



“Either We Start from Scratch, or We Close It”. The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Female Entrepreneurs in Transylvania, Romania

Orsolya GERGELY

Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
orsolyagergely@uni.sapientia.ro

Andrea ZERKULA

MA student at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
zerkulaandrea@uni.sapientia.ro

Abstract. Cross-national studies emphasized that female entrepreneurs have experienced a major decrease in income, and there was a decline in market demand as well. The pandemic crisis increased the workload of women, and mainly those who raise small children did not have much choice: they had to invest time and energy in the family. The success of the strategy that could be used during this period lays on the success of balancing the family–work conflict. The following research is based on an online questionnaire that collected responses and data between 2 April and 20 May 2020. Our questions focused on the situation caused by the pandemic, so that through this online survey we aimed to determine how women entrepreneurs in Transylvania coped with the difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We wanted to get information regarding the financial reserves of the firms owned by female entrepreneurs, but also regarding the human resource reserves of these firms. We also aimed at learning if the pandemic period had an impact on the promoting and marketing practice of the firms and on their sale activities as well as whether there were any changes occurred due to the pandemic.

Keywords: female entrepreneur, Transylvania, online survey, pandemic

Introduction

Among the most significant social changes taking place worldwide in the last 30–40 years, we can quote the transformations in the roles of men and women in the labour market, including the growing prestige of female workers (Bokányi–Bauer 2019). In particular, an increasing number of women have started their own businesses (Castrillon 2019, Geambaşu 2019a, Gergely 2019a, Bokányi 2019).

This decision is often motivated by the desire for financial independence. Some women want to work part-time because they want to care for their children or because they do not want to return to a full-time programme. Entrepreneurship is considered a career path for women because it offers better social and economic opportunities for them (Szekeres 2014, Gódnány 2018, Gergely 2020).

Although differences in employment, wages, and education have decreased significantly, women are still less active than men in the labour market, and they are overrepresented in low-wage occupational sectors. They work as employees rather than being self-employed, and they are underrepresented among entrepreneurs and in leadership positions (Bokányi–Bauer 2019). Because of the phenomenon of the “glass ceiling” in the workplace, the ability of women to advance is much limited. However, as entrepreneurs, they have a greater opportunity for self-fulfilment (Gódnány 2018). The central elements of female entrepreneurs’ social narratives target the possibility of choice and the fact that the only conditions for success are assertiveness, good planning, and perseverance. Thus, failure itself is associated with the personal lack of assertiveness and perseverance, and not with macro-factors such as social bias and double standards (Geambaşu 2019a).

Being a Woman, Doing a Career

The idea of a career woman is still subject to negative attitudes. According to the public opinion, a woman who desires a career is suspicious because she is likely to neglect her maternal “vocation” (Koncz 2016). Moreover, female stereotypes and traditional social norms contribute to challenging the everyday lives of ambitious women. According to the literature, female entrepreneurs often encounter these prejudices (Geambaşu–Gergely 2019).

Although significant changes towards gender equality have taken place worldwide in the recent decades, gender segregation is still present in Western societies: although women have become increasingly active participants in the labour market (Crotti et al. 2020) and in the entrepreneurial sphere (Gergely 2011), they still bear a significant share of household and childcare responsibilities (Geambaşu–Gergely 2019); regardless of their professional commitment, they often work part-time or have a flexible work programme, which, however, is associated with lower pay (Gârdan–Gârdan 2014); in almost all sectors of activity, women face a wage gap, unequal advancement opportunities, and a higher amount of time dedicated to work; although the wage gap exists in almost all areas of activity, occupations traditionally associated with men tend to pay better than occupations traditionally associated with women (Gârdan–Gârdan 2014).

In the labour market, women with small children or young women who are about to have children still face discrimination. Women with small children

have been shown to have the highest rates of inactivity (Bokányi–Bauer 2019). Measures are in place to enable women to care for their children and stay at home in the first years of their children’s development (i.e. maternity leave and parental leave). Labour law is also aimed at ensuring the protection of women in the pre- and post-natal periods. However, discrimination against women’s participation in the workplace persists, which is greatly influenced by social stereotypes. Thus, a common stereotype is that productive roles are associated with men, such as leadership, education, and cultural creation, whereas women are (often exclusively) assigned reproductive roles such as childbirth, parenting, and household management (Gârdan–Gârdan 2014).

Furthermore, the social classification of work differs for women and men. Such categories devalue the work done by women and privilege paid work, endowing it with prestige in the forms of ranking, promotions, and rewards, from which a significant number of women are excluded. Society does not appreciate the huge amount of work done in the household, even though it requires the same or greater amounts of time as the number of hours worked in industry. As a result, this lack of recognition weakens a woman’s positive sense of life, her self-importance, self-satisfaction, self-knowledge, and self-esteem, thus lowering self-confidence and limiting the freedom to choose a career path (Koncz 2016). Social and individual assessments of careers are mostly consistent in the case of men, but they differ in a large group of women. On the one hand, men, in accordance with their social role and socialization patterns, identify with maintaining family, holding power, and prioritizing paid work, which are behaviours that are valued by society. On the other hand, a significant number of women consider that childbearing and raising children are of equal value or more important than paid work and employment status. However, the labour market and society do not reinforce these beliefs, which has led to decreases in the desire to start a family and raise children, thus limiting the healthy reproduction of the population (Koncz 2016). Although social norms have changed significantly, many people still find it difficult to accept a woman in a leadership position, which indicates how women are valued both economically and socially (Bokányi–Bauer 2019).

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

In late December 2019, the coronavirus spread so widely and rapidly from Wuhan in China to other countries that on 11 March 2020 it was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). To alleviate the spread of the coronavirus, the governments of the countries concerned introduced measures of social alienation, widespread isolation, and restrictions on travel, movement, and public gatherings. Consequently, public, social, community, and

private life have moved to online spaces (Liguori–Winkler 2020). According to analysts, the COVID-19 pandemic not only has caused a huge health crisis (Derderian 2020) but also has presented a major test for the world's economy, which is closely linked to China, which is a major player in international trade chains. Examples are growing supply problems and significant fluctuations in resource tariffs such as oil and gas. Furthermore, the effects of the pandemic are likely to include a potential global economic crisis exacerbated by a significant decline in consumption (framesmedia.ro 2020).

Entrepreneurs have been no exception to these effects. They had to transfer their business to online platforms or to suspend the activity of their firms for short or long periods. Despite the shift to doing business online, not all problems can be solved online. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the entrepreneurial commitment of self-employed people: some entrepreneurs have had to close their businesses temporarily because of government restrictions; others have had to take precautions in continuing their activities. They also have had to find innovative solutions to all aspects of their entrepreneurial endeavours as the consequences of the pandemic continue to unfold. It has taken time for entrepreneurs to become oriented to the new situation and for governments to help them by developing concrete policies that provide information, advice, and financial support (Kuckertz et al. 2020, Turner–Akinremi 2020).

Specialists contend that entrepreneurs need to be prepared to lose 50–80% of their revenue and that the biggest challenge in the recovery of small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) is the lack of adequate financial resources (McCall 2020). Most SMEs can cover their costs for less than a month before they need to lay off staff and reduce their costs (McCall 2020). Small businesses comprise a significant portion of the economy, and in some industries they are more vulnerable than in others: the most vulnerable companies are those that interact directly with customers, which involves personal contacts and gatherings such as the service industry (McCall 2020). Research has shown that service industry and the real estate sector are experiencing the largest declines. The tertiary (services) sector, especially transport and tourism, has been also drastically affected by the crisis, and the automotive industry may experience even more serious negative effects (Falchetta–Noussan 2020). According to the results of a survey including 1,000 micro-, small, and medium-sized enterprises in Hungary, one third of them expected a decrease in production and services, and they did not plan to make major investments in the near future because of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Századvég 2020).

Without a Safety Net

During 2020 March and April, many scholars and research institutes in Romania conducted surveys to obtain accurate data on the population's attitudes and situations during the pandemic. According to the statistical results, 84% of the respondents declared that the pandemic would affect their financial situation. Only half of the respondents (49%) had financial reserves in the spring of 2020. Out of these respondents, 41% estimated that their reserves would be sufficient for one or two months. Only 10% of the respondents had sufficient financial reserves for more than one year (IRES 2020). Furthermore, the jobs of more than half a million Romanian residents were temporarily suspended, and 430,000 workers had been fired (COVID-19: Romanian Economic Impact Monitor 2020).

Two-thirds of the ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania (65%) stated that the epidemic would have a negative impact on their families and lives (Barna–Kapitány 2020). Entrepreneurs, self-employed, employees in the technical, clerical, sales, tertiary sectors, unskilled workers, and more than 70% of students have been negatively affected financially by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the spring of 2020, six out of ten (62.9%) Romanians were convinced that the financial crisis would be more severe than the 2008 financial crisis. Regarding financial reserves, 28% of the respondents had sufficient financial reserves for less than a month, and 21.4% had sufficient financial reserves for more than a year. If austerity measures would have continued, 42% of the respondents said they would become at risk because they may not be able to pay their bills, would not have enough money for food, would not be able to repay their bank loans, and would not have enough money for medicines. Furthermore, more than half of the population might become socially vulnerable if additional austerity measures were introduced (Barna–Kapitány 2020).

The situation was dire because the incomes were low. Another study concerning the ethnic Hungarians in Romania showed that half of the respondents reported an income between 2,000 and 3,999 RON in the month before the epidemic, and only two-thirds of the respondents had financial reserves. Every fourth person who had financial reserves declared that they would be sufficient for at least one year, and every third person (35%) had financial reserves for three months. These results confirmed that the amounts of income and reserves were significantly correlated (Nistor et al. 2020).

Being a (Female) Entrepreneur during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Surveys from several developed countries showed that the pandemic has caused severe damage to the economy: for example, in the USA, the prognosis was that 24% of small businesses had less than two months to final closure, and 11% had

less than one month (Fairlie 2020). Regarding the question of what risks have been identified during the COVID-19 pandemic, many investors have reported transportation problems, possible price increases, and increased financial barriers. These statistics help in understanding the financial situation of the Romanian population. They also indicate that consumer potential has steadily deteriorated in the region, and consumer confidence has declined because consumers have prioritized basic needs (Gulyás–Nguyen 2020).

Studies also find that those firms were affected in a less negative or in positive way by the pandemic whose owners used online tools more often even before the COVID-19 period (Koltai et al. 2020). Therefore, COVID-19 restrictions had less impact on those entrepreneurs who worked in sectors where the activities made the introduction and usage of online tools possible. Anyway, three out of four (72%) of the surveyed Romanian entrepreneurs did not have a contingency plan for emergencies; therefore, it was recommended for businesses to create a new plan that would cover even the worst emergencies (Derderian 2020). According to another entrepreneurial survey conducted in Romania in the same period as our study, only one out of five (19%) entrepreneurs interviewed said that they had not interrupted or reduced the activity of their firm and that they could pay the salaries as well; and one out of ten (14%) are optimistic: they do not expect a decrease in turnover. All the other interviewees said they were heavily affected by the COVID-19 situation: they either reduced (20%) or partially interrupted (18%) or stopped (19%) their activity altogether. Further, every tenth entrepreneur had no production problems or interruption in providing their services; however, they had cash flow problems and could not pay the salaries in time (Sava 2020).

From the perspective of gender, the COVID-19 situation had a disproportionately large impact on women as they tend to be more vulnerable economically and socially as well (Lomazzi 2020). Some struggle to keep their company afloat, while others work as fast as they can to adapt to new business models (Teleki 2020). According to an American Express survey (Lin 2020), many women-owned businesses are in industries that are the most exposed to the economic and social effects of the pandemic: about a fifth (22%) of all women's businesses were hairdressing, nail salons, and pet grooming, and 16% were catering and canteen-type businesses. A Canadian study found a similar result: businesses in the service industry, most of which were owned by women, were the most affected by the pandemic. The study contends also that female entrepreneurs were found to be more likely to assume childcare responsibilities because they no longer had access to kindergartens, nurseries, and day care. Thus, during the pandemic, compared with men, women entrepreneurs, regardless of their socio-economic status, have been at a disadvantage because they have been burdened by childcare and household chores (Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub 2020).

A London-based study found that the majority of respondents (93%) had been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although 4% of the respondents said they had not yet been affected by the virus, they were unsure about becoming infected in the future. Of those already affected, 44% had temporarily ceased operations, and 3% had permanently ceased operations (Cherie Blair Foundation for Women 2020). Despite these difficulties, the findings of this study have also shown that adaptation and innovation are under way. Many people have reshaped and redesigned their businesses in the short term. This British qualitative study showed that because of declining income entrepreneurs needed to enter a new product line to earn an income and that they were working to create products that fit the current situation (Cherie Blair Foundation for Women 2020). Women are now exploring new ways of running, producing, and transforming a business, especially with regard to the most efficient use of technology. They are looking for online solutions, developing websites, and emphasizing online marketing. While the professional services, training, and education sectors are exploring online communication channels, the retail and food manufacturing sectors are trying to reach customers by offering delivery services. The subjects in this British study emphasized that they were concerned about the health and well-being of the staff (Cherie Blair Foundation for Women 2020).

Furthermore, the uncertainty and the risk had also a negative impact on female entrepreneurs (Del Simone et al. 2021): financial and administrative uncertainty but also uncertainty regarding home schooling and children’s mental condition (Geambaşu et al. 2020).

According to a cross-national study conducted in summer 2020 (Koltai et al. 2020), six out of ten female entrepreneurs experienced a major decrease in income (62%) and every second female entrepreneur experienced declining in market demand as well (52%) (Koltai et al. 2020). However, one of four female entrepreneurs (23%) introduced new products in this period, and every sixth female entrepreneur (14%) reported increase in online sales (Koltai et al. 2020).

According to other studies, the most successful female entrepreneurs – under the influence of neoliberal principles – tend to invest time and energy in the business and sacrifice the family (De Simone–Priola 2021); they cannot overcome the gender barriers otherwise (Adamson–Kelan 2019). But since the pandemic crisis increased the workload of women (Del Boca et al. 2020, Geambaşu et al. 2020, Koltai et al. 2020), they, mainly those who raise small children, did not have much choice but to invest time and energy in the family. And this means that they could give less time, energy, and dedication to their firms: those who had small children could work much less during the pandemic period (Koltai et al. 2020). Thus, the success of the strategy that could be used during this period lays on the success of balancing the family–work conflict as a main part of the entrepreneurial success (De Simone et al. 2021).

Data Collection

Initially, for March–April 2020, we planned a qualitative research focused on female entrepreneurs in Transylvania in order to find out more about the entrepreneurial motivations and expectations, their work–life balance strategies, as a continuation of previous research projects (Geambaşu–Gergely 2019, Gergely 2013a,b, Geambaşu 2019b). Due to the COVID-19 situation, the earlier research project had to be redesigned and moved to an online platform. However, we did not only change the platform of the research but also transformed it into a quantitative research, changing its focus as well: we wanted to capture and describe the specific situation of female entrepreneurs during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the research is based on an online questionnaire that collected responses and data between 2 April and 20 May 2020. Our questions focused on the situation caused by the pandemic: through this online survey, we aimed to determine how female entrepreneurs coped with the difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We wanted to get information regarding the financial reserves of the firms owned by female entrepreneurs, but also regarding the human resource reserves of the firms. We also wanted to know when the pandemic period had an impact on the promoting and marketing practice of the firm and on the sale activity. How did it work earlier and what kind of changes occurred due to the pandemic?

The questionnaire was shared on various¹ online platforms and targeted Hungarian female entrepreneurs in Transylvania. Since we were able to reach primarily highly educated female entrepreneurs, who are also frequent Internet users, our data is representative only in this narrower subpopulation of female entrepreneurs, i.e. the core population of highly educated, Internet user female SME entrepreneurs in Transylvania,² the northwestern part of Romania. In the online campaign of the research, we highlighted the fact that we were searching for female entrepreneurs running a business as their main activity and for whom the entrepreneurship is the main economic activity.

The questionnaire was completed by 84 female entrepreneurs, and this low number may have been due to the pandemic situation. Many female entrepreneurs had to redesign their operations, switch to an online interface, adapt to frequently changing laws, or stay at home with their children (Koltai et al. 2020). Thus,

1 The online survey was distributed throughout Transylvania. We promoted the questionnaire on Facebook in different groups where the members were mainly female entrepreneurs. It was posted several times in the Facebook groups of *Female Entrepreneurs in Transylvania* and *Female Entrepreneurs in Ciuc*.

2 A historical Romanian region. We chose to do our research in the same geographical area wherein several studies on female entrepreneurs were conducted in the last couple of years (see Geambaşu 2019a, Geambaşu–Gergely 2019) but also during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Koltai et al. 2020, Geambaşu et al. 2020).

we believe that it was enough to deal with finding solutions to their difficult situations, and they did not want to get involved in another time-consuming activity such as answering a questionnaire.³

The respondents were aged 22–59 years, and they started their businesses between 1990 and 2020. The responses to the questionnaire were analysed mostly from a descriptive viewpoint, using the SPSS program.

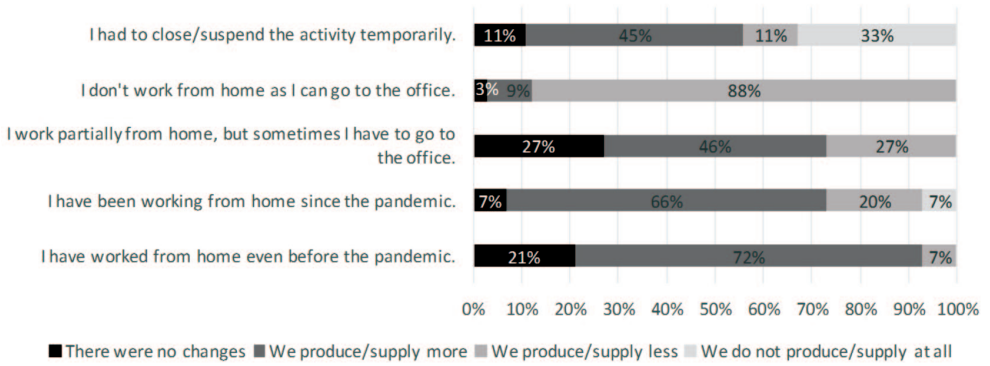
Results

Nearly three-quarters of the respondents had less than ten employees, i.e. the majority of our respondents were owners of micro-enterprises. There were a few who owned small businesses (the number of their employees are between 9 and 50) and only two persons whose businesses had reached medium size (their firm hired more than 49 but less than 250 employees). The proportion of the self-employed is not negligible as almost a quarter of the respondents have this type of business.

The results of the data analysis showed a close correlation between changes in the operations of a firm and changes in its activity since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic ($p = 0.000$). The respondents' businesses declined during the pandemic. Of those who had to temporarily close or suspend their businesses, approximately 90% were unable to continue their activities the way they used to do before. These results indicate that the situation had negatively affected the production and services of all entrepreneurial companies regardless of how their operations had changed since the onset of the pandemic.

Moreover, the results showed that because of the pandemic situation not only businesses had to be temporarily closed or production had to be cancelled, but often employees had to be fired ($p = 0.006$). Employees were required to take compulsory leave mainly in the commercial sector.

3 An additional negative factor for not filling in the questionnaire may have been the limited amount of free time potential responders had. It is also interesting that most female entrepreneurs completed and sent the questionnaire during late night hours or after midnight, which can be mentioned as illustrative examples of the respondents' workload (see also the results of several research studies conducted during the pandemic – e.g. Fodor et al. 2020, Geambaşu et al. 2020).



Source: authors' computation

Graph 1. The impact of the virus on the operation and activity of the firm (%). N = 81



Source: authors' computation

Graph 2. Impact of the virus on employees by company profile (%). N = 80

Challenges and Difficulties before and after the COVID-19 Pandemic

The data analysis revealed that one of the biggest challenges for entrepreneurs even before the pandemic were issues regarding administration and bureaucracy. However, during the pandemic, these obligations (e.g. payments, tax requirements, tax returns) doubled. Moreover, the data analysis revealed that several other problems had emerged such as switching to online sales, keeping up employee morale, and producing for customers during this time, which had made administration even more difficult. The next most frequently mentioned

problem was the suspension of activities, the ensuing financial difficulties, and the number of cancelled events.

Reduced sales and the associated loss of income were major concerns for female entrepreneurs. One respondent stated that she would have starved to death without her husband. Nearly half of the enterprises had sufficient financial reserves for one to three months, 15% for less than one month, and a small percentage had sufficient financial reserves for more than one year. More than half of the respondents had another source of income. These results indicate that female entrepreneurs were not prepared for an income loss of this magnitude. These problems were exacerbated by clientele challenges. There was no opportunity to contact clients who had disappeared. Moreover, on the one hand, it had become more difficult to meet the needs of clients since the online networks were the only communication platforms. On other hand, it had become very difficult to find new clients since the face-to-face events, the local community events, and the networking events were cancelled.

The results showed a correlation between the difficulties encountered before and after the virus ($p = 0.037$); that is, they faced problems that were similar to those before the pandemic. Those who had not had any difficulty before the virus did not have severe business problems when they completed the questionnaire. However, the responses to the open-ended questions indicated that it had become increasingly difficult to deal with bureaucracy. On a scale of 1 to 10, the respondents rated how difficult it had been to adapt to the newly issued laws, where 1 = very easy and 10 = very difficult. The respondents were judged to have an average difficulty of 5.46 in their ability to navigate the law.

Table 1. *Difficulties faced by female entrepreneurs before and after the COVID-19*

The main difficulty before the virus appeared	The main difficulty since the virus appeared
time management	switching to online sales
sales	keep motivating the employees to produce products for which demand has increased
bureaucracy, administration competition	even more difficult administration and bureaucracy
difficulties with products/services	suspension/reduction of activity
customer-related difficulties	financial problems customer difficulties
no particular difficulties	#stayathome

Source: authors' data based on the open-ended questions

We could encounter three types of crisis management according to the cross-national study conducted in the summer of 2020 (Koltai et al. 2020: 49): reduction, adaptation, and long-term development. Regarding reduction, eight out of ten female entrepreneurs decreased their firm's activity: half of them put their firms on hold (39%), and half of them reduced the activity of the firm (42%). This is a much higher proportion than revealed by the cross-national, European survey, where the proportion of female entrepreneurs adopting this strategy was only 50% (Koltai et al. 2020: 5).

About approximately every fifth (21%) female entrepreneur can be said to have introduced an adaptation strategy due to the COVID-19 situation. The majority of them, as a novelty, moved their businesses to online platforms and started to promote their activities, products, or services. Among the female entrepreneurs who filled in the questionnaire, there were only a few who started to sell their products on an online platform because of the pandemic. This proportion is also lower than in the case of European female entrepreneurs, where 2.5 times more female entrepreneurs tried to adapt to this new situation (Koltai et al. 2020: 5).

One out of nine women said that they had used or would use this period as a recharge period so as to have time and space to rethink their activity, to redesign their product or service, or to find new inspiration. One person said that she had introduced home delivery as a new option for her clients.

Beyond Economic Challenges...

In many cases, the lockdown period, the lack of personal connections, and the inability to leave the house without any trouble have emerged. Implementing work–life balance during quarantine has also been a challenge for women (Del Boca et al. 2020, Geambaşu et al. 2020, Lomazzi 2020), and female entrepreneurs could not be an exception (Koltai et al. 2021). Several respondents indicated that it was difficult to work from home with young children and to manage their home schooling (Geambaşu et al. 2020). The majority of these female entrepreneurs could dedicate less time to their firm and business activities: mainly those with children ($p = 0.04$) are affected by the upset work–life balance. The main reason for this was that during our research period (April–May 2020) all educational institutes were closed and all programmes had to be assured by the parents, especially by the mothers. As several other research studies concluded, female entrepreneurs had to sacrifice their working hours because of their children's learning activities, household duties, and caring responsibilities (Geambaşu et al. 2020).

What about Tomorrow?

Most respondents mentioned the “uncertain future”: the uncertainty, the lack of prospects in the complicated situation caused by the pandemic, and the impossibility of knowing when they can restart their business activities. But despite the problems and challenges listed, almost a third of the female entrepreneurs were positive about the future; the beauty workers were already waiting for clients, and business owners tended to be even more aware. Some respondents wanted to succeed with their new products, and some emphasized the importance of attitude and flexibility in this situation. Some respondents had experienced this situation as a creative period, and they made plans that they had not had time for to implement before. Some realized that in the future their businesses would need reserves in the event of a possible loss of revenue due to a similar crisis. Overall, the respondents expressed a positive outlook on the future, and many pointed out that it would be a long process until their pre-pandemic businesses could be resumed.

The next group, which was the largest, expressed that they had expected many difficulties, mainly material, in the absence of demand. They also indicated that they had had to accept the fact that their businesses might be terminated as a result of the pandemic. During this period (April and May), cancelled events had been a vital loss for some businesses. The respondents anticipated that in the future people would have less money, and they would spend less on things that were not necessary.

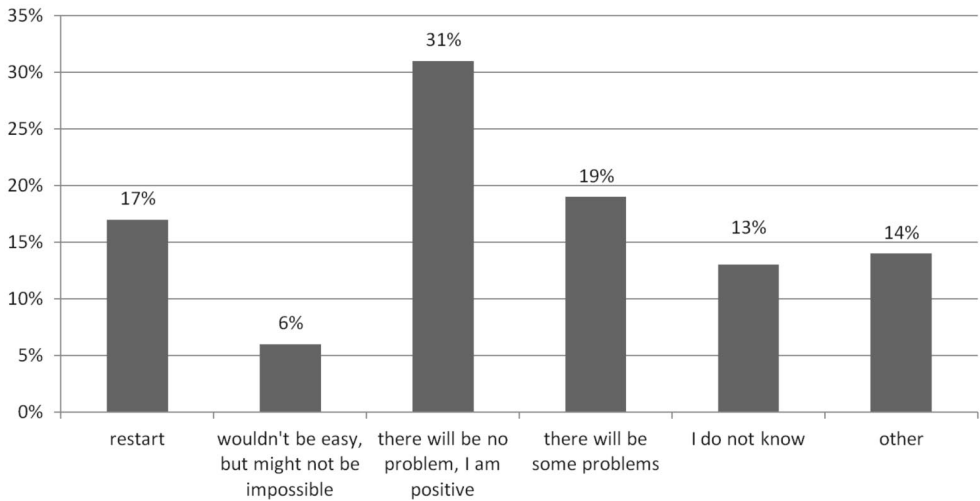
More than a quarter of the respondents said they needed to redesign their businesses in part or in full. Some had already decided that they would “step back” into the market in a new business. Some expressed that they were waiting to see how the fate of their current businesses would unfold but were preparing for the future by having a “plan B”. Some had asked a marketing expert to help with redesigning their business. Some others were expanding their businesses, products, or services to be able to continue operating if a similar event occurred. The majority of the respondents highlighted the need to put more emphasis on online sales and promotion.

Several respondents stated that they did not know what would happen in the future or what the impact on their business would be. Some respondents expressed that they viewed the future of their businesses as unpredictable and subject to chance.

In another category, I classified respondents who said they were waiting curiously for what the future would bring and who stated that whatever it was, they would react to it. According to some respondents, companies that had not been able to keep up with the market would disappear, and those who survived this selection would be reinforced in their return. New opportunities would allow

them to remain in the market. However, they would have to react as quickly as possible, and sometimes there would be no time to work out small details because of the intense competition. Some respondents said that they expected that their customers would be more responsible and prudent. Moreover, they expected that employees would be re-evaluated, particularly regarding flexible working hours.

Finally, some respondents expressed that they expected difficulties, but they tried to have a positive attitude towards the future, although it was difficult in the current situation. These respondents reported a sharp decline in turnover, hoped to have enough work to sustain themselves, and anticipated an economic crisis.



Source: authors' computation

Graph 3. What can be expected from the next period? (%) N = 84

The results showed a significant correlation between how the activities of the company were affected by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and how the entrepreneurs viewed the future ($p = 0.040$). Those whose activities had not changed since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic expressed a more positive outlook on the future than those who had been producing or supplying less since the appearance of the virus. The few who had increased their production or supplies during this period did not reflect on what would happen next, but they said they would rather wait and then adapt to the situation. Understandably, those who had closed their businesses during this period and had experienced a large loss of income expected material difficulties in restarting, such as fewer customers and lower income.

Conclusions

As previous research showed, the majority of the women-led businesses typically declined during the coronavirus (Koltai et al. 2020), and many of the owners had to send employees on forced leave due to reduced production and fewer services. Even before the virus appeared, time management had emerged as a problem, but this has come to the fore even more since the beginning of the pandemic. And, as in other European countries (Koltai et al. 2020), our respondents emphasized that their firms' promotion processes had also changed, with entrepreneurs having to move to the online space, which was not an easy task for some businesses. The biggest problems had to be faced by those women whose firms had not sold online before the pandemic and had to close their stores due to curfew. This mainly affects the commercial sector as they are characterized by contact sales and do not have the opportunity to meet customers due to restrictions.

Female entrepreneurs not only reported financial and sales difficulties but also related how they were affected as individuals by the pandemic period (Koltai et al. 2020, Del Boca et al. 2020). Except for those who had to shut down their businesses and face a huge loss of income, overall, female entrepreneurs seemed to be optimistic regarding the future. However, many entrepreneurs point out that it will be a long process until their businesses could get back on track. During this period, several female entrepreneurs had to rethink their businesses. There are those who have already decided that they would “step back” into the market with a new business and those who are waiting to see how the fate of their current businesses would unfold but are preparing with a plan B. They stressed that they needed to put more emphasis on online sales in the future and that they needed financial reserves if a similar case were to happen again.

We can conclude that this period was very difficult for female entrepreneurs, among whom those were affected the most for whom online sale and online marketing had not been part of their business life before. At the same time, those with small children were also affected since they could work less because of the greater housework load. It seems that those who were familiarized with the online sphere (Koltai et al. 2020) or who could rapidly come up with a novelty were the ones to get positive results in this period. Our research shows that this period was very important in rethinking the entire entrepreneurial role and the entrepreneurial expectations and in redesigning the basic function of the firm and its principle of operation. We could define this time of pandemic as a game-changing period, an unavoidable milestone for female entrepreneurs, who are forced to take new decisions having arrived at the crossroads: going ahead with new “online” strategies, starting something new, or giving up on entrepreneurial life.

Limitations

This is an exploratory study that provides some first impressions and facts regarding the effects of the pandemic period on female entrepreneurs in Transylvania. However, this study has several limitations. First, through our ad-hoc online research, we were able to reach primarily the highly educated female entrepreneurs, who are also frequent Internet users, and this fact has resulted in a narrower set of answers, which can be considered to be representative only of the core population of highly educated, Internet user female SME entrepreneurs in Transylvania. This could limit the generalizability of the findings and must be taken into account when interpreting results. Furthermore, we could only capture one snapshot of this long COVID-19 period, i.e. the second month of the Romanian lockdown.

References

- Adamson, Maria, Kelan, Elisabeth K. 2019. "Female Heroes": Celebrity Executives as Postfeminist Role Models. *British Journal of Management* 30(4): 981–996.
- Barna, Gergő, Kapitány, Balázs. 2020. *A koronavírus Erdélyben – felmérés* (<http://statisztikak.erdelystat.ro/uploads/files/a-koronavirus-erdelyben-ii-23042020-1587649535.pdf>).
- Bokányi, Zita, Bauer, Béla. 2019. A vállalkozásindítás nem férfiprivilegium. *Korunk* 30(10): 87–93.
- Castrillon, Caroline. 2019. Why More Women Are Turning to Entrepreneurship. *Forbes* December 20 (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolinecastrillon/2019/02/04/why-more-women-are-turning-to-entrepreneurship/?sh=c488620542a7>).
- Cherie Blair Foundation for Women. 2020. *Women Entrepreneurs Struggling & Innovating in the Face of COVID-19* (<https://cherieblairfoundation.org/app/uploads/2020/05/impact-of-covid19-on-women-entrepreneurs-in-low-and-middle-income-countries-report-1.pdf>).
- Crotti, Robert, Geiger, Thierry, Ratcheva, Vesselina, Zahidi, Saadia. 2020. *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*. Geneva: World Economic Forum (http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf).
- De Simone, Silvia, Pileri, Jessica, Rapp-Ricciardi, Max, Barbieri, Barbara. 2021. Gender and Entrepreneurship in Pandemic Time: What Demands and What Resources? An Exploratory Study. *Frontiers in Psychology* May 19 (<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.668875/full>).
- De Simone, Silvia, Priola, Vicenza. 2021. "Who's That Girl?" The Entrepreneur as a Super(wo)man. *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences* [in press] (<http://oro.open.ac.uk/76360/>).

- Del Boca, Daniela, Oggero, Noemi, Profeta, Paola, Rossi, Mariacristina. 2020. Women’s and Men’s Work, Housework and Childcare, before and during COVID-19. *Review of Economics of the Household* 18: 1001–1017.
- Derderian, Marie-France. 2020. *What Is the Impact of COVID-19 on Entrepreneurship?* (<https://www.hospitalitynet.org/opinion/4098262.html>).
- Fairlie, Robert. 2020. The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Small Business Owners. Evidence of Early Stage Losses from the April 2020 Current Population Survey. *SIEPR Working Paper* 20–22 (<https://siepr.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/20-022.pdf>).
- Falchetta, Giacomo, Noussan, Michel. 2020. The Impact of COVID-19 on Transport Demand, Modal Choices, and Sectoral Energy Consumption in Europe. *Current Trends in Transport Demand. IAEE Energy Forum, Covid-19 Issue*, 48–50 (<https://www.iaee.org/documents/2020EnergyForumSI.pdf>).
- Gârdan, Iuliana Petronela, Gârdan, Daniel Adrian. 2014. The Role of Chances Equality and Social Inclusion in Terms of Economic Development. *Annals of Spiru Haret University* 14(4): 37–47.
- Geambașu, Réka. 2019a. A két világ legjava? Vállalkozói stratégiák erdélyi kisgyermekes nők körében. *Korunk* 30(10): 6–16.
- 2019b. *Women Entrepreneurs in Europe. Challenges, Strategies and Policies.* (https://ifempower.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/ifempower_intellectual-output_1_FINAL_EN.pdf).
- Geambașu, Réka, Gergely, Orsolya. 2019. *A székelyföldi vállalkozónők gazdasági és társadalmi szerepei.* Odorheiu Secuiesc: Udvarhelyszéki Kis- és Középvállalkozások Szövetsége.
- Geambașu, Réka, Gergely, Orsolya, Nagy, Beáta, Somogyi, Nikolett. 2020. Qualitative Research on Hungarian Mothers’ Social Situation and Mental Health during the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 11(5): 151–155.
- Gergely, Orsolya. 2013a. *Vállalkozás női módra – A székelyföldi női vállalkozók profiljának és motivációinak vizsgálata.* Cluj-Napoca: ISPMN.
- 2013b. Female Entrepreneurs in Szeklerland, Romania. *GÉNEROS Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies* 2(1): 58–80.
- Górány, Zsuzsa. 2018. Női vállalkozók – kutatási területek. *Vezetéstudomány – Budapest Management Review* 49(4): 58–67.
- Gulyás, Attila, Nguyen, Dóra. 2020. *Koronavírus – várakozások korábbi járványok és gazdasági válságok alapján* (<https://www.horvath-partners.com/hu/media-center/cikkek/koronavirus-varakozasok-korabbi-jarvanyok-es-gazdasagi-valsagok-alapjan/>).
- IRES. 2020. *România în pandemie. Comportament financiar. Achiziții și economii* (ires.ro. <https://ires.ro/articol/388/romania-in-pandemie-partea-a-iii-a->).

- Koltai, Luca, Geambaşu, Réka, Bakacsi-Saffer, Zsuzsanna, Barna-Petróczi, Andrea, Zsár, Virág. 2020. *COVID-19 and Female Entrepreneurs throughout Europe*. Budapest: Hétfa Research Institute Ltd.
- Koncz, Katalin. 2016. A női karriertípusok és jellemzőik. *Opus et Educatio* 3(1): 30–39.
- Kuckertz, Andreas et al. 2020. Startups in Times of Crisis – A Rapid Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Business Venturing Insights* 13: e00169.
- Lin, Connie. 2020. COVID-19 Has Been Harder on Women Business Owners. These 11 Resources Can Help. *Fastcompany* April 16 (<https://www.fastcompany.com/90491863/covid-19-has-been-harder-on-women-business-owners-these-11-resources-can-help>).
- Lomazzi, Vera. 2020. *The COVID-19 Crisis and Gender Inequality: New and Old Challenges for Europe* (<https://blog.gesis.org/the-covid-19-crisis-and-gender-inequality-new-and-old-challenges-for-europe/>).
- Magyar Exportfejlesztési Ügynökség. 2020. *Hírösszefoglaló: A koronavírus gazdasági és kereskedelmi hatásai*. Budapest: zmkik.hu.
- McCall, Jamie. 2020. *Assessing the Economic Impacts of COVID-19 on North Carolina's Small Business*. Raleigh: Carolina Small Business Development Fund (<http://carolinasmallbusiness.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-NC-Small-Business-Impacts-Report.pdf>).
- Nistor, Laura, Gergely, Orsolya, Sántha, Ágnes, Telegdy, Balázs. 2020. *COVID-19 járvánnyal kapcsolatos attitűdök és viselkedések. Kutatási jelentés*. Miercurea Ciuc: Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania.
- Sava, Justina Alexandra. 2020. Impact of COVID-19 on Business Activities in Romania 2020. *Statista* November 20 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1114494/romania-covid-19-impact-on-business-activities/>).
- Századvég. 2020. *A koronavírus-járvány gazdasági következményei: a vállalkozások többsége még idén javulást vár*. Budapest: Századvég Gazdaságkutató Zrt. (<https://szazadveg.hu/hu/kutatasok/a-gazdasagkutato-kutatasai/elorejelzesek-kozlemenyek/a-koronavirus-jarvany-gazdasagi-kovetkezmenyei-a-vallalkozasok-tobbsege-meg-iden-javulast-var>).
- Szekeres, Valéria. 2014. *Női vállalkozók a XXI. Században*. Budapest: Óbudai Egyetem, Keleti Károly Gazdasági Kar (http://kgk.uni-obuda.hu/sites/default/files/06_SzekeresValeria.pdf).
- Teleki, Wendy. 2020. *Towards a Gender-Smart Response in the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Crisis*. Washington: we-fi.org (<https://we-fi.org/towards-a-gender-smart-response-in-the-covid-19-coronavirus-crisis/>).
- Turner, Joanne, Akinremi, Temitope. 2020. The Business Effects of Pandemics – A Rapid Literature Review. *Enterprise Research Centre Publication* April 16

(<https://www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ERC-Insight-The-business-effects-of-pandemics---a-rapid-literature-review-Final.pdf>).

Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub. 2020. *The Impact of COVID-19 on Women Entrepreneurs* (<https://www.georgiancollege.ca/wp-content/uploads/The-Impact-of-COVID-19-on-Women-Entrepreneurs.pdf>).

*** *COVID-19 – Romanian Economic Impact Monitor*. 2020. Universitatea Babeş–Bolyai, Facultatea de Ştiinţe Economice şi Gestiunea Afacerilor (<https://econ.ubbcluj.ro/coronavirus/?fbclid=IwAR0CGVifEYH-inXiZPR75ZHifLWJOIuE1ZQV5TcOLF5Dw8VwxAC1PivF9Ww>).

*** *Mentális egészségmegőrzés a COVID-19 koronavírus járvány időszakában*. 2020. Budapest: Állatorvostudományi Egyetem (<https://univet.hu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Covid-19-info-HUN.pdf>).