contrary to the “Western” business start-up paradigm of “Family and Friends Provide a Key Lifeline for Entrepreneurs”, according to which friends and family provide not only emotional, but also financial support, and most importantly, the “start-up social capital” in the world of business connections (Alshibani and Volery 2021; Fernández-Bedoya 2021). Having said that, the respondents indicated the importance of business networking and their willingness to invest in maintaining and developing business connections.
7. The question about the “**horizon of planning**” and the “**future vision of the business**” turned out to be a very sensitive topic for the interviewees. All the responses openly expressed anxiety and frustration at the impossibility of planning for any foreseeable period. The current planning horizon is one month, and the long-range planning horizon is one year! Nevertheless, all the interviewees showed an ability to adapt and a certain stoicism in the face of adverse external circumstances.
8. It was confirmed that women entrepreneurs have concerns apart from their businesses, such as their children, husband, and parents. This should be taken into account: it turns out that their working day effectively includes not only hours at work, but also hours of housework. According to the respondents’ estimates, it totals *about 19 hours!* This again raises the question of what the real value of women’s work in society is and whether there exists a measure of fair reward for such efforts.
9. Question 9 again brings up the issue of business uncertainty (caused by “external” factors) – and this is the main worry and concern and the key stress factor, mainly because it is beyond influence in any way. At the same time, positive emotions from a job well done, new contracts secured and being able to afford to pay your staff in full and on time outweigh any negative factors. It is also noteworthy that women entrepreneurs do not express “joy” at the prospect of working with public sector enterprises, and the same motive is evident in the answers to Questions 10–11: Russian women entrepreneurs do not participate in professional associations, nor do they seek to benefit from government support measures, unlike their counterparts in Kazakhstan. Perhaps this is a set of problems specific to the relationship between Russian SMEs and state-owned enterprises?

The pilot interviews revealed a clear general reluctance of women entrepreneurs to see their children carry on their business. This is a radical contradiction to the findings of INTERGEN research, where many respondents said that their goal was to pass on the business to the next generation. The reasons for this are still unclear, but the main ones under consideration are the instability of the socio-economic and political situation, high levels of stress and actual self-exploitation: “*owning a business is hard work, and not everyone is up to it.*”

General conclusions and insights

1. *Adaptability and emotional resilience.* Respondents demonstrate high emotional resilience in coping with the anxieties and stresses involved in owning a business. They have learnt not to be anxious and to look forward positively, they deal with uncertainty

by separating the factors that can be controlled from those that cannot. All the respondents demonstrate a high degree of adaptability and flexibility in a changing external environment. This is key to their resilience and success.

2. *Motivation and satisfaction.* All the respondents find satisfaction in their work: enjoying the gratitude of customers, celebrating successful deals and appreciative customers and being able to afford to pay to their employees.
3. *Overcoming gender stereotypes.* Women entrepreneurs do not face gender stereotypes, as these do not seem to be typical of the current business environment and do not hinder doing business. Personal connections play a significant role. Activities to maintain and develop a network of personal and business contacts are important. In Kazakhstan, social networks play a key role, especially Instagram¹.
4. *The family as a source of emotional support.* The family provides both emotional and practical support that enables women entrepreneurs to cope with their business challenges. This is particularly important during periods of high workload. The family (extended family – parents and relatives) is not involved at all in the management of the business.
5. *Working with friends is limited.* The experience of working with friends can be rather negative, so many women entrepreneurs prefer to keep their personal and business relationships separate.
6. *Importance of business relationships.* Business relationships and personal contacts play a key role in business development. They help to attract new customers, share experiences, and receive support.
7. *Use of technology and social media.* Social media is a valuable tool for maintaining business contacts.
8. *There is no intention of transferring the business as an inheritance:* “owning a business is hard work, and not everyone is up to it.”
9. *Limited use of formal support vehicles.* Most respondents did not actively engage with professional organisations, nor did they utilise government support programmes for their business.
10. *Planning horizon.* In the face of uncertainty, the respondents generally adopt a short-term planning approach, enabling them to respond promptly to changing circumstances.
11. Unwillingness to work with government customers or receive any support measures (Russia); willingness to actively participate in programmes providing support to family businesses (Kazakhstan).
12. The total working day of a woman entrepreneur, including work and household duties, is 19 hours.

Conclusions and areas for further research

We believe that the revised INTERGEN survey methodology enabled us to thoroughly examine the principles of women’s entrepreneurship development in Russia and Kazakhstan. The analysis revealed that the majority of surveyed women entrepreneurs started their businesses to fulfil their potential and establish an occupation that would provide

¹ A Meta Platforms Inc. project, banned in Russia.

both income and moral satisfaction. The analysis of responses indicated that women tend to be more open-minded in their entrepreneurial pursuits, exercise autonomy in their actions, and demonstrate a sense of responsibility and dignity. Furthermore, while women tend to care for their employees, they do not extend this care further to build personal relationships.

In the current economic climate, development of the entrepreneurial environment is a key strategy for addressing economic instability in Russia. With effective organisation and a good understanding of techniques for assessing and fostering entrepreneurship, there is significant potential to increase the country's economic performance and GDP. The primary responsibility of the state is to create favourable conditions for the development of this sector, including the organisation of training programmes both within and outside educational institutions.

This study has confirmed a number of hypotheses about the role of women's entrepreneurship in the business system of the two countries. Firstly, it has been confirmed that women's entrepreneurship is a natural phenomenon that has been building up over the years to systematically reach a high level. Women as a social category have become equal to men, which is confirmed by the results of this study and established by current legislation. In Russia, women run a considerable proportion of economic entities. There is also a trend towards an increase in the number of women entrepreneurs: over the years, the percentage ratio of men and women entering the business world has tilted in favour of the latter.

Based on the findings of the pilot study, it can be argued that women entrepreneurs in Russia and Kazakhstan show determination and resilience and currently have a favourable basis for realising opportunities both in sectors typical of women's entrepreneurship and in other market segments and types of social relationships. At the same time, they belong to a "sandwich generation", both in terms of their actual age and the challenges that dramatically increase their actual working hours. Thus, only an increased stress tolerance allows them not only to cope successfully with all tasks, but also to perceive their life and the results they achieve in a positive way. In other words, women's entrepreneurship is not for the faint-hearted!

The findings of the pilot study clearly need to be corroborated by the findings from a representative sample, although this would be difficult to achieve. In addition, the findings raise a number of questions that open up directions and prospects for further research. In particular, the following directions can be identified:

- Effective networking strategies: explore the networking techniques that have proven most effective for small business owners, especially in different cultural contexts (e.g. Kazakhstan and other regions).
- Succession planning: further explore attitudes to business succession planning, particularly in relation to family involvement and long-term sustainability.
- Effectiveness of support vehicles: explore why entrepreneurs are reluctant to use formal support vehicles and what changes could make those resources more attractive or useful.
- Work-life balance: a more focused study of how entrepreneurs balance personal and business responsibilities and how this affects both.
- Cultural influences: it makes sense to explore how cultural factors (especially in countries such as Kazakhstan) influence business practices, networking, and entrepreneurial attitudes, as well as gender dynamics in entrepreneurship.

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Annex 1

Questions for an in-depth interview

1. “Assume I know nothing”: Please tell us when, how and why you decided to start your business. What were the starting conditions, what did you overcome and where are you now?
2. You are both a business owner and a top executive. Please describe how you make decisions.
3. How have you organised management in your company? Describe target setting, performance control and distribution of authority.
4. How have you organised work with external counterparties (customers, suppliers, contractors)?
5. Family and friends. Who works in your company, who works for you? Is this a help or a problem? In what way?
6. How have your personal and business connections helped you? What do you do to maintain your personal and business relationships?
7. Business planning and development. What is your planning horizon and how do you create a future vision of your business?
8. Balancing business and family responsibilities. How is your family (your children) involved in your business? Do you count on their help and support?
9. What are your anxieties and worries, and what makes you “happy” about your business?
10. Are you (your company) a member of any professional organisations and do you benefit from the membership?
11. Does your company use support from state business support institutions?
12. Do you want your children to carry on your business?

Far from all the respondents were willing to waive the conditions of anonymity; only those who were fully willing to disclose their identity, name and activity profile were included in the final results of the survey. The remaining material was used only for additional validation of the responses included in the published part of the survey.

Annex 2

Key excerpts from the pilot interviews

Question 1. “Assume I know nothing”: Please tell us when, how and why you decided to start your business. What were the starting conditions, what did you overcome and where are you now?

“I had no starting conditions. In 2005, I was working as an account manager in an advertising agency, so I already had had experience. My husband insisted that I try it, because I wouldn’t have dared to do it on my own. He said, “Go ahead and try it”. I had nothing at the time, we were living in a rented flat and set up an office there. A year later, we bought our first equipment so that we could fulfil orders ourselves, rather than acting as an intermediary. The nature of the business: we are a general contractor in the field of printing, advertising, packaging, gifts, and souvenirs. I’ve come a long way since 2005, I now have my own production facility, equipment, and office. Before the Covid-19 and SMO [special military operation], I rented a three-storey detached building for production and office space.”

“In fact, my husband and I started from zero, I would even say below zero. We had no background whatsoever, we were newbies with no experience, knowledge or understanding of how to do business in this industry (translation services). We later learned that the competition were doing things differently, many of them started off already having signed contracts and big-name clients in their portfolios. We jumped in without knowing the rules and the ‘ins and outs’ of the business. At first, we (my husband and I) wanted to buy a ready-made business, but when we looked closely at what was for sale, we realised that these were risky non-entities. That’s why we decided to start on our own.”

“A friend of mine told me that she was selling her creative studio. I immediately liked the idea (the opportunity). We made a deal, and I became a [co-]owner in May 2022. Initially on a 50/50 basis. In September, I told my partner that she had to work and bring in more money. But ten days later we decided that I would own the business 100%. We closed the deal in October. I hired 15 people on a piecework basis.”

Question 2. You are both a business owner and a top executive. Please describe how you make decisions.

“I collect information myself, make calculations (estimates), negotiate with clients. I make decisions myself, well, maybe my brother helps too. My brother has a share (in the business), and I am the majority owner. When we started, the owners were myself, my sister, my brother, and my husband - it was a family business. Now I happen to own 99% of the business.”

My husband and I share ownership and management proportionally. It’s like I’m 45% owner and 55% manager. I make decisions easily. Quickly, sensibly, and easily. Unlike the big companies I used to work for, in construction and banking, we make decisions quickly. I am responsible for all resources and for the part of the business called operations. I always know what we’re doing, when it’s going to be done, what resources will be available and when, and I can say exactly what we can and cannot do. We can’t take on a job that we can’t do. My husband is responsible for the finances, some clients, and the legal function, and we are in constant contact. It’s my decision and I can make a discount for a customer if we have spare hands available or, conversely, I can haggle over the price if there’s a lack of resources. We’ve got over our teething problems and I know I can’t and shouldn’t do everything for everyone. In 2019, we started to create business blocks and put managers in charge. Now I manage a block of managers - project managers and a quality assurance block. I rather like working with men more; when I worked at a bank, 85% of the team were men, it was comfortable and interesting to work with them.”

Decision-making is easy. The main question is “what’s in it for me?” The first thing I do is decide who to target, how much things are going to cost, and estimate the revenue. Then I work out whether it’s profitable or not. In terms of staffing, I look at who among my staff is more capable of working with which category of clients. Some are good with adults, others with children. I am not an impulsive person, but I never hesitate to make decisions. For me, family support is about sympathy and empathy, and business issues are my business and my decisions”.

Question 3. How have you organised management in your company? Describe target setting, performance control and distribution of authority.

“I set tasks by email. Before the pandemic, I had about 30 staff. There was no chain of command or hierarchy. Now there are 10, so in a way it’s easier. I also control the fulfilment of tasks. I don’t use any sophisticated technology to do that.”

“It’s simple. We use a CRM system, bitrix24, where all the operational functionality is implemented, and a system for setting targets and monitoring performance is in place.”

“I’m prepared to share authority, but only part of it. If I have to go away, I have someone to delegate to for a while. That’s three people, my team. Control is mainly feedback from customers. I know how to be on the right side of them, and I always ask for their feedback, and I always have a handle on potentially negative things.”

Question 4. How have you organised work with external counterparties (customers, suppliers, contractors)?

“Only short contracts are left now. I used to have customers who had been working with me since 2006 (17 years!), but due to the Covid and various consequences they went out of business. However, the employees of these companies have moved on to other companies or set up their own businesses. They all eventually came back to me because we do quality work, we deliver on time, and I know how to keep my word. In general, word of mouth works, and that’s how we’ve got new customers.

It’s not common anymore for owners to communicate directly with customers, that’s the job of account managers. Customers don’t even know we’re there. We only get involved in the worst or best cases. A good case is where the company can get more, and a bad case is complaints and claims. We look at it in a very positive way, as an opportunity to get better and it’s a very good time to fix things. We communicate by phone, email, file sharing system, video link. Communication with suppliers and contractors is my domain. I organise and maintain all communication.

This is Kazakhstan, which imposes certain business rules and business ethics. You need to be able to build and maintain relationships, be polite and take a sincere and honest interest in your business partner, with a smile and a good mood!”

Question 5. Family and friends. Who works in your company, who works for you? Is this a help or a problem? In what way?

“It’s always help and support. Wherever I lack experience, I get help. In the hot season (when there are a lot of orders) my parents come and babysit, and I work round the clock. My family is my support and backing.

We’re the two owners of the business. Nobody else is involved in the business except us. It’s just me and my husband as partners. But I prefer to think of myself as working for my husband. He has the main financial and legal responsibility. I do have a say, but I believe it is the right thing to do, and all my experience of working with banks tells me that ultimately, there should be a single decision-maker. As for friends, I have learnt that your friends should not work in your business, friends are a completely different thing, I’ve had some experience, and it was extremely negative.

I've had experience of working with a partner and with a close friend. The partnership grew into a friendship, but in the latter situation neither partnership nor friendship worked. I don't think you can do business with friends. Getting support is different from working together. For example, my son works for me on absolutely equal terms (with other employees). My son is a high school student, and this is a part-time job for him. The only indulgence is that I offer him the job first, he has the right of first refusal. Even my Labrador dog works for me as a Canis therapist”.

Question 6. How have your personal and business connections helped you? What do you do to maintain your personal and business relationships?

“All the people I communicate with become my friends or good acquaintances. For example, a person I worked with for five years recently called and asked me to make a souvenir badge, which I did quickly and beautifully. They are now ordering large quantities from me. I know how to be a friend.”

“Overall, they did not help at all. My husband used to have a good relationship with an accountancy firm. We've been working with them since the beginning and we've grown together, sharing experiences, and helping each other to get better. They understand me quickly and it works the other way round. But our business relationship has not reached the level of personal contact.”

“That's the most important thing. Personal connections play a huge role, but I prefer to work only with people with whom I have an ongoing business relationship. I regularly organise parties, celebrations, and events to maintain and develop my business network. In Kazakhstan, Instagram is a must-have tool that everyone uses everywhere. It is good manners to like all your contacts' stories of the day in the evening. This rule should not be neglected, people pay attention to it, forgetting or skipping means disrespect.”

Question 7. Business planning and development. What is your planning horizon and how do you create a future vision of your business?

“I'm not a planner. I would always like to have more and better things for the business, but circumstances are so different. I would love to learn to plan for the long term, but for now I play it by ear and can weather any storm. My future vision? There was the crisis of 2008, the 2014, the Covid, now it's SMO [Special Military Operation]... I move fast.

Every year, the planning horizon is shrinking. I used to think of making plans for five to ten years. But life has shown us that there are things that cannot be predicted and are beyond our control. I did an MBA in the UK, there was a course on business planning and development, and I wrote a roadmap of how my business should develop, you could say, my genius plan. But the Covid, and then the Politics, wiped out all my plans. Now my planning horizon is very short, from a month to half a year, a year at the most. We are working in a turbulent world. I am trying to recoup the money I spent on the MBA, and I am using the mind-mapping technique, which is a terrific way to keep things in focus.

My planning horizon is one year. I am already planning events for the new year 2024. I make a current plan for one month and I will contract with event agencies. My plan for this year is to move away from creative programmes for children and focus on adult audiences instead. For me, the business is primarily a job, the studio must bring in a good income.”

Question 8. Balancing business and family responsibilities. How is your family (your children) involved in your business? Do you count on their help and support?

“I try to keep a balance. I get very tired, but I have realised that my son is my personal life, and I'm giving him my full attention. My son is still young, he is far from being involved in the business, and I have already told you about the help I get from my family.

I am a mother of three and, to be honest, things are quite difficult. Tolerance and self-organisation are qualities I have inherited. My day starts at 5.30 a.m. and ends at 1 a.m. There is enough work and household chores to do. If something needs to be done, I go and do it, no matter what. The inner voice tells me 'You have to do it' and I do it. The kids are not involved in the business in any way, they've been to my work, they've seen everything, but it's just a tour. The first person I count on is my husband. Unfortunately, my parents aren't getting any younger and I can't leave the kids in their care. Of course, I can count on them sometimes, on their help and support, but I know exactly where the limit is.

It's hard and sad to deal with. But my husband and my son are wonderful. I used to do all the housework. My mother came over for New Year's Eve and I had hired a cleaner, but I hardly do any housework now. In the early days of my business, I couldn't keep up with the housework, my family understood my situation and I'm very grateful to them for that! But I expect this start-up period to be over so we can have our family lunches and dinners again. Throughout December, I worked until 3 a.m. every day. When my husband and I talked about it, we agreed that's the way it has to be in a start-up business."

Question 9. What are your anxieties and worries, and what makes you 'happy' about your business?

"I have learnt not to be anxious and to be positive. I love my work and especially finding a solution to a customer's challenge. I love it when orders are completed and the customer has paid on time. I love the words of gratitude and appreciation from my customers. I enjoy it.

As I said before, uncertainty is my main source of anxiety and worry. I know HOW my business should operate under normal conditions, but what happens is that because of the multitude of extraneous reasons, there is a lot of disruption and uncertainty, and as a result my anxiety and worry grow. Everything consists of things I can control and things I can't control at all. I have to live with that and worry about the future. It's good to know that I have my work and that, no matter what, we stand on our feet, we have orders from customers, and we can pay the wages.

The Covid was a test of strength, many companies went under and shut down, I sympathise with them. We survived, mainly because we spread the risks and worked with the widest possible range of customers in the widest possible range of industries. But we're not a jack-of-all-trades, there are things we don't want to do (like working with the public sector or translating software). What really motivates me in business is when you work hard for a long time and then you get it. That's the most amazing moment when you can say to yourself, "I'm good!" When I do a big deal, it's important for me to know that my people have a job and that I can pay them on time and give them bonuses. In general, paying the wages is my priority.

I always like to keep the momentum. There were problems when my partner preferred to chill too much. It was a very emotional moment when I left my partner. Work requires full commitment, for example when I am working on a new line of services, for me it is my creativity that makes me happy. And then there's the other thing, I do events, celebrations, birthdays, and dates. It makes me very happy that I and my company are needed and when the event is over, the client thanks me sincerely and emotionally. Everyone is happy and satisfied, the client would offer to have a cup of tea, sit quietly, and have a chat. I can see that the stress, fatigue, and tension are gone, and a relaxed conversation begins. Actually, I have to study a lot of things that I am not particularly interested in or, frankly, do not believe in. But business is business, and I have to keep up with all the fashion trends and user preferences on a regular basis."

Questions 10, 11. Are you (your company) a member of any professional organisations and do you benefit from the membership? Does your company use support from state business support institutions?

“No. Formally, we have participated in some ratings and registered in professional community forums, but that is rather a form of promotion. We used to be a member of a large international community, but it was useless. We don’t qualify for any kind of support, and I don’t see the point. I don’t want to be dependent on anyone.

I had the idea of joining the Association of Businesswomen of Kazakhstan. But I’m not a member and I don’t think about it anymore; it’s not for me. About a year ago, the Art&Sport programme was launched in Kazakhstan. In May 2022, I didn’t manage to join the programme in time. The programme is cool, and I regret that I didn’t join. If the programme is extended for 2023, I will try to join as soon as I can. Almost all my competitors have joined the programme, and they have received subsidies from the government through the programme.”

Question 12. Do you want your children to carry on your business?

“Of course I do! I like what I do, apart from the money I make, my business makes me feel positive, free to act, and a sense of dignity. I care about my team; they work with me and for me for a good salary and I want to make my little world happier and better. I will be happy if my son becomes my assistant and continues my business. But if not, I will accept his decision.

No. I feel strongly that my children should be able to choose their own path. It should be their own decision. But if one of them wants to and shows interest, I will support them. I also know that running your own business is hard work and not everyone is up to it.

I don’t want my child to carry on with my business. It should be his choice and his desire. As it is, I will always insist on my opinion and propose my solutions, and that would be wrong.”