

## 9. Social Network and Entrepreneurship: A Case Study of Women in Network Marketing During COVID-19

**Archana Behera**

Ph.D Research Scholar,

Dept. of Sociology, Pondicherry University

Email- beheraarchana102@gmail.com

### Abstract

*In the global market, the importance of women in the workforce significantly contributes to economic growth. However, in India, women remain underrepresented in the informal sector. To address this disparity many women, choose self-employment, seeking equality and independence as entrepreneurs. Network marketing is such a type of self-employment where success pivots on developing a social network. Example: during the COVID pandemic while every sector was layoff, network marketing stands as a vital source of socio-economic support for women. Recognizing this, the present paper aims to explore the importance of social networks in business development. Using a qualitative approach, the research conducted multiple case studies involving 140 women from four network marketing companies (Amway, Herbalife, Vestige, Modicare) in Balasore district of Odisha through snowball sampling technique. The result shows how social networks in terms of strong and weak ties enabled women to sustain and expand their business during the pandemic.*

**Keywords:** Social network, Entrepreneurship, Network Marketing, Women, Pandemic

### Introduction

Women's involvement in the labour market is the only factor driving the nation's economic growth. One of the possibilities in the labour market is women in business where they are still underrepresented in the Indian context. Here women not only get economic independence but also develop higher confidence and self-belief. In the entrepreneurial process, a social network is a channel through which entrepreneurs acquire the necessary resources for progress and sustainability (Kristiansen,2004). Building a professional network and collaboration with other

businesses helps to reach business success. However, women have less number of networks, (World Bank Group, 2019) they are more likely to rely on their family and friends to make high-quality entrepreneurial networks for business success. Previous studies focus on how women have better and more diversified networks compared to men (Ali et al., 2019) which suggests that women have a distinctive edge in business, as they bring a wider range of ideas and capacity to creative thinking and problem-solving.

In this paper, there is a focus on how social networks helped in business success among the women entrepreneurs operating in the network marketing business in Balasore district of Odisha during the Covid pandemic period. The objective of the present research is to understand the importance of social networks in developing the business. Supporting theoretical viewpoints on social embeddedness it is argued that entrepreneurs possess an opportunity to develop social relations and shape cultural bonds. Aldrich (1989), argues that how networks plays a crucial role in the entrepreneurial journey, as entrepreneurs are embedded within a social framework that both facilitates and restricts their activities. In this context, women often faced disadvantages and excluded from various social ties. To start a business, they need to have a proper plan to monitor their networking activities and try to increase the diversity of their connections.

Women entrepreneurs frequently start their entrepreneurial process from non-managerial positions which leads to less extensive and developed networks among women in network marketing. Additionally, due to balancing family and work responsibilities they also spend less time compared to men. These gender disparities in networking have a negative impact on their entrepreneurial activities. Furthermore, the challenges that women face in networking can also intensify existing gender inequalities in entrepreneurship (Doshi, 2022).

## **Women Entrepreneurship**

Entrepreneurship is an act to build up a new business where one can take advantage of new opportunities (Veena, 2014). It provides huge opportunities for enormous personal growth while benefiting society. An entrepreneur is a person who owns, creates, manages, and takes the risks of economic endeavors of his/her own business (Grave & Salaf, 2003) and must be characterized by hard work, goal setting, self-starting, confidence, resilience, assertiveness and comfort with power (Carter & Evans, 2012). According to Schumpeter (1934), an entrepreneur is an innovator who

introduces something new into an economy. Entrepreneurs have ideas, knowledge, and competence to test and run the business but they also need complementary resources to produce and deliver their goods and services. Women entrepreneurs are defined as a group of women who initiate, organize and operate a business or enterprise (Garg & Agarwal, 2017). The need for entrepreneurs helps India's economic growth. The hidden entrepreneurial activities of women have gradually been changing with the growing compassion for their role and economic status in society. The key factors driving women into entrepreneurial ventures are skill, knowledge and flexibility. In developed countries, women are recognized and have a greater presence in the business world. But the Indian women entrepreneurs are facing some major constraints like low self-esteem, socio-cultural barriers, market-oriented risks, motivating factors, comprehension of business management, knowledge of financial assistance, exposure to the training programme etc.

### **Social Network and its Practices**

Network helps entrepreneurs to gather information from personal ties (Kristiansen, 2004). A network consists of a number of both formal and informal ties between a set of persons in a circle of acquaintances (Ibarra, 1995). Network helps in different phases of the entrepreneurial process by providing resources (knowledge, financial capital) to the entrepreneurs. Trust is also important to provide cooperation in achieving efficiency and help to reduce risk in relationships between entrepreneurs (Kristiansen, 2004). Women entrepreneurs also need support both from strong ties (family members, friends, relatives) and weak ties (business partners, acquaintances) in the whole entrepreneurial process where there are already large numbers of women business owners who can serve as role models and mentors (Bruderl & Preisendorfer, 1996). Strong ties are important for sharing resources in terms of knowledge, information, capital and emotional support, on the other hand, weak ties provide unique opportunities and resources by acting as brokers to other actors and networks. According to Granovetter, those who use weaker ties in job search may have access to better social resources because weak ties tend to possess diversity. Therefore, useful information and influence would increase the chance of getting better jobs. So, women show more homophily networks which is a tendency of individuals to associate and link with like them in one or more ways like gender, profession and stage in life course (Szell & Thurner, 2013).

Social networks are flexible depending on the needs of various businesses and the social context in which they operate. (Granovetter,1985). Entrepreneurs incorporate both formal and informal networks into their businesses based on their distinctive requirements. While close family members are crucial to the startup stage of the business, other distant relatives provide informational support during the growth stage. Entrepreneurs construct networks to gather information which are frequently contacted from different selected networks. Then the entrepreneur uses her network to obtain a response from her external environment through different seminars and contact with other entrepreneurs. Here she can seek to develop a more formal interorganizational network to supplement their interpersonal network and family. At last, in the development stage, the inter-organizational network becomes increasingly important for the survival and growth of business.

### **Network Marketing**

Network marketing is a business model in which one becomes an independent distributor or representative of a company and earns income by selling products and services of the respective company without any middle person in the whole distribution process (Kapoor and Chauhan, 2020). This model offers business opportunities relying heavily on the power of networking and building relationships with existing customers and other distributors. Through networking, one can expand their customer and increase sales, which is ultimately leading to greater financial success. Network marketing sector plays an important role in the growth of the Indian economy where women have a significant role (Kapoor & Chauhan, 2020). In the network marketing field, women often have a different experience compared to men and have a unique experience. One of the key benefits of network marketing for women is the opportunity for an independent entrepreneur and become economically and socially empowered by earning income through their own efforts. They can start their businesses, set their own goals, and work towards achieving financial success on their own terms. The major aspect that helps women to succeed in this sector is social network. Women have higher homogeneous networks in terms of kin which strengthen personal networks for them (Renzuli, et.al 2000). From the personal network, women draw social support to carry out the business. This platform also supports women to strengthen their entrepreneurial skills, overcome barriers in traditional employment settings, work-life balance and caregiving

responsibilities. Network marketing offers flexible working hours, allowing women to balance their personal and professional responsibilities more effectively (Veena, 2004). Furthermore, network marketing empowers women by providing support (Bruckermann, 2021) building more relationship opportunities and access to leadership through networking. According to Conn, Japanese women are drawn to network marketing as it offers economic and social independence, which they desire (Croft & Woodruffe, 1996).

The importance of compliance and flexibility are the key skills in network marketing. Women have demonstrated their ability to adapt to the changing market conditions and find innovative solutions to continue their businesses (Du, 2019). Social networking sites also provide a convenient and efficient means for women to promote their businesses, build business networks, and connect with more customers (Karyotaki, et.al 2022). According to human capital theory, more knowledge, skills and individual capability make a person to achieve a greater outcome (Bourdieu,2018). Taking advantage of the technology women entrepreneurs have improved their efficiency of work, risk-taking abilities and enhancement of their capabilities. During the pandemic period, women entrepreneurs have made a new effort to conduct one of the businesses to gain empowerment.

### **Network Strategies for Women Entrepreneurs**

To become a successful entrepreneur one can use a number of strategies. Constructing a social network could be one such strategy (Ganesh, et.al.,2002). In order to start and expand their business entrepreneurs rely on networks is a productive entrepreneurial activity. A network can provide access to business advice, new customers, export opportunities, and social capital (Ali et. al, 2017, Henry 2021). Additionally, network can also provide emotional support that can help entrepreneurs to maintain their initiative (Henry, 2021). It helps entrepreneurs get better access to business ideas, knowledge and capital by reducing risks and transaction costs. There are two aspects of network; trust and legitimacy which encourage entrepreneurs to achieve efficiency and help to reduce risk in relationships (Kristiansen, 2004; Hanson and Blake, 2009).

In the entrepreneurial journey, women required both personal and extended networks. A personal network, consists of strong and direct ties and reflects one-to-one relationships. The foundation lies in direct personal connections among actors, though certain indirect contacts may

also be incorporated, contributing to the enhancement of network quality. In contrast, an extended network represents all contacts of an individual's personal network. During the entrepreneurial journey entrepreneur will seek to access such network primarily through her direct networks with those she employs or retains (Mcgowan & Cooper, 2008).

Size of the network refers to the number of ties in an interpersonal relationship in the entrepreneurial process. A large number of networks helps to build a supportive tie to overcome challenges in business. Density refers to the extent of interconnectedness among individuals within a network (Carson et.al, 2000). Developing a network with relatively high density is crucial for entrepreneurs to achieve growth and development and facilitate capitalization of opportunities. Diversity refers the range of resources accessible to entrepreneurs, comprising the backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge of individual network members. Entrepreneurs need varied networks to acquire information essential for capitalizing on opportunities and attaining success. (Aldrich et al, 1997). Reachability pertains the presence of a "path" connecting individuals who aren't directly associated with the entrepreneur, achieved through the establishment of direct connections. Greater reachability leads to increased contact among indirect network members. Strength of ties refers to the combination of both strong ties (family members, friends, relatives) and weak ties (business partners, acquaintances) (Granovetter, 1982). Weak ties enable them to access information beyond the scope of their social circle while strong ties help to provide information, support and resources during the starting phase of business.

### **COVID and the Livelihood of Women**

The network marketing sector has been significantly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Positively it impacted women in the network marketing, providing them with unique opportunities for growth and empowerment during this challenging period. For many women, network marketing has become a lifeline during this period while traditional industries suffered many hindrances and a lot of individuals faced job losses. With the traditional job market being uncertain and many businesses facing closures or layoffs, network marketing has provided women with an alternative source of income for seeking financial stability and entrepreneurial opportunities. The pandemic has forced many individuals to adapt to new ways of earning income, and women have been particularly resilient in navigating these changes within the network



marketing sector. Network marketing offers flexible working hours and the ability to work remotely, making it an option for women juggling multiple responsibilities such as childcare and household duties. Moreover, the pandemic has created a larger market for health and wellness products, which are often promoted through network marketing channels. As a result, women in network marketing have been able to capitalize on this increased demand and expand their customers. Furthermore, network marketing companies have also adapted to online methods and provide training and skill development programmes which have been better facilitated during this time. The shift towards e-commerce and online sales provides women with new opportunities to showcase their products and reach a wider network. Furthermore, a notable social shift occurred in the buying and selling patterns, where traditional offline sales were once prevalent, but during the pandemic, sellers increasingly prioritized e-commerce for their sales strategies (Luthfiyyah & Fitri, 2021). It has also fostered a sense of community and support among women in network marketing.

Women in network marketing have historically faced barriers and biases that have hindered their growth and success. During the pandemic time, they faced the challenge of adapting their sales strategies to a virtual setting. The pandemic has shifted consumer behavior and purchasing habits, requiring network marketers to find innovative ways to reach their target audience. As the pandemic has limited in-person interactions and gatherings, women in network marketing have had to rely heavily on digital platforms and social media to maintain their business and reach potential customers. As a result, women in network marketing faced problems to quickly adapt new technologies and learn how to effectively market and sell their products or services online. This suggests that apart from various advantages, women in network marketing faced unique challenges and barriers during the pandemic, hindering their ability to sustain and grow their businesses. These challenges include: 1. **Limited social interactions and networking opportunities:** With lockdowns and social distancing measures in place, women in network marketing faced limited opportunities for face-to-face interactions and engaging in traditional networking events. This impacted their ability to build relationships, expand their customer base, and recruit new members to their network marketing teams. 2. **Reduced consumer spending:**

During the pandemic, many individuals faced financial uncertainties and limitations, leading to reduced purchasing power and discretionary spending.

## **Methodology**

In the present study, a qualitative approach of multiple case studies was used to identify the factors closely associated with women in network marketing. 140 women entrepreneurs engaged in network marketing in Balasore district of Odisha are sample of the study. In Balasore district Network marketing companies are functioning exclusively for providing entrepreneurship. These marketing organizations constitute both males and females from different caste and class categories, educational levels and both rural and urban backgrounds. Purposively only women representatives were selected and the data was collected through the snowball sampling technique. The collected data were transcribed and analysed thematically reflecting the perspective and documenting their accounts of the respondents.

## **Analysis and Interpretation**

### **Profile of the Respondents**

The women engaged in network marketing are largely in the age group of 31 to 45 years. A majority (83.6%) are married and belong to the OBC caste group (48.6%) while very few SC and ST women are involved in the business. About half (50.7%) have a Graduation degree level of education and are unemployed, while one third have post-graduation and the remaining are secondary and primary level of education respectively. More than three-fourths have more than a year of experience in the business. The network connections reflect that many of the ties of business groups are largely acquaintance and peer groups. The work nature requires at least 2 hours of work per day.

### **Network Support and Network Resources**

The qualitative data can be categorized into two broad themes as network support and network resources. Again, network support can be divided into 2 sub themes as support from strong ties and support from weak ties. We interpret these 2 subthemes as financial support, emotional support, and informational support.



Entrepreneurs who have a broad and diverse personal network have received much support for success in business which is known as network support. This network enables connections with individuals who have like-minded, visions, and entrepreneurial outlooks. Such connections can result in collaborations, joint ventures, and beneficial partnerships. This support is accessible through both strong ties and weak ties.

### **Theme 1: Support from Strong Ties**

During the start-up period of new business, women require support which can come from close relationships known as strong ties. These strong ties encompass family members, neighbors, relatives, friends, and similar connections. These supportive networks offer emotional and financial support, addressing both the need for financial backing and emotional encouragement for entrepreneurs.

#### **Emotional Support**

Emotional support refers to demonstrating to others empathy, care, love, understanding or encouragement to others, caring for them, and making them feel happy. It emphasizes the emotional side of social support, which may indirectly help to overcome problems. This support from strong ties (family members, friends etc) enables women in the Network Marketing business to develop trust. This trust through emotional exchange and contact with other members might help to increase network and business success. Respondents emphasized that living with a supportive family gave them more confidence and a feeling of being capable of doing business. As one of the respondent said “.....my husband lost his job during COVID pandemic time. To maintain family I joined the N.M business. My family members help me in every stage to make success. When I was busy with online meeting and training my in-laws took care of my whole family and my child. To continue with the business my husband motivated me constantly.....”

#### **Financial Support**

Financial support for women in business entails providing monetary resources to them, primarily required during the initial phases of starting a business. Typically, this support is sourced from family members. Since many respondents were homemakers, they relied on support from their husbands, in-laws, and other family members. As per one of the respondent “.....When I became a Herbalife distributor, I invested 5000/- in purchasing the products. Being a homemaker

*with no additional income sources, my husband provided financial assistance. Over time, as my business grew, my in-laws also contributed and played a significant role in the success of my business. ....”* ( Herbalife entrepreneur)

As money is important for business development, family support stands out as a primary resource to bridge this gap. Women who lack such support from their families often navigate this challenge by seeking help from friends and relatives.

*“..... my family members lacked faith in my business, As per them N.M is a fraudulent organization. Consequently, they refrained from offering any financial support when I initially joined.. However, during this period, a trusted friend stepped in, providing the necessary funds to start my business. Moreover, she played a crucial role in expanding my network, which proved to be a significant asset for my business.....”* (Vestige entrepreneur)

## **Theme 2: Support from Weak ties**

Weak ties refer to business partners, acquaintances, former employers and co-workers. In business, these ties play a crucial role in furnishing valuable information, as they often possess diverse insights from various segments of the social system (Granovetter, 1974, 1983). A broad network comprised of weak ties can be particularly advantageous during the business development phase. In the present research, It was found that mostly informational support was received from weak ties.

### **Informational support**

In the whole entrepreneurial process, support from weak ties is more important for information by uniting members of many small groups for business growth and maturity. The relationships that are deemed to be more dynamic frequently make up weak ties. These weak ties provides advice, guidance and useful information that helps to generate new ideas, to make good decisions and to be successful in business. If women continue to receive valuable information from weak ties, they are more likely to show integrity and capability in the business which helps to enhancing their trust towards the tie members. As per one of the respondent-

*“..... The members of my upline and downline (weak ties) serve as the cornerstone of my business. In the early stages, my upline or mentor supports me in strengthening the business by offering motivational guidance. Conversely, during challenging times such as the pandemic, my*

*downline members assist in fostering connections to expand the business network further.....”*  
(Herbalife entrepreneur).

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, informational support provided by weak ties proved that how information from weak ties is important to develop the business. As one of the respondents said “..... *During the pandemic, when face-to-face interactions were restricted, I acquired a lot of business-related information and forged numerous informal connections through online platforms. These digital networks proved to be invaluable in driving the success of my business.....”* (Modicare entrepreneur)

### **Network Resources**

The network is a means of resource including social support, discussion of business ideas, growth of members in female owned business (Dawa & Namatovu, 2015). Entrepreneurs need 3 types of resources to develop the business such as value and motivation; idea, capital, information and market; bureaucratic goodwill and trust. Here networks are considered more effective for increasing the chances of resource acquisition than market methods with valuable resources for entrepreneurs in terms of knowledge, advice and emotional support (Dawa & Namatovu, 2015). So those who have contacts in more places (a greater range) have greater access to resources and information.

### **Case Study: Pandemic helps Women to Grow their Business**

Numerous women encounter financial challenges when their husbands lose their jobs, yet they are unwilling to rely on others. Addressing this dilemma, network marketing has emerged as a solution, empowering women to establish their own identities and flourish as entrepreneurs. There was a massive answer by all the respondents who participated in this study. They believe that N.M business will give not only economic sustainability but also social empowerment and leadership management. But during the COVID-19 period, it helped them a lot. Women got much free time during this period and with the help of mobile phones and various social media, able to grow the size of the network. During that period with the help of an online platform (ZOOM), it was easy to conduct the meeting and join more people by providing health and wealth opportunities.

*One of the respondent (Amway entrepreneurship) stated that COVID-19 pandemic period was the life-changing period of my life. Before that everything was offline. So, meeting customers and approaching towards the business was a slow process. Conducting meetings and creating awareness was the top most work for me with the household work and with taking care of my child. It was easy when everything was in the online process. To maintain my family, I was able to conduct my business smoothly and during that time the contact by mobile helped me to increase the network size. Along with this , social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook encouraged me to grow my network. During this period, I qualified platinum level of my business and recognized by the company with foreign tour.*

*As per one of the respondent (Modicare entrepreneurship) “During the pandemic I joined the business which helped me to become an independent entrepreneur and provided economic sustainability. Due to the impact of online platforms, it was easy for me to advance in technology and to create my own identity through this platform”.*

During the pandemic, women used their time with Network marketing and became successful entrepreneurs. The company also supported in distribution of supplements and provided offers for customers. For taking health supplements, people joined this system in large numbers.

## **Summary and Discussion**

The qualitative study explored how social networks play a crucial role in business development, especially during the pandemic. Family support with the financial and emotional support positively influences women to enhance their quality of life. Additionally, various motivational factors contribute to women feeling more capable in business, enabling them to manage both their entrepreneurial endeavours and family responsibilities effectively. While family support entails encouragement, motivation, and both financial and emotional backing, institutional support focuses on providing informational resources to enhance business skills.

During the period of the pandemic, many women got help to start their new business. In this period women in Network marketing business played an indispensable role in multiplying their social relationships and networks. Physical interaction was too restricted but through online mode, women reached a high number of network sizes and interaction with people with like-

mindful elicited better strategies to grow the business successfully which helped them to enhance their self-efficacy.

In summary, the experiences of women in network marketing during the COVID-19 pandemic have been shaped by a combination of challenges and opportunities. While the transition to online platforms and economic uncertainty have presented obstacles, the flexibility of the industry and the ability to build supportive communities have allowed many women to adapt and thrive in this field, especially during the pandemic period.

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