

# Elevating Empowerment: A Holistic Digital Learning Strategy for Women in Aceh Tamiang After the Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

Digital learning is an educational strategy that utilises technology to facilitate learning. In the realm of entrepreneurship, proficiency in digital skills is crucial for enhancing sales performance. Women's involvement in entrepreneurship, aiming to bolster the family's financial situation, has a positive influence on enhancing education. A family's economic well-being significantly impacts the educational opportunities available to the children within that family. This study sought to examine the empowerment method required by female-dominated small business players in Aceh Tamiang, both during and after the pandemic. The study used convenience sampling, gathering data through interviews, observations, and documentation. The acquired data underwent analysis through credibility testing, member checks, dependability assessment, conformability evaluation, and transferability examination. The findings indicated that achieving the empowerment of housewives/women as small business participants in Aceh Tamiang necessitates optimal collaboration among the government, private sector, and the community. This empowerment initiative specifically addresses the challenges faced by individuals during the epidemic, including the transition to digital methods of production and marketing.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

An entrepreneur is a person who is interested in economic activity and makes an effort to create a business with unique ideas. Entrepreneurship provides great potential for self-expansion and serves the public. All around the world, entrepreneurs create massive employment chances by establishing up Micro, Small and Medium enterprises in urban, semi - urban and rural areas for raising the living standard of people (Agarwal, 2016). The phenomenon of women entering the entrepreneurial arena is in the early stage as businesses have been male-dominated and women have always engaged in homely matters, i.e, cooking and nurturing the family and children. Over the last several years, the scenario has altered and the women have emerged to the forefront as not only noteworthy but also as inspirational entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship as such is not confined by the class, religion, community, gender or age and so any person can start a business today.

Industrialization, urbanisation, education, and awareness have all contributed to the rise of women entrepreneurs in recent years, who have played a crucial role in the country's economic and social advancement. Numerous doors have been opened for the family, the country, and society as a whole.

Starting their own businesses gives individuals the freedom to do what they want, when they want, and helps them establish their own social identity. By incorporating themselves into product innovation, they have not only helped their customers be satisfied but have also been able to empower individuals economically while achieving work-life balance. A group of women who start, manage, and run a company or enterprise is called an entrepreneur (Garg, 2017).

Talking about how women are portrayed in the media and other public spaces is clearly important. The conventional wisdom holds that men should take the lead in other areas of life, while women should stay at home and take care of the house. Women in this role are seen as supplementary figures in the household, according to Naflah (2018). There is a persistent gender gap in how women are evaluated. Academic studies disprove the long-held notion that women are fundamentally less competent than men in positions of public authority (Koo, 2012; Marleni, 2013). According to Irzum Farihah (2015), women now have more bargaining power than they did in the home sector, which is another factor that encourages them to be involved in public life. Working allows women to earn their own money and lessens their dependency on their husbands' salary to support the family.

Contemporary women are involved in a diverse range of productive endeavours to support their children's education. According to Suyanto (1996), trade is a highly favoured profession among women due to its ability to offer a reliable source of income and its compatibility with their skillset. Women in the trade business generally have greater bargaining power in talks compared to women in other wage sectors due to their constant time constraints and the need to maintain consumer confidence (Farihah, 2015). Women throughout the archipelago, especially those from Aceh, have traditionally fulfilled the role of being the primary providers of economic support and social protection within the household, as well as being responsible for education. The workplace is a competitive environment where individuals vie against each other to obtain resources and manage their time effectively. Participating in a competition is a means to get the highest position on the podium of honours. The Acehnese women have always been the focus of attention.

Uncertainty, particularly in the financial sector, has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 epidemic. The rate of recovery, policies and interventions by the government, shifts in consumer spending and how they affect the sustainability of businesses, the emergence of new businesses, investments in research and development and human capital, and other variables all play a role in determining the level of productivity in the medium to long term (Yuswanto et al., 2021). The results of previous research showed that the pandemic greatly affected many countries, departments, businesses, and individuals (Hadiwardoyo, 2020). Moreover, it had a significant impact on the domestic economy of states and the existence of MSMEs (Nalini, 2021). Therefore, a feasible strategy involving the digitization of micro, small, and medium enterprises, including efforts to recover the Indonesian economy, was adopted (Arifqi, 2021). Furthermore, the pandemic led to a recession period, which was believed to slow down economic growth (Asmini et al., 2020).

Also, it's no secret that Aceh Tamiang's small business actors had a rough go of it. The government invested much in mentoring and empowering its citizens. It became clear that their ineffective use of information and communication technologies in company management was the main obstacle to their success in the worldwide market. Several businesses were able to survive the pandemic with the help of these. The lack of knowledge and comprehension among small business actors, particularly housewives, regarding technological growth and utilisation makes it increasingly difficult to know. (Aceh Tribun News, 2018)

Based on some acquired data (mdn.biz, 2021), relatively 60% of MSMEs in the country are run by women. They also encountered difficulties during the pandemic. Similarly, housewives in Aceh Tamiang who ran small home-based businesses also felt the negative impact of COVID-19. There were many declines in demand and transaction values because the people are low-income earners, resulting from the implemented Community Activities Restrictions Enforcement policy. During the current health crisis, there was a significant decrease in purchasing power (Santoso & Fitriani, 2016). Therefore, defensive strategies adopted in the past were unable to overcome the recent pandemic. Although other crises have

affected the global economy, the uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic led to a new perspective (Liguori & Winkler, 2020).

Pre-survey results from some interviews proved that 67% of women in Aceh Tamiang are housewives who experienced a decrease in sales and ran out of capital while trying to ensure their businesses were productive. This is not due to a decrease in public purchases, rather, it is due to changes in consumers' behavior that switched to making online transactions because they were forced to sit at home. These housewives failed to understand the behavioral changes and were even unable to change their sales patterns therefore, they had to wait for consumers to come make their purchases. Hardilawati (2020) stated that the MSME survival strategies adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic include advice on e-commerce transactions, digital marketing, improved product quality, customer service, and optimized marketing relationships.

Women who adhere to traditional market norms dominate small business actors in Aceh Tamiang. It follows that they have not made the most of technology advancements in order to increase their sales. Their lack of financial resources and comprehension of the term "internet access" prevent them from providing the necessary infrastructure to support their innovative and profitable sales efforts. Good human resources, proper technology, greater efficiency and productivity, access to varied promotional possibilities, improved product, and structured quality are the characteristics of small and medium-sized firms with competitive advantages (Tambunan, 2002). That is to say, they must have an efficient system of management, sufficient funds, a wide-ranging network of business contacts, and an entrepreneurial mindset. In addition, a high degree of creativity, perseverance, risk-taking, and a relentless pursuit of new technologies to boost performance are essential in managing MSMEs.

Therefore, it is necessary to empower and educate these housewives to adapt to productive sales innovations perceived as strategies adopted to survive during the pandemic. This serves as a form of response to the problems encountered and empowers small businesses to ensure it survive during the pandemic while facing the digital market situation. Therefore, this research aims to identify the empowerment strategy needed by small home-based business actors in Aceh Tamiang during the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, it was assumed that the most appropriate and relevant empowerment procedure is still unknown. Therefore, the usefulness of the acquired results is important.

## 2. METHODS

A participatory approach that actively involves all research subjects to determine practically oriented, empowering, and sustainable target programs was adopted (Poerwandari, 2007). This process involves several stages

- a. The initial stage involves an in-depth analysis of interesting small business management development cases. This was carried out through focus group discussions (FGD), interviews, and developing business plans. This activity involves all housewives that are small household business actors and the government or regulators that guide and monitor the empowerment process.
- b. The second stage involves the formulation of a simple, sustainable business development management program realized through open discussions and interviews.

Officially, based on the Department of Industry data, there are 4299 SMEs and Cooperatives. However, the number of small business owners that are housewives is not ascertained because many of them suddenly appeared during the 2020 pandemic. Meanwhile, the samples were selected using the convenience sampling technique according to the research objectives. This consists of easily located micro-enterprises owned by creative females (housewives). The data collection techniques include interviews, observations, and documentation directly obtained in the field. All data collected were reduced by discarding unnecessary information unrelated to the research needs. These were classified based on several categories, further verified by comparing them with various sources ranging from

interviews and observations. The final stage involves the interpretation of various findings in the field. Subsequently, a data validity process consisting of credibility, member check, dependability, conformability, and transferability was performed.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### *3.1 Descriptive respondents based on age, education, and line of business*

Based on observations and interview results, it was revealed that 187 housewives are small business actors in Aceh Tamiang. Interestingly, all these MSMEs are easily located because while running their businesses, they also take care of their homes and families. The majority belongs to the productive age, which is 35 to 44 years, and they run their business from home. It is also a known fact that most housewives have low educational backgrounds, with only 126 of them being high school graduates. Meanwhile, the remaining 61 are undergraduates that generally work as private employees. However, they switched professions and became traders to help their husbands due to the pandemic.

Low education has an impact on the knowledge possessed in developing a business. Therefore, they possess limited skills in processing resources, such as raw materials into finished products or services. However, they do not have knowledge of management and business development due to lack of innovation and creativity that suits the current conditions. The following fields were mostly affected 78 culinary, 50 agribusiness, 30 handicraft, and 29 service businesses. The reason behind the numerous culinary businesses is based on the fact that they are considered easy to run and do not take long to manage. Furthermore, even the consumer market is unlimited.

#### *3.2 Condition of Small Household Business in the Pandemic to support children's education*

The housewives stated that they experienced a decrease in sales due to restrictions on movement, including business time. Based on this information, those that had developed their businesses since 2015 experienced a 50% decrease in turnover. Therefore, they were forced to shut down, although they tried to get back up by changing their pattern of production and sales based on incoming orders directly delivered to the consumers. However, it was difficult trying to survive during the pandemic because of limited capital. Moreover, relatively 30% to 40% of businesses operating since 2015 experienced a decrease in turnover.

The decline in consumer purchasing power was due to reduced income caused by the pandemic, which had a great impact on the economy. The implemented PSBB restricted consumers in terms of visiting various merchandise; even some rules regulated the opening and closing of markets, thereby leading to certain limitations. Moreover, other impacts include difficulties obtaining raw materials during PSBB, increased production costs, and transportation services. Culinary (food) business actors were the most affected during the pandemic. The decline in production was due to limited raw materials and labor costs, which led to a temporary shutdown.

Other fields that were greatly affected during the pandemic due to the implemented PSBB include agribusiness that was dominantly constrained by transportation problems. Furthermore, certain obstacles were encountered in transporting agricultural products and materials such as seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides). In addition, the service and handicraft businesses experienced a decline in the sales process and raw materials due to limited space.

#### *3.3 Efforts to Survive During a Pandemic to support children's education*

Housewives adopted many efforts to overcome the decline in sales. Generally, they survive by promoting their products or merchandise and services through word of mouth or selling directly to consumers by moving from door to door. Moreover, they also entrust their wares to agents. They generally agreed to promote their services through digital or social media because it reportedly increased revenue. However, they were constrained by certain factors, such as their cellphones do not meet the capacity to sell online or using social media.

Furthermore, their understanding of using recommended applications such as WhatsApp or marketplace to boost their sales was limited. They prefer to make sales offline or sell directly to consumers. The most important attribute is the spirit of the housewives during the pandemic. However, there was a change in the activities carried out by small household business actors, especially housewives. They adapt to selling products that were currently needed during the pandemic, namely masks and hand sanitizers. Although these alternative items increased their income, it was considered only temporary because they intended to continue with their initially sold products. This condition provides an opportunity to empower housewives to manage their businesses, especially during the pandemic appropriately.

### ***3.4 Business Empowerment to Survive during Pandemic to support children's education***

The pandemic caused several people to spend more time at home, which led to increased use of technology or social media in daily life activities. It was even reported that there was a significant increase in online purchases. Some strategies adopted by MSMEs involve using technology, namely e-commerce applications, digital marketing, improving product and service quality, and marketing relationship. The utilization of e-commerce applications has a significant effect in terms of boosting their performances and income (Hardilawati, 2020; Ningtyas et al., 2015; Noviani Hanum & Sinarasri, 2018; Helmalia & Afrinawati, 2018; and Setyorini et al., 2019).

The housewives also improved their product quality by adding free delivery services related to a certain minimum purchase. These business actors also execute marketing process through a customer network that uses agents involved in sales based on people's requests (open pre-orders) (Hardilawati, 2020). Furthermore, Elfizon et al. (2020) stated that product marketing executed through e-commerce positively influences household business actors. This system tends to reach a wider consumer by promoting lower prices. During the pandemic, there was an increase in the use of Android phones, which was therefore perceived as a great opportunity for unlimited product or service marketing (Samsiana et al., 2020). Sutinah et al. (2020) stated that it was necessary to guide small business actors, including housewives, to learn to understand shifts in consumers' characteristics and behavior towards the digital market and the benefit of carrying out sales online. It is also a known fact that 60% of businesses in the country are run by women (Ministry of Cooperatives and Small and Medium Enterprises of Indonesia, 2015). This figure also covers the number of small business housewives in Aceh Tamiang, contributing a lot to families, the environment, and society.

Attention was drawn to the development of this industry to empower the women, especially housewives, to bring them closer to accessing capital, information, technology, markets, and training sessions, thereby improving their family welfare and food security. However, this empowerment failed to run optimally because it requires all parties to coordinate an innovative, collaborative and holistic approach. Currently, small businesses owned by women, including housewives, only pursue quantity and selling. Therefore, improvement needs to be made on the quality and readiness to compete globally. One of the strategies that need to be adopted is the utilization of digital instruments and technology to reach a wider market. Even though the pandemic led to enacting policies that restricted movement and halted the economy, production and sales could reach various regions irrespective of the situation.

The efforts to empower small businesses run by women need to be improved. Data from Warta Ekonomi.co.id, IFC, and the 2016 USAid Report stated that females with access to information technology are still unable to take absolute advantage of the internet properly. A total of 47% failed to embrace this process, while 32% did not know ways of obtaining their desired information through the internet.

The discussions with small business actors, especially housewives in Aceh Tamiang, showed that they encountered several obstacles in terms of developing their business. Even during the pandemic, there was no change, and this forced them to close their businesses. Firstly, this made life more difficult, and they were confused when making certain decisions. Although psychologically, they

become more indecisive and emotional, these attributes are used to characterize women. It is also believed that many housewives shut down their businesses because they were unable to finance the production process due to minimal sales. This condition was also motivated by poor knowledge and skills. Secondly, they were afraid of failure, especially in changing their business activity pattern. This circumstance made these housewives unable to boost their income. Thirdly, the constraint is related to their poor knowledge of entrepreneurship. The obligation to take care of the household and the need to raise finances for the family by running a business often do not go hand in hand, which even makes them busier than their husbands (men). This also causes them not to have enough time to learn certain skills. Moreover, some obstacles are also encountered in terms of managing these businesses, are (1) techniques such as minimal capital and skills, limited market access and promotion, lack of knowledge related to utilizing technology, conventional management, and non-innovative production processes, (2) regulations related to business development for women still do not provide wide opportunities compared to the male entrepreneurs. This is based on the view that men as heads of families are more entitled to opportunities, especially in credit services. Housewives have limited time and space to develop a business because they require access to communication and a large public environment.

In conclusion, various obstacles faced by small household entrepreneurs were not much different before and during the pandemic. This was even more difficult to handle during the crisis because of government regulations restricting people's movement to prevent the spread of coronavirus, and at the same time, it hampered the economy. Therefore, several empowerment methods according to the constraints faced, were adopted.

The empowerment opportunities for housewives that run small home-based businesses in Aceh Tamiang still refer to the results of discussions and observations, namely.

- a. It requires the collaboration of various parties that have access to issuing policies that are friendly to the development of their businesses. This partisanship is also evident in the Family Welfare Empowerment program initiated by the TP PKK and the Dekranasda Aceh Tamiang as part of the Education and Skills Working Group in collaboration with the Department of Manpower and Industry and Trade of SME Cooperatives. The focus is coaching and empowering housewives to be productive and develop the necessary skills to support their families.
- b. Continuous (long-term) training on to market information, simple managerial skills, e-commerce, venture capital, and marketing, especially comprehensively introducing these housewives to the business world using simple methods, needs to be performed.
- c. Provided training on business planning (starting from small businesses to the development process) and provided a motivational session encouraging them to be innovative, creative, and try new things.
- d. Provided awareness about applying for business loans, thereby making it easier for them to access bank credit and properly manage their finances (bookkeeping).
- e. Provided education and assistance in the development of marketing networks. As business actors, these housewives need to be familiar with consumers' needs (wants) and tastes to produce suitable and sellable products. An appropriate information system is needed to help make it easier to read market trends and conditions.
- f. The introduction of an efficient promotion system ensures that highly competitive products are sold. The applied methods include
- g. The simple design of product packaging is changed to be more attractive. This is achieved by altering the shape or color and explicitly stating its advantages.
- h. Learning e-commerce with assistance in creating a website as an alternative to selling products, especially during a pandemic, tends to be easier (efficient).
- i. Encouraged to actively participate in various exhibition events, to make sales easier as well as the opportunity to meet other potential customers. However, the obstacles encountered in this activity are capital for administrative and accommodation purposes, production costs, rental of premises, transportation, etc.

- j. It is necessary to assist them in building the distinctive characteristics of the products compared to its competitors. The housewives require special attention in terms of being creative and innovative. Furthermore, it needs to be able to add value to the benefits obtained from the mix and match of other products. Even the innovations of new products have to possess adaptive capabilities related to the consumers' socio-economic environment, such as packaging designs or variations of new product names that correlates with changing market needs and tastes.
- k. There is a need for intensive assistance by forming a cooperative forum to accommodate business development and help housewives overcome certain difficulties encountered.
- l. Helping these housewives to expand their business network by ensuring they get involved in various opportunities to introduce valuable products or services needed by the people.

Furthermore, business development is also assisted by production (manufacturing, quality control, and packaging), finance (budgeting, reports, and purchasing), marketing (implementation of strategies, control, and sales reports), selection of raw materials, operations (regulations, work culture, and working hours) and human resources (recruitment system, payroll, and benefits). As a form of boosting the economy, these small business actors need the attention of the government and related agencies in terms of coaching and funding sources during the pandemic to survive. In addition, the government needs to provide flexible access in all aspects of management, thereby enabling them to maintain their businesses under various circumstances.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The empowerment program initiated for small business actors, especially housewives in Aceh Tamiang, Indonesia, requires the maximum cooperation of the government, private sector, academics, and individuals. It also focuses on handling the difficulties encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic, one of which is the digital transformation of production and marketing. However, continuous awareness and assistance are also needed to enable these housewives to accept and adapt to behavioral changes and market needs of consumers who prefer to shop digitally due to the restrictions of movement by the government to prevent the spread of the virus. This assistance needs to be comprehensively carried out on business governance or managerial aspects that adapt to digital production that promotes transactions. Therefore, it is necessary to create a forum or support group that motivates them to continuously learn to be innovative and creative to ensure their businesses survive in various times of crisis.

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