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~ INTERACTIVE PAPER ~

COUNTERBALANCING NETWORK RESOURCES BY FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS: INSIGHTS FROM CAMEROON FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS

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Principal Topic

Social networks are important resources for female entrepreneurs, but the same networks, can also, act as a constraint. For example family networks can be accessed to obtain starting capital, but relatives can also impede by requesting money or imposing unreasonable conditions on the loans. Despite considerable research on the benefits for female entrepreneurs of rich social networks, research on network constraints has been largely overlooked.

Each female entrepreneurs has a number of different networks to draw upon, and each kind of network is more important for different kinds of problems experienced. For example family networks may be helpful in raising start-up finance, but business networks may be more important for resolving problems of customer supply and retention. Networks, moreover, are not static resources but depend on the entrepreneurial dynamisms and abilities to operationalise the network. This may depend on the competence of the entrepreneur in manipulating advantage from different networks. An important aspect of this may be the ability to use different networks to overcome constraints in others.

In this study, the role of networks of female entrepreneurs in Cameroon is investigated through in-depth case studies and related to entrepreneurial performance. A particular focus is how far entrepreneurial females enhance performance by counterbalancing the detrimental effects of one network, with the advantages of another- specifically how women manipulate and exploit family, friends, religious, business, NGOs, suppliers, employees, professionals, associations, and consumers networks, in achieving personal goals and business performance.

Methods

Semi structured interviews were administered to twenty four female entrepreneurs in Buea Cameroon from four different sectors, (food, clothes, crafts and vegetables), with a further eight detailed unstructured follow up interviews. Female entrepreneurs who performed well (as measured by a range of performance indicators) were compared with those who performed less well and the role of network manipulation analysed in considerable depth.

Results and Implications

The findings show that better performing women were more likely to develop different networks for resolving different types of problems, and were more adept in identifying resources in one network to compensate for constraints in another. The trustworthiness of network contacts, including family members proved to be a major issue and proved especially damaging in the case of some of the respondents. Findings take the current emphasis on network resource utilisation further by demonstrating the importance entrepreneurial processes of network resource manipulation

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