



Women and Small Apparel Business Ownership:  
A Cross-cultural Exploration of the Entrepreneurial Experience

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Women-owned small businesses are making increasingly important contributions to the global economy and are developing at a faster pace than those of men (Langowitz & Minniti, 2007). Indeed, it is estimated that women-owned enterprises comprise approximately 30% of the total number of small businesses in most countries (Minniti & Naudé, 2010). Within the entrepreneurship literature, women and small business ownership has primarily been studied from a motivational perspective. That is, researchers have focused on the reasons why women seek to start their own businesses (Jamali, 2009). Findings suggest that women's motivations do not differ greatly from those of men. Instead, it is the kind of challenges faced by female small business owners which differentiate their entrepreneurial experiences from those of males (De Bruin, Brush, & Welter, 2007). Such challenges typically include a lack of access to financial and social resources (Miller, Besser, Gaskill, & Sapp, 2003) as well as balancing work and family considerations (McDougald, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of such challenges within the entrepreneurial experiences of women who own small apparel businesses and to examine them across cultures. Very little research exists on women and apparel entrepreneurship in general, and even less explores the topic relative to countries outside of the United States. Likewise, women's labor has long been associated with the apparel industry, both in terms of production as well as retail (Collins, 2003), but their role as industry entrepreneurs has thus far been under-examined within the literature. Moreover, the apparel industry is a global industry. Although it has been investigated as such within the supply chain literature, few studies explore the extent to which small apparel businesses are a global industry phenomenon. Because small businesses play an integral role in the apparel supply chain within nearly every country (Scott, 2006), an examination of the small apparel business across countries would add an international dimension to the literature.

To gain a global understanding of the challenges faced by female small apparel business owners, primary and secondary data were collected on small business in three countries: South Africa, Russia, and Thailand. These countries represent vital mid-sized apparel markets in Europe, Asia, and Africa, but are often overlooked, as most attention is paid to large markets such as China and India. Moreover, small businesses play a significant role within the economies of each of the three countries (Xavier, Kelly, Kew, Herrington, & Vorderwülbecke, 2013). Secondary data compiled included definitions of small business in each country, the role of small

business within each country's industry, and the relationship between small business and government within each country. In-depth interviews were then conducted with a total of thirteen female small apparel business owners, including four in Russia, six in South Africa and three in Thailand. Questions focused on the experiences of owning and operating a small apparel business. Businesses ranged from tailoring and custom clothing shops, to small scale design and production as well as apparel retail stores. Interviews were transcribed, translated, and then analyzed by the researchers for patterns that emerged across the responses. Secondary data were used to supplement analysis of primary data to achieve a holistic interpretation of results.

Three themes emerged to structure the interpretation: *Making Money*, *Managing the Competition*, and *Striking a Balance*. For participants, the central role of financial capital pertained as much to starting a business as it did to maintaining it. Competition from local and global sources required that participants differentiate their product and add value through the service experience. Managing the time constraints of running a small business in light of family and personal obligations framed how participants built their networks and who they hired. The interpretation revealed more commonalities than differences across women's experiences, suggesting that the challenges are more related to gender than culture within the entrepreneurial experience. Findings of this study provide insight into the experiences of female small apparel business owners outside of the U.S. Although this study addresses several gaps in the literature, further investigation of the topic is needed, including research that takes men's experiences into consideration as well as small apparel businesses in countries beyond those of this study.

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