

Women entrepreneurs in violent conflict zones

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Read here for insights from a Libya-based study conducted by researchers at the University of Alberta about women entrepreneurs in violent conflict zones

In a couple of recent Open Access Government publications, [Professor Jennifer Jennings from the University of Alberta collaborated with a former doctoral student to offer ideas for policy priorities](#) and policy-oriented research related to gender and entrepreneurship. Here, she teams up with one of her current PhD students, Omima Elkailani, to share findings from a study of women's entrepreneurship in one of the world's most violent conflict zones: the African country of Libya after the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings.

The need for a greater understanding of entrepreneurship in violent conflict zones

Why do we need a stronger understanding of women's entrepreneurial activities in violent conflict zones such as Libya? As one might imagine, the key reason is that very little academic research has been conducted to date in such contexts. This under-attention is at least partially attributable to the following theoretical and empirical considerations, respectively:

- The presumption of peace implicit in predominant theories of entrepreneurship (which tend to be grounded in Western experiences) and,
- The difficulty of data collection in conflict-ridden regions (which include concerns for researcher safety).

The unfortunate consequence is a need for more knowledge regarding a) the unique challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in violent conflict zones and b) the nature and consequences of the coping efforts enacted by women who have chosen to launch business ventures in such dangerous environments. Enhanced understanding of these topics is important, considering that the economic development aims of NGOs in these contexts often involve stimulating and supporting entrepreneurial activity.

The Libyan context after the 2011 Arab Spring Uprising

The northern African country of Libya (sadly) represents an ideal context for studying the challenges and coping efforts of women entrepreneurs in violent conflict zones. In February 2011, this oil-rich nation experienced an Arab Spring uprising triggered by those that had previously occurred in Tunisia and Egypt. Unfortunately, the incumbent regime's response – and the ensuing war – resulted in tens of thousands of deaths as well as

significant destruction to the country's infrastructure, the collapse of oil production, and a dramatic drop in the nation's GDP. With armed rebels active in the country for many years afterward, Libya still appears on the World Bank Group's List of Fragile and Conflict-affected Situations.

Study methodology

During her Master's program at Oxford Brookes Business School, University of Alberta PhD Student Omima Elkailani decided to focus her thesis research on women who had started businesses in Libya after the 2011 Arab Spring uprising. In 2019, she conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 female entrepreneurs who differed in terms of their geographic location, age, education level, type of enterprise, and years in business.

The interviews were conducted online, in Arabic, audiotaped, and transcribed verbatim. Illustrative questions included: "What are the main challenges that you faced during your entrepreneurial journey?", and "What kept you going despite these challenges?"

The 317 pages of transcribed interview data and accompanying interview notes were organized and analyzed using the MAXQDA software package. The analytic process involved iterative rounds of open coding the direct quotes, creating first-order conceptual codes, constructing second-order themes, and peer debriefing of emergent inferences.

Key challenges facing women entrepreneurs in violent conflict zones

Analysis of the interview data revealed what the researchers have termed the "indeterminate everyday dangers" experienced by Libyan women entrepreneurs. One such hazard was the likelihood of being exposed to random bombing and/or gunfire – and the anxiety-provoking threats associated with the use of such weapons. These threats included the potential destruction of the women's business premises as well as the possibility of severe physical injury (or even death) to herself, her employees, and/or her friends and family members.

Another indeterminate everyday danger emphasized by the interviewees was their likelihood of being personally and deliberately targeted, specifically because of their entrepreneurial activity. One woman described how she had become infamous because she had been (wrongly) accused of being a spy. Others alluded to (distressing) concerns about the possibility of being abducted and held for ransom due to the assumption that they were wealthy because they had started their own business.

Notably, these perils differ markedly from the threats identified within prevailing entrepreneurship theory and research, which has historically been conducted in more stable countries within North America and Western Europe. In such settings, the predominant threats of engaging in entrepreneurial activity tend to be portrayed as financial in nature, such as the likelihood of lower income relative to traditional employment, the possibility of not recouping one's personal equity, and the threat of bankruptcy.

Because the indeterminate everyday dangers experienced by the interviewed Libyan women entrepreneurs differed dramatically from these purely financial threats, the type of fear and frustration that they expressed during their interviews were also of a highly different nature than the nature of these emotions examined within entrepreneurship research set in more peaceful social settings.

Coping attempts by women entrepreneurs in violent conflict zones

Further analysis of the interview data revealed two key tactics that the Libyan women entrepreneurs had enacted to help them cope with the fear and frustration provoked by the indeterminate everyday dangers described above. One such tactic was concealing their entrepreneurial identity. Some of the interviewees did this by hiding the fact that they had started their own business. Others did so by keeping their business location a secret or by working from home. Concealing one's identity as an entrepreneur and/or the location of one's business are phenomena that have gone unacknowledged, to date, within mainstream entrepreneurship research set in more stable societal contexts.

The second coping tactic involved emphasizing the social impact of their entrepreneurial venture. Many of the interviewees spoke about the importance they placed upon using their business to help address – or at least offer a refuge from – the continuing chaos that they and others were living in after the Libyan Arab Spring uprising. They spoke passionately about how empowered they felt through their efforts to uplift others (especially other women). Some even felt that their entrepreneurial efforts were helping to erode previously taken-for-granted – and highly restrictive – social norms regarding women's roles in Libyan society. These 'pearls' shone brightly in contrast to the darkness of the 'perils' associated with the indeterminate everyday dangers that the interviewed women entrepreneurs had experienced.

The study summarized herein was presented at that August 2024 Academy of Management Meetings in Chicago, IL. A preliminary condensed version of the academic paper can be found in the [Academy of Management BestPapers Proceedings](#).

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Primary Contributor

Jennifer E Jennings
University of Alberta

Additional Contributor(s)

Omima Elkailani
University of Alberta

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